

Social and emotional learning: a critical case study

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Abstract: Social and emotional learning (SEL) is embedded in the emerging Australian national curriculum (ACARA 2013), reflecting a growing body of research (Durlack, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger 2011), professional (Merrell & Gueldner 2010) and popular writing (Covey 1998), and the uptake of that work in practice (Barnard 2006). This paper offers a critical perspective on both the conceptualization of SEL and its uptake in one particular school. We draw on Foucauldian concepts of discourse (Foucault 1971), governmentality (Foucault, et al. 1991) and technologies of the self (Foucault, et al. 1988) as well as a substantive understanding of the role of the discipline of psychology in constituting and articulating understandings of the self (Davies 2006) and of schools in cultivating particular modes of selfhood (Hunter 1988, 1994), to show that formulations of SEL in research professional and policy play a critical role in making available particular ways of understanding and disciplines selves. We then turn to a small case study of SEL in a state primary school in northern Queensland to show the how SEL might be enacted. First, we show how SEL in this school takes up essentially individual-psychology understandings of the social and emotional domains of human being. Second, we show how SEL is 'translated' into practices that are quite complexly related to the understandings of SEL in the scholarly and professional literature and, in particular, are inflected into a highly traditional or conservative pedagogical and disciplinary set of practices. Third, we show how these discourses of self-competency are mobilized by a small sample of year 6 students and their teachers. While our approach is critical of SEL at each of the levels at which we consider it here, it is appreciative rather than dismissive, and we raise a series of questions about its value and about possible ways it might be elaborated or transformed in light of our critique.

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