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Educators' perspectives on the relevance of Social and Emotional Learning skills in South Africa

Abstract

Youth have difficulty making the transition from education to the workplace in the Fourth Industrial Revolution. High levels of youth unemployment prevail in South Africa, and it is necessary to find ways to assist youth to enter the workplace. The purpose of this grounded theory study is to explore how educators view the efficacy of social and emotional learning (SEL) skills in the learning environment. There is evidence worldwide that implementation of SEL skills is effective for improving academic achievement as well as success in the future life. Findings indicate that 68 participating purposive selected educators, who wrote written responses to open-ended questionnaires, believe SEL skills would have a positive impact on the learning environment; would be essential for learners to become future ready; and would be beneficial to themselves as educators both personally and professionally. Educators referred frequently to the importance of building interpersonal relationships, self-management and social awareness skills. It would be prudent, as a next step of exploration, to collaborate with educators and learners to co-construct effective interventions and formal support structures with policymakers, for the benefit of all those in the learning environment.

Keywords: *social and emotional learning, transition to work, educators' perspectives*

1. Introduction

The transition from education to the workplace has become complex with the advent of Fourth Industrial Revolution (4th IR). The difficulty arises because youth are not always equipped with the necessary market related skills nor the personal "human" skills to navigate this change (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2020; Schonert-Reichl, 2019; Schwab, 2016). "Human skills" are personal social and emotional skills that help people achieve their potential. Market-related technological skills are key skills for employability in the 4th IR. However, youth also need to be empowered with personal human skills to navigate their way successfully into the workplace.

The intention of this study is to generate relevant and useful knowledge, in close partnership with educators, that will help to inform theory and practice in the South African context. This study explores how educators, who work with the youth in South Africa, perceive the relevance of SEL skills, and how these skills could form a foundation for appropriate interventions. The South African study was part of a larger international study, in which 18 other countries participated. The results of the broader international study are published elsewhere. This paper is a "snapshot" in a video of a much longer research process which continues. Building future-ready resilient youth with hope for success in their future requires an important shift in perspective and practice, especially when designing interventions among high-need, high-risk youth (Solberg, Park & Marsay, 2020).

As a psychologist working in the field of assisting young people make a successful transition, I endeavoured to explore where the gaps are, and what sort of skills would be appropriate and effective for youth in South Africa. The question I am confronted with is what sort of intervention would assist youth struggling to make a successful transition from education to earning a sustainable livelihood. Using an informed Grounded Theory (GT) approach, I took advantage of my experience in this field of work which has been informed by pre-existing theories and used findings in the substantive field in a sensitive, creative and flexible way (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021).

2. Background

2.1 The South African context

Youth in South Africa face many adversities driven by poverty, inequality, and unemployment (Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2016). During the fourth quarter of 2021, youth aged 15-24 years and 25-34 years recorded the highest unemployment rates of 66.5% and 43.8%, respectively (Statistics South Africa Q4, 2021). The high youth unemployment rate, within the context where informal labour markets predominate, renders the expression 'career guidance' inappropriate. Considering the adversities facing youth in South Africa, the concept of career can be replaced with more appropriate language that speaks about finding appropriate ways to earn a sustainable livelihood (Marsay, 2014; Marsay, 2020; Marsay *et al*., 2021).

In the absence of adequate formal employment, which is characteristic of most economically developing countries, including South Africa, it is appropriate to think within the framework of 'livelihood' as opposed to formal employment when trying to understand how people generate incomes to heave themselves out of poverty. Young people do not have a positive sense of hope for their future (De Lannoy *et al*., 2018; Engelbrecht *et al*., 2015; Ndlovu & Walton, 2016). Scholars criticise the relevance of universal theories of career guidance in economically developing countries (Arulmani, 2014; Ribiero, 2020; Sultana, 2020). Theories and practices developed in more developed countries are often based on freedom of choice, and a plethora of opportunities. The reality in South Africa, is that young people are not always able to choose subjects at school, nor are they all provided with quality education (Jansen, 2019; Spaull & Jansen, 2019). Due to several limiting factors, young people are reliant on their specific communities for support and opportunities. Thus, theories from more developed countries, which are often based on freedom of choice and ample opportunities, are not always appropriate for the vast majority of South Africans.

I prefer a narrative way of working using an integrated approach to develop "hope for a sustainable livelihood" (Marsay, Scioli & Omar, 2018: 709). The integrated approach combines the constructs of hope (Scioli & Biller, 2009, 2010) within a sustainable livelihoods' framework (Chambers & Conway, 1992). This approach moves away from "guidance and counselling" (which is by its nature power based) to "empowering and enabling" (which encourages and develops personal agency). Young people are empowered and enabled when they have adequate human capital and personal agency to navigate themselves through the challenges they face in a developing country. Health, skills and motivation are key to earning a sustainable livelihood. Livelihood strategies include what people do, with what they have, taking assets and vulnerability into account, while being supported by effective policies and processes.

2.2 Policies and curricula to address the issue of unemployment

A significant body of research suggests SEL interventions linked to personal agency (motivation) and educational achievement (skills) are critical for preparing youth to be future ready (Solberg *et al.,* 2020; Marsay *et al*., 2021). Furthermore, Jagers, Rivas-Drake and Williams (2019) emphasise how transformative SEL skills are for addressing equity among a culturally diverse youth.

Currently, South Africa is implementing a National Skills Development Plan 2030 (2019) which aims to mobilise and align education with demands of the workplace emphasising technical skills required for high demand occupations. It is expected that in time the focus will include future readiness skills, such as social and emotional learning skills. Strides are being made to introduce technical skills into the curriculum from primary school. However, the grade 10,11 and 12 learners have not benefitted from this initiative.

The life orientation curriculum drafted by Department of Basic Education (DBE) is a compulsory subject that tries to address transition from education to the workplace (DBE 2011:5). Despite this curriculum statement, there is evidence that the implementation of the curriculum has difficulties (Seherrie & Mawela, 2021; Swarts, De Sousa & Rens, 2019; Pillay 2012). The responsibility to impart future-ready skills to the youth within the South African context often lies with the educators, who may also be primary caregivers and role models of young people (Marsay, 1996; Theron & Theron, 2010). The rapidity with which change is taking place in the workplace is profound and needs to be urgently addressed.

2.3 The task of conceptualising SEL in South Africa

There is no clear theoretical or conceptual foundation that guides the development of interventions referred to as Social and Emotional learning (SEL). Rather, the approach to Social and Emotional learning is influenced by multiple theories, contexts and frameworks (Haynes 2021). Drawing from findings of several studies worldwide (Durlak *et al.*, 2011; Schonert-Reichl, 2019; Zins, Elias & Greenberg, 2003) SEL interventions improve academic achievement and success in future life. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, n.d.) suggest that the fundamentals of SEL can help all young people and adults: to thrive personally and academically; to develop and maintain positive relationships; to become lifelong learners; and to contribute to a more caring, just world. The CASEL framework describes five core competencies, namely self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (https://casel.org/). This study used these core competencies as a backdrop to guide the exploration.

In summary, despite world-class policies and curricula designed to equip learners with relevant skills for the workplace, it would appear that implementing these policies and curricula are fraught with challenges. Some of these challenges are because of difficult learning environments and others because educators lack adequate training and are over-burden (Matoti, 2010). Developing SEL skills could help address various forms of inequity, empower young people and adults to co-create thriving schools and contribute to safe, healthy, and equitable communities.

3. Methodology

Grounded theory (GT) emerged as a method of discovery described by Glaser and Strauss in 1967 to explain "what is going on" in a particular area of human endeavour. Grounded theory exploration is an appropriate process used to address the gap between theory and empirical research. The approach used in this study aligns with the work of Charmaz and Thornberg (2021) who describe informed grounded theory approach as a systematic method of conducting research that shapes collecting data and provides explicit strategies for analysing data. This method helps researchers to generate new concepts, which may have direct application for professional policies and practices in the field of education and psychology. Ethical clearance was granted by the Institutional Review Board at Boston University, since this study was part of an international research network. Educators received written information regarding the purpose and process of the study and were invited to ask questions for clarity and transparency before they committed to voluntary participation.

3.1 Participants

Given the diversity of the population, research within the South African context requires a specific respectful community-focused approach. Rural communities are structured differently from urban communities and the research approach must be contextually appropriate. Recognition of, and sensitivity to local knowledge, culture, and lived experiences guide the way in which research among communities in Africa unfolds (Khupe & Keane, 2017; Kramer, Fynn & Laher, 2019). The community, and not the researcher, is at the centre of this study. Hence, it is fitting that the person collecting data is known to and trusted by the community and speaks the vernacular of the community. Data were collected over a period of time by a person known to the community from educators in different contexts.

A purposive sample of educators were selected from a broad spectrum of geographical, socio-economic, environmental, and cultural contexts. Invitations to participate were sent to several schools serving diverse communities. Ultimately there were 14 participants from schools in Gauteng. 17 participants from Western Cape (WC), and 14 participants from urban schools and 23 from rural schools in Kwazulu Natal (KZN). All participants were educators working with Grades 10, 11, and 12 learners. Responses from 68 educators were valid for analysis. The number of years' experience as an educator was between 1 year and 45 years. The average number of teaching years was 15,2 years.

3.2 Procedure

Informed grounded theory methods specify analytic strategies, not data collection methods (Charmaz, 2000). Initially a "spill question" (Nathaniel, 2020) asked the educators about their knowledge and experience of SEL skills, prompted a general discussion. The discussion was followed by an open-ended questionnaire, which was selected because of limited resources

and language differences. English was the chosen language for the questionnaire that was handed out by the person collecting data, who was known and trusted by the community and was able to converse in the appropriate vernacular of the school environment. Participants were encouraged to respond anonymously by writing down their own experiences and perspectives of SEL skills. The people who collected the data explained their field observations and experiences to me. I was responsible for the processes of analysis. I used the approach described by Charmaz and Thornberg (2021).

The first part of the questionnaire established the context of the school and some biographical details of the participating educators. Significant details of biographical data were organised using an Excel spreadsheet so that comparisons could be made to understand the educators' perspectives in context.

The second part used open-ended questions in English to explore the educators' perspectives of SEL skills within their context. The open-ended questions were:

- Does your school offer social emotional learning skills programmes or activities? If so, please describe the programmes and activities being implemented.

- Consider the impact of the educator's use of SEL skills on students' learning and engagement in school. Describe your thoughts. Please describe a situation or incident in which using SEL skills can help educators work more effectively with students in the classroom.

- Please describe how SEL skills are relevant in helping educators support young people in making successful postsecondary transitions and/or preparing to enter the world of work.

Theoretical sampling and theoretical saturation which depend on pursuing an iterative analytical process, constantly moving back and forth between raw data and constructed categories contributing to the "trustworthiness" and quality of the study (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). An iterative process began by listening to the experiences of the people who collected the data (field notes and observations). Then the researcher read through and transcribed each answer before labelling answers with key words. Key words taken from the data were used to code. This line-by-line coding leads to refining and specifying extant concepts (Charmaz, 2000). Organisation and management of research data was assisted using analytical diagrams and memos, and codebooks which were all revisited in a reflexive process. Separate codebooks were written for each province, as well as urban and rural schools. Constant comparative analysis was used. These codebooks were compared, looking for similarities and differences. Ultimately all the codes were clustered into categories and then themes.

Only once codes were identified by each country did comparative discussions take place to discuss differences and similarities between countries. Ultimately NVivo was used to compare data collected from all participating countries. Unique codes from each country were identified. The findings from these comparisons are discussed elsewhere.

The GT analysis tells a story about people, social processes, and situations (Charmaz, 2000). A final visit to findings in literature is useful to conceptualise the SEL in SA context. The findings and discussion below illustrate how the perceptions of South African educators resonate with literature. The findings are presented as a set of interrelated constructs and explanatory statements are used to detail the relationship between categories and contexts. Raw data in the form of direct verbatim quotes are used to support the storyline.

4. Findings and Discussion

Participating educators' perspective is that SEL skills are indeed important in the learning environment. Although educators were familiar with the constructs of SEL skills, none of them were aware of the CASEL (n.d.) framework (https://casel.org/). 32 of the 68 educators (17 from urban and 15 from rural schools) stated SEL skills were not taught in their schools. 31 of the educators (24 from urban and 7 from rural schools) answered that the constructs of SEL skills were taught in their school, either in the compulsory Life-Orientation curriculum or in the Religious Studies curriculum. 5 educators did not answer the question, which was interpreted as unsure. All participating educators felt that SEL skills would benefit the learning environment. However, it is noteworthy that 32 of the 68 responses stated that SEL skills are not taught in their schools.

The following response from an educator in a rural school illustrates the importance of SEL skills generally. "Young people need this kind of learning to prepare them for the challenges and adversities/diversities outside of school."

Educators identified relationship-building, self-management and social awareness most frequently as important skills for both creating more positive learning environment as well as assisting youth make a successful transition. The variation and complexity of the responses from educators quoted in this discussion illustrate how interpersonal relationships, self-management and social awareness are interrelated and intersubjective. Interpersonal relationships involve building relationships with diverse individuals and groups, as well as communicating clearly, resolving conflicts, helping others and seeking help. Self-management includes self-control, emotion regulation, and self-discipline to do what is expected of key players (educators and learners) in the learning environment. The theme of social awareness clusters empathy, understanding, diversity, and recognising effective support systems. The following quote from an educator in Western Cape (WC) explains: "We are social beings. We need others to survive. Therefore, relationship and communication skills help individuals form meaningful and fruitful bonds."

Responses from educators illustrate the reality of the difficult learning environment, discussed earlier, and show the interrelatedness of these constructs. An educator from an urban school in KZN illustrates how pivotal educators' social awareness is. This educator explains, "Knowing more about social and economic background. If you are able to listen and know what learners are going through and where they come from it is much easier to interact with them. This will in turn create healthy relationships conducive to teaching and learning." An educator from WC echoes this by saying, "Social awareness reduces fear and discrimination. Once you understand others and their background, you are less likely to fear them, instead you will feel empathy and show respect."

Another educator from the WC says this about self-management: "This skill may help young people understand the importance that they may be alone in their endeavours and that they need to rely on positive coping mechanisms which can be developed in the classroom." Another educator from the WC said, "Respecting others is a big part of growing up and this starts at home. Sadly, teachers are now the 'parents' who need to teach learners to respect themselves first and then others." An educator from Gauteng said, "If a learner gives you attitude but the teacher knows that there is a history of abuse at home, then the way s/he reacts towards that learner's behaviour will be different, simply because of that awareness."

This quote from an educator in WC illustrates how interconnected the constructs of social awareness, self-management and self-awareness are, "Learners will be aware of what is socially acceptable and unacceptable behavior they will be able to set goals for themselves because of a positive self-image which allows them to know their own strengths and weaknesses."

An educator from KZN illustrates how important these skills could be to reduce violence and inequality: "Social awareness creates more respectful relationships with peers, bullying, xenophobia, racism, gender discrimination will all be reduced as mind states change."

Self-awareness can be described as the ability to label feelings and relate feelings to thought and behaviour; be aware of strengths and challenges. This theme of self-awareness had fewer responses from educators and may illustrate a nuance of a more collectivist society. The following quotes highlight the relationship between self-awareness and personal agency. An educator from Gauteng says, "Recognising strengths and self-efficacy gives a learner the confidence to face future challenges." An educator from a rural school in KZN explains, "Self-awareness is a relevant SEL skill in helping support young people, it creates the mindset of individuality and allows one to accept who they are, their goals and their personality."

Educators believe that self-awareness is a more important skill in determining the choice of work learners can do rather than decision-making. This sentiment is explained by an educator in KZN, "To be able to face the outside world and survive, they need to know who they are and what drives them as individuals."

Educators regard the well-being of self and others, evaluating consequences of actions, and making safe choices for self, others, and the environment as responsible decision-making. The following quotes from educator in rural KZN gives testimony to decision-making in terms of a safe school environment, "Decision-making skills are important for everyday life, especially when it comes to safety concerns regarding our learners". The educators' perspectives regarding decision-making imply that interpersonal relations and the well-being of self and others are important, reflecting the interconnectedness of these constructs. An educator from Gauteng says, "Differentiating between right and wrong develops excellent self-management skills and will benefit learners later on in life". An educator from WC says, "We must allow them to make decisions and to take responsibility for their actions. Make them aware of what reactions can come from different actions."

The low frequency of responses regarding decision-making, as the least important skill for a successful transition into the world of work, may be attributed to the fact that young people in South Africa have limited freedom of choice and are constrained by socio-economic conditions, religious values, and duties to the family (Ribeiro, 2020).

Educators' mental health and well-being are negatively impacted by their work, and they are at risk for compassion fatigue. Schools are microcosms of diversity and can be places of violent multicultural dissonance, as discussed earlier. The perspective of participating educators reveals that positive classroom environment and improved educator efficacy and well-being were significant outcomes they would anticipate from developing SEL skills. This finding is significant, as it highlights a possible way of ameliorating the problems in the learning environment. Schools, where these interventions are implemented, may become places of safety and growth for young people.

Furthermore, the voice of participating educators concurs with other studies worldwide, suggesting that educators benefit personally and professionally from being aware of, and implementing SEL interventions. The following quote from an educator from KZN illustrate this: "Educators will be effective in what they do; they will be more productive and fulfilled. They will also be able to look into areas of their own lives and make positive changes that will not only be beneficial to themselves, but also to the learners".

In summary, the response from the educators emphasises how a matrix of SEL skills are critical for future readiness and life after school. Learners are not only future workers; they are also future adults, parents, role models, citizens, and future decision-makers. This finding resonates with the findings of other studies worldwide. (Jagers *et al*., 2019; Jones, McGarrah & Kahn, 2019; Nishina *et al*., 2019; Schonert-Reichl, 2019; Yoder, 2015; OECD, 2020). CASEL (n.d.) asserts that SEL skills could help address various forms of inequity, empower young people and adults to co-create thriving schools and contribute to safe, healthy, and equitable communities.

5. Conclusion

The perspectives of participating educators support a case for developing effective interventions to impart and develop SEL skills, not only for learners, but also for educators. In South Africa, where unemployment is rated as one of the highest in the world, youth need to become equipped with essential skills to do what they can, with the available resources to earn sustainable livelihoods in an environment where informal labour markets prevail. SEL skills have been referred to as a key component of employability in the Fourth Industrial Revolution of the 21st century. If educators in South Africa perspective is that SEL skills would ameliorate some of the problems in the learning environment, whilst providing learners with important skills to make a transition from education to the workplace, then it is essential to equip educators and learners with contextually relevant SEL skills interventions.

Several studies within the South African context suggest that interventions would ameliorate problems encountered by both educators and learners in the learning environment (Engelbrecht *et al*., 2015; Matoti, 2010; Theron, 2020; Ungar & Theron, 2020; Zins *et al*., 2003). In South Africa, we need to be mindful of developing future readiness programmes that are formulated from our needs, rather than using theories and practices, which may not be relevant for our context. A strong case can be made for implementing SEL skills interventions to advance the South African learning environment (Zins *et al*., 2003; Solberg *et al*. 2020).

Grounded theory states a reality not the reality and remains open to refinement. Thus, further research to understand the perspectives of learners is recommended before an appropriate contextual intervention can be created. Theron (2020) advocates for practitioners in the community to better understand resources that matter most for specific groups of youth and educators themselves, and to tailor multisystemic interventions accordingly. Hence, the voice of the youth and educators, within different contexts, needs to be heard and considered. It would be prudent to collaborate with educators, learners and policymakers, to co-construct effective interventions that develop SEL skills within formal support structures, to benefit all those in the learning environment.

Acknowledgments

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

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