

## FROM ASSESSMENT TO ENACTMENT: FIVE YEARS OF RESEARCH ON EDUCATORS' SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL) COMPETENCIES

Merav Esther Hemi<sup>1,2</sup>, & Ronen Kasperski<sup>2,1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*SEL-C Simulation Center, Shaanan Academic Religious Teachers' College (Israel)*

<sup>2</sup>*Department for Inclusive Education, Gordon Academic college for Education (Israel)*

### Abstract

Social-emotional learning (SEL) has been increasingly recognized as a central component of educators' professional functioning, well-being, and instructional effectiveness. However, research on educators' SEL has often remained fragmented, focusing on isolated interventions, single assessment tools, or narrowly defined outcomes. The present paper integrates findings from a multi-year program of research examining educators' SEL across assessment, developmental differences, simulation-based learning, and enactment in professional contexts. Drawing on a sequence of quantitative and qualitative, intervention-based, and simulation-oriented studies, we synthesize evidence from the development and refinement of the EduSEL-R - a questionnaire specifically designed for educators; investigations of individual differences across educators' career stages, and studies examining the effects of clinical simulations on SEL development and enactment of educators. The integrated findings highlight three central insights: (a) educators' SEL can be reliably assessed using profession-specific instruments; (b) SEL competencies vary across career stages and do not develop linearly through experience alone; and (c) different types of simulation-based learning - ranging from active participation to mimetic learning-by-observation (across face-to-face, online, and video-based modalities) - support not only SEL development but also its enactment in complex, value-laden professional situations. Together, these findings contribute to a more integrated understanding of educators' SEL as a dynamic, contextually enacted professional capacity and offer directions for research, teacher education, and professional development.

**Keywords:** *Educators' social-emotional learning, SEL assessment, simulation-based learning, teacher education, SEL enactment.*

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### 1. Introduction

Teaching is an inherently social and emotional profession (Hargreaves, 1998; Korthagen, 2017). Beyond subject-matter knowledge and pedagogical expertise, educators are required to regulate emotions, manage interpersonal relationships, resolve ethical dilemmas, and sustain caring yet bounded interactions with students, parents, and colleagues (Darling-Hammond, 2000). These everyday demands position social-emotional learning (SEL) not as a secondary skill set, but as a core component of professional practice.

Over the past two decades, SEL research has expanded substantially, largely focusing on students and school-wide programs (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). In this literature, educators are typically framed as implementers of SEL (Charlton et al., 2021) rather than as learners whose own social-emotional competencies shape classroom processes, professional well-being, and instructional quality. As a result, empirical research on educators' SEL has often relied on generic adult measures or indirect indicators, limiting both conceptual clarity and cumulative knowledge building.

In response to these limitations, our research program has pursued a coherent line of inquiry into educators' SEL over approximately five years. This program has combined the development of profession-specific assessment tools, empirical mapping of individual differences across career stages, and examination of learning processes - particularly simulation-based learning - that support SEL development and enactment. Our work is grounded in established SEL frameworks, particularly the model proposed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), which conceptualizes SEL as comprising self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020). This conceptualization informed both the development of assessment tools and the design of learning interventions examined across the studies synthesized in this paper.

## 2. Overview of the research program

The findings presented in this paper derive from a sustained line of research conducted over five years, aimed at conceptualizing educators' social-emotional learning (SEL) as a professional capacity. The program began by addressing the lack of profession-specific assessment tools, leading to the development and validation of EduSEL (Hemi & Kasperski, 2023) and its subsequent refinement into EduSEL-R, with expanded scope and improved psychometric validity (Kasperski & Hemi, 2024). As these instruments were applied across diverse samples, the research focus shifted toward examining variability in educators' SEL across career stages, revealing non-linear developmental patterns that challenge assumptions of growth through experience alone (Hemi, 2025; Kasperski, 2023).

Building on these insights, later phases of the program investigated how educators' SEL can be intentionally developed through simulations-based pedagogies. These studies examined the continuum from active participation in clinical and online simulations (Hemi et al., 2025; Kasperski & Hemi, 2022; Kasperski & Crispel, 2022; Kasperski et al., 2025; Levin et al., 2023) to mimetic learning-by-observation across face-to-face, online, and video-based modalities (Kasperski & Crispel, 2022; Kasperski et al., 2023). Most recently, the research extended beyond self-reported competencies to examine how SEL is enacted within complex, value-laden professional interactions, highlighting the situated and integrated nature of educators' social-emotional functioning (Hemi et al., under review; Kasperski & Hemi, under review).

## 3. Integrated findings

The development of EduSEL and its refined version, EduSEL-R, addressed a central gap in the literature: the absence of valid, profession-specific tools for assessing educators' SEL. Initial validation of the original EduSEL (Hemi & Kasperski, 2023) revealed a three-factor structure (cognitive, emotional, and social), aligning with Jones and Bouffard's (2012) framework. Subsequently, following the addition of expert-reviewed items designed to broaden the assessment scope the EduSEL-R yielded a stable four-factor structure, comprising self-management, ethical problem solving, self- and social awareness, and relationship skills, which better aligns with the CASEL framework. EduSEL-R demonstrated high internal consistency and strong structural validity across large and diverse samples (Hemi & Kasperski, 2023; Kasperski & Hemi, 2024). Importantly, the factor structure reflects both alignment with established SEL frameworks and adaptation to the ethical and relational demands of educational practice, particularly through the emergence of ethical problem solving as a distinct dimension.

Across multiple studies, educators' SEL competencies were found to differ meaningfully across career stages. Preservice educators, beginner teachers, and experienced educators showed distinct profiles in overall SEL and in specific competency domains, particularly within cognitive-emotional dimensions such as awareness and regulation (Hemi, 2025; Kasperski, 2023). These findings challenge assumptions of linear SEL development through accumulated experience. Instead, they suggest that certain competencies may plateau or decline without intentional support, underscoring the importance of structured learning opportunities throughout educators' careers.

Intervention studies employing online and face-to-face clinical simulations, as well as video-based simulations consistently demonstrated that educators' SEL competencies are responsive to targeted learning experiences (Hemi et al., 2025; Kasperski & Crispel, 2022; Kasperski & Hemi, 2022; Kasperski et al., 2023, 2025; Levin et al., 2023). Improvements were observed across career stages, with particularly strong gains among preservice educators. At the same time, the magnitude and nature of change varied by experience level, indicating that simulation-based learning interacts with educators' developmental positions and prior professional schemas. These differential effects highlight the importance of aligning simulation design and facilitation with participants' career stages.

More recent studies in the program extended beyond self-reported competencies to examine SEL enactment. Analyses of simulated professional interactions revealed that educators do not enact SEL as isolated skills but as integrated responses to complex, emotionally and ethically charged situations (Hemi et al., under review; Kasperski & Hemi, under review). Simulation contexts enabled close examination of how emotional regulation, ethical judgment, and relational strategies co-occur in practice. These findings support a view of educators' SEL as a situated, enactable capacity rather than a static individual attribute.

## 4. Discussion

The integrated findings from this research program advance understanding of educators' SEL in several important ways. *First*, they demonstrate that educators' SEL can be reliably and meaningfully assessed using profession-specific instruments. The development of EduSEL and EduSEL-R provides a methodological foundation for cumulative research and evaluation in this area. *Second*, the findings indicate

that educators' SEL is developmentally patterned but non-linear. Differences across career stages, together with evidence of responsiveness to intervention, suggest that SEL competencies are shaped by both experience and learning opportunities rather than by professional tenure alone. *Third*, the convergence of assessment, intervention, and enactment findings highlights the unique contribution of simulation-based learning. Simulations appear particularly well suited to supporting educators' SEL because they combine experiential, reflective, and mimetic learning processes within emotionally authentic professional scenarios.

Taken together, these findings support conceptualizing educators' SEL as a dynamic, integrated professional capacity that develops through situated learning and is expressed through enactment in relational practice.

## 5. Implications and future directions

The integrated evidence presented here carries several implications. For research, validated tools such as EduSEL-R enable more precise investigation of SEL trajectories and intervention effects. For teacher education and professional development, the findings support the systematic integration of simulation-based learning to foster SEL across career stages. For policy and program design, the results caution against assumptions that SEL develops naturally over time and underscore the need for intentional, sustained support. Future research should continue to examine how SEL enactment transfers from simulated contexts to everyday practice and how organizational conditions shape educators' opportunities to enact social-emotional competencies.

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