



Book Reviews

The books reviewed here are all relevant to the concept of social and emotional learning (SEL). The first, *Is This Autism? A Guide for Clinicians and Everyone Else*, examines the social and emotional needs of children, adolescents and adults who are neurodiverse. What is unique about this book is that the authors are neurodiverse, and they took advice from a panel of autistic people as they wrote it. The second edited book, *Assessing Competencies for Social and Emotional Learning: Conceptualization, Development, and Applications*, is written by leading experts in the field of SEL assessment. The third book, *Bully Blocking: Empowering Students to Manage Bullying. A Guidebook for Teachers, Parents and Counsellors*, gives a wealth of practical advice to educators, mental health professionals and parents on how to help those children who are being bullied at school and how to build up their self-confidence, self-esteem and resilience. Each will be of interest to readers of IJEE.

Helen Cowie
Reviews Editor

1. *Is This Autism? A Guide for Clinicians and Everyone Else*

Author:	Henderson, D. and Wayland, S. with White, J.
Publisher:	Routledge
Publication Country:	USA
Year of Publication:	2023
ISBN:	978-1-032-15023-9 (hbk), 978-1-032-15022-2 (pbk), 978-1-003-242113-0 (ebk)

This amazing book, written by two eminent clinicians, themselves neurodiverse, offers us a unique framework for considering autism and takes the reader on a fascinating journey into the minds of autistic people. As Cook (2024, p.1) proposes in a recent article that also challenges traditional conceptualisations about neurodiversity:

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- Neurodiversity is a natural and valuable form of human diversity, but current educational practices often focus on diagnosis and conformity rather than embracing differences in thinking and learning.
- Teachers may face challenges in providing inclusive education due to external pressures and regulatory frameworks. Additionally, attitudes and misconceptions about neurodiversity can further impede inclusive education and prevent the adaptation of teaching methods to cater to diverse student needs.
- Combined with a focus on individualised provision of adaptive learning opportunities, teacher education programmes should enable a broader understanding of neurodiversity and inclusion principles, challenging the myth of the ‘normal’ child and preparing all teachers to respond to neurodiverse learners effectively.
- Future research should explore teachers' conceptualizations of neurodiversity, the development of their understanding and the impact on inclusive pedagogy, while considering the perspectives of neurodiverse communities.

Donna Henderson and Sarah Wayland have developed neuro-affirming practice and integrate their experience and knowledge with the perspectives of autistic people, including those on the *autistic advisory board*, that guided them as they wrote. The authors emphasise the strengths of autism but also point out the many everyday challenges that autistic people face, often living with a persistent feeling that they don't fit in or are somehow “different”. Yet the problem is less to do with them, the authors argue, than with the stress of living with the *mismatch* between their nervous system and a world that is designed for those who are non-autistic.

As the authors know from their wide experience as clinicians, many autistic people are misdiagnosed. The point of seeking a diagnosis should be to understand the person and to observe their developmental journey in the context of their environment. Above all, the diagnosis must be carried out with compassion. In contrast to the mainstream medical model which tends to pathologise autism, the authors offer us a neurodiversity paradigm which has at its core the following beliefs (pp. 7-8):

- There is no *normal*. Brains come in many varieties; no two brains are alike; and there is no better or worse. Moreover, neurodiversity confers a competitive advantage to our species.
- Autism is part of human biodiversity and on an individual level is an inherent part of a person's identity.
- Disability results from a poor fit between a person and their environment. The lack of environmental support of flexibility is disabling.

Unlike the medical model which aims to find a “cure” or make the person “look less autistic”, the neurodiversity model aims to help the autistic person be their authentic self in a way that works in their life. Treatment, therefore, would also involve changing the environment to shift negative perceptions and create better support systems. Importantly, this model involves changing the cultural narrative about autism.

As the authors indicate, autism has many variations but at its core it means having a different nervous system. This means that people with this kind of nervous system experience, process and respond to the world differently from non-autistics in ways that can include heightened sensitivity to external stimulation (like noise or bright lights) and to internal stimuli (such as hunger, thirst and pain), communication (preferring a more direct communication style than is not always culturally acceptable) and information processing (e.g. being more detail-focussed and less context-driven). This often results in being *overwhelmed* and *misunderstood*. Consequently, autistic people have a much higher risk of experiencing anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, eating disorders, and even suicidal thoughts.

Here's an account by an autistic person, Elena-Maria, about being aware of a communication difficulty but having no control over it at the time.

My conversational dominance came out when I laid out in detail how Chernobyl happened; then I carried over – without any input from others – to the ExxonMobil accident, and so on. I was so passionate about the topic and felt that I just needed to explain better and kept going until everyone was gone. I feel awful now. I knew they didn't want to hear it – why did I continue?

Here Elena-Maria demonstrated her difficulty with turn-taking when in conversation with others – the typical reciprocity that non-autistic people experience when they chat with others. She took up too much time herself and talked “at” her conversation partners instead of “with” them. She was awkward in reading social cues at the time but, on reflection afterwards, was aware that she spoke too much and that her audience quickly lost interest in her monologue.

The authors go into detail about the major challenges that autistic people face, to include reciprocity, nonverbal communication, relationships, flexibility, intense or atypical interests and sensory differences. In each case, they parallel what the clinicians and researchers know about a particular aspect of autism with the lived experience of the experts – that is, autistic people themselves – who provide the reader with their reflections on the challenges that they face in their interactions with others. The chapter on relationships is especially insightful.

Part 2 of the book alerts readers to patterns of behaviour and communication that can enable them to consider whether someone they know may be autistic. As in Part 1, each aspect contains reflections from one of the members of the expert panel who can provide deeper insights from the inside. The book ends on a note of optimism by describing autistic strengths. For example, someone who has great difficulty in listening to others and so may feel overwhelmed and even appear “impaired” to others, for example, in a restaurant where there is a lot of loud background noise, may make a brilliant audio engineer where their ability to analyse different sounds or edit voice samples may come into its own. Autistic people often have cognitive strengths, such as the ability to process information in ways that others do not, so enabling them to develop innovative problem-solving abilities and insights. Others show unusual abilities to discover and organise patterns in a wide range of domains. As one autistic person describes it (p. 237):

I'm really good at figuring out what the problem is and coming up with effective solutions. I think it's systemizing – and, in particular, I think it's systemizing around people. It's noticing the patterns in what people say and do and figuring out how to predict outcomes based on these observations.

This book has a follow-up volume, *Is This Autism? A Companion Guide for Diagnosing*, written specifically for clinicians to help them diagnose and negotiate collaborative enquiry around meaningful recommendations.

References

Cook, A. (2024). Conceptualisations of neurodiversity and barriers to inclusive pedagogy in schools: A perspective article, *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 00, 1–10.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12656>

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2. *Assessing Competencies for Social and Emotional Learning: Conceptualization, Development, and Applications*

Author: Jeremy Burrus, Samuel H. Rikoon, and Meghan W. Brenneman (Eds.)
Publisher: Routledge
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Social and emotional learning assessment has come a long way in the past 20 years. It has long been acknowledged that school is a place where students learn how to behave as well as to read, write, and do arithmetic. But only more recently has it become apparent that social and emotional learning is a primary function for schools. Misbehaviour has traditionally been treated as an impediment to learning, and social and emotional aspects as mere background or contextual information to help interpret the important stuff--student achievement growth. Consider the international comparison studies, such as OECD's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Ikeda, 2023) which launched in 1997 to evaluate the mathematics, reading, and science achievements of students around the world, although always including significant

background questionnaires. As a reflection of how much things have changed, 20 years after PISA, OECD launched the Survey on Social and Emotional Skills (SSES) (OECD, 2021), which asked students about their social and emotional competencies, not as background for understanding achievement, but as the focus, the basis for comparing schools, regions, and cultures on their progress in fulfilling one of schools' main functions, teaching social and emotional competencies. The background has moved to the foreground.

It is in this context that one can appreciate the significance of the comprehensive and well-rounded set of chapters making up Burros, Rikoon, and Brenneman's (2023) *Assessing Competencies for Social and Emotional Learning*. The editors of this collection have assembled essential master classes on frameworks, standards, validity arguments, builder guides, technology enhancements, scoring and reporting methods, and a variety of social emotional learning (SEL) use cases from formative classroom assessments to high-stakes admissions measures. As the editors point out in their fine introductory chapter, chapter authors are "many of the field's leading thinkers in SEL assessment." It also is the case, as the editors assert, that this is a unique volume. While the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has produced a useful edited volume on SEL (Durlak et al., 2015) it focused on defining SEL and demonstrating it can be taught, with some discussion of measurement. In contrast, measurement is the focus of the present volume. The now defunct CASEL Assessment Work group produced and made available on their website useful briefs aimed at practitioners on some of the topics addressed in the present volume. But as Burrus and the editors argue, the present volume provides much needed in-depth treatments that should prove useful to a broad audience of researchers, practitioners, and policy makers, or as Hamilton points out in her excellent Foreword, "for anyone who is measuring or promoting SEL and for those who will engage in the future research and development efforts that will be crucial to move the field in a constructive direction" (p. xx).

The book is laid out in logical clusters of conceptualization, development, and applications (as the title says) and includes Hamilton's Foreword, bookend introductory and summary chapters by the editors, and thirteen appropriate length (15 – 20 page) chapters in between, enough to adequately cover the terrain, without needless abstruse meanderings, with informative literature reviews to provide guidance to the reader who wants more. The chapters are uniformly well written and engaging, with a nice mixture of text with pictures, figures, tables, bulleted lists, and equations, reflecting the editors' selection of first tier contributors and undoubtedly a thoughtful editing touch.

Some highlights along the way include Hamilton's brief but insightful history of SEL and her placement of SEL in the practical school context. Casillas, Roberts, and Jones provide a valuable synthesis of frameworks and taxonomies. However, here the reader might be left still wondering about the fundamental differences between the Big 5 framework, steeped in measurement and popular in personality and industrial-organizational psychology, and the CASEL framework, derived from an intervention and developmental perspective, which has a stronghold in the K-12 SEL world, and whether the differences between frameworks ought to be resolved or a winner declared, and if so, whether the victory is by force or persuasion. Their transtheoretical framework is a start. The following chapter by Bulotsky-Shearer, Alamos, Futterer, and Bailey provides an essential developmental perspective on SEL and helpfully provides State SEL developmental

standards which many will find useful. However, the chapter also implicitly points to the tension between the Big 5 and SEL framing—or more precisely, the measurement versus developmental/intervention perspective. Specifically, their developmental timeline suggests continual SEL growth, in much the same way academic achievement grows steadily from Kindergarten to 12th grade. But data from the California Office to Reform Education shows anything but continued growth in SEL skills—some skills go up, some go down, some zigzag, but there is nothing like continuous growth. Does this reflect “adolescent storm and stress” or bad measures? The jury seems to be out.

The next two chapters, by Mattern and Walton and by Rodriguez, round out the conceptualization cluster, covering the validity argument and standards for SEL assessments, respectively. Both are written from the measurement perspective by prominent contributors to the SEL measurement field. Mattern and Walton provide a useful walk through the sources of validity evidence for SEL measures along with challenges for each, although there might have been a missed opportunity with non-rating-scale style assessments such as situational judgment tests or newer performance or “direct measure” assessments such as what OECD is currently attempting to implement and that Russo-Ponsaran, Karls, and McKown cover in their chapter later in the book. Rodriguez’ thorough standards chapter covers much of the background for technically sound SEL assessment—this should be mandatory reading for anyone engaged in serious and large-scale SEL evaluations.

The middle, Part II, cluster comprises a set of exciting and diverse, state-of-the-art SEL assessment methods that begin to paint the picture of a field on the move. DiPerna, Lei, Anthony, and Elliott’s contribution is a natural follow-up to Rodriguez’ chapter. They provide a step-by-step workshop on how a high-quality SEL assessment is developed, covering all phases including scoring and reporting. Importantly, although not trumpeted, is that these are field-tested methods, not speculations from behind the desk. Primi, Hauck-Filho, and Valentini focus on a specific, but widespread and vexing problem in interpretations of SEL assessment results—response biases in SEL self-reports. In addition to providing a comprehensive review of a variety of response biases, the authors discuss approaches to mitigate these biases, from item development to administration method to scoring. Given that the vast majority of all SEL assessments are self-reports, the authors provide useful suggestions that can be applied immediately in both research and operational testing.

But not all SEL assessments are self-reports. In the next chapter, Russo-Ponsaran et al. discuss the use of technology to go beyond paper-and-pencil rating scales to measure the CASEL competencies, covering both advantages and challenges. They also provide a brief but important review of on-the-horizon next steps in SEL assessment, such as ecological momentary assessment, video games, eye-tracking, and biosensors, which are already used in research but not yet in operational, large-scale SEL assessment. Stealth assessments, the topic covered in the Stoeffler, Rosen, and Way chapter, are another form of on-the-horizon SEL assessments that involve a learning or game-like environment, in which students are assessed (stealthily) on their progress. The challenge here is mapping actions to evidence for constructs, which is accomplished with Mislevy’s evidence-centered design approach. The authors demonstrate the stealth approach across two tasks, which supports the promise of the method. In the final chapter in this cluster, Zenisky takes on the reporting challenge, borrowing from what has proven successful in reporting on academic achievement progress and applying these procedures

to SEL assessment. The chapter provides a clear example of how synergies between cognitive and SEL domains can accelerate progress in the SEL assessment field.

The final, Part III, cluster focusses on applications. Hessen, Lee, and Kuncel provide a definitive treatment of SEL use in admissions, pointing out that admissions is not limited to selection. They also include an extremely handy table that compactly but thoroughly summarizes the case of admissions use, in the form of methods, research findings, future directions, and practice recommendations. Elliott, Anthony, Lei, and DiPerna describe a set of assessments used in large-scale K-12 studies that have served both as formative assessments and as impact measures in SEL intervention studies. The level of detail provided is useful for practitioners who might have a need to implement SEL assessment in school. The measures are unique in being aligned with the CASEL framework, and they include mental health as well as progress monitoring scales. Luther and Zillmer also review the mental health application, relating SEL constructs to the mental health language of internalizing and externalizing symptoms, and well-being. Both of these chapters are important, cross-disciplinary attempts to unite SEL considerations to the related field of mental health, fields which have different origins, terminologies, and research literatures, but also a common goal of promoting healthy personal development. Berg, Diffenderffer, and Osher provide an excellent overview of school climate assessments, which go hand-in-hand with SEL assessments but are typically targeted at the school or classroom level, and used to evaluate the degree to which school conditions support SEL development. There seems to be an overwhelming number of climate assessments and frameworks in existence, but the authors provide a sensible summary of critical dimensions and constructs to tame the landscape. Finally, the book editors provide a useful summary at the end of the book.

What is missing? Besides the chapter by Brazilians Primi et al., which covered geography-independent methodology and not the first-of-its-kind SENNA study of system wide social emotional assessment in Brazil (Primi et al., 2021), all chapters were written by authors residing in the United States, covering American research, emphasizing uniquely American topics such as racial reckoning and the Every Child Succeeds Act (ESSA). These are important topics, and the U.S. is an important player and consumer of SEL, but there are also significant SEL activities outside the U.S. starting with OECD's SSES project (which is in the middle of a second round), and including research and applications in Europe, Malta, Japan, Korea, Singapore, and Brazil. Perhaps a Volume 2 might wade into international territory?

Another missing piece was views from outside psychology. Economists have made significant contributions to the foundations of social and emotional learning, for example, demonstrating its importance to education, the workplace, and life (Kautz et al., 2014), and considering the relationship between economic preferences and personality (Almund et al., 2011). Most importantly, economists are arguably the ones most responsible for elevating SEL concerns to the policy level—as the psychologist Daniel Kahneman noted in an Association for Psychological Science symposium many years ago, if you want to influence policy, make friends with an economist.

Nor does Artificial Intelligence (AI) have much to say here. The book writing was completed in 2021 and ChatGPT first appeared in November 2022, and so the authors could not have anticipated the tectonic shift

created by that event. But there already are significant influences of AI on measurement, including SEL measurement, and had the timing worked out more favorably, it would have been thought-provoking to hear speculations about future AI impacts on SEL assessment.

It might also have been useful to hear about how SEL skills are assessed in the workforce. They are not called SEL skills in the workforce; they are referred to as soft skills or durable skills. But nevertheless, those working on the assessment of those skills in the workforce, for employee screening and program evaluation, face some of the same challenges in measuring soft skills as education researchers face in measuring SEL competencies. There are differences but combining efforts or at least being aware of what is going on in the other field would be productive for researchers on both sides of the application sector fence.

But these are not limitations of the current volume, but more like wish lists for future efforts. The book as it stands is the first in-depth, comprehensive treatment of SEL assessments in education. The chapters individually are quite informative and essential reading for researchers in the SEL field. The editors have performed a great service by organizing the set in a way that most readers will likely find useful. The editors and chapter authors are to be commended for contributing a compelling edited volume. The field has indeed advanced significantly over the past twenty years with undoubtedly more to come. In the words of Rahm Emanuel, "We have come a long way and we have a little further to go," or perhaps more appropriately, to quote Martin Luther King, Jr. "We have come a long, long way, but we have a long way to go."

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3. *Bully Blocking: Empowering Students to Manage Bullying. A Guidebook for Teachers, Parents and Counsellors*

Author: Evelyn M. Field
Publisher: Amba Press
Publication Country: Australia
Year of Publication: 2023
ISBN: 978192607843 (pbk), 9781922607850 (ebk)

Evelyn Field is an author with wide-ranging experience as a teacher, counsellor, psychologist and speaker. In this book, she builds on the success of her previous school bullying books, *Bully Busting* (1999) and *Bully Blocking* (2007), with up-to-date information on recent research and a new section on the damaging impact of bullying on the young person's brain. She also takes account of the effect of workplace bullying on school staff and how this may influence the ways in which adults relate to the children in their care. She has useful guidance for parents and a wide range of survival skills that the children may implement to protect themselves from being bullied. This is a collaborative book in which adults and children together can work out strategies for preventing bullying and for managing it when it occurs. It is an empowering book filled with good, practical ideas for strengthening children's resilience and creating social contexts where relationships can flourish and where inclusion is fostered. As Evelyn Field proposes, bullying is often presented as a "doom and gloom" story but here she provides a wide range of options that paint an optimistic and empowering picture.

She acknowledges that bullying is widespread in all social and cultural contexts. But she offers wise advice on how bullied individuals can stand up to those who bully them. She identifies some of the main reasons why some children become the targets of bullying, without in any way blaming them. At the same time, she shows understanding of the underlying reasons why some children bully others, quoting research that indicates the long-term risks involved in being a bully, to include a greater likelihood of becoming a criminal, of being involved in domestic abuse, or of having poor interpersonal workplace skills. She also explains how important it is for the target child to understand the mindset of the bully in order to develop more effective strategies for protecting themselves. Not only that, she describes the main ways in which parents may unwittingly promote bullying behaviours and gives guidance on how their ways of relating to their child could change, with positive results for all.

Each chapter has classroom exercises that the teacher can implement in order to create opportunities for children to explore the nature of bullying, the damage it does and the constructive ways in which they can help to prevent it.

This book is a valuable resource for teachers, healthcare professionals, counsellors and parents. I recommend it.

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