Translating Human Development Research Into Practice
Notes From the Field

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Adolescence is a critical stage in human development. It is the time when one's identity and relationship to society truly begin to take shape, and the decisions that educators make when working with adolescents can help determine the life course. I have had the privilege of engaging with this essential moment in people's lives in a variety of professional contexts, as a teacher, a researcher, a volunteer, and, since fall 2020, as a doctoral student in Comparative Human Development at the University of Chicago. In the course of my doctoral studies, I have been able to more substantively engage with the critical role that social context plays in one's moral, behavioral, and cognitive development. When I became aware of the Advancing Education in Muslim Societies (AEMS) research agenda and its groundbreaking report, "Mapping the Terrain," which surveys young people and educators in 15 Muslim societies on a host of Social Emotional Learning skills with the goal to identify what

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causes social transformation and personal change, I was immediately intrigued. Over the last six months I have been lucky enough to partner with the AEMS team to share the field-based knowledge gained on positive human attributes and to shape the study's reach by highlighting implications for education policy and practice. Through this work I have connected with researchers from all over the world. I am excited to share some of my learnings from the study's report and my time in and around classrooms with the readers of the *Journal of Education in Muslim Societies* and to contribute what little I can to a movement that incorporates human development research into the day-to-day experiences of educators, students, and families (see https://iiit.org/en/mapping-the-terrain/ for the full report).

WHAT DO WE MEAN WHEN WE SAY SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING SKILLS?

Social Emotional Learning, or SEL, and its connection to well-being is receiving unprecedented attention. A recent OECD report emphasized, "The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted that schools are not only crucial as education provider[s], but also as a place to respond to socio-emotional needs and support the well-being of vulnerable students. Schools can ideally be a safe space for vulnerable students, providing psychological support, responding to their socialization needs and creating a sense of community" (OECD, 2020).

Worldwide, educators are acknowledging the need for interventions that go beyond traditional academic objectives and focus instead on the whole child. This is a positive development, but for this acknowledgment to turn into action, more work needs to be done to determine what the new SEL objectives should be, what strategies can be used to teach these essential life skills, and how these can be measured. "Mapping the Terrain" is particularly important in this space because most of the work on Muslim societies has highlighted deficits, while we take an asset-based approach. Through a review of the existing literature, "Mapping the Terrain" examined a host of SEL skills, and specifically those related to universal Islamic values, under three umbrella categories: open-mindedness, responsibility, and the collaborative collective. In doing so, it hopes to provide baseline measures of these essential SEL skills that can be used to inform subsequent policy and pedagogical decision-making. It is important to note that, by their very nature, measurements of SEL skills will never be as precise as

those of traditional learning objectives. A student cannot "achieve mastery" in open-mindedness in the same way that they might with a particular math skill such as the ability to accurately reduce fractions. Exponents of SEL in classrooms should embrace this ambiguity rather than shy away from it—focusing on SEL requires educators to adopt a long-term vision for student success. Cultivating students' open-mindedness is a daily objective for the duration of their time in school, not a discrete one completed at the end of a unit and left behind. In the following pages, I will go through some of the skills included in each of these three umbrella categories, highlighting effective strategies that educators can employ.

Open-Mindedness

The construct of open-mindedness includes values and skills such as empathy, meaning making, problem-solving, life satisfaction, and hope. The literature on open-mindedness indicates that it is seen as a virtue or a value but at the same time as a skill including the ability to think things through, to adapt and maneuver in solving problems with critical thinking skills, and to examine all sides and perspectives of a problem or situation (Proyer et al., 2011).

Teaching Empathy

In this study empathy is defined as the ability to understand others' emotion, the willingness to care, feel, and take the perspective of others and to be responsive to their needs. Empathy can be developed internally within the four walls of a classroom by encouraging students to share across lines of difference. Technological developments in video conferencing and long-distance communication have created new opportunities for empathy to be advanced. A 2017 study by Wegerif et al. evaluated a program aimed at creating dialogue between classrooms in 20 different countries. They found that videoconferencing and blogging between students significantly increased empathy, and specifically *interreligious and intercultural understanding*. This increased empathy also bolstered students' resilience against extremist narratives, radicalization, and recruitment into violent extremism. There are certainly technological constraints that need to be considered, but educators across the globe that are interested in developing their students' empathy should explore opportunities for the spontaneous sharing of personal lifestyle details with students from different countries through blogging and videoconferencing. Many young people are already developing these skills independently with their online activity, but there

should be more opportunities to promote deeper relationships across lines of difference in a structured and deliberate way.

Teaching Meaning Making

Meaning making has been defined as a "sense of coherence or understanding of existence, a sense of purpose in one's life, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of fulfillment" (Ho et al., 2010, p. 2). Purpose and meaning are important developmental resources for adolescents, helping youth and their healthy transition to adulthood (Burrow et al., 2010). Lack of meaning and purpose results in negative consequences, such as identity crisis (Erikson, 1968). Helping students make sense of their lives can be part of a larger project of engaging young people in their own identity development. Tools like the Social Identity Wheel can be used to explore students' various social identities, and the open-endedness of these exercises means that they can be applied in different contexts without losing their relevance.

The Social Identity Wheel worksheet is an activity that encourages students to consider their social identities and reflect on the various ways those identities become visible or more keenly felt at different times, and how those identities impact the ways others perceive or treat them. The worksheet prompts students to fill in various social identities (such as race, gender, sex, ability/disability, sexual orientation, etc.) and further categorize those identities based on which matter most in their self-perception and which matter most in others' perception of them. The meaning one makes of their identity is highly dependent on context, and the exercise asks students to reflect on how these meanings are socially constructed and how their own identities relate to those of their peers. Once students have assessed their intersecting identities, they can return to them in making meaning across the rest of the school year and throughout their lives.

Responsibility

The construct of responsibility includes values and skills such as self-regulation, emotional regulation, self-efficacy, and gratitude. Bandura (1989, 2001) proposes that human beings are not passive creatures controlled by their environments and able to react only to their contextual and social cues; rather, they have agency and the capability to proactively manage and control their functions and actions. This characteristic gives individuals the ability and responsibility to thrive and grow and to influence their social environment and other individuals.

Teaching Self-Regulation

In this study self-regulation is defined as "generated thoughts, feelings, and actions that are planned and cyclically adapted to the attainment of personal goals" (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 14). Self-regulation has long been a focus of academic instruction, and it has been shown to be a strong predictor of academic achievement in math, science, reading, and writing. The tie between self-regulation and academic achievement is so well established that it is arguably the driving force in many educational reform efforts targeting inequity—think of "No Excuses" schools that aim to close racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps. The logic behind pedagogical constructs like SLANT ("Sit up, Listen, Ask and Answer Questions, Nod, Track the Speaker") follows that if young people can self-regulate their bodies in this way, then their minds will take in and retain knowledge regardless of the content. This is of course, an approach that is at best narrowly focused on academic achievement and at worst a type of oppressive body control that can feel better suited for a military academy than an elementary school. Nevertheless, the popularity of these strategies and their demonstrated success at achieving their desired outcomes is proof that self-regulation is something that can be taught; the question is how broadly we choose to conceive of self-regulation.

SEL-oriented educators are not simply interested in cultivating the self-control necessary for a young person to stay in their seat for the duration of a class period or to consistently complete their homework but also in building their capacity to self-monitor and evaluate their own behavior and modify or continue using appropriate strategies to achieve their goals. For educators, this requires a delicate balance of scaffolded support that gradually presents young people with the autonomy to self-regulate in various settings and situations. In order to do this well, educators need to be well versed in developmental psychology to know what is developmentally appropriate for the young people they are working with. They also need to think creatively about opportunities to teach self-regulation. Take, for example, one resource's list of 10 games that require no equipment and that promote self-regulation (Your Therapy Source, 2017). Expecting children to SLANT—and having consequences associated with failure to do so—may indeed build up a young person's self-regulation, but it does so in a punitive way largely devoid of joy. Many of the same skills can be built by playing "Simon Says" instead.

Teaching Emotional Regulation

Self-regulation is very closely tied to emotional regulation. A holistic approach to human psychology suggests that a person's emotional state and

their behavior are intimately linked. That being said, the skills involved in one's emotional regulation are distinct, and teaching them should be a priority for educators interested in their pupils' long-term well-being. Emotional regulation has been referred to as "a process through which individuals modulate their emotions consciously and non-consciously to respond appropriately to environmental demands" (Goubet & Chrysikou, 2019, p. 1). The last part, about responding appropriately to environmental demands is worth lingering on. First, it centers the reality that emotional expectations vary significantly depending on one's identity and the way that identity interacts with the external environment. The range of emotional expression considered acceptable for young girls and young boys in different contexts, for example, can be highly variable and may necessitate different coping strategies for two people who may be experiencing similar emotional triggers. This is important to keep in mind, especially when you consider the role educators play in constructing the learning environment. If we can build classrooms that provide safe opportunities for young people to emotionally regulate, and to explore different strategies for doing so, then we can build their toolbox of emotional responses and help them mature into adults with a healthy relationship to those emotions. For example, "mood meters" have been integrated into the curriculum of major school districts in the United States, and their complexity can be scaled up as young people build their vocabulary for recognizing and naming specific emotional states.

Mindfulness exercises, such as those for purposeful deep breathing at the start of an activity (Van Woerkom, 2020), can help young people focus and prepare to learn and also give them a tool for regulating their emotions in non-academic settings. Promoting the emotional regulation of young people should be an explicit goal for educators and one that is shared with students in the same way you might share academic goals. The best part is that most of these activities take up very little time and can be integrated into almost any existing classroom routine.

Teaching Self-Efficacy

Self- and emotional regulation on their own are enough for someone to adapt to and survive in most environments, but in order to thrive young people need to believe in their own ability to achieve goals and influence their environment. Self-efficacy affects how people think, feel, and behave. It influences one's decision to initiate an action, the types of goals one sets and activities one undertakes, and the level of effort, persistence, and time that

one is willing to spend in completing certain tasks (Bandura, 2006, 2017). Many studies support Bandura's claim that a person's beliefs in his or her ability to be successful in a task plays a more significant role in success than the capability itself. Self-efficacy is malleable and is influenced by four main sources: past performance accomplishment or mastery, vicarious experience, social persuasion, and physiological/psychological states (Bandura, 1986).

If we can give young people frequent opportunities to succeed (Wilson & Conyers, 2017) while situated in classrooms that affirm their identities (Buchanan-Rivera, 2019) that are staffed by educators that routinely and genuinely communicate their belief in them (APA, 2021), then we can take care of the first three sources of self-efficacy for students. Bandura's final source, physiological/ psychological states, is highly individualized and prone to influences outside of a classroom teacher's control. However, effective instruction and engagement with the previously mentioned self- and emotional regulatory strategies can equip young people with some of the tools they need to build lasting self-efficacy.

Collaborative Collective

The third umbrella category explored by the "Mapping the Terrain" study is a unique construct selected specifically for this study, aiming to capture the collective nature of Muslim-majority societies while accounting for the collaborative aspects required for a collective to work. The construct of the collaborative collective includes values and skills such as a collectivist orientation, sense of belonging, and forgiveness.

Promoting a Collaborative Collective

Deciding to bring the collectivist-individualist societal orientation into the classroom is an important initial task for educators when designing their classrooms even if they are not explicitly focusing on it. For example, the hyper-competitiveness driven by the global testing paradigm can promote a very individualistic approach to learning that sees academic achievement as a zero-sum game. When teachers venerate individual performance and academic achievement, they are promoting this culture. Viewing K-12 education as primarily a proving ground for young people to demonstrate their superiority (or inferiority) relative to their peers is an easy trap to fall into, and there is a whole vocabulary of programs organized around this idea: tracking, magnet schools, selective-enrollment, etc. This is understandably most acute in individualistic societies like the United States, but educational systems in more collectivist societies such as China

can suffer the consequences of individualism as well ("China's cutthroat academic competition is ruining a generation of youth," 2015).

Proponents of such an approach to teaching and learning will say that competition is a necessary driver of achievement and that competitive classrooms and schools prepare young people for the realities of a competitive adult world. Elements of this argument may be true, but research over the last several years into how children learn (Kirschner, 2011) along with a renewed emphasis on equity suggest that collaborative classrooms are not only more enjoyable but also more productive.

No matter the baseline orientation of the student body, teachers can promote collaboration in their classrooms. Some strategies for doing this include games that require working together as a community, specific roles for group work that necessitate every team member's contribution, and various brainstorming, discussion, and peer-feedback activities before and after individual work (Mulvahill, 2016). For students who are used to very individualistic academic tasks, there may be some initial challenges in implementing these sorts of collaborative exercises. But if a collectivist classroom is implemented with fidelity, then students will see the benefits of working with and learning from one another.

Cultivating a Sense of Belonging

In an academic setting, a sense of belonging is defined as students' perception of being supported, accepted, respected, and included in the institution (Goodenow, 1993). Shifting students' orientation toward their peers from one of competition to one of collaboration can itself go a long way toward giving students a sense of belonging in their classrooms. However, explicitly and deliberately focusing on building a community of learners will extend this sense of belonging to the classroom and school. Educators have known the importance of a strong community for a long time, and there are plenty of community-building resources available for different age groups and teaching styles (e.g., Minero, 2019). These can range from simple daily practices such as greeting each student by name at the door, to more comprehensive collaboration with students in the design and upkeep of their learning environment. Exciting new work into Youth-led Participatory Action Research (YPAR, 2015) trains young people to conduct systematic research to improve their lives, their communities, and the institutions intended to serve them. This sort of work has been shown to not only improve the sense of belonging and experience of young people in their present contexts but also to lead to their long-term engagement in

their future communities. The increase in the feeling of belonging to the school and community will also improve and elevate the sense of a collaborative collective.

Teaching and Modeling Forgiveness

In this study, forgiveness is defined as the ability and willingness to let go of hard feelings and the need to seek revenge on someone who has wronged the subject or committed a perceived injustice against the subject or others. Forgiveness is an essential part of a collaborative collective because people are social animals, and they rely on interacting with others. In order to be a positive member of a collective, you must be willing and able to forgive. Forgiveness is a deeply personal action, and the ways in which it is conceptualized are often deeply tied to one's particular social, cultural, and religious contexts. Teachers can model forgiveness (Linsin, n.d.) by purposefully modulating their own behavior and emotions and offering radical forgiveness to their students who misbehave or transgress—that is, forgiving fully and freely with no expectation for anything in return. When students see their teachers forgive their peers, they not only come to like and respect their teachers more, but they also learn an important lesson of the power of forgiveness, not only for the person on the receiving end but also for the forgiver themselves. A forgiving school culture (Zakrzewski, 2014) creates a more positive workplace and learning environment for every member of the school community.

AND SO, WHAT?

If we aim to raise a generation of young people who are open-minded, who feel a strong sense of personal responsibility, and who believe it is important to be part of a collaborative collective, then we can lay the groundwork for social and personal transformation. Incorporating these values into our educational systems will not come at the expense of traditional academic achievement, but rather these values should contribute to the development of well-rounded, highly capable individuals who can excel both within and beyond strictly academic contexts.

This study provides firsthand evidence of the current state of these values and competencies in education in countries that are often discussed in Western academic settings from a deficit-based perspective. "Mapping the Terrain" is primary research on Muslim youth carried out by researchers

who have firsthand knowledge of the contexts and are optimistic about the future of these youth and their societies. The focus on transformative and holistic educational goals and wellbeing is a global movement, and every part of the globe deserves to be represented in this discourse.

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