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## Chapter One

# What Is Social and Emotional Learning?



- \* What is your understanding of the term *Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)*?
- \* Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
  - » SEL is a fairly new concept in education.
  - » SEL and academics are two unrelated skill sets.
  - » SEL is meant only for very young children.
- \* How familiar are you with the following terms and concepts?
  - » *EI/EQ*
  - » *growth mindset*
  - » *social agency/agility*

It seems the term SEL is everywhere these days. For many educators, this is met with a collective sigh of relief. At long last, we are talking about more than just academics and standardized testing when it comes to providing students with a quality education. To others, however, the buzz about SEL may be cause for concern. Is SEL merely a trend? Is it just the flavor of the month that will soon fade away only to be replaced by the next big idea in education? And then there are those who see SEL as nothing more than a shiny new name for an age-old concept. Indeed, an argument can be made to support any of these perceptions. Therefore, to provide some context and a deeper understanding, let's drill down into the historical roots of SEL, starting with the meaning of *intelligence*.

## Measuring Intelligence

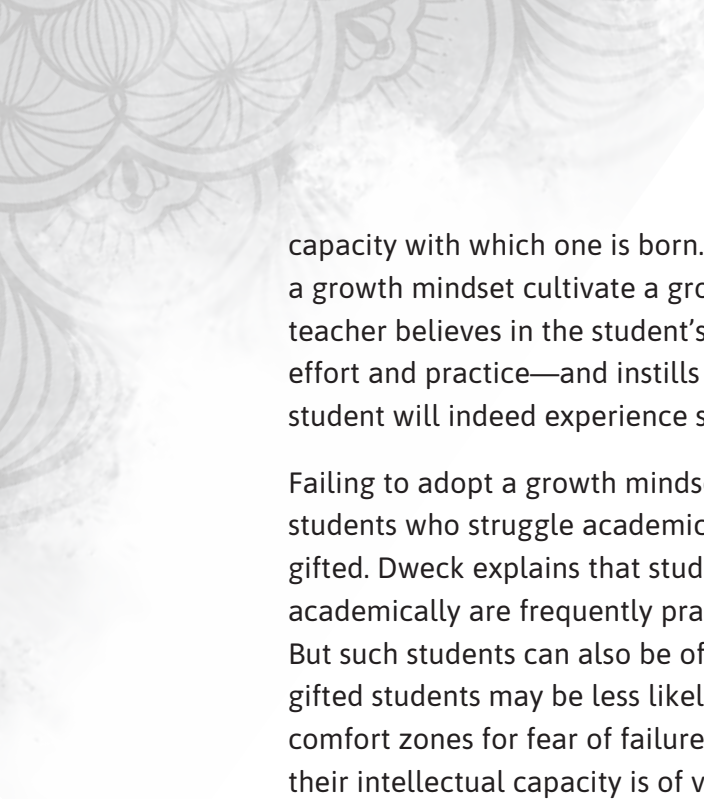
Early proponents of social and emotional learning include Howard Gardner and Daniel Goleman. Until Howard Gardner, a Harvard-educated developmental psychologist, published his theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI) in his 1983 book *Frames of Mind*, the field of education recognized only one form of human intelligence and only one method for measuring intelligence—the traditional IQ, or Intelligence Quotient. The IQ test sought to quantify the intellectual capacity of humans based on cognitive ability to solve a given set of problems. Gardner enlightened us with the concept that there is more than one type of intelligence. A decade later, Daniel Goleman (1995) expanded on Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences with his more specific theory of Emotional Intelligence (EI), later followed by his Social Intelligence theory (2006).

Gardner exposed how the concept of multiple intelligences impacts our entire education structure, which he refers to as the *uniform school*. The uniform school, Gardner explains, is one where all

students are treated in the same manner, taught in the same way, and assessed or tested in a standardized format. While this seems on the surface to be a fair approach to education, Gardner argues that “this supposed rationale [is] completely unfair. The uniform school picks out and is addressed to a certain kind of mind . . . the IQ or SAT mind” (1983, 5). Gardner makes the case that, for those among us whose brains think and process information differently from the uniform school mind, “school is certainly not fair to you” (1983, 5). More recently, the uniform school mind has been referred to as students learning to “do school” as opposed to real-world learning, or what we often hear referred to now as twenty-first-century learning skills.

Gardner believed that “intelligences are not fixed from birth” and “how intelligence is defined, developed, and demonstrated will differ from culture to culture” (Elias and Arnold 2006, 37). If we fast-forward to 2006, we find this point echoed in Carol Dweck’s theory of “a new psychology of success.” Dweck introduced the concept of *growth mindset*, which is “the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts” (2006, 5). Conversely, a *fixed mindset* is the belief that one is limited to the intellectual





capacity with which one is born. Dweck believes that teachers with a growth mindset cultivate a growth mindset in their students. If the teacher believes in the student's ability to learn and grow through effort and practice—and instills that belief in the student—the student will indeed experience success.

Failing to adopt a growth mindset can have negative effects on students who struggle academically as well as those considered gifted. Dweck explains that students who are exceptionally talented academically are frequently praised and revered for their intellect. But such students can also be of a fixed mindset. These academically gifted students may be less likely to venture out of their educational comfort zones for fear of failure (Dweck 2006). Believing that only their intellectual capacity is of value can, in a sense, stunt their growth in other areas of development.

