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Schools Owe Students Culturally- and Trauma-Informed Social and Emotional Learning

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Abstract: Social and emotional learning (SEL) refers to the process in which individuals develop the adequate knowledge and tools to understand, process, feel, and express their emotions across interpersonal and external relationships. There are five core competencies that guide SEL, developed by Collaborative of Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) which are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship building, and responsible decision-making. Many are encouraged by the prospect of offering SEL curricula across schools to mitigate classroom behavior, student-to-student and student-to-teacher relationships, and empower students to work towards their own goals. However, given the historical contexts of exclusivity and white normative curricula in the United States public education system, critics are reasonably concerned with SEL's ability to respond to the needs of our most underserved children. For this reason, schools adopting SEL frameworks must be centered on culturally- and trauma-informed philosophies.

Introduction: The Obligation for Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

For centuries, low-income and students of color across the United States have been deprived of educational opportunities and equity. Disproportionately placed in underperforming schools and subjected to exclusionary discipline practices, these students are often disfavored as a result of the criminalization and degradation of their socioeconomic status and racial or ethnic identities. There is a common, socially ingrained misconception that public education serves as an equalizer, atoning for social policy failures: income inequality, housing segregation, the list goes on. However, schools remain a place of state-sanctioned harm: promoting white-centered assimilation, neglecting students' identities and communities as centers for growth and learning, and allowing for the production of the phenomenon of an anomaly—a student who is able to “succeed” despite their circumstances. Structural issues, e.g., inequitable funding and resource allocation, are neglected because these anomalies function as a source of false hope, serving the notion that individual action can offset the failure of schools to address systemic racism and oppression of communities at large. We cannot reach equitable educational opportunities and outcomes without addressing the socio-political policies that have historically and continue to

cyclically criminalize and oppress youth of color, thus reproducing inequitable schooling.

Since 2006, Ladson-Billings has called on the nation to examine *achievement gaps* through the historical, economic, socio-political, and moral decisions that have led to what she deemed an *education debt* (Ladson-Billings 2006, 3). She quoted Professor Emeritus Robert Haveman to define an education debt as “the foregone schooling resources that we could have (should have) been investing in (primarily) low- income kids, which deficit leads to a variety of social problems (e.g., crime, low productivity, low wages, low labor force participation) that require on-going public investment” (Ladson-Billings 2006, 5). By centering social and political responsibility for this debt, it becomes evident that the resources, multicultural and informed pedagogy, and student well-being focused frameworks that many activists are pushing for, are not privileges of education but rather rights that we have neglected and dismissed.

Students’ identities and experiences are multi-faceted, and educators often bear the brunt of working through generational and state-sanctioned systemic failures without substantial tools to support and help students healthily process their experiences. Student “success,” traditionally ruled by standardized exams and grading metrics, is increasingly growing to function as a holistic assessment of student well-being and progress. A student’s emotional and mental state can contribute to classroom behavior, academic efficacy, the development of personal relationships, and much more.

With student well-being contributing to a large facet of school climate and environment, many educators have shown a growing interest in active, cognitive learning frameworks. Social and emotional learning (SEL), led by five critical competencies, is a methodology that supports students in feeling and understanding their emotions with the goal of applying these learnings towards personal and academic goals, relationships, and decisions. When SEL is culturally- and trauma-informed, these practices can allow students to not only understand and process their emotions, but also how to communicate their needs and recognize the societal and environmental factors that influence their lives. We are especially indebted to the well-being of low-income/students of color who are unjustifiably facing cyclic forces of oppression inside and outside of the classroom.

Historical Contexts and the Miseducation of Marginalized Communities

Demographic Makeup of the U.S. Public Education System

The United States' public K-12 education system serves approximately 50 million students with a racial and ethnic breakdown as follows: 45.9% white, 28% Hispanic/Latinx, 15% Black, 5.4% Asian, 0.9% Native American/Alaska Native, 0.4% Pacific Islander, and 4.5% identifying with two or more races (Riser-Kositsky 2022). The proxy measure that serves as an indication of the population of low-income students across schools is the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) which identifies students eligible for free or reduced lunch. In 2018, students of color were disproportionately overrepresented—45% of Black students, 44% of Hispanic/Latinx students, 37% Native American/Alaska Native, 24% Pacific Islander—in schools deemed high-poverty, more than 75% of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch (U.S. Department of Education 2021).

Recent projections suggest that within less than three decades, the United States' demographic makeup will exist as a “minority-majority”. With growing wage gaps nationwide, it is also believed that the number of youths residing in low-income communities is increasing (Jagers, Rivas-Drake, and Williams 2019). The context for student demographics is critical to understanding the importance of sustaining and uplifting historically marginalized students and communities.

Why Changing Demographics Matter

Historically, institutions of education across the United States have barred a plethora of individuals from enrolling based on their identities. When marginalized groups were allowed to attend, educational outcomes were—and continue to be—disproportionately stratified by proximity to whiteness, higher socioeconomic status, and a ‘heterosexual male’ identity. Through the phenomenon of *miseducation*, the cultural, linguistic, and societal values and teachings of non-white normative peoples are deemed not only inferior but wrong. Students from multicultural backgrounds are disconnected from their ways of being and indoctrinated to assimilate to the needs of the dominant white, capitalist social structures around them. It is critical to reconstruct our educational frameworks that are still rooted in the genesis of United States public education. As Dr. Camanigan and Dr. Cariaga reminds us:

If dispossessed young people do not know how autonomous, resourceful, and abundant their civilizations were prior to their relationship to colonialism, then it becomes difficult for them to imagine something radically different than the material conditions they currently find themselves in. Further, if dispossessed young people do not know how their communities have historically resisted colonization, then it becomes difficult to imagine a world beyond colonial domination. (Camanigan and Cariaga 2021, 3.)

Without acknowledging and actively working to undo the harm that the education system—as an institution of the state—has inflicted onto marginalized communities, schools will persist in producing inequitable outcomes and failing to meet the social and academic needs of students from all backgrounds. Schools have the potential to empower students, serving as sites of agency and resistance, but the pedagogical and sociological frameworks of our institutions must first re-humanize non-normative and -dominant ways of being.

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

Students' Hardships Affects Their Ability to Perform in School

The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated and highlighted the historical disparities that are prevalent in today's contemporary education system. The inability and instability of many students, particularly Black and brown students, to attend and actively engage in their virtual classrooms across K-12 grade levels served as a “painful reminder that not every child has secure access to computers and Wi-Fi, much less to food, housing, and other necessities that would allow them to stay focused on school during a national emergency” (Royston et al. 2020, 8).

Whether a child is facing food or housing insecurity, does not have a space in which they can do their work, has responsibilities impeding their ability to perform well, or endless other circumstances, their youth should not deprive them of a space to process and feel their emotions. Though our public schools may not have the resources or ability to provide students with all the necessities they are deserving of, they do have the power to provide students with the tools to

understand and work through their struggles. Students are often expected to leave their “problems from home” at the door of the classroom, but students’ existence and well-being outside of the classroom affects their ability to learn. Studies have found relationships between emotions and cognitive development or processing; students’ curiosity, academic interests, ability to pay attention, etc. are influenced by their own feelings about themselves (Osher et al. 2016).

The Goals of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

Social and emotional learning (SEL) has been defined as a process in which people “acquire and apply core competencies to recognize and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle personal and interpersonal situations constructively” (Osher et al. 2016, 645). Incorporation of SEL in our education system is believed to empower students with their identities, healthily understand and process their emotions, develop meaningful relationships, and be able to articulate their needs. Processing emotions includes expression and emotional knowledge, but also regulation—something that can assist students who are construed as *defiant* and may face exclusionary modes of discipline because of their inability to regulate and explain their emotions. Cognitive-centered regulation refers to, but is not limited to “attention control, response inhibition, working memory, and cognitive flexibility or set-shifting” and emotional regulation “involves cognitive, physiological, and behavioral processes that are responsible for monitoring, evaluating, and modifying the experience and expression of emotions in order to accomplish personal goals” (Osher et al. 2016, 653-654). These personal regulations are believed to assist children in their ability to retain their attention, understand and control anxiety during circumstances like exams, and the development of friendships (Osher et al. 2016).

SEL and student regulation goes beyond classroom management. Recognition, understanding, and processing emotions is a life skill that early development can instate agency into children—who are beings with valid emotions and needs.

With school belonging serving as a critical factor for student well-being, academic efficacy, and motivation, SEL programs have become increasingly popular (Jagers, Rivas-Drake, and

Williams 2019). Collaborative of Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is a national organization working to advance academic and social and emotional learning for all students. Their research has categorized five targeted competencies that their work is dedicated to working towards: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship building, and responsible decision-making. These core competencies exist with the goal of fostering healthy identities and understanding emotional management. SEL programs have been implemented as independent lessons and integrated throughout school curriculums. Interventions for dropout prevention, graduation rates, bullying prevention, the school-to-prison pipeline, etc., have found lower absenteeism rates, improved academic achievement as determined by test scores, and lower exclusionary disciplinary rates and disparities (Osher et al. 2016).

Critical to the implementation of SEL efforts is the incorporation of resources and pedagogy that “are tailored to students’ development and align with children’s cognitive, social, and emotional skills across multiple grades” (Osher et al. 2016, 655-658). Additionally, training and support for students’ school educators, parents, and community members is deemed necessary for truly transformative initiatives (Osher et al. 2016).

Why Historical Contexts Influence SEL

SEL programs must also consider the role of white normative pedagogical frameworks in historically promoting notions of cultural deficiency. If these programs are not culturally-sustaining and trauma-informed, “schools will continue to be institutions that mystify the colonial reality and place the onus of social and emotional health on the very young people whose social stressors have been shaped *because* of dispossession and marginalization” (Camanigan and Cariaga, 2021, 3). The United States’ public school system has a history of miseducating youth of color (Camanigan and Cariaga 2021); through forced assimilation and reproduction of white normativity that views other cultural and linguistic conventions as inferior, students from marginalized communities are often alienated from their own identities.

As Shawn Ginwright reminds us, “Daily survival and ongoing crisis management in young people’s lives can make it difficult for them to see beyond the present” (Ginwright 2020). By using culture to ground our youth, especially students of color and those experiencing incredible hardship, we can positively influence their development of self-perception and purpose.

Ginwright emphasizes the necessity of acknowledging harm to a community, but also working towards individual and collective modes of healing. He offers that healing is shaped by identity and “experienced collectively” (Ginwright 2020)—an occurrence that cannot be neglected.

Culturally-Responsive and Trauma-Informed Frameworks

Why It Matters

A 2014 study conducted by the Department of Justice and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that over sixty percent of children had one or more direct exposure(s) to violence, crime, or abuse; additionally, students living in under-resourced communities are more vulnerable to exposure to trauma (Kokka 2018). There have been strong associations between residing in an under-resourced urban community and likelihood of experiencing exposure to trauma, specifically because of structural factors. The number of children living in these localities are disproportionately students with marginalized identities.

These experiences often result in untreated feelings of anxiety, aggression, distractedness, and behavioral challenges that can be perceived as willful defiance. The potentially high stress levels and traumatic circumstances that students may experience can impact cognitive development and increase symptoms of post-traumatic stress, such as aggression, anxiety, depression, ability to focus, etc. (Kokka 2018). Due to these experiences, students from marginalized communities struggle in the development of their identities (Pawlo et al. 2019) and may portray behaviors traditionally perceived as disruptive, defiant, or troubled. Ecological frameworks consider environmental factors and how their “influence [on] one’s exposure to adverse life experiences that can result in a traumatic stress response, inviting structural analysis of trauma and healing” (Kokka 2018, 1186). When considering transformative SEL, some researchers have considered resistance as a healthy social and emotional development as “a process by which individuals or groups resist stereotypes, roles, and expectations that support their oppression and undermine their humanity, and how such patterns change over time” (Jagers, Rivas-Drake, and Williams 2019, 170). Thinking back to behaviors traditionally thought of as disruptive or defiant, we can reframe those ways of being as resistance. Whether resistance to a white normative curriculum, behavioral or cultural norms, or to a system that has

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generationally continued to oppress one's ancestry. There is often an underlying circumstance to students' "misbehavior" and the development of social and emotional learning can assist in transforming these conducts by regarding students as people with agency and providing them with the tools to communicate or address their needs.

Some scholars have outlined the following recommendations for SEL to be culturally-informed:

"(a) connecting a student's cultural assets and references to academic concepts and skills, (b) employing curricula that encourages student reflection on their own lives and society, (c) supporting student cultural competence by facilitating learning about their own and other cultures, and (d) pursuing social justice through critiques of discourses of power" (Jagers, Rivas-Drake, and Williams 2019, 173).

This is in conjunction with Ginwright's perceptions of healing-centered engagement that suggest how communities can regain agency and sense of control when they can advocate for resources like mental health access and educational resources because they have the competencies of understanding both their emotions and the structural roots of oppression that have allowed the harm to exist and persist (Ginwright 2020).

When SEL is culturally- and trauma-informed, we expand SEL programming's ability from a function of growth in personal and social relationship-centered competencies, to in conjunction, moving towards understanding and processing generational and cyclical socio-political forces that unfortunately students cannot inherently control. Students often do not have the tools, do not understand, and are not accustomed to recognizing their displaced anger and social dissatisfaction that is often re-entered into their own communities (Camanigan and Cariaga 2021). It is suggested that to serve underserved communities, SEL must "cultivate in them the knowledge, attitudes, and skills required for critical examination and collaborative action to address root causes of inequities" (Jagers, Rivas-Drake, and Williams 2019, 163).

In Practice: Applying Culturally- and Trauma- Informed SEL

One example would be the cooperation between the Association of Alaska School Boards and First Alaskans to adapt the CASEL core competency frameworks to the beliefs and needs of Athabascan, Tlingit, Inuplat, and Yup'ik cultures. Regarding relationship building skills,

students are encouraged to share; learn about village cooperation; value listening, peace, and unity; and speaking up with care. The self-management competency was interpreted through the development of honesty, patience, fairness, and self-sufficiency (Osher et al. 2016).

Additionally, an initiative including 250 schools across five counties in southwest China was led by UNICEF China and the Chinese Ministry of Education to construct SEL in frameworks suitable to Chinese cultural bases. Centered on a cultural understanding of self-regulation when considering oneself versus others, Chinese SEL experts focused on collective awareness when discussing the Western competence of self-management (Osher et al. 2016).

In other scenarios, students in mathematics classes were asked to investigate social issues relevant to the students' local contexts. Using a ratio and proportion lesson, a teacher tasked students in finding the proportion of corner stores to homes in their neighborhood respective to those in wealthier neighborhoods (Kokka 2018). Similar tasks using police stations and access to hospitals allowed students to see and then discuss, in a safe classroom environment, structural issues in their own communities. From removing self-blame for systemic conditions to conversations about wages and access to secure housing, students gained awareness, and some even expressed desire to take action (Kokka 2018)—reiterating how SEL competencies assist in empowerment and agency with self-awareness and understanding. When incorporating trauma-informed and healing-centered pedagogical practice with culturally-informed practices, students can ground their well-being in their own cultural ways of engagement while also considering their connections to their community. Intersectionality, an analysis of the power relations across the multitude of one's identities rooted in Black feminist theory (Jagers, Rivas-Drake, and Williams 2019), is a framework that should guide the trauma- and cultural-informed principles.

Limitations

The transformation of schools into sites of well-being, healing, and holistic achievement requires structural and micro-level support. From institutional changes that allow for the prioritization of budget reallocations and appropriate funding to ensuring teachers are properly trained to not only assist students in their processes of SEL but developing those competencies for their own well-being, the implementation of long-lasting, transformative SEL is not easy work.

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There are valid concerns about educators currently engaging with SEL program implementation without consideration of their own implicit biases and those that may exist within the school system and curriculum (Camanigan and Cariaga 2021). At the micro-level, teachers need to feel supported. Already experiencing low-pay and lack of institutional support, the emotional and academic labor that is required of educators to appropriately introduce and sustain trauma- and culturally-informed SEL programs will require additional compensation and recognition. With many districts using high stakes testing as indicators of student performance and denoting funding allocations, it is understandable that schools and educators dedicate importance to standardized testing (Bailey et al. 2019). If there was greater consideration about holistic well-being—student belonging, progress, community/parental involvement, student/teacher relationships, staff support, etc.—there would be more reflective representation on the state of our schools.

Studies have found that students have greater outcomes with SEL when programming is implemented across school contexts; students can then actively and frequently practice the SEL competencies they are learning (Bailey et al. 2019). From art rooms to spaces for children to comfortably step out of the classroom to engage with their emotions, SEL frameworks align with the methodologies of restorative and transformative justice frameworks. Dedicated to student and educator well-being, fostering safe educational environments, and attending to the needs of the community, implementing these frameworks requires undoing cyclical and intentional harm that has been ingrained in the United States education system for centuries.

Conclusions

By acknowledging and upholding the value of each student's racial/ethnic and cultural identities, recognizing the ongoing impacts of historical oppressional contexts, and adapting pedagogical practices to students' backgrounds, schools can begin to serve as places of affirmation and belonging. To be trauma-informed and healing-centered, schools and educators need to understand the effects of trauma in children, their communities, and in educators themselves (Blitz, Anderson, and Saastamoinen 2016). By helping students process their behaviors in restorative manners, moving beyond individual behaviors and comprehending that the behavioral challenges may be a consequence of structural harm, schools can adopt practices that center community healing and growth.

**BALVANEDA: SCHOOLS OWE STUDENTS CULTURALLY- AND TRAUMA-INFORMED SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL
LEARNING**

Through the adoption of critically-conscious frameworks, communities that have been historically oppressed by the workings of capitalism and colonialism are granted the humanization to which they are entitled. Students from marginalized communities should not have to prove “resilience” by “succeeding” in a white, normative, and historically inequitable education system. Every day that these students survive is a sign of their resiliency. The glamorization of resiliency is dangerous; it removes accountability from the systemic issues that have required these students to become resilient in the first place. Rather than attacking systems of inequity that perpetuate oppression, these issues are viewed as individual matters and indicators of a single person’s capabilities. With the promotion of agency and active resistance, schools can start addressing the needs the American education system has failed to serve across generations.

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