EQUITY-ORIENTED SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING: A CONVERSATION WITH SCHOOL LEADERS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS

For many educators, the social and political upheaval that has occurred during the past two years has elevated the importance and imperative of addressing social and emotional learning (SEL) in our schools and classrooms (Walker, 2020), particularly in the face of school reopenings this year. Furthermore, the persistent calls for the transformation of our education systems to be more equitable demands that our discourse about SEL is equity-oriented—not as an afterthought or "add-on" to existing models and frameworks but rather as a complete reimagination.

Although calls for equity-centered SEL are longstanding, the renewed sense of urgency to center equity-oriented SEL in school reopenings for the 2021-22 school year spurred us to call together education leaders and practitioners to discuss the topic in greater depth. More specifically, we felt the need to bring a diverse group of people together to discuss how to center the social and emotional needs of students, families, and communities in this new phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. In late July of 2021, we convened 25 educational leaders and service providers with deep expertise in SEL and/or Family Engagement from our network to engage in a two-day action sprint. This group also reflected people with deep expertise and experience in issues that are essential in addressing equity, such as race, culture, linguistic differences. Although we separated SEL and family engagement for the purposes of these conversations, the group quickly agreed that they are deeply intertwined and that family engagement is central to effective, equity-oriented SEL. The intentions of the action sprints were to:

1. Create the space and time for attendees to be in conversation with each other and begin to develop new relationships.

2. Spur individual and collective action related to SEL and Family Engagement for the 2021-22 school year as we welcome students and families back into school buildings.

As the action sprints unfolded, another objective that emerged was to summarize insights surfaced by this group of service providers and school leaders with a goal of sharing them among our networks and with the broader field. This brief addresses that emergent objective and provides a summary of what was discussed during these action sprints.

Insights fell loosely into two broad threads:

- The imperative that schools address SEL
- How to address SEL through an equity lens

This brief is organized according to these two threads and both are framed as fundamental issues of equity. We know there is unequal access to high quality SEL programming, thus the imperative that all schools address it is the first hurdle towards equitable SEL. Then, we move on to discuss how to address SEL through an equity lens. Each section includes a summary of both barriers and promising practices to address each thread; embedded throughout are video vignettes featuring examples from school leaders as well as resources for practitioners to use in their own contexts.

WHETHER SCHOOLS ADDRESS SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING IS AN EQUITY ISSUE

Whether schools do or do not address SEL is itself an equity issue. Some students get robust, integrated approaches while others do not, creating an imbalance in opportunity to access and benefit from such programming. Yet, the research is clear on the importance of addressing social and emotional learning as integral to students' academic, social, and life success, particularly in times of heightened stress: "Research indicates that when implemented effectively, high-quality, evidence-based SEL programs have positive impacts on children's social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes as well as teacher practices and the culture and climate of schools" (Ramirez et al., 2021, p. 2).

> Neuroscience research tells us that when students are too stressed, they cannot learn. We also know that strong relationships and supportive school programs can help buffer the effects of stress. Children need to feel safe (physically and emotionally) and feel a sense of connection to peers and caring adults in order to access learning (Woolf, 2021, Point 2).

Barriers to Prioritizing Social Emotional Learning

In the SEL action sprints, participants identified a variety of barriers to addressing SEL that they experienced or saw in their own practice in schools with students and families. Here is a summary of the top five barriers to prioritizing SEL they discussed, including direct excerpts from their discussions.

- District and school leaders do not prioritize social and emotional learning because of the perception that they don't have the time or resources to address it.

  - "Leaders having instructional training and skills, but not human-centered management training and skills."

  - "SCARCITY culture that creates anxiety around "never enough" time, resources, etc."

- Relatedly, social and emotional learning is pitted against rather than seen as integral to academic success, further exacerbating the first point.

  - "Connecting SEL to academics. We should think about a practice that will support this connection, otherwise the tension will always exist, especially for classroom leaders. All cognitive work is social emotional."

  - "For adults there is a tension of integrating and leveraging SEL AND address[ing] competing priorities of tests, academic measures, etc. Where is the connection of increased student achievement, teacher efficacy, and SEL."

- Social and emotional learning is complex and perceived as hard to measure. Current accountability models and metrics often do not include social and emotional learning, so it is not enacted as a priority despite evidence that there are growing calls from administrators, educators, and students alike to prioritize SEL.

  - "We're measuring the things that have been traditionally valued and upheld. We value what is measured, not measure what is valued."

  - "What you measure, you treasure."

  - Listen to one district leader discuss this tension!

■ Adults do not have consistent support and professional learning opportunities to develop the knowledge and skills to address their own, let alone students', social and emotional needs and often personalize students' behaviors

    ❝ "Focusing on adult learning. What the adults don't know, [is that] they also have a light bulb (through observation and debrief) in understanding why the student does "X". Information is being delivered that is not comprehended [and] builds anxiety. At a certain point, children do not have a choice in escaping/ disrupt[ing]/discharging that level of anxiety. Helping adults see things differently and then teach skills. Up until that point, adults are also feeling like it is personal or about their teaching."

■ Adults in schools are processing and navigating their own trauma, exhaustion, and wellness which may interrupt their desire and ability to prioritize SEL.

    ❝ "Educators' sense of overwhelm from an INCREDIBLY disruptive year can move them to a "just the basics" mindset…"

Practices to Prioritize Social Emotional Learning

Participants in the action sprints also identified promising practices and strategies for moving towards prioritizing SEL in schools and classrooms. Their conversations touched on a variety of practices for both district and school leaders, as well as classroom educators. Below, we summarize the primary themes touched on in these discussions, parsed by role. Included with each promising practice are video clips centering examples of how some of these leaders engage in the practices as well as resources to kick start your own practice.

District and School Leaders

■ Co-construct concrete goals and measures for SEL with a diverse and representative group of members from the school community—especially students and families.

    ▶ Watch how one district leader builds capacity for collective action!

    ✸ Resource Spotlight—Something to Use: Prioritize SEL in the transition to in-person learning Toolkit

    ✸ Resource Spotlight—Something to Use: Guide to Schoolwide SEL: Create A Plan

■ Commit real resources, including time, to address SEL; this may require the redistribution of resources. For example, reallocate funding from reactive, punitive models of behavior management to hiring counselors and psychologists as a proactive approach to cultivating capacity to address the social and emotional needs of adults and young people in our school systems. Additionally, bolster universal SEL supports and support teachers to integrate SEL and restorative practices into their daily practice.

🔊 Hear how one district leader is doing it!

■ Participate in coaching, training and learning experiences to build your own knowledge and capacity related to SEL.

📖 Resource Spotlight—Something to Read: The Daily SEL Leader (book)

■ Normalize and model SEL by attending to social and emotional wellness for yourself and your staff.

⚙ Resource Spotlight—Something to Use: EdWell: Wellness platform for educators, by educators

■ Create a comprehensive plan to provide SEL training and support to all adults in the school system/building. Consider integrating it as part of your School Improvement Plan. This will help ensure implementation is consistent across the school or district, and thus, support strong buy-in and success of SEL initiatives. Emerging research suggests that consistency in implementation is critical to SEL success (see below).

⚙ Resource Spotlight—Something to Use: Guide to Schoolwide SEL: Strengthen Adult SEL

📖 Resource Spotlight—Something to Read: Social and Emotional Learning:Best Practices and Barriers to Successful Implementation (brief)

📖 Resource Spotlight—Something to Read: Year Two of Harmony SEL Demonstrates Increased Implementation and Improved Student Outcomes (brief)

Classroom Educators

- Advocate for and ask your school and district leadership to prioritize SEL.

  - 📖 Resource Spotlight—Something to Read: The Missing Piece: A National Teacher Survey on How Social and Emotional Learning Can Empower Children and Transform Schools (brief)

  - 📖 Resource Spotlight—Something to Read: Remaking Middle School Learning Series

- Build team-level communities of practice and resource libraries to support your own learning— regardless of what district and building leaders are doing.

  - 🔊 Resource Spotlight—Something to Listen to: Getting to Know How Students Are Feeling And Functioning (The 180 Podcast: P.S. 340)

  - 📖 Resource Spotlight—Something to Read: Building Social Emotional Competencies Through Integrated Student Supports (brief)

- Engage in peer-to-peer observations and feedback loops to open up your practice and develop shared knowledge about how SEL is playing out in your classrooms.

  - ○ Resource Spotlight: Guide to Schoolwide SEL: A Supportive Classroom Environment

- Co-construct goals for social emotional learning in your classroom with your students.

  - ⚙ Resource Spotlight—Something to Use: Turnaround for Children Toolbox

- Normalize SEL by modeling attention to social and emotional wellness for yourself and your students.

  - ⚙ Resource Spotlight—Something to Use: EdWell: Wellness platform for educators, by educators

HOW SCHOOLS ADDRESS SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING IS AN EQUITY ISSUE

Most of our current social and emotional learning frameworks and models are not inherently equitable and, in fact, often perpetuate inequities (Coomer, 2019). In a recent comprehensive analysis of current SEL programs, Ramirez and colleagues (2021) noted that "findings from our content analysis are consistent with the claim that SEL programs, while promising vehicles for promoting equity because of the alignment between many of their principles, are not inherently equitable" (p. 11).

Other research suggests that we must completely reimagine SEL models through an equity lens to ensure they do not reanimate structural inequality and harm for students who are most marginalized. As Dr. Nickie Coomer (2019) of the Great Lakes Equity Center stated:

> It is imperative for school leaders and policymakers to consider how standards and policies related to SEL continue to the center norms of emotional experiences and behavioral response that are rooted in the preferences of the White, middle class (Tobin, 1995), and that rather than control student behavior, SEL can be a responsive method by which school professionals promote and foster student engagement and agency (p. 2).

The implications of how we do SEL are real. One problematic pattern we observe that is partly connected to inequitable SEL is the application of disproportionate exclusionary discipline practices. Decades of research demonstrate that biased classroom norms and behavior expectations paired with discretionary (mis)interpretation of student behavior results in exclusionary discipline practices being used disproportionately more frequently on students who identify as Black and Indigenous. These practices have been implicated as a major contributing factor to the "school to prison pipeline" (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Skiba et al., 2011).

Barriers to Equity-Oriented SEL

The leaders who participated in the July 2021 action sprints spent a good deal of time discussing the barriers to equity-oriented SEL they experienced and witnessed. Their discussions centered on the five key themes summarized below. Direct excerpts from their discourse are embedded throughout.

■ Many SEL models, frameworks and practices have been developed by researchers and practitioners with dominant cultural identities (e.g., people who are White and middle-class), and thus, prioritize those identities. Because they prioritize norms from White, middle-class cultures, they may spur disharmony among and between school administrators, educators and students from historically excluded communities about expectations and what behaviors and skills are valued in classrooms, particularly related to social norms and emotional expression.

    ❝ "When researchers and practitioners do not share the identities of the students participating in SEL programming, resulting models can be irrelevant and perpetuate harmful mindsets."

    ❝ "SEL is framed through white dominant lens because perspectives have been excluded from the development of theory, frameworks, models, etc."

    ❝ "SEL resources and supports are often designed/created by well-intentioned researchers/scholars who don't fully understand K-12 environments, especially for marginalized students of color. Therefore, it's not very applicable and relevant for them and for adults who serve them."

■ Adults implementing SEL in schools often do not have shared lived experiences or cultural identities with the students and families they serve. This difference further exacerbates the prioritization of dominant cultural norms regarding behavior expectations and emotional regulation and, relatedly, to the misunderstanding and misinterpretation of student behaviors.

    ❝ "Most teachers and leaders (school and district/CMO level) are white/do not reflect the student bodies."

    ❝ "Lack of knowledge of the communities/students being served. Not knowing cultural norms of behaviors and behavior expectations."

■ Adults bring explicit and implicit biases and deficit mindsets about students and families into schools and classrooms. The beliefs we hold about the young people in our classrooms play into our expectations of them, both academically and behaviorally. When those beliefs are limiting, incorrect, and/or deficit-oriented, we act on them and create conditions that harm our young people. Children's behaviors may be criminalized and pathologized when viewed through those biased and deficit lenses, especially when those children come from historically marginalized and excluded communities.

- ❝ "Self expression of BIPOC [students] is often seen as lesser, intimidating and often SEL is used to teach students to assimilate vs self actualize."

- ❝ "What one believes about a student shows up in their expectations of them, academically and behaviorally."

■ Students' voices, needs, preferences, and desires are not centered in SEL. They do not hold real power, agency or influence in decision making regarding their desires, interests and goals in SEL.

- ❝ "In order to effectively teach SEL you also have to shift school culture from an adult/teacher centered culture to a student led and student agency based culture."

- ❝ "Acknowledging how we approach children, due to lack of power (ex: voting, $) are treated as sub-human beings. We carry over learned ways of interacting across age."

- ❝ "Conditions make it challenging to prioritize SEL. Power structures play into how these conditions are constructed. Power is the ability to influence the relationship between someone's interests and how they exist within the structure. What does it look like to prioritize the interests of communities/ students? Example: Focus on accountability and tests."

- ❝ "It is expected that students put themselves aside when they enter the school house (situation, trauma, etc). Focus on academics and instruction- not culturally relevant."

■ Students' families are not authentically and meaningfully empowered to be involved as partners in their children's education. There is still a deferral to administrators and educators as "experts" and baked-in power dynamics.

- ❝ "Trust requires truth. There are families who have experienced trauma within schools for generations. We have to create space to restore relationships with schools."

- ❝ "If a relationship isn't established, there isn't trust between the educator and the families. A lack of trust, particularly for families who had their own adverse experiences, can make working together difficult."

- ❝ "Families are, in fact, doing the "SEL" work (daily) with their young people but it doesn't align with the way it's intellectualized or talked about in education."

Towards (Re)Defining Equity-Oriented SEL

Models of SEL that are developed and implemented by people who represent the full array of diverse identities and cultural norms in our school systems are less likely to replicate harmful patterns. They are more likely to interrupt biases, and create opportunities for reflection on different perspectives. As one action sprint participant stated: "There's a growing number (thankfully) of researchers/scholars of color. Use them and highlight them and their work, alongside other proven white/ dominant scholars too that are good and aligned - not ones that reinforce white supremacy."

Yet, although the inclusion of diverse perspectives is a necessary precursor to developing more equitable models of SEL, we know it is insufficient to fully realize equity in and of itself. We looked to the work of the Region IV Equity Assistance Center, Great Lakes Equity Center, for a definition of educational equity that may help operationalize what more equitable models of SEL will require. They define educational equity as:

> When educational policies, practices, interactions, and resources are representative of, constructed by, and responsive to all people such that each individual has access to, can participate, and make progress in high-quality learning experiences that empower them towards self-determination and reduces disparities in outcomes regardless of individual characteristics and cultural identities. (Coomer, 2019, p. 9)

A similar framing was offered by the Aspen Institute in their 2018 call to action to pursue social and emotional development through a racial equity lens. They stated:

> In an equitable education system, every student has access to the resources and educational rigor they need at the right moment in their education, irrespective of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, language, disability, family background, family income, citizenship, or tribal status. Equity is not just about resource allocation, however...merely ensuring more equitable resource allocation won't ensure that schools are affirming of students' background and cultural and linguistic heritage (Aspen Institute, 2018, p. 2).

Pulling across these two definitions, the following principles are implicated as co-equal drivers for spurring equity. Each driver is necessary but insufficient without the others for creating more equitable contexts in our education systems, including in SEL.

- Recognizing, affirming and sustaining each student's diverse identities such that no one identity group or cultural way of being is held as superior to others.

- Ensuring the full, meaningful participation of people from historically excluded communities as equals, particularly in decision making and holding seats of power.

- Unfettered access to and agency in choice for high-quality educational opportunities and resources including, redistribution of such opportunities and resources when necessary to ensure access for all.

- Realizing positive outcomes—social, emotional and academic—that center autonomy, empowerment and self-determination for each and every student.

- Acknowledging and redressing legacies of harm, injustice, and oppression that students, their families and communities have faced.

We can return to the work of Ramirez and colleagues (2021) to see these principles operationalized in their definition of equitable SEL: "We define equitable SEL as an approach to SEL that incorporates the cultural knowledge, experiences, and assets of students from diverse families and communities, and acknowledges and addresses the social injustices, inequalities, prejudices, and exclusions that students face" (p. 5).

> ⚙ Resource Spotlight—Something to Use: Centering Equity in Social Emotional Learning Tool
>
> 📖 Resource Spotlight—Something to Read: Equity in Social Emotional Learning Programs: A Content Analysis of Equitable Practices in PreK-5 SEL Programs (article)
>
> 📖 Resource Spotlight—Something to Read: Transformative SEL (article)

So, what does this look like in practice? Check out the next section for some ideas from the school and educational leaders who participated in these action sprints.

Promising Practices for Equity-Oriented SEL

- Shift to asset-based models of SEL that affirm students' identities: Learn and use asset-based pedagogies, like culturally relevant, responsive and sustaining pedagogies (CRSP), in your SEL practices (Gay, 2002; Howard 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b, & 2009; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014). Asset-based pedagogies center the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of students as strengths and "conduits for teaching" (Gay, 2002, p. 106) and seek to "sustain linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling" (Paris & Alim, 2014, p. 85). These practices hold real promise for moving education systems closer to equity-oriented SEL.

📖   Resource Spotlight—Something to Read: Why Trouble SEL? The Need for Cultural Relevance in SEL (paper)

🔊   Resource Spotlight—Something to Listen to: Leading Equity Podcast

⚙️   Resource Spotlight—Something to Use: Ready for Rigor Framework

■ Cultivate critical consciousness: Paulo Freire (1968/1970) first coined the idea of critical consciousness in his book, Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Rooted in Freire's work, researchers Sharon Radd and Bruce Kramer (2016) define it as, "…the willingness and ability to see how power and privilege are at work to systematically advantage some while simultaneously disadvantaging others" (p. 584). Educators serious about centering equity in their praxis must cultivate critical consciousness to become aware of and interrupt oppressive hierarchies as well as their own automatic thoughts and feelings about students, families and communities.

📖   Resource Spotlight —Something to Read: Is This How Discrimination Ends? (article)

📖   Resource Spotlight— Something to Read: Leadership Practices for Transformative Change Towards Equity (newsletter)

■ Acknowledge and disrupt adultism: Engage in learning experiences related to understanding how adultism plays out in schools and classrooms and how to create authentic student empowerment. One approach is practicing ceding power, as one participant offered: "Revisit decision-making 'rights' and practice ways to more explicitly challenge power hierarchies that are often baked into how decisions are made."

📖   Resource Spotlight—Something to Read: Youth participation: Adultism, human rights and professional youth work (article)

⚙️   Resource Spotlight—Something to Use: Ladder of Children's Participation

⚙️   Resource Spotlight—Something to Use: Pathways to Participation

■ Authentic family engagement: Educators invest time and resources to empower students' families to be authentically involved partners in their children's education. We asked action sprint participants to define "family engagement." The following two excerpts capture the breadth of the responses and offer more context about how this group of experts thinks about family engagement as central to equity-oriented SEL:

❝ "Family engagement means schools and families are partners in children's learning. Families are valued for the knowledge they bring to the table. Schools communicate often and effectively with families, sharing information about the school, school system and children's academic progress. Families are brought to the table for key decision-making. And if it's done well, there is mutual trust between school/district staff and families. Lastly, traditional family engagement tends to be transactional rather than relational. Strong family engagement is relational, and relationships are established early on, so that positive connections can be made and trust is built."

❝ "Sharing of power. We have to fundamentally rethink what it means to share the power of decision making, of ownership, of voice, moving away from selling families on the merits of our ideas to incorporating honestly the wisdom of their thinking."

○ Watch how three of these leaders approach Authentic Family Engagement!

- Ownership and Sharing Power
- Cultivating Deep Relationships with Families
- Focusing on Adult Wellbeing

○ Parent Organizing Groups:

- Community Organizing and Family Issues
- Our Voice Nuestra Voz
- Black Organizing Project
- Learning Heroes

The insights summarized here are certainly not comprehensive, nor exhaustive, but they are a starting place and the conversation will continue. If you are interested in joining the SEL collective mailing list, please sign up here.

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APPENDIX

Compendium of Tools and Resources

Video Vignettes

- Watch how one district leader builds capacity for collective action!
- Hear how one district leader is doing it!
- Ownership and Sharing Power
- Cultivating Deep Relationships with Families
- Focusing on Adult Wellbeing

Podcasts

- Getting to Know How Students Are Feeling And Functioning (The 180 Podcast: P.S. 340)
- Leading Equity Podcast

Readings

- The Daily SEL Leader (book)
- Social and Emotional Learning: Best Practices and Barriers to Successful Implementation (brief)
- Year Two of Harmony SEL Demonstrates Increased Implementation and Improved Student Outcomes (brief)
- The Missing Piece: A National Teacher Survey on How Social and Emotional Learning Can Empower Children and Transform Schools (brief)
- Remaking Middle School Learning Series (article series)
- Building Social Emotional Competencies Through Integrated Student Supports (brief)
- Equity in Social Emotional Learning Programs: A Content Analysis of Equitable Practices in PreK-5 SEL Programs (article)
- Transformative SEL (article)
- Why Trouble SEL? The Need for Cultural Relevance in SEL (paper)
- Is This How Discrimination Ends? (article)

- Leadership Practices for Transformative Change Towards Equity (newsletter)
- Youth participation: Adultism, human rights and professional youth work (article)

Tools, Guides and Frameworks to Use

- Prioritize SEL in the transition to in-person learning Toolkit
- Guide to Schoolwide SEL: Create A Plan
- EdWell: Wellness platform for educators, by educators
- Guide to Schoolwide SEL: Strengthen Adult SEL
- Guide to Schoolwide SEL: A Supportive Classroom Environment
- Turnaround for Children Toolbox
- Centering Equity in Social Emotional Learning Tool
- Ready for Rigor Framework
- Ladder of Children's Participation
- Pathways to Participation

Parent Organizing Groups

- Community Organizing and Family Issues
- Our Voice Nuestra Voz
- Black Organizing Project
- Learning Heroes

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