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Creating a Foundation of Well-being for Teachers and Students Starts with SEL Curriculum in Teacher Education Programs

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Abstract

During the COVID-19 crisis, it has become clear how unprepared our educational systems are to provide social and emotional support through distance learning. Despite the demands for teachers to support the social and emotional development of their students, our universities are behind the curve in providing coursework to develop their knowledge and skills in these areas. This paper calls us to imagine teacher education with Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) as a cornerstone in teacher preparation programs. We outline the importance of SEL curriculum in preservice education and suggest a multifaceted approach to teacher preparation.

Keywords

SEL, Teacher Education, Equity, Trauma Informed, Well-being

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Creating a Foundation of Well-being for Teachers and Students Starts with SEL Curriculum in Teacher Education

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During the COVID-19 crisis, it has become clear how unprepared our educational systems are to provide social and emotional support through distance learning. Despite the demands for teachers to support the social and emotional development of their students, our universities are behind the curve in providing coursework to develop their knowledge and skills in these areas. This paper calls us to imagine teacher education with Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) as a cornerstone in teacher preparation programs. We outline the importance of SEL curriculum in preservice education and suggest a multifaceted approach to teacher preparation.

In late March 2020, the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) collected survey responses from over 5,000 teachers across the U.S. These two research groups found that teachers described their current feelings as anxious, fearful, worried, overwhelmed, and sad (Cipriano & Brackett, 2020 April 7). Compounding the uncertainty during the COVID-19 crisis, teachers are navigating working from home during school closures, learning new systems for online learning, supporting struggling students and families, taking care of their own children, and protecting their health. Facing pressure from their districts, states, and the families of their students, teachers have adapted quickly to be resilient, flexible, and ready to make positive decisions despite these conditions. However, many teachers are unprepared for this relentless and compounding personal and professional stress. Prior to the pandemic, teachers reported some of

the highest levels of stress of people in helping professions in the U.S. with staggeringly high attrition rates of nearly 40% in the first 5 years (Metlife, 2013). Reports reveal that teachers most often leave the profession due to chronic stress and burnout (Bellingrath et al., 2009; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Now, in this time of crisis, without access to their regular professional supports and social networks, teachers are even more susceptible to increased mental health issues and burnout as a result of unmet social and emotional needs.

Similarly, students are adjusting and adapting to new realities, such as engaging in online learning platforms, without the access to supports that are usually offered by schools. Student needs for stability, consistency, and routine are not being met. The COVID-19 epidemic has brought many unpleasant experiences to students, including fear, tension, isolation, and frustration. With the lack of intact social networks and adult support, many are becoming susceptible to mental illness or depression. This is especially true when their social and emotional needs go unaddressed.

The difficulties suffered by teachers and students shine a spotlight on how important social and emotional well-being is for teaching and learning, and how unprepared our educational systems are to provide social and emotional support through distance learning. Additionally, the pandemic has brought to the surface critical issues pertaining to social justice and equity within our educational systems; recent research shows the achievement gap widening and learning loss the greatest within our historically underserved populations (Hanover Research, 2020; Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020). As a result, policy makers and advocacy groups across the US are calling for more teacher training in Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) to meet the needs of students during the ongoing crisis (Walker, 2020, April 15). Teachers need social and emotional competencies (SECs) so they can manage their stress through this pandemic and the rapidly evolving educational landscape. They need training in SECs now, to be psychologically ready to return to school in the fall. However, new teachers entering the field will also be expected to have these competencies, and that presents a unique opportunity for teacher education programs to re-evaluate their programming in light of the broad systemic changes occurring in the K-12 education system.

SEL is defined as the process of acquiring the personal and interpersonal skills both children and adults need to establish caring positive relationships with ourselves and others, make responsible decisions, handle challenging situations effectively and ethically (CASEL, 2020a). The dimensions of SEL, based on the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) model include self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. SEL is sometimes considered the “missing piece” in education because it represents a part of learning that is inextricably tied

to school success and positive student performance, yet it has not been explicitly addressed or given much attention until recently (Bridgeland et al, 2013; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017).

The Current State of SEL in Teacher Preparation Standards and Programs

How much are pre-service teachers currently learning about SEL? A 2017 report by Schonert-Riechl, Kitil, and Hanson-Peterson reviewed the current status of state standards for teacher preparation. The results of this review found that only six states had high standards in all areas of SEL (Connecticut, Hawaii, New Jersey, North Carolina, Rhode Island, and South Carolina). The most frequently addressed area in the state standards for teacher SEL was responsible decision-making, followed by social awareness and relationship skills. The least found was self-awareness and self-management. In the Northwest region, only Idaho had 4 or more areas of student SEL addressed in their standards for teacher certification.

Although it's good news that most states had at least some coverage of SEL areas in their teacher certification standards, how well colleges and universities are meeting these standards in their preparation programs is not systematic. In the same report, the authors found that many teacher preparation programs currently have no established curricula, guidelines, or 'best practices' for their instructors to disseminate knowledge of SEL to pre-service teachers, either to implement SEL at schools or to develop their skills in promoting SEL for their own well-being (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). 304 teacher preparation programs were selected as a national representation sample. This part of the study found that almost none of the programs addressed all of the dimensions of teacher SEL. The most commonly left out area, mirroring what was seen in the scan of teacher certification standards, were the areas of self-awareness and self-management. In the Northwest region, only Oregon and Idaho included one SEL dimension of the four that were sought. When looking for specific courses with SEL content, 63% of courses were found to have no SEL content in any of the areas. Courses most likely to have SEL content included: Curriculum, Instruction, and Methods; Foundations; Psychology; and Special Education. Despite the demands for teachers to have SEL competencies, our colleges and universities are behind the curve in providing coursework to develop these skills.

This article calls us to imagine what teacher education in the U.S. could do for our students and teachers with social and emotional learning as the cornerstone in our teacher education programs, rooted by standards in our teacher education programs. This is our opportunity to make foundational shifts in the way we approach teacher education. Giving pre-service teachers deep and broad knowledge of SEL now is a critical piece in preparing them for today's schools, and for equipping them to transform today's schools in the next decades.

A Multifaceted Approach to SEL Education in Pre-service Programming

Empowering teachers with skillsets to implement culturally responsive SEL that promotes equity in schools requires weaving knowledge and practice of SEL throughout their preparation courses. To accomplish this, we propose an approach to preservice education that mirrors CASEL's suggestions for implementing schoolwide SEL that is anchored on four focus areas (CASEL, 2020). This proposal suggests that SEL learning starts with a foundational class that all teacher candidates take that broadly addresses all four areas of focus. The initial course would be followed by subsequent elective courses going into more depth in the four areas of focus that could be taken as an area of concentration for undergraduate or master's students resulting in an endorsement in SEL.

Much of the focus in the pre-service programs follows the technical knowledge and methods that are needed for effective teaching such as curriculum design and classroom management. However, with the increase of student social and emotional needs, teachers can no longer be considered effective if they don't address that component of students' wellbeing. Additionally, there has been a shift in the perception of the what schools need to focus on, and recently SEL has become a huge component that many districts believe needs attention. The issue, however, is that teachers are not prepared to implement SEL due to the lack of know-how. Courses integrated in teacher preparation programs become as essential as any other course. Rather than advocating for more on top of other required courses, we believe a reevaluation of the courses in which SEL becomes embedded in the program is a must. In other words, we call for an epistemological and ontological paradigm shift in what we think effective preparation programs should deliver. Thus, swapping outdated courses with newer ones that explicitly focus on SEL would be important if we are to deliver a strong program that addresses the needs of schools and students in our current times.

Foundational Knowledge

The first area of focus needs to be building pre-service teachers' foundational knowledge in social and emotional development across the life span. This area of concentration should include broad constructs such as emotional regulation, emotional intelligence, and identifying core social and emotional competencies, as well as specific issues of inequity in society, an understanding of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and the necessity of trauma informed practices for whole-child development.

Core concepts in social and emotional learning. Teachers must have a solid understanding of the core of SEL: the intrapersonal experience of emotion, and the interpersonal experience of social relations. SEL is defined as the process of acquiring the personal and interpersonal skills both children and adults need to establish caring positive relationships with ourselves and others, make responsible decisions, handle challenging situations effectively and ethically (CASEL, 2020a). The dimensions of SEL, based on The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) model include self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. SEL is sometimes considered the “missing piece” in education because it represents a part of learning that is inextricably tied to school success and positive student performance, yet it has not been explicitly addressed or given much attention until recently (Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan, 2013; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). These core concepts should include historical context and the connections to psychology and neuroscience.

SEL and the connection to trauma informed teaching. Teachers and schools use SEL as a tool to create supportive environments for students who have experienced trauma. New teachers need an understanding of the prevalence of trauma and approaches to serving students who have experienced trauma. Almost half of children have been exposed to at least one adverse childhood experience (ACE) such as abuse, neglect, parent mental illness or substance abuse, domestic violence, and financial instability (Trauma Informed Oregon, 2019). Exposure to multiple ACEs can cause traumatic stress reactions in children, including feelings of fear and helplessness, with the possibility of numerous negative outcomes into adulthood (Bethell et al., 2017). Children who experience trauma may lack the social and emotional competencies to identify, express and manage their emotions. Helping students build strong relationships, understand and manage their emotions and find healthy ways to alleviate their stress through SEL programming can go a long way toward teaching them to work through trauma.

In order to create these environments, adults must themselves have strong SECs in order to teach, model, and foster these skills in their students. Teachers who are exposed to SEL during their teacher training programs and have developed their own SECs will be equipped to carry out trauma-informed practices in their schools, putting students and themselves in a better position to mitigate the risk of lasting negative effects.

SEL and the connection to social justice. In order for new teachers to serve all students, they must develop their personal social and emotional competencies in order to see, acknowledge, and address the systemic patterns that

have created inequity in our school systems. This work is important for teachers because a growing body of evidence reveals that cultural identity plays a critically important role in the social and emotional well-being of students, especially marginalized and historically underserved students (e.g. Alim & Paris, 2017; Brittan Loyd & Williams, 2017; Gee et al., 2019; Jagers et al., 2019). The development and expression of social-emotional skills (for both teachers and students) are affected by factors such as social-historic context, including epistemic beliefs (i.e., about the nature of knowledge) and power dynamics (Medin & Bang, 2013).

SEL curricula in both teacher preparation and at the K-12 level that does not deeply consider culture as the central framework through which learning occurs likely perpetuates inequity. In order to be culturally relevant and not continuing to perpetuate Eurocentric views, SEL curricula in teacher education programs needs to call attention to the ways that complex social-historical landscapes influence learning, create spaces for teachers to engage in discussions of deep cultural analysis, and include the development of sociopolitical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Pollock, 2008). In light of the nation-wide awakening to the devastating effects of institutional racism, there is an urgent call for educators to understand the social and emotional needs of youth of color and their historical roots.

Effectively engaging SEL in diverse contexts requires integrating the cultural assumptions that underpin psychoeducational practices. Culturally responsive SEL programs can create opportunities for teachers to recognize and serve young people exposed to trauma, both contemporary and historic. However, uncritical discussions of social and emotional well-being may pathologize trauma or mark marginalized youth as “damaged,” without consideration of the complex cognitive, political, and social ecologies dominated by Eurocentric bias. When teachers who work with marginalized students fail to consider cultural differences in the rules governing social interaction, miscommunication and conflicting behavioral expectations may cause some actions to be interpreted as willful misconduct or lack of cooperation, meriting punitive measures (Yeatman, 2000). All too often, a lack of cultural understanding and the failure to place learning models—including SEL practices—within their historical and political contexts fuel inequitable or discriminatory practices that disproportionately affect marginalized students.

In addition to increasing inclusivity in classrooms and schools, entrenched issues of race and ethnicity must be explicitly considered in the development and delivery of SEL programs to truly address systemic inequities in the education system. This requires extensive training, practice and forethought by educators. Pre-service teachers who have substantial training in culturally relevant SEL in

their teacher education programs, and have been guided through the cultivation of their own SECs will be better equipped to implement meaningful SEL in schools.

Personal Social and Emotional Competencies for Teachers

As mentioned in the previous section, the second area of focus in a pre-service training program must be dedicated to cultivating pre-service teachers' own social and emotional competencies. This includes a) guiding preservice teachers through exploration and strengthening of their own SECs; b) providing safe spaces to identify, reflect, and unpack their own stereotypes, biases, microaggressions; and c) creating personal care plans and strategies for managing their emotions, well-being, and eliminating culturally insensitive practices from their teaching.

Educators are exposed to a variety of daily psychological and physical stressors and must cope effectively with their own emotional reactivity to student behaviors and situational stressors in order to perform effectively (Day & Qing, 2009). Most educators are not prepared in any formal way for the daily strains of constantly managing their own emotional reactions and expressions in order to meet the demands of classroom performance (Brown & Valenti, 2013). Educators' experiences of stress and negative emotion in the classroom over time may lead to decreased performance and burnout as well as poor student outcomes (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Since teachers' own SECs and well-being are key factors influencing their performance as well as student outcomes, it is imperative that they develop SECs early on to manage their stress adequately or else their instruction will suffer, impacting student well-being and achievement (Greenberg, Brown & Abenavoli, 2016; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Imagine a new teacher who is self-aware. During a lesson on the Oregon Trail, a student hotly challenges him about the textbook's portrayal of settlers' treatment of Native Americans. The room goes cold as the students wait for his response. He notices his anxiety and fearful emotional response as he worries about making a good impression on his students and answering the student's question with care. He notices his heart beating faster, his knees shaking and his stomach turning over. He wants to run out the door, but then recognizes that this behavior is a result of his own emotions and thoughts, and he chooses to behave differently. He refers to the toolkit of coping strategies he learned in his teacher preparation program to cope with stressful experiences and takes 3 deep breaths before responding to the student. He realizes that the student was likely experiencing a similar mixture of anxiety and worry before speaking up, and manifested it as anger. A mentor teacher who observed the incident may have seen the new teacher take a beat before answering. The teacher's answer to the student was then a thoughtful response that communicated care to the student, and invited the class into a deeper discussion of the text. The mentor teacher may have

felt the students relax as they realized that they were in safe space to talk openly about difficult topics. Rather than reacting to the student's interruption as disrespectful, because of his self-awareness the teacher was able to avoid a confrontation and use the incident as a teachable moment.

Teachers' own social and emotional skills are vital to teaching and need to be cultivated early in their teaching preparation and supported throughout their careers (Jones et al., 2013). Teacher education programs are the ideal place to begin that work.

Overview of Evidence-based SEL Programs

The third area that needs to be focused on in pre-service teacher education is learning about the wide variety of evidence-based SEL programs and practices in K-12 settings. Many schools and districts are implementing SEL as a Tier 1 intervention in a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) model, that involves classroom skill building, school-wide programming and professional development to help all students develop skills to manage their emotions and build healthy social relationships at all grade levels. Since SEL is not itself not one, standalone program but an approach, this class highlights the diverse ways that SEL can be implemented at the classroom, school and district level. Preservice teachers need to be familiar with specific programs and practices, just as they need familiarity with best practices and common programs in literacy. In the last decade, efforts to improve school climate and performance have given increasing attention to the importance of student health and well-being, resulting in student-centered SEL (Atkins, Hoagwood, Kutash, & Seidman, 2010; Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2003; Berger et al., 2019). Thus, pre-service teachers need to be familiar and ready to implement the SEL programs that best fit the learning contexts of their students.

Continuous Improvement

The fourth area that needs to be focused on for a strong SEL-based preparation program is learning continuous improvement practices to drive modification of SEL implementation over time based on data and the needs of the community. Schools need quality data to guide SEL programming selection, implementation and outcomes assessment. Teachers need to effectively and efficiently evaluate student participation and progress in SEL. To accomplish effective and efficient monitoring of school and district-wide SEL requires that teachers understand the basics of program evaluation and how to utilize both quantitative and qualitative measures to develop robust continuous improvement plans that involve creating implementation strategies, tracking progress,

examining outcome data and making appropriate adjustments to implementation based on the specific needs of the educational community. These research competencies are already taught in many teacher preparation programs and required in Master's programs; including SEL in these courses not only will help students deepen their understanding through inquiry, it may push further research and innovation in an area of education that is rapidly developing.

With training in these four areas as a part of their teacher education program, new teachers have the potential to be leaders in the promotion of SEL early in their careers. Teachers would be equipped with strong SECs for effective teaching and healthy well-being, and would be ready to implement culturally responsive SEL programs that positively impact students.

Conclusion

Transforming our educational system to promote student and teacher well-being is an endeavor that requires persistent collective effort. It can begin with how we educate our pre-service teachers. Increasing training in SEL for pre-service teachers as outlined above may have profoundly positive, long-term impacts on educational settings, leading to the promotion of mental and emotional well-being of teachers and students as they manage the trauma they are enduring during these unprecedented times. Substantial research evidence has revealed the benefits of SEL for all school stakeholders. Teachers who have developed strong SECs are likely to recognize the importance of SEL and be better prepared to lead the implementation of SEL programs, policies, and practices in their schools. Additionally, effectively engaging SEL in diverse contexts requires integrating the cultural assumptions that underpin psychoeducational practices. Teacher education programs can cultivate these skills and prepare pre-service teachers with valuable knowledge of how to implement meaningful SEL. A common theme has emerged across educational contexts –that supporting the social and emotional development of our students is important. Establishing the foundational knowledge for culturally responsive SEL implementation that promotes equity requires teacher education programs to go beyond their current approach. It is time that teacher preparation programs provide more formal training in SEL including implementation and assessment of such programming to support the next generation of educators.

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