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Social Emotional Learning for Social Emotional Justice: A Conceptual Framework for Education in the Midst of Pandemics


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Social Emotional Learning for Social Emotional Justice: A Conceptual Framework for Education in the Midst of Pandemics

Abstract

US education is situated not only in the midst of the novel coronavirus pandemic but also in longstanding “pandemics” of oppression, including but not limited to systemic racism. In this paper, the authors critique the oppressive aspects of traditional SEL and introduce the concept of Social Emotional Learning for Social Emotional Justice (SEL-SEJ). An emergent concept for re-imagining SEL, SEL-SEJ is explicitly oriented toward social justice. Drawing on a decolonial understanding of “resilience,” SEL-SEJ builds from principles of reciprocity and relationships. SEL-SEJ can help educators support students, communities support educators, and school systems support communities.

Keywords

Social Emotional Learning, Social Justice, Indigenous, Students of Color, Pandemic

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Cover Page Footnote

As co-authors, we acknowledge equal contribution to the development of this manuscript and reject the status of “first” or “second” author. Further, we recognize the tireless effort of K-12 educators who focus on advancing social justice and equity in schools. We thank educators for their additional sacrifice to promote this work amid the current “pandemics.” Lastly, we believe students of color who have experienced ongoing injustice deserve our sacrifice and compassion.

Social Emotional Learning For Social Emotional Justice: A Conceptual Framework for Education in the Midst of Pandemics

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US education is situated not only in the midst of the novel coronavirus pandemic but also in longstanding “pandemics” of oppression, including but not limited to systemic racism. In this paper, the authors critique the oppressive aspects of traditional SEL and introduce the concept of Social Emotional Learning for Social Emotional Justice (SEL-SEJ). An emergent concept for re-imagining SEL, SEL-SEJ is explicitly oriented toward social justice. Drawing on a decolonial understanding of “resilience,” SEL-SEJ builds from principles of reciprocity and relationships. SEL-SEJ can help educators support students, communities support educators, and school systems support communities.

Public schooling has never been solely about the transmission of academic content. Most young people of color in the United States spend the bulk of their time in schools, not only reciting math facts and reading from textbooks but also learning how to interact with their peers and resolve conflicts, build relationships with teachers who are often culturally different from themselves, and cope with an education system that was not initially designed for their success (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006). As the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) reached a pandemic level in early spring of 2020, most public schools closed their doors and transitioned to “online learning,” with students connecting to teachers and classmates via technology or sometimes not at all. We suggest that COVID-19 is not the only “pandemic” that students are currently experiencing. Systems of oppression, including but not limited to racism, classism, and sexism, have been entrenched in US institutions and identities since time immemorial.

Black and Brown communities have experienced a long history of threats and violence, such as segregated schools for Black students with sparse resources

and mistreatment as the “lower class” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006), and Native American boarding schools intended “to kill the Indian and save the man”—a phrase often used by Captain Richard H. Pratt and others during the time (Brayboy, 2005). Today, many youth are forced to witness extreme violence and hatred against their own racial groups over social media platforms and other technologies. Although many youth and their communities are engaging in important anti-racist activism (e.g., the Black Lives Matter movement), young people of color are often expected to remain self-controlled and calm in the face of adversity. Without safe opportunities for face-to-face interaction, crucial possibilities for an education based on social justice and solidarity are left to technology, which can feel emotionally isolating and socially detached.

These “pandemics” of systemic oppression and COVID-19 combine to exacerbate the threats on physical, mental, social, and emotional wellbeing of Black and Brown students in K-12 education. As educators, we are presented with a precarious yet powerful opportunity to re-imagine how education could look and feel for students, teachers, parents, and communities. In particular, how can we re-envision the roles and priorities of schooling to promote spaces for young people of color to heal, and to build bridges toward more compassionate communities? We suggest that social emotional learning in K-12 schools can play an important role in this process of healing and bridge-building, if done with attention to social justice. In this conceptual paper, we disrupt the oppressive aspects of traditional social emotional learning (SEL) and introduce the concept of Social Emotional Learning for Social Emotional Justice (SEL-SEJ).

A Critique of Traditional SEL

Traditionally, SEL is founded in Western developmental frameworks that recognize learning as more than purely “cognitive” (Elias et al., 1997; Goleman, 1995). The focus of SEL is to promote students’ abilities for emotional self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2020). SEL is incorporated into schools and classrooms to various degrees, such as wide-sweeping curricula or targeted interventions (Humphrey, 2013). Though well-intended, current models of SEL can center white and middle-class knowledge systems as superior to all others, position marginalized students as incompetent and/or troubled, and ultimately perpetuate injustices (Hoffman, 2009; McMain & Higheagle Strong, in press). For instance, emotion regulation is often lauded as a means toward academic achievement in the form of higher test scores, and emotion is presumed to be predictable and confined within individual bodies (Hoffman, 2009). Too often, SEL becomes a new measured “skill” that contributes to sorting and ranking students (Apple, 2004). Although

many programs do attempt to be “culturally sensitive,” “culturally relevant,” or “culturally responsive” (Denham & Weissberg, 2004; Philibert, 2018), these efforts often fall short by simply plugging racially-diverse characters and scenarios into frameworks and assumptions that remain individualistic, Western, and white-dominant (Hoffman, 2009). SEL must be culturally *sustaining* (Paris & Alim, 2014), culturally *revitalizing* (McCarty & Lee, 2014), and adamantly anti-racist (Weaver, 2020). In a recent article, Kaler-Jones (2020, para. 5) stated, “SEL devoid of culturally-affirming practices and understandings is not SEL at all.”

How can educators support students’ social and emotional experiences in ways that do not reinforce gatekeeping of who will “succeed,” receive safety, and be valued in and beyond education? Social reproduction theorists (e.g., Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Bourdieu, 1973; Collins, 2009) explain how schools reproduce inequities by instructing and assessing students in ways that privilege those whose identities and experiences already align the most with dominant ideologies. However, even while schools reproduce unjust power relations, they are also sites of conflict and contestation (Carnoy & Levin, 1985). SEL programs are largely shaped by white, neoliberal ideologies but also by calls for reform and transformation. To avoid the social reproduction of inequities and injustices yet still foster SEL, we propose a concerted effort to *re-envision* SEL from a lens oriented toward social justice.

By partnering helpful components of SEL with more recognition of power relations and diverse knowledge systems, educators can become better prepared to a) build awareness of students’ social-emotional needs and experiences and b) help students move toward healing, justice, and well-being. SEL-SEJ also values the principles of reciprocal and relational education that are central to Indigenous models of learning (Brayboy, 2005; Kovach, 2018). SEL-SEJ can help educators support students, communities support educators, and school systems support communities. We also acknowledge the labor of educators continually forced to “revise” curricula that are inherently inadequate for their students of color. We call curriculum developers, administrators and policymakers to critically ask, “for whom and for what is this curriculum designed?” Further, “were Black, Brown, and Native American tribal communities involved in the development and assessment process?”

A Decolonized “Resilience” Framework of SEL-SEJ

Students may be inclined to cope with social and emotional tensions, trauma, and discrimination in ways that can bring further harm, such as impulsive retaliating, social withdrawal, negative self-beliefs, and self-medicating with alcohol/drugs (Compas et al., 2017). Although SEL-SEJ should support students in developing healthier coping techniques, it should also understand resilience as a communal

rather than individual endeavor. The onus of change should never be on the student alone but should leverage their community strengths and resources.

Too often, students of color are met with deficit models that position them as damaged victims of suffering (Tuck, 2009; Zembylas, 2013) and suggest that their cultural identities, languages, and practices are obstacles to success (Paris & Alim, 2014). Though it is important to recognize and respond to the pain and injustices inflicted by systems of colonialism, patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalistic education (Tuck, 2009), it is also important to recognize their strengths, cultural supports, and resilience despite injustices. Labeling marginalized students as exclusively victimized, troubled, or “at risk” can contribute to narratives of educator-saviors who attempt to “fix” students with white, colonial, and patriarchal knowledge (Hoffman, 2010; Tuck, 2009; Zembylas, 2013). SEL-SEJ models could integrate resilience strategies utilized by communities of color to help *all* students adapt through the current “pandemics.”

“Resilience” is often understood in educational frameworks as an individual quality that protects students from “risk factors” in their lives. However, students’ local aspects of strength and agency are undermined when white and middle-class constructs become equated with “protective factors” (Hoffman, 2010). The concept of resilience can be taken up in ways that pressure parents and educators to equip (assimilate) marginalized students with ways of thinking/speaking/behaving that produce “better” outcomes *because* they are more valued by oppressive systems. Colonial models of resilience also tend to neglect the systemic violence that may be inflicted upon youth of color regardless of how “resilient” they strive to be (Weaver, 2020).

With a decolonial resistance of such models, we understand resilience as relational, drawing from Indigenous frameworks that emphasize respect and reciprocity for one’s culture, people, and identity even amidst disaster (Brayboy, 2005; Tuck, 2009). “Resilience” may draw from ecological models (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Masten, 2018) in SEL-SEJ, but not in a way that predetermines “risk” and “protective” factors. We understand resilience as something that is shaped and reshaped by political and cultural contexts (Hoffman, 2010). Rather than labeling students and communities as either “at risk” or “resilient,” we encourage educators to foster a relational resilience in which students are encouraged to engage with their emotions, welcome their intersectional identities, and work toward compassion for themselves and those around them (Zembylas, 2013).

Creating Spaces for Healing with SEL-SEJ

To promote social and emotional resilience in a space of trusted relationships, educators must recognize school systems as racialized and political (Brayboy,

2005; Dyches & Boyd, 2017; Rector-Aranda, 2016). Over the course of the coronavirus pandemic, it has become clear that denying the virus's existence only exacerbates the suffering caused by the disease. Similarly, denying the prevalence of systems of oppression will result in a continuation of unjust programs and practices. Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006) "posits that racism is endemic in society and in education, and that racism has become so deeply ingrained in society's and schooling's consciousness that it is often invisible" (Brayboy, 2005, p. 428). Educators can draw upon the notion of SEL-SEJ to learn with students in ways that are aware of and against structural injustices.

The prevalence of individualistic, binary-driven logic systems in US education contributes to the idea that racism, sexism, or classism are "bad" practices done only by "bad" people. Thus, people who are well-intending and aware must not be racist, sexist, or classist. Educators are often called to develop "cultural competence," but this type of professional development may reproduce a notion that an individual has "achieved" a certain level of cultural knowledge that exempts them from further learning. We suggest that SEL-SEJ build from Tervalon and Murray-Garcia's (1998) framework of cultural *humility*, in which teaching for social justice is a never-ending project of learning and unlearning. In a similar vein, Dyches and Boyd's (2017) paradigm of Social Justice Pedagogical and Content Knowledge (SJ-PACK) explores how teacher education can position all instruction and interactions as politically charged, never neutral, and part of an ongoing process of teacher identity growth.

We do not claim to offer SEL-SEJ as a ready-to-go curriculum or even a "finished" concept but as an emergent framework for attending to the entanglements between SEL and social justice, particularly in the midst of severe social distress. In this brief article, the ideas we provide for teaching and student engagement are simply ideas, and they are meant to spur critical conversations with communities of color, teachers, students, families, and other educational stakeholders/policy makers. Again, "SEL devoid of culturally-affirming practices and understandings is not SEL at all" (Kaler-Jones, 2020, para. 5). We need to resist SEL frameworks that have not *meaningfully* included Black, Brown and Native American tribal voices in their curriculum design and assessment. We also suggest that educators consider how elements of mindfulness, aesthetics, and bodily engagement can be incorporated into SEL activities (with the additional challenge of being done remotely through technology) in ways that disrupt mind/body binaries in learning (Davies, 2014; Finley, 2008; Philibert, 2018).

Philibert's (2018) model of SEL provides many compelling ideas for school-wide and body-centered SEL, but it should be extended beyond cultural "relevance" to become more culturally *sustaining* and *revitalizing* and cognizant of social power relations (McCarty & Lee, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2014). Davies'

(2014) work in *Reggio Emilia* school settings draws from Deleuzian and mindfulness frameworks to push against the idea that emotions are confined within individual bodies. Her suggestions for education, while not labeled as SEL, can provide important first steps for promoting more relational and aesthetic ways of engaging with students' emotions that decenter whiteness and colonialism. Arts-based learning (Finley, 2008; Greene, 1995) is another constellation of frameworks to turn to in shaping SEL-SEJ.

Even via technology, educators can engage students in important conversations about social privilege and identity. We advise teachers and curriculum developers to discuss Black, Brown, and Native American tribal communities and historical figures beyond the “heroes and holidays” zeitgeist that presents them as occasional add-ons to Eurocentric knowledge (Rector-Aranda, 2016). Rather than “weighing” students' experiences against one another (as in, “you should not be upset because this person has it worse”), students should be able to express their range of social and emotional needs without fear of judgment. That being said, educators must also help students recognize how their individual experiences are tethered to larger systems (e.g., white students must understand that their whiteness benefits them despite other struggles or discrimination they may face). Students are active agents in all facets of their learning, and even young students can partake in projects and conversations about what it means to be compassionate in both words and actions of solidarity (Zembylas, 2013). Solidarity is a gradual process that begins early. To be compassionate members of a community, students must understand how injustices are produced through systems, not just individuals, and how they themselves are implicated in these systems.

Building Bridges toward Compassionate and Empathetic Communities

Drawing from Indigenous paradigms of reciprocity (Brayboy, 2005; Kovach, 2018; Tuck, 2009), SEL-SEJ should promote holistic wellbeing for entire communities. As we encourage educators to work as compassionate activists with and for their students, we also want to garner systemic community support for educators. Schooling in the midst of the current pandemics can produce strong feelings of discomfort, exhaustion, and emotional burnout. Students and teachers alike may experience challenges such as compassion fatigue, a sense of desensitization toward suffering, and self-victimization (e.g., indignation, self-pity, and resentment for having to engage with others' suffering; Zembylas, 2013). A social-justice politics of compassion interwoven with SEL-SEJ can help people work through these struggles. As Zembylas (2013) writes,

Empathetic identification with the plight of others, then, is not a sentimental recognition of potential sameness—you are in pain and so am I, so we both suffer the same—but a realization of our own common humanity, while acknowledging asymmetries of suffering, inequality, and injustice. (p. 513)

It is important to provide spaces in education for learners of all ages and social positionings to share their stories of suffering, anger, sadness, confusion, etc. in ways that do not (as dominant models of SEL often do) view such “negative” affect as energies to “deal with” in order to return to academics. Emotions are not just textures that accompany our learning. They are states of existence to learn *from* as we unpack the entanglements between personal experience and socio-political context (Ahmed, 2004). Community models of schooling are important to consider in creating a SEL-SEJ framework that recognizes how the personal is also political.

In a system where school funding depends largely on property taxes and test scores, many low-income schools are situated in a negative feedback loop in which they are punished (in the form of fewer resources) for problems that stem from limited resources. This is not to take a deficit view of low-income schools as helpless or devoid of rich cultural resources, but rather to acknowledge the neoliberal landscape that perpetuates inequities at nested levels of government. Community schools, which are often used as an intervention tactic for low-income, “low-performing” schools, allocate educational funds toward school counselors, nurses, food programs, family outreach, healthcare, and other resources (National Education Association [NEA], 2013). We suggest that variations of community school models (pushing *against* the Every Student Succeeds Act’s emphasis on test scores and audits; Au & Hollar, 2016) be considered as a more sweeping approach to education in any community.

Transforming the education system is no small task, but the destabilization caused by COVID-19 may also present an opportunity for serious change. The Coalition for Community Schools is an alliance of national, state, and local K-12 organizations. As of 2020, there are more than 5,000 community schools in the United States (National Center for Community Schools, 2020). Community schools usually emerge from local initiatives, funded by various sources including community partners, philanthropies, and the federal government. To push for wraparound services that support reciprocal school-community relationships, local actors (educators, administrators, organization leaders, families, etc.) must come together to advocate for school-community partnerships and governmental funding (NEA, 2013).

SEL-SEJ should situate actors (students, teachers, school administrators, etc.) in their immediate communities while recognizing the connections among

communities at broader levels. Before trying to “save the world” or merely sympathize with remote problems, stakeholders should learn more deeply about ways to promote holistic wellbeing in their own “backyards” and then extend outward (Zembylas, 2013). In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, governmental decisions should be led by community voices that can focus on their particular needs. By promoting SEL-SEJ alongside community school models and a relational ethics of education, we hope to see socio-ecological justice at multiple levels.

Conclusion

In response to the systemic oppression that is inflicted upon youth of color and exacerbated by COVID-9, we present Social Emotional Learning for Social Emotional Justice (SEL-SEJ) as a framework for engaging students, teachers, and communities in projects of activism, healing, and compassion. This framework includes a decolonial understanding of “resilience” as a relentless commitment to stick with ourselves and our communities even during times of great despair. A key goal of SEL-SEJ is to nurture reciprocal networks in which youth of color are valued and cared for within communities that are committed to dismantling systemic racism and other forms of violence. Educators must be seen as frontline workers in this network, and schools must be recognized as sites of perpetuated injustice *and* ongoing transformation.

Developing frameworks of SEL-SEJ is an especially difficult challenge in the face of online learning and the COVID-19 pandemic, but it is also more important than ever. The inequities exposed by the coronavirus pandemic (Dooley et al., 2020; Laster Pirtle, 2020) remind us that schools have always been more than sites of academic curriculum delivery. Schools can be constructed as places to nurture students and their communities physically, emotionally, socially, and intellectually. Education remains a source of identity formation and relationship-building. Even without (or with limited) in-person connections, we can still foster meaningful social connections and solidarities through whatever venues are currently available.

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