"Curriculum and Culture Go Hand in Hand"

Understanding Teachers' Experiences with an SEL Curriculum from a Socio-Cultural Competency Lens

Praxis Project Thesis: Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts — as part of the Community, Youth, and Education Studies Major at Clark University

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Abstract

This praxis study examines the critical role of educators in implementing Social and Emotional Learning [1](SEL) curricula, highlighting the need for teachers to possess socioemotional and sociocultural competencies. Drawing on ongoing research involving educators, administrators, and school curricula, it identifies key factors influencing successful SEL delivery, including administrative support and the school calendar's structure. The study further examines the importance of culturally responsive and trauma-informed approaches, particularly in diverse and marginalized educational settings. It underscores that the well-being and competencies of educators significantly impact the effectiveness of SEL initiatives. Collaborative strategies involving mental health professionals are recommended to support students and teachers better. In the current educational landscape, the findings highlight the growing relevance of SEL in fostering resilience, equity, and holistic development. Overall, the research advocates for personalized, inclusive, and systemically supported SEL implementation that meets the diverse needs of school communities.

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[1] SEL: Social Emotional Learning

Acknowledgments

First, I want to thank my partner in crime, Nani. We started this not knowing what we were doing and ended up still not knowing, but at least we were not alone! (P.S. Good luck on your defense!!!) Next to the girl who read and talked about my thesis more than I did, Miss Ella. I love you and am forever grateful for your help with problem-solving. And once again-YOU GOT THIS! And to Ezra, who spends countless nights in the library, CMACD, or our makeshift classroom in the living room, you are a great praxis guru :). I also want to thank my Winner's Camp Ohana, because you all are the ones who get me through it every day, knowing that my work can help change lives and have a *Keauhou:* A New Beginning. I want to thank Jake and Hamilton, who welcomed Nani and me with open arms and were incredibly helpful. They made the transition to a new site easy and genuinely cared about their students and teachers. I also want to thank every single teacher who agreed to participate in an interview with us. Taking time out of your regularly busy schedule to discuss something you are passionate about shows how much you care about your students. Lastly, there is genuinely no way to thank this person, my professor and mentor, Jie Park, who is the entirety of the past, present, and future of Community, Youth, and Education Studies (CYES) and Praxis. I genuinely respect you so much, Jie, and you have no idea how much influence you have on our lives.

Introduction

I remember walking into my mom's room, tears exploding down my face, as I had to tell her the news I just received—that one of my closest friends had passed away. I remember the phone call from my best friend confirming that the Instagram post was not a joke. I remember the fighting and arguing, my parents asking me to take sides. I remember the yelling from my sister and the pit-sized hole in my stomach. I remember every sound, smell, feeling, and emotion I experienced. However, I do not know how I processed it. I just woke up one day and told myself it would be okay.

This is what navigating mental health challenges often looks like—confusion, emotional weight, and silent survival. For those who are blissfully unaware, mental health issues are not only deeply personal, but our cultural environments, socio-economic status, and access to care also shape them. Mental illness affects 1 in 5 people each year, and its prevalence continues to rise, especially among adolescents, who are simultaneously forming their identities while processing emotional trauma (NAMI, 2025). However, mental health is rarely addressed through a culturally competent lens. What is considered "appropriate" expression in one cultural context may be discouraged or pathologized in another.

Every adolescent eventually walks into a school, and with them, they carry their identities—their cultural background, family expectations, language, and norms. Teachers are the first line of connection, often before therapists, counselors, or even family. Moreover, teachers, too, were once those kids—navigating the complexities of identity, emotion, and cultural expectations. That is precisely why I focused my praxis project on teachers: their experiences, emotional labor, and capacity to support students through socio-emotional learning (SEL) in culturally responsive ways.

Regardless of age, we all must grapple with emotions—in school, with friends, or in our careers. These emotions do not exist in a vacuum; they are filtered through our cultures and lived experiences. Growing up, I had a difficult upbringing that led to significant mental health challenges, requiring both individual and family therapy. Unlike many, I had the privilege of attending a high school with a robust SEL curriculum, access to culturally aware counselors, and supportive administrators. My experiences were not universal—the resources of a private institution shaped them. This intersection between emotional wellness and privilege has deeply informed my understanding of identity, mental health, and cultural access to care.

Abbott Elementary, where I conducted my research, already had a pre-existing SEL curriculum, allowing me to observe how such a program is implemented. However, it also made me wonder how culture, race, and identity are acknowledged within these lessons. (How) do teachers feel equipped to incorporate students' cultural perspectives and expressions of emotion? My project was born from questions like this one. I wanted to understand how teachers, as cultural mediators, interpret and implement SEL and what kind of training or support they need to do so effectively and equitably.

I have worked with children in schools, summer camps, and community projects, motivated by a desire to affirm that their feelings are valid—and that identity plays a central role in how those feelings are expressed and understood. Some days, I still struggle with that myself. I often reflect on my younger self and wonder how different life might have been if someone had offered emotional validation and cultural recognition. If someone had said, "You are not just feeling this—you are feeling this *as you,* and that matters."

This is why social emotional learning is so powerful when *culturally responsive*. It allows for identity-affirming spaces where emotions can be safely processed. It encourages students and

teachers to honor their cultural narratives in coping, communicating, and growing.

The significance of this research lies not only within Abbot Elementary but also in its implications for other schools, communities, and educators. When teachers are trained and supported in culturally competent SEL practices, students are more likely to feel seen, safe, and empowered. This creates a ripple effect—better emotional regulation, stronger teacher-student relationships, and more inclusive classrooms. The ultimate goal is for emotional learning to become a shared cultural value, not a luxury.

This praxis project is driven by a theory of change rooted in socio-cultural awareness: that emotionally and culturally supported educators can cultivate identity-affirming spaces for students, that schools can be places of healing, and that mental health education, when framed through identity and cultural competence, becomes not just practical but transformational.

"Curriculum and Culture Go Hand in Hand"

Curriculum and culture are inextricably linked. Every curriculum, whether explicitly or implicitly, carries cultural values, assumptions, and norms that shape how knowledge is constructed, delivered, and received in classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 1995). For this reason, it is essential that educators possess sociocultural competencies—the ability to recognize, respect, and integrate students' diverse cultural backgrounds into instructional practices. Sociocultural competency enables teachers to create inclusive learning environments, foster student engagement, and critically examine how systemic inequalities manifest within educational content and structures.

In any curriculum, but particularly within frameworks like Social Emotional Learning (SEL), sociocultural awareness is foundational. SEL programs aim to support students in developing self-awareness, emotional regulation, interpersonal skills, and responsible

decision-making (CASEL, 2020). However, these skills do not exist in a cultural vacuum. Students' ways of expressing emotions, resolving conflict, or demonstrating empathy are deeply shaped by their cultural and social contexts. A one-size-fits-all SEL curriculum risks misinterpreting or invalidating students' behavior if it fails to account for these differences. For example, in some cultures, maintaining eye contact may be considered disrespectful, while in others it is a sign of attentiveness. Without sociocultural competence, a teacher might misread a student's behavior and unintentionally enforce dominant cultural norms as the "correct" way to be socially or emotionally regulated.

Moreover, sociocultural competency helps teachers move beyond surface-level inclusion and toward culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017). This means not only acknowledging students' backgrounds but actively affirming and sustaining their cultural identities within the learning process. In SEL, this could involve incorporating community-based examples of conflict resolution, validating multilingual communication, or inviting students to share how emotional expression is understood in their families and communities. When students see their lived experiences reflected in the curriculum, they are more likely to feel valued, connected, and safe—conditions that are essential for meaningful social and emotional growth.

Ultimately, sociocultural competency is not an add-on to curriculum design; it is an ethical imperative for equitable teaching. In increasingly diverse classrooms, teachers must be equipped to navigate cultural differences with sensitivity and humility. Whether teaching math, literature, science, or SEL, culturally responsive practices help ensure that all students can access, engage with, and benefit from the curriculum. As Nieto (2010) notes, education is always a political and cultural act—what we teach and how we teach it matters deeply. Embedding sociocultural understanding into curricular decisions not only strengthens learning outcomes but

also contributes to the broader goal of educational justice.

Positionality
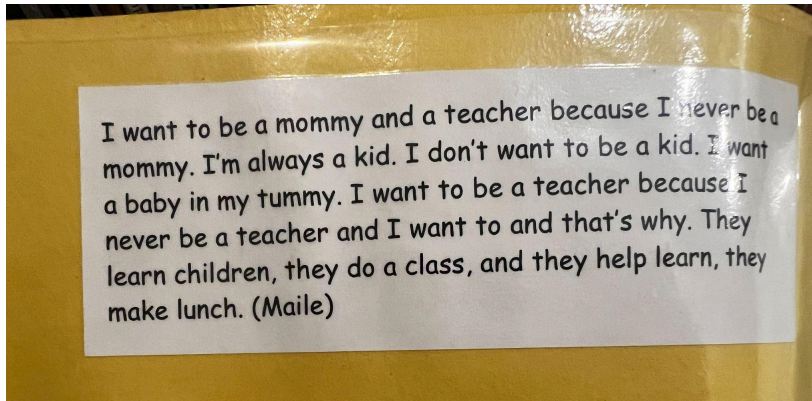
Figure 1: January 19th, 2008, "A letter to my future self"

As you can see above, my standards and priorities were not realistic. I mean, a baby and mommy? Come on! Be for real, little Maile. However, one thing my younger self did have right was that I wanted to help and care for others. And one can do that in so many different ways. I will worry about having kids one day, but today is not that day!

My identity, raised in Hawaiʻi, is central to how I approached this project. I attended private schools throughout my life, which provided access to robust academic and emotional support systems. Growing up in a multicultural environment—deeply rooted in the Hawaiian value of "aloha," encompassing kindness, unity, and respect—taught me to appreciate diversity and community-centered values. However, this upbringing also came with privileges that many students and educators do not share, especially those in underfunded or culturally marginalized school contexts. My educational and personal background offers an insider's understanding of SEL's potential and an outsider's distance from teachers' specific struggles in implementing such curricula under resource constraints.

My positionality is also informed by the theories that I draw on. The theoretical

orientation of this project is rooted in sociocultural theory, culturally responsive pedagogy, and critical pedagogy. Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes that cognitive and emotional development are socially mediated and culturally situated (Vygotsky, 1978). Moll et al.'s (1992) concept of "funds of knowledge" supports the integration of students' cultural and community-based knowledge into the classroom. Gloria Ladson-Billings' (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy and Paulo Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy underscore the importance of identity, agency, and equity in educational practices. Tara Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework adds an essential lens to this study by identifying and valuing the aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital that multicultural and multilingual students bring to learning environments. These frameworks shape my belief that SEL must be implemented with cultural responsiveness, recognizing and honoring the diverse emotional expressions, values, and strengths students bring into learning spaces.

As a researcher shaped by privilege, cultural multiplicity, and a commitment to social justice, my positionality influences every stage of this project. While I bring lived experience and academic insight to the topic of SEL, I also bring bias, perspective, and responsibility. Recognizing and reflecting on these elements is critical to ethical research practice and honoring the trust and experiences of the participants who contributed to this study.

This background fueled my passion for SEL—the idea that everyone (especially the teacher) needs to feel and be well to create a community where students' socioemotional learning can be supported. This realization has been a challenging but necessary lesson for me, as I tend to prioritize the needs of others over my own. Ensuring educators are equipped with tools for their well-being is essential to fostering environments where students' emotional lives are respected and supported.

Being an undergraduate student at Clark University, majoring in Community, Youth, and Education Studies and Psychology, with a minor in Spanish, further shapes who I am. In this research, I occupy the role of an outsider-observer—not a member of the Abbott School teaching community, yet someone who entered the space for inquiry. While I developed professional relationships with teachers and administrators and participated in classroom settings, I remained external to the school's ongoing community rhythms. I was not a co-designer or full partner in the SEL implementation but rather a researcher seeking to understand teachers' experiences through qualitative methods such as surveys and interviews.

My role at Abbott included over 15 visits, during which I sat in on classes across grades and subjects, assisted teachers, and experienced the daily schedule of an Abbott student. Students and teachers knew me as the "Clark student"; however, my identity extended beyond that label. As a white woman raised in a multicultural and multilingual environment, I bring an appreciation for diverse worldviews and an awareness of my privileges. While I am originally from Hawaiʻi—a U.S. state—my cultural experiences differ significantly from the predominant "mainland" American norms. My private education exposed me to multiple languages, cultural perspectives, and teaching styles, which helped me cultivate a safe and supportive learning environment—a privilege not all students experience.

Grounding my framework in asset-based thinking, I understand that students already possess emotional and behavioral competencies shaped by their homes, cultures, and communities. Rather than assuming a lack, I recognize that traditional SEL models may fail to acknowledge the emotional knowledge and coping strategies that students already use. Early emotional education can be powerful, but it must affirm students' strengths and community-based wisdom. For SEL to be effective, students must learn in inclusive, affirming

environments that validate their identities and values—environments fostered by well-supported, culturally responsive teachers.

Thus, teachers must have access to resources that help them develop inclusive SEL practices, and schools must recognize the cultural wealth students bring. SEL, Teacher Social-Emotional Competency (SEC), and Top-Down Implementation theories must be applied to resist deficit-based thinking and center equity and affirmation.

I also recognize that complicated power dynamics were at play throughout this research. As an undergraduate, I was younger and less professionally experienced than the teachers I interviewed, which may have impacted how they saw me. They may have viewed my partner and me more as students than as legitimate researchers, which could have influenced how openly they shared their thoughts. They might have held back specific criticisms or more honest reflections because they did not fully trust our role or see the purpose of the research in a serious light.

In addition, the school administration's introduction and support of the project added another layer to these dynamics. The heads of the lower and middle schools were very involved—they helped schedule interviews, encouraged teacher participation, and supported the study. While that support helped access participants, it may also have unintentionally pressured teachers to participate or speak more positively than they otherwise would have. Some may have felt they needed to give answers that reflected well on the school, especially knowing that the administration had backed the project.

I have realized that some complex power dynamics were involved in this research. As an undergraduate, I knew I was younger and less experienced than the teachers we interviewed. That difference in status likely influenced how they saw me and my research partner, Nani.

Throughout the process, we were often called the "Clark college girls," which, while it might have seemed casual or lighthearted, reinforced the idea that we were just students, not serious researchers. That perception could have made it harder for teachers to fully open up or feel comfortable being completely honest with us.

Another factor was the role of the school administration. The heads of the lower and middle schools were very involved in getting the project off the ground—they helped us set up interviews and encouraged staff to participate. While that support made the research possible, I now see how it might have created some pressure for teachers to participate and respond in ways that reflected positively on the school. Suppose they knew that administrators were backing our work. In that case, they may have felt hesitant to share anything too critical or controversial. Especially about SEL (Social and Emotional Learning) or how it was being implemented.

Working with my partner, Nani, also brought interesting dynamics into the research. We come from different backgrounds—I grew up in a multicultural environment, while Nani was raised in a more racially homogeneous white community. Those differences showed up in the way we approached the project. I was especially interested in how SEL connects with multicultural students and whether it supports broader DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) goals. On the other hand, Nani focused more on how SEL was being rolled out in classrooms—what was working and how the logistics played out. These different perspectives shaped what we paid attention to during interviews and how we misunderstood what teachers said. It showed me just how vital reflexivity is in research, recognizing that who we are affects how we understand our work.

If I could do this kind of research again, I would ask more profound, specific questions, especially around areas that felt too surface-level this time. For instance, I would ask, "How do

you handle it when the SEL curriculum does not align with your students' cultural backgrounds?" or "What kind of support do you receive from school leadership when trying to adapt SEL to fit your classroom better?" These questions would help bring out more honest, meaningful responses and shed light on the tension teachers may feel between what is expected and what is right for their students.

This project taught me that research isn't just about collecting answers—it's shaped by many factors, including who asks the questions, how they're viewed, and the environment in which the research occurs. Collaborating with Nani pushed me to think more critically about my perspective and reminded me how important it is to reflect on our identities throughout the research process. That awareness strengthened our work and helped me grow as a student and researcher.

Ultimately, this research seeks to understand teachers' experiences with SEL and contribute to a broader conversation about how schools can cultivate social-emotional learning that affirms and uplifts the cultural wealth of all students.

Context

Initially, I wanted to work with Sky High. Sky High was known to be a bilingual combined education school, which would allow for more access to multicultural and multilingual curricula and educational practices. However, because they were understaffed, it was too much of a commitment to uphold, and they could not take on another project. Although I was disappointed because Sky High would have been the target demographic for my research, another opportunity presented itself. My advisor brought up the idea of working with Abbott Schools. Although not a part of the Worcester Public School system, Abbott was still eager to work with my partner and me and could take on a new project. Thus, I went forth and scheduled

meetings with the heads of schools through Zoom the summer before the Fall Semester. Then, once we all returned to campus for the start of the school year, I could go in person, speak with all the teachers and faculty, and take a tour around campus. I got the school vibe and saw what the future held.

Abbott Schools is a private, independent day school in Worcester, just outside the Main South community. It houses three schools: Lower (Pre-K through fifth), Middle (sixth through eighth), and Higher (ninth through 12th). I chose to primarily focus on the lower and middle schools (Pre-K through eighth grade), although I would love to disperse the findings to the high school later.

Another important layer to this research is the demographic and institutional context in which it took place. Abbott is a private school that also happens to be a predominantly white institution (PWI), and this context cannot be ignored when considering how the research was conducted and how Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) was implemented. As a private school with primarily white students and staff, Abbott operates within a very different cultural and socioeconomic setting than most public schools in the area.

In Worcester, Massachusetts, where this study was conducted, there are 46 public schools—including preschools, elementary, middle, and high schools—and 19 private schools. Out of the 65 schools, only six offer a curriculum focusing on SEL. Abbott only began implementing their SEL program in the Spring of 2023, meaning it is still very new and in the early stages of development. That alone raises questions about how prepared the staff are, what support systems are in place, and how the effectiveness of the curriculum is being evaluated.

The distinction between public and private schools also shaped how I understood this research. Public schools, especially in urban areas like Worcester, often face chronic

underfunding, larger class sizes, and limited access to mental health resources

(Darling-Hammond, 2015). In contrast, private schools like Abbott generally have more funding,

smaller student-to-teacher ratios, and access to supplemental programs like SEL. This disparity

forces us to ask: Is the problem simply access, or is it also about the quality and cultural

relevance of what is being provided?

For example, even though Abbott has the resources to implement an SEL curriculum,

there is still the question of whether that curriculum is meaningful, inclusive, and relevant to all

students, especially those from non-dominant cultural backgrounds. Given that Abbott is a PWI,

it is crucial to consider how SEL is being taught and whether it genuinely reflects the diverse

emotional and social needs of students from marginalized or multicultural communities. Too

often, SEL programs reflect dominant cultural norms around emotion, behavior, and mental

health, which may not resonate with students of color or those from different cultural traditions

(Gregory & Fergus, 2017).

This also connects to my personal experience and the perspective I brought into the

research. Growing up in a multicultural environment, I was especially attuned to how SEL

intersects with race, culture, and equity. In contrast, Nani, my research partner, came from a

more homogeneous white community, which influenced her focus on implementation and

logistics. These differences in our backgrounds helped us see the value in approaching SEL from

multiple angles. However, they also highlighted how easy it is to overlook key issues when

diversity is not centered in the conversation.

If I were to do this research again, I would ask more critical and reflective questions like,

"Whose cultural values are embedded in this SEL program?" or "How do you adapt SEL

strategies to meet the needs of students from different racial or cultural backgrounds?" These

questions get at the heart of equity in education and force us to think about how privilege and access appear in supposedly "universal" practices like SEL.

Ultimately, this research pushed me to think deeply about the inequities that exist in education, particularly around mental health support and emotional development. The fact that only six schools in Worcester offer SEL-focused programs shows just how limited access still is, especially when we know how essential these skills are. It raises a critical question: How do we ensure culturally competent emotional learning is not just a privilege for students in well-resourced private schools but a right for all students, regardless of their background?

Section 1: The Younger Self

Figure 2: February 20th, 2005, "My younger self"

The younger self has no idea what the future self holds. It could be glorious, horrible, or even a little bit of both. The first thing is the most memorable—first steps, words, flavors, and even your first emotions. The thing about your younger self is that they are trying to live through

the future. Constantly think about when you will grow up, what you will look like, who you will be friends with, and what people will think of you. However, I never once as a kid had to think about the political or economic status of my life or worry about someone mistaking my name for something other than beautiful and unique. The issue is that as a kid, you never have to worry about anything but being a kid. Moreover, that is what we have social emotional learning for.

What if your younger self holds the key to understanding and teaching socio-cultural competence today?

Think back—before professional training, academic theory, or educational standards—what did you learn simply by being in the world as a child? You may not have realized it then, but the way you navigated friendships, responded to difference, or handled conflict likely shaped your earliest understanding of identity, community, and empathy. These foundational experiences are the building blocks of social-emotional learning (SEL) and socio-cultural competence—skills that are now rightly embedded in forward-thinking educational curricula.

Yet in education, we often overlook the wisdom stored in those early moments. We focus on structured methods for teaching SEL but forget the power of lived experience. Reflecting on your younger self—your questions, misunderstandings, and small acts of courage—can ground your teaching in authenticity. Were you ever the new kid? Did you witness exclusion? Did you try to stand up for someone, or wish you had? These moments are not just personal memories—they're entry points for creating learning environments that center empathy, equity, and inclusion.

In re-engaging with your younger self, you unlock an internal compass for how to approach socio-cultural learning with students. You remember what it felt like to be unseen,

unheard, or misunderstood—and how powerful it was when someone finally got you. That emotional memory can inform how you build classrooms today: where students of every background feel valued, where cultural differences are explored rather than avoided, and where emotional intelligence is as prized as academic achievement.

So ask yourself, how can your younger self continue to teach you? What lessons still resonate—and how might they shape the way you model, teach, and advocate for social-emotional and sociocultural growth in your educational practice?

Theoretical Frameworks

My research addressed the issue of how educators can be better supported in implementing SEL curricula effectively. This focus is informed by literature emphasizing the importance of providing teachers with adequate resources and support for successful SEL integration. At the time of starting this project, Abbot Elementary needed a process to assess how its new SEL curriculum was being implemented and experienced by its staff. My study, therefore, aimed to provide teachers and administration at Abbot with a nuanced understanding of SEL implementation in the various grades and classrooms from the teachers' perspectives and experiences. I aimed to highlight the commonalities and differences across teachers' experiences and the challenges and opportunities for strengthening the SEL experience for students. This is important because there has been little to no assessment of how the SEL curriculum has impacted the Abbot community academically and socially. I hoped, with the data, to bridge gaps currently going unnoticed in Abbot Schools' SEL implementation. SEL is situated within the systems of power and privilege of the education system and students' intersectional, overlapping, and interconnected identities. Understanding the interaction of student identities with SEL in the context of school systems and the power and privileges steeped therewith is a "necessary and

complex area of inquiry for the field of SEL to address" (Cipriano & McCarthy, 2023).

The Social-Emotional Learning theory is a broader spectrum that is essential in understanding the importance of an SEL curriculum and the specifics that can help teachers implement it, as it may differ from other subject implementations. According to *The Missing Piece,* a CASEL framework, the IA survey found that nearly all teachers (93%) agreed that SEL is an important concept that should be explicitly taught in schools: "Of the teachers who list poor student behavior as at least somewhat of a problem, three in five (78 percent) say SEL is very important, and 79 percent think it will improve student performance." (Bridgeland, et al., 2013, p.6) My research project is not just about implementing a new curriculum; it is also about the importance of the curriculum itself.

Educators should receive high-quality professional development on teaching social and emotional skills during pre-service and in-service (professional development) training. Professional development for teachers, principals, and professional and paraprofessional staff should focus on teaching explicit core social and emotional skills, embedding SEL in regular instruction, and creating opportunities for students to apply social and emotional skills throughout the day." (Bridgeland et al., 2013, p.10)

Figure 7: Outcomes Associated with the Five Competencies (according to CASEL Framework)

The benefits of social-emotional learning are long-term educational benefits, better in-school experiences, and improved relationships with others. Those competent in SEL can

recognize and manage their emotions, establish healthy relationships, set positive goals, meet personal and social needs, and make responsible and ethical decisions (Elias et al., 1997; Yton et al., 2000). The goal is for students to adequately deal with and express their emotions, where they have healthy emotional behaviors and habits. Suppose they can acknowledge when they feel and express a particular emotion adequately. In that case, they know whether they want to stay in it or shift out of it, being able to recognize others' feelings while giving them space to express and cope with said emotions. Students feel a strong sense of confidence when discussing their feelings with their peers and teachers.

The five core competencies—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020)—are articulated by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), one of the leading organizations in developing and disseminating SEL frameworks.

1. Self-awareness refers to recognizing one's emotions, thoughts, and values and understanding how they influence behavior.

2. Self-management involves regulating emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively.

3. Social awareness includes empathizing with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures.

4. Relationship skills involve establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding interpersonal relationships.

5. Responsible decision-making includes ethical, constructive, personal, and social behavior choices.

These five dimensions are foundational to most SEL curricula and school interventions today. CASEL's framework has been widely adopted in policy and practice across educational systems in the United States and globally, often promoted as a "neutral" and universal set of

skills essential for academic and life success. However, the supposed universality of these competencies has been the subject of critique, particularly from sociocultural and critical race theorists, who argue that emotional norms and relational expectations are culturally constructed and not value-neutral.

Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

The Social Emotional Learning curriculum would not exist without looking at emotions and mental health first. This is where SEL stemmed from, with people recognizing the gap in research of comprehensive steps for adolescents to identify and regulate their emotions. The Social Emotional Learning Theory is required to fully understand the curriculum and processes behind it. This theory defines SEL as "a process that helps people develop the skills and attitudes to manage their emotions, build relationships, and make responsible decisions." (CASEL, 2024) It is based on the CASEL framework, a multidisciplinary network that includes researchers, educators, practitioners, and child advocates nationwide who are passionately committed to SEL for all students. CASEL's theory of action is based upon first deciding at what level the implementation will happen: district, school, or classroom. The goal is for my research aspect to be implemented within the school, where they would have a set team devoted to SEL. Developing the curriculum, practicing SEL foundations with each other, and communicating the implementation plan. This will then lead to the allotment of strengthening adults' understanding of SEL.

Within the lower and middle school, Abbot has the school counselor(s) and head of schools help the other educators understand and feel comfortable with the SEL practices and begin to model SEL throughout the school. The goal is not just to implement a curriculum and walk away, but also for the students to understand its importance. This can be done through the

school developing a clear plan to support the implementation of SEL by supporting the classroom, the community, family engagement, and more. Also, data for constant improvement within the school should be collected and analyzed, and school-specific data should be utilized to focus on areas of improvement and make changes where necessary.

The concept of SEL has its roots in multiple academic traditions, including emotional intelligence theory (Goleman, 1995), child development psychology, and whole-child education movements. Its institutional formation began in the 1990s, particularly through the efforts of scholars like Daniel Goleman and organizations such as CASEL (founded in 1994). The early emphasis was mainly on intrapersonal and interpersonal skills supporting academic achievement, reducing behavioral problems, and promoting long-term well-being (Zins et al., 2004). However, while well-intentioned and based in psychological research, this initial framing of SEL largely ignored the impact of social, cultural, and structural factors on students' emotional lives and relational practices.

Sociocultural Responsive Pedagogy

Socioculturally responsive pedagogy emphasizes integrating students' cultural backgrounds, lived experiences, and community contexts into the educational process. In the context of SEL, this approach recognizes that cultural norms, values, and social systems deeply influence emotional and social development. Educators who adopt a socioculturally responsive framework strive to design teaching strategies that validate and affirm students' identities, promoting emotional intelligence, empathy, and resilience in ways that resonate with their cultural experiences. This theoretical framework is grounded in key concepts from sociocultural theory, culturally relevant pedagogy, and critical pedagogy. These all provide a foundation for understanding the dynamic relationship between culture, identity, and learning.

Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory offers a foundational lens for understanding how learning and development are inextricably linked to social interactions and cultural contexts. According to Vygotsky (1978), cognitive development is not a solitary process but occurs through interaction with more knowledgeable others within a cultural context. This theory underscores the importance of teachers recognizing and building upon students' artistic knowledge and using culturally relevant tools and resources to facilitate learning. When applied to SEL, Vygotsky's ideas suggest that students' emotional and social development cannot be fully understood outside the cultural contexts in which they live. Educators are thus encouraged to create culturally responsive learning environments, integrating students' lived experiences into their SEL curricula (Roth & Lee, 2006).

Further, Moll et al.'s (1992) concept of funds of knowledge provides an essential framework for educators seeking to tap into the diverse cultural assets that students bring to the classroom. Funds of knowledge refer to the skills, knowledge, and practices students acquire through family and community experiences. In a socioculturally responsive classroom, educators recognize that students' cultural backgrounds provide valuable resources for learning. For example, SEL competencies such as empathy, self-regulation, and communication might be framed in ways that align with the cultural norms and values of the students. This could involve incorporating community-based approaches to conflict resolution or promoting collective well-being in a classroom environment. By leveraging students' cultural funds of knowledge, SEL can become more meaningful and applicable to their daily lives, fostering deeper engagement and connection with the learning process.

In addition to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, Gloria Ladson-Billings' work on culturally relevant pedagogy offers an essential perspective on integrating cultural identity into teaching

practices. (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006) Argues that culturally relevant pedagogy involves three key goals: academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. For students to succeed academically, educators must affirm their cultural identities and provide learning opportunities through culturally meaningful contexts. Regarding SEL, this means recognizing that their cultural frameworks shape students' emotional experiences. For instance, different cultures have varying expressions of emotions such as anger, grief, or joy, and SEL programs should acknowledge these differences to be genuinely effective. Culturally relevant SEL would focus on teaching students social-emotional competencies that are universally applicable and aligned with their cultural understandings of emotions, relationships, and social norms.

Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy further extends the idea of education as a tool for empowerment, advocating for a transformative approach to teaching that encourages students to critically examine their social realities and take action to address inequality (Freire, 1970). This perspective is particularly significant for socioculturally responsive SEL, as it promotes a sense of agency and social responsibility among students, encouraging them to use their emotional and social skills to challenge injustice and work toward collective well-being. SEL, in this framework, becomes a means of developing not only personal emotional intelligence but also a commitment to social change, allowing students to reflect on how social inequalities impact their emotional and social experiences. Critical pedagogy pushes educators to think beyond traditional SEL models and create learning environments that empower students to participate actively in their communities and society.

Additionally, Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of social capital and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) offer further insight into the role of students' social and cultural backgrounds in shaping their learning experiences. Social capital refers to the networks of relationships and community

connections that students bring with them. In contrast, cultural capital pertains to the knowledge, skills, and dispositions valued by society. Educators in a socioculturally responsive classroom recognize that students' social and cultural capital impacts their academic success and emotional and social development. By valuing these forms of capital, educators can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for students, enabling them to thrive emotionally and socially in ways consistent with their cultural identities.

Finally, a social justice perspective, which emphasizes equity and the redistribution of power, is crucial for any socioculturally responsive pedagogy or SEL framework. In the context of SEL, this means addressing the systemic inequalities that affect students' emotional and social well-being. A social justice approach to SEL encourages students to develop the skills to navigate their emotional worlds and the capacity to critically examine and challenge the societal structures that shape those emotions (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). In this way, SEL becomes a tool for personal and social transformation, equipping students with the emotional intelligence to work toward a more just and equitable society.

Teacher Social Emotional Competency (SEC)

According to *The Prosocial Classroom*, the Teacher's Social-Emotional Competence Theory (SEC) includes emotional, cognitive, and behavioral competencies: self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision-making, self-management, and relationship management. The key is to look at student relationships, classroom management, and classroom climate to assess whether or not the theory is applicable. When we look at how it is broken down, we can see the education and information dissemination. For example, "teaching performance is a function of the school environment as well as of personal qualities." (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009, p.299). This proves that an adolescent's education is determined by one thing and by the

teachers, administration, curriculum, and environment.

Having an emotionally intelligent classroom program entails recognizing and labeling emotions, understanding emotions, and expressing and regulating emotions in response to situations commonly encountered by teachers in a classroom. It also enhances commitment to teaching and training students regarding social and emotional development. Mindfulness-based interventions, emotional intelligence pieces of training, and practical classroom management skills can lead to effective SEL program implementation. "Most SEL programs assume that the teacher is prepared to act as an effective emotional coach and role model." (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009, p.504). This proves a gap in the research that teachers need proper training without assumptions or stereotypes. The issue with this is that no one has created a specific training or facilitation that could be required for educators to be adequately equipped to handle emotions and personal experiences.

CASEL is a very educated and backed curriculum that has been empirically tested. However, CASEL is primarily based on the concepts of emotions and education within a classroom setting and does not account for outside influences such as language barriers, cultural backgrounds, or personal experiences. In other words, SEL and its dimensions rely on cultural assumptions. SEL can be used as a behavioral management strategy or "controlling students" rather than a culturally inclusive practice, which limits students from diverse backgrounds from expressing social and emotional skills and reinforces a deficit narrative by focusing on students' deficiencies rather than strengths (Shuen Lau et al., 2024). A case study examining SEL practice at a school district in Chicago, IL, found that "conventional SEL instruction" overlooks issues of identity and equity, reinforcing inequities in opportunities and challenges to social-emotional learning across racial and ethnic lines and "placing an unfair burden on individual youth to

self-regulate their emotions and behaviors rather than supporting them in confronting the institutions that impact them and their communities" (McGovern et al., 2023, pp. 1-2). The whole point of this argument is to demonstrate that even a curriculum that is used nationwide can have flaws, which then goes back to my point of whether access to this curriculum and competency is more essential or if the quality of the curriculum is more important for the future of students' emotional and social competencies.
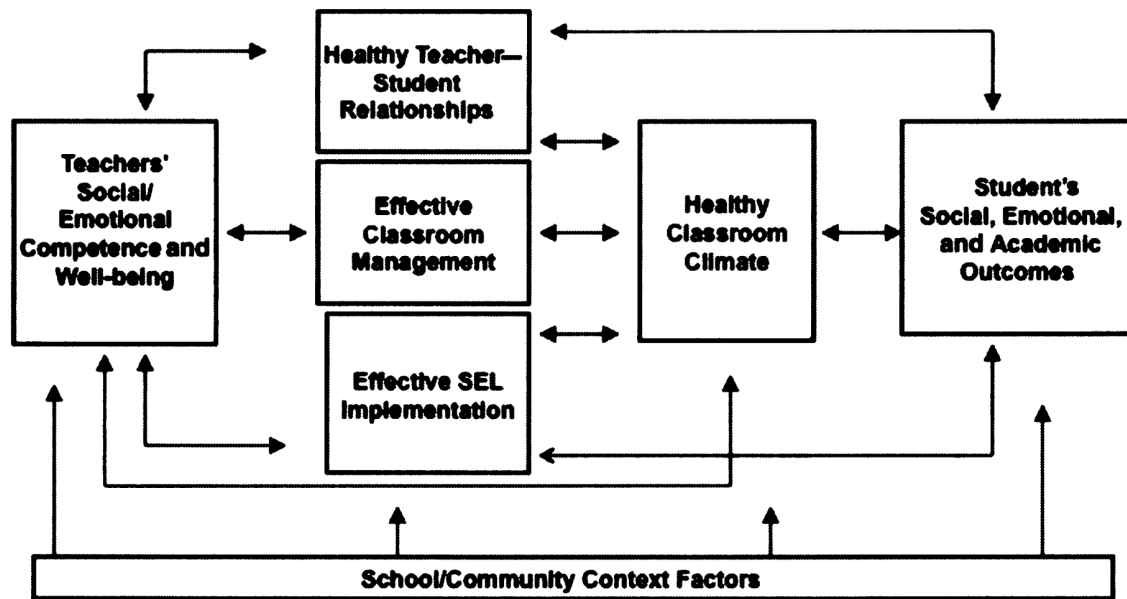
Figure 8: The Prosocial Classroom—a teacher social and emotional competence model and classroom and student outcomes (Jennings, P. A., & Greenberg, M. T., 2009).

Figure 8 demonstrates the inner workings of a school or community context and how that can affect an adolescent's learning styles and positive environment. Teachers' competencies shape the nature of their relationships with students.

"The quality of teacher-student relationships, student and classroom management, and effective social and emotional learning program implementation all mediate classroom and student outcomes…Classrooms with warm teacher-child relationships promote deep

learning among students: children who feel comfortable with their teachers and peers are

more willing to grapple with challenging material and persist at difficult learning tasks"

(Schonert-Reichl, 2017, p.139).

However, the teachers also said they need strong support from district and school leaders to

implement and promote SEL skills in classrooms and schools effectively. Much of implementing

a new curriculum stems from the teachers, who can put increased pressure and stress on

themselves. Professors report having one of the highest stress levels due to work. The more

stressed teachers are, the more likely burnout will happen, and when burnout happens, it has

been linked to poor job satisfaction, poor instructional time, and poor student success.

Figure 9: Top 5 Social and Emotional Learning Skills (according to CASEL Framework)

The concept of Social and Emotional Competence (SEC) in educators extends far beyond

the mere acquisition of informational content; it fundamentally involves the personal

development of emotional awareness, regulation, and interpersonal skills. Contrary to any claim

that SEC strictly pertains to information education without regard to personal influences, the

research consensus emphasizes SEC's deeply personal and experiential nature. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) define SEC in teachers as encompassing self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and relationship skills, all of which are intrinsically tied to an individual's internal experience and personal growth. They argue that teachers' ability to create supportive classroom environments and manage interpersonal interactions effectively depends on their emotional competencies. This position aligns with the broader framework advanced by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), which underscores the importance of educators embodying the competencies they aim to cultivate in students. Thus, it is inaccurate and reductive to characterize the SEC as purely informational or detached from the personal dimensions of learning and development.

However, I would like to contradict myself here by saying that I found something contrary when examining my data, simply because the research suggests it. SEC ensures that teachers are fully educated first so that they can then inform others. This theory can be applied to any curriculum or subject, not just SEL. The **limitation** with this concept is that it does not necessarily account for students' or teachers' specific cultural backgrounds or language barriers. The entity SEC relies on is that teachers must have the proper curriculum to teach themselves first; however, as we have seen, they do not even have the appropriate curriculum for the students. Therefore, I think a barrier of the SEC is that if we are explicitly talking about emotions and personal experiences, they are potentially traumatizing or anxiety-inducing. In my opinion, the way that the SEC is viewed is that it strictly only accounts for the education of information, not the personal influences of that information. It also does not account for students' personal languages or cultural backgrounds and customs. Therefore, if a teacher is going to be socially and emotionally competent, they will need to educate themselves on how to be socially and

emotionally competent from a cultural or linguistic standpoint; then and only then can they connect between students, SEL, and cultural competence.

Critiques of SEL from Sociocultural and Critical Race Lenses

Although SEL has gained broad acceptance in mainstream education, it has not been immune to critique, especially from scholars working within sociocultural, critical pedagogy, and critical race theory (CRT) traditions. These critiques challenge the dominant SEL framework on several key grounds: its cultural assumptions, depoliticization, and how it can reinforce dominant norms rather than disrupt inequities.

One primary concern is that traditional SEL frameworks, including the CASEL five competencies, are implicitly grounded in white, middle-class norms of emotional expression, behavior regulation, and relationship-building (Nolan et al., 2022). For example, emotional self-regulation may be interpreted differently across cultures: in some communities, emotional expressiveness is seen as a sign of authenticity and connection, whereas in others, restraint is more valued. When schools impose a singular view of "appropriate" emotional behavior, they risk pathologizing the emotional styles of students from marginalized communities, particularly Black, Indigenous, and Latinx youth.

From a critical race perspective, SEL is critiqued for promoting assimilation rather than liberation. Paris and Alim (2017) argue that SEL often functions as a tool of "white emotional normativity," requiring students of color to conform to dominant behavioral expectations rather than affirming their cultural ways of being. This dynamic is particularly problematic when SEL is used to police student behavior under the guise of "restorative" or "trauma-informed" practices, without addressing the systemic racism and structural violence that cause trauma in the first place (Ginwright, 2016).

Similarly, sociocultural theorists have pointed out that SEL is frequently implemented in ways that decontextualize emotional learning from students' lived realities. Instead of recognizing how social conditions such as poverty, discrimination, or community strength shape students' emotions, SEL curricula often individualize emotions as internal traits to be managed or corrected (Garner et al., 2021). A more socioculturally responsive SEL would situate emotions within relationships, cultural practices, and social histories and involve community members in shaping SEL content and delivery.

Moreover, critics from decolonial and Indigenous perspectives caution against SEL frameworks that center Western psychological paradigms and marginalize non-Western emotional epistemologies. For example, many Indigenous communities view emotional well-being as inseparable from spiritual, communal, and ecological well-being—a perspective rarely included in dominant SEL models (Tuck & Yang, 2014).

In response to these critiques, there is growing advocacy for Transformative SEL, a term increasingly adopted by CASEL. It calls for a more equity-focused, culturally grounded, and justice-oriented approach to emotional development (CASEL, 2020). Transformative SEL aims to center students' voices, experiences, and agency—especially those from historically marginalized backgrounds—and explicitly connects SEL to identity, power, and equity issues.

These theories can be demonstrated by looking at the education system itself. If Abbot can implement a new curriculum and, therefore, have trust in their staff, it will add support, which will create a positive environment for the students to learn. This is in a perfect world. In reality, we hope that the teachers and administration create a conscientious curriculum and that the students then take the information and knowledge. This is why it is crucial to interview the teachers about their experiences and have an anonymous survey. The methods aim to collect

teachers' experiences and perspectives on implementing SEL curricula so that various stakeholders (e.g., teachers and administrators) can make informed decisions about SEL instruction. I also want to assess how implementing the Social Emotional Learning curriculum has impacted Abbot positively/negatively and look at resources and support for Abbot teachers, faculty, and staff. This way, we know what is lacking and what requires additional support.

A teacher's social and emotional competence affects how the students receive the lessons that are being taught. According to Jennings & Greenberg (2009), teachers with high social and emotional competence are self-aware.

"They recognize their own emotions, they can use their emotions positively to motivate others to learn, and they understand their capacities, strengths, and weaknesses well. They are also socially aware - they recognize and understand others' emotions, including those of their students and colleagues, and work to build strong, supportive relationships."

The importance of this is so that we can see how education is not separated but, in reality, all connected—through the administration, to the teachers, and then to the students and beyond. Two programs used to demonstrate the importance of social-emotional learning for the greater community are based on mindfulness: CARE (Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education) and SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Timebound) in Education (Stress et al. Training). Mindfulness means "maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and surrounding environment through a gentle, nurturing lens" (University of California, Berkeley, 2013).

Educator Social-Emotional Learning Competency can also enhance the environment created for students and administration. This stems from the five SEL skills mentioned in Figure

9 above: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, decision-making skills, and guiding principles. "When SEL becomes a school focus, student-teacher relationships improve, classroom management challenges decrease, instruction thrives, and teacher burnout diminishes." (Gimbert et al., 2023). Self-awareness is first because you must self-reflect and reflect collectively to expose and eliminate barriers. This requires the person to lean on peers and leaders to build a community. Self-management is next, which involves the self-modeling of individual and shared competence behaviors that the person wishes to exude. This helps ease work-induced burnout, leading to the desired teaching environment. Social awareness is related to imbuing thinking and action with 'cultural humility,' where the individual can be an authentic advocate. Relationship skills are equally important, and the objective is to demonstrate care and empathy so that they can shape safe learning spaces. This also produces a way to connect with individuals and collaborate with peers, whether through the teachers and administration or with the students. Decision-making skills appear through committing to personalizing ethical outcomes and deliberating on daily decisions. This also relates to engaging colleagues as peer reflectors and holding the administration accountable. Finally, guiding principles bring all the SEL skills together by modeling positive behaviors and creating and sustaining healthy relationships.

Lastly, the Top-Down Community Theory (Ciani et al., 2008) links Social Emotional Learning Theory and Teacher Social Emotional Competence theory. This theory is essentially based on the fact that if educators are adequately trained and educated on the subject, they will, therefore, be able to teach their students more accurately, which will then lead to the students being able to process information and share it with their close circle (friends, family, etc.). This also relates to the fact that if the administration creates a positive work environment where the

teachers, faculty, and staff feel welcome and supported, the students will have a positive learning environment. Ciani et al. (2008) found that "trust, engagement, collaboration, and support from administration can be conceptualized as subcomponents of the teacher community." This also stimulates a strong sense of community in schools, which is reflected by "shared expectations and supportive relationships among teachers and administration, [which] may facilitate not only teachers' instructional efforts but also their personal well-being and job satisfaction (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Grossman et al., 2001; Irwin & Farr, 2004; NCES, 1996)." Therefore, if the administration supports their staff better, the overall atmosphere of the school shifts could lead to better teaching practices.

This is essential not just to SEL but to all curricula and education. The Social Emotional Competence theory is based upon the fact that education can only be productive if those administering the education are also adequately equipped with resources and support. Therefore, teachers who are trained, educated, and confident in SEL will create a conducive environment for the students to be adequately educated on the subject (Lozano-Peña et al., 2021). This is opposed to teachers being handed a random curriculum and expected to educate others on the subject when they are not knowledgeable. This happens often in underfunded schools or districts that need more staff. This idea connects to the broader Top-Down Theory, which emphasizes the influence of systemic structures on individual practice. In the context of SEL implementation, this theory suggests that when school administrators prioritize and support social-emotional learning, recognizing it as essential to adolescent development and education, that commitment filters down to the teachers. As a result, teachers are more likely to receive the necessary resources, guidance, and encouragement to implement SEL effectively because the support begins at the leadership level and shapes the overall school culture. Therefore, this will lead to a

positive and conducive learning environment for the students, where they will feel safe and

comfortable in a comfortable environment to talk about their emotions and mental health.

Section 2: The Middle School Self

Figure 3: June 2nd, 2015, "My middle school self"

Middle school is a time when a lot starts to change—not just how you think or act, but

also how you understand the world around you. You might start noticing things you didn't

before: who gets included, who feels left out, how people treat each other when they're different,

and how it feels to really belong.

These aren't just random observations. They're actually part of something you're

learning called socio-cultural competence—a skill that helps you understand people from

different backgrounds, respect others' identities, and build more fair and inclusive communities.

In fact, this kind of learning is now part of many school curriculums, especially through

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL).

You might not have called it that at the time, but your middle school self has probably

already experienced these lessons in real life:

Have you ever felt out of place because of the way you look, speak, or believe?

Have you noticed when someone was treated unfairly, and wondered why?

Have you had to unlearn assumptions or try to understand someone else's point of view?

These moments are at the heart of socio-cultural learning. They teach you about empathy, identity, inclusion, and equity—key parts of both SEL and the way schools today are helping students grow as thoughtful, respectful individuals.

In middle school, you're asked to think more deeply, speak up for yourself, and listen to others in new ways. When you reflect on your experiences—not just what happened, but how it made you feel—you're building a stronger sense of who you are and how you affect others. This is what socio-cultural competence is all about: understanding your role in a bigger world where people are not all the same and learning how to treat those differences as strengths.

Your middle school self is not just in the middle of growing up—you're in the middle of becoming someone who can help shape a kinder, more inclusive world. So next time your class talks about emotions, identity, or fairness, think about what you've already experienced. What have you learned about yourself and others? What are you still trying to understand? Your story matters. And your middle school self has a lot to teach—not just you, but the world around you.

Literature Review

This literature review explores critical themes and scholarly perspectives at the intersection of social-emotional learning (SEL), educational justice, and data ethics. Drawing from foundational works in culturally sustaining theories, decolonial methodologies, and critiques of data, the review highlights how teacher well-being, student identity, and equitable data practices are deeply interconnected. This review synthesizes existing literature and identifies

key gaps that future research must address by examining the roles of researcher positionality, relational accountability, and community-driven approaches.

Implementing Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) curricula in schools is a growing focus in educational practice and research. While SEL is often framed around student outcomes, this literature review shifts the lens to include teacher well-being, cultural responsiveness, and the structural contexts in which SEL is embedded. Grounded in culturally sustaining pedagogy and critical data studies, this review interrogates the assumptions behind SEL implementation and explores how such curricula shape and reshape educators' experiences. This review argues that SEL initiatives must be reimagined through cultural responsiveness, teacher well-being, and decolonial ethics to serve as truly equitable educational practices.

Culturally Sustaining and Educational Justice

Paris and Alim (2017) argue for culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP), which acknowledges and supports the linguistic and cultural practices of students from historically marginalized communities. Their work challenges the assimilationist tendencies in educational reform and is foundational to understanding how SEL curricula must be contextually responsive. Similarly, Tuck and Yang (2014) introduce the concept of "refusal" in research to reject extractive and colonial methodologies. These perspectives emphasize that equity in SEL must include honoring students' cultural narratives and resisting deficit-based framing.

Well-being, Emotions, and Competence

Schonert-Reichl (2024) and Cipriano et al. (2024) emphasize that teacher well-being is a foundational component of effective SEL implementation. Teachers' social-emotional competence (SEC) directly impacts classroom climate, student outcomes, and the sustainability of SEL practices. However, this dimension is often underexamined in policy and practice. The

emotional labor required of educators, particularly in under-resourced or culturally diverse settings, can lead to burnout and decreased efficacy unless supported by institutional structures (Schonert-Reichl, 2024).

Cefai (2020) and Cipriano et al. (2024) highlight the systemic challenges of making SEL linguistically and culturally responsive. Cipriano et al. note that 84% of SEL studies that mention language refer only to English learners, neglecting students' multilingual identities. This signals an urgent need for SEL curricula and training that affirm diverse linguistic and cultural narratives. Moreover, Cefai underscores the feasibility gap in expecting teachers to tailor SEL to individual needs without structural support, particularly when emotional labor and time constraints are high.

To bridge this gap, sociocultural competence must be an explicit component of SEL curricula and teacher preparation programs. Teachers require training that enables them to recognize and respond to their students' cultural identities, histories, and communication styles. Without this foundation, SEL risks replicating dominant cultural norms under the guise of universal social-emotional standards. Embedding socio-cultural competence as a core element of teacher education, rather than as an ancillary or optional training, would better equip educators to implement SEL in inclusive, affirming, and justice-oriented environments, support, and structural capacity.

The literature supports a shift toward interdisciplinary and team-based SEL implementation. Stalbaum (2021) advocates for SEL programs that integrate school counselors, psychologists, and social workers to alleviate the burden on individual teachers and expand cultural and trauma-informed capacity. However, real-world disparities—like the understaffed mental health team at Abbott School—illustrate the tension between best practices and actual

infrastructure. These resource gaps compound existing challenges in emotionally supporting both teachers and students.

Data and Power

The intersection of SEL and datafication invites scrutiny from scholars like Noble (2018) and Benjamin (2019), who critique how data systems perpetuate systemic biases. These works reveal that educational data, including SEL metrics, often reflect and reinforce white-dominant norms, marginalizing students who do not conform to dominant behavioral standards. Patel (2016) underscores that data collection in education is never neutral, arguing for a decolonial data ethic that centers relational accountability and community agency. When guided by algorithmic or standardized assessments, SEL implementation risks undermining the cultural and emotional nuance it claims to support.

Positionality and Commitments

Recognizing the researcher's position within their critique systems is essential to ethical inquiry. The reviewed literature emphasizes self-location and reflexivity as tools for moral engagement, especially when working with historically oppressed communities (Patel, 2016; Tuck & Yang, 2014). This includes acknowledging privilege, navigating complicity, and aligning with justice-oriented research practices that do not simply "study" communities but build with them.

Gaps and Implications for Future Research

While existing research robustly critiques dominant paradigms and outlines alternative frameworks, gaps remain in documenting teachers' lived experiences implementing SEL in marginalized contexts. More research is needed to explore how educators navigate tensions between mandated curricula and culturally responsive teaching. Studies that center students'

voices in the co-design of SEL and data practices are also critically underrepresented.

The literature also lacks longitudinal data on how trauma-informed and post-COVID SEL strategies affect teacher mental health, burnout, and job sustainability. Although scholars like Maloney et al. (2024) and Flakes (2020) offer models for transformative SEL, they stop short of capturing teachers' lived experiences in these evolving contexts. Future research should prioritize participatory approaches that elevate both teacher and student voices.

This literature review reveals that effective SEL implementation cannot be divorced from broader justice, identity, and relational ethics questions. When teachers are emotionally supported and their cultural contexts acknowledged, they are better positioned to foster inclusive and healing learning environments. SEL can evolve into a truly transformative practice by incorporating culturally sustaining pedagogy, ethical data practices, socio-cultural competence, and a reflexive understanding of positionality.

Section 3: The High School Self

Figure 4: September 30th, 2018, "My high school self"

Think back to your high school self—not just who you were, but what you were learning, in and out of the classroom. In high school, things often start to feel more serious. You begin

forming stronger opinions, questioning systems, and noticing the ways society affects people differently. You might have become more aware of issues like race, gender, class, or language—whether through what you studied, what you experienced, or what you witnessed. Maybe you started to understand what it meant to feel included or excluded. Maybe you recognized unfairness or even began to speak up about it.

These are not just life lessons—they're central to socio-cultural competence, a vital part of what today's educational curriculum aims to develop. Sociocultural competence is the ability to understand and respect the diverse identities, histories, and experiences of others while reflecting on your own place in the world. In schools, it often shows up in lessons about

Identity and intersectionality – Understanding that who we are is shaped by many parts of our lives, not just one.

Historical context and social justice – Learning how power, privilege, and oppression have shaped societies, both past and present.

Communication across differences – Practicing how to listen deeply, speak respectfully, and challenge assumptions.

Empathy and ethical decision-making – Learning to see things from multiple perspectives and to act with integrity.

If your school offered classes or projects around these themes—maybe in social studies, literature, health, or even science—you were likely participating in a growing effort to make education not just about content, but about conscious citizenship. If it didn't, your own experiences—your questions, your friendships, your discomforts—may have filled that gap.

Looking back, your high school self may have started building a foundation for the adult you're becoming today: someone who can engage thoughtfully in conversations about race,

culture, identity, and justice. Someone who can reflect, adapt, and connect. So what did your high school self see that still shapes you now? What questions did you start asking, and which ones are still with you? What do you wish you had learned more about? Your high school years weren't just preparation for college or a career—they were part of your journey toward becoming a more socially and culturally aware person. And in a world that deeply needs understanding, courage, and connection, that journey matters more than ever.

Methodology

My first goal was to visit Abbott and learn more about its culture, community, and connections within the school. This happened through campus visits, looking at different grades and subjects, and attending school-wide events such as "Friday Share" or "Recess." I wanted the kids, teachers, and staff to know me as a person first and a researcher second. That was a vital aspect in doing my research and collecting data, especially if the data would be returned to the same participants in my study. It was also important for me to know the demographics of the types of students that go to Abbott and the demographics of teachers, knowing how their personal experiences and opinions come into play when they are teaching.

Once all the teachers knew who I was and the students were comfortable having me in their classrooms as an extra aid or a background person, I started setting up times to collect my data. I created a template letter that I emailed directly to the head of schools, who then emailed it to all Abbott's teachers, faculty, and staff within the lower and middle levels. This was so I could set up confidential interviews with the teachers and get the link out widely for the anonymous survey.

The survey covered more general questions about the implementation process and social-emotional learning itself, and the interviews went more in-depth into the teachers' personal

experiences with implementation, new curricula, and the social-emotional learning aspect of teaching. The goal was to have one teacher from each grade, Pre-K through eighth, to have various responses and opinions.

The timeline followed as such:

1.   End of July: Meet on Zoom with the Head of Schools

2.   Mid to late September: campus tours and classroom visits

3.   November to December: teacher interviews

4.   February: interview Head of Schools

5.   End of April: Thesis Defense

6.   Beginning of May: final thesis due

When collecting data, I wanted at least one teacher from each grade to participate in the interview process, which would have ensured that lower and middle school teachers were included correctly in the data collection. The interview target number was eight to ten teachers, at least one from each grade between Pre-K through eighth. My target number for the anonymous survey was 35. The rationale for this number was that it represented about 75% of all Abbott's Lower and Middle-Grade teachers. It would have been just primary grade level teachers, specialty subjects, and extracurricular teachers. Unfortunately, I could only interview the primary grade-level teachers. However, I could speak in person about my project to different teachers in passing during classroom visits.

The research questions were:

1.   *What are teachers' experiences implementing their SEL curriculum, and how do their personal and professional backgrounds shape this process?*

2.   *What benefits and challenges do educators encounter when integrating SEL in*

culturally and socioeconomically diverse classrooms?

3. *How do teachers incorporate students' cultural identities and lived experiences into SEL instruction, and what strategies support culturally responsive SEL?*

4. *What institutional, parental, and community support do teachers believe is most effective in enhancing SEL implementation and sociocultural responsiveness?*

5. *How does training in socio-cultural competence influence teachers' confidence, effectiveness, and emotional well-being in delivering SEL content?*

These research questions are mainly based on implementing the classroom SEL curriculum. My data came from interviews with teachers who consented to participate in my research and an anonymous survey distributed to all teachers (grades Pre-K to eighth) about their experiences with the SEL curriculum. I also interviewed the head of schools for both the lower and middle schools. These questions explore the mechanics of curriculum delivery and the cultural fluency required to make SEL meaningful. Moreover, it is also important to note that this comes back to my title and main research point: "curriculum and culture go hand in hand." Therefore, for every question I ask, one would have to incorporate their identities into play, whether from the teacher's or student's side.

My rationale for using my methods was rooted in my beliefs about how one can know, interpret, understand, and make claims about the world. I used an anonymous survey because it allowed teachers to answer questions freely without fear of their responses being returned to their administration with their names attached. The survey also gave me raw data about teachers' feelings before any interventions. I used interviews because they gave consenting teachers a safe space to delve deeper into their thoughts on the SEL curriculum. Often, teachers do not have an outlet to express their emotions clearly for fear of repercussions from the administration. That is

where I come in because I can provide an inviting environment where the teachers can talk about their struggles and frustrations and share their successes.

Data Analysis

My approach to data analysis began with reviewing transcripts from teacher interviews and responses from the anonymous surveys. I focused on identifying consistent patterns, key moments, and recurring themes that spoke to teachers' experiences with the SEL curriculum at Abbott School. I looked at where teachers felt supported and where gaps remained, particularly in how the curriculum was being implemented, the support (or lack thereof) they received from administration, and the extent to which they were modifying lessons based on their experiences and backgrounds.

Through this process, I wanted to understand the differences between what the administration expected and what teachers did in practice. This lens helped reveal what teachers needed regarding resources, training, and support. It also gave insight into how the curriculum functions in its formal structure and how it is adapted to meet students' needs.

As someone who deeply values culturally responsive teaching and sees SEL as more than skill-building, as something rooted in identity, empathy, and community, I am concerned about looking at how SEL is or isn't reflecting the cultural and emotional realities of the student body. I hoped this analysis would show what's working and spark conversations about equity, emotional safety, and teacher readiness.

One of the first themes that emerged was teacher preparedness. Many educators felt only "somewhat prepared" to teach SEL, which pointed to a gap between training and practice. Teachers wanted more hands-on, sustainable strategies that would make a lasting difference for students, not just short-term solutions. This connects directly to my desire to help teachers build

confidence and feel equipped when emotional or difficult moments arise.

Another central theme was the role of school leadership. Teachers described the administration as supportive but distant. While some appreciated the freedom, others felt that SEL implementation lacked cohesion without involvement or feedback. A leadership presence—especially from DEI staff—could help bridge that gap and bring more inclusive, community-based perspectives into SEL planning.

Teachers also voiced concerns about the SEL curriculum feeling too generic and not reflective of their students' diverse identities. Some mentioned that the lessons seemed geared toward white students, leaving others feeling unseen. This confirmed my concern that SEL, when not thoughtfully adapted, can miss the mark in truly supporting students of color or marginalized backgrounds. The teachers' feedback showed a clear desire to personalize SEL, making it more relevant and connected to students' experiences.

Time was another limiting factor. Teachers consistently said they didn't have enough time in their schedules to teach SEL meaningfully. Advisory periods felt rushed, and teachers were left to squeeze complex emotional learning into brief windows without adequate time. This again reflected a structural issue, where the importance of SEL is acknowledged in theory but not fully supported in practice.

Lastly, mental health support stood out as a serious concern. Teachers often felt alone in managing the emotional weight of SEL topics, especially given that the school relied on just one counselor. This put more pressure on teachers and risked harm if they weren't fully prepared to support students in crisis. It reinforced the need for more staff, training, and a school-wide system prioritizing emotional health alongside academics.

Across all of these themes, I was struck by the dedication of the teachers. Despite these

challenges, they remained committed to supporting their students' academic, emotional, and social growth. Their voices highlighted both the potential and the current limitations of SEL in this school context.

Ultimately, this work is part of a larger vision: one where SEL is culturally relevant, equitably supported, and deeply integrated into schools' functions. I hope this research contributes to that vision by showing what's possible when we listen to teachers, adapt our tools, and create space for SEL to live and breathe beyond the classroom. I aim for students to learn to name and process emotions and feel safe to share those experiences with teachers, peers, and their families. When that happens, SEL becomes not just a curriculum but a culture.

Section 4: The College Self

Figure 5: December 3rd, 2021, "My college self"

Think back to your college self—the one navigating new freedoms, unfamiliar ideas, and

complex identities, both your own and those around you. It was a time of discovery, challenge, and transformation. And whether you realized it or not, those years were shaping not only your academic knowledge, but also your socio-cultural competence and social-emotional growth—core components of a well-rounded educational experience.

In college, you likely encountered a wider range of people, perspectives, and lived experiences than ever before. You may have joined discussions on race, gender, ability, equity, or power. You may have made friends from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds. Perhaps you found yourself reflecting more deeply on your own identity: your upbringing, your assumptions, your biases. These moments were not separate from your education—they were essential to it.

That's where social-emotional learning (SEL) and socio-cultural competence come together. While SEL is often associated with K-12 education, its core principles—self-awareness, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness—remain vital in higher education. In fact, college is where these skills are tested and deepened in real-world settings.

Socio-cultural competence, in particular, demands more than knowledge—it asks for action. It asks you to recognize systems of privilege and oppression, to listen with empathy, to communicate across difference, and to participate in shaping a more just and inclusive society. A college curriculum that centers these ideas doesn't just prepare students for jobs; it prepares them to be thoughtful leaders, collaborators, and change-makers.

So what did your college self teach you? Perhaps it taught you how to sit with discomfort, to unlearn, to make space for others, or to find your own voice. Perhaps you learned that emotional intelligence is not separate from intellectual growth—it fuels it. The ways you handled group projects, classroom debates, or activism on campus all reflect how SEL and

socio-cultural learning were playing out in real time.

Your college years were more than a stepping stone—they were a mirror and a map. A mirror reflecting who you were becoming and a map guiding you toward who you wanted to be in your relationships, your work, and your role in the world. As you continue forward, don't forget the lessons your college self was learning—not just from lectures and textbooks, but from every interaction that challenged you to be more human, more aware, and more connected.

Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights into implementing Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) at Abbott School, several limitations impacted the findings' scope, depth, and generalizability.

One significant limitation was participant engagement. Despite initial enthusiasm from teachers during campus visits, the final response rate was notably low. Although the research invitation was extended to all lower and middle school faculty, only core subject teachers expressed interest, and ultimately, only six responses were received out of over 50 teachers contacted. This limited response does not necessarily indicate a lack of support or interest. Instead, it results from time constraints, overextended schedules, and competing priorities common among educators. As such, while the qualitative responses collected were rich and insightful, the limited quantity restricts the ability to draw broader conclusions or identify patterns across a larger faculty body.

Another constraint was the shift in scope due to the low participation rate. Originally designed to explore SEL implementation across various disciplines, the study had to be narrowed to core subjects. This change in focus reduces the representativeness of the findings. It excludes potentially valuable perspectives from special subject teachers (e.g., arts, physical education,

foreign language) who contribute meaningfully to SEL.

It is also important to note that this research did not involve directly implementing a socioemotional curriculum. Instead, it focused on understanding teachers' perspectives and lived experiences regarding existing or informal SEL practices within the classroom. This distinction limits the study's ability to evaluate the effectiveness or outcomes of SEL interventions and positions the findings as exploratory and diagnostic, offering a foundation for future curriculum development and implementation strategies.

Institutional limitations within the school system further affected the study. Notably, the school employs only one counselor for the lower, middle, and upper divisions. This understaffing represents not only a barrier to consistent and effective SEL programming but also reflects broader structural challenges that may impact teacher support and program sustainability. In addition, limited access to SEL-specific training for educators at Abbott School influenced the content of their responses and the school's current capacity to integrate SEL into classroom practice fully.

Finally, because the research relied on self-reported survey and interview data, it is subject to common limitations such as response bias and subjectivity. Teachers may have shaped their responses based on perceived expectations or withheld criticism due to concerns about anonymity or institutional culture.

In summary, these limitations underscore the complexities of conducting school-based qualitative research, particularly within environments constrained by time and staffing limitations. While the small sample size limits generalizability, the insights gathered provide a valuable starting point for future inquiry into SEL implementation, training, and support structures at Abbott School and similar educational contexts.

Section 5: The Present Self

Figure 6: May 25th, 2024, "My present self"

Now that college is behind you, it might be tempting to think that your most important lessons are complete. But in many ways, the most meaningful learning—the kind that shapes who you are and how you show up in the world—is just beginning.

As a post-college adult, you are no longer just a student of academics—you are a participant in society. And whether you're entering the workforce, continuing your education, or carving your own path, you're carrying with you the critical tools of socio-cultural competence and social-emotional learning (SEL)—whether you know it or not.

You're learning how to manage relationships in professional spaces, navigate complex team dynamics, and balance your own well-being with the needs of others. These are SEL skills in action: self-awareness, empathy, responsible decision-making, and social awareness. But now, they extend beyond the classroom and into your everyday life—affecting how you communicate,

how you lead and how you advocate for equity and inclusion.

At the same time, sociocultural competence is no longer a theory discussed in coursework—it's part of your daily reality. It means acknowledging the different lived experiences of colleagues, communities, and students if you work in education. It's choosing to ask questions before making assumptions, to listen with humility, and to recognize how systems of power and privilege continue to shape opportunities for others.

If you're in a teaching or helping profession, these lessons are even more essential. Today's educational curriculum increasingly demands that educators not only teach math, literacy, or science—but also model emotional intelligence and cultural humility. The ability to create inclusive, emotionally responsive learning environments is not a bonus—it's a responsibility.

But even outside the classroom, your ability to connect across difference, build trust, and take action with compassion is deeply needed. As someone who has gone through the educational system, you have the opportunity—and perhaps even the obligation—to live out the values of SEL and socio-cultural learning: to create spaces where people feel seen, heard, and respected.

So, take a moment to check in with your present self:

What did you carry with you from your younger years?

What habits or beliefs are you still unpacking?

What kind of presence do you want to be in the spaces you now lead or influence?

Your education didn't end with graduation. It continues now—in the way you treat others, in the way you reflect on your impact, and in the choices you make each day to build a more just and emotionally intelligent world.

Findings

Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the qualitative and quantitative data collected. Interview transcripts from six educators were carefully coded using both inductive and deductive approaches. Initial coding cycles identified recurring patterns related to SEL implementation, including cultural relevance, instructional challenges, and personal teaching philosophies. These codes were then refined into overarching themes aligned with the study's five guiding research questions. Survey responses were analyzed descriptively, focusing on frequency patterns and narrative comments that reinforced or nuanced the interview findings. Cross-validation between the two data sources strengthened the credibility of interpretations, offering a layered understanding of educators' SEL experiences in a culturally diverse school context.

This section presents a thematic analysis of interviews conducted with six educators and two administrators at Abbott School, supplemented by data from an anonymous teacher survey. These sources provide a comprehensive view of educators' and administrators' experiences implementing Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) curricula. The analysis is structured around five guiding research questions, examining how personal and professional identities, cultural responsiveness, institutional support, and socio-cultural competence training shape the SEL implementation process.

Teachers' Experiences Implementing SEL Curriculum

Abbott School educators expressed enthusiasm and frustration in their experiences with SEL implementation. Across all six interviews, teachers described noticeable student progress in emotional communication and conflict resolution. One teacher explained, "I found that the curriculum helped my students talk about their feelings more openly... I noticed they were using

the language we practiced to discuss conflicts" (Ms. Janine Teagues).

However, this positive impact was tempered by concerns over the curriculum's rigidity and lack of cultural relevance. Teachers reported needing to make spontaneous adaptations to engage their students more effectively. One educator shared, "We had to adjust some of the lessons because they didn't connect with our students' cultural backgrounds. Some stories just didn't feel relevant" (Mr. Gregory Eddie).

Survey responses echoed these experiences. While 65% of teachers felt "somewhat prepared" to implement SEL, only 18% felt "very prepared," while 17% felt "unprepared" or did not respond. Furthermore, 42% indicated they had modified SEL content to better align with students' cultural experiences, underscoring the need for more adaptable, inclusive curriculum materials.

Educators also highlighted the dual nature of administrative involvement. While some appreciated the freedom to tailor SEL approaches without micromanagement—"No one is breathing down my neck… they are supportive but from afar" (Mrs. Barbara Howard)—others believed more direct leadership, particularly from DEI staff and administrators, could provide essential support in navigating sensitive topics. Teachers emphasized the importance of representation in both curriculum content and staffing, with one noting, "I want them to have a different exposure to it because their world is different from mine" (Mr. Jacob Hill).

Time constraints emerged as another consistent barrier. The current advisory structure limits teachers' ability to engage students in SEL topics deeply. Although students could often identify SEL concepts, applying them to nuanced or unfamiliar scenarios remained challenging. Teachers advocated for extended instructional time and additional resources to facilitate deeper engagement.

Influence of Teachers' Personal and Professional Backgrounds

Teachers' personal and professional identities significantly influenced how they approached SEL. Those sharing cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds with their students reported greater ease in building trust and understanding. One teacher shared, "Coming from a community like theirs helped... I think that made them more open to learning from me" (Ms. Melissa Schemmenti).

In contrast, others noted the absence of SEL training in their formal education. "I didn't learn anything about SEL in my teacher prep program. Everything I know I learned on the job, mostly through trial and error" (Mr. Joseph Morton). The survey reflected this sentiment: 70% of teachers reported minimal SEL instruction during pre-service training, and 55% independently developed SEL strategies. These findings highlight the need for structured, equity-centered SEL training in teacher education programs and ongoing professional development.

Benefits and Challenges in Diverse Classrooms

Despite implementation challenges, educators were united in their belief that SEL improved classroom dynamics. Teachers observed benefits such as enhanced emotional regulation and smoother classroom management. One teacher shared, "It helps a lot with classroom management. Once they understand how to identify and regulate their emotions, it cuts down on disruptions" (Mrs. Howard).

Cultural misalignment between curriculum content and students' lived experiences presented persistent challenges. One teacher remarked, "The challenge is making it relevant. One story talked about going to the mountains, but most of my students have never even left the city" (Ms. Teagues).

Survey data reinforced these perceptions: 48% of teachers found the curriculum only

"somewhat culturally relevant," and 27% felt it was "not culturally relevant" at all. Teachers

noted that some lessons, especially those from digital platforms like WinAtSocial, lacked

cultural depth and instead focused broadly on mental health or digital behavior. One educator

commented, "The SEL lessons seem generic and tailored more towards white students learning

about racism, rather than how to make everyone feel included" (Survey Response).

Administrative Perspectives on SEL Implementation

Interviews with Head of Schools Ms. Ava Coleman and Mr. Coltrane Johnson added

insight into institutional decision-making and priorities surrounding SEL. Both administrators

acknowledged the necessity of SEL in modern education but admitted there were gaps in

execution. Mr. Johnson observed that while SEL was "clearly something the kids need," there

was still a lack of "cohesive support structures and training for teachers."

Ms. Coleman emphasized the challenge of balancing teacher autonomy with strategic

oversight, noting, "We want to empower our teachers, but we also have to make sure there's

accountability and consistency. Right now, I think there's a little too much variability." Both also

highlighted the absence of a clear mental health infrastructure at Abbott. Mr. Johnson shared

concern over the limited mental health staffing, stating, "One counselor for three divisions is just

not enough. Teachers are being put in positions they're not trained for."

Ms. Coleman echoed this concern: "When something serious happens, it shouldn't fall on

a classroom teacher to make judgment calls. We need more professional capacity in that area."

Their insights reinforced what teachers reported—gaps in professional development, inconsistent

administrative engagement, and a lack of clear mental health protocols.

Moreover, both leaders agreed on embedding cultural responsiveness into SEL. Ms.

Coleman stated, "If SEL isn't intersectional, it's not SEL. We're missing the point if we're not

addressing how identity shapes emotion and experience." Mr. Johnson added that the DEIB team had begun influencing some SEL content, but "that work is still in its early stages."

Culturally Responsive SEL Strategies

To address these gaps, educators implemented culturally responsive teaching practices. These included integrating affirming literature, multilingual materials, and real-life scenarios that reflected students' communities. One teacher described the impact of this approach: "We started using books and examples that reflected the kids' lives... Engagement shot up after that" (Mr. Eddie).

According to survey data, 60% of teachers regularly adapted SEL materials to reflect their students' cultural identities. Many also credited the Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) team for developing culturally relevant lessons around specific holidays and events. As one teacher noted, "I think the DEIB Team will steer us in the right direction toward being more inclusive of our kids of color" (Survey Response).

Institutional, Parental, and Community Support

Educators' perceptions of institutional support were mixed. While some appreciated the availability of resources like WinAtSocial, others pointed to a lack of adequate training and inconsistent follow-through. One teacher explained, "They offer support, but it often feels distant or disconnected" (Mrs. Howard). Survey responses varied as well, with ratings of administrative support ranging from 2 to 4 out of 5.

Parental involvement presented additional complexity. Some teachers encountered resistance or misunderstanding from families unfamiliar with SEL's purpose. As a result, educators recommended building stronger school-family partnerships to extend SEL learning beyond the classroom.

Impact of Socio-Cultural Competence Training

Teachers who had received professional development on equity and cultural competence consistently described it as transformative. One teacher explained, "The equity training we had last year gave me new tools... It made a huge difference in how I approached SEL" (Ms. Teagues). Another reflected, "Before that training, I didn't realize how much my biases affected how I taught SEL. Now I'm more intentional" (Ms. Schemmenti).

Survey data substantiated this impact: 72% of teachers who had received such training felt more confident addressing students' emotional needs, and 68% reported better stress management when dealing with emotionally charged situations.

However, significant gaps remain. Teachers expressed concern over the lack of infrastructure to support mental health crises. Abbott employs only one guidance counselor across three divisions, and no formal SEL-related mental health protocol exists beyond mandated reporting. Educators emphasized the need for additional training, collaborative reflection time, and clear protocols to ensure student safety.

The findings from both interviews and survey data reveal a shared commitment among educators and administrators to the goals of SEL. However, they also expose notable gaps in curriculum design, teacher training, and stakeholder engagement, especially in culturally and socioeconomically diverse classrooms. Educators' and administrators' effectiveness in delivering SEL is shaped by their personal experiences, cultural competence, and the institutional supports available.

For SEL to achieve its full potential, it must be culturally responsive, embedded in continuous professional development, and supported through strong institutional and community partnerships. In this way, SEL transcends emotional skill-building to become a foundational

practice for fostering equity, empathy, and inclusion in education.

Implications

This study offers several implications for schools seeking to implement or improve Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) practices, with broadly generalizable insights across private and public school contexts. While the research was situated in a private school, Abbott School, the emerging themes—teacher preparation, administrative support, cultural responsiveness, and resource limitations—reflect widespread conditions across K–12 education. Importantly, this study did not evaluate the implementation of a formal SEL curriculum. Instead, it focused on exploring teachers' perspectives and lived experiences with SEL, highlighting formal and informal ways educators incorporate social-emotional learning into their practice. This distinction is a limitation, as the study does not assess program outcomes or fidelity. Still, it offers a more grounded, teacher-centered view of SEL, particularly relevant for schools that have not yet adopted a formalized curriculum.

While private and public schools may differ in funding structures, governance, and autonomy, many of the findings in this study are applicable across both settings. For example, teachers' need for professional development in SEL and culturally responsive instruction is universal. The call for training is not merely about having more hours or better workshops—it reflects a more profound need for capacity building around specific competencies: facilitating emotionally charged conversations, responding to student trauma, and connecting SEL content to students' lived realities. These challenges are not unique to private schools. The urgency may be even greater in public schools, which often serve more diverse and higher-need populations.

Additionally, teacher autonomy and administrative support emerged as critical factors shaping the success of SEL efforts. Abbott's relatively hands-off administrative approach

allowed creativity but left some teachers unsupported. The implication for any school system is that SEL implementation requires flexibility and structure. Teachers need the freedom to adapt lessons to their classrooms, and work, resources, and active leadership are also necessary guides that work. This balance is a generalizable design principle for SEL programs regardless of setting.

Perhaps most significantly, the study found that effective SEL must be grounded in cultural relevance and student identity. Teachers across all schools, public or private, increasingly serve diverse student populations. They must be equipped to connect SEL lessons to students' cultural backgrounds, family dynamics, and social contexts. The need for cultural competence as part of SEL training is not a luxury—SEL needs to be meaningful, safe, and equitable. Whether in a well-funded suburban private school or an under-resourced urban public school, students bring unique emotional and cultural realities into the classroom. SEL must be responsive to those realities.

Actionable Takeaways for Implementation

While educators frequently cite the need for more time, support, and training across many instructional initiatives, this study reveals specific and actionable insights unique to SEL implementation:

Invest in Targeted SEL Training: Generic professional development is insufficient. Training must address emotional literacy, trauma-informed practices, and culturally sustaining pedagogy. This can be implemented through in-house workshops, peer-led learning communities, or partnerships with SEL specialists.

Embed SEL in Daily Instruction: Teachers emphasized informal SEL strategies—relationship-building, classroom routines, restorative conversations—that are not

bound to a single curriculum. Schools can leverage this by integrating SEL objectives across subjects, rather than treating it as a standalone initiative.

Create Structures for Reflection and Feedback: Educators need time and space to reflect on what's working. Schools should establish regular forums, such as professional learning communities (PLCs), feedback surveys, or teacher roundtables, to evaluate SEL efforts continuously. This promotes adaptive implementation, not just compliance.

Align SEL with Equity and Inclusion Work: SEL cannot be siloed from diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts. Teachers must be trained to recognize how identity, power, and culture shape emotional experiences. Schools should bring DEI leaders into SEL planning to ensure inclusive and intersectional practices.

Build School-Wide SEL Ecosystems: Teachers alone cannot carry out SEL. The study underscores the need for administrative leadership, clear protocols, and adequate staffing, including counselors and mental health professionals. This holistic approach supports consistent messaging and a safe environment for emotional development.

Limitations and the Need for Further Study

A notable limitation of this study is that it did not evaluate the implementation of a formal socioemotional curriculum but focused on teachers' interpretations and informal practices surrounding SEL. As a result, the study does not measure curriculum efficacy or outcomes but sheds light on how educators experience and shape SEL in real-world conditions. Additionally, the small sample size, limited to six participants despite outreach to a much larger group, means that findings cannot be assumed to reflect the broader faculty or be statistically generalizable. However, the depth of qualitative insight provides a valuable exploratory foundation for future, more comprehensive investigations.

This study provides practitioner-informed recommendations across various school types and contexts. While public and private schools may face different constraints, they share a common need for inclusive, sustainable, and teacher-supported SEL programs. The findings support a shift in SEL practice from administration collaboration toward reflective and equity-centered models. Schools that treat teachers as co-constructors, provide culturally attuned training, and embed SEL into daily school life are more likely to foster environments where students and educators thrive.

Conclusions and Next Steps

This is version 1,128,359… I have written, erased, stared at blank pages, and honestly contemplated my entire existence and being on this planet. Even though I am just one person, I sometimes think I could change the world. And don't get me wrong, I still do; however, now it is from a better perspective. How does each step lead to the next force of change? And how can we use that change for good? Some questions I ask myself daily. It involves looking in a mirror, seeing your reflection, and noticing that you are a version of yourself or someone you don't know. Something I struggled with that helped me learn a lot about myself was asking myself, "What is holding you back?" "Is this bigger than myself?" It's a tricky question to ask, let alone answer. But that's the whole point. Is what I learned that you don't need to find the answer? That's what I struggled with throughout my project, and even in my defense (which my readers helped point out) is that there isn't one answer or "solution." And that is okay, and maybe even better. Because these schools, teachers, and students don't need a "solution" per se, they just need support, one day at a time.

The study underscores the critical role of teachers in the success of SEL programs and the necessity for schools to support educators effectively. Abbott's implementation journey offers a

microcosm of broader challenges and opportunities for SEL adoption. Integrating teacher and student feedback into the SEL framework ensures its ongoing relevance and impact. Strengthening collaboration between administration and educators can mitigate gaps in support and foster shared accountability for student outcomes.

Expanding teacher interviews and ensuring greater survey participation will enrich the findings and inform actionable recommendations. This research highlights the need for an iterative approach to SEL implementation, where continuous feedback shapes sustainable and impactful practices for educators and students. While I initially wanted to focus on students, this research reveals essential insights into teachers and what they say they need to implement an SEL curriculum (what they need from the administration, from the school calendar, etc.). At the end of the day, how do we expect students to know the information if teachers do not?

As I reflect on the development of my praxis throughout this course, I ground my perspective in the framework of praxis as a cycle of action, reflection, and transformation. My journey has deepened my understanding of how personal identity, particularly my race, gender, class, and educational background, intersects with systems of power and privilege. I recognize that praxis is not a static commitment but a dynamic engagement with the world through critical reflection and ethical action.

Informed by the course's emphasis on critical consciousness, I now situate myself more intentionally within the systemic oppression and collective liberation matrix. I understand that my social location affords me power and complicity and that naming these realities is necessary to transform them. For example, as someone who occupies a middle-class and cisgender identity, I've had to examine how these positions can obscure my view of the material realities and lived experiences of those more deeply marginalized by systems like capitalism or white supremacy.

Also coming from a space that is surrounded by a mixture of cultures and languages, and then moving to a new environment, I became the center of stereotypes and biases in broader society. It was a difficult adjustment.

The readings and discussions in class invited me to reflect on how healing justice and transformative justice offer alternatives to punitive systems, grounding change in relationship, accountability, and interdependence. These frameworks challenge me to imagine liberatory possibilities beyond reform, focusing instead on community-rooted responses to harm and systemic violence.

Furthermore, integrating intersectionality as a guiding analytic tool helped me grasp the layered nature of oppression and privilege. It reminded me that justice work requires a multi-axis approach that resists flattening marginalized people's experiences into single-issue categories. My praxis now includes a more profound commitment to centering the voices of those most impacted rather than speaking over or for them.

This course has also urged me to think of education as a site of liberation. Drawing from the work of bell hooks and Paulo Freire, I view learning as a co-created, dialogic process that should affirm the humanity of all involved. As I consider my future roles—as an educator, organizer, and community member—I feel more equipped to engage in work that dismantles oppressive systems while cultivating spaces for joy, healing, and collective care.

Ultimately, my praxis has shifted from abstract theorizing to embodied commitment. I recognize that transformation begins with how I appear in conversations, conflict, reality, and imagination. While I still have much to learn and unlearn, I leave this class with a clearer sense of purpose: to participate in the creation of a world where liberation is not just a vision, but a lived reality.

I will leave everyone with one last point of parting wisdom: I want everyone to stand in front of the mirror and picture themselves as a little kid. Remember when you were in elementary or middle school; what teacher did you have? Were there any counselors there to support you? What curriculum were you learning? What happened when you were sad, when you were angry, or even when you were happy? Would you have turned out differently if you had the proper curriculum and a great teacher with the right resources? That, folks, is the question of the day. Now, I cannot turn back the clock of time. However, I can prepare the future generation of students and educators so that we can all be socially and culturally competent so that our younger selves do not have to endure what they did. So the next time you look in the mirror and say hi to your younger self, remember, life does indeed get better.

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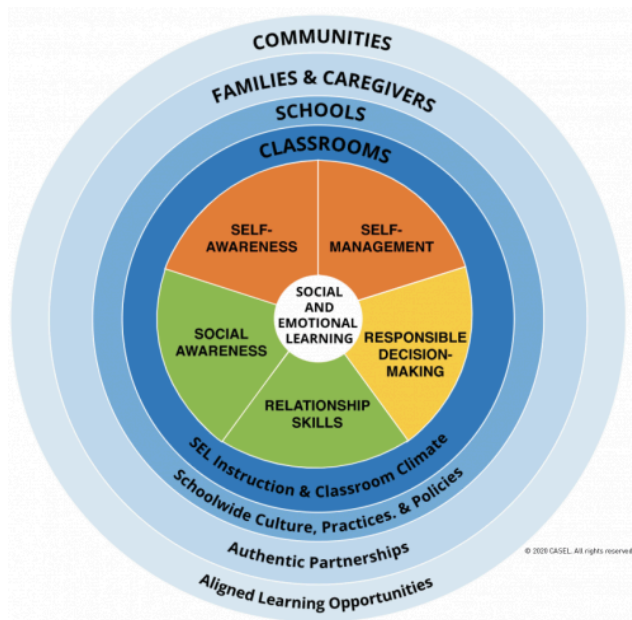
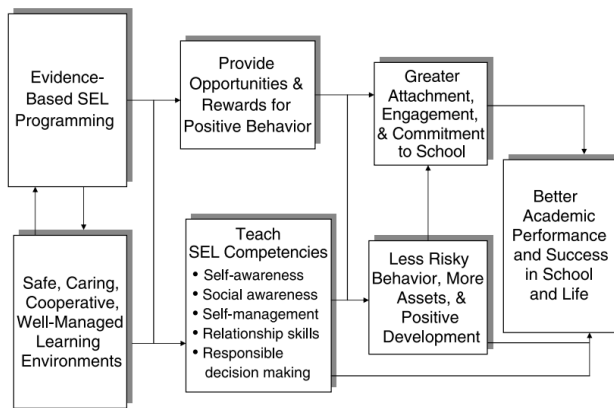**Appendices**

Figure 10: CASEL SEL framework

Figure 11: Evidence-based SEL programming paths to success in school and life.

Anonymous Survey Questions:

1. How prepared do you feel you are to teach SEL?

2. On a scale from 1-10, how well do you feel your administration has supported you throughout the transition of implementing SEL?

    a. Explain your thinking for the previous question.

3. On a scale of 1-10, how much does the SEL curriculum benefit your students?

    a. Explain your thinking for the previous question.

4. What would you have changed about the implementation process?

5. Are the SEL curriculum/lessons multicultural/culturally relevant?

Interview Questions:

1. How long have you been teaching here?

2. Can you share your past experiences with teaching SEL?

3. What are your opinions and philosophies on SEL, and how does it impact the classroom?

    a. How does this way of thinking affect how you teach SEL?

4. We understand that all lower schools use the Second Step SEL curriculum. Can you describe your approach to implementing it? Do you have specific times dedicated to SEL? Is it just slowly transitioned in?

5. What tools or resources have helped implement SEL?

6. What types of support/resources have you received during this transition?

7. What types of support/resources are you lacking?

8. What part of the SEL curriculum do you like? Dislikes?

9. What is challenging within the curriculum?

10. What is something that is going well, and what is something that could be improved within your SEL time?

11. What areas of SEL do you feel your students need the most help with?

12. What areas of SEL do you feel your students are confident in?

13. Will your students benefit from this SEL curriculum?

14. Do your lessons explore SEL through multicultural lenses (language, culture, race, religion, etc.)?

    a. If yes, please give an example.

    b. If not, why do you think that is? Is culture not as present in SEL?

15. How do you handle the influence of culture that may come up while teaching SEL?

16. Do you account for students' cultural backgrounds when planning your SEL lessons?

    a. In your view, how can SEL instruction be more culturally relevant or responsive?