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SEL and Equity: Current Issues and Considerations

Prepared for the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction
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> *Good intentions to develop the whole child mean nothing if they are not grounded in a fierce commitment to equity.*
> Berger, Berman, Garcia, & Deasy, 2019

There is a growing sense of urgency regarding the need to examine social and emotional learning (SEL) in relation to issues of equity in K–12 education. For example, a recent cultural analysis of SEL questioned whether the prevalent frameworks, programs, and assessments "adequately reflect, cultivate, and leverage cultural assets and promote the well-being of youth of color and those from under-resourced backgrounds."[1] Our landscape scan of SEL efforts across Washington echoes this concern,[2] as stakeholders called for more culturally responsive SEL frameworks and worried about potential negative impacts of SEL assessment on students of color. This brief draws on diverse sources (research articles, presentations, blog posts, policy reports) to summarize the dialogue on this issue and offer equity considerations for the Washington SEL Work Group in the design of a statewide SEL framework, implementation guide, and indicators.

Key Issues and Opportunities

According to the National Equity Project, "educational equity means that each child receives what he or she needs to develop to his or her full academic and social potential."[3] This brief focuses specifically on issues of equity as they relate to race, culture, and economic status. SEL is described as supporting educational equity in multiple ways: emphasizing whole child development, drawing attention to the social nature of learning, advancing the belief that all children can learn, developing young people's skills to navigate social contexts, and improving relationships between students and teachers—a key protective factor for students.[4] Further, research has shown that social, emotional, and cognitive skills work together to build students' success in school and life.[5] A recent meta-analysis of 82 universal, school-based SEL initiatives found positive long-term effects for students, with no significant differences by demographic group.[6] However, these authors and others caution that research conducted to date has included only limited numbers of students from diverse socioeconomic and racial groups, and more research is needed to determine the effectiveness of SEL programs across the full diversity of students in U.S. schools.

This lack of research-related attention on issues of cultural diversity is just one indicator of the need to further integrate SEL with broader conversations about educational equity.[7] Below, we discuss three critical opportunities for change that are gaining traction in local and national discussions:

- How student SEL is defined
- How adults promote SEL in schools
- How policies and resources are aligned to support school transformation in support of equity

Expand notions of student SEL to explicitly address cultural diversity, power, and privilege

There is robust research on the ways in which culture influences development, including how emotions are expressed, sources of motivation and engagement in learning, and norms for communication. [8] For example, Brady, Germano, and Fryberg (2017) found that students from cultures with an interdependent model of self (including many Native American, Latinx, African, and Asian cultures, as well as working-class culture in the United States) view education as a way to help their families and communities, and these students may be more likely to hold their opinions and defer to authority in the classroom than students from cultures with an independent model of self (including many European cultures). A white, middle-class model of self that values independence dominates schools; students of color and students in low-income communities often experience "cultural mismatch" in education settings that expect forms of expression and participation not aligned with their culture.[9]

Without explicit attention to equity and cultural diversity, prevalent SEL frameworks, models, and curricula may not adequately reflect the diverse worldviews of students and families.[10] Given the bias toward white norms in schools and in an education workforce that does not represent the diversity of the student population, there is concern that educators may view SEL as an intervention to "fix" students who do not conform to these norms rather than a repertoire of knowledge and skills that help all students live and learn together.[11]

Thought leaders are starting to respond by reimagining SEL from the lenses of racial equity and cultural responsiveness.[12] In a call for "transformative SEL" that makes explicit issues of power, privilege, prejudice, discrimination, social justice, empowerment, and self-determination, Jagers, Rivas-Drake, and Borowski (2018) offer "equity elaborations" for each of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) 5 SEL Competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. For example, the authors expand on the current CASEL definition of self-awareness to include ethnic-racial identity, given the importance of positive identity for overall well-being and the development of self-efficacy and collective efficacy.

> *Transformative SEL connotes a process whereby students and teachers build strong, respectful relationships founded on an appreciation of similarities and differences, learn to critically examine root causes of inequity, and develop collaborative solutions to community and societal problems.*
> Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Borowski, 2018

Strengthen educators' capacity to develop positive relationships with diverse students and to create engaging, supportive learning environments that promote SEL

To support this transition to a more asset-focused, equity-driven model of SEL, an effort is underway to shift the focus from student to educator SEL capacities. Student-teacher relationships and classroom context matter greatly for social, emotional, and academic development. Students can be highly engaged in one context and less engaged in others. Classroom conditions, instructional practices, and educator expectations influence students' mindsets and engagement in school, which are key drivers of academic outcomes.[13]

To promote equity, SEL cannot be implemented as a stand-alone curriculum or be considered the responsibility of school counselors. All adults who interact with students have a role to play. Current thinking is that SEL should be part of a larger approach to promote a positive school culture and climate in which all students are engaged in learning and supported by positive relationships and student-centered instructional practices.[14] There is no one-size-fits-all approach to SEL. Educators need to "attune" their strategies to fit the local priorities and values of students, families, and communities.[15]

> *The future of our education and child-serving systems should be built upon what we now know about the development of the brain and the power of context, including the supports provided to adults, to construct that development.*
> Osher, Cantor, Berg, Steyer, & Rose, 2018

Many schools are using multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) to integrate SEL schoolwide. This public health model often involves the vertical alignment of universal SEL practices with more specific interventions for students who need additional supports. This alignment creates consistency for students and staff members as they take multiple paths toward the same goal. To address equity, schools also need to strive for *horizontal* integration across schoolwide initiatives, such as aligning SEL with trauma-informed practice, restorative justice, culturally responsive practice, and family/community engagement.[16] For example, have a team of school personnel support teaching SEL through positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS)[17] and use diverse forms of data (e.g., climate surveys, academic data) to implement MTSS.

Trauma-informed and culturally responsive practice focus on changing school culture and climate to make school safe and welcoming for each student, regardless of their background, race/ethnicity, or other demographic factors.[18] Positive school culture and climate are driven by the adults in the school community (bus drivers, teachers, food preparation staff members, administrators, etc.) and address the overall needs of students by nurturing their relationships with adults.[19] Similarly, SEL can support restorative justice efforts by "reaffirming relationships" and helping students change behaviors, and SEL concepts can be taught through the filter of community (e.g., classes define what responsible decision-making means in a particular setting, or teachers use circles to help students explore what it looks like to express anger).[20]

An important example of horizontal integration is aligning SEL across school, family, and community. Doing so helps reduce cultural mismatch for students, and it recognizes the roles of diverse adults in developing student SEL.[21] For instance, a meta-analysis of family-school SEL interventions found that involving a range of adults across children's social environments enhanced their social-behavioral competence and mental health, with larger effects found for African American students.[22] In addition, out-of-school-time programs—which emphasize positive relationships, as well as voluntary engagement based on young people's interests and strengths—can be both models and partners for schools in promoting SEL.[23] For example, programs that help youth critically reflect on community issues and engage in collective action to address them can build a sense of efficacy, belonging, and empowerment, as well as collaboration and leadership skills.[24] Further, community-based youth programs can help low-income youth of color develop "critical social capital" through partnerships

with adults who share their identity and lived experience.[25] Evidence suggests that when schools adopt these types of youth-adult partnership practices, they can foster youth agency and belonging, enhance student-teacher relationships, and deepen engagement in learning.[26]

Below, we dive deeper into culturally responsive and trauma-informed practice, two schoolwide approaches prioritized by the Washington SEL Work Group.

Culturally responsive practice

One of the critiques of SEL is that it is often promoted as a set of universal competencies. Although many broad aspects of SEL, such as social awareness, are found across cultures, the way they are defined, expressed, and achieved varies.[27] Differences in cultural orientations manifest in the classroom in multiple ways that are relevant for SEL. For example, communication in a "high-context culture" (such as Asian, African, Arab, and Latinx cultures) relies on implicit messaging and nonverbal cues, with a preference for group process and observational learning. Communication in a "low-context culture" with Western European roots can be more explicit and focused on speed.[28] Awareness of these differences may help educators build more positive relationships with students and their families, as well as foster better relationships among students. For example, students from high-context Latinx cultures may thrive in settings that require collaboration and observation, such as project-based learning, and may serve as models for their peers. Celebrating this aspect of collectivist cultural orientation in the context of SEL skill development could counter current "deficit perspectives" that suggest the cultural traits of Latinx students are the primary cause of academic underachievement.[29]

Culturally responsive practice is grounded in the assumption that culture is a resource for learning, not a barrier. Along those lines, culturally responsive teaching refers to the ability of educators to recognize and respond positively to students' cultural displays of learning and meaning making by using culture to scaffold new concepts and content and to speed up information processing.[30] This includes using materials and concepts that resonate with students' cultural identities as an entry point to learning. However, culture is fluid and dynamic, with variations within cultural groups based on age, gender and sexual identity, immigration experience, and community type (e.g., rural, urban). Additionally, students of color continue to experience many challenges in schools even as more teachers have adopted these practices. Extending the idea of "culturally relevant pedagogy" first proposed by Gloria Ladson-Billings, there is now interest in "culturally sustaining pedagogy" that explicitly acknowledges the multiple and shifting identities of young people, as well as the need to critically examine and counteract the systemic oppression that continues in schools.[31]

In the realm of SEL, Brady and colleagues (2017) call for "culturally grounded interventions" that "acknowledge student cultural differences[,] … recognize that educational contexts tend to normalize one culture over others[,] … and develop sustainable change by building on the assets and strengths of different cultural ways of being."[32] There is a limited body of research on culturally adapted and grounded SEL interventions, but two studies with African American students offer insights.

In an example of a culturally sustaining model, a small study of urban African American students participating in Fulfill the Dream—a hip-hop-based SEL curriculum that emphasizes social justice and critical consciousness—found positive changes in students' self-awareness, hope, self-determination and motivation, positive self-talk, and critical consciousness[33]. A larger study of the cultural adaptation of the Strong Start intervention for African American male elementary school students found positive results regarding self-regulation and self-competence, with no impact on other areas, such as empathy, responsibility, and externalizing behavior[34].

This is an area in which further research is warranted, both in terms of student SEL and the adult practices that promote students' well-being. Educators should work with students, families, and community members to co-create expectations for SEL, and they should choose models and interventions that align with the community's cultural values.

Trauma-informed practice
Trauma is broadly defined as "any experience in which a person's internal resources are not adequate to cope with external stressors," and it can be provoked by one-time experiences (such as divorce or the death of a family member) or ongoing experiences (such as abuse and neglect).[35] Trauma may also be a collective experience, such as the historical trauma Native American and Alaska Native communities have suffered. Historical trauma is "cumulative, collective emotional and psychological injury over the lifespan and across generations resulting from a history of group trauma experiences."[36] According to the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, a trauma-informed program, organization, or system "realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths to recovery; recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system; responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and seeks to actively resist re-traumatization."[37]

Like SEL, trauma-informed practice aims to create safe and supportive learning environments, and in doing so, requires awareness of the diversity of student experiences. Specifically, an equity-informed approach to trauma is schoolwide and avoids re-traumatizing students, stigmatizing them, or treating them as if they are defined by their histories.[38] For example, assessing student adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can be counterproductive because trauma is a subjective experience. The same events—including those that seem minor to educators—can be experienced as traumatic or not, depending on an individual's culture and other factors.[39] Further, because exposure to potentially traumatizing events is correlated with other social determinants of health, such as poverty and race/ethnicity, narrowly focusing on "fixing" students experiencing trauma can exacerbate inequities within the school community, sending "erroneous messages that students of color have greater deficits than assets" and possibly even dismissing students' negative emotions related to their experiences of injustice, racism, or white privilege.[40] To help students understand their personal experiences within larger histories of trauma and oppression, Ginwright (2017) advocates for a social justice perspective centered on healing that builds on students' strengths, instills optimism, and helps students develop a sense of control and power.[41]

To date, there has been little rigorous research about effective trauma-informed practice, but descriptive research suggests promising practices for schools.[42] These include shifting away from punitive and exclusionary discipline and toward restorative justice and/or PBIS systems, school staff member training on the impacts of trauma, classroom trainings on coping skills, wraparound mental health services, and adding therapists and/or social workers to schools.[43] Adults' needs are also considered within positive learning environments, as teachers and staff members may experience compassion fatigue or secondary trauma as they grapple with their own emotions and needs for support related to their students' trauma.[44] Effective trauma-informed practice, then, provides supports for both students and adults and may be better conceptualized as "healing-centered" rather than "trauma-informed."[45]

Effective SEL and trauma-informed practice can be complementary when integrated into MTSS, with some overlapping features, such as the need for schoolwide changes to school culture and climate, as well as targeted supports or interventions for students who need additional assistance. In the case of trauma, students may need help from specially trained and credentialed staff members, such as school counselors.[46]

Align resources and policies to connect SEL with larger efforts to transform education in support of equity

The persistent effects of racism influence education in multiple ways, and they are apparent in problematic interactions between teachers and families, disparities in access to basic resources, and school policies and culture that maintain racial privilege. Racism in schools directly impacts the social and emotional health of students in terms of identity development, stereotype threat, microaggressions, and the quality of support they receive.[47] Without addressing institutional racism in schools, the effects of SEL will be limited.[48]

The practices described above require capacity building for educators as they shift their mindsets, roles, and behaviors. To do this, SEL needs to be part of a larger set of strategies and supports for transforming schools so that student race, ethnicity, economic or immigration status or identity does not determine their outcomes.[49] SEL for equity requires addressing barriers at the systemic (poverty) institutional (exclusionary discipline) and individual (implicit bias and burnout of staff) level.[50] This includes efforts to recruit and retain a more diverse workforce that reflects the student population, equity policies, professional development for educators, anti-bias trainings for educators, and school-family-community partnership.

Recommendations for the Washington SEL Work Group

Highlight the importance of context and culture in all materials

The statewide materials the Washington SEL Work Group is developing, particularly the framework and implementation guide, are an opportunity to place SEL in the context of transforming schools—cultivating positive culture, climate, and sense of belonging; deepening engagement with families from underrepresented groups; and extending partnerships with community-based organizations. These documents can include text, visuals, and examples that help stakeholders make the connection between SEL and school, district, and statewide initiatives to advance educational equity.

Additionally, the statewide materials can explicitly recognize how the culture of educators and students influences the process of teaching and learning. For example, the indicators can explain how SEL competencies may be expressed differently across cultures and contexts, and the implementation guide can offer ideas for how educators can draw on their students' diverse cultural assets to enrich SEL in their classroom.

> *Questions for the Washington SEL Work Group to consider while developing statewide resources:*
>
> 1. How may this resource build shared meaning regarding the context for SEL?
> 2. How may this resource recognize the cultural assets of students and families, especially those with a collectivist worldview?
> 3. How may this resource help adults develop positive relationships and learning environments that engage diverse students?
> 4. How may this resource be adapted to fit local communities, in partnership with families and community organizations?
> 5. How may this resource be used to support changes in school culture, climate, policies, and systems to promote educational equity?

Connect the framework, implementation guide, and indicators in a way that encourages reflective practice and builds on students' assets

One potential risk of having separate framework, guidance, and indicators documents is that educators will not use all three. Without reviewing the framework and implementation guide, educators may not see how the student indicators fit within larger efforts to promote SEL and positive school climate. The work group could develop a simple diagram or graphic that shows how the documents are related, as well as their audiences and intended uses. We recommend clearly connecting the three documents by including references and hyperlinks.

To avoid replicating deficit models of SEL that focus solely on students, it is imperative that all the materials acknowledge the need to build adult capacities related to SEL. In the introduction to the indicators, emphasize that they are not intended for assessment purposes but to help teachers know what supports to provide to students. To the extent possible, offer ideas for using the indicators to support positive student-teacher relationships, school climate, and school culture. Another approach to drive equity is to connect each set of standards, benchmarks, and indicators with opportunities to build both youth and adult capacity for SEL (table 1).

Table 1. Opportunities for equity-focused SEL practices aligned with Washington SEL standards

WA SEL standards	Opportunities for equity-focused SEL practices
Self-awareness and social awareness	Support *students* in developing positive racial/ethnic identities that provide alternatives to dominant values of individualism. Help students understand how race and class influence various settings. Help students recognize their own abilities to navigate these competing demands and messages as a strength. Support *educators* in reflecting on how their cultural worldview and bias may influence their interactions with students and families. Provide opportunities for educators to adopt a sociocultural and historical orientation to their work with students.
Self-management and social management	Help *students* engage in critical analysis of socioeconomic inequality through instructional strategies, such as youth participatory action research. Provide students with assistance in developing coping strategies to manage acculturative stress and discrimination. Help *educators* adopt culturally responsive and healing-informed practices. Encourage educators to consider how school policies and practices may be interpreted differently, depending on the cultural group.
Self-efficacy and social engagement	Support *students* in developing a sense of collective efficacy by working with others to challenge injustice and create positive change. Provide opportunities for students to participate in class, school, and community decision-making. Support *educators* in developing positive, trusting relationships with students whose identities and backgrounds differ from their own.

Source: Adapted in part from Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Borowski, 2018; Gregory & Fergus, 2017.

Ensure SEL indicators do not privilege dominant white, middle-class culture

The members of the work group have been working hard to create and refine the indicators. We recommend that they review table 1 and *Equity and Social Emotional Learning: A Cultural Analysis*[51] to develop indicators from an equity lens. Also, they should consider ways the indicators could be revised to help both students and their teachers recognize student strengths, especially those grounded in culture. The indicators can emphasize the importance of collective and interdependent ways of being by adding "We can" instead of "I can" statements to relevant indicators to emphasize the integrated, collective focus of many nondominant cultures. Additionally, there could be closer connections made between the self and social sets of indicators to acknowledge their interdependencies. Finally, it's important to avoid framing student experiences of emotions—even intense and negative ones—as problematic, especially in the context of social injustice and inequity. SEL is not about eliminating emotions; it is about understanding them and being empowered to take appropriate actions.

Acknowledge variability in pace of SEL development

Current research finds that SEL development varies based on context and culture. Further, development of SEL is not a linear process in which students progress smoothly in one direction. The work group's materials, especially the indicators, should be explicit and unambiguous about these ideas (for example, by labeling only the endpoints of its developmental continuum of indicators). Another possibility is to change the label for the highest level of development (currently high school) so that it refers to adulthood. This would allow educators to see the intent of the indicators—healthy, thriving adult community members—and support students to work toward that goal without being tempted to label students as "lagging behind" or deficient as they work through the normal and expected plateaus and even setbacks of SEL development.

This brief is intended to provide a snapshot of current dialogue in the field about issues of equity related to SEL. We encourage OSPI and the SEL Workgroup to continue to reflect on these issues and expand the conversation to include other aspects of equity not addressed in this paper, such as the experiences of LGBTQ students and students with special needs. As a leader in SEL, we encourage Washington to contribute to the national dialogue about how to further integrate SEL with efforts to promote educational equity.

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