Transformative Social and Emotional Learning

In Pursuit of Educational Equity and Excellence

By Robert J. Jagers, Alexandra Skoog-Hoffman, Bloodine Barthelus, and Justina Schlund

Imagine a school community in which: All children and youth have equal opportunities to thrive. Social and cultural markers no longer negatively predict young people's academic, social, and emotional outcomes or their life chances. Adults honor and elevate a broad range of perspectives and experiences by engaging young people as leaders, problem solvers, and decision makers. Youth and adults engage in an ongoing process of cultivating, practicing, and reflecting on their social and emotional competencies. Learning environments are supportive, culturally responsive, and focused on building relationships and community. And families, school staff, and out-of-school-time staff have regular, meaningful opportunities to build authentic partnerships and collaboratively support young people's social, emotional, and academic development, while continuing to deepen their own social and emotional competencies.

This is the community we aspire to build—and we ask you to join us on this journey. In 2019, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), long known to many educators as a leading research center and advocate for social and emotional learning (SEL), adopted an ambitious three-year strategic plan that prioritized advancing SEL in service of equity and excellence, elevating the criticality of SEL for adults, and ensuring integration of SEL throughout the instructional process. The pandemic brought our society's systemic racism and economic inequity into sharper relief and further energized our work. As some return to a "normal" that we find unacceptable, we remain committed to this journey.

We are striving to identify and contribute to the types of educational experiences that foster personal and collective growth and well-being for young people, especially those our society has long underserved. These are typically, but not only, Black, brown, and Indigenous youth and those from under-resourced communities. It is increasingly evident that addressing these inequities and related challenges also necessitates attending to the social and emotional learning of young people and adults who are white and/or reside in better-resourced communities as well. Many of us in the field understand that we are at an inflection point. We have an opportunity to invest in viable strategies to reimagine the purpose of education and to more fully appreciate the nature

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY GABY D'ALESSANDRO

of learning, where and how it occurs, and its relevance to a more equitable and vibrant civil society.[1]

Our commitment and contribution to supporting meaningful, sustained change in the US education system is rooted in recent revisions to our definition of SEL, as well as to our tools and resources.* We have also launched a research-practice partnership strategy allowing our teams to work more systematically and collaboratively with a subset of our district and school partners. Our work necessarily focuses on both youth and adult SEL in school and community contexts, and on how to fully integrate academic, social, and emotional instruction.

In this article, we first share our revised definition of SEL and our focus on *identity*, *agency*, *belonging*, *collaborative problem solving*, and *curiosity*. We then describe some considerations and directions for ongoing action research with some partnering school communities. These include co-constructing equitable learning environments via project-based learning and SEL for adults. We conclude with some thoughts about next steps in our ongoing research-practice partnership efforts.

Our Evolving Definition Supports Transformative SEL

In order to achieve the conceptual expansion necessary to center equity and excellence, CASEL's revised definition of SEL places greater emphasis on affirming the strengths, experiences, and identities of all students—most especially those who have been marginalized and minoritized by our society:

> Social and emotional learning (SEL) is an integral part of education and human development. SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.
>
> SEL advances educational equity and excellence through authentic school-family-community partnerships to establish learning environments and experiences that feature trusting and collaborative relationships, rigorous and meaningful curriculum and instruction, and ongoing evaluation. SEL can help address various forms of inequity and empower young people and adults to co-create thriving schools and contribute to safe, healthy, and just communities.[2]

This new definition sets a vision for what high-quality systemic SEL is and how it might be achieved. CASEL is also refining a specific form of SEL implementation that concentrates SEL practice on transforming inequitable settings and systems, and promoting justice-oriented civic engagement—we are calling this *transformative SEL*. This form of SEL is aimed at redistributing power to promote social justice through increased engagement in school and civic life. It intentionally points to competencies and highlights relational and contextual factors that help promote equitable learning environments and foster desirable personal and collective outcomes. Transformative SEL is a process whereby young people and adults build strong and respectful relationships that facilitate co-learning to critically examine root causes of inequity and to develop collaborative solutions that lead to personal, communal, and societal well-being. This form of SEL is necessary to meet the growing political, economic, and health challenges we face in the United States and around the world.

Many educators are familiar with CASEL's long-standing, overlapping domains of competence: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. As we center equity, we are highlighting the importance of identity, agency, belonging, collaborative problem solving, and curiosity. These focal constructs are most germane to well-being and promoting thriving among diverse groups in a raced, classed, and gendered society.

CASEL's revised definition of SEL places greater emphasis on affirming the strengths, experiences, and identities of all students.

- *Identity* implies understandings and sensibilities associated with multifaceted personal and social group statuses (often discussed in terms of intersectionality and positionality). It suggests self-reflection and self-respect.
- *Agency* confers the wherewithal to impact positively on this psychological and social reality. It reflects hope and self-direction.
- *Belonging* suggests the sense of connectedness and trust needed to engage in co-constructing an equitable, thriving local community and vibrant civil society. It enhances self-worth.
- *Collaborative problem solving* acknowledges and helps realize the collective rights and responsibilities of full citizenship in local, national, and global community contexts. It is a critical feature of efforts to pursue equity and excellence.
- *Curiosity* reflects the deep need to continuously surface and curate information about oneself in relation to others and the physical world. It prioritizes informed decision making based on open-minded investigation that sparks self-development and careful social analysis.

Focal Constructs for Transformative SEL: A Closer Look at the Keys to Equity

Each of our focal constructs has a strong foundation in research and practice, which we summarize below. Like the domains of competence in which they are nested, they are related and potentially mutually reinforcing. For example, in many respects, collaborative problem solving can provide a context for leveraging and cultivating identity, agency, belonging, and curiosity among young people and adults.

Identity is focal among self-awareness competencies and refers to how students (and adults) view themselves. Identity is multidimensional (e.g., race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, religion, values, interests, etc.), with each dimension having a level of importance and emotional tenor (positive/negative) that may

*See casel.org/in-action and casel.org/resources.

change over time. These dimensions also intersect with each other (e.g., Latina teacher dedicated to a chronically under-resourced school, Indigenous transgender boy leading his school's yearbook club). Having a healthy sense of identity is important developmentally across the lifespan[3] because it buffers against negative or traumatic experiences (e.g., stereotype threat or discrimination) and contributes to positive academic, social, and emotional outcomes.[4]

Agency is focal among self-management competencies and signifies perceived and actual capacity to effect change through purposeful action. This may include having voice and making choices about learning and career goals to pursue, overcoming personal challenges, and engaging in collaborative problem solving. Agency is key to young adults' success, allowing them to take intentional actions to shape the course of their lives. Agency also includes collective efficacy, which has been shown to improve teachers' abilities to improve school outcomes for students from under-resourced communities and to increase coordinated actions among adolescents and adults that contribute positively to civic life.[5]

Belonging is focal among social awareness competencies and connotes experiences of acceptance, respect, and inclusion within a group or community. It implies not only feeling recognized but also being fully involved in relationship-building and co-creating learning spaces. Having a sense of belonging is critical to students' and adults' cognitive, social, and emotional well-being, as well as school and work satisfaction and academic motivation and achievement.[6]

Collaborative problem solving is focal among relationship skills competencies and reflects a complex skill set in high demand in our increasingly multifaceted local, national, and global contexts. Distinct from collaborative learning and collaborative decision making,[7] collaborative problem solving is defined as the capacity of an individual to effectively engage in a process whereby two or more people attempt to solve a problem by sharing the understanding and effort required to come to a solution and pooling their knowledge, skills, and efforts to reach that solution. Despite its recognized importance as a developmental imperative, international studies of adolescents indicate that only one-third of 15-year-olds are proficient at collaborative problem solving—but students in racially and culturally diverse schools and those participating in group-based extracurricular activities (e.g., sports teams, band) are more likely to be proficient than their peers.[8]

Curiosity is focal among responsible decision-making competencies and can animate critical self- and social analysis and action. Curiosity has both cognitive and affective elements that contribute to an enduring tendency to pursue knowledge and new experiences. As such, it appears to be essential to attention, engagement, and learning. A recent study of Black and Latinx adolescents found a positive association between the growth over time in curiosity and increased societal analysis and involvement.[9]

Co-Constructing Equitable Learning Environments

CASEL's SEL framework includes classrooms, schools, families, and communities as learning contexts that can support the types of human growth and development we envision. Our work engages states, districts, and schools in the process of implementing systemic SEL by (1) building foundational support and planning, (2) strengthening adult SEL competencies and capacities, (3) promoting SEL for students, and (4) practicing continuous improvement. While presented separately, these four areas are overlapping and interrelated. For example, the planning team should include education leaders, students, families, and community stakeholders. Similarly, continuous improvement is intentionally featured in the initial effort to build foundational support and plan so that all stakeholders are actively learning and adjusting throughout the implementation process.

This interest in collaboratively and continuously improving the learning environment is an essential feature of our emerging work that is not unique to CASEL. Recent research points to a movement in education away from adopting "best practices" and toward addressing local challenges by adapting evidence-based strategies and practitioners' promising practices.[10] Across the country, continuous improvement is being pursued through a range of approaches that share the following characteristics:

- Grounding improvements in local problems or needs
- Empowering practitioners to take an active role in improvement research
- Engaging in a cyclical process of action, assessment, reflection, and adjustment
- Striving to stimulate change in individual classrooms as well as across schools and systems

Historically, our work has focused primarily on supporting and tracking the efforts of key state and district administrators to enact organizational improvements, with less attention given to schools' communities. To realize the principles and goals of transformative SEL, we are now also pursuing opportunities for collaborative inquiry with local practitioners (e.g., teachers and youth workers), families, and youth. We have framed our emerging work primarily in terms of research-practice partnerships, with a particular focus on design-based implementation research. This will allow us to honor, leverage, and blend the expertise of local stakeholders with what we have learned over the years.

The Promise of Project-Based Learning as a Driver of Transformative SEL

A key implication of our commitment to transformative SEL and what students, families, and educators require has to do with recommendations for the selection of school- and classroom-based SEL programs. Instead of creating our own program or curriculum, CASEL serves as a neutral body in the field, evaluating programs for pre-K through high school against our rigorous criteria to determine which are high quality and evidence-based. As part of revising all of our resources to support implementation of transformative SEL, we continue to update our inclusion criteria for programs and approaches.[11]

We believe that key features of culturally responsive education and youth-guided approaches—like project-based learning and youth participatory action research—are essential for transformative SEL.[12] We have particular interest in student-led project-based learning,[13] since these programs and practices tend to feature collaborative problem solving and thus effectively integrate aca-

demic, social, and emotional learning. Students learn through the co-construction of knowledge that is actively applied to address an identified concern and evaluated for its effectiveness; adults serve as coaches or facilitators, thereby increasing students' agency in their own inquiry and reflection.

Project-based learning (PBL) can range from packaged curricula to teacher-designed approaches (giving educators opportunities to be agentic). The goal is to help students work together to develop knowledge and understanding that can be applied to solve real-world problems. Essential design elements include

1. a challenging problem or question that is important to students;
2. sustained inquiry that is active, in-depth, and iterative;
3. authentic relevance for students;
4. student ownership reflected in their voice and choice;
5. student and teacher reflection on what, how, and why they are learning throughout the project;
6. critique and revision such that students are taught how to give and receive constructive feedback on processes and products; and
7. a public product that demonstrates learning and offers a solution to a problem or an answer to a driving question.

A review of the literature reveals PBL contributes to increased attendance and positive attitudes toward diverse classmates, more positive attitudes toward learning, reduced gender disparities in science achievement, and reduced disparities by race and socioeconomic status in math achievement.[14] Recently, a series of experimental studies demonstrated that PBL improves academic outcomes across a range of grade levels, content areas, and student populations.[15]

Further, there is some evidence that PBL promotes important SEL outcomes such as identity, agency, and collaboration. For example, the use of PBL in high school science courses allowed students to leverage prior experiences, begin to see themselves as scientists, and thereby increase their engagement in disciplinary practices.[16] Similarly, a study with third-graders learning science found that PBL students placed greater value on reflection and collaboration and also increased their science achievement.[17] This was true regardless of students' demographic backgrounds or current reading abilities. While PBL is often reserved for students in better-resourced school settings, these findings point to the need to further interrogate its promise for advancing transformative SEL in schools with large populations of students who have been marginalized throughout our nation's history.

Similar to project-based learning, youth participatory action research (YPAR) is also a potential driver of transformative SEL (though the effects of YPAR have yet to be extensively examined in studies using comparison groups). YPAR is a youth-centered form of community-based participatory research, which includes engaging youth in learning and practicing action research skills, thinking strategically, and developing strategies for influencing change on a youth-identified topic. The approach has been valuable with young people in elementary, middle, and high schools and in out-of-school-time settings. Young people and adults develop group cohesion and collaborate to conduct iterative cycles of problem identification, analysis, design, action, and reflection. This relies heavily on adults (teachers, youth workers) engaging as co-learners and facilitators rather than experts or primary decision makers.[18]

YPAR positions youth as experts—critical consumers and producers of knowledge—about their lived experiences and the ways to bring about desired changes. Research shows that young people see and will seek to address a range of issues relevant to their sense of personal and community well-being, including food access, community violence, and juvenile justice reforms. Projects also focus on educational issues, including school governance, curricular options, student supports, and in-school food services.[19] As such, it's important that districts and schools are increasingly using YPAR in their school improvement efforts. However, YPAR teams are usually small groups of young people, so the selection of participants and limited adult capacity can present challenges to these efforts being adequately inclusive. Additionally, there are several potential barriers to youth-led efforts effectively enacting change, including the deficit assumptions that some adults make regarding young people (e.g., ageism, racism), the complexity of gathering adequate data (e.g., quality, rigor), and the difficulty of holding decision makers accountable.[20]

Student-led project-based learning tends to integrate academic, social, and emotional learning.

Despite the challenges, we see benefits in supporting PBL, YPAR, and other student-driven approaches that feature collaborative problem solving, and also leverage and scaffold academic content, to examine issues of interest to young people. To catalyze transformative SEL, we hope to learn more about the levels of curiosity fostered, connections to aspects of current and prospective identities, how agentic participants become, and the sense of belonging that might ensue.

Transformative SEL for Adults

Our revised definition of SEL highlights family-school-community partnerships. So, in order for transformative SEL to become systemic—to fully take root in schools and other learning environments—we see a need to prioritize adults' learning about and critical reflection on their own social, emotional, and cultural competencies. After all, this pursuit of equity and excellence cannot be done to students—it can only be accomplished through collective youth and adult action. There are several entry points for this work: adults in schools, families, and communities.

Adults in Schools

Although all of the adults in a school matter, we begin with principals because of the power they have to shape the learning environment. Principals are largely white, and the extent of their professional experience has declined, especially in under-resourced schools. Thus, there are growing representation and experience gaps that are most likely to have a detrimental impact on students of color.

Principals can build an equitable climate by hiring more teachers of color, working with teachers to support the implementation of culturally responsive education, and managing student discipline in a supportive manner, especially with students of color. But anti-racist, equity-focused educational leaders are often challenged by district, teacher, and family stakeholders seeking to maintain the structures and practices that perpetuate the status quo. Currently, such work is more likely to be taken up by principals of color than white principals.[21]

The hiring of teachers of color may make an especially important contribution to a school climate that advances equity and excellence. For example, compared with their white colleagues, teachers of color are preferred by students from all backgrounds.[22] Further, there is evidence that having more Black male teachers is predictive of more positive educational outcomes for Black boys.[23] However, it would be naive to conclude that racial group membership and race-matching are sufficient to improve educational experiences and outcomes. We know, for example, that Black people vary greatly in their racial identities (e.g., the degree to which they view being Black as important and positive or their preferred ways of engaging in US society). As such, the key, likely, is not racial group membership alone, but also the competencies and practices Black educators commonly use to produce these positive relationships and student outcomes. We imagine our focal constructs (identity, agency, belonging, collaborative problem solving, and curiosity) are relevant in this connection.

Equity and excellence can only be accomplished through collective youth and adult action.

Regardless of their own backgrounds, essential actions for adults in schools include replacing deficit-oriented perceptions with more affirming views of students as change agents, respecting and striving to learn about families' and communities' funds of knowledge, understanding one's own culture, and approaching learning about others' cultures and communities with curiosity and humility. Additionally, educators have a responsibility to conduct (and administrators have a responsibility to support) a critical analysis of their textbooks and other materials to ensure they are rigorous, are relevant to and respectful of their students, and engage students in high-level practices.[24]

The vast majority of classroom teachers are white (and primarily women). And there is a substantial literature on racial bias (implicit and explicit) that indicates that we as a country have a long way to go in addressing teacher attitudes and practices that have negative effects on the school outcomes of students of color.[25] Such attitudes and practices are inconsistent with culturally responsive education and student-led project-based learning. As such, we are interested in surfacing effective ways to mitigate racially biased mindsets and practices, and to promote anti-oppressive educational practices as part of advancing transformative SEL.

Some scholars have suggested that book clubs, curriculum labs, and professional learning communities provide means to develop a constructive white racial identity, reducing microaggressions and enacting greater cultural, ethnic, and racial literacy.[26] Research indicates, however, that relying solely on beliefs-focused professional development has no appreciable, sustained impact on teaching practices; worse, it could foster resentment among some white teachers.[27] Fortunately, moving from beliefs to actions is effective. For example, research indicates that active co-learning opportunities—like community walks, project-based learning, and youth participatory action research—improve teachers' attitudes and instructional practices with students from diverse backgrounds.[28]

There are, of course, additional struggles faced by teachers who try to launch and sustain this or any other type of transformative educational work. These include structural challenges associated with an overemphasis on testing and administrators' discomfort with students' critiques of schooling. Teachers also have reported instructional challenges such as vulnerability and loss of power, student apathy, and discomfort with discussions of race. Based on this research, teachers interested in pursuing this type of work are advised to develop allies among colleagues and community stakeholders and to experiment with the practices to adapt and improve applications to the local context.[29] Implied here is the critical need for teacher identity work and for communities of practice that support collaborative problem solving and the sense of personal and collective agency teachers need and deserve to advance transformative SEL.

Adults in Families

The pandemic has raised our awareness of the various places and ways in which learning happens—the developmental ecosystem for children, adolescents, and adults. CASEL has long asserted that family-school-community partnerships are essential to realizing the potential of systemic SEL.[30] With our revisions and transformative SEL, we now separate families from communities as distinct contexts for SEL. This provides for a more focused and nuanced approach to our work in the family context. Families play an integral role in the social, emotional, and academic development of children and youth and are essential to creating, informing, and sustaining educational equity initiatives—including transformative SEL. Parents and other primary caregivers value the development of these life skills and view the home as the first place SEL occurs. However, it is clear that most families of color require modifications in the learning environments typically provided by districts and schools.[31]

The family context can function as a safe and open environment where children and youth can be themselves while practicing social and emotional norms, cues, and skills needed to effectively navigate and contribute to a range of social interactions and settings. As such, the ways in which families socialize children and youth about emotions (i.e., their messaging and modeling) often intersect with racial pride. In fact, one question we are exploring is the heightened importance of civic activism socialization in fostering transformative SEL as young people develop.[32]

Fostering more authentic family-school partnerships is a priority in our collaboration with districts, schools, and practitioners.

We anchored this work in a framework[33] that outlines the need for family-school partnerships to surface challenges, establish essential conditions (organizational and procedural), and pursue policy and program goals that foster capabilities (skills and knowledge), connections (networks), cognitions (shifts in beliefs and values), and confidence (self-efficacy). The model views this as a recipe for dual capacity building for authentic partnering and constructive collaboration.

Educators develop the capacity to:	Families develop the capacity to:
Engage with families as co-creators	Engage with educators as co-creators
Connect family engagement to learning and development	Be supporters and encouragers
Honor families' funds of knowledge	Serve as monitors
Create welcoming cultures	Shape the work as advocates and models

Toward this end, we have engaged in collaborative work to facilitate a discussion series among educators and caregivers.[34] An initial pilot study with a community organization serving Latinx families found the discussion series informative; families used their new insights to become active participants on schools' SEL advisory committees.

Adults in Communities

Communities have always represented an important context for the cognitive, social, and emotional development of children, youth, and adults.[35] The ongoing national crises—from quashing the pandemic to reckoning with racism to addressing climate change—have made it even more evident that families, schools, and communities must work together to ensure collective well-being and thriving. For transformative SEL, key community partners include a range of youth-serving organizations that offer structured learning opportunities.

These organizations, the programs they offer, and youth workers who staff them are typically overlooked in conversations about how and where to best promote academic, social, and emotional growth among young people.[36] But they are crucial for achieving our vision of SEL in the service of equity and excellence. Several studies have found positive outcomes among Black and Latinx youth from low- and middle-income families.[37] A meta-analysis of SEL implemented in afterschool settings revealed that programs that are well-designed and well-implemented can have a positive impact in an array of academic, social, and emotional competencies.[38]

Community-based youth-serving organizations often feature culturally relevant education and other affirming, youth-centered strategies.[39] As such, we are particularly interested in the degree to which they foster ethnic and racial identity development, voice, and autonomy—especially through youth participatory action research.

The majority of these organizations' workers are people of color; their professional development (and that of organization leaders) could prove informative. While community-based educational spaces offer a fertile context for culturally and developmentally appropriate relationships and locally grounded learning experiences, there is typically no formal infrastructure for staff recruitment and training.[40] Understanding whether and in what ways youth workers come to understand and enact engaging, transformative practices might be instructive for school personnel and the field (which is yet another avenue we are exploring with some of our partner schools and districts).

We certainly want to illuminate and learn from the bright spots in classroom, family, and community settings where adults and young people are thriving. Our work with adults will benefit from formative data to help us understand the contributions of adult competencies and supports (e.g., professional development and caregiver discussions) that make this so. In the school context, this includes separate but related work with administrators and teachers. We are especially interested in how school staff, parents, and youth workers can align their efforts to maximize opportunities for the academic, social, and emotional growth and well-being of children and youth.

Some Concluding Thoughts

We committed a few years ago to a program of work aimed at advancing SEL in the service of equity and excellence. As we engage in this work, we maintain an abiding interest in organizational improvements, so we will examine the roles that state policies and education agencies can play in framing and enabling work in school districts.* We also have narrowed our focus to a subset of districts for deeper work on transformative SEL, as we quickly recognized how intensive this effort needs to be. As a result, we are paying greater attention to district readiness to commit leaders from key divisions to this work in a sustained way and are streamlining the onboarding process. Finally, we have created space to co-learn and co-design, with districts, models of transformative SEL that best support systemic and sustainable implementation to impact student outcomes.

Looking ahead, we realize that much more needs to be understood about what happens in school communities. Our revised definition has encouraged us to also pursue opportunities for collaborative inquiry with local practitioners, families, and youth. This requires hard-earned relational trust, but it is well worth the effort because it has the potential to make the focal problems and practices more germane to those closest to the work. We hope this will result in greater interest in, facility with, and use of co-generated data.[41]

One of our primary goals is to identify programs, approaches, modules, and practices consistent with the promotion of equity-focused social and emotional competencies, especially identity, agency, belonging, collaborative problem solving, and curiosity. Together, with youth, families, practitioners, and communities, we look forward to collaborating to advance transformative SEL. ☐

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*For details, visit casel.org/partner-district and casel.org/state-page.

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