"THEY FORGOT ABOUT IT BECAUSE WE'RE ALL DISPERSED": ONLINE SCHOOL INFLUENCE ON TRANSFORMATIVE SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is critically important for well-being and success and must not be overlooked when students are learning online. In a qualitative exploration of parents, teachers, and students across the United States, this study investigates the ways in which transformative SEL (Jagers et al., 2019), a form of SEL specifically focused on social justice, can be fostered in online spaces. As our findings suggest, decisions made at the school level have critical potential to either support or hinder this work.

Keywords: *social-emotional learning, social justice, transformative social and emotional learning, online education, contextual influences*

INTRODUCTION

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is a critical factor for student well-being and success (e.g., CASEL, n.d.; Durlak et al., 2011; Immordino-Yang et al., 2018; Jones & Kahn, 2017; Mahoney et al., 2018; Osher et al., 2016). However, there is a growing need to better understand how to support social-emotional wellness when students are learning online. Not only are online learners receiving inconsistent support in this area (e.g., Kebede, 2021; Prothero, 2020), but these inconsistencies and inequalities are more pronounced along race and class lines (e.g., Blad, 2021; Burney, 2020; Cummings, 2021; Herold, 2020; Kebede, 2021; Perez, 2021; Saavedra et al., 2021; Shapiro et al., 2021).

In addition, even as we emerge from the depths of the pandemic, and as many students are relishing the return to in-person schooling, some families are also reporting a desire to continue online learning for their children (e.g., Gewertz, 2021; Saavedra et al., 2021; Schwartz et al., 2021; Singer, 2021). For

example, a recent Education Week survey found that 7 out of 10 districts are reporting a plan to continue offering a wider range of schooling options (Bushweller & Lloyd, 2021). As an increasing number of students and families are opting to continue this online route, an additional layer of distance is being created between schools and students. During this critical time, educators must continue to prioritize SEL in order to support both academic *and* social-emotional wellness.

The primary research question guiding this work is: What do teachers, parents, and children perceive as effective practices in fostering social-emotional learning in online spaces? While other reports coming out of this research explore pedagogical moves that can support this kind of student development (see Soutter et al., 2021), this paper focuses specifically on the ways in which schoolwide decisions and supports can play a role in bolstering—or inhibiting—equitable social-emotional supports for online learners. As our findings suggest, even though much SEL occurs at the classroom level in the

form of community-building, fostering authentic relationships, and targeted SEL lessons, decisions made at the school-level also have critical leverage to either support or hinder this work, even when learning occurs remotely.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Transformative Social Emotional Learning

The Collaborative for Academic and Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines social and emotional learning (SEL) as "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" and parses this broad construct into five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL "Fundamentals of SEL", n.d.). A large body of scholarship documents a host of positive outcomes associated with SEL (e.g., CASEL, n.d.; Durlak et al., 2011; Immordino-Yang et al., 2018; Mahoney et al., 2018) including stronger relationships with peers and teachers (Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, 2019), an ability to regulate stress and depression (CASEL, n.d.), positive attitudes towards one's self and others (Mahoney et al., 2018), and academic achievement (Durlak et al., 2011; Mahoney et al., 2018). Partly in response to this growing body of literature, recent reports indicate that schools and districts spend approximately $640 million on SEL education each year (Assessment Work Group, 2019; Krachman & LaRocca, 2017) and that over 71% of principals are currently implementing (or plan to implement) SEL programming in their schools (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019).

Transformative social and emotional learning (Jagers et al., 2019) is a form of SEL that is "intended to promote equity and excellence among children, young people, and adults" (p. 162) and is aligned with the work of scholars who advocate for vision of SEL grounded in social justice (e.g., CASEL, n.d.; Kaler-Jones, 2020; Kirshner, 2015; Love, 2019; Niemi, 2020; Rose, 2013; Seider & Graves, 2020, 2020; Simmons, 2019, 2021; Soutter, 2019, 2020). We define social justice as "a communal effort dedicated to creating and sustaining a fair and equal society in which each person and all groups are valued and affirmed" (John Lewis Institute for Social Justice "Terminology", 2021). While CASEL relies on five central pillars to describe SEL (self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making), Jagers and colleagues (2019) parse each of these competencies into three tiers: *personally responsible* (a responsible citizen who contributes to one's own community), *participatory* (one who is actively involved in activism and service), and *transformative* (one who critically analyzes inequality and seeks social justice and collective well-being). For example, the CASEL competency of relationship skills at the *personally responsible* level means having the ability to build and sustain positive, trusting relationships; at the *participatory* level, this includes building cultural competence to better navigate friendships and social situations with a diverse group of people; *transformative* relationship skills incorporate collaborative problem-solving and multicultural competence in building trust (Jagers et al., 2019). Similarly, the CASEL competency of 'social awareness' at the *personally responsible* level emphasizes creating a sense of belonging, defined as students having access. Social awareness at the *participatory* level defines belonging as inclusion and recognizes diversity as an important piece of this inclusion. Social awareness at the *transformative* level defines belonging as students being co-owners of the classroom in a way that shares power (Jagers et al., 2019). It is this vision of transformative SEL that guides our research; our goal is to identify the ways in which students who are learning online can be supported in developing SEL not only for their own internal and interpersonal skills, but also in the service of social justice.

Contextual Influences: School Factors and Transformative SEL

We also situate the present study in the theoretical frameworks of ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993) and relational developmental systems (RDS) metatheory (Lerner & Schmid Callina, 2014) as a way to recognize the powerful interaction—and co-action (Lerner & Schmid Callina, 2014)—of contextual factors and individual well-being. Aligned with this conceptualization, CASEL's framework explicitly

recognizes the role of broad contextual influences on student social-emotional learning. That is, the five competencies themselves are ensconced in four surrounding layers: (1) Classroom: SEL Instruction and Classroom Climate; (2) Schools: Schoolwide Culture, Practices, and Policies; (3) Families and Caregivers: Authentic Partnerships; and (4) Communities: Aligned Learning Opportunities.

Indeed, a body of literature outlines the importance of these surrounding support layers on student social-emotional growth (e.g., Baehr, 2015; Durlak, 2016; Fagan et al., 2015; Jones & Kahn, 2017; Jones et al., 2019; Osher et al., 2016; Osher et al., 2020). For example, Osher et al. (2016) have reported on the importance of systemic and comprehensive SEL programs to promote social-emotional well-being. Similarly, Durlak (2016) has written about the ways in which implementation plays a critical role in whether or not SEL interventions are successful, in part acknowledging the impact of ecological factors and the importance of collaboration between multiple stakeholders. More broadly speaking, Jones and Kahn's (2017) Consensus Statements of Evidence from the Aspen Institute's National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, confirms the importance of the infusion of SEL into all parts of the school day and school spaces as opposed to bringing a piece-meal approach to the classroom. Longitudinal data has shown the ways in which sustained, multifaceted, theory-based SEL programs in elementary schools can positively influence mental health, health maintenance, and adult functioning more than 25 years later (Hawkins et al., 2005; Kosterman et al., 2019).

Aligned with this contextual approach to SEL in schools, Jagers et al.'s (2019) transformative SEL framework also points to the ways in which systemic factors have the power to either perpetuate or combat deeply entrenched inequalities related to social-emotional learning. They note that schools often and repeatedly reinforce this kind of inequality, which is both harmful and traumatic for students who have already been marginalized. This recognition of the power of systemic influences on student well-being is a foundational reason why examining the impact of school decision-making on student social-emotional learning is so important for the field.

METHOD

Our research team consisted of two faculty principal investigators and three masters-level graduate students. All members of the team were involved in each step of the data analysis, and to reduce researcher bias, the research team held weekly lab meetings where we discussed findings, reflected on relevant literature, and reflected on our positionality.

Participants

In order to explore the ways in which school-level decision-making might support transformative SEL in online spaces, we interviewed four students, seven parents, and four teachers to draw from a range of experiences and perspectives. Our intent is not to stratify the experiences of these different stakeholders, but rather to gather multiple perspectives to better understand commonalities and to paint a more holistic picture of how schools can support student transformative SEL.

Given the difficulty of measuring constructs such as social-emotional learning and social justice (e.g., Clark et al., 2020; Duckworth & Yeager, 2015; McKown, 2017; Soutter, 2020; Soutter et al., 2022), and the diverse and nuanced experiences of online learning in the pandemic, we selected qualitative methodology in order to gain an in-depth understanding of these varied experiences. Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) specifically reaching out to teachers in our networks who were focusing on SEL in some manner, to parents in our networks whom we knew cared about elements of SEL and/or social justice for their children's education, and to students who had experience with online learning (we sought students who actually had some kind of online schooling—e.g., not all asynchronous work—or whose families opted to remain in online school for the 2020-21 school year so they had more extensive experience with remote learning). We also aimed to recruit a diverse sample: The participants included 3 Black males, 1 White male, 2 Black females, 6 White females, 1 Black and Latina female, 1 Asian female, and 1 Latina female. The schools from our study represented a variety of locations and types ranging from urban public schools (7), to suburban public schools (5), to urban private schools (3), and to suburban private schools (2) across the United States (more schools are represented because some parents had

more than one child in different schools). Finally, our sample focused entirely on elementary school experiences to contribute to the relatively limited body of literature focused on transformative SEL with young students.

Data Collection

Semistructured interviews (Seidman, 1991) were conducted via Zoom from November 2020 to June 2021 and were approximately 30-60 minutes long. In order to avoid academic jargon, we did not specifically ask about "transformative social-emotional learning," but rather asked about both SEL and social justice more broadly to try to understand the extent to which these elements were addressed in the online schooling of our participants. Some examples of queries for students included, "Are there ways that your teacher makes you feel like you are still in the classroom even though you are learning from home?" and "Can you tell me about a time when your teacher talked about how to make friends or resolve conflicts?" For teachers, some questions included, "In what ways (if any) did you work to bring your social-emotional learning practices online during the shift to online learning? How do you feel that you were successful?" and "How do you see your role as a teacher in teaching students about social justice and equity?" and "In what ways (if any) did you work to bring your social justice and equity practices online? How do you feel that you were successful?" For parents, example questions included, "What are your expectations for your child's teacher and school in meeting your child's social-emotional needs?" and "From your perspective, how is your child's teacher supporting or not supporting your child's social-emotional needs during remote learning?" and "Does your child's teachers emphasize any elements of social justice teaching during online learning?" As such, participants do not actually use the terminology of "transformative SEL" but rather more holistically address social-emotional learning and social justice and the ways in which they intersect.

Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and we employed a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clark, 2013, 2019) relying on both deductive and inductive coding to analyze our data (Maxwell, 2013). We first created an initial draft of a qualitative codebook consisting primarily of etic codes such as the five SEL competencies parsed into the three tiers of transformative SEL (Jagers et al., 2019). Each member of our research team then coded the same single interview using this codebook remaining open to etic codes as well (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Charmaz, 2006). Our team discussed the first round of coding and collaborated to fine-tune our code book to include precise definitions of each competency at each tier. We then coded two interviews as a team to ensure alignment and agreement of the completed codebook as well as the coding process itself. During this phase we also added an additional layer of coding to indicate the layer of influence on social-emotional learning: student SEL, parent SEL, teacher SEL, or a school influence on SEL. Each interview moving forward was then coded by at least three members of the research team to ensure both validity and reliability (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). We then sorted our codes into a conceptually clustered matrix (Maxwell, 2013) allowing us to look for themes in the data. We further grouped larger themes (e.g., schoolwide influences) into subthemes, such as "prioritization" and "deprioritization," creating the foundation for the current paper.

RESULTS

Even though our questions focused primarily on individual experiences and teaching practices, the impact of schoolwide contextual factors on SEL and social justice emerged as a clear theme in both beneficial and harmful ways. While some participants pointed to the positive influence of school-level decision-making on students' transformative social-emotional learning, others referenced their schools as the source of difficulty in supporting students' social-emotional growth. Even though participants did speak of the impact of individual educators or classroom-level pedagogical decisions (see Soutter et al., 2021), the power of the contextual school environment itself was overwhelmingly clear. Below we describe the ways in which these environmental factors played a role. Our hope is that these perceptions and experiences can ultimately provide guidance to schools and school leaders on the ways in which their decision making can impact student-level social-emotional wellness.

Since we did not use the term "transformative SEL" in our interviews to avoid academic jargon (as noted above), our results are organized into the two larger categories of SEL and social justice, and we more explicitly recognize the intersection of the two in the discussion.

Deprioritization of SEL Online

Some participants shared that there was not enough time allotted to SEL, making it difficult for students to grow and be supported in this way. For example, Sasha, a White teacher in an urban public school in a midsize urban city whose class focused primarily on SEL, shared that her school was worried about students falling behind academically during online learning and decided to cut down on the number of times she was able to work with students in this way:

> *We saw them every day but then moving into the second quarter they moved just to once a week because of the falling behind in academic stuff. They're really big on saying, "We're giving a lot of grace to our students. We want to make sure they feel supported," but there hasn't been any leniency on the push toward "Are you participating? Are you making progress in your reading levels?" and stuff like that. It's been full, full steam ahead.*

This decision to deprioritize SEL at the students' expense was echoed by other participants as well. Ava, a Black mother whose son attended a public school in a midsize suburban town, shared how her son was identified by the school as needing additional social-emotional supports, and how he was supposed to meet in a small group with other students to address this need; however, Ava explained, "I agreed to it and then the pandemic happened, and we never had a small group." Even though the logistics of the shutdown were of course tremendous, we again see a school decision to cut out a social-emotional piece right when students were being increasingly isolated.

Hannah, a White mother whose two sons attended a public elementary school (2nd grade) and a private preschool in a midsize suburban town, shared a similar experience for her older child, reflecting simply, "In the spring they really weren't able to do social emotional stuff, which was disappointing." Hannah also shared that while she deeply appreciated the work that her older son's school was doing to try to support all families and students (as explained in more detail below), there were also some schoolwide decisions that lead to her son being in remote learning for long stretches of time where her child's social-emotional needs were not being sufficiently met:

> *They switched the calendar so now it's a seven-week time period that our cohort is only in school for four days total. This is a terrible time for there to be so little social emotional support for these kids and for families. I emailed the school committee, and I acknowledged how hard this was and I don't think anyone's intentionally trying to do a bad job—everyone is doing their best in an impossible situation, but I think this was a big mess. I said, "Can we as a community figure out how to support these kids from a mental health standpoint? Could we have small groups with kids?" I listed out a few ideas and was like, "Could we open this to the community because I'm really worried for these young kids who are without socialization." Unfortunately, they haven't done anything about it and it's rough. There's a lot of room for improvement on this.*

Hannah's description here illustrates the ways in which students' SEL needs were not prioritized by the school and the ways in which she felt that the children in her community were not receiving the support they needed.

Finally, participants also spoke about the negative impact that a disjointed vision of success had on teachers' ability to prioritize and adequately support their students socially and emotionally, especially those in particularly challenging situations. For example, Aria, a White Art teacher working in a public school in a midsize urban city, shared,

> *There's an expectation children should be learning, but what that looks like changes to every administrator. It's misinformation across the board. As a specials teacher, nobody tells us what to do because no one knows what to do. The expectation for me is students have to fail if they never come to my class, but how is that trauma*

informed if they're in a shelter, and they don't have access?

Similarly, Sasha, the SEL teacher mentioned above, shared, "A lot of teachers that I've worked with have different philosophies on point systems and consequences and punishment and taking away re-recess and stuff like that. So, there's just different philosophies on education and learning, so that can be conflicting." Without a clear approach to SEL, discipline, and grading at the school, especially during online learning, Sasha shared that she and other teachers sometimes clashed over how students should be treated and to what extent SEL should be prioritized.

Prioritization of SEL Online

In contrast to the examples given above, some participants shared the ways in which their school prioritized a dedicated time or focus for SEL and the benefits they experienced as a result. Emily, an Asian Kindergarten teacher working in a public school in a midsize urban city, for example, shared that her school provides SEL curriculum for the teachers and that there was time specifically dedicated to this kind of work even while teaching (in this case) in a hybrid format:

> *We're given the curriculum lesson by lesson and teach a lesson formally once a week. It's typically on Wednesday. The way that our current class is set up, I have 7 students in person with me four days a week and then everybody else [13 students] is at home. All the kids are seen for our morning circle and we talk about how we feel, and then we do a check-in, and then the kids in person are being seen by my supporting teacher, while I'm on the computer seeing kids in small groups. On Wednesday, we have Closing Circle, which is a whole group time where we meet, and we do a read aloud, and we talk about different elements of the book and how they would solve the problem that was happening in whatever book, or how their "feelings monster" would look like, etc.*

This school-sanctioned Wednesday time helped to create space for and set a precedent for SEL, even when this teacher was navigating both in-person and online teaching simultaneously.

Students we spoke to also shared about their schools' dedicated SEL time, albeit somewhat less directly. Deliah, a Black and Latina second grader attending school in a midsize suburban town, for example, referred to her "SEL Teacher" who "shows us different things about feelings," referring to her school's teacher who was explicitly assigned to do this kind of work with students. This child went on to describe a lesson where she learned about celebrating differences across cultures, learning how to adapt to a new place, and making friends. Even while learning fully online, this student was able to articulate the ways in which her schools' SEL-sanctioned approach translated into the classroom.

From the parent perspective, this kind of school focus on SEL, particularly when children were feeling so isolated as a result of online learning, was perceived as especially beneficial. Erica, a White mother whose two children attended a public school (first grade) and a private (preschool) in a small suburban town, shared how her child's school focused on both student and parent well-being:

> *A thing that they did that was really good was they did zoom lunches, where you could be selected as one of two students per classroom and then you could have lunch with the principal if you were an exceptional student that month. Which was cool. They're having monthly parent check-ins with the school counselor because so much of our kids' social and emotional wellness is how well the parents are doing. We're doing so much more of the teaching at home, so I thought that was really cool to be reaching out and being positive and being really communicative with parents.*

Similarly, Nora, a White mother whose two daughters were in second and fourth grade at a private school in a midsize urban city, described how her daughters' school set aside a specific day to focus on SEL, which she thought was beneficial since she perceived the teachers as being apprehensive about teaching and supporting students online:

> *They have the toolkit they do even online, which they do every Wednesday; they have a dedicated unit every day called SEL; they also do check-ins; the school*

counselor will have, maybe once a month, office hours for the grade, where you show up if you want, and then she puts the kids in breakout rooms, so that the kids can just have time to just see each other, spend a little time together. I think the teachers are more anxious on the zoom, is my sense. The vibe I get, when I overhear it, is that teachers are more focused on getting [work] done rather than supporting in the classroom.

In this way, the schoolwide focus on SEL was perceived as setting a clear routine and precedence for social-emotional learning, even though teachers may have felt more reluctant or uneasy to implement this work online.

Finally, Hannah, despite the challenges she shared in the section above, also reflected on the ways in which her older child's school's vision for SEL was impactful at times, as well as their commitment to assessing and meeting students' mental health needs:

My child's school actually has a beautiful framework for this, that I've adopted too, which is we learn how to take care of ourselves, we learn how to take care of each other, we learn how to take care of our community. The guidance counselors are also evaluating basically every child this year to see where there are more mental health needs, and they're following up with families who have a child who really qualifies for mental health services. And I think for other kids who are in a lower tier of need, they're creating different support groups. I would love for them to do it for everybody. I think it's so important.

Even though this parent shared earlier that she wished her school were doing more and the ways in which some decision making was challenging for her family, this clear vision of and dedication to SEL on the part of the school was clearly having an impact. Nonetheless, the varying ways that Hannah's child's school was able to prioritize or not prioritize SEL depending on the situation, had a notable impact on the perception of how SEL was integrated into the day and internalized by the children and families.

Deprioritization of Social Justice Online

A number of participants shared that while they felt their schools were making strides toward prioritizing social justice, they still had a lot of work to do to effectively support student development in this way. Nora shared,

We have an antiracist book club, like a mom's antiracist book club, which is obviously on zoom and not in person. And the Head of School has a book club and her book this month was an antiracist book. So, there's a lot that goes on with the parents. I'm not sure as much of it is happening with the kids. I just wish it was. I think they're afraid. It's a bunch of White people. White people thinking that they're antiracist, probably are just not racist, you know what I'm saying? And don't know how to raise it with kids.

Nora's description illustrates how there clearly are some schoolwide initiatives in place, but she doesn't feel that they have sufficiently reached the students. Ava shared a similar perspective on her son's experience:

I'm not aware of any conversation around it happening. I could ask [child] but in conversations with them it seemed as if all the information they knew about it was information they got from us.

Rose, a Latina mother with a child attending second grade in a public school in a midsize suburban town, shared how she felt that her school needed to have more of a focus on social justice both in person and online:

When they used to go in person, the principal would send an email saying what they discussed or what they were going to discuss and only one time do I remember reading something that was related to social justice, and I think it was in February [referring to Black History Month]. I feel like you miss a lot of good content if it's not something that is addressed more often. If it is addressed mainly by the principal who is the leader, and everybody respects, or hopefully respects, their opinion, it is going to be perceived differently. In my opinion

it should be reinforced not only by the teacher but by the principal too and distributed throughout the year. It's not just, one month we talk about this and that's it.

Clearly, these schools were putting forth an effort to emphasize social justice, but these efforts were perceived as needing additional reinforcement, especially when students were learning online. Some parents also shared that schoolwide initiatives that had been put into place were either cancelled or diminished with the shift to online learning. Nora shared:

They have affinity groups at her school, and then they have the allies and upstanders group. And in person they met very regularly, and I noticed that they're meeting a lot less regularly on zoom. But then after January sixth, I noticed the following week, there was a students of color affinity group on the calendar and the week after that there was an allies and upstanders group on the calendar. So, I don't know if they're like, "Oh yeah, right. Justice." You know, like, they forgot about it because we're all dispersed.

Similarly, Hannah shared that their school had introduced school- and district-wide social justice initiatives, but that these efforts were lessened with the shift to online as well.

They've started a racial literacy program throughout the whole district but they're only doing it in school because they feel it's the type of curriculum that has to be taught in person. So, the kids are only really privy to it in person. But I think in terms of the online piece, I don't know that there's a lot of carry-over to when we're at home. Which is too bad because I think kids are really craving that right now, and families are really craving that. So, I think if we find nothing else outside of this time, I think there's opportunity to teach our kids to become kind, caring people who are really community minded.

What is notable in many of these reflections is that participants saw the need to support students in terms of equity and social justice when learning online, but that partly as a result of schoolwide

decision-making, these efforts were not prioritized.

Finally, Aria shared how her school's expectations for the shift to online learning was not trauma-informed and how that created conflicts between teachers and impacted her own approach to supporting her students' well-being:

The school environment is not trauma informed so the expectations for me were not trauma informed. There's kids that are laying down or under the covers, trying to just listen. I'm not going to tell a kid not to do that because that's not trauma informed. That's not SEL. But then I have my students where their homeroom teacher is sitting in the class and she'll pop on and be like, "sit up, you're falling asleep, blah, blah, blah." So this whole, semi coteaching only for certain classes is definitely a weird thing that would not normally happen in-person.

Aria's reflection here illustrates some of the reasons why a trauma-informed approach is simultaneously so important and so complex, and also why having a schoolwide approach is so critical in order to have unified support for student well-being. While this particular teacher may be developing her practice to make it increasingly trauma-informed, if the school's approach and other teachers' approaches are not aligned, it can be difficult to hold true to this vision.

Prioritization of Social Justice Online

Although a schoolwide emphasis on social justice and equity was less common in our data, for participants for whom this was the case, this focus and prioritization was perceived as having a positive influence on students' overall well-being.

For example, Hannah shared a number of examples of some ways in which her younger child's school was making a concerted effort to prioritize teaching social justice to students such as a gift-giving campaign during the winter holidays, a letter-writing campaign to the elderly, and a support network for immigrant families. For example, she shared,

They're part of a temple that has a big social action initiative and it's woven into everything that they do. So, for example, right now we're celebrating

Hanukkah and so Monday night, the fifth night of Hanukkah, has become a charity night, and so you're invited to bring an unwrapped gift for a child who doesn't have a gift. You bring it unwrapped, and then there's an organization called Cradles to Crayons, which provides all sorts of services. And so, we will bring our gifts and then they'll do a program to help teach the kids.

She also reflected:

We had the opportunity to write letters to people in nursing homes who are pretty lonely. And one of the children actually got a letter back from the person that he wrote to, and our other child got a phone call from the person that he wrote to saying, "thank you." It was so sweet and meaningful and really created a connection. So, it wasn't just like we're helping people. It was like creating a connection because I think that's something we struggle with too: there's sort of like this, "we can help" and then it makes that playing field sort of strange or creates a strange dynamic.

In this way, these schoolwide efforts to serve the community were having a broader impact on her family's engagement as well. Relatedly, for her older child, the district's decision-making process around access to in-person vs. online learning was intentional and focused on equity concerns.

If you are a child who, either English is your second language, or you are experiencing types of real economic hardship, or if your parents are teachers, or frontline workers, those children are part of what's called the A cohort and they get to go to school every day, which is amazing. And it's like a systemic way of creating that equity.

Hannah shared how this schoolwide decision-making created opportunities for her to have conversations around equity with her child at home who was asking about the new schedule. What is important to note here is that even though the school's decision did not specifically impact online learning or online SEL in and of itself, it is a clear example of a school very intentionally thinking about the varying needs of their community during this time and making systemic decisions in response.

DISCUSSION

It is important to recognize that the shift to online learning was of course prompted by a massive international crisis and global pandemic, and that schools and teachers worked tirelessly to meet their students' needs. Our intent here is not to diminish these efforts or to criticize individual school's decisions with the benefit of hindsight. Nonetheless, we find it useful to learn from these participants' responses in order to see where there were gaps, missteps, or decisions that were perceived and experienced as harmful or beneficial for students' transformative social-emotional learning.

The first main take away from these data is the critical importance of having a systematic, unified approach to a vision of SEL grounded in social justice. When schools were perceived as prioritizing and making time for these two overarching areas, participants perceived this as positive and beneficial for students' overall well-being. Conversely, when these areas were pushed aside, or when the vision for their implementation was not clear, teachers and parents expressed concern around how students were being supported. These findings are aligned with the literature on SEL and transformative SEL, which highlights the importance of a unified approach to SEL programming that involves the school community, district initiatives, parents, and community members (e.g., CASEL, n.d.; Durlak, 2016; Jagers et al., 2019).

A second notable take-away is that a unified approach to SEL and social justice is challenging and is hardly a straightforward endeavor. Even when there is a schoolwide emphasis on SEL, this does not always translate to universal implementation, especially with online learning. For example, many participants had multidimensional responses that illustrate how various school-level decisions at a single institution could have both positive and negative effects. Hannah's comments embody this in that she does not describe her children's schools as just good or bad, but she rather noted the myriad ways in which schoolwide decisions were beneficial (e.g., social justice initiatives, systemic organization to support families who had the most need, a clear framework for approaching SEL and

social justice) and the ways in which they could have done more (e.g., put a plan in place to support all students' SEL online, prioritize students' mental health, create more space for conversations around race). Similarly, Nora's comments detailed some of the all-school initiatives that she perceived as beneficial (e.g., antiracist book club, schoolwide focus on SEL), but she also noted her perception that the teachers did not feel prepared—and were even fearful—of bringing social justice topics to their classrooms.

Based on these findings and the extant literature, we present some recommendations for schools who are aiming to support the transformative social-emotional learning of students learning remotely. First, we emphasize the importance of prioritizing a systematic plan for schoolwide transformative social-emotional learning even (and especially) when students are learning online. This kind of unified approach can support SEL development in a cohesive, comprehensive way and avoids a piecemeal approach, which has been shown to often be ineffective (e.g., Durlak, 2016; Social and Character Development Research Consortium, 2010). In addition, this unified approach to SEL must be grounded in culturally sustaining pedagogies and center the voices of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color to honor these experiences (e.g., Rigby et al., 2020).

Second, there is a need for teachers to be trained in implementing this work. Even though there is currently limited research on teacher preparation in this area (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017), there does exist some practical scholarship on some of the ways in which teachers can be supported in these ways including focusing on teachers' own transformative SEL (e.g., Goodwin & Darity, 2019; Soutter & Timmerman, 2022; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015; Ullucci, 2010), developing a strengths-based teacher mindset (e.g., Farrington, 2020; Goodwin, 2002; Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013), and creating a supportive school environment for teachers (e.g., Will, 2020).

Third, our data show that students in our sample had an informed understanding of why they were learning online and how their teachers were supporting (or not supporting) their academic and social needs. This awareness speaks to the importance of not underestimating even very young students and of listening to youth to hear their perspectives. Indeed, a body of literature shows that elementary age students are able to engage with these concepts in developmentally appropriate ways and benefit from a respectful, culturally responsive approaches to teaching (e.g., Agarwal-Rangnath, 2020; Donahue-Keegan et al., 2019; Heberle et al., 2020; Kimura et al., 2022; Learning for Justice, n.d.; Touloukian, 2020).

Finally, the ways in which parents and teachers reflected on parent involvement speaks to the potential for continuing to engage families and communities in this work. Transformative social-emotional learning considers not only the individual student, but the larger ecosystem as well, and schools would benefit from a concerted effort to leverage these kinds of family and community partnerships.

LIMITATIONS

A few important limitations must be noted. This study's sample size of just 15 participants is one of the primary limitations to this study as the results are not generalizable to the broader population and certainly do not capture the hugely disparate experiences of online learning of students, teachers, and families across the United States. Nonetheless, we specifically sought out participants who are diverse along multiple metrics (race, gender, school type, geographic location) to gain a broad perspective, especially given our focus on transformative social-emotional learning. Importantly, our intent is not to generalize our findings, but instead to illustrate the ways in which this small group of people experienced online schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to lend insight into important perspectives on online transformative social-emotional learning. We decided to aim for depth rather than breadth to gain a more nuanced, detailed understanding of participants' lived experiences during this time. A second important limitation is that our data from the students is not as rich as we had hoped and anticipated so their perspectives, while they are present and certainly informed our analysis, do not show up as prominently in the present paper.

CONCLUSION

Social-emotional learning and social justice—transformative SEL—is integral for student well-being, and it cannot be overlooked in online spaces. The additional layer of distance and

isolation that comes with this kind of schooling can be overwhelming, and despite the constant need to support students academically, this kind of holistic support must be a priority in online learning. School leaders must be aware of the ways in which their school-level decision-making can have an acute impact on student social-emotional wellness—even when learning remotely—and how they might adapt their policies accordingly.

It is also critical to remember that while many students will find great relief and will thrive with the return to in-person learning, many students and families found solace and benefit from an online schooling option for a host of different reasons (e.g., Gewertz, 2021; Singer, 2021). For students for whom remote learning becomes a necessity, or for those who may seek out this option, their transformative social-emotional needs cannot be ignored, and indeed must be a priority for schools moving forward.

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