Compliance and Control: The Hidden Curriculum of Social-Emotional Learning

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Abstract

In this paper, we seek to critically address the enactment and impact of social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum and implementation in early childhood and elementary (PK-5th) classrooms. Specifically, we argue that SEL, as frequently operationalized, is a dehumanizing process that seeks to assimilate non-dominant children into dominant ways of being while concurrently seeking to enforce compliance and normalize children to oppressive structures. SEL is often seen as a "nice" form of classroom management, perfect for a field dominated by "nice" white women who see their work as apolitical and neutral rather than political and rooted in the maintenance of white supremacy (Galman et al., 2010). As such, it makes sense that PK-5 contexts, deeply rooted in a "Just be Kind" sense of morality as opposed to one rooted in justice and student empowerment (Turner, 2019), turn to SEL programs as "fixers" of student behavior. But SEL programs are often anything but "nice." Despite presenting as humanizing and kind, the focus on compliance makes it inherently dehumanizing.

Introduction

"When I speak of a child's right to freedom, I mean that by virtue of being human she is endowed with the unassailable right not to have any part of her personhood assaulted or stolen. A free person can expect to be seen and treated as a full human being, free from any threats to her identity, to her cultural values and know-how, to her safety and health, and to her language and land. A free person retains her power, her right to self-determination, her opportunity to flourish, her ability to love and be loved, and her capacity for hope. A free person recognizes when she or others are being treated as less than fully human. And a free person embraces both her right and her duty to struggle against such treatment and to organize with others to do the same as a solidary community." (Shalaby, 2017 pp.xv-xvi)

Fig. 1. Meet the Wizard Social Media Image

In the summer of 2019, as schools were gearing up for another year, an image was making its way around social media: an elementary school bulletin board with a Harry Potter theme (Figure 1). It possessed the following message: "Meet the Wizard Responsible for Your Choices, Grades, Success, Words, Actions." Above each category was a mirror. The meaning is clear: you and you alone are responsible for what happens to you in this space. The social media response to this was overwhelmingly positive as many educators in both PK-12 and higher education (teacher preparation), expressed their approval of the message and a desire to create something similar. While this particular example comes from an elementary school, messaging around individual choice and managing one's

behavior is present in early childhood-centric contexts too (Ritz et al., 2014), indicative of the ways in which the well-documented curricular pushdown (Teale et al., 2018) includes a pushdown of the hidden curriculum as well.

This image is the epitome of what we, and many others, argue is one of the problematic features of schooling in the United States, generally, and the way in which social-emotional learning (SEL), in particular, is operationalized and weaponized, specifically when it comes to policing Black and Brown bodies (Kaler-Jones, 2020). The myth of meritocracy and valorization of the individual are deeply embedded within the ethos of schooling and the broader U.S. context, so much so that it allows for this misreading of Harry Potter. If there are any lessons to take away from that series, one is that relying on your support systems is everything as little is effectively accomplished by acting alone. Harry rarely succeeds when acting independently and his actions are always in response to things happening in the surrounding context (Heise, 2019), and the same is true for children in our schools.

Educators often act as if achievement and behavior are simply the result of individual talent, grit, and hard work rather than acknowledging the apparatus of support that props up students from dominant social groups (e.g., white, middle-class), and the ways in which schools are, by design, intended to allow certain (white, middle-class) children to excel at the expense of others (Anyon, 1981; Apple, 2011, 2017; Bhattacharya, 2017; Labaree, 2010; Love, 2019b; Oakes, 1985; Spring, 2004). Further, as clearly depicted in the bulletin board example, many schools and teachers operate from a paradigm wherein children are believed to be largely in control of their behaviors, that these behaviors are personal choices, and that behaviors are independent of teacher actions and the educational contexts within which children interact (Glasser, 1998). Essentially, it is believed to be entirely the young child's responsibility to choose behaviors that align with those expected by the educational environment, and if the child neglects to do so—that is, if they *choose* not to—then *they*[1] have a problem in need of fixing.

1. We use the gender-neutral pronoun "they" to refer to singular individuals.

By failing to take the school context into account and the ways in which it harms—or "spirit murders" (Love, 2019b)— Black, Indigenous, and Children of Color (BICOC) and children from low-income back-grounds, it becomes easy to attribute malevolent intentions and motivations to children and their behaviors, thus seeing them in need of managing and discipline. As the harmful effects of harsh disciplinary and "common-sense practices" like clip charts and Class Dojo come under scrutiny (Garlen, 2019; Manolev, et al., 2018) many educators have sought a nicer, seemingly more humane approach: Social-Emotional Learning (SEL). SEL is one way educators seek to manage students. With attention paid to the emotional and social well-being of children through character development and the cultivation of individualistic competencies like self-awareness and self-management, SEL has broad appeal. These approaches, as opposed to more punitive ones, are used to "encourage" children to regulate their behaviors to meet the normative expectations of schools. However, as we argue herein, it is anything but "nice." Rooted in white, Eurocentric, middle-class values, SEL becomes one additional way to sort, rank, label and ultimately harm students by broadening the definition of what counts as school knowledge (Apple, 2004) and stripping them of their full humanity in its attempts to assimilate. Further troubling, this process increasingly begins during early childhood (Boutte & Bryan, 2019).

The Manifestation of SEL in PK-5 Classrooms

Fundamental to teaching and learning in the United States is the assumption that children require management, a concern that has been present since education was formalized (Casey et al., 2013). In fact, most teacher education programs have entire classes devoted to training future teachers to control children's actions and attitudes—our own institution having one of those courses. The goal of classroom management is to "produce desirable student behavior," and "effective classroom managers set up and maintain procedures, routines, rules, and standards to do so," (Casey, et al., 2013, p. 42).

It is not surprising, then, that in the U.S., a main goal of the SEL programs marketed toward early childhood and elementary contexts is improving effective classroom management (Blewitt et al., 2020). Educators, administrators, and teacher educators who commit and invest in classroom management maintain a clear set of values and beliefs: that children need structure, that they need to be told how to act "right," that consequences and punishment are necessary in the development of "appropriate" or "expected" behavior, and that there are right and wrong ways to act, and essentially be.

A focus on compliance is most typically found in schools serving BICOC and children from low-income backgrounds (Winn, 2018). In such schools, young children still in preschool or primary grades are often characterized as having emotional, social, or behavioral problems that result in discipline difficulties, and therefore these schools are frequently targeted to implement packaged SEL curriculum in hopes of curbing student noncompliance (Humphries et al., 2018). While perhaps less *overtly* harsh than "zero tolerance" forms of management, SEL as frequently operationalized attempts to address the same objective: socializing children into the dominant behavioral norms that operate within a given society; this socialization process starts as early as pre-school (see https://casel.org/guide/ratings/preschool/; see also Second Step, 2020; U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2016, May 6).

SEL is often seen as a "nice" form of classroom management, perfect for a field dominated by "nice" white women who see their work as apolitical and neutral rather than political and rooted in the maintenance of white supremacy (Galman et al., 2010). As such, it makes sense that early childhood and elementary contexts, deeply rooted in a "Just be Kind" sense of morality as opposed to one rooted in justice and student empowerment (Turner, 2019), turn to SEL programs as "fixers" of student behavior. But SEL programs are often anything but "nice." Despite presenting as humanizing and kind, the focus on compliance makes it inherently dehumanizing. As SEL expert Dena Simmons suggests, SEL devoid a deep, socio-political awareness is more aptly described as "white supremacy with a hug" (cited by Madda 2019, n.p.).

That current educators, teacher educators, and teacher preparation candidates are overwhelmingly white, middle class, monolingual, and female (USDOE, 2016) should give us pause when it comes to the fervent embrace of SEL.

It is perhaps the case that SEL is appealing because it covertly plays upon deficit orientations, thus aligning with the deficit views of many educators (Gorski, 2010; Valencia, 2010). Deficit perspectives blame children and families for issues like noncompliance with school norms and school failure, disregarding the role played by systemic factors such as racism, opportunity structures, and educators' bias (Valencia, 2010). According to Gorski (2010), deficit ideology is "a remnant of imperial history (Shields, Bishop, & Malawi, 2005), a mechanism for socializing citizens to comply with a host of oppressions, from colonization to enslavement, educational inequities to unjust housing practices" (Gorski, 2010, p.4). That compliance is policed and enforced most intensively and visibly in schools serving BICOC (sometimes cloaked in the "nice" language of SEL) is a grievous development of the US school system, one rooted in cultural and political histories that cannot be ignored.

For BICOC and children from low-income backgrounds, implementation of SEL in early childhood and elementary schools often results in the internalization and normalization of students' own oppression. Being taught to "regulate their emotions, thoughts and behaviors" (casel.org) results in the suppression of the rightful and righteous anger many marginalized students feel.

> Righteous anger has long been used as a tool to fuel movements that have and continue to propel our nation forward towards justice. **To tell students to not harness their anger is to tell them their rage isn't warranted.** As Audre Lorde told us about anger, 'Focused with precision, it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change.' (Kaler-Jones, 2020, n.p.)

By seeking to minimize and strip away students' authentic feelings and selves, SEL curriculum acts as a form of violence, which "occurs

when educators and curriculum writers have constructed a set of lessons that damage or otherwise adversely affect students intellectually and emotionally." (Jones, 2020, np).

In this paper, we seek to critically address the enactment and impact of SEL curriculum and implementation in early childhood and elementary classrooms. Specifically, we argue that SEL, as frequently operationalized, is a dehumanizing process that seeks to assimilate non-dominant groups into dominant ways of being by seeking to enforce compliance and normalize children to oppressive structures. Compliance efforts increasingly invade young children's classrooms. We focus particularly on PK-5th grade contexts given the paucity of research that attends to such manifestations and their impacts.

First, we explain the historical and current constructs of SEL generally, and then turn specifically to early childhood and elementary education. Next, we address the merging of social-emotional development with student compliance and discipline, resulting in more oppressive structures and policies. We also discuss how curriculum has long been used as a tool of oppression in schools and how a recent surge of attention to formal SEL has resulted in packaged SEL curriculum being enacted, again with specific consideration to the early and elementary context. Finally, we assert that even when SEL programs attempt to address equity, they still seek to socialize children into one dominant way of being and to work within the system rather than addressing oppressive structures. We close with a discussion of the implications for practitioners and some critical questions for praxis.

It is important to note that we are not dismissive of the idea of social and emotional learning—in fact, we would argue that it is imperative that all children are allowed space in schools to self-actualize, heal, and thrive (Love, 2019b). While the turn to a "transformative" SEL is a significant improvement, it more tinkers with the approach rather than transforms the goals of SEL. "Transformative" SEL does not, as of yet, appear to allow for true self-actualization and instead

continues to socialize children into particular ways of emoting and being. Truly transformative SEL curriculum and instruction would not only take into account the socio-political and historical contexts within which we all operate, but it would also manifest in culturally and community sustaining ways, honoring multiple ways of knowing and being. We welcome, for example, SEL that allows students to uncover their own assumptions and biases and explore their own and others' identities (see *Learning for Justice*, for example). We welcome SEL that focuses on joy, that engages authentically and deeply with the community, and establishes "a school culture that engages in healing and advocacy. This requires a commitment to learning from students, families, and educators who disrupt whiteness and other forms of oppression" (Abolitionist Teaching Network, 2020). We welcome a complete and total transformation of SEL, one that disassociates from and disavows the need to manage little bodies into compliance.

Social and Emotional Learning

Formed in 1994, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020b) is the leading source of SEL[2] expertise in PK-12 education. According to CASEL, "social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (n.d.). Believed to suffer from "social-emotional competence deficits," students are taught SEL "competencies through explicit instruction and through student-centered learning approaches" wherein a set of skills are taught, modeled and practiced (Weissberg, et al., 2015, p. 5-6). Envisioned as a humanizing approach to schooling, the stated purpose of SEL is to attend to the psychological well-being of students (Durlak, 2015).

2. More recently, scholars have come to refer to SEL as social-emotional academic development (SEAD) to emphasize the role SEL plays in improving student achievement.

SEL is intended to help nurture students' resilience and resolve so that they have the fortitude to overcome challenges (Durlak, 2015), arguably useful qualities to develop. The problem, of course, is the extent to which a focus on resilience and tenacity in facing challenges fails to honestly and accurately address the type, nature, and origin of those challenges and the prescribed way in which children show resilience. The concept of grit, for example, is heralded in schools as a necessary trait that teaches students to persevere in face of obstacles. The narrative that children need to be taught grit to succeed in school is pervasive even in early childhood contexts (Tough, 2012). As Love (2019a) argues "the idea of grit seems harmless at face value—we can all agree that children need grit to be successful in life, regardless of how you define success—but is actually the educational equivalent of *The Hunger Games*" (n.p.). While grit is perceived as necessary when encouraging a child to, say, finish a puzzle, grit is dangerous and disruptive when marshaled to hold children responsible for surmounting (while failing to acknowledge) institutional barriers (Goodman, 2018; Love, 2019a, 2019b). In fact, outside of "transformative SEL," (see Jagers, et al., 2018)—which will be discussed later in this article—most SEL programs and their proponents fail to take "power, privilege and culture into account," (Gregory & Fergus, 2017, p.118) and instead operate from a color-evasive (Annamma et al., 2017) stance that minimizes existing structural oppressions and their consequences.

While children need to know that challenges exist, they also need to know how and why such challenges were created and are currently maintained, and that many of these challenges were intentionally crafted. Without such knowledge, they will not be in the position to deconstruct and dismantle the system in order to reconstruct a more equitable and just one (Ayers et al., 2008). More importantly, it is imperative that children know that they possess the power to resist and change the conditions that produce those challenges as opposed to simply learning to accept them. Students need to be empowered to live the words of Angela Davis; to "no

longer accept the things [they] cannot change." Further, asserting that we need to teach children a decontextualized resilience at best underestimates, and, at worse, dismisses the grit that marginalized children already possess and display regularly as they navigate oppressive institutions like schools (Goodman, 2018; Love, 2019b).

As a contrast, Akiea Gross, the founder and educator of Woke Kindergarten (2020), shares a pedagogy of liberation and abolition through developmentally appropriate curriculum for young students. Instead of a narrative about student grit that ignores oppressive systems of power, they engage children directly in understanding systems of power and how to challenge them. For example, in a segment entitled "Safe" from their curriculum "60 second text," they advocate all the ways people (young and old) deserve to feel safe. In a way that the youngest children understand, the text shares pictures relevant to current societal contexts such as "I feel safe when there are no police" and empowering words including "it's everyone's job to make sure that people who are being treated unfairly feel safe too."

Origins of SEL[3]

SEL is rooted in the fields of social intelligence and emotional intelligence. Social intelligence speaks to the extent to which the social rules, norms, and expectations that govern a particular society have been internalized and can be executed. Similarly, emotional intelligence "involves the ability to monitor one's own and other's feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one's thinking and action" (Salovey & Mayer, 1990) and "includes the verbal and nonverbal appraisal and expression of emotion, the regulation of emotion in the self and others, and the utilization of emotional content in problem solving," (Mayer and Salovey, 1993, p. 433). Goleman (1997) outlines five facets of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills.

3. This section draws from a unpublished report submitted to Ball State University co-authored by Cipollone and Zygmunt, 2019.

Despite being presented as universally accepted values and traits, what constitutes social and emotional intelligence is anything but neutral. Drawing upon the work of Aristotle, Goleman (1997) argues that emotional intelligence is "the rare skill 'to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way'" (p. xiii). But this begs the question: "right" by whose definition? What constitutes "right" and "wrong" are not innate, natural concepts but instead constructed by dominant groups in a given society. Those who hold power possess the ability to set the terms of engagement. Recent work by Bryan (2020) shows how from a young age white children frequently misread and/or accuse minoritized children of being dangerous because of not acting "right." For example, the experiences of young Black boys on a playground can be dehumanizing as their play actions can be wrongfully perceived as misbehavior and even criminal.

SEL, birthed from the fields of social and emotional intelligence, poses similar concerns regarding universality. Typically, SEL comprises five core elements: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (https://casel.org/). Taken on their own, devoid of the context and intent within which they are often advanced, these are qualities that few would argue against developing. Yet, these are culturally constructed traits not devoid of context and intent, thus an examination of how these qualities are defined in the milieu of U.S. early childhood and elementary schools is necessary in order to reveal the values embedded within. For example, the standard notion of self-awareness has conceptual incoherencies that include cultural bias (Yan & Wong, 2005). However, if you were to compare SEL programs, often self-awareness is statically defined, viewed through a white, middle-class/affluent lens.

Enacting SEL Through a Color-Evasive Lens

Hoffman (2009), in a review of SEL literature, argues that the majority of programs focus on "emotional and behavioral control strategies that privilege individualist models of self" (p. 533).

For example, Weissberg and colleagues (2015) share the following definition for self-awareness:

> understanding one's emotions, personal goals, and values. This includes accurately assessing one's strengths and limitations, having **positive mindsets**, and possessing a well-grounded sense of self-efficacy and **optimism**. High levels of self-awareness require the ability to recognize how thoughts, feelings, and actions are interconnected. (p. 6)

Is it probable that many families' definition of self-awareness would not include optimism and instead focus on pragmatism? Is it very likely that families and SEL curricula expect different outcomes of how thoughts, feelings, and actions interconnect in a five-year old's actions? Of course, yet most schools are expecting families to subscribe to one definition that removes or ignores cultural and historical contexts. This persisting narrative is perhaps most highlighted in the few examples of platforms that are actively working against this willful disregard of cultural and historical context. In addition to Woke Kindergarten, Rethinking Schools (Hinderlie, 2020) offers strategies to authentically help young children appreciate Black history and Blackness, more broadly, and Sesame Workshop (2020) offers strategies to families and school about how to discuss race, power, and privilege in PK-5th grade classrooms.

This definition of self-awareness, coupled with definitions of self-management and social awareness (casel.org; Weissberg et al., 2015) make clear that in Eurocentric approaches to SEL, learning social behavioral norms and regulating emotions and behaviors is of top priority. While children are encouraged to develop the capacity of perspective-taking in order to develop compassion and empathy, it seems improbable that such skills will be executed in truly equitable and culturally sustaining ways given that SEL is generally divorced from conversations about social inequality and oppression while a particular set of behaviors and norms are privileged.

For example, to what extent might an emphasis on self-management and social awareness lead to practices of tone policing?

Frequently, white folks underestimate and dismiss the role of racism in everyday life (DiAngelo, 2018), and when issues of racism are brought to their attention accuse Black, Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) of being "too sensitive" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). What if, as in the cases of young Kaia Rolle and Salecia Jones, this focus leads to actual policing? What does a "high level" of self-awareness and self-management look like at age six? To what extent are normal and typical behaviors of young children criminalized and racialized by conventional SEL practices and beliefs? Recent work by Halberstadt and colleagues (2020) suggests that preservice educators demonstrate a racial anger bias toward Black children. That Black children are perceived (1) to be more angry than white children and (2) angry when they are not has implications for the application and consequences of SEL. Specifically "because perceived anger (even if misinterpreted) can evoke punishment as well as anger (Côté-Lussier, 2013), teachers' misperception of anger may also lead to adverse consequences such as undeserved interruptions from learning (e.g., time outs or suspensions)," (Halberstadt et al., 2020 p.2), beginning in preschool settings (Cyphert, 2015).

Early childhood contexts perpetuate white privilege and other capitalist cultural strategies that emphasize conformity of children's thoughts and actions through a persistent discourse that early childhood pedagogical practice is color-evasive (Butler et al., 2019). Despite, in particular, more recent attempts to position SEL as equity work that prioritizes "diversity," caring, and community, it is clear that a significant portion instead takes a color-evasive approach that focuses on individual strategies to shape behavior so that children conform to dominant norms (Hoffman, 2009). As Simmons (2019) argues:

> many popular SEL approaches do not explicitly confront these forms of violence or other social inequities. Recoiling from topics that divide us—when SEL skills could help us get along better—diminishes SEL's promise. Why teach relationship skills if the lessons do not reflect on the inter-

> personal conflicts that result from racism? Why discuss
> self and social awareness without considering power and
> privilege, even if that means examining controversial topics
> like white supremacy? (n.p.)

Attendant to color-evasive approaches is the very real potential that BICOC will be especially targeted and harmed. In fact, one of the most frequently touted benefits of SEL is decreased behavioral issues (Durlak, et al., 2011; Weissberg et al., 2015; Zins et al., 2004). For example, citing others, Durlak, et al. (2011) define SEL as an "approach [that] integrates competence promotion and youth development frameworks for reducing risk factors and fostering protective mechanisms for positive adjustment" (p. 406). Thus, as frequently enacted, SEL appears to be more about facilitating compliance without resorting to external force which is evident in the attempts to marry SEL with Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) frameworks. However, there is nothing equity-focused about teaching students strategies to fit in with dominant norms.

SEL as a Capitalist Tool

That the antecedents of SEL (emotional intelligence and social intelligence) were cultivated in the realm of business is also important to keep in mind from an equity perspective. The extent to which SEL is a mechanism for producing workers is therefore something worthy of consideration.

> The dominant workforce development framework of SEL
> encourages young people to stifle the very emotions that
> have long contributed to a history of resistance, so that
> they can contribute to society as a worker. SEL has long
> been about decreasing 'problem' behavior. Even the terms
> 'manage' and 'regulate' are words commonly associated
> with transactional business tactics. (Kaler Jones, 2020, n.p.)

The types of behaviors that SEL advances, such as regulating emotion and following rules align with notions of "good" workers rather than the creation of self-actualized individuals—and similarly aligns with

notions of being "productive," "good," and "contributing" citizens. A workforce that does not know how to comply with orders and that challenges authority is certain to provide unwanted problems for management. As Shalaby (2017) notes, we "train youth in the image of capitalism instead of a vision of freedom—for lives as individual workers rather than solidarity as human beings" (p. xvi). This is on display with our youngest students in the pervasive "school readiness" campaigns across the country that advertise how individual students need to be equipped with certain compliance attitudes and academic skills by the age of five.

Instrumental critiques of education are certainly not new (Anyon, 1980; Labaree, 2010). The linkages between schooling, industry, and producing workers for our capitalist economy are well established in the literature (Bowles & Gintis, 1976) and many theorists have long posited that the function of schools was to transmit norms and values and prepare children for work (Durkheim, 1956, Parsons, 1959)—although little of this literature has fully considered the reproductive effects of early childhood education. The ways in which schools have been positioned as essential to the economy (to provide childcare) during the Covid-19 global pandemic is further evidence of these connections. Capitalism is also inextricably tied to racism and white supremacy (Kendi, 2016). Thus, any discussion of SEL, with its frequent charge to "tame" marginalized bodies and teach behavioral norms and values, would be remiss if not examined through the lens of capitalism.

In summary, hundreds of studies have been conducted to argue that SEL is a panacea that benefits students in multiple ways: increased academic achievement, decreased behavioral disruptions, decreased engagement in "risky" behavior, more pro-social behavior, increased graduation, improved readiness for postsecondary education and career success, reduced criminal behavior, and engaged citizenship (Weissberg et al., 2015). However, who does SEL really benefit and what is the price of these benefits, especially for our most marginalized students?

The Conflation of Social-Emotional Development, Compliance, and Discipline

The racism inherent to schooling in the U.S. is perhaps most clearly visible in an examination of school discipline practices and outcomes. As Stovall (2016), argues, "the punishment enacted upon Black bodies in school is understood as normal, right, and good," (Stovall, 2016, p. 2, referencing Wun, 2014). That minoritized children, in particular, need "structure" and "discipline" is a taken-for-granted assumption among educators (Freedman, 2003; Morris, 2006). Black students are suspended and expelled at significantly higher rates than their white peers (Anyon, et al., 2014; Skiba et al., 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Coupled with these disparate discipline outcomes is the concurrent rise of surveillance and policing and a decrease in support services (counselors, school psychologists, social workers) in schools serving children from marginalized backgrounds (Whitaker, 2019; Boyd et al., 2011; Kalogrides, et al., 2013). In place of these support personnel, it is common to find some of the most severe policies in place; the effects of police presence and zero-tolerance policies in schools have been well documented (Nolan, 2011; Skiba et al., 2014).

The impacts of these policies are not neutral. Such efforts, as Manolev and colleagues (2018) assert, not only normalize surveillance, but they also serve as mechanisms of behavior control. These practices disproportionately affect, and arguably target, students from historically marginalized backgrounds (Curran, 2016; Kinsler, 2011; Losen & Martinez, 2013; Skiba, et al., 2014). In terms of early childhood and discipline, Black youth face overrepresentation in suspension and expulsion. Black students comprise 18% of the total preschool population but 47% of the preschool students who are suspended (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE] Office of Civil Rights [OCR], 2016). Black girls represent 20% of the preschool population but 54% of the preschool girls who are suspended, while Black boys represent 19% of the male preschool population and account for 45% of preschool boys who are suspended (USDOE OCR, 2016). Powell and Coles (2020)

call attention to how suspensions starting in preschool push Black children out of the educational system through reproducing historical trauma via implicit and explicit school discipline as Black mothers simultaneously resist the suspension of their children. When young children are suspended or expelled from school, they are more likely to experience disciplinary action later in their academic career; drop out, fail out, or be pushed out (Morris, 2016) of high school; and, be incarcerated later in life (Raffaele Mendez, 2003). Furthermore, they are more likely to report feeling disconnected from school (Raffaele Mendez, 2003). While this type of consequence represents only a small percentage of overall disciplinary decisions (USDOE OCR, 2018), when situated within the larger national context, we see that these school occurrences have coincided with national trends toward mass incarceration (Alexander, 2010), the school-to-prison pipeline, and increased surveillance in our daily lives.

While zero-tolerance policies remove discretion from the equation—in that these policies by their very nature necessitate exclusionary decisions (e.g., expulsion, suspension) for certain infractions—there has been a move in some states to ban the use of such policies in favor of discretionary disciplinary decision making (USDOE and U.S. Department of Justice [USDOJ], 2014). Discretionary discipline decisions are made when there are no mandated consequences for a particular violation or infraction. Data suggest that discretionary disciplinary decisions are disproportionately implemented with youth from historically marginalized backgrounds (Kinsler, 2011; USDOE OCR, 2018). For example, in Texas, during the 2008-2009 school year, more than 500 kindergarten and 1st graders were sent to an alternative school placement for discretionary, nonviolent, code of conduct violations (Fowler, 2011). Discretionary discipline has also resulted in detaining, restraining, handcuffing, and in extreme cases, arresting young children, as demonstrated in the earlier examples of Kaia Rolle and Salecia Johnson.

Although administrators have the flexibility, or discretion, to make less punitive disciplinary decisions, mounting evidence

suggests that they overwhelmingly and disproportionately impose the most restrictive, punitive decisions on youth from historically and presently marginalized backgrounds. Research suggests that such punitive and exclusionary practices are largely ineffective (Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003) and have negative academic implications (Gregory et al., 2010). Still, many public schools continue to utilize suspensions as standard practice for responding to student misbehavior (Losen, 2011).

Schools as Oppressive Places

The process of schooling has long been a violent endeavor, intended to forward the project of white supremacy. While disciplinary practices are perhaps the most visible manifestation, racism permeates all aspects of the system, from who the educators are, to curriculum, the so-called "achievement gap"[4] and classroom management, among other aspects. The promise of being a "great equalizer" was predicated upon non-dominant groups assimilating into the dominant culture, forcibly or otherwise (Paris & Alim, 2017). The U.S. system of public education was advanced to create a "common culture" and mitigate social and political discord as new populations of people with divergent beliefs, values, and practices came into contact (Labaree, 2010; Spring, 2004). While today's assimilation efforts may not be as explicit as they were in Indigenous boarding schools, for example, they remain pernicious as they work to strip students of language and culture, devalue their identities and communities, and regularly inflict curricular violence. Despite moves to embrace "trauma-informed" pedagogies, for BICOC, it is regularly the schools that are inflicting, not healing, the trauma (Love, 2019b). That most of this occurs under the guise of

4. The way in which the field frames discussions about the resulting differences in school outcomes, however, fails to take into account systemic discrimination, indicative of deeply entrenched white supremacy and classism. Most notably, the "achievement gap" is a deficit framework that locates the group differences in achievement in the individuals themselves rather than accounting for the opportunity differences that exist between groups. As Ladson-Billings (2006) has argued, these differences are much more aptly called an "education debt."

"good intentions" and "niceness" is important to underscore as it demonstrates how deeply deficit ideologies and racism are internalized by educators (Gorski, 2010; Valencia, 2010).

"Niceness" in Teacher Education: The Appeal of SEL

Although society views discipline as imperative to effective student learning, to many white educators, being viewed as "mean" and "strict" is often anathema to their construction of what it means to be a caring educator (Weinstein, 1998). Part of this explains the willing outsourcing of discipline to school resource officers (Bleakley & Bleakley, 2018), as well as the enthusiastic (superficial) embrace of practices to teach grit, meditation, and social-emotional development. For example, it's not uncommon to read about the uncritical adoption of teaching mindfulness and yoga to children (Kamenetz & Knight, 2020, Purser, 2019). While we would contend that mindfulness and yoga can be incredibly beneficial to one's well-being (Simmons et al., 2018), we do take issue with the ways in which these methods are frequently co-opted (Purser, 2019) and used as yet another method to get children to comply. Referred to as "McMindfulness," such practices have secularized mindful practice, disrupting its ethical underpinnings and commodified it for individual, capitalistic use (Hyland, 2015; McCaw, 2020). In classrooms, "thin" mindful practice is designed to increase student focus and achievement and calm student behavior (McCaw, 2020). In this way, we see mindfulness used as an attempt to center the individual at the expense of analysis and critique of the structures influencing the individual. In other words, like grit, mindfulness in the classroom frequently seeks to "fix" people rather than "fix" the circumstances to which individuals are responding.

That these approaches appeal to many educators is not surprising; belief in meritocracy and deficit orientations are deeply internalized, and many educators have not developed the critical consciousness needed to critique such beliefs and practices (Gorski, 2010; Valencia, 2010). Deficit thinking is rooted in "ideology that shapes individual assumptions and dispositions in order to encourage

compliance with an oppressive educational and social order" (p.3). It could be argued further that deficit orientations are also deeply entrenched in the field of education. One does not need to look far to notice such orientations, particularly in special education where the focus is on student deficits in order to remediate and/or qualify for services and supports via IDEA. Teachers are socialized into embracing deficit ideologies (Gorski, 2010), so when SEL curricula are offered as "nice" ways to "fix" children's behaviors, opposed to being "mean," it seems like the perfect solution.

Curriculum as a Tool of Oppression

The attraction to niceness filters into the curriculum as well with harmful, if unintentional, consequences. Curriculum is political, reflective of the ideologies of those with the power to write, adopt, and enact it (Apple, 1992; 2004), and kindness curriculum is no different. Kindness, as Turner (2019) argues, is at the core of elementary school pedagogy. However, like SEL more broadly, an emphasis on kindness fails to acknowledge historical and current forms of oppression, As Turner (2019) elaborates:

> when being considerate, nice and friendly is all children learn about how to treat one another, we risk losing something fundamental. Young children are not only developing a sense of morality; they are developing a sense of who they are. This includes their race, gender, class and more. These identities have never been treated or represented equally in our society, so when we teach about love, acceptance and kindness without addressing this inequity, we gloss over crucial differences in the ways our students experience the world. (n.p)

Educators' negligence in situating kindness within hierarchies of power and oppression is not the only criticism levied against this curricular emphasis. Watson and Ferlazzo (2020) suggests two further troublesome elements: that kindness is often framed as a transaction and that efforts to embed kindness in the curriculum are often targeted at schools serving BICOC. In the latter instance, such acts

are premised upon deficit assumptions that BIPOC communities are lacking in kindness and in need of explicit instruction in how to be kind. In this way, such practices are consistent with a long history on the part of schools of minimizing and/or dismissing the rich funds of knowledge (Moll et. al. 1992) and cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) of children and their families. With regard to the former, Watson and Ferlazzo (2020) says:

> Kindness did not save George Floyd's life. When teachers extol the virtues of kindness, they unintentionally encourage the further subjugation of people of color in general, and Black people in particular, in schools and society at-large. They do so by making acts of kindness transactional events rather than natural and expected occurrences. In the former paradigm, kindness becomes a selective act and is then extended to those whom the giver deems worthy. Those not afforded kindness are considered less than and not deserving of love, compassion, and, most importantly, kindness. In fact, their very humanity is negated." (n.p.)

Because an emphasis on kindness specifically, and SEL more broadly, is advanced without a concurrent and explicit tie to justice, its potential to harm is amplified. It is also indicative of the larger curricular and pedagogical "mismatch" that significantly and negatively influences the school experiences and outcomes of BICOC.

Several scholars, instead, have advocated for a pedagogical approach that affirms and sustains BICOC. Often referred to as culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017) and community-responsive (TFAEvents, 2016) teaching, these approaches have been shown to support BICOC's academic, social, and emotional learning and growth (Esposito & Swain, 2009; Howard, 2003; Milner, 2011; Tate, 1995). Early childhood, in many ways, has led the way, with a long history of advocating for and enacting anti-bias and anti-oppressive practices (Derman-Sparks & Olsen Edwards, 2010). However, there is increasing pressure for preschool to increase children's academic

attainment and to "look more" like elementary schools (Needham & Ülküer, 2020). The pushdown of increased academic expectations has resulted in a simultaneous pushdown of the experiences prevalent in the elementary classroom, including oppressive curriculum, a move away from culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies and more decontextualized "kindness" work, and implementation of (inappropriate) behavior expectations and management practices.

SEL as a Curriculum in PK-5

There has been a steady incline of interest in increasing social-emotional learning in schools, as reflected in the hundreds of SEL programs in use (Mahoney et al., 2018) and how over the last decade, more than 80 articles on SEL have been published in *Education Week*. Such interest has resulted in increasing publication and sales of SEL programs to schools. The popular programs or initiatives that schools can purchase and subsequently have teachers implement (Vega, 2012) tout outcomes for behavior improvement. For example, PBIS has been "moderately effective in reducing misbehavior" and *Second Step* brings "increased cooperative behavior and reduced aggression in the classroom for up to 6 months." In fact, in advertising a Second Step SEL curriculum for preschool students, *Second Step Early Learning Classroom Kit* (at a cost of $459), the company heralds:

> "Improved behavior, improved learning. Help your littlest learners harness their energy and potential by teaching them to listen, pay attention, control their behavior, and get along with others. When students enter kindergarten with the self-regulation and social-emotional skills taught in the research-based *Second Step* Program, they're set up for success." (Second Step, 2012-2020).

It is listed clearly in the descriptions and promised outcomes of these (expensive) curricula that the point of enacting SEL curriculum are to "harness" and "control" children into compliance so that they can be successful in elementary school. This language and attitude is mirrored in the elementary school SEL curricula, all assuming that the goal of education is to get students to

comply long enough to master skills in order to progress to the next stage. Noticeably absent from these descriptions of SEL curricula are goals of creating a classroom community where children feel safe, respected, and empowered to advocate for a more just and democratic society.

The surge of packaged programs or standardized curriculum in SEL is particularly disconcerting when it focuses on the early childhood years. "Proven effective" SEL programs are said to not only improve teachers' classroom management but build skills and enhance academic performance (Bierman et al., 2017). The curricular pushdown throughout early childhood is well documented (Teale et al., 2018), and the pushdown of SEL now coincides with the pushdown of literacy and math objectives. These curricula promote the notion that if students can regulate their bodies and emotions to not be disruptive, then academics can be micromanaged and (hypothetically) students can work beyond their development. The promotion of more SEL learning in early childhood appears to be about regulation in early childhood contexts, without a critical evaluation of developmentally appropriate education for children ages 0-8 (Eklund et al., 2018). Not only is this contrary to well-established social learning theory (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978), evidence has conclusively demonstrated that children in the early childhood years learn best through education that is fun, rooted in activities of interest to the child, and tied to authentic outcomes (Teale et al., 2010). Children should be encouraged to observe the world around them and develop personal projects of interest tied to their community (Heath, 1983). In early childhood contexts that take this approach, SEL happens naturally, aligned with academics, and through the support of children's families, teachers, and peers (García et al., 2016). Given that the research in the field of early childhood has exhaustively demonstrated the benefits of and advocated for this type of comprehensive and authentic educational experience (Bassok et al., 2016), it is critical to examine and explicate why SEL curricula are being bought and used in classrooms.

Tracking for Compliance.

It is well established in the K-12 literature that the school mechanisms used to sort, evaluate, and educate student are shaped by race and class and serve to reproduce inequality (e.g. Anyon, 1981; Apple, 2011, 2017; Bhattacharya, 2017; Labaree, 2010; Oakes, 1985; Spring, 2004). This reproduction lens has been applied less to early childhood contexts and SEL, specifically, but is a useful tool for understanding the disparate experiences of children. SEL curriculum is not without its own form of tracking, which is particularly evident when paired with positive behavioral interventions and support (PBIS) programing. Academic response to intervention (RTI) and PBIS are touted as preventative approaches designed to deliver interventions and supports, based on students' needs, via tiered service-delivery frameworks. The frequency, duration, and intensity of interventions and supports increase across tiers. Using screening and progress monitoring data, students are 'targeted' for group-based or individual intervention and support based on their needs, labeled according to their tier (e.g. "Tier 2 students"), resulting in the sorting and tracking of students.

PBIS is designed to prevent unwanted behavior, with a focus on teaching "expected" or "appropriate" school behaviors. More recent efforts have begun integrating social-emotional skills within PBIS frameworks (e.g., Interconnected Systems Framework; Barrett et al., 2013), particularly at Tier 1 and Tier 2. In such frameworks, Tier 1 supports are designed to "foster pro-social and coping skills, emotional regulation and management, [and] allow students more opportunities for success across settings" (Barrett & Perales, 2018). An example of what constitutes a desired, "pro-social" behavior is to "choose kindness over being right" (Barrett & Perales, 2018, slide 36). Emphasizing such a value, as earlier argued, serves to protect and further instantiate privilege while simultaneously harming marginalized groups. By prioritizing niceness over doing the right thing, we teach children to not speak up and challenge their oppression while simultaneously reifying fragility and bystander tendencies in dominant groups.

Standalone frameworks (RTI and PBIS), more comprehensive frameworks that integrate SEL competencies (such as Multi-Tiered Systems of Support [MTSS] and Comprehensive Integrated Three-tiered Model of Prevention [CiT3]), and the student assessments upon which these frameworks rely, often lack consideration of contextual circumstance and structures of oppression. Consistent with packaged classroom curriculum (e.g., Second Step), these school-wide approaches to SEL implementation and integration perpetuate the "fix them" mentality with a deficit-oriented focus, rather than acknowledging students' varying developmental stages, race, class, gender, contexts, cultures, and community differences. These programs (i.e., frameworks, curriculum) are predicated on a set of behavioral expectations or *norms*, that are presented as universal while perpetuating white, middle-class/affluent values/norms. When discussing customizing strategies to fit the needs of students and staff, (e.g., "if a large number of students display problem behavior or experience stress") recommendations simply direct teachers and staff to address the behavior and fail to investigate or address the underlying cause(s).

Transformative SEL: Talking the Equity Talk

"What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow parameters of change are possible and allowable." (Audre Lorde, 1984, pp. 2-3)

The rise of SEL programs has coincided with increased calls for education to be culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1994; 1995), responsive (Gay, 2000), sustaining (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017), and equitable. Yet, according to Simmons and colleagues (2018), there have not been parallel, substantial efforts to ground SEL in the larger context of equity efforts in education. Transformative SEL is the field's attempt to integrate equity frameworks into SEL. While traditional models of SEL require transformation, we assert

that transformative SEL does not go far enough to dismantle the problematic assumptions and continues to prioritize assimilation into dominant norms over self-actualization, collective healing, and societal change.

While positioned as a tool for cultivating caring environments that nurture students' growth, often SEL programs have been silent in the face of issues of equity and justice or have engaged in superficial celebrations of difference (Jagers et al., 2019). In order to create classroom communities rooted in authentic care (Rolón-Dow, 2005) where children can self-actualize, educators must recognize the significance of identity and systems of power in shaping the lived experiences of children in and out of schools. SEL without this is no SEL at all. As a result, several substantive critiques have been levied against traditional SEL. For example, in a policy brief calling educators to act, the Aspen Institute (2018) states:

> The prioritization of social, emotional, and academic development (SEAD) through a racial equity lens is one critical piece of the puzzle. Most educators and school system leaders have good intentions and are committed to equity. But good intentions do not obviate the need to understand historical context and the role of race, racism, white privilege, and implicit bias in holding students back. Research indicates that teachers, like everyone, are subject to implicit biases associated with race and ethnicity, which can affect their judgments of student behavior and their relationships with students and families. As educators and school system leaders attempt to pursue more intentional approaches to social, emotional, and academic development, the absence of a racial equity lens has led to some challenges with implementation and unintended, negative consequences, particularly for students of color and indigenous youth. (p.3)

Arguably, the results of poorly conceived and implemented SEL have led to more than "challenges." Most SEL has done little more than give "lip service" to honoring cultural differences, failing to examine the

hegemony of the Eurocentric values that undergird SEL philosophies and schooling more broadly (Hoffman, 2009). By operating under the assumption that the values embedded within SEL are neutral and universal, rather than designed to forward a white, middle class agenda, things like "school readiness" and school discipline come to be seen as matters of self-regulation as opposed to the raced, classed constructs that they are. That SEL has focused on assimilation and compliance while ignoring the larger race and class dynamics at work undermines any stated commitment to valuing *diversity*.

What is "Transformative SEL"?

"Transformative SEL" attempts to address this critique. Its advocates envision transformative SEL as "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 et al., 2018, p.3). Jagers and colleagues (2019) further describe it this way:

> The concept of transformative SEL is a means to better articulate the potential of SEL to mitigate the educational, social, and economic inequities that derive from the interrelated legacies of racialized cultural oppression in the United States and globally. Transformative SEL represents an as-yet underutilized approach that SEL researchers and practitioners can use if they seek to effectively address issues such as power, privilege, prejudice, discrimination, social justice, empowerment, and self-determination. In essence, we argue that for SEL to adequately serve those from underserved communities—and promote the optimal developmental outcomes for all children, youth, and adults—it must cultivate in them the knowledge, attitudes, and skills required for critical examination and collaborative action to address root causes of inequities. (p.163)

In light of the recent racial uprisings, CASEL, too, has become more explicit in their calls for an equity-focused SEL. They say,

> "CASEL is committed to advancing equity and excellence through social and emotional learning. We believe that there is no system more important than education to fighting against racism and dismantling the systems that condone racist acts. We at CASEL hold fast to the belief that our work must actively contribute to antiracism in all forms of prejudice reduction." (CASEL, 2020a).

In the most comprehensive articulation of transformative SEL, Jagers and colleagues (2019) offer a substantive critique of SEL, providing evidence of the ways in which the majority of SEL programs reinforce individualist values, beliefs, and practices; seek assimilation into dominant norms; fail to prioritize a focus on inequity and the structures producing it; reduce student voice and agency; and do little to disrupt the implicit and explicit biases of educators. While situating the call for transformative SEL within notions of collectivism, critical democracy, redistributive justice, and a call for understanding the historical roots and present realities of oppression, the authors work within the five SEL competencies, offering up what they call "equity elaborations," (Jagers et al., 2018). These elaborations expand upon the prior SEL buckets, suggesting a vision for the ways in which identity, intersectionality, belonging, and agency can fold into the traditional framework. In so doing, they trouble the more coercive function of previous SEL philosophies and practices and seek alignment with principles of culturally responsive and relevant education, youth empowerment, and social justice. They also highlight practices that many educators already embrace—specifically youth participant action research (YPAR) and project-based learning (PBL)—as pedagogically aligned with transformative SEL. While a turn away from traditional SEL is certainly welcome, to what extent can transformative SEL truly be transformative, particularly if it remains committed to the traditional framework of SEL?

While examining how this work is taken up, *in practice*, will be one important factor in discerning whether transformative SEL can, in fact, achieve its aims at bringing about equity and justice, an

arguably more pressing critique is discerning the extent to which transformative SEL is indeed transformative. By tinkering (Tyack & Cuban, 1995) within the original framework of SEL, it is ostensibly the case that only the "most narrow parameters of change are possible and allowable," (Lorde, 1984 p.3)—a seemingly far cry from transforming SEL. Further, despite adopting the *language* of social justice, many of those advancing transformative SEL appear to have retained the deficit ideologies that make traditional SEL so problematic, thus forwarding the same values that an equity approach should disrupt, further limiting any power to transform. For example, Simmons and colleagues (2018), discuss what they see as the five barriers to SEL development: poverty, exclusionary discipline, lack of trauma-informed practices, implicit bias, and educator stress. In case of point, when discussing exclusionary discipline, they say:

> Exclusionary discipline, such as school discipline practices like suspension and expulsion, narrows life opportunities and compromises quality of life. Students who are not in school miss out on crucial SEAD opportunities, feel less connected to school, and are more likely to engage in drinking, substance abuse, violence, and unsafe sexual encounters. In a vicious cycle, this puts students further behind and decreases their odds of graduating from high school, contributing to reduced likelihood of postsecondary success, limited job prospects, compromised quality of life, and poorer health. (p. 4)

We, too, contest the use of exclusionary discipline; however, while we take issue with its existence and the message it reinforces about belonging, Simmons and colleagues fail to question this and instead lament that students miss out on SEL learning and the social problems that ensue. Similarly, regarding trauma-informed practices, the authors do not take into account the ways in which schools regularly and routinely inflict trauma on students (Love, 2019b). Absent in the discussion of the three other "barriers"—poverty, implicit bias, and teacher stress—is a critical structural analysis that examines

the mechanisms that produce these various conditions, and any discussion of how to prepare educators to tackle these challenges. Saying teachers need to be equity-literate without advancing an equity-literate analysis of the problems of SEL will likely contribute to the continued use of SEL to reinforce the status quo.

Part of maintaining the status quo requires inoculating people to their own oppression and the oppression of others. As discussed earlier, a significant critique of traditional SEL is that it works to normalize oppression (Kaler-Jones, 2020, Simmons, 2019). Transformative SEL fails to disrupt this. As Jagers et al., (2018) explain:

> The cultural and ERI [ethnic/race identity] aspects of self-awareness discussed above could provide more adaptive coping strategies by enabling youth to see acculturative pressures and discrimination as reflections of societal ills rather than as personal affronts. Instead of becoming emotion-focused and disengaged, students could become more focused on identifying situational or societal challenges and pursuing individual and collective solutions (p. 6)

In other words, the benefit of transformative SEL is not about changing the system so much as it is about changing the perspective of marginalized students so that they can cope with oppressive systems and not take offense at efforts to assimilate them into dominant norms. That emotion is to be ignored or diffused is also significant; what types of emotions are SEL-approved? Such an approach could easily translate into the kinds of tone-policing and suppression of righteous rage discussed earlier in this article.

Attention to language, while perhaps tedious, is imperative. Language, as Masha Gessen (2020) notes, is what makes something thinkable. A review of the transformative SEL literature reveals the way deficit ideology remains embedded within what is meant to be a justice-oriented approach. For example, Jagers and colleagues (2019) say:

> In essence, we argue that for SEL to adequately serve those from **underserved** communities—and promote the

optimal developmental outcomes for all children, youth,
and adults—it must cultivate in them the knowledge,
attitudes, and skills required for critical examination and
collaborative action to address root causes of inequities.
(p. 163, emphasis added)

Terminology like "underserved" has been critiqued for the violence
it inflicts on marginalized groups and how it reifies deficit thinking
(Burke, 2016; Kraehe & Acuff, 2015). Further, almost all transformative
SEL focuses on marginalized groups, which underscores the point
that the goal of SEL is ultimately compliance and assimilation into
dominant groups' ways of thinking and being. Without an intensive
effort to disrupt oppression and the privilege experienced by dom-
inant groups, how can transformative SEL *transform* the system? It
stands to reason, then, that transformative SEL seeks to *transform*
the student, changing or fixing who they are to fit within existing
systems and structures of oppression. While it may be unfair to expect
schools to transform a deeply inequitable society, transformative SEL
has also taken this as their goal and thus is worthy of such scrutiny.

Conclusion

*"Look closely at the present you are constructing: it should look like
the future you are dreaming."*

– Alice Walker

We situated much of our argument regarding the need for
increased attention and resistance to how SEL is being implemented
and discussed in PK-5th grade settings within the current literature
of older children. While there are scholars taking up the import-
ant work of critiquing early childhood spaces and advocating for
humanizing and socially just teaching and learning (e.g., Boutte &
Bryan, 2019), much of the attention is on contexts that teach older
children. Early childhood and elementary education settings are
increasingly demanding compliance of students at younger ages,
and compliance to a dominant school ideology is increasingly being
sold to schools and teachers through SEL narratives and curriculum.

All children deserve an education that allows them the space to grow socially and emotionally.

Despite its promises, social-emotional learning does not deliver. Positioned as a "kinder" form of classroom management, SEL is a framework to bring about compliance. But enforcing compliance through SEL is the opposite of kind; it is dehumanizing. In fact, as frequently operationalized, SEL tends to stunt students' emotional and social growth, preventing children from embracing the full range of human emotion. Children are encouraged to suppress "inappropriate" emotions in order to regulate them in ways that meet normative expectations. Moreover, because SEL is generally taught as a set of five competencies absent a larger framework for critically examining structures of power and oppression, their historical roots, and current iterations and consequences, the development of empathy is also inhibited. Rather than developing a collective and critical conscious-ness and solidarity, children are inculcated into the individualistic, "meritocratic" ethos wherein they, alone, are responsible for their behaviors and "offenders" should be "held personally accountable for the assaults to their personhood that they endure daily in schools" (Shalaby, 2017, p. xix). The result is that oppression and the myth of meritocracy are normalized and weaponized (Dillard, 2020). And while the impacts are differently felt, it is important to note that all children are harmed by this.

While we support the call to bring an equity lens to SEL, trans-formative SEL remains rooted in deficit ideology, and does not go far enough to dismantle systems of oppression. Particularly problematic is the focus on helping BICOC and low-income children develop a deeper understanding of inequity in the service of honing "appro-priate" coping mechanisms to persist in the face of current realities. While advocates of this type of SEL raise questions like "How can SEL be leveraged to help youth from historically marginalized race/ethnic and socioeconomic groups to realize their fullest potential as contributing members of an increasingly complex and diverse global community?" (Jagers et al., 2018, p. 2), the solutions tinker

within the system rather than dismantling the system and imaging something new.

As Love (2019b) argues,

> for centuries, we have tried to tweak, adjust, and reform systems of injustice. These courageous efforts, righteous and just in their causes, are examples of the pursuit of freedom. (…) However, freedom was short-lived because the system and structures oppressing dark people were not abolished at the root. (p.90)

It is not enough to tweak the practices. As the quotation at the onset of this section suggests, the practices we engage in the present have ramifications for our future. What if instead of the impulse to bring more people into the existing system—wherein the system adopts some of the values, beliefs, and practices of the new group but ultimately remains intact—we create new systems? What could a new future look like? And how do we begin by making that new system a reality today?

While we do not presume to have the answers to these questions—in fact, we would argue that answering these questions should be a context-specific endeavor wherein educators, in solidarity, alongside, and at the behest of communities, co-determine the social-emotional and education vision and needs of children—we would like to offer some recommendations about what we can do as field given what we know about SEL and its consequences in early childhood spaces.

We call for an increase in research focusing on PK-5th grade contexts. Specifically, we identify four critical domains: research that examines the reproductive nature of early childhood contexts, research that challenges commonly applied constructs like kindergarten/school readiness, research that examines the impacts of SEL and its related tools (e.g., grit, mindfulness, compliance) in early childhood settings, and, perhaps most importantly, research that explores ways to create and implement new systems of healing, self-actualizing SEL. We call for an increase in partnership between

researchers, communities, and educators, premised upon radical reciprocity and authentic relationships, to realize community dreams and visions for the education of their children (Cipollone et al., in press). Communities—not researchers, educators, or politicians—should be the ones to set the metaphorical table and invite those willing to support and achieve community-identified goals and needs.

We offer our remaining recommendations for practitioners. We call upon educators across the P-20 spectrum to reject SEL systems focused on compliance and create new realities for our youngest students, their families, and their educators. This will require a radical rethinking of the purpose and function of education; an examination of current and historical systems of oppression and power; an unlearning of deficit ideologies, biases, and white supremacy; learning about the rich funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) that resides within communities; and a commitment to work in solidarity with communities to dismantle the systems and barriers, both inside and outside of school, that harm children and families. This means actively challenging SEL and management practices by speaking up to colleagues and administrators and offering approaches that are community-centered, culturally and community responsive and sustaining, and focused on healing and self-actualization. Above and beyond this, we call specifically on our colleagues in teacher preparation to stop teaching traditional classroom-management courses, and instead offer preservice teachers opportunities to engage the work we outline above for educators.

In summary, we call for an SEL that is:

> critical, healing centered, reciprocal in nature, culturally responsive, transformative, and dialogical. Abolitionist SEL models center vulnerability, healing, joy, and community, resist punitive or disciplinary approaches, and do not involve school resource officers or police. (Abolitionist Teaching Network, 2020 p.3)

We close by asking readers to reflect, with urgency, on the following: what would humanizing, culturally and community sustaining, socially just social-emotional learning look like and what will you do to make it happen?

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