Applying an Equity Lens to Social, Emotional, and Academic Development

This issue brief, created by The Pennsylvania State University with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, is one of a series of briefs that addresses the need for research, practice and policy on social and emotional learning (SEL). SEL is defined as the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.

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Executive Summary

Social and emotional learning (SEL) equips young people with competencies to lead productive and healthy lives. SEL refers to life skills that support children and adults in experiencing, managing, and expressing emotions, making sound decisions, and fostering interpersonal relationships. SEL protects against adverse risk-taking behaviors, emotional distress, and conduct problems, and contributes to health, academic achievement, and success later in life.[1,2]

There are barriers, however, that prevent many students of color and other marginalized youth from developing social and emotional competencies. For all students to benefit, SEL must be grounded in a larger context of equity and justice efforts within public education. Doing so will help to identify and dismantle barriers that prevent many students from accessing and benefitting from SEL. Importantly, these efforts should not be viewed as a corrective measure for students of color and marginalized youth, but rather as an opportunity to ensure all children experience the benefits of a quality education that includes opportunities for social, emotional, and academic development (SEAD).

Barriers

Five barriers contribute to inequitable access to a high-quality SEL education, and in turn, opportunities for all children to have healthy SEAD:

Systemic level barriers

- *Poverty* limits the SEAD of young people and diminishes present and future education and life prospects

Institutional level barriers

- *Exclusionary discipline practices and policies* are disproportionately used to punish students of color and marginalized youth, limiting SEAD opportunities
- *Lack of trauma-informed practices* adversely impacts students' SEAD opportunities and their life outcomes

Individual level barriers

- *Implicit bias in school staff* engenders low expectations and disengagement for students of color and marginalized youth
- *Educator stress and burnout* reduce the safety and productivity of the classroom and educators' ability to model SEL skills

Opportunities

Although no single solution can eliminate the barriers noted above, the following programs, initiatives, and policies may increase access to SEAD resources:

- *School racial and socioeconomic integration initiatives*
- *Restorative justice practices for school discipline*
- *Trauma-informed system interventions* to create supportive school environments
- *Culturally competent and equity-literate educators and academic content* to reduce implicit bias
- *SEL and mindfulness programming to support students and teachers* to cope with stress, develop SEL skills, and create healthy, caring schools

While promising efforts exist, more research is needed to test innovations that can inform policies and practices to enhance students' health and wellbeing equitably.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, social and emotional learning (SEL) has gained traction among parents, educators, and policymakers as a result of its successful implementation across urban, suburban, and rural districts, and its growing evidence base. SEL leads to better health and life outcomes, as students develop critical social and emotional skills that help them avoid risk-taking behaviors and that increase the likelihood they will build and maintain healthy relationships and graduate from high school.[1,3] SEL helps to improve school climate, resulting in more meaningful attachments between and among students and school staff, and increasing student investment in school.[3]

All young people deserve access to a high-quality education that promotes social, emotional, and academic development (SEAD). However, several barriers limit this access and can have lifetime repercussions for the most marginalized youth. As our nation becomes increasingly diverse[4] and childhood poverty rates continue to rise,[5] confronting educational inequities is necessary to enhance the health and wellbeing of our nation.

Burgeoning SEL research and programmatic initiatives cannot be isolated from the larger public education context, which is fraught with inequities. Because young people spend significant time in school over many years,[6] it is an ideal setting to address practices and policies that contribute to inequity.

Health equity, one key outcome, refers to everyone having a fair and just opportunity to be as healthy as possible.

Despite the growing interest in SEL, there have not been parallel, substantial efforts to ground SEL in the larger context of equity efforts in education. Applying an equity lens to SEAD elevates the importance of eliminating barriers to quality education, and in turn, health and wellbeing. Educational attainment is a social determinant of health;[7] thus, improving the education of our nation's young people, with a focus on the most marginalized, will contribute to better life outcomes for them.[8]

Health equity, one key outcome, refers to everyone having a fair and just opportunity to be as healthy as possible. This requires removing obstacles such as poverty and discrimination, and reducing their consequences, such as powerlessness and lack of access to good jobs with fair pay, quality education and housing, safe environments, and healthcare.

Key Findings

Five barriers across systemic, institutional, and individual levels contribute to inequitable access to SEAD and, ultimately, unfavorable school, health, and life outcomes.

Poverty

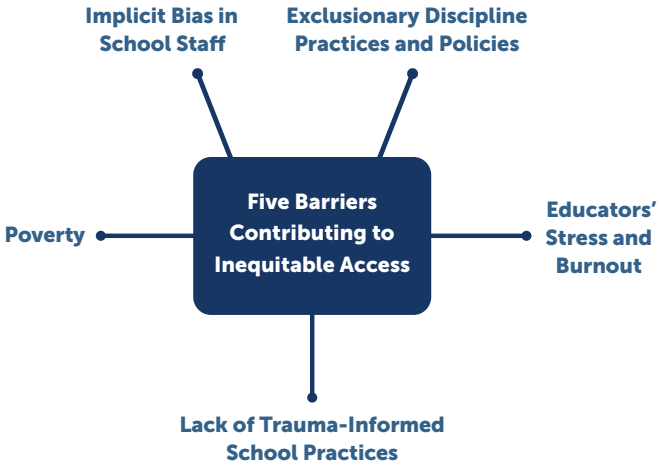
Poverty sets up children, especially students of color and marginalized youth, for a lifetime of disadvantage, by limiting their access to quality education, healthcare, and necessary social and economic resources.[9]

Exposure to poverty in early childhood impacts brain areas related to stress regulation and emotion processing.[10] This increases the risk of difficulties with executive function, including inattention, impulsivity, defiance, and poor peer relationships, all of which are related to facets of social and emotional competencies.[11] Poverty also is associated with neuroendocrine dysregulation, which may alter brain function and possibly lead to the development of stress-related diseases later in life, including cardiovascular, immune, and psychiatric disorders.[12]

Additionally, children in poverty have less access to medical care, health insurance, safe and stable housing, quality teachers, rigorous curricular, and Advanced Placement courses in school.[13,14] They also have less social capital, social relationships from which an individual can gain access to resources such as institutional support, information, and knowledge; educational and job opportunities; and services.[15]

Exclusionary Discipline Practices and Policies

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.[16] In a vicious cycle, this puts students further behind and decreases their odds of graduating from high school,[17] contributing to reduced likelihood of postsecondary success,[18] limited job prospects, compromised quality of life, and poorer health.[19]



Exclusionary discipline is used disproportionately against marginalized youth. Black students are suspended and expelled three and a half times more than their white peers and are punished more harshly than white students for the same infractions.[20] The discipline gap between black and white students starts as early as pre-school with black pre-school students 3.6 times as likely as white students to be suspended.[21] This disparity contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline.[22]

Black boys also are 30 percent more likely to be sent to school administrators for disciplinary problems than white boys, and black girls are twice as likely to be detained when compared to white girls.[23] Inequities in school discipline exist for Latino,[24] LGBTQI,[25] and First Nation students, students with disabilities, and youth at the intersection of these varied identities.[26,27] Schools that develop a healthy SEL climate and use discipline policies that are restorative can create new possibilities for more equitable educational outcomes.

Lack of Trauma-Informed School Practices

About sixty-percent of U.S. youth ages 17 or younger have witnessed or experienced maltreatment, abuse, bullying, violence, or assault.[28] The effects of trauma are immediate and long-term. The mental health sequelae of violence exposure and other adverse childhood events include posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, and behavior problems. These outcomes, in turn, are all associated with lower grade-point average achievement, lower IQ, decreased high school graduation rates, and significant deficits in attention and abstract reasoning.[29] Children who have experienced trauma also exhibit biomarker and brain structure differences associated with a vulnerability to engage in violent behavior, commit suicide, and drug addiction.[30] They also tend to be less engaged in school and suffer chronic health conditions in childhood and lower employment productivity in adulthood.[31]

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A threat to equity exists for the large number of youth, especially students of color, who have limited access to mental health services and support after exposure to traumatic events.[32] Trauma, left unaddressed, can set youth up for a lifetime of disadvantage.

Implicit Bias in School Staff

Implicit bias, the automatic and unconscious stereotypes that drive behavior and decision-making,[33] can have deleterious outcomes for students of color and marginalized youth. Educator implicit bias negatively influences student academic achievement[34] and contributes to low academic expectations and exclusionary disciplinary practices.[21] Implicit bias can also interfere with educators' quality of content delivery, hindering student learning.[36] Confronting educator implicit bias is crucial, as our nation becomes more racially and ethnically diverse and our teaching force remains mostly white.[37]

Culture plays a role in how SEL competencies are developed and expressed,[38] which is why it is imperative to address implicit bias. Cultural differences between teachers and students in emotion regulation[39] and emotion display rules[40] can result in misunderstanding and miscommunication and contribute to disproportionate rates of exclusionary discipline, academic failure, and school disengagement for students of color and marginalized youth.

Highlighting the problem of implicit bias in education in no way aims to demonize educators, but rather to highlight a critical area of growth that must be addressed to guarantee better health and life outcomes for all students.

Educators' Stress and Burnout

About half of our nation's teachers report high daily stress.[41] When teachers are stressed, they become combative in their interactions with students, have poorer self-regulation capacities, and are less likely to model effective stress management.[42] Overwhelmed, unhappy teachers are less likely to foster opportunities for student learning and SEL skill development. Students in classrooms with highly stressed teachers are also at risk of being surrounded by students with greater behavioral problems and having lower academic performance.[43, 44]

Teacher stress and burnout often leads to disengagement and turnover,[45] disrupting opportunities for long-lasting relationships between teachers, students, and families.[46] Teacher attrition compromises high-quality instruction because of disproportionate numbers of replacement novice teachers[47] and diversion of funds from enhancing classroom instruction to pay for recruiting, hiring, and developing new teachers.[48]

Together, these five factors—poverty, exclusionary discipline, lack of trauma-informed practices, implicit bias, and educator stress and burnout—can limit or even directly harm students' ability to build social and emotional competencies.

Generally, students in more diverse schools have better academic and life outcomes than students attending less integrated schools.

Opportunities

No single solution exists, but the following initiatives show promise in providing fair and just access to SEAD opportunities and in promoting greater equity.

School racial and socioeconomic integration

Initiatives to integrate schools can mitigate the effects of poverty on schooling. Generally, students in more diverse schools have better academic and life outcomes than students attending less integrated schools.[49] Strategies to integrate schools racially and socioeconomically are showing promising results across the nation. Three examples include:

- *Hartford, CT*'s inter-district magnet program provides a wider range of educational opportunities to students. Students in the program have better academic achievement[50] and social and emotional competencies.[51]

- *Cambridge, MA* practices a controlled choice program to integrate schools, which has led to more integrated schools[52] and strong student achievement.[53]

- *Jefferson County, KY Public Schools* (JCPS) balances family choice for school options and school racial and socioeconomic diversity. This strategy has received community support, and students report feeling well-prepared to engage in diverse settings.[54]

More research is needed on school integration to capture the experiences of students of color and marginalized youth to ensure they are not merely included, but also welcomed.

Restorative justice practices in school discipline

Restorative justice practices (RJP) are designed to repair harm done to individuals and the community cooperatively. RJP integrate a problem-solving approach to school discipline that focuses on restitution, resolution, and reconciliation.[55] Many RJP also have the potential to confront racial disparities in school discipline.[56]

Most research on RJP is descriptive or anecdotal[57] but shows promise in: (1) creating opportunities for SEL development,[58] (2) improving relationships between and among teachers and students,[59] (3) increasing academic achievement,[60] and (4) reducing harsh, exclusionary discipline practices.[61] More rigorous evaluations are needed.

Trauma-informed system approaches and trauma-specific interventions

Young people who have experienced adversity need support to mitigate the negative outcomes of traumatic experiences. Schools are opportune settings to provide support and can employ a trauma-informed systems approach, a framework to guide systems, behaviors, practices, and policies to shift organizational culture and mindsets to be sensitive to trauma.[62]

An example of a trauma-informed approach is the Healthy Environments and Response to Trauma in Schools (HEARTS) program developed at the University of California, San Francisco. A study on HEARTS found that it led to an increase in knowledge of trauma and trauma-sensitive practices among school personnel and to improvements in student academic engagement and attendance.

Trauma-specific interventions that focus at the individual level also show promise. For example, Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavior Therapy (TF-CBT) is a structured form of therapy involving a trained clinician, parent/guardian, and child, not necessarily

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conducted in schools. Research shows TF-CBT reduces posttraumatic stress, depression, behavior problems, shame, anxiety, and other abuse-related attributions in children.[63] It also benefits parents, who report improvements in depression, abuse-specific distress, support of their child, and effective parenting practices.[64]

Culturally competent and equity literate educators

Cultural competency includes valuing diversity, being culturally self-aware, understanding the dynamics of cultural interactions, and designing curricula that incorporates students' lives.[65] Cultural competence can increase educators' awareness of their privilege, implicit bias, and microaggressions, and support them in creating conditions where students and families feel a sense of belonging, support, respect, and safety.[66] It energizes educators to create and teach in culturally responsive ways.

Direct confrontation with inequity on the path to equity is also necessary. Educators, SEL program developers, and researchers must be equity literate, which refers to identifying and confronting inequity in practices, policies, curricula, and research, and to preventing the imposition of values and beliefs on young people, which can cause inadvertent harm. Equity literacy is a fairly new theoretical construct with limited empirical research on its impact. Nonetheless, it has the potential to influence teaching and learning positively and to create more welcoming environments.[67]

Teachers who implement SEL report better classroom management, lower occupational anxiety and depression, better interactions with their students, greater engagement, and greater perceived job control.

SEL and mindfulness approaches

School-based SEL approaches have yielded positive outcomes for both students and teachers. Teachers who implement SEL report better classroom management,[68] lower occupational anxiety and depression,[69] better interactions with their students,[70] greater engagement,[71] and greater perceived job control.[72] Two example approaches are RULER and the PATHS Curriculum. RULER classrooms have students who perform better academically[73] and classrooms rated as having higher degrees of warmth and connectedness between teachers and students,

more autonomy and leadership among students, and teachers who focus more on students' interests and motivations.[74] Similarly, teachers in PATHS classrooms display more competence with regard to quality of classroom climate and have more positive relationships with students.[75] Schools and classrooms that exhibit these conditions allow for optimal teaching and learning environments for educators and students alike.

Teacher-focused SEL approaches have been found to be effective in promoting educators' SEL competence and wellbeing. CARE (Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education) and SMART-in-Education (Stress Management and Resilience Training) are two promising approaches. CARE teachers have shown improvements in their adaptive emotion regulation, mindfulness, psychological distress, and time urgency and have sustained emotional support over the course of the year as compared to teachers who had not received the training.[76] Teachers in SMART-in-Education report less stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout, and show greater mindfulness, working memory capacity, levels of self-compassion, and focused attention.[77]

Mindfulness programs, which encourage the practice of open, judgment-free awareness of present-moment experiences,[78] have shown reductions in stress and burnout and improved wellbeing for teachers,[79] and there is some promising evidence for youth.[80] Mindfulness meditation also cultivates positive emotional states toward others and reduces bias against socially stigmatized groups.[81] Loving-kindness meditation, which includes cultivating love and compassion toward oneself and others, increases social connectedness[82] and reduces bias and racial prejudice.[83]

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It is worth noting that teachers can become overwhelmed by the demands of implementing SEL and mindfulness curriculum on top of existing curriculum.[84] Hence, proper training and support for teachers is critical to successful implementation.

Research, Policy, and Practice

In light of the promise of SEL to create greater health and educational equity, we make some research, policy, and practice recommendations:

Research

There is limited research on the explicit link between SEL and health equity. There is a need to measure, understand, and assess the impact of universal SEL, RJP, mindfulness, and trauma-informed interventions on student academic achievement and health outcomes in educators and students.

While the gold standard in prevention science is a randomized controlled trial, we also need carefully designed studies conducted in different settings among diverse social groups that examine longitudinal effects, including dosage and quality of implementation, to fully understand the effects of SEL, and to inform the design and modification of SEL programming.

Policy

Anti-poverty initiatives and those that mitigate the effects of poverty are central in assuring all students have access to the necessary resources for optimal health and wellbeing and for social, emotional, and academic success. Although eradicating poverty is a monumental task, initiatives that integrate schools racially and socioeconomically and that build social capital in impoverished communities show promise. Building this social capital must also include family engagement as an integral part of education, as families are partners in educating young people.

Additionally, policymakers must engage in school finance reform efforts that put the development of the whole child at the core by ensuring all students have access to quality educational resources and opportunities to be successful. Only then will we begin to provide our nation's young people with fair and just opportunities to develop socially, emotionally, and academically.

State and local legislation can also eradicate zero tolerance policies and exclusionary discipline. Finally, we must re-examine policies and practices at all levels—with a new lens—to prevent the perpetuation of inequity.

Practice

Schools are responsible for providing a continuum of services for students, creating safe, stable, and welcoming learning environments for all, and nourishing the education, growth, health, and wellbeing of the whole child. To do this, school systems must integrate SEL, including trauma-informed practices, into all aspects of teaching and learning in ways that are accessible, sustainable, evidence-based, culturally responsive, and equity literate.[85] This creates the conditions where all youth can thrive and ensures that SEL approaches are not used to oppress marginalized social groups.

Importantly, creating professional development (PD) opportunities for educator self-care and other practices that mitigate stress and burnout in teachers is crucial to ensuring an effective teaching force. School systems must also build the capacity of educators so that they are skilled in practicing and teaching SEL for enhanced wellbeing, high-quality relationships, and improved classroom climate. PD for educators must also include instruction in cultural competency and other evidence-based content to mitigate and reduce implicit bias.

Conclusion

This brief outlined some of the key barriers that impact student outcomes and presented promising initiatives for applying an equity lens to SEL programming, leading to healthy SEAD for all children. It is worth taking actionable steps to address the barriers mentioned in this brief in order to shift the larger societal and historical contexts that have perpetuated health and educational disparities for too long. Many other barriers exist too beyond the scope of this brief. These include limited access to: technology, mental health support or services, early childhood education, family engagement opportunities, and coordinated school health services, as well as residential segregation, inadequate and inequitable school funding, and biased hiring practices that limit teacher diversity.

Health equity benefits everyone and aligns well with our nation's promise of *liberty and justice for all*. We must apply an equity lens to how leaders lead, educators teach, and students learn to create opportunities for all young people to be as healthy as possible.

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Suggested Citation

Simmons, D. N., Brackett, M. A., & Adler, N. (2018) "Applying an Equity Lens to Social, Emotional, and Academic Development," Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center, Pennsylvania State University.

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