

Teacher Transformative SEL as a Foundation for Student Transformative SEL

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Abstract: Transformative social and emotional learning (Jagers et al., 2019), a form of social-emotional learning (SEL) specifically focused on equity, is an important part of student overall well-being and success. However, there is limited research on how to effectively prepare teachers to bring SEL to their classrooms, especially SEL grounded in social justice. In order to contribute to the growing field of teacher training in social-emotional learning, this qualitative study explores teacher perceptions of their own preparedness in this area. Findings reveal that teachers saw their *own* transformative SEL as a key factor in supporting *students'* transformative SEL, highlighting the importance of holistic teacher preparation that focuses on the social-emotional development of teachers themselves.

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Introduction

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is widely recognized as an integral part of student overall well-being and success (CASEL, 2021; Durlak et al., 2011; Immordino-Yang et al., 2018; Jones & Kahn, 2017; Mahoney et al., 2018; PA School Safety Report, 2018). Importantly, there is also a growing call to recognize the importance of implementing SEL with a culturally-sustaining, equity lens (Kaler-Jones, 2020; Kirshner, 2015; Love, 2019; Niemi, 2020; Rose, 2013; Seider & Graves, 2020; Simmons, 2019, 2021; Soutter, 2019, 2020). That is, despite the existing research on SEL, questions have been raised about who benefits from such efforts and how approaches can be shifted to support all student identities (Farrington, 2020; Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013). For example, instead of envisioning SEL as solely an individualistic endeavor or one that aims to “fix” students or enforce compliance, educators are advocating for SEL initiatives that are consistent with the National Equity Project’s (2021) definition of equity (“each child receives what they need to develop to their full academic and social potential”), and Paris & Alim’s (2017) conceptualization of culturally sustaining pedagogies which “seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation” (p. 1).

However, there is limited research on the best ways to prepare teachers to foster SEL – particularly SEL grounded in equity – in the classroom (Niemi & Weissberg, 2017; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017; White et al., 2020). For example, a recent national exploration of teacher preparation for social and emotional learning (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017) reported that SEL is given little attention in required courses in colleges of education in the U.S., leaving teachers largely to figure this component out by themselves.

This kind of limited teacher training can lead to intermittent and ineffective SEL practices in schools (Durlak, 2016; Niemi & Weissberg, 2017). In addition, research has shown that many teachers (especially White teachers) enter the field with limited cultural knowledge (Sleeter, 2008), lack of awareness of systemic inequality (Picower, 2009), and a deficit approach (Cruz et al., 2014, Donahoe-Keegan et al., 2019) that can be harmful to students. Indeed, one of Schonert-Reichl et al.’s (2017) primary recommendations from their comprehensive report is to advance research that examines the impact of promoting teachers’ SEL in teacher prep programs on both teacher well-being and student social-emotional growth and wellness.

In order to contribute to this call and to the growing field of teacher training in social-emotional learning, this research seeks to answer the following question: What are teacher perceptions of effective practices in preparing teachers to foster SEL in their classrooms?

Our data reveal that teachers saw their own social-emotional learning as one key factor in supporting students. More specifically, the ways they spoke about their own SEL was aligned with Jagers et al.’s (2019) conceptualization of *transformative SEL*, a form of SEL specifically focused on social justice. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the ways in which transformative SEL for teachers can be built as a foundation for fostering equity-grounded social-emotional learning for students themselves.

Transformative Social and Emotional Learning

Transformative Social and Emotional Learning (Jagers et al., 2019) is a form of SEL that upholds a vision of social justice and equity as its primary aim. While the Collaborative for Academic and Social

Emotional Learning (CASEL) relies on five central pillars to define SEL (*self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making*), Jagers et al. (2019) parse each of these competencies into three tiers: *personally responsible* (a responsible citizen who contributes to one's community), *participatory* (one who is more actively involved in service and activism), and *transformative* (one who critically analyzes inequality and seeks collective well-being and social justice). Thus, while the transformative tier of each competency is aligned with each of CASEL's definitions, Jagers et al. (2019) push the goals of SEL to be more equitable, critical, and collectivistic. For example, Jagers et al. (2019) define ***transformative self-awareness*** as being comprised of certain key indicators that transcend an individualistic vision of this competency; instead of just working to build awareness of one's own strengths and weaknesses, they advocate building a critical self-awareness that includes examining one's biases and privileges and their impact on others. Similarly, ***transformative self-management*** moves beyond managing one's own emotions alone toward building cultural humility as one way of understanding how to cope within the context of others. Jagers et al.'s (2019) conceptualization of ***transformative social awareness*** includes a critical social awareness that explicitly recognizes the salience of diversity and systemic inequalities. ***Transformative relationship skills*** incorporate multicultural competence in the building of trust within relationships. Finally, ***transformative responsible decision-making*** looks beyond making smart choices that positively impact only one's self toward those that consider collective well-being.

Transformative Social and Emotional Learning for Teachers

SEL is most often discussed in terms of student outcomes, but a growing body of research also focuses on the importance of SEL for teachers (Blumenfeld-Jones et al., 2013; Campbell, 2013; Fallona & Canniff, 2013; Kasalak, 2020; Kim et al., 2020; Santoro, 2018; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). For example, the work of Blumenfeld-Jones et al. (2013) makes a case for why the development of a teacher's own ethical self is so important for educators. Kasalak (2020) highlights for the significance of teacher self-compassion. Santoro's (2018) research on teacher demoralization emphasizes the impact of teacher identity and morality on longevity. Fallona & Canniff (2013) have argued for the moral development of teachers specifically to foster a stance committed to equity and justice. These research findings and perspectives highlight the power of SEL not only for the well-being of educators themselves, but also for the ways in which holistic teacher support directly benefits students.

There is a body of research that also points to the importance of focusing on teachers' own critical awareness and identity development in order to support students equitably and holistically (Donahoe-Keegan et al., 2019; Tintiangco-Cubales, 2015; Ullucci, 2010). For example, Tintiangco-Cubales et al. (2015) have advocated for credential programs to weave Ethnic Studies content into coursework, engage teachers in critical self-reflection, and create spaces for teachers (particularly White teachers) to reflect on their own biases and positionality. Similarly, Ullucci (2010) has noted the need for increasing coursework focused on multicultural development for teachers; supporting pre-service teachers in recognizing dominant, problematic narratives and providing them with new lenses for analyzing entrenched, harmful practices; and fostering racial awareness and understanding, while

also cautioning against the development of a White savior complex (Aaronson, 2017).

Despite the existing research, many scholars point to the need to better support teachers in these ways (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009; Goodwin & Darity, 2019; Martell, 2018; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017; Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2015), and more research is needed to better understand how to prepare teachers accordingly.

Methods

Participants

In order to better understand how teacher preparation programs prepare teachers in these ways, we spoke to 11 teachers from across the United States employing a purposeful sampling approach (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Teachers were asked to participate if they had a documented track record of centering SEL in their classrooms, working for social justice or activism, or were recommended by colleagues for being exemplars of SEL or equity work. Their teacher prep programs ranged from undergraduate to graduate to alternate certification programs. Teachers came from a variety of racial/ethnic backgrounds, with varying amounts of teaching experience, and had experience teaching in grades across the PreK-12 spectrum.

Data Collection

In January-July of 2020, we conducted 45 to 60-minute, semi-structured interviews (Seidman, 1991) via Zoom with each participant. To avoid educational jargon, the term “transformative SEL” was not explicitly used, but rather alluded to through questioning about social-emotional and social justice programming. Some sample queries included, “To what extent do you feel that your teacher preparation program

prepared you to meet the social-emotional needs of your students?” and “To what extent did your program prepare you to center diversity, equity, and inclusion in your classroom?” and “What do you think are the best ways to prepare teachers in these ways?”

Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and we analyzed our data through a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clark, 2013; Maxwell, 2013) relying on both deductive (emic) and inductive (etic) coding to inform our findings (Maxwell, 2013). All interviews were double-coded by both authors and any disagreements and additional coding suggestions were resolved through discussion. We grouped themes into a conceptually clustered matrix (Maxwell, 2013) allowing us to look for patterns in the data including sorting participants’ responses into the transformative SEL framework.

Results

Data analysis revealed that one of the primary ways that teachers in our sample conceptualized their own preparedness to foster students’ transformative SEL was through the development of their own transformative SEL. Below we illustrate the ways in which teachers explained the importance of attending to their own development in these ways in order to meet their students’ transformative social-emotional needs.

Transformative Self-Awareness: Critical Self-Analysis

Recall that Jagers et al. (2019) upheld *critical self-analysis* as a key indicator of self-awareness at the transformative level. Teachers in our sample consistently spoke of the importance of critically reflecting on

their own race and biases in order to support their students' SEL in ways that are consistent with this competency. For example, Vida, a white woman who worked in an urban public school with predominantly students of color reflected,

I think it's really important to do personal reflection on, 'how do I want to approach this?' I know there's going to be a disconnect, I know that there's going to be a trust issue. And I think you really need to confront possible biases coming in, even if you don't think you have them. How are you going to deal with that?

Dolores, a black teacher at an urban charter school, similarly spoke about the importance of teacher identity development:

Teaching – everything you're doing – is going to be biased, whether it's for better or worse. So, I think making teachers conscious of it; putting it in the forefront: everything you do in your classroom is influenced by your experiences and your identity.

This belief in the importance of explicitly addressing teacher biases was echoed by Isa, a White teacher working at an urban public school, who reflected that her lack of awareness of her own racial identity could have been problematic but that her teacher prep program helped to support this development: "It's embarrassing to look back on how unaware I was and how much room I had to grow in terms of recognizing that. So, I did a lot of learning and growing at [teacher prep program] for that." Phoebe, who is also White and worked at an urban charter school, spoke about the critical importance of this kind of reflection in order to combat white savior complex in order to truly be able to support her students' overall well-being:

I don't think I went in with a white savior complex completely, but I think there's a spectrum of white savior complex.

There's the thing you hear about a lot which is the obvious negative: like, oh, I'll save all these poor kids; and then there's the other end of the spectrum. And somewhere in between there's a part of you that feels like you're better. And I think I went into teaching feeling like, well these are whole people, but I can help them be better or something, you know? I think there's a turning point that happens; maybe it's through reading and learning or having conversations with people who don't look like you, where you realize you really truly feel – and not just know, because I always knew that my students were of equal value to me – but there's a turning point when you actually feel it, truly feel it. And I didn't know I didn't feel that way, true in my heart, until I did.

Phoebe's honest reflection on working through her own internal biases are a crucial window into why this kind of critical self-awareness for teachers is so important. By shedding light on her own biases, she was able to make a fundamental shift in her own mindset to be able to truly value, respect, and support her students.

Transformative Self-Management: Cultural Humility

Jagers et al. (2019) emphasized the importance of cultural humility as an element of transformative self-management. Cultural humility can be understood as holding an other-oriented stance (rather than self-focused) and respecting and honoring (rather than feeling superior toward) others' cultural backgrounds and experiences (Hook et al., 2013). Consistent with this conceptualization, teachers we spoke to reflected on how the development of this kind of mindset was an important piece of supporting their students' social-emotional learning through an equity lens. For example, Carmen, a

black teacher who worked in urban public schools, spoke about the importance of teacher training programs fostering a sense of cultural humility and supporting teachers in addressing their own beliefs and values to ensure that the students they work with will be treated with care and respect:

People who are running the program should watch closely how people are interacting with kids. Having lots of conversations were really powerful in terms of getting to know what people's beliefs were, what their value systems were, what they were thinking about things, where they had ignorances, and how to tackle those things.

She emphasized that it was beneficial to have space to tackle these areas of ignorance when in a safe learning environment “while you're in a program with a supportive group of people who you are building friendships with and trust, versus when you are actually in the profession and you may not feel as comfortable to share and you may not have as much time to have those conversations.”

Vida gave a specific example of what this could look like, reflecting on a time when she had to humbly admit that her original approach with a student of color was not respectful of that student's identity and autonomy and how another teacher helped her to realize this. She explained how she had coordinated a meeting with this student and the response that ensued:

[The student] was so mad about coming in, and [the teacher] was like, “What did you say when Vida asked you when would be a good time for you to do this?” And I was like, “Oh my god, no, I didn't ask her. Of course, I didn't ask her. I was like, adults make plans, and you bring kids in.” And that was sort of like a check for me: the different ways that you try to honor a kid's perspective, which is easy to forget when you're an adult.

Through this experience, Vida's own humility in recognizing where she was wrong played an important role in shifting how she worked with students to include them as valued, respected members in problem-solving scenarios. It is important to note that Vida perceived her teacher preparation program as woefully lacking, and many of the stories that she shared were lessons she learned on the job, but that she wished she had learned in advance when she was still in training.

Transformative Social Awareness: Critical Social Analysis

Jagers et al.'s (2019) conceptualization of transformative social awareness incorporated an element of critical social analysis, and teachers in our sample spoke about this competency as an important way of supporting students' transformative social-emotional learning. Phoebe reflected on the ways teachers' critical analysis of racist practices and policies could support students' own awareness and confidence. She advised,

Make sure your sources are not rooted in white supremacy. Use texts by people of color and different perspectives and voices. Representation is so much more important than I ever knew. I always knew it was important for kids to have teachers that look like them, but I never really thought deeply about why that is. There are lies that white teachers can perpetuate unintentionally, just from having lived their life as a white person.

Similarly, Carmen spoke about the benefits of teachers educating themselves to learn about the racial and cultural histories of their cities and students, speaking specifically about the importance of this for white teachers who will be working with students of color:

I think some students can fly through their programs because they're super

smart, or they're very ambitious, and their grades and academics look great, but they may be missing that social emotional piece; they may be missing that race and equity and social justice piece. And I think those are the things to be wary of. In [graduate program] I learned about racial equity, how racist my city was; I learned about white flight, redlining, the levels of need in in big districts. All that was highly valuable. I believe it's really important in undergrad for young people who are getting into teaching to start learning about those things.

What is especially notable about these reflections is that teachers spoke about developing this critical awareness specifically as a foundation in order to meet their students' transformative social-emotional needs.

Transformative Relationship Skills: Relationship Building & Multicultural Competence

When conceptualizing transformative relationship skills, Jagers et al. (2019) emphasized the importance of not only relationship building itself, but also multicultural competence in the forging of these bonds. In an aligned way, many teachers spoke about the importance of training educators to have the skills to build classroom communities, to foster meaningful relationships, and also how to do so in a culturally competent way. First, Catherine, who is white and taught in an urban private school, shared a comment that encompassed many other perspectives in our study:

I think to be successful teacher you need to create a community in your classroom no matter what age the kids are. People need to feel safe, to have a voice, and know that they're going to be respected.

Importantly, teachers also spoke of the need for educators to build their own

multicultural competence in the building of these kinds of communities. Tina, who is White and had taught in public, private, and charter schools in both urban and suburban areas, spoke about teacher cultural competence as foundational, noting, "You should be aware of race issues in our country and how to be culturally responsive;" and Carmen commented on the need for "open forums to talk about race and cultural competency" and that "connectedness is a huge thing because if that is missing, then maybe that teacher is not ready, because that's where it starts." Carmen's emphasis on race, cultural competence and connectedness again highlight the need for teachers to develop these kinds of transformative social-emotional skills for themselves as a foundation for the benefit of their students.

Transformative Responsible Decision-Making: Collective Well-Being

Finally, recall that Jagers et al. (2019) upheld collective well-being as a key element of transformative responsible decision-making. Vida spoke of the no-excuses discipline approach at her first school that she felt was harmful and biased against students, and shared that she didn't yet have the transformative decision-making skills needed to support the well-being of her students:

I started at a school that was a mess and they were starting to use this new, no nonsense classroom management thing through the district. And all the experienced teachers were like, 'well, this is just dumb, this doesn't work,' but I didn't know. I just did what they told me to do.

Vida shared that she wished she had known more about how to challenge these kinds of policies and urged teacher preparation programs to support teachers in developing the knowledge and skills to be able to make responsible decisions for the collective well-

being of their students.

Mary, who is latina and worked in an urban public school, shared how her teacher preparation program lay a foundation of social justice, but how she wished she had been provided more support in that area. Here she explained how she was working to support the collective well-being of her students through her own responsible decision-making:

I think [our program] did talk about social justice, but not deep enough. One of the things I'm trying to get better at is teaching my students those hard parts of history that maybe they don't get taught other places. I'm trying to be better at bringing the solutions into place and how they can be a part of that solution or what they can do. With the younger kids, you definitely need to have the uplifting part at the end; they need to feel that possibility to change it, and then give them that feeling of being change-makers. I'm trying to get better at it. I'm still not quite there, but I'm learning that's what they need.

Here we see Mary grapple with how to integrate a social justice approach into her teaching in a developmentally appropriate way, illustrating again, how teacher transformative SEL (in these cases, learning how to make informed, culturally responsive, responsible decisions) is inextricably linked to students' own transformative social-emotional development and collective well-being.

Discussion & Conclusion

Focusing on teacher SEL to support student SEL is not a new idea; indeed, even though more research is needed, there is a body of scholarship documenting the ways in which teacher mindsets, well-being, morality, and SEL more generally can impact student social-emotional learning

(Blumenfeld-Jones et al., 2013; Fallona & Canniff, 2013; Kim et al., 2020; Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2014; Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Zinsser et al., 2019). In addition, a focus on training teachers to center equitable practices in their classrooms by first critically analyzing their own biases, privileges, and identities is hardly a new concept either, with a body of research supporting the benefits of this as well (Aaronson, 2018; Goodwin & Darity, 2019; Tintiangco-Cubales, 2015; Ullucci, 2010). Nonetheless, our research contributes to the field of teacher preparation in SEL by highlighting the ways in which transformative social-emotional learning (Jagers et al., 2019) can be leveraged as a framework for considering how to support teacher preparation in fostering an equity-grounded, culturally sustaining vision of social emotional learning in their classrooms. Below we present some sample recommendations that teacher educators might consider in order to cultivate each of the transformative social-emotional competencies detailed above.

First, in order to foster *critical self-analysis*, teacher preparation programs might emulate a university course reported on by Donahue-Keegan et al. (2019) that asks teacher candidates to read a chapter from *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* (Hammond, 2015), to reflect on their own backgrounds and identities, to take the Implicit Association Test (Greenwald et al., 1998) and reflect on their own biases, and then to discuss the role of privilege and power in society and schools. Similarly, programs might look to the work of Goodwin (2002) who described an assignment where teacher candidates closely examined a single student's learning trajectory and were provided with multiple opportunities to reflect on and to challenge their own biases and preconceived notions.

Second, the work of Brown et al. (2016) provides some insight into how

teachers might develop *cultural humility*, describing the ways in which guided critical reflections allowed teacher candidates to grapple with their own ideologies and positionalities as well as their students' contextual surroundings, "funds of knowledge" (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014), and family histories. Importantly, these reflections were intentionally situated within field experiences to support the transfer of this knowledge to working with children and families from a range of backgrounds.

Next, in order to foster a sense of teachers' own *critical social analysis*, teacher prep programs can engage their candidates in literature highlighting the importance of diverse representation in the classroom (Huyck et al., 2016; Jiménez, 2018), the perpetuation of systemic inequality (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Love, 2019; McGhee, 2021; Rothstein, 2017), and lesson plans that specifically address these issues (Learning for Justice, Zinn Education Project, Facing History & Ourselves).

In order to support educators in developing transformative relationship skills and *multicultural competence*, teacher preparation programs might consider how to shift courses on classroom management to include lessons on how to build a classroom community (e.g. Responsive Classroom), how to set classroom agreements (Singleton & Hayes, 2013), how to honor students' historical and cultural identities (Muhammad, 2020), and how to approach classroom community in a culturally sustaining way (Weinstein et al., 2004).

Finally, learning to be a transformative responsible decision-maker in order to ensure the *collective well-being* of one's students can involve opportunities to practice just this. For example, teacher candidates might be given case studies in which they need to consider how to navigate challenging decision-making that will impact their students so that they do not feel unprepared

when faced with these kinds of realities (Shapira-Lishchink, 2011).

This list of recommendations is of course not comprehensive as each of these competencies is complex, robust, and malleable. Nonetheless, we hope that this is a helpful place to start in considering how to support teachers' transformative SEL development. As one of the teachers we spoke to, Phoebe, aptly put it, "You shouldn't be allowed to step into a classroom if you have not done that work on yourself."

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