

Reimagining Social-Emotional Learning in K-12 Education

Addressing Racial and Social Inequities Facing Today's Youth



Introduction

Today's students need the skills to navigate unjust realities in an increasingly complex world—one where hate-fueled violence and inequities are omnipresent. 2020 has turned a magnifying glass on racial inequity in America. Recent violent events centered on minority groups have dramatically underscored the country's systemic racial injustices. Dena Simmons, assistant director at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, states, "American youth are consuming these narratives of hate with too few opportunities to digest what is happening or to recognize their agency in creating meaningful change."¹

Race equity has always been woven through the education system.² Recent events, however, have given rise to a movement—one in which educators are being called on to specifically dismantle interpersonal and institutional racism. Leading this movement are social-emotional learning organizations that are shaping the conversation and providing direction and resources as they support educators.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) has long been recognized as an integral part of equipping students with the skills to succeed in school, careers, and life. However, with this increased cultural awareness and call for action, the field of SEL in K12 education is seeing a shift—one that reimagines social emotional health through a lens of cultural self-identity, anti-bias, and social justice.

Long-standing organizations are recognizing opportunities for SEL to combat biases and interrupt inequitable practices in today's classrooms. *This paper highlights the growing movement by examining what SEL leaders, key organizations, and policy makers are doing to foster cultural awareness, teach beyond tolerance, build empathy, and inspire change.*



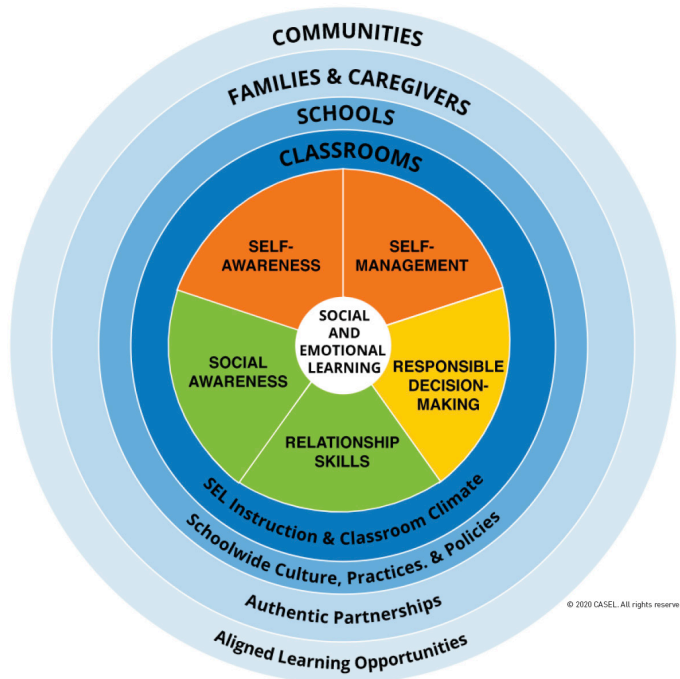
“Social-emotional learning (SEL) skills can help us build communities that foster courageous conversations across difference so that our students can confront injustice, hate, and inequity.”³

— **Dena Simmons**, assistant director at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence

1. Simmons, D. (2019). **Why We Can't Afford Whitewashed Social-Emotional Learning.**
2. Darling-Hammond, L. (1998). **Unequal Opportunity: Race and Education.** The Brookings Institution.
3. Simmons, D. (2019). **Why We Can't Afford Whitewashed Social-Emotional Learning.**

Reimagining SEL Through an Equity Lens

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines effective SEL programming as coordinated classroom, schoolwide, family, and community practices that help students develop skills within five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making.



CASEL Core SEL Competencies⁴

While the core competencies and values of SEL have not changed, violent events and a resulting cultural “wake up call” have illuminated the need to equip students with specific skills to combat hate and bias with a strong sense of self-awareness, an appreciation for diversity, and agency for change—skills which Simmons has termed “The Ultimate Life Skills.” She argues, “This will not only prepare our students to engage civically and peacefully across difference, but also to become the changemakers and leaders we need.”⁵

Field experts and leaders recognize that traditional SEL skills are not sufficient unless the values of equity are explicit in SEL education. This necessitates examining the CASEL core competencies through an equity lens:

CASEL Core Competencies: Through an Equity Lens

Self-awareness

I affirm my intersectionality and recognize my cultural assets

Self-management

I can use positive skills to cope with acculturation stress, prejudice, or discrimination

Social awareness

I recognize inequitable practices in society

Relationship skills

I can relate and find commonality with those outside of my culture or “group”

Responsible decision-making

I pursue inclusive solutions for social conflicts

From this equity lens, CASEL has emerged as a strong voice in the conversation, conducting research and speaking up for SEL as a lever for equity and social justice—a notion they have termed *transformative SEL*.

4. CASEL Core SEL Competencies

5. Simmons, D. (2019). *Why We Can't Afford Whitewashed Social-Emotional Learning*

Transformative SEL

In a 2019 article, CASEL founder Robert Jagers and his colleagues introduced the concept of “transformative SEL” as learning that “focuses on issues of race and ethnicity as a first step toward addressing the broader range of extant inequities.”⁶

CASEL is leading collaborative efforts with partner organizations to develop a transformative SEL framework. Jagers argues that SEL “has the potential to help mitigate the interrelated legacies of racial and class oppression” and that “currently, that potential is underrealized.”⁷

“Transformative SEL connotes 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 society problems.”⁸

— Robert J. Jagers, CASEL

Transformative SEL is opening the conversation to bring about change and make SEL more relevant to issues of collective well-being. The field is expanding to include others that have been working to help today's students be socially aware and understand the world around them. By calling attention to marginalized groups, transformative SEL is teaching empathetic and actionable responses—skills that today's students need to combat bias and enact change.



Exploring the SEL Landscape

Organizations and Movements

Many organizations are newly prioritizing social justice rather than taking a secondary approach. While many established organizations have extensive experience in the world of SEL, the following organizations' initiatives, programs, and projects exemplify this focus on societal and systemic racial inequity.

CASEL CARES Initiative

CASEL's network of practitioners, policymakers, and researchers is working to connect educators with experts to address the new needs of SEL. CASEL recently moved the needle with a new **SEL Roadmap** and an influential **webinar series** aimed at shining a light on the role of SEL to combat racism and engage students in issues of social justice. Karen Niemi, CASEL President & CEO, affirmed a growing understanding that “there is no system more important than education to fighting against racism. We believe that our work in social-emotional learning must actively contribute to anti-racism.”⁹

6. Robert J. Jagers, Deborah Rivas-Drake & Brittney Williams (2019) **Transformative Social and Emotional Learning (SEL): Toward SEL in Service of Educational Equity and Excellence**
7. Jagers, R., Rivers-Drake, D., & Borowski, T. (2018). **Equity & Social and Emotional Learning: A Cultural Analysis**
8. Jagers, R., Rivers-Drake, D., & Borowski, T. (2018)
9. CASEL. (2020, June 12). **CASEL CARES: SEL As a Lever for Equity and Social Justice [Video]**

“SEL has the potential to do a lot of things. It has the potential to help people move from anger to agency and then to action...having the moral courage to act in the face of challenges, including enormous challenges of racism, irrespective of the color of your skin. These are all important things that matter, and we see SEL as a tool for anti-racism.”¹⁰

— Karen Niemi, CASEL President and CEO

The existing CASEL framework anchors their work, which demands that transformative SEL provides more complex skill development, engages more actively within the community, pays attention to places of inequity, and inspects the system, who it works for, and what it will take to be more equitable for all.

CASEL is currently working to update the definition of each competency to explicitly address SEL as a level for equity, and more wholly encompass the vision of SEL as being a transformative tool for equity and social justice:¹¹

Updated CASEL core competencies as a lever for equity

Self-awareness	Racial, classed, gendered identities Examining beliefs and biases Integrating personal and social identities
Self-management	Collective agency in addressing challenges to achieve collective goals and aspirations
Social awareness	Belonging Recognizing situational demands and opportunities Social interdependence
Relationship skills	Cultural competency Effectively navigate settings with differing social and cultural norms Develop relationships across difference
Responsible decision-making	Distributive justice/collective well-being Critically examining ethical standards and behavioral norms Ethical responsibility Analyzing interpersonal and institutional impacts



National Equity Project

As a long-standing organization for social change, the National Equity Project equips leaders to transform their systems into equitable, resilient, and liberating environments. Recently they partnered with the BELE Network to develop the **BELE Framework: A Guide to Building Equitable Learning Environments** in an effort to “overcome this period of crises—COVID-19 and systemic racism—and to restore our collective future.”¹² This **framework** is rooted in their belief that “there has never been a greater time to come together and rebuild the education system into one that truly serves every student.”¹³

10. CASEL. (2020, June 12).

11. CASEL. (2020, June 12).

12. (2020, July 20). **The BELE Framework: A Guide to Building Equitable Learning Environments**

13. **National Equity Project.**

With roots in social-emotional learning competencies, the framework emphasizes a commitment to student engagement and agency while providing a sense of optimism for the future, self-acceptance, and pride in one's multiple identities, as well as understanding one's own and others' cultural histories and contributions.

Teaching Tolerance

Begun by the Southern Poverty Law Center in 1991, Teaching Tolerance seeks to help educate youth to be active participants in a diverse democracy. As the national conversation on anti-racism and social justice becomes louder, Teaching Tolerance is answering the call with important, timely resources.

The **Social Justice Standards** are a road map for anti-bias education at every stage of K-12 instruction. Divided into four domains—identity, diversity, justice, and action—these Standards provide a common language and organizational structure educators can use to guide curriculum development and make schools more just and equitable.

Committee for Children

Committee for Children is a nonprofit organization that advocates for policies to advance the safety and well-being of children through SEL. They recently published a **policy brief** detailing their investigation of social-emotional learning policy and how it can contribute to evidence-based, in-school racial equity strategies. In this review they examine and recommend policy areas to promote racial equity in K-12 education, and assess the role of SEL in supporting these strategies.

National Education Association

As the harsh reality of racism in America is thrust to the forefront, educators are talking about it openly—many for the first time. The National Education Association is bringing together like-minded educators with its **EdJustice League**, a movement designed to empower local communities and turn attention to “a long legacy of racism, violence and white supremacy in our

communities.”¹⁴ The movement connects local activists and advocates, and rallies educators with the support and resources they need to create positive, safe, and affirming school environments.



Affecting Change Through Policy

Policy makers and activists are joining leading SEL organizations to affect change, as they increasingly recognize the impacts of racial trauma on academic and societal opportunity.¹⁵ The following are just a few examples of policy shifts towards culturally responsive teaching practices that strengthen transformative SEL competencies of self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills.

The New York State Education Department convened a panel of experts, including SEL leaders, to create their **Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework**. This framework sets the standard for student-centered learning environments that affirm racial, linguistic, and cultural identities; develop students' abilities to connect across lines of difference; elevate historically marginalized voices; and empower students as agents of social change.

The **Federal Teacher Diversity and Retention Act** authorizes grants to include culturally responsive teaching as well as SEL competencies in educator certification or preparation programs.

14. EdJustice League: **Building Power in Our Communities**. (2020, August 11).

15. García, E. E. & Ozturk, M. (2017). **An asset-based approach to Latino education in the United States: Understanding gaps and advances**.

Minnesota companion bills **HF6** and **SF31** were both introduced this year, requiring comprehensive plans to improve teaching and learning to include culturally responsive pedagogy. These bills seek to establish mandatory standards of social, emotional, and cognitive development as part of curriculum, as this is proven to bolster our community, society, and workforce. In New York, companion bills **A03648** and **S02937** seek to implement a culturally responsive education curriculum and standards aligned with transformative SEL.



Transformative SEL Resources for Educators

Themes of violence and racism in today's news will inevitably arise in classroom conversation. Frameworks, programs, and policies provide guidance and direction for transformative SEL, but educators need a myriad of support and resources to draw from to help them navigate and facilitate discussions about racial and social inequities.

For some educators, initiating tough conversations about race and bias can prove to be a barrier to truly transformative SEL in the classroom. Sometimes they don't know where to start, or they lack the confidence to tackle complex topics like racial injustice and

historical bias. The following organizations are among the growing list of agencies that offer no-cost, timely, robust resources to jump-start the conversation and provide ongoing support while promoting student agency for change.

The New York Times

The New York Times has published a collection of videos ("**25 Mini-Films for Exploring Race, Bias and Identity with Students**"), asking students to challenge their own biases and prejudices while building self-awareness. To help educators make the most of these films, they provide several teaching ideas, related readings, and student activities.

The Anti-Defamation League

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) was founded on a mission to "fight hate for good." They are continually developing new programs, including **A Classroom of Difference**, an anti-bias training program that promotes respect, inclusiveness, and civility in the pre-K through 12th grade classroom. Other resources include timely anti-bias tools and strategies, such as guides to **Creating an Anti-Bias Learning Environment** and **Helping Students Make Sense of News Stories about Bias and Injustice**.

Empowering Education

Empowering Education recently stated that social-emotional learning starts with bringing an end to racism and injustice. They have collected a **set of books for adults and young people to read**, believing that people should "grow up in a world where they feel valued, respected, and heard no matter their skin color."¹⁶ They have also vetted a **list of resources** for educators who wish to implement social justice-oriented SEL in their own classrooms and communities.

Aperture Education

Aperture Education's recent publications include a how-to guide for educators about **Promoting Equity**

16. Howard, C., Eaton, W., & Teitelbaum, N. (2020, June 23). **SEL and Racial Equity: Social Emotional Learning Curriculum for Kids**

Through Social and Emotional Learning. The DESSA, their flagship social emotional learning assessment, has recently been reexamined through an equity lens in their published webinar **Advancing Equity with the DESSA: Practical Applications to a Crucial Issue**. Furthering the conversation, their resources aim to equip educators with “new insights, tools, and techniques” to advance the goal of equity and social justice in education.¹⁷

“SEL & equity when interconnected provides one of the missing pieces of education. Students and adults have had to leave parts of their identity at the door. This is irresponsible. We need to address all parts of their identity.”

— **Eric Moore**, Chief of Accountability Research and Equity, Minneapolis Public Schools

Looking Ahead

SEL leaders recognize that today’s students require an education that is directly relevant to their lives and explicitly addresses the sociopolitical context.

So what does this look like when transformative SEL empowers students and communities to become agents of change? Some districts have already answered the call, equipping themselves and their students to operate for social equity and justice. A grassroots movement of teachers, parents, administrators, and community members in the **Rochester City School District** was inspired by student actions to protest racial injustice and police brutality. Their work eventually evolved into a full-day event: Black Lives Matter at School: A Day of Understanding and Affirmation.

While a single day is not enough, this is a valuable example of collective action within a school district for racial justice and racial equity. It showcases how the current work of SEL leaders can equip students with the social and emotional aptitude to recognize injustice and demand change.

According to the National Equity Project, the potential for change will only be realized if we intentionally prioritize educational equity and belonging as a primary goal of social-emotional learning and strategically apply what we know from research on the effects of race and racism, the relationship between culture and learning, and the neuroscience of healthy brain development.¹⁸

Looking ahead, SEL leaders will need to continue to develop resources and strategies that maintain, fight for, and protect the new urgency that has emerged around social and racial justice. With this collective effort, we can reimagine SEL and empower agents of change for a better tomorrow.



17. **Aperture Education: SEL and Equity**. (2019, October 23).

18. **National Equity Project: Social Emotional Learning and Equity**.