

From Awareness to Action: Bridging the CASEL Framework for SEL and Cultural Responsiveness

Dr. Sarah L. S. Rothstein

Dr. Judith Nagel

October 23, 2025



Education & Licensure

- High School Principal at Maranatha Christian Academy in Brooklyn Park, MN
 - 13 years as School Counselor
 - Expertise in
 - Student Support Services
 - Data-Driven Leadership
 - Supporting Neurodiverse Learners
 - Guiding Schools in Effective SEL Programming
 - Passionate about mental health and SEL!
- Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, **College of Saint Benedict**
 - Bachelor of Arts in Communication, **College of Saint Benedict**
 - Master of Arts in Counseling, **Marquette University**
 - Doctor of Education in K-12 Administration, **Bethel University**
 - **Licensure:** K-12 School Counselor, K-12 Principal

Higher Education Experience

- Adjunct Instructor & Dissertation Advisor/Reader, **Bethel University**
- Adjunct Faculty: Dissertation Chair, **UMASS Global**
- Dissertation Advisor/Reader, **Concordia University**
- Former Program Director, M.A. in Special Education; Adjunct Instructor, Field Specialist & University Supervisor, **Saint Mary's University**



Administrative, Teaching & Board Experience

- Over 23 years of administrative leadership, serving as Director, Principal, Assistant Principal, Program Supervisor Level IV, and District Supervisor across Pre K through higher education
- 20 years of teaching experience spanning K–12 and higher education, plus paraprofessional roles
- 8 years of service on three governing boards

Education and Licensure

- Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, **University of Minnesota-Duluth**
- Masters of Science in Special Education/EBD, **Minnesota State University**
- Doctor of Education Leadership, Policy & Administration, **University of St. Thomas**
- **Licensure:** EBD and SLD, Director of Special Education, Principal, and Superintendent

Explore

the relationship between the CASEL Framework for SEL and culturally responsive teaching practices

Understand

how teachers' perceived cultural competence influences their implementation of culturally responsive SEL practices for diverse student groups

Recognize

the extent to which culturally responsive SEL practices influence student outcomes

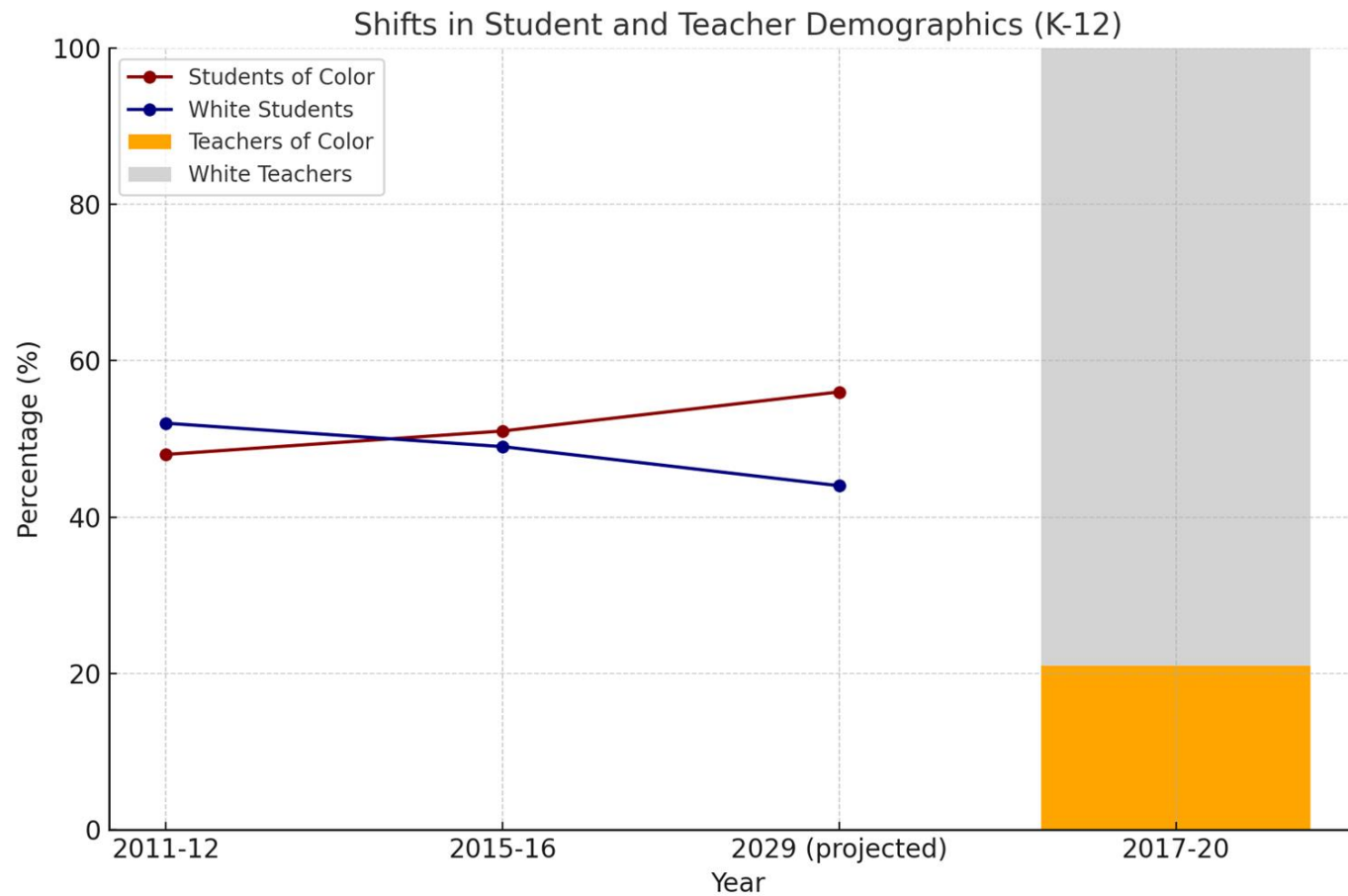
Learn

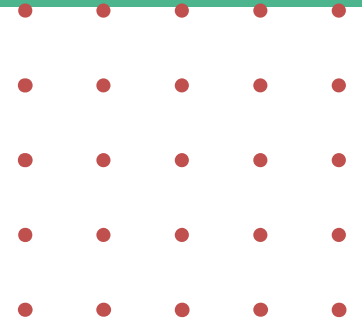
practical strategies to strengthen culturally responsive SEL implementation

The Problem

- Teachers struggle to find culturally responsive ways of meeting the social and emotional needs of students in the classroom (Barnes & McCallops, 2019).
 - Lack of teacher diversity
 - Achievement gap
 - Mental health gap

A Growing Diversity Gap





The Problem

- These gaps are often wider for students who receive special education services, especially those of color.
- Students with disabilities can be at a higher risk for mental health challenges.
- The mental health gap is often related to a lack of access to appropriate related services (e.g., counseling, psychological services) as mandated by IDEA.
- Special educators need to be trained to differentiate between a disability-related challenge (e.g., social communication difficulties related to Autism) and a cultural difference (e.g., a culturally appropriate way of showing respect or emotional expression)

How might these gaps look in your district or building?
What data would confirm or challenge that?

The Importance

- It is essential for educators to meet the SEL needs of all students
- There is a lack of SEL research that can be generalized to students of color
- Inform transformative SEL practices in schools
 - Administrators/School Counselors
 - Teachers

Linking CASEL & Culturally Responsive Practices



When you hear the term SEL, do you first think of student skills, teacher skills, or curriculum?

Introduction to Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

- Social & emotional development begins in early childhood.
 - Children begin communicating with adults and peers
- Development is shaped by genetics and experiences, including individual, situational, and cultural factors.
- There is a need for schools to help grow student's social and emotional development.

Introduction to Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

- SEL is a process where “young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes” to create positive self-identities, understand emotions, set and achieve personal goals, develop and maintain relationships, and make good decisions (CASEL, 2021d, para. 1).
- Development is ongoing and differs by (Saavedra & Nolan, 2018):
 - Culture
 - Age
 - Gender



Introduction to Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

- Benefits of SEL:
 - Increased Academic Achievement
 - Decrease in Conduct Behaviors
 - Decrease in Mental Health Problems

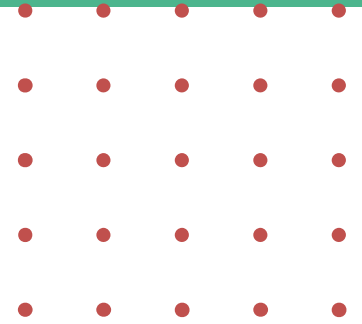
Introduction to Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

- SEL skills are crucial for students with disabilities, however their acquisition and application may require explicit instruction, adaptation, and accommodations based on their Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals
- SEL goals often align with common IEP areas, such as social skills, self-regulation, transition planning, and executive function.
- Developmental Differences: The factors listed (culture, age, gender) are highly relevant, but in special education, you must also consider the specific developmental, cognitive, or social-emotional profile of the student.

Overview of CASEL Framework

- The CASEL Framework was created from 25 years of SEL research.
- 5 interrelated core competencies
 - Self-Awareness: Personal strengths and weaknesses, goal-setting, values
 - Self-Management: Stress management, regulate behaviors and emotions
 - Social Awareness: Perspective taking, understand social norms
 - Relationship Skills: Form and maintain relationships, effective communication, conflict resolution
 - Responsible Decision-Making: Determine consequences, align ethics and values to decisions





Classroom Instruction & Culture

- SEL needs to be explicitly taught to students
 - Focused curriculum
 - Integrated with academic instruction
- A focus on adult SEL competence

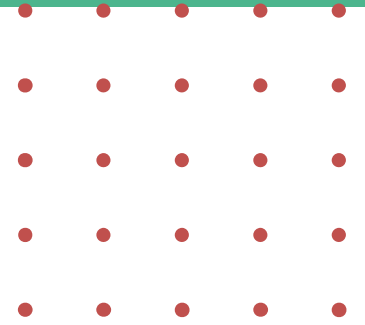
Schoolwide Culture, Practices, & Policies

- Develop teachers' SEL skills
- Implement SEL within the school's practices and policies
 - School norms
 - Values
 - Discipline policies
 - Conflict resolution
- Meet the needs of all students in a tiered system of support (i.e., MTSS)



Partnership with Parents & Caregivers

- A shared vision and goals for SEL development, coupled with a shared responsibility
- Educate parents on SEL
- A strong focus on building strong partnerships with families



Community Partnerships

- Can provide schools with additional resources
- Extracurricular as avenues for students to practice SEL skills
- Collaborate with partnerships who share a similar vision to reach a common goal

Overview of Transformative SEL

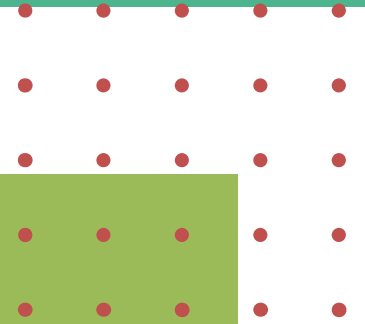
- Transformative SEL: A "process whereby students and teachers build strong, respectful relationships founded on an appreciation of similarities and differences, learn to critically examine root causes of inequity, and develop collaborative solutions to community and societal problems" (Jagers et al., 2018, p. 2; Saavedra & Nolan, 2018, p. 2).
- Transformative SEL practices:
 - Use lived experiences and prior knowledge
 - Encourage student voice and participation
 - Classroom community building
 - Encourage adult SEL

Overview of Transformative SEL

- Valuing disability identity: Encourage students to share their experiences with their disability, accommodations, and the special education process. This validates their identity and prior knowledge about navigating systems.
- Encourage student voice and participation
 - Self-Advocacy & IEP: Transformative SEL is an ideal framework for explicitly teaching self-determination skills.
- Students must learn to critically examine their IEP goals, voice their preferences for accommodations, and co-facilitate or lead their own IEP meetings.
 - Understandably this varies based on factors such as the student's age, developmental, communication, behavioral and/or other skill areas.
 - Consider person centered planning and building student advocacy at any age and ability level

Overview of Transformative SEL

- Classroom community building & increasing inclusive settings:
 - Build communities that explicitly address and dismantle ableism (discrimination against people with disabilities).
 - Community building must promote respect for neurodiversity and physical differences.
 - Use literature, discussion, and role-playing to discuss and challenge stereotypes related to disability and to promote peer mentorship between students with and without IEPs.

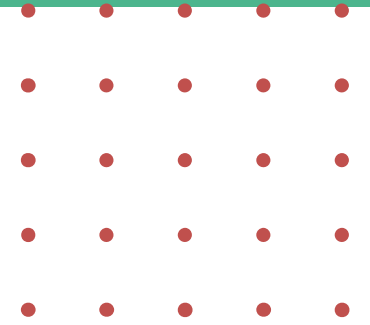


Cultural Competence Defined

- "The ability to critically examine the social and cultural identities of oneself and others, understand and appreciate diversity from a historically grounded and strengths-focused lens, recognize and respond to cultural demands and opportunities, and build relationships across cultural backgrounds" (Schlund et al., 2020, p. 10).

Teachers' Cultural Competence

- There is a large gap between teachers' and students' cultural backgrounds.
- Different cultures view and define SEL competencies differently and place different levels of importance on SEL competencies.
- Because of the gap, cultural competency is important to SEL instruction.



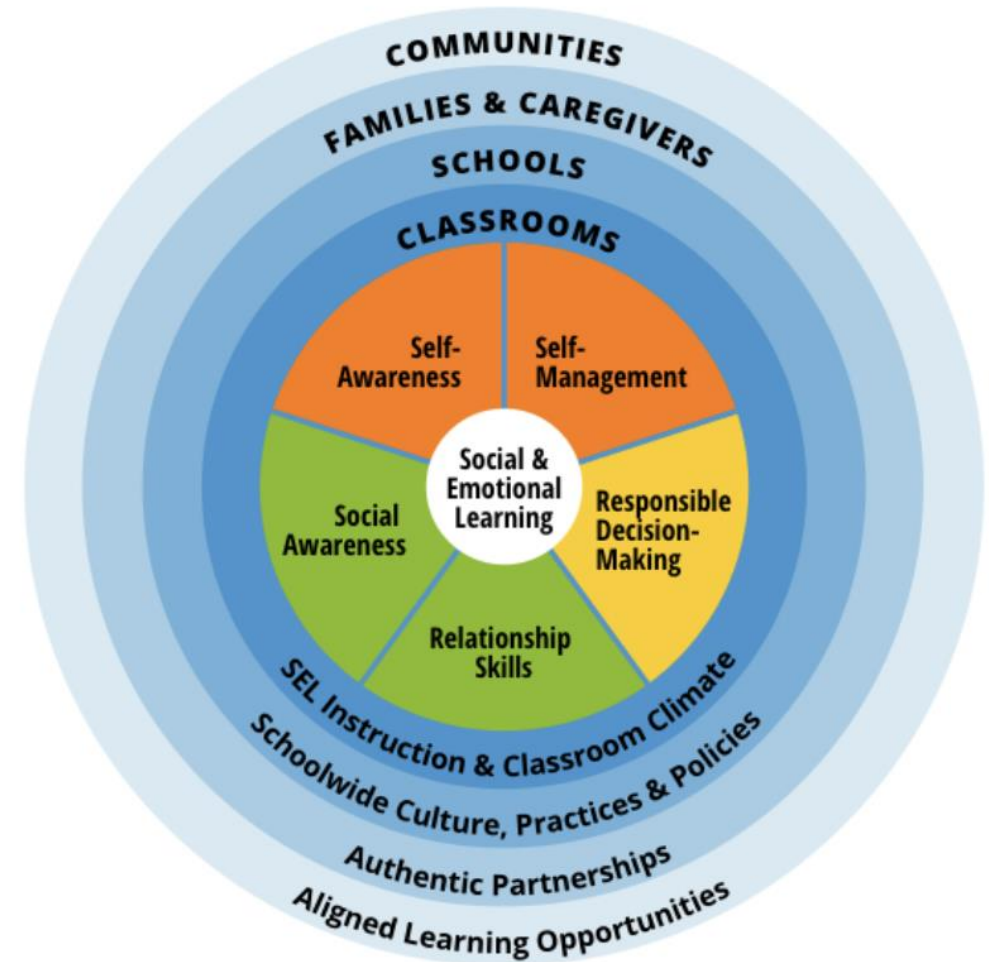
CASEL Competencies as Culturally Responsive

- Self-Awareness → Affirming cultural identity
- Social Awareness → Perspective-taking across cultures
- Relationship Skills → Building trust with families from diverse backgrounds

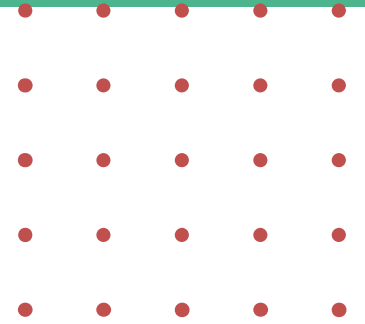
Think - Pair - Share

Pick one CASEL Competency and brainstorm a culturally responsive classroom strategy

- Examples:
 - Using student literature
 - Community-based projects



Teachers' Perceived Cultural Competence & Implementation of Culturally Responsive SEL Practices



Purpose of the Study

- To explore the relationship between teachers' perceived cultural competency and the self-reported use of culturally responsive social-emotional learning (SEL) practices in classrooms.
- To learn if there is a relationship between perceived implementation of culturally responsive SEL practices and students' SEL outcomes.

Research Design & Sample

Quantitative cross-sectional survey design.

Research Sample

Research Question 1

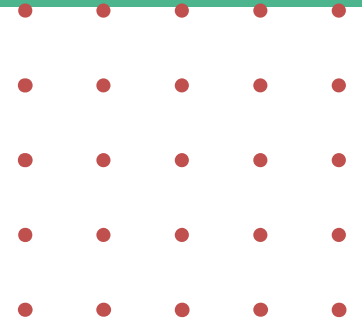
- All licensed teachers in the state of Minnesota
- 97,352 educators

Research Question 2

- Teachers employed during the 2021-2022 school year by districts with a minimum of 30 teachers who completed the survey

AND

- Students who are enrolled in the same school district with a minimum of 25 students from different race/ethnic backgrounds



Measures

1. Teacher Survey
 - a. 11 demographic questions
 - b. question related to the level of perceived SEL implementation at the district level
 - c. Educators Scale of Student Diversity (ESSD) Survey (Patel, 2017) – measures teachers' perception of cultural competence
 - d. Teachers' perception of implementation of culturally responsive SEL practices
2. Minnesota Student Survey (MSS)
 - a. Students' SEL outcomes

Teacher Participants

- 97,352 surveys sent, 2,176 surveys returned (2.24% return rate)
 - 828 unfinished surveys removed
 - ***1,348 total teacher participants***
- Demographics

		Total	%
Race	White	1,258	93%
	BIPOC	90	7%
Ethnicity	Hispanic/Latino/a	31	2%
	Not Hispanic/Latino/a	1,317	98%

Student Participants

- 5th (**5,360 students**), 8th (**7,745 students**), 9th (**6,039 students**), and 11th (**5,161 students**) grade students from the following MN Public School Districts
 - Anoka-Hennepin
 - Minneapolis
 - Osseo
 - Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan
 - South Washington County
- Students' racial/ethnic groups:
 - Black, African or African American
 - Asian, South Asian or Asian American
 - White
 - Hispanic or Latino/a
 - American Indian or Alaskan Native

RQ1: Culturally Responsive SEL Practices

1. I encourage student reflection on their own lives and society.
2. I connect students' cultural assets to academic concepts and skills.
3. I am able to create meaningful relationships with parents culturally different from myself.
4. I allow my students to productively challenge inequities that they see in my school and/or classroom.
5. I use data in order to identify disparities among my students.
6. I actively encourage students to share about their experiences and cultural backgrounds.
7. I ensure that students can see themselves in my classroom.
8. I facilitate learning about students' own culture and the culture of others.
9. I encourage students to engage in collaborative problem-solving.

RQ1: Summary of Results

RQ1: Is there a relationship between teachers' perceived cultural competence and the implementation of culturally responsive SEL practices, conditional on teachers' race?

BIPOC Teachers	Showed the strongest correlation between cultural competence and culturally responsive SEL implementation.
White Teachers	Showed a moderate but weaker correlation.
Hispanic/Latino Teachers	Showed a moderate correlation, though some results were non-significant due to small sample size.
Not Hispanic/Latino Teachers	Similar to White teachers, with moderate correlations.

Impact on Student Outcomes



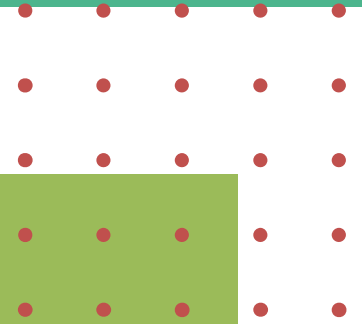
RQ2: Is there a significant relationship between teachers' perceived implementation of culturally responsive SEL practices and students' SEL outcomes in Minnesota public school districts, conditional on students' race?

RQ2 Findings: Teachers' Culturally Responsive (CR)-SEL Practices & Student Outcomes (by Race)

Self-Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Positive for White, Black, Asian, and American Indian students.● Not significant for Hispanic/Latino students.
Self-Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Positive for Black and Hispanic/Latino students.● No significant relationship for other groups.
Social Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Positive for White and American Indian students.● Negative for Hispanic/Latino students.● No significant findings for Black or Asian students.
Relationship Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Positive for White and American Indian students.● Negative for Hispanic/Latino students.● No significant findings for Black or Asian students.
Responsible Decision-Making	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Negative for Asian students.● No significant relationships for other groups.

RQ2 Findings: Teachers' CR-SEL Practices & Student Outcomes (by Race)

Academic Achievement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Positive for White, Black/African American, and American Indian/Alaskan Native students.• Negative for Asian students when teachers emphasized reflection-based practices.• No significant effect for Hispanic/Latino students.
School Connectedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Positive across all racial/ethnic groups. This was the most consistent finding, showing that CR-SEL practices supported belonging for every group.



Key Takeaway

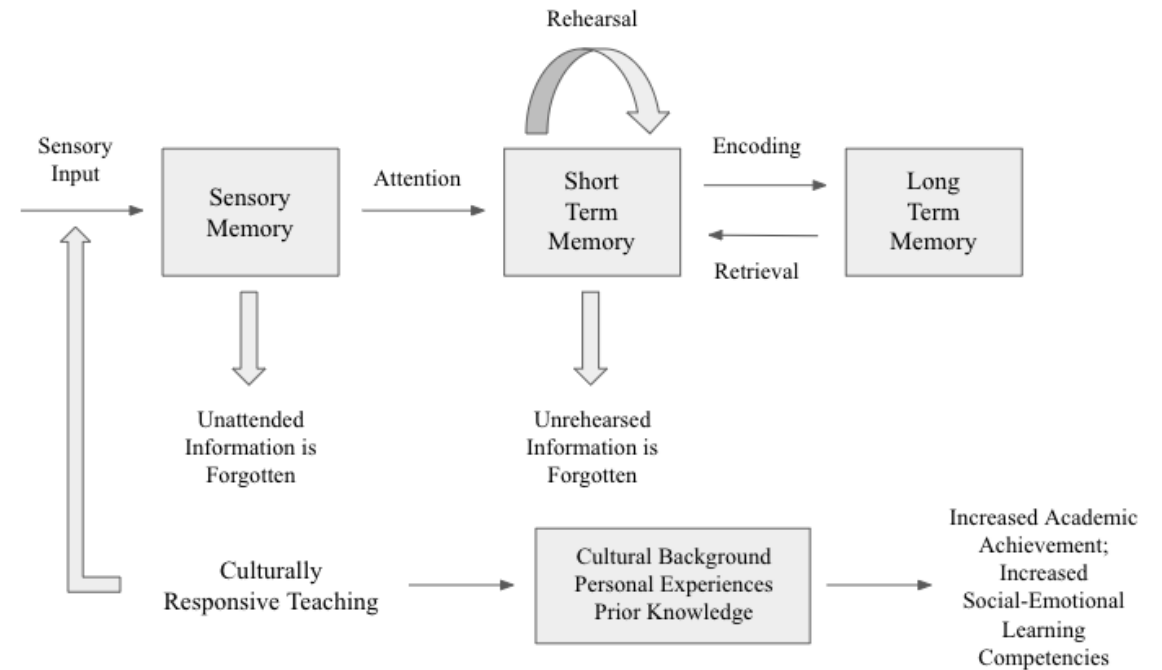
Teachers' implementation of CR-SEL practices generally supported positive SEL outcomes, but the effects varied by student race. Some practices produced unexpected or negative results, especially for Asian and Hispanic/Latino students, highlighting the importance of truly culturally grounded implementation rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

Based on your experience within your role(s), do these research findings surprise you? Why or why not?

Practical Strategies for Implementation

Conceptual Framework

- Culturally Responsive Teaching (Vavrus, 2018)
- Stage Model of Information Processing Theory (Atkinson & Shiffrin, 1968)



Conclusion from the Study

There was a perception among teachers that they are culturally competent and implementing culturally responsive SEL practices, however, the perceived implementation of culturally responsive SEL practices were not positively enhancing student outcomes across all racial/ethnic groups.

Teachers' Perceptions of Cultural Competency

- Students of color are more likely to be successful when they have culturally competent teachers.
- Without culturally competent teachers, students are more likely to have negative experiences, leading to:
 - Lack of engagement
 - Decreased motivation
 - Increase in the achievement gap
- Educators could benefit from professional development.

Provide Ongoing Professional Development (Overview)

- Key focus: Build cultural competency and equitable SEL practices through sustained, embedded professional development.
- Core Strategies:
 - Embed professional development within the context of the school and district
 - Integrate guided self-reflection on cultural beliefs and biases
 - Practice how to teach and model culturally responsive SEL skills
 - Use data to examine root causes and measure progress in SEL goals

Strengthening Educator SEL and Equity Practices

- Focus Areas:
 - Reflect on adult SEL competence and how it impacts equity and relationships
 - Examine classroom and schoolwide practices for inclusivity and fairness
 - Use progress-monitoring tools (e.g., rating scales, frequency data) to assess SEL skill growth
 - Identify whether lack of student SEL progress stems from a *skill deficit* (requiring more explicit instruction) or *cultural mismatch*

Addressing Bias and Disproportionality

- Strategies:
 - Review of district data for disproportionality in special education identification, placement, and discipline
 - Train staff to recognize implicit bias and its influence on referrals and evaluations.
 - Reflect on cultural norms (eye contact, communication, emotional expression) that may be misinterpreted as behavior problems
 - Promote equity within IEP team decision-making and family communication

Professional Development for Special Educators: Explicit Instruction

- Practical Applications:
 - Write measurable IEP goals that embed SEL skills
 - Use explicit instruction models, gradual release of responsibility (e.g. I Do, We Do, You Do) and/or task analysis to teach SEL skills that are often challenging for students such as:
 - self-regulation
 - perspective-taking
 - problem-solving
 - Differentiate instruction using visual supports, social stories, assistive technology, and adjusted learning intervals

Linking SEL and Behavior Supports

- Integration Tips:
 - Connect SEL goals with Functional Behavior Assessments (FBAs) and Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs)
 - including using visual schedules
 - social stories
 - assistive technology, or shorter instructional periods to meet diverse cognitive and behavioral needs
 - Use SEL instruction proactively for skill replacement and self-regulation
 - Model empathy and patience—educator stress directly impacts student relationships

Culturally Responsive IEP Practice

- Implementation Strategies:
 - Adapt SEL curricula and materials to reflect students' cultural and family values
 - Model how to write culturally responsive IEP goals aligned with family expectations
 - Provide ongoing coaching on equitable and relationship-centered special education practices

Increase Multicultural Understanding

1. Step out of your comfort zone
2. Self-reflection
3. Perspective-taking

Teachers' social-emotional competency (SEC) is an important part of building strong teacher-student relationships and furthering transformative SEL.

Conclusion from the Study

For Black, African, or African American, Asian, South Asian, or Asian American and Hispanic or Latino/a students, when teachers reported higher levels of implementing culturally responsive SEL practices, students were more likely to self-report lower levels of SEL outcomes.

Teacher diversity gap between students and teachers exists in the state of Minnesota and schools tend to be culturally relevant to White students.

Increase Teacher Diversity

- When students' racial or ethnic identities match that of their teachers, students are more likely to experience greater happiness, increased motivation, and feeling cared for by their teacher often due to an increased ability of teachers of color to relate to students from a similar background (Egalite & Kisida, 2017; Rasheed et al., 2020).

Strengthen Recruitment Pipelines

- Build partnerships with historically Black colleges and universities, Hispanic-Serving Institutions,, and tribal colleges to recruit teacher candidates of color (Ingersoll et al., 2019).
- Develop “Grow Your Own” educator programs that identify and support high school or paraprofessional staff from diverse backgrounds to enter teacher preparation programs.
- Offer paid student teaching or residency programs to reduce financial barriers.

Why it Matters:

- Research shows that targeted recruitment and financial incentives directly increase the number of diverse candidates entering the profession (Carver-Thomas, 2018).

Increase Teacher Diversity

Barriers that impact a school district's ability to recruit and retain non-White teachers (Carver-Thomas, 2018):

1. The % of people of color to complete their 4-year college degree, including teacher education programs, is low.
2. Less students are enrolling in teacher education programs (both White and non-White) due to increasing debt among college graduates.
3. School conditions

Create Inclusive & Supportive School Climates

- Conduct equity audits and climate surveys to assess how inclusive the school environment feels for teachers of color.
- Promote collaborative professional cultures rather than competitive or isolated ones.
- Ensure that school discipline, parent communication, and instructional practices reflect cultural responsiveness for both staff and students.

Why it Matters:

- Retention of teachers of color is significantly higher in schools with strong administrative support and inclusive staff communities (Grissom, 2018).

Review Hiring & Evaluation Practices for Bias

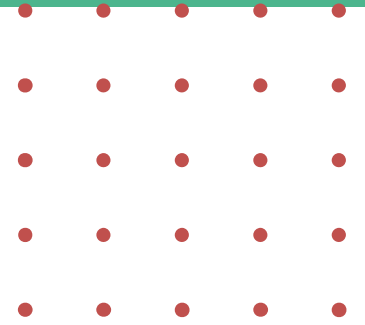
- Implement diverse hiring committees trained in implicit bias.
- Use structured interviews that focus on core teaching competencies rather than subjective “fit.”
- Review evaluation data for racial disparities and ensure fairness in feedback.

Why it Matters:

- Hiring processes often unintentionally exclude diverse candidates when cultural bias or “fit” language is used (NCTR, 2022).

Conclusion from the Study

When teachers reported higher levels of implementing culturally responsive SEL practices, students in their school district were more likely to agree that they felt their teachers were interested to them as a person (i.e., school connectedness) regardless of their race/ethnicity.

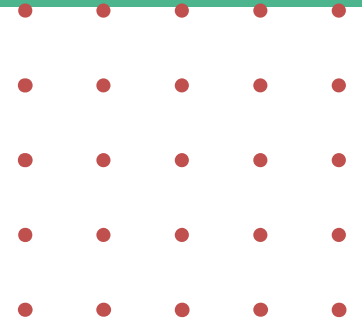


School Connectedness

- The results confirmed prior research in which students who consistently participated in social-emotional learning activities were more likely to experience a positive sense of community and safety where students of color could explore their identity (Rivas-Drake et al., 2020).
 - Encouraging student voice and sharing
 - Setting goals
 - Creating positive behavior routines

Implement Research-Based Culturally Responsive SEL

- Consider adopting CASEL's systemic SEL model (CASEL, 2023b; Mahoney et al., 2021):
 - Build foundational support
 - Strengthen adult SEL
 - Engage all areas of the school
 - Utilize data for continuous improvement



Other SEL Practices

- Explicit classroom instruction
- Adults' modeling SEL competencies
- Incorporating SEL into academic subject areas
- Developing teachers' SEL skills through professional development and collaboration
- Educating parents on SEL and promoting a collaborative partnership so that they can encourage these skills at home

Implement Research-Based Culturally Responsive SEL

- Secure a culturally responsive, research-based SEL curriculum that is vertically aligned PreK-12.
 - The chosen curriculum should affirm the cultural diversity of the student population and be relevant to students' experiences, backgrounds, and communities (CASEL 2023k; Rivas-Drake et al., 2021)
 - The curriculum should be sequenced and students should participate in active forms of learning where the skills are practiced (CASEL, 2023h; Mahoney et al., 2021).

Address Funding Challenges

Step #1: Consensus is needed from district and school administration on the importance of SEL.

- Research federal and state grant programs that focus on students' mental health and wellbeing.
- Research specific government grants to see if your district qualifies.
 - Education Innovation and Research (EIR) Program
 - Supporting Effective Instruction State Grants under Part A of Title II
 - The Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP) under Part B of Title VI
 - The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Title II Formula Grant Program
 - Title I, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act
 - Alternative Delivery of Specialized Instructional Services
- Seek private donations and gifts from families and community members.

Implement Research-Based Culturally Responsive SEL

- Communicate that SEL is "a lever for equity" by creating “core values, commitments, and standards [that] align SEL implementation with equity goals” (Schlund et al., 2020, p. 8).
- Prioritize enhancing adult SEL and cultural competency.
 - Examining one’s biases and beliefs
 - Implementing practices in which schools are teaching prosocial skills rather than solely focusing on student discipline
 - Collaborate to build a district-wide equitable school culture
- Encourage students' voice and allow for students to create positive change within their school.

CASEL Resources for Educators

- CASEL provides free tools to educators:
 - Guide to Schoolwide SEL: [Social and Emotional Learning | CASEL - Casel Schoolguide](#)
 - [Program Guide - CASEL Program Guide](#)

A Call for Structural Change

- State-level policy for SEL and other initiatives should explicitly reference and align with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).
 - This ensures that the implementation models consider the unique needs and rights of students with disabilities including access to SEL as a related service or a goal within an Individualized Education Program (IEP).
- Curriculum must also be disability-aware and accessible. It should include materials and representation that affirm and reflect the diverse experiences of students with special needs.

A Call for Structural Change

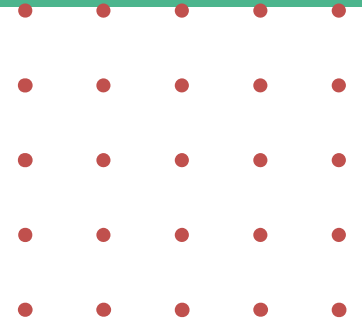
- SEL competencies should be viewed as critical skills for independence and self-advocacy.
- Policies must support the meaningful participation of parents/guardians of students in the IEP process, transition planning, and overall school decision-making, ensuring communication is provided in their native language and mode of communication.
- Policies should continually promote the recruitment and retention of highly-qualified special education teachers and related service providers (e.g., school psychologists, speech-language pathologists). A diverse workforce is better equipped to understand and meet the needs of all students with disabilities.

1. A qualitative research study from the perspective of parents from different racial and ethnic backgrounds to explore meaningful transformative SEL teaching practices.
2. Replicate this study utilizing specific school districts that implement an SEL curriculum and have a diverse student population.
3. Address how understanding culturally responsive teaching practices translates into positive student outcomes in the classroom, and what conditions must be met in order for these outcomes to occur.
4. A case study of a school that is currently implementing culturally responsive teaching practices and a research-based SEL program with fidelity.

Implications for Further Research

Conclusion

- The impact that cultural responsiveness has on teachers' ability to implement culturally responsive SEL practices in the classroom is evident based on the results of the current study.
- These practices are not positively impacting students' SEL competency outcomes across all students' race and ethnicity groups as expected.
- Therefore, even when teachers perceive that they are implementing culturally responsive strategies in the classroom, these strategies are not effectively meeting students' social and emotional competencies.



Stop - Start - Continue

- What will I **STOP** doing because of this new learning?
- What will I **START** doing immediately?
- What proven practice will I **CONTINUE** (and maybe enhance)?

Questions?