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# Critical- Diversity, Belongingness, Inclusion, and Equity SEL

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Critical- Diversity, Belongingness, Inclusion, and Equity SEL

By

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We certify that we have read this document and approve it as

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The social and civil unrest across the United States has ignited a call for more school-based social and emotional learning (SEL) frameworks and practices that are social justice-oriented. The Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning (CASEL) is one of the organizations that chose to revisit their existing SEL framework and introduced *transformative* SEL as an attempt to take steps toward creating a more social justice-oriented approach. This critique will review the SEL landscape of some pre-K-12 SEL programs and their methods to highlight gaps and limitations in the fields for future research considerations. Then, a new social and emotional learning approach will be introduced, which expands on *transformative* SEL to create a critical- diversity, equity, inclusion, and belongingness SEL (C-DBIE SEL) conceptual framework. C-DBIE SEL addresses the opportunity to learn SEL for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students by integrating critical race theory, Indigenous epistemology and pedagogy, and the concept of DBIE. Yet, it is a framework that can continue to expand and include different intersectional identities.

**Key Words:** Education, Social and Emotional Learning, pre-K-12, diversity, equity, inclusion, belongingness

**Introduction**

For more than 25 years, social and emotional learning (SEL) has become an area of focus for school districts across the U.S. (Robert et al., 2019; Weissberg et al., 2015) and internationally (Torrente et al., 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic and civil unrest fueled a national conversation encouraging a deeper understanding of the opportunity to learn (OTL;

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McDonnell, 1995) social and emotional learning (SEL) skills for all students, particularly marginalized Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students. Alongside a need to understand students' access to SEL curricula, there is also a heightened need to re-examine whether SEL frameworks and tools are grounded and aligned to equity frameworks that support students of color. COVID-19 amplified awareness of the "interconnection of self, individual, family, community, nation, society and creation" (Absolon, 2010, p.76) which encouraged a deeper understanding of students' social and emotional learning needs.

This critique will analyze SEL in pre-K-12 education, identifying gaps in the field. More specifically, there is a significant amount of SEL programming and research in primary grade levels and less research in secondary grade levels. Middle and high school encompass an array of critical developmental stages where they explore and solidify who they are as individuals, scholars, and members of society. Although it is vital to provide young scholars with SEL skills at the primary grade level, it is also crucial that they receive continued social and emotional development support in secondary grade levels. This review will also denote a need for more SEL research that considers theoretical frameworks created to support folks to know how to approach working in partnership with marginalized communities of color. When working with such communities, race and ethnicity become crucial factors of effective SEL frameworks and programs. In a 21st-century education where students are preparing to address local and world problems, there is a need for all students to develop academic, social, and emotional skills (Jukes et al., 2019) at every stage of their development through programs that support them in relevant ways.

*Transformative* SEL (Jagers et al., 2018; 2019), recently developed by the Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning (CASEL), exemplifies how SEL is evolving into

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theory and practice differentiated for specific populations. Furthermore, *transformative* SEL (Jagers et al., 2018; 2019) is CASEL's first step towards a more holistic and inclusive SEL model that supports students from marginalized communities, acknowledging the impact that racism and oppression have had on their development. However, *transformative* SEL (Jagers et al., 2018; 2019) falls short of addressing critical social and emotional development needs for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students. This approach to SEL does not integrate theories explicitly created to inform practices and ways of thinking about working with marginalized student populations, such as critical race theory and Indigenous pedagogy and epistemology. This thesis will introduce a critical- diversity, belongingness, inclusion, and equity (C-DBIE) SEL conceptual framework. C-DBIE integrates critical race theory, Indigenous pedagogy, and epistemology with the practice of DBIE, adding dimension and depth to *transformative* SEL (Jagers et al., 2018; 2019). This approach will contribute to SEL research striving to address the opportunity to learn SEL for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students.

Creating another approach to SEL means reimagining the role of school community members. Reconceptualizing general SEL approaches into a C-DBIE SEL curriculum would provide education leaders with a tangible programming tool that takes more holistic approaches that support students' social and emotional learning needs. From educators and school leaders to parents, guardians, and community partners, it will be essential to understand how everyone in a school community can contribute to students' opportunity to learn SEL through C-DBIE SEL. Education leaders must consider prioritizing equity-based SEL at the policy level because "what we pay attention to grows" (Brown, 2017); that is to say, investing in SEL is investing in students. The development of this C-DBIE approach supports understanding how C-DBIE SEL can is a tool to make SEL more accessible to Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students.

Schools serve diverse students, which calls for developing a C-DBIE framework that considers intersectional experiences (Crenshaw et al., 1995) and fluid identities (O'Malley, 2013, p.361). In this way, this approach to C-DBIE SEL will further support Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students to not only survive school and life but thrive (Love, 2019).

**Chapter 1: Social and Emotional Learning**

Social and emotional competence has the "ability to understand, manage and express social and emotional aspects of one's life" (Elias et al., 1997, p.2). Having social and emotional competence means having the skills required to successfully navigate the array of life experiences students traverse throughout their development. CASEL identifies five competencies that are the target of programming: *self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making* (Weissberg et al., 2015). In school, this might look like having the skills that make students good teammates, like empowering peers who might be struggling in a project and having empathy towards them. Within social groups, this might look like understanding how peer pressure and bullying affect a student socially and emotionally and having the skills to manage the situation. Interpersonally, competence might look like celebrating small wins, growth, and progress. These five SEL competencies facilitate students' ability to engage with their peers, understand how to navigate the playground differently than the classroom, have self-assurance, and respond to conflict and challenges that arise; skills essential for scholars to navigate the complexities of a 21-century schoolhouse and the world (Jukes et al., 2019).

An early definition of social and emotional learning shared that SEL is "the process through which children and adults develop the skills, attitudes, and values necessary to

acquire social and emotional competence" (Elias et al., 1997, p.2). Programs and curricula, therefore, are vehicles for students to develop the social and emotional skills necessary to succeed in their education trajectory and life. For this reason, it is vital to reevaluate theories, frameworks, and approaches that inform social and emotional learning curricula and programming. Appropriate methods continue to come to light through an evolving understanding of how SEL can support students' social and emotional competence.

**1.1 An Evolving Understanding of Social and Emotional Learning**

Examining the language and words used to outline SEL frameworks, approaches, and definitions is essential. Lather argues that "the way we speak and write reflects the structures of power in our society" (1991, p. 25). An example can be seen in schools when students are greeted as scholars and leaders, words that can uplift and empower a student to be the best version of themselves. In this example, students understand that the adults in school and society value them. In this way, they might experience healthy power dynamics between themselves and those around them. Correspondingly, using negative words toward young scholars can negatively impact how they perceive themselves and engage with the adults around them. Ultimately, students might interpret these unfavorable engagements to mean that society does not value them. In this latter example, the power dynamics between students and those around them can be unhealthy, dangerous, and in extreme cases, cost a life. Acknowledging the impact words can have on students emphasizes the importance of consistently analyzing and criticizing the language used when defining SEL and frameworks that inform the approach and execution of SEL.

In *Social and Emotional Learning: Past, present, and future,* Weissberg et al. (2015) elaborate on an early understanding of SEL. Through SEL programming, "children and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that can enhance personal development, establish satisfying interpersonal relationships, and lead to effective and ethical work and productivity" (Weissberg et al., 2015, p.6). Weissberg et al. (2015) describe a generalist approach to SEL where there is a need for deep differentiation. Although this approach to SEL recognizes the importance of having strong intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships to be effective and productive individuals, it does not aim to support students in understanding how to develop more meaningful transformational relationships with themselves and those around them. Du Bois (1903) spoke about understanding one's ancestors' history to comprehend oneself. This approach describes a more meaningful way of building self-awareness that can support students to understand themselves in a profound and impactful way.

Generalist approaches to SEL, such as the one presented by Weissberg et al. (2015), lack dimensions of equity and inequity that are essential to understanding the challenges that students of color face while attempting to develop social and emotional competence. More specifically, students of color experience the world differently than their white counterparts (Crenshaw et al., 1995), requiring an understanding of how race and oppression impact Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students' opportunity to learn SEL.

More recently, CASEL elaborated on previous understandings and approaches to SEL, defining it in the following way.

SEL is a process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and

achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and

maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.

(Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning, 2022, para.1)

This most recent SEL definition reflects how social and emotional learning continues to

evolve to remain relevant to changing populations and the development of students more

specifically. This definition uses more inclusive and community-oriented language. Students

identified as *children* are described as *young people*. This change acknowledges students as

developing individuals. There are also words like *collectivistic,* which encourage healthy power

dynamics among students and between adults and students in their environment. Integrating

words like *empathy* and concepts like *supportive relationships* and *caring decisions* inform

students of a society evolving into a more inclusive and restorative community.

In understanding the evolution of how SEL is defined and why the words and language

chosen to redefine SEL are critical, the following section will elaborate on SEL in the specific

context of pre-K-12 education. Reviewing pre-K-12 SEL approaches is essential to identify gaps

and limitations. Identifying opportunities to learn SEL can inform how a different conceptual

framework can address existing inequities for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students.

### Chapter 2: Prior pre-K-12 SEL Research

Since the birth of SEL, research studies have demonstrated that SEL programming in pre-

K-12 grade levels contributes to students' social, emotional, and academic development. In 2008,

a universal review of 180 SEL programs involving 277,977 elementary and middle school

students found that SEL programs led by teachers, which also met the *SAFE* criterion, resulted in

students' improvement in social, emotional, and academic performance when compared to a

control group (Payton et al.). The analysis demonstrated a range from "9-10% improvement in positive attitudes and social behaviors, conduct problems, and emotional distress to an 11% gain in academic performance and a 23% gain in social-emotional skills" (Payton et al., p.12). The expectations of a *SAFE* (Durlak et al., 2007) criteria included: *Sequenced*: coordinated progression of activities; *Active*: students engaged in active learning; *Focused*: dedicated time or specific SEL program elements; and *Explicit*: there were specific SEL competencies in the program. These four components allow students to engage with SEL in a way that scaffolds their learning and development. It will also actively engage students, creating spaces where students will know that they are working on specific SEL competencies and will ensure that students are developing targeted social and emotional skills.

This study included an Indicated Review, a review of a subset of programs from within the study, of 80 intervention programs that worked with students who displayed early signs of behavioral or emotional challenges (Payton et al., 2008, pp.13-14). This indicated review also used the *SAFE* criteria and saw a positive effect in how students saw themselves, school, and others, along with five other indicated outcome categories. Unlike the 2008 study, more than half of the programs in this review included non-school personnel as facilitators, making *SAFE* a sound approach to SEL and a best practice of what makes a successful SEL program.

The universal and indicated studies did not include race and ethnicity, factors essential to understanding whether SEL programming is effective with students of diverse demographics. These studies highlight a need for more investment in discovering different approaches to SEL programming which support diverse student populations. One limitation of the study is the exclusion of SEL programs that helped high school-aged students. The investigation could have contributed to understanding specific SEL approaches supporting high school scholars.

A later study in 2011 comprised a meta-analysis of 213 school-based universal SEL programs involving 270,034 K-12 education students. This study found that students engaged in a *SAFE* universal SEL program had an 11 percent increase in achievement and developed "SEL skills, attitudes, and positive social behaviors following the intervention, and also demonstrated fewer conduct problems and had lower levels of emotional distress" (Durlak et al., 2011, pp. 412-417). This study supports the viability of *SAFE* criteria for SEL programs in high school and reflects a grander shift toward understanding SEL programming in high school.

Researching SEL programs that consider race and ethnicity might provide insight into key components of SEL programming, allowing specific student groups to strengthen specific social and emotional competencies through more precise approaches. Payton et al. (2008) and Durlak et al. (2011) do not explicitly provide an analysis of the impact or role of race and ethnicity, which would be essential to understanding the opportunity to learn SEL for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students. Although both studies name that their student populations were diverse, they did not prioritize understanding the role that race and ethnicity could have had on students' social and emotional growth in the programs that were part of the study.

More recent research illustrates long-term positive SEL skills development outcomes and attempts to assess program effectiveness by analyzing the role of race in the study. In 2017, Taylor et al. led a meta-analysis of 82 universal in-class SEL programs demonstrating positive long-term outcomes when using Durlak et al. (2007) *SAFE* program criterion. The study, involving 97,406 students from kindergarten to high school, found that more students in the intervention group succeeded in high school and completed college than those in the control group (Taylor et al., 2017). Students' success in the study proved the long-term benefits of SEL programming. The study echoed previous research, which stated that the *SAFE* criterion was a

practical approach to implementing universal SEL programming. Unlike previous studies, they found that students of color did not benefit differently from *SAFE* SEL programming than their white counterparts but acknowledged a need for culturally competent approaches (Hetch and Shine, 2015).

The limitations of Taylor et al. (2017) continue to mirror the need for more SEL program evaluations to understand how race and ethnicity can inform how students best learn and develop social and emotional skills. Although the research did find that programming outcomes did not differ when considering race and ethnicity, only 46 of 82 studies provided enough data that included students of color (Taylor et al., 2017, p.6). The literature did not provide data on how specific racial groups differed in their skill development for each competency, which might have given insight for future research. The study demonstrates the need for more research that explores understanding SEL programming in pre-K-12 education that considers race and ethnicity.

The following section reviews SEL literature by grade level and underlines gaps and limitations in research.

## 2.1 SEL in pre-K and Primary Grade Levels

Research has found that early positive SEL programming in early childhood can alter a child's neurobiological and physiological response to their environment (Blaire et al., 2008; Blaire & Raver, 2015). Infant and young children's cognitive and language malleability (Duncan & Murnane, 2014; Nelson & Sheridan, 2011) makes them highly responsive to rich learning environments, making this an opportune time for cognitive, social, and emotional development. Early positive SEL correlates with higher academic course performance rates, positive behavior

patterns (such as self-regulation), positive engagement with peers and adults, and success in life (Blair & Raver, 2015). When caregivers provide children with sensitive scaffolding of their behavior, children exhibit lower levels of cortisol, associated with stress, and higher levels of self-regulation (Blaire et al., 2008). These results are even more prevalent in populations with low socioeconomic status (SES) and high-adversity environments where chronic poverty, "defined as income adjusted for family size, or income-to-need ratio," is associated with lower levels of executive functioning skills (Blair & Raver, 2015, p. 73). These studies stress the importance of intentional, sensitive, and scaffolded SEL approaches within early childhood and reiterate the value of SEL in children who come from low SES and high-adversity environments. Future research should consider how outcomes might change when considering groups of a specific race and ethnicity or intersectional identities.

Scholars have found multiple factors supporting formal SEL learning in elementary school. Duncan and Murnane (2014) examine program implementation in pre-K education and find that effective pre-K programs consist of a) creating a scope and sequence for teachers to follow, b) providing materials and adequately equipped facilities, c) placing strong teachers with paraprofessionals in classrooms, and d) provide coaching and professional development training for administrators and teachers (pp. 61-62). Rimm-Kauman and Hulleman (2015) present an SEL conceptual framework consisting of three intervention components: *explicit instruction in SEL skills, integration of SEL and academics, and SEL classroom teaching practices*. These three SEL intervention components can lead to a positive classroom environment and intentional integration of SEL into coursework. They call these *proximal outcomes*. These proximal outcomes, evident in teacher-student and student-to-student engagement and relationships, influence *distal outcomes* of improved student social and academic performance (Rimm-Kauman

& Hulleman, 2015). The mutual components that both Duncan and Murnane (2014) and Rimm-Kauman and Hulleman (2015) speak to are the positive outcomes found when SEL is executed in the classroom, led by educators, and integrated into the classroom and the curriculum.

The studies reviewing primary grade level SEL programming include suggestions for different variables that make successful program execution. However, there are still opportunities to develop SEL in primary grade levels. There is a need to understand how to differentiate SEL programming for specific student groups, specifically Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students of color. There is also no mention of how SEL programming can benefit from critical theory frameworks such as critical race theory and Indigenous epistemology and pedagogy to understand how these frameworks might support creating more inclusive SEL approaches to programming. Elementary-aged students are developing an understanding of their place in society through the programs and curriculums used in schools. They must develop social and emotional competence through frameworks that understand how race and ethnicity impact and influence student development.

## 2.2 SEL in secondary grade levels

When analyzing the importance of SEL in middle school, Jager et al. (2015) argue that social and emotional competencies are vital tools in a complex developmental stage where students navigate social pressures, high-risk behavior, and academic performance. They review ten middle school SEL programs that use a universal SEL approach grounded in the CASEL framework and the five SEL competencies. Additionally, they also integrate the research of Guerra and Bradshaw (2008) on positive development and risk prevention, reconceptualizing positive and healthy adolescent social-emotional competence (Jagers et al., 2015, p.168).

Positive youth competence included a *positive sense of self, self-control, decision-making, a moral system of beliefs, and prosocial connectedness* (Guerra & Bradshaw, 2008). The programs reviewed in Jagers et al. (2015) vary in structure. Still, most have a prevention approach targeting high-risk behaviors such as substance use, violence, and unsafe sexual behaviors by using core strategies that promote SEL competencies. However, only two of the ten programs had "three or more successful randomized controlled or quasi-experimental trials of the intervention" to prove its effectiveness (Jagers et al., 2015, p.168), demonstrating a need for more SEL research within middle school grade levels.

Furthermore, this study did not include an assessment of programs that serve students who demonstrate at-risk behavior, which would have supported an understanding of how to approach working with this specific group of students. Finally, the programs described in this analysis had a universal approach to SEL, which does not consider the complexities of students' identities and cultures (Hecht & Shine, 2015). There is a need for SEL programs that include differentiated intervention approaches that consider students' demographics.

Williamson et al. (2015) asserted that high school adolescents navigate crucial biological, cognitive, and physiological development, peer pressure, exploration of identity, and purpose while maturation increases. CASEL (2021) identifies five SEL competencies that reflect a student's essential skills in this developmental stage, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. For this reason, the importance of SEL programs in high school is essential. The study did not find any SEL high school programs with three or more trials to prove their effectiveness but found seven promising programs with some empirical evaluations. Although there is a suggestion of replicating middle school programs in high school, high school students experience unique developmental

challenges, making this suggestion problematic. Future research and programming need to incorporate the current contexts, such as the impact of the digital era (Jukes et al., 2019), the development of instructional practices (Darling-Hammond & Oakes, 2019), and the integration of SEL into additional spaces such as extracurricular activities (Jagers et al., 2015). Finally, given the complexity of adolescent experiences and identities, there needs to be a critical and equity-based approach to SEL programming.

It is evident that SEL programs are essential for students' personal and academic development, but Greenberg et al. (2017) make a case for SEL as a preventative approach to public health. Although the field of SEL is relatively new, there has been an emphasis on SEL research in early childhood (Blair & Raver, 2015) and elementary grade levels (Duncan & Murnane, 2014; Rimm-Kauman & Hulleman, 2015). The early focus on understanding SEL in primary school has left a gap for further SEL research in secondary grade levels (Jagers et al., 2015; Williamson et al., 2015). If SEL is a tool that supports public health, SEL needs to continue to expand and deepen its research in secondary grade levels.

Until recently, a limitation in K-12 SEL research was a need for more equity-based SEL pedagogy recognizing the historical context of oppression, race, and racism. The National Center for Education Statistics (2019) shows that Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students are disproportionately experiencing lower academic outcomes than their white peers. In 2017, in fourth grade, "White students scored 30 points higher than American Indian/Alaska Native students, 26 points higher than Blacks students, [and] 23 points higher than Hispanic students" in reading assessments (p. 69). That same year, "White students scored 25 points higher than Black students, 21 points higher than American Indian/Alaska Native students, 19 points higher than both Hispanic and Pacific Islander students" in math assessments (p. 74). Research has

demonstrated that SEL positively correlates with students' academic achievement (Durlak et al., 2011; Weissberg et al., 2015). If specific strategies support Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students' social and emotional learning, SEL could further help close existing educational achievement gaps. These statistics demonstrate a need for further investment in creating SEL frameworks and curricula that consider race and ethnicity. Differentiating SEL frameworks can lead to differentiated curricula and programs that can further support Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students to thrive socially, emotionally, and academically.

In general, from primary to secondary SEL programs, there is still a need to integrate approaches and frameworks that allow Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students the opportunity to learn SEL. There is a clear emphasis on primary grade level research and, therefore, a need for more research in secondary grade levels. There is also a need to consider the role of race and ethnicity in SEL to understand how to differentiate approaches that can support diverse groups of students to have more access to social and emotional learning. Integrating social justice approaches to SEL, like critical race theory and Indigenous epistemology and pedagogy, might support closing existing gaps preventing students of color from fully benefiting from SEL programming.

## 2.3 Value and Limitations to Existing Equity-Based SEL Frameworks

SEL is a new but growing research field that has recently begun to integrate equity-based frameworks and approaches. Recently, the Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning revised SEL to be a "process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain

supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions" (CASEL, 2021). Lather (1991) emphasized the importance of words because language reflects power dynamics in society. This new definition of SEL demonstrates a change in how students are perceived in society through the words chosen. Using concepts like "achieve personal and collective goals" reflects a shift from an individualistic to a collectivistic approach to SEL. Integrating specific terms like "empathy" informs students that it is salient to take compassionate approaches to how they engage with peers. The new definition entails more specific language that reflects what it means to be a contributing member of society. Instead of a generalist approach to defining SEL, this new definition encourages a more holistic approach to developing social and emotional skills.

*Transformative* SEL focuses on developing global citizens through engaged citizenship, which is one of the long-term outcomes of CASEL's SEL model (Jagers et al., 2018; 2019). It integrates transformative citizenship typology (Banks, 2017) and Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) three typologies, including citizenship typology, distributive social justice, and transformational resistance (Solorzano & Delgado-Bernal, 2001). This approach aims to mitigate "educational, social, and economic inequities that derive from the interrelated legacies of racialized cultural oppression in the United States and globally" (Jagers et al., 2019, p. 163). It differentiates SEL for marginalized student populations impacted by oppression and racism. Please see Jagers et al. (2018; 2019) for the equity elaborations that became the revised transformative SEL competencies.

Although the revised SEL competencies are a starting point for a more accessible SEL framework, integrating critical race theory, Indigenous epistemology and pedagogy, and the concepts of diversity, belongingness, inclusion, and equity (DBIE) can further allow Black,

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Latinx, and Indigenous students to have a culturally relevant and responsive approach to learning SEL. Lather (1991) spoke about the importance of language, and Jagers et al. (2019) used the terms *critical democracy* and *critical citizenship*. Still, the competencies lack depth which can be achieved by integrating critical race theory and Indigenous epistemology and pedagogy. For instance, through Indigenous epistemology and pedagogy, students develop self-awareness of how their ancestor's wisdom and traumatic experiences might impact how students see themselves while also understanding why they might engage differently with peers of different identities and ancestral backgrounds (Brayboy & Maughan, 2009). By leveraging Indigenous epistemology and pedagogy, students might be better able to understand triggers that can become roadblocks in their development and understand how to use tools that can support them to overcome those obstacles.

Additionally, Hayashi et al. (2022) acknowledge the power of different cultures' similarities while highlighting the importance of specificity that makes each culture different, which informs how students process information. The C-DBIE SEL conceptual framework takes the same approach in that it acknowledges diverse experiences while leveraging commonalities among students of different races and ethnicities. Critical race theory and Indigenous epistemology and pedagogy are leveraged as frameworks that inform how SEL can be used to work towards healing where harm has been caused, which might be detrimental to scholars' social and emotional development. Elaborations of transformative SEL competencies through a C-DBIE SEL conceptual framework will be presented later in this review.

Earlier in this review, Durlak et al. (2011) *SAFE* criterion was presented as a compelling method for SEL programming, but it is not the only approach in the field. An exploration of programming methods, like a deeper learning approach (Darling-Hammond & Oakes, 2019),

might allow the discovery of how to engage students in SEL in ways that might give them access to understanding the content differently.

Finally, due to the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on students' social and emotional development (Singh et al., 2020), there is also an opportunity to research the role of trauma in *transformative* SEL and students' social-emotional development in general.

The limitations and gaps in transformative SEL call for the continued search for different approaches to SEL, which can support addressing the opportunity to learn SEL for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students.

## Chapter 3: A New Equity-based SEL Conceptual Framework

Building upon the evolving equity-based *transformative* SEL framework developed by CASEL, I propose a critical- diversity, belongingness, inclusion, and equity (C-DBIE) SEL conceptual framework (see figure 1). This framework addresses crucial SEL needs of marginalized Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students.

**Figure 1.**

*Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students' opportunity to learn C-DBIE SEL.*
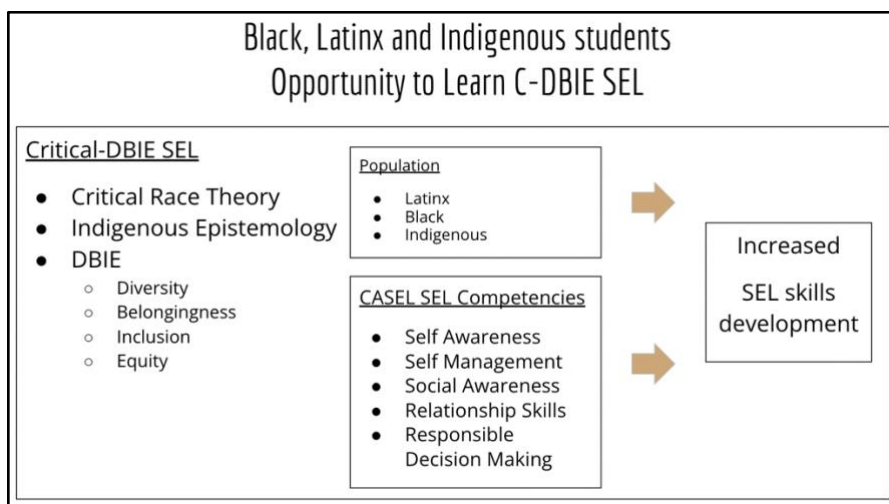
This conceptual framework consists of four intersectional elements—*diversity, belongingness, inclusion,* and *equity*—critical to equity-based SEL where students feel safe, seen, supported, and empowered. Like *transformative* SEL, this framework acknowledges the historical context of the U.S. It explicitly names oppression and racism as part of why so many marginalized students do not thrive in education and do not have an equitable opportunity to learn SEL. More specifically, this conceptual framework strives to bridge the opportunity to learn SEL for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous youth through a diversity, belongingness, inclusion, and equity approach to SEL informed by critical race theory and Indigenous pedagogy and epistemology.

## 3.1 A Critical- Diversity, Belongingness, Inclusion, and Equity SEL Framework

Extending *transformative* SEL (Jagers et al., 2018; 2019), C-DBIE explicitly acknowledges and integrates critical race theory (CRT) and Indigenous pedagogy and epistemology into the five CASEL competencies. CRT is a "collective of activists and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT states that people experience race and racism every day in the U.S. (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), which means that SEL needs to have a critical theoretical lens that acknowledges the structures and context that inform the challenges that students experience.

This C-DBIE SEL framework also includes Indigenous epistemology and pedagogy. Integrating Indigenous ways of understanding how students learn grants SEL access to Indigenous students and Black and Latinx students who have also lived systemic oppression. Indigenous scholars and community members share the necessity for decolonization for individuals to connect with their environment (Absolon, 2010; Brayboy & Maughan, 2009;

Garcia & Shirley, 2012; Villanueva & Barber, 2021). Absolon (2010) acknowledges the

"reciprocal interconnections of self, individual, family, community, nation, society and creation"

(p. 76), which can lead to healing. A similar concept is a "circular worldview" where "everything

and everyone in the world [impacts] everything and everyone else… where ancestral knowledge

guides contemporary practices and future possibilities" (Brayboy & Maughan, 2009, p.13). A

similar concept in Black and African communities is the belief in *ubuntu* which speaks to the

ripple effects of one individual's behavior on all those who surround them and the responsibility

that people have to each other as a community (Gade, 2012, pp.489-490). There are also similar

terms in Latin American Indigenous communities, like *In Lak'ech* in the Mayan community,

which translates to "you are my other me" (Fernandez, 2019, p.191). This phrase speaks to

individuals' communal responsibility to each other, like being in brotherhood, sisterhood, and

siblinghood. Similarly, in Latinx communities, the term *comunidad* encompasses the concept of

unity among individuals who have ties to each other through shared experiences, identities, or

beliefs (Park, 2011, p.68). Integrating culturally relevant approaches (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and

decolonizing practices (Garcia & Shirley, 2012; Love, 2019) into an SEL framework informed

by critical race theory can be a tool that educators use to support the healing process for Black,

Latinx, and Indigenous students harmed by oppression and colonization.

The following elaborations on the meaning of diversity, belongingness, equity, and

inclusion integrate critical race theory and Indigenous epistemology and pedagogy.

### 3.1.1 Diversity

On a surface level, diversity includes characteristics such as race, gender, and sexuality

(Love, 2019). Still, critical race theorists such as Du Bois challenge folk to delve deeper into our

identity and, therefore, our understanding of diversity. Du Bois (1903) presents the concept of

*double consciousness*. This concept sees diversity as encompassing a person's life experiences alongside ancestors' trajectories and intergenerational wisdom and trauma (Du Bois, 1903). Diversity should be seen from a deeper perspective. It might allow students to understand themselves and their peers through a holistic understanding of how different folks might have been impacted by ancestral struggles and challenges and preset asset-based intel of contributions to society.

A tenant of critical race theory is intersectionality, which can contribute to understanding diversity through an empowerment lens. Crenshaw (1991) shared that "ignoring differences within groups contributes to tension among groups," adding that "identity-based politics can be a source of strength, community, and intellectual development" (p.1242). Highlighting how Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities differ paves the way to empathy and understanding while lifting commonalities can bring profoundly different individuals together. Intersectionality allows people to be seen as their entire selves and understand how the convergence of distinct contestations, convergences, and encounters creates their unique experiences. Intersectionality takes individuals from being seen as fragmented pieces to existing as whole people with complex understandings of the world.

After acknowledging a student's diversity, it is essential to build spaces where Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students will have a sense of belongingness before including them in schools and classrooms that might perpetuate harm and oppression.

### 3.1.2 Belongingness

A sense of belongingness derives from a "psychological membership in the school or classroom, that is, the extent to which students feel personally accepted, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (Goodenow, 1993). It is not enough to be invited into

a decision-making group; belongingness requires intentional effort to build physical and social structures, protocols, and norms to create safer spaces for people of color (Villanueva & Barber, 2021). Students are constantly growing and evolving and need schools and classrooms that are fluid to meet students' needs (Brown, 2018). Madrazo et al. (2015) would add that belongingness requires emotional and psychological safety, which is necessary for students to grow and learn.

Understanding that Latinx students navigate the education system differently, Garcia (2020) speaks to the experience of Latinx students in predominantly white institutions highlighting the need for these students to build spaces of belongingness to obtain the access and capital necessary to thrive. In this study, students who find themselves in predominantly white institutions describe the characteristics that allow them to feel like they belong: *"where I have a role or responsibility, where people look like me, where I am valued and cared for, where my racial identity and culture is recognized and valued, and where I share interests or values with others"* (Garcia, 2020. p. 186). Students describe feeling a sense of belonging when invited into spaces where they have reciprocal relationships, are cared for, can contribute, are respected, and are valued.

Dr. Bettina Love (2019), an abolitionist and critical race theorist, would call wanting to feel respected, valued, and cared for, wanting to *matter* (p. 42-68). Mattering means being valued as essential in a space, acknowledging, and leveraging their talents, skills, and historical heritage, or the wisdom and trauma passed down to them, and decentralizing power to empower students to resist oppression (Love, 2019. p.42-68). Mattering and belongingness mean building norms and protocols that reinforce the understanding that everything that impacts one individual will affect those around them, directly or indirectly (Love, 2019. p.47-48). When White institutions,

and all spaces, consider building systems, protocols, and norms that prioritize belongingness, Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students will thrive.

### 3.1.3 Inclusion

Inclusion "requires attention to the complex, dynamic, and intersecting identities that all learners and teachers bring to the pedagogical experience" (Lawrie et al., 2017, p.2). Inclusivity means that teachers build classroom environments where students clearly understand that every student adds value to the class, not despite their differences but because of their differences. Critical race theorists Delgado and Stefancic (2017) speak about the Black-White binary paradigm as an example of what exclusion looks like for Latinx and other minorities. In this case, inclusion means understanding the challenges and struggles that uniquely pertain to individual communities.

Inclusion can also be seen in theorists like Pearson and Wilkinson (2018), who use the term Sexual and Gender Minority (SGM) to describe individuals, from children to adults, who might identify "with a range of sexual and gender identities, expressions, and behaviors" (p. 209). SGM removes forced labels on how individuals want to identify and creates space to include individuals who might identify across the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer spectrum. This approach to inclusion ensures that individuals can take on fluid identities which might be more inclusive of how they identify. Inclusion requires the actionable integration of inclusive practices, policies, and theories into formal and informal norms, rules, regulations, programs, curricula, and advocacy (Pearson & Wilkinson, 2018).

### 3.1.4 Equity

Equity can be seen "as an approach that ensures everyone [has] access to the same opportunities. Equity recognizes that advantages and barriers exist, and that, as a result, we all

don't start from the same place" (Boulger, 2020). Kim et al. (2021) would add that because individuals do not start in the same place, equity requires a need to differentiate how students are supported. Although differentiation might seem inequitable because it provides different students with different approaches to accessing the same resources, differentiation allows students impacted by racism, oppression, and colonization with the support and resources they need to succeed (Kim et al., 2021). Equity assumes that all students are challenged, held to high expectations, and have educators who provide access to the tools, materials, and classroom environments that support their learning (Cohen, 2000, p.276; Love, 2019). Critical race theorist Ladson-Billings would add a need to a) recognize the role that power and empowerment have in education, b) a need to dismantle traditional ways to engage students, and c) advocate for more culturally relevant pedagogy and practices (1995; 1998).

An example is Esposito's (2012) critical place-based pedagogy, where students' communities are integrated into classroom assignments to make content more relevant and accessible for students. Gonzalez et al. (2005) would call such assets *funds of knowledge*. Using personal stories, narratives, and student experiences to fill in gaps in the curriculum can encourage cognitive conflict necessary to challenge different perspectives, can be a way to legitimize different experiences not included in the curriculum, and might be seen as a strategy for healing social and emotional wounds caused by oppression (Ladson-Billings, 1998. p.13-14). This way, equity becomes synonymous with challenging existing power dynamics in the classroom. Students then learn that every individual story is as important as the next, ensuring they can intentionally hear, process, examine, analyze, critically think about the world, and challenge systems of oppression.

Building inclusive classes with a deeper understanding of diversity and belongingness will address equity and inequity in students' education trajectories. This approach to SEL is vital because it encourages students and educators to have a more profound definition of diversity and understand that it is not enough to have racially integrated classrooms; creating equity-informed classrooms fosters a sense of belongingness. When C-DBIE is integral in SEL work, Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students will get closer to knowing that they *matter* (Love, 2019).

As a result of the challenges and obstacles that Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students experience, they are not only impacted in reading and math, but they are also not graduating at the same rates as their White peers (NCES, 2019). K-12 SEL theorists such as Blaire and Raver (2017), Duncan and Murnane (2014), Rimm-Kauman and Hulleman (2015), Jagers et al. (2015), and Williamson et al. (2015) would all agree that SEL is critical towards closing the course performance gap demonstrated throughout history and in the data presented.

### 3.2 C-DBIE SEL Competencies

Social and emotional competencies should support students in developing the skills necessary to thrive in society. *Transformative* SEL focuses on developing competencies that allow students to strengthen their skills, knowledge, and ability to be "engaged citizens," one of the long-term outcomes of the CASEL framework for systemic school and district SEL (Jagers et al., 2019, p.165). The framework also includes 1) the short-term outcome of improving attitudes about self and others, 2) the intermediate outcomes of developing positive social behaviors and relationships and having less emotional distress, and 3) a long-term outcome that focuses on developing healthy relationships (Jagers et al., 2019, p. 165). Before aiming to be "engaged citizens," students need to have the skills, knowledge, and ability to understand who they are as individuals and how they engage with others through culturally relevant ways. Black, Latinx, and

Indigenous students, specifically, need to have the opportunity to reach these outcomes through practices and pertinent approaches that acknowledge the impact of oppression and racism while using empowering practices, beliefs, and ways of being.

Using critical- diversity, belongingness, inclusion, and equity alongside critical race theory and Indigenous epistemology and pedagogy can produce SEL competencies that allow historically marginalized students to develop positive attitudes towards themselves and others, decrease emotional distress, have positive social behaviors, and develop healthy relationships. By investing in students' ability to develop the social and emotional skills that lead to obtaining these outcomes, students become fractals, a micro reflection of a repeated pattern (Brown, 2017), of a greater society that continues to strive towards engaging in healthier ways of being.

The following are descriptions of C-DBIE SEL competencies that aim to address the opportunity to learn SEL for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students who deserve the right to thrive in life. These competencies intend to support students in developing the skills necessary to see themselves in the best light while also understanding how to engage and build healthy relationships with others. C-DBIE SEL competencies aim to create systemic change, using culturally informed practices that empower students to grow through healing and culturally relevant practices (Hayashi et al., 2022; Ladson-Billings, 1995), ways of knowing, and ways of being.

Table 1 outlines the first attempt to develop C-DBIE SEL competencies.

**Table 1.**

*C-DBIE SEL Competencies*

| | |
|---|---|
| **Self-awareness** | Encourages exploration of how intergenerational wisdom and trauma impact one's development, which requires an understanding of the self through the narratives of ancestors (Brayboy & Maughan, 2009, p.13), or *double consciousness* (DuBois, 1903). Self-awareness, in this way, involves understanding one's positionality within a white-male-centric society and the role of privilege and oppression within that context (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Mayan philosophy called this *Panche Be*, or "to seek the truth of the root," necessary to reach critical consciousness (Fernandez, 2019, p.191). Ultimately, the goal would be to seek healing by unlearning internalized oppression and decolonizing oneself to have a role in the decolonization process of others (Brayboy, 2005; Villanueva & Barber, 2021) |
| **Self-management** | Critical race theory and Indigenous epistemology ask for *self-decolonization* to make self-healing and self-empowerment possible (Brayboy, 2005; Menchu, 1984; Villanueva & Barber, 2021), a way to reach more profound and transformative self-management. In this way, having *grace* for oneself includes being compassionate with oneself when it is difficult to manage emotions and behavior. Compassion is therefore rooted in understanding that behavior and feelings might be rooted in harm caused by internalized racism, racism, and oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Love, 2019). In such cases, *advocacy* for a *collectivistic* approach to self-management is an alternative to an individualistic approach which could be isolating (Brown, 2017, pp. 83-102). |
| **Social awareness** | Requires an understanding of one's positionality within a white-male-centered, racist, and oppressive society (Love, 2019; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) and how these impact and influence their social groups. For Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students, this might require understanding how tools like *code-switching* (Rincón & Hollis, 2018) are used as a survival mechanism to navigate challenging environments. Other tools like *counter-stories* (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001) can also help students to understand history from the perspectives of survivors and colonized people, building a fuller and more inclusive understanding of why different individuals from different communities function the way they do. |
| **Relationship skills** | It includes awareness of one's internalized oppression and its impact on one's ability to develop authentic relationship skills with others and asks individuals to take action towards unlearning internalized oppression to make space for healing (Villanueva & Barber, 2021). Black and Latinx students would also understand how to leverage creating intentional relationships to support them in navigating an oppressive and racist education complex (Love, 2019). Approaching relationships through a fluid mindset to understand that relationships evolve, folk evolve, and what is possible within fluid relationships changes (Brown, 2017; Villanueva & Barber, 2021; Love, 2019) |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Responsible decision making** | The roles of belongingness and inclusivity are essential in making responsible decisions. Included is an understanding of how one's decision-making process might perpetuate systemic oppression and racism, which can cause harm to others (Love, 2019; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Responsible decision-making needs to include *freedom dreaming* (Love, 2019), where students can take risks and think critically about the cause and effects of their decisions within safe spaces. Freedom dreaming is essential in decolonizing students' thinking process (Villanueva & Barber, 2021). |

Although C-DBIE SEL was created as an attempt to expand on CASEL's SEL framework, the competencies described in table 1 are not all-encompassing. There is an opportunity to research further how other identities can benefit from this model and framework. Expanding C-DBIE SEL to include other critical theories, such as LatCrit, Black Crit, and Queer Theory, will be important so that students with an array of identities can also develop SEL skills in a culturally relevant way. Creating a more inclusive SEL framework can allow more students to have the opportunity to learn SEL in ways that reflect the various dimensions of diversity as well as the intersectional oppression they might experience.

## Chapter 4: Conclusion & Recommendations

SEL research has not only proven its critical position in students' academic success, but the current COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the opportunity to learn SEL within Black, Latinx, and Indigenous student populations. Although SEL is relatively new, there is research that proves positive SEL outcomes in early childhood (Blair & Raver, 2015; Durlak et al., 2007, 2011; Payton et al., 2008), elementary school (Rimm-Kauman & Hulleman, 2015), middle school (Jagers et al., 2015), and high school (Williamson et al., 2015). The research reviewed demonstrates extensive SEL research and programming in primary grade levels, leaving a gap in

secondary grade levels. In the future, it will be essential to invest in middle and high school SEL research and programming to continue supporting students to be ready for the world as adults.

In recognizing the gap for equity-based SEL frameworks, CASEL revised its original SEL model, creating a *transformative* SEL framework with equity elaborations (Jagers et al., 2018; 2019). *Transformative* SEL acknowledges the oppression and racism historically experienced by people of color in the U.S. More specifically, *transformative* SEL acknowledges the impact of oppression and racism on students' ability to develop SEL skills.

This critique contributes to CASEL's first step toward a more comprehensive equity-based SEL framework by creating a critical- diversity, equity, inclusion, and belongingness (C-DBIE) SEL conceptual framework. C-DBIE SEL leverages critical race theorists (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Du Bois, 1903; Garcia, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Love, 2019), Indigenous epistemology and pedagogy (Absolon, 2010; Brayboy & Maughan, 2009; Garcia & Shirley, 2012; Villanueva, 2018), framed within DBIE (Boulger, 2020; Cohen, 2000; Garcia, 2020; Goodenow, 1993; Kim et al., 2021; Lawrie et al., 2017; Love 2019; Madrazo et al., 2015). The C-DBIE SEL conceptual framework provides additional dimensions and depth to CASEL's SEL competencies. This framework does not include all identities but encourages an expansion of what C-DBIE SEL can look like if it includes students' sex, gender, class, abilities, religion, and intersectional identities.

Future research should also understand how a C-DBIE SEL framework can be applied to the classroom through programming and curriculum. Leveraging youth participatory research (Rubin et al., 2016) will allow any integration of this framework to remain student-informed and student-centered. Understanding the vital role that educators and education leaders have in students' ability to learn SEL, it will also be essential to know how this framework can be

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integrated into staff professional development and adopted into school culture. Extending SEL beyond the school, research should also seek to understand the role of parents and community-based organizations in C-DBIE SEL.

For research taking place in the U.S., leveraging other critical theories such as LatCrit, Black Crit, Queer Theory, and intersectionality will support further understanding of the complexities of oppression and how it impacts historically marginalized Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students of color. Fryer & Levitt (2004) express a need for more research about the White community and pose the question of why this community is not studied as much as communities of color. In education, research must work towards understanding students of color, those impacted by oppression, and White students who benefit from oppression. For this reason, it would also be beneficial to understand the role of White students in C-DBIE SEL. These findings will continue to expand the understanding of how to center the experiences of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students within C-DBIE SEL.

This critique and the development of the C-DBIE SEL framework are motivated by generations of historically marginalized Black, Latinx and Indigenous students. The global COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated inequities experienced by marginalized students of color and, more specifically, impacted their social and emotional development. Investing in equity-based and social justice-oriented SEL research will promote understanding how to support marginalized students of color as they develop into adults and into our nation's leaders. For this reason, addressing the opportunity to learn SEL for Black, Latinx and Indigenous students is investing in our nations leaders.

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