

Rising Up Together: Spotlighting Transformative SEL in Practice with Latinx Youth

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PURPOSE

Transformative SEL was introduced as a way to integrate an explicit equity and social justice lens into the conceptualization and implementation of social and emotional learning (SEL). As [Jagers, Rivas-Drake, and Williams](#) (2019) explain, it is a form of SEL aimed at interrupting the reproduction of inequitable educational environments by attending to issues of identity, agency, belonging, and related issues such as power, privilege, prejudice, discrimination, social justice, empowerment, and self-determination. Since the introduction of transformative SEL, questions have arisen about what it looks like in practice. We are continuing to learn and share through research-practice partnerships about effective practices, programs, professional learning, and assessments to guide implementation toward the goals of transformative SEL.

This brief is part of our initial efforts to illustrate transformative SEL in practice based on surveys with youth, interviews with teachers, and observations during dedicated SEL instruction time in a predominantly Latinx school in a large urban district.



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A transformative approach to SEL promotes competencies such as healthy personal and social identities, collective agency, critical analysis of community and social issues, and community well-being. Thus, transformative SEL is a way to incorporate intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional functioning into learning content and instructional practices. This shifts attention from teaching individual-level competencies to taking seriously the need for learning opportunities that foster community-level responsibility and empowerment. Whereas the former focuses only on personal responsibility and conformity (e.g., “sit down, on your own”) which can be disempowering to minoritized youth and communities, the latter reflects a transformative (e.g., “rise up, together”) approach that seeks to imbue necessary youth and adult social and emotional competencies in service of collective well-being, thriving, and, in the longer-term, a more equitable and socially just society.

Recently, we embarked on a project to help elucidate the potential of transformative SEL for teaching practices in the middle school grades. A central goal of the project is to clarify how SEL can better leverage youths' emerging understandings of community issues and broader social injustices, as outlined in the transformative SEL framework. In particular, we have been working to connect the dots between SEL, ethnic/racial identity development, and emerging civic and sociopolitical development among Latinx early adolescents. As a first step in this research-practice partnership project, we surveyed 455 students (274 Latinx) in grades 5-8. We're still learning, but, to date, of the Latinx youth surveyed:

About
85%

reported that their parents said they should feel proud of being Latinx.

About
85%

said their parents talk to them about Latinx people and events that are important to their community.

Close to
60%

said that their parents discuss current events with them.

Close to
60%

said they felt they could impact their community positively.

Over
50%

had observed a parent or community member take action to correct injustice.



In addition, youth whose parents talked to them about political issues at home—unfair treatment and news items, for example—said they:

- Were exploring their ethnic-racial identities more
- Wanted to be involved in their community right now
- Expected to be involved in their community when they were older

This brief spotlights three examples of the ways educators were taking up this challenge, and in doing so, were promoting the [CASEL 5 Core SEL competencies](#), which were updated in 2020 to include expanded definitions and examples of knowledge, skills, and attitudes for creating equitable communities. These examples come from interviews with 13 middle school teachers at three schools (12 female, 3 Latinx, 10 White) and classroom observations of six teachers (1 Latina, 5 White, all female) collected by researchers trained in ethnographic methods. We hope these examples illustrate how teachers may adapt their SEL instruction to foreground community concerns and social justice issues as a way to support students in seeing how social and emotional well-being has been historically tied to social, economic, and political injustices. Many of these strategies build upon and adapt existing frameworks for [implementing schoolwide SEL](#) and fostering [developmental relationships](#) to focus on developing students' collective agency to examine and interrupt inequities. Furthermore, we aim to show how transformative SEL instruction may support not just students' SEL but also their active, informed, and critical participation in civic and political processes in their communities and beyond.

Principle 1

Centering Students’ Lived Experiences and Identities in SEL Instruction

One key way in which we have observed teachers engage in transformative SEL is through committing to having their students’ identities and experiences centered during instruction. This includes adapting an evidence-based SEL curriculum selected by the district to ensure that students’ identities, communities, values, and concerns are represented but also that students are able to learn from, about, and with others who may not share their backgrounds.

P1

Strategy
Supplementing to ensure representation in curricular materials

During an SEL lesson, we observed how the teacher supplemented the SEL curriculum to better integrate the lived experiences of their students. For example, in class “the teacher commented that she chose this book [to supplement SEL lessons] because it is a collection of short stories about the lives of Latino youth growing up in the U.S. and hopes the students can relate to some of the characters in the stories. The book incorporates words in both English and Spanish as well as common sayings in Spanish. The teacher **uses this to tie in the students’ cultural backgrounds and personal experiences into the lesson.** Additionally, the teacher **uses a mix of English and Spanish (Spanglish)** as she is speaking as well as translating certain utterances to make sure that all students understand. She does this to encourage the students who do not speak English as fluently as others to actively participate in class.”

Furthermore, in an interview, a teacher explained that “read-alouds are such a good way to expose kids to all cultures...more awareness of everyone is important and trying to bring that awareness into literature of making sure that kids are able to find themselves in books, but then also able to find other kids that don’t look like them, but have the same social emotional needs, like bullying

and things like that.” Thus, SEL instruction became a space for students to reflect on their own identities and values while also exploring those of youth and communities who, despite being different from themselves in some ways, shared similar experiences and needs.

P1

Strategy
Drawing on current events and the news that youth will likely be aware of

During SEL discussions, teachers were also diligent about encouraging conversations regarding local or national events impacting students’ communities. This centering of local events both engaged students in reflections about events impacting their lives while also addressing students’ wonderings and concerns about their worlds.

After a student inquired about the coronavirus news [at the time], the teacher replied, “How did you know I was going to present that story as the **news of the day** today?” The student and the teacher started talking about the outbreak and what it would look like if there was an epidemic in the city.

Our observations and surveys have made it clear that students were not only aware, but also interested in discussing events and situations impacting their lives. It was also evident that students were engaging in these important discussions with adults at home. Thus, the integration into SEL instruction of current events, particularly those that highlight social inequities, is a productive and necessary way to bridge the goals for SEL with the experiences, concerns, and needs of students.

P1

Strategy
“Stepping away” from a curriculum to address immediate emotional needs and possible trauma

Addressing students’ social and emotional needs often meant having the willingness and skill to pivot away from planned instruction to attend to the immediate and urgent needs of students, including experiences of trauma.

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"There are times that we do have to step away from the curriculum to input things into our SEL time so that students can really benefit and see the direct connection, 'okay, why are we doing this? Oh, okay.' **This just happened and this is important.** This is what makes sense right now. Especially things on the news, things in our local community. We had a lockdown drill last year that lasted a long time and we thought it was a drill but...It was a lockdown. They had said that there might have been somebody at the [community site] with a gun, and so as I'm in the closet with my students and time kept passing and passing and passing, I started to get really nervous thinking about is somebody going to come into our school, where it became real when things you see on the news and so forth, and so we stepped away the next morning and we talked about our lockdown and we talked about emotions that we were having, and things like that because students need to debrief.

Making the choice to move away from planned instruction requires skill and nimbleness. It also involves teachers being deeply attuned to the needs of students. Transformative SEL requires teachers who are prepared to address students' experiences of trauma and emotional distress, and who understand how such experiences are often shaped by historical legacies of injustice.



Reflection Question

During SEL instruction, how am I affirming my students' identities, drawing on their lived experiences, and addressing their urgent needs?

"We know all of these things are happening, but we don't talk to them. We don't check up on people and we learn and read stories, but we read it and that's it. We don't talk about it."

Principle 2

Using SEL Discussions to Validate Student Experiences of Oppression

Another key instructional practice that supported transformative SEL was to provide opportunities for students to examine and reflect on the collective experiences of trauma and oppression of communities they belong to or share experiences with. This required discussing such experiences with social justice lenses and with an eye toward transformative action and social change.

P2

Strategy

Opening space to acknowledge trauma experienced at the community level

Acknowledging the experience of collective trauma in students' communities is central to SEL instruction that is social justice oriented and transformative.

During our observations, we saw how teachers invited students' concerns about traumatic experiences in their communities. For example, we observed how after hearing from multiple students that **people are afraid of moving due to ICE raids in nearby communities, being pulled over by the police, and the need to find jobs that pay cash**, the teacher pointed out that there are so many other people living through similar things and that almost everyone knows that people are struggling with these kinds of issues, but no one ever talks about these issues. She noted, "We know all of these things are happening, but we don't talk to them. We don't check up on people and we learn and read stories, but we read it and that's it. We don't talk about it."

These invitations for students to engage in discussions and engage in perspective-taking about community experiences of oppression should aim to go beyond merely providing a space for students to share their concerns. They should be grounded in a commitment to centering social justice into SEL.

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P2

Strategy
Infusing broader social injustice issues into bread-and-butter SEL topics

Teachers who were particularly skilled at drawing connections between SEL and civic engagement had the drive and courage of placing social justice issues at the core of their teaching. For example, teachers could use an SEL lesson as a way to scaffold a conversation about the broader sociopolitical climate.

“The teacher then began the [SEL] lesson by telling the students that she wanted to continue their previous conversations about bullying, but she wanted this lesson to touch on **a different kind of bullying that is rarely ever talked about: political bullying.**”

Justice-focused discussions and activities were aimed at supporting students’ emerging understanding of the ways in which current and historical social disparities often result in disparate social and emotional experiences and outcomes.



Reflection Question

During SEL instruction, how am I acknowledging and supporting students’ emerging understanding of oppression as well as its emotional toll?

Principle 3

SEL Instruction as a Space to Encourage Youth to Use their Voice for Social Justice

Transformative SEL is also committed to supporting young people’s development as informed, committed, and active members of their communities. The teachers in our study encouraged students to use their voices to denounce oppressive circumstances experienced by their families and communities and to advocate for the social changes that they were hoping for.

P3

Strategy
Recognizing youth as emerging social change agents

Encouraging civic engagement began with recognizing students’ voices and potential for transformative action and encouraging students to use their voices in support of their communities. “The teacher took time to **tell the students that they have a powerful voice** and they need to let others know that they care. *‘Si ustedes no demuestran que tienen una voz y que les importan las cosas que están pasando en su comunidad. No sólo sus casas y escuelas si no también en sus comunidades...’* [If you don’t show that you have a voice and that you care about the things happening in your community. Not only in your homes and schools, but also in your communities...]”

Encouraging students’ agency also involved sharing models of active community members that students could relate to. “The teacher played a YouTube video [of a youth advocating for policy change] for them to watch, giving them time to write their thoughts as they came up. She also told the students that she had thought of them when she first saw this video. She continued to say that she saw her students reflected in the video because the students are working on similar ideas and her students care. Then she went on to tell the students that they had to be continuous leaders and reminded them that they are all leaders (*‘Todos ustedes son líderes’*) and **their voices have the power to enact change** in their communities.”

Ultimately, transformative SEL is concerned with not just the analysis of disparate experiences of social and emotional well-being, but with encouraging youth to engage in collective projects and activities that aim to contribute to community well-being and justice.



Reflection Question

During SEL instruction, how do I encourage and provide opportunities for students to engage in developmentally appropriate and community-connected civic and political activities or projects?

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