



When Social Emotional Learning Intersects with Historical Trauma for Marginalized Students

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ABSTRACT

As educational leaders, it is paramount that we uphold the responsibility to unpack the arguments and public petitions made by youth activists and social movement organizations as they directly relate to and intersect with broader educational desires for thoughtfully developed culturally responsive and anti-racist work in schools today. The research discussed in this narrative is attuned to the opportunities for public discourse critiques and analysis, which reveal the processes of inequity and racist thinking underpinning our financial, curricular, and pedagogical structures throughout the education system. Implications of this work include considerations for the ways that policing structures our schools, our students' communities, and allowing for our work to question how those policing dispositions integrate into the classroom through SEL instruction.

Keywords: Anti-racist pedagogy, Police Brutality, Social Emotional Learning

INTRODUCTION

In parsing out the threads of an intertwined COVID-19 crisis and racial liberation movement, I have been keenly attuned to the opportunities for public discourse, which reveal the processes of inequity and racist thinking underpinning our financial, curricular, and pedagogical structures throughout the education system. One needs only to turn to the virtual pages of Teen Vogue, Slate, Medium, or tune into a live feed of Unicorn Riot or Tik-Tok to listen and learn. For many throughout this time of social revolution and revival, our vision has become a bit clearer and our deep-seeded concerns laid bare, as the youth of our nation speak-back to generations of injustice. So, it seems time for a reappraisal of our personal agendas around the social direction of curriculum and the intentions we hold for our students' when it

comes to trust-building, relational dispositions, and the development of classroom behavior guidelines and expected “norms”.

DISCOURSES OF DISCIPLINE

As a critical discourse researcher of social emotional learning (SEL) curricula and its associated pedagogies, I have shared many concerns about that social emotional learning takes the form of policing toward Black and Brown students for quite some time. Teachers, administrators, and teacher educators should take the time to read the recent literature that has emerged around police brutality and over-policing in the communities where they teach and serve. As educational leaders, it is paramount that we uphold our responsibility to unpack the arguments and public petitions made by youth activists and social movement organizations as they directly relate to and intersect with broader educational desires for thoughtfully developed culturally responsive and anti-racist work in schools today. If educators are not already involved in supporting social action and youth leadership, the demands of the Black Lives Matter movement in particular, cannot be overlooked as we attempt to address the social emotional needs of our students nor the community issues of the time.

The goals for traditional SEL Initiatives and their associated standards often come with very different intentions than emancipatory and abolitionist movements who are working arduously toward much-needed deliberate educational changes now. Today’s standardized SEL programs have been critiqued by numerous scholars as being drawn from age-old discourses of eugenics, ableism, and whiteness, and in fact, are a contradiction to agentive and liberating practices we hope to proclaim and labor toward for our children. The work of SEL over the past decade appears to move toward the amelioration of disciplinary discourses, and school-to-prison pipeline fallout by creating an alternative path that leads to “soft skills” and restorative practices, but this is not necessarily true. Many forms of traditional SEL have simply changed the style of regulatory discourses that teachers use when maintaining a disciplinary stance toward students. These mainstream SEL discourses have instead white-washed the same policing intentions and standardized regulation of student body movements, emotions, and inner thoughts. These forms of expression are now more closely monitored. When taking a closer look at the research behind these initiatives, the cultivation of good behavior has been fastened into metrics focused on improved disciplinary compliance and school achievement outcomes. This situates an inevitable burden of imbalance within the power-relations of the teacher-student relationship when it comes to the enactment of SEL instruction and practice in the classroom.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

Today's mainstream SEL has attempted to erase the idea that the school-to-prison pipeline is still an active byproduct of our schooling system and has exalted many teachers from their guilt and their needed anti-racist self-work by believing these programs help students live better lives. The question for me is, who did all of the transformational work? Who did the labor fall upon? For me, SEL as an apparatus of normalization has kept teachers entangled with their internal biases and race-blindness and instead has pushed students further toward adapting to systems of schooling that are in crisis and in need of far-reaching, systemic change. Through the design and positioning of students as "in need of SEL interventions", traditional SEL programs have shouldered the burden of change on the students by instructing them to self-regulate and demonstrate acceptable levels of emotional control. Teachers also face a similar form of labor when working against burn-out through their own SEL interventions in order to survive their jobs rather than having the support to shift the broken system inciting the issues at hand. Instead, I question what the possibility of dismantling systemic oppression and embracing the emotional work that goes with it might yield. As we move toward empathy and compassion in our work as educators, I also consider how this tandem work can further the reparations process for our most marginalized students.

RECOMMENDATIONS / NEXT STEPS

Social-emotional learning is not quick or easy work that can be conveniently applied as a stop gap for larger issues schools — it is delicate work that needs much critique and thought, specifically for the care and wellbeing of students whose communities are habitually policed or whose identities are historically targeted and marginalized. If educators are going to do any kind of SEL "soft skills" work with students, the caution label here is to be sure we are also in an active and critical process of examining the privilege and biases within yourself, among our teaching staff, as well as considering how policing is already structuring our schools, our students' communities, and allow our work to question how those policing dispositions, however obvious or subtle, integrate into the classroom through SEL instruction. I would put a huge warning label on any SEL program or initiative folks are considering until the "whole picture" has been examined, meaning that the community needs and the history of violence in the neighborhood and the nation have been contextualized within the larger culture and a clear and connected understanding of the learning community being served. What is the SEL intending to do here, in this place, with these particular children? Is it to

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normalize student behavior in the face of deficits caused by systemic and institutional injustice or racism? Is the goal to get more students to college without misbehavior or incompliance? Or is the goal to enrich students' schooling experiences, affirm their existing identities, and allow them to express themselves in a safe space where we are the space holders protecting their right to feel and be alive? Are we pushing our students to adapt to the norms of the institution under the guise of seemingly friendly SEL interventions and associated curricular and pedagogical approaches? Are we also teaching students to be accomplices and bystanders while others are over-conditioned through this process? I argue that students' individual needs and identities must be centered on the main concerns of any practice we take up in schools and learning spaces, specifically those dealing with students' internal navigation and self-understanding. A concerned and thoughtful learning of the history of schooling, the history of policing and marginalized communities, and a critical understanding of whiteness and the bypassing of emotions in teaching and education, knowledge of the reappropriation and secularism that informs many SEL initiatives today, as well as an awareness of the work of emancipatory scholars and youth who are producing wonderful counter-movements to traditional SEL programs, are among a few things to be aware of if we are interested in SEL program, or already working on such school initiatives during this time of vibrant and fluctuating educational change.

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