

## Toward Transformative Social and Emotional Learning: Using an Equity Lens

Adapted from [Social and Emotional Learning: A Cultural Analysis](#)

*by Robert Jagers, Deborah Rivas-Drake, and Teresa Borowski*

This brief from the American Institutes for Research provides a summary of the Assessment Work Group's Special Issues brief on social and emotional learning (SEL) and equity, *Social and Emotional Learning: A Cultural Analysis*. It demonstrates how an equity lens is essential for understanding the social-emotional development of children, youth, and adults. SEL can promote educational equity by helping all young people reach their fullest potential. Educators can use SEL to promote the cultural assets that all students bring to their classrooms—if SEL instruction and assessments are implemented with a culturally responsive lens.

This brief explores the core competencies of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) through an equity lens; demonstrates how transformative SEL can be implemented at the classroom level; and addresses implications for assessment.

### SEL is Fundamental, Not a Panacea

Each day, students and educators work with those who are both similar and different from them in their school communities. Such interactions occur more frequently as schools across the United States become more racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse. Developing social and emotional competencies—such as the CASEL core competencies of social awareness, responsible decision making, self-awareness, self-management, and relationship skills—can help children and educators navigate their differences effectively.

Social and emotional development is a life-long and reflection-driven process. Understanding this notion is essential prior to implementing SEL at any level. Social and emotional development should be understood as a complex, dynamic, ongoing, and culturally-adaptive process. How social and emotional competencies develop and are expressed varies across developmental

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stages, race, class, gender, contexts, cultures, and countries. Individuals learn to socialize, or interact with others, and express themselves in a way that is appropriate to the community in which they were raised. Strategies to implement SEL must be responsive to, rather than blunt, these assets and experiences.

In the school setting, building stronger SE competencies starts with teacher and leader reflection. Without careful consideration, our ideas about SEL and how we implement it risk operating from a deficit orientation. In other words, educators might operationalize SEL as a means to “fix” students rather than help them grow and thrive as unique individuals.

## The Need for Culturally Responsive SEL

Students can have vastly different perspectives on whether they feel supported and safe in the same classroom, even if educators use their own adult SE competencies. For example, experiencing racial/ethnic or gender discrimination, economic inequities, and traumatic events can negatively impact how students react to everyday situations with their peers and teachers. But students also develop unique protective factors to handle these stressful situations and to pursue healthy growth and development which we can consider *assets*.

WE MUST CONCEPTUALIZE, IMPLEMENT, AND ASSESS SEL IN A WAY THAT IS SENSITIVE TO STUDENTS’ CULTURAL ASSETS AND RECOGNIZES THEIR INHERENT STRENGTHS.

Practitioners and researchers must conceptualize, implement, and assess SEL in a way that adapts to students’ cultural assets and recognizes their inherent strengths. In doing so, students may feel more respected and valued for who they are as

individuals and experience a sense of belonging that is foundational to their learning success. Most existing SEL frameworks and programs have not yet made explicit the connections between students’ cultural assets and their social and emotional development. However, as research on the intersection of SEL and equity has emerged, so have conversations for revising frameworks and programs.

## The Transforming SEL Frameworks Using an Equity Lens

Social and emotional competencies can be expressed similarly across developmental stages but differently by culture. If educators and leaders implement SEL without regard to students’ cultural, racial/ethnic, linguistic, or economic backgrounds, some students may feel more alienated in their classrooms. To ameliorate this concern, educators can rethink and define SEL as *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 social problems.

TRANSFORMATIVE SEL IS A PROCESS WHERE 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 SOCIAL PROBLEMS.

The CASEL core competencies framework, for example, is popular, evidence-based, and easy to understand. The core competencies present an opportunity to revisit key social and emotional competencies through an equity lens. The following are questions to consider as an educator when exploring the CASEL core competencies through an equity lens.

#### SELF-AWARENESS

- Can you recall times or events in which your identity (race/ethnicity, social class status or gender) were made obvious or important to you?
- In what ways does your identity inform who you are as an educator?
- What are the relevant similarities and differences in your lived experiences and those of your students? What are the historical, contextual and personal factors that help explain this?
- Are you doing everything you can to move your students closer to opportunity?

#### SELF-MANAGEMENT

- What is the connection between your sense of wellbeing and the educational experience you provide your students?
- How do you best support students who experience difficulties outside of the classroom? What about inside the classroom?
- What are the best strategies for encouraging students to assert themselves in constructive ways?
- How do you respond when you feel like students aren't engaged in classroom activities?
- How do your personal preferences/biases affect how you interact with my students?

#### SOCIAL-AWARENESS

- What does it mean to provide a great education for underserved students?
- What types of discrimination are experienced in the US? What types of disadvantage are experienced by your students?
- What are the social dynamics among students from different backgrounds in your classes?
- Do you see differences as deficits or assets to be leveraged?
- How can what and how you teach better position your students to address their concerns and interests?

#### RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

- To what degree should students have input on what and how they learn?
- How do you make sure that students help/support each other to grow and learning in positive ways?
- Do you make every effort to get to know your students and their community?
- Do you invite students to get to know you?
- How do you ensure that you create an inclusive, safe learning environment for all of your students?

#### RESPONSIBLE DECISION-MAKING

- What educational opportunities can you provide that help diverse learners realize their fullest potential?
- How can you help students to become informed and engaged citizens?
- Are there policies and practices in your school that undermine your students receiving the high-quality education they need and deserve?
- In what ways can you address power relationships that discourage engagement in academic, social and emotional learning?
- How can you create opportunities for the range of perspectives and talents in your classroom to be appreciated/leveraged to improve learning for all?



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## Driving Educational Equity by Applying Adult SEL

Many educators, district administrators, and state leaders strive for equity in education. *Educational equity* means that all students have access to the same resources and educational rigor despite race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, family background, or family income. Multiple barriers stand in the way of achieving equity, including school resource allocation, existing community inequities, and biased perspectives. Educators and education leaders do not have total control over these factors. However, they do have control over how they view themselves, their students, the school community, the world, and how they act on these perspectives.

When we reflect on our existing views, assumptions, and perspectives, we employ components of two SE competencies: *self-awareness* and *social awareness*. Reexamining our perspectives on the intersections between our sense of self and how society may view us and those around us, is fundamental to creating educational equity, for two reasons.

1. It allows us to consider the world from the viewpoint of someone different from us: *do the students in my classroom have similar opportunities and experiences that I did when I was growing up? If not, why?*
2. Reexamining perspectives can lead to action. We see the world differently, which prompts us to change. *My students have had different opportunities and experiences than me – how can I address and empathize with their needs?*

Educators and leaders who employ adult SE competencies are equipped to influence lasting changes to address inequities at the community, district, and State levels.

## Advancing Transformative SEL: Promising Approaches in Schools

Schools should embody values, norms, and practices specific to their local communities. As communities change, so too do schools. In many schools across the country, educators already work to foster a sense of community and appreciation for students' backgrounds. Efforts such as transformative SEL, which seek more equitable educational experiences for all students, can support these efforts at scale. The examples in the table highlight practices to promote transformative SEL in schools.

<b>Cultural Integration</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connect student's cultural assets to academic concepts and skills, such as designing history lessons that resonate with students' backgrounds.</li> <li>• Encourage student reflection on their own lives and society.</li> <li>• Support student cultural competence by facilitating learning about their own and other cultures.</li> </ul>
<b>Classroom Community Building</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct morning meetings.</li> <li>• Set individual and classroom goals and expectations.</li> <li>• Engage in collaborative problem solving.</li> </ul>
<b>Promoting Ethnic-Racial Identity Development</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognize and assess the impact of one's beliefs and biases.</li> <li>• Understand one's strengths.</li> <li>• Ground and affirm one's cultural heritage(s).</li> </ul>

## Implications for Assessment

To ensure that practitioners and researchers measure SEL appropriately and ethically, assessment tools must be designed in a culturally responsive, strengths-based way. As the field of practical SEL measurement advances, leaders in the field should make the following considerations:

### CAPTURE CULTURAL ASSETS.

- Framing student behaviors and skills in a deficit-oriented manner can do more harm than good. For example, a student who has experienced any kind of discrimination may use coping skills or code-switching to navigate social relationships; existing SEL assessments do not yet fully capture these variations. Some existing validated assessments, especially in the social psychology and identity literature, include perception items that capture students' cultural assets in a sensitive way.
- Key questions to consider: How can notions of SE competencies be expanded to include the multiple orientations, skills, and abilities of students from diverse backgrounds? What are some ways that students can demonstrate their growth in SEL through multiple means? What are these means?

### CONSIDER CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

- Environment, race/ethnicity, language, and culture greatly influence the way that students respond, make decisions, and perceive themselves and others. In a welcoming learning environment, educators should provide students with opportunities to collaboratively learn from the perspectives and experiences of others.
- Key question to consider: What are the key features of learning environments that make students, especially those farthest from opportunity, feel safe and supported? How can educators create spaces where students feel comfortable making mistakes in SEL and learning from those mistakes?

### FOCUS ON ADULT SEL

- Educators shape how students experience school every day. Therefore, educator social and emotional competencies strongly impact how students experience school and can influence how students develop socially, emotionally, and academically.
- Key questions to consider: What supports are necessary for educators to examine and address their own biases? When these supports are in place, how can educators use SEL to more effectively interact with and facilitate the growth of students from diverse backgrounds?

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## About the Adapters

*We are grateful to the American Institutes for Research (AIR) team for their adaptation of this brief and efforts to enhance its utility for practitioners. AIR conducts and applies the best behavioral and social science research and evaluation towards improving people's lives, with a special emphasis on the disadvantaged.*

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## The Measuring SEL Series of Frameworks Briefs

The *Establishing Practical Social-Emotional Competence Assessments of Preschool to High School Students* project as guided by the Assessment Work Group (AWG) is dedicated to helping advance the effective use of data to inspire practice in SEL. In deciding how the AWG could best contribute to advancing the field and complement rather than compete with other efforts underway to address the challenges of multiple frameworks and inconsistent use of language, the AWG Frameworks Subgroup, led by Stephanie Jones and Roger Weissberg, developed four series of briefs designed for practitioners. Each series and each brief in the series is designed to help advance how people think about the issues and make reasonable choices that work best for them and their context. We hope they provide a set of “building blocks” that systems and practitioners can use to advance and improve their SEL efforts. Learn more at <https://measuringSEL.casel.org>

### Introductory Series

These briefs are about what frameworks are, how they are useful, the challenges and opportunities they present in practice, and defining criteria that are helpful when considering what frameworks to use.

### Comparative Series

These briefs explore efforts underway to categorize and align ways of thinking about comparing unique frameworks. The briefs also describe tools available to aid systems and practitioners in their selection and use of a framework.

### Special Issues Series

These briefs identify critical issues that frameworks must address or that influence how they are used that are important to consider when selecting and using frameworks, such as equity and SEL, and developmental considerations.

### Descriptive Series

These briefs each describe an individual framework currently in use. They are intended to illustrate how frameworks can be analyzed and help practitioners learn to evaluate frameworks on the types of criteria that matter most in their settings. *(The briefs are not an endorsement of these frameworks.)*

*The Assessment Work Group is committed to advancing dialogue on key issues in the field and stating a perspective when appropriate. The views and opinions expressed in these briefs reflect the general position of the Assessment Work Group. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of CASEL or any of the individual organizations involved with the work group.*