

# Chapter 13

## Building Resilient Voices: A Conceptual Framework for Culturally Responsive SEL

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter discusses social-emotional learning (SEL) in urban schools and the impact of these interventions on student academic achievement, behavior, self-efficacy, and instances of stress and depression. Utilizing Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the White-Savior Industrial Complex, the authors provide a conceptual framework for developing a culturally responsive SEL program for urban youth. Because the teaching demographics in the United States consisting of over 80% white educators, the authors discuss the importance of implementing SEL practices that specifically address racism at the individual and institutional levels.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Three people approach each other in a hallway; one offers a handshake, the other a hand-salute, and the last a dap. Each walks away with a sense of recognition and respect. The notion of social-emotional development being foundational to a holistic education is becoming more mainstream ([Ready to lead](#)), and, as such, the question of ensuring that the practice of culturally sustaining social-emotional learning is increasing in urgency. In today's political, racial, and social climate in the United States, it is pivotal that students experience explicit instruction in both citizenship development and social-emotional learning (SEL) as channels for academic and social success (Hatchimonji, Linsky, & Elias, 2017; Pace, 2015).

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Additionally, there has been an abundance of research that supports the effectiveness of schoolwide SEL systems in urban schools for students of color (Hamedani & Darling-Hammond, 2015; Kendziora & Yoder, 2016). SEL interventions in urban schools increase student academic achievement, behavior, self-efficacy, and lower stress and depression (Durlak et al., 2011). However, effective SEL programs in urban schools must be facilitated with fidelity and sustainability for diverse student populations (Barnes, 2019). If not promoted from a culturally sustaining approach, SEL programs in schools may inadvertently be used as a way to control versus empower, deter versus develop, and ultimately undermine our students' cultural grounding (Lauricella, Valdez, Okamoto, Helm, & Zaremba, 2016). To ensure the best outcomes for all students, culturally sustaining approaches to social-emotional learning several principles should be incorporated.

Culturally sustaining SEL focuses on the “why” before the “what.” Handshakes, hand salutes, and daps are all ways of exchanging respect through greeting (Schleincher, 1997). Across cultures, negotiating respect is an essential notion of developing and maintaining relationships (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Culturally sustaining SEL focuses on the why of the skill and helps students to translate the different looks of the “what” in various contexts.

Culturally sustaining SEL places teacher interactions, not a curriculum, at the core of addressing student's needs. Until instruction around principles of social-emotional development becomes standard fare in pre-teacher and administrator programs. As a result, curriculum is an invaluable tool to generate exposure to SEL concepts and create a common language in the classroom and the school (Schonert-Reichl, Hanson-Peterson, & Hymel, 2015). However, the curriculum can never substitute for teachers who self-model social-emotional competence and join their students on their journey of social-emotional development (Usher & Pajares, 2006). Culturally responsive SEL is rarely about “you” and almost always about “we.”

Culturally sustaining SEL engages the community, but creating a community is no easy task. Despite different ages, cultures, and priorities, community members must come together to establish and model shared ways of being. Communities thrive when their members are skilled in ways of relating to themselves and others in a way that fosters constructive problem solving and effective decision making (Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Borowski, 2018). Culturally responsive SEL recognizes that schools are part of a larger ecosystem of families, civic organizations, faith-based communities that support the social-emotional development of young people (National Commission on Social Emotional and Academic Development, 2019).

### **Culturally Sustaining SEL is Always Strength-Based**

Active social-emotional learning builds upon what students already know and feel about their lives and the lives of those around them. Students who struggle to turn in their homework on time may in fact demonstrate significant amounts of personal responsibility by taking care of their siblings at home. Social interactions that are not constructive in a school context may be adaptive coping mechanisms in light of threats in the community. Building upon what students do well will facilitate their social-emotional fluency across contexts (Usher & Pajares, 2006).

When these concepts are neglected, social-emotional learning can help negate students' identity instead of sustaining it. The assimilation of youth of color to the dominant culture's social norms dehumanizes and removes the cultural identities of students (Paris & Alim, 2017). It neglects to recognize the talents and unique differences of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Furthermore,

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