

Racialized Organizations and Social-Emotional Learning Initiatives in Juvenile Court Schools

**By: Bo-Kyung Elizabeth Kim, Patricia Burch, Jessica Leila Carranza, Jessenia De Leon,
Adrian Huerta**

Introduction

For over a decade, there have been calls across sectors for schools to incorporate activities and curricula that address students' social and emotional learning (SEL). Interest in SEL has grown alongside mounting empirical evidence that when students and the adults teaching them have high levels of social and emotional skills, school climate improves, and students do better in school and beyond (Albright et al., 2019; Aspen Institute, 2018; Weissberg et al., 2015; Berkowitz et al., 2017; Jones & Doolittle, 2017).

SEL has been defined in various ways, but at its core, it refers to helping individuals develop greater awareness of feelings and to use these feelings to build strong relationships and networks that can help them succeed in school. This brief discusses findings from a mixed methods study focused on better understanding how juvenile court schools might *explicitly* address racial trauma, incurring from racial injustice, that perpetuate the school-to-prison pipeline as an intentional part of SEL curriculum. The findings are based on a mixed methods study of social and emotional learning for justice impacted youth conducted in collaboration with the Los Angeles County Office of Education.

Our research examines the relationships between educators' attitudes and beliefs towards systemic and structural racism and school-level efforts to support the social and emotional learning of incarcerated youth. Towards this objective, we were specifically interested in the following research questions:

1. What are staff's perceptions about their own social-emotional needs as well as mental/emotional well-being, especially given current events/crises (such as the rise of anti-black police violence across the nation, fears/new constraints related to COVID)?
2. What are staff's perceptions of students' social-emotional needs and their own capacity to support these needs?
3. To what extent are policies and practices of SEL in juvenile court schools addressing racial inequity and promoting SEL?

Framing Ideas

The design of our study leveraged findings from three broad areas of research.

1. Implementation of SEL

Policymakers have passed legislation aimed at incentivizing schools to measure and report data linked to social and emotional skills at the Federal, state, and local level. For example, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, the most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, requires the inclusion of at least one measure of school quality or school success broadly defined as data on student engagement, educator engagement, school climate, and safety among other non-academic indicators. States such as California have followed with legislation to require all schools to include measures of school climate in accountability plans. States across the country are setting standards for what constitutes good SEL practice at the school level (Albright et al., 2019).

Implementation research suggests that school level practices associated with positive outcomes of SEL interventions include the following: 1) *Strategies to promote positive school climate and relationships*. This includes activities such as whole school culture-building, promoting personal interactions to build trust and relationships, organizing schedules and students to support relationships, and grouping students into smaller communities or “families” within large schools. 2) *Supporting positive behavior*. This included activities such as positive behavior management and restorative practices, setting and enforcing clear values and expectations, targeted approaches for struggling, at-risk, or historically minoritized students. 3) *Strong champions and leaders for SEL*. Leaders at all levels are needed to help educators translate principles into strategies and to sustain efforts over time.

2. The Importance of Educators’ Social and Emotional Well-Being

Educators’ social and emotional well-being is a critical dimension of school climate and the success of instructional interventions targeting students (Murano et al., 2019; Jennings et al., 2017). The role of teacher social and emotional competencies in academic success is often overlooked. Educators, just like students, experience social and emotional traumas in and outside of schools. The social and emotional competencies of educators influence the teacher-student interactions in several ways (Jones et al., 2013). Teachers who are experiencing trauma (including stress and depression) may find it more difficult to have positive interactions with students, the stress may make it more difficult for educators to respond effectively to students’ needs and to model social and emotional wellness. In addition, limited social and emotional skills can disrupt educators’ ability to teach the curriculum and limit capacity to integrate social and emotional skill development into the curriculum (Brackett et al., 2010; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Chang, 2009).

3. Social and Emotional Learning in the Context of Racialized Organizations

While building on this work, our research takes as its starting point the idea of organizations as racialized organizations (Ray, 2019). The students and staff participating in social and emotional interventions are living through a historical moment of increasing police violence against people of color and in a society where everyday racism in schools and the workplace continues to be tolerated. In adopting this perspective, we recognize educators responsible for implementing social-emotional learning initiatives as existing inside of racialized organizations, where policies and practices implicitly and/or explicitly reflect structural racism in society. The implementation and impact of social-emotional learning cannot be understood independently of how educators experience and interpret the dynamics of structural racism in their own and students' lives.

Context for the Work

Social-Emotional Learning and Juvenile Court Schools

Juvenile court schools are schools within juvenile correction facilities (See Figure 1). On any given day in 2019, 3,311 California youth attended juvenile court schools, with over 40,000 youth served during the 2018-2019 academic year (California Department of Education, 2020). Many students enter the juvenile justice system with long histories of chronic academic struggles and school disciplinary experiences (i.e., expulsion, suspension) (Jäggi & Kliewer, 2020). As a result, they tend to have lower literacy skills, minimal academic content knowledge, and little to no credits completed toward high school graduation. Many also carry the burden of personal trauma and unmet social-emotional needs, leaving them unprepared to engage in the school setting (Ruiz de Velasco & McLaughlin, 2010). When they exit juvenile facilities, they are often unequipped to positively rejoin society, increasing their likelihood of continued justice involvement. While these negative school experiences, in large part, reflect the racist pedagogy and policies that have marginalized youth of color within U.S. school systems, education *can* be a turning point for justice-involved youth (Jäggi & Kliewer, 2020).

Figure 1



Note. An illustration of a school housed within a juvenile correctional facility

Study Description and Findings

In the wake of public outcry against anti-Black police violence, compounded with increased social isolation occurring from the pandemic, the Los Angeles County of Education (LACOE) initiated a collaboration with our multidisciplinary research team to collect student level data on social-emotional needs and experiences of racial injustice among youth attending juvenile court schools. During the 2018-2019 school year, approximately 1,500 LACOE juvenile court school students received an SEL-informed curriculum. One hundred percent of students in the program are socio-economically disadvantaged; approximately 95% are Latinx or Black, and approximately 30% are English Learners. SEL themes were integrated into the academic curriculum in order to support students in developing skills such as understanding emotions, managing emotions, and getting along with others. Additionally, other goals with this initiative included having students better understand equity and systemic racism as well as to envision what working towards equity and anti-racism can look like. Overall, the integration of SEL into instruction was geared towards improving school climate and equity by reducing barriers to learning for students of color, LGBTQ students, English learners, and foster care youth.

The findings of the brief point to the promise of SEL as an integrated component for addressing students' social and emotional needs, but with an essential caveat: in order to be effective, SEL activities need to integrate anti-racist curriculum as a central component and schools must train and support staff to bring this into their classroom practice. This requires investment and courage on the part of high-level administration to name and address structural racism within their own organizations. We highlight the key findings linked to this recommendation next (see Table 1).

All staff reported that social-emotional skills were at least moderately important to student success, providing further support for the importance of SEL instruction, but expressed concern about design and implementation of SEL curriculum.

Over 70% of staff rated their own social-emotional skills (as manifest in their interaction with students) as high to very high. Nearly 70% of the staff reported at least moderately confident in their own ability to integrate SEL into instruction. Only about a third of the staff (34%), however, rated their own level of SEL integration into instruction at 7 or higher, on a scale of 0 to 10, and 11% rated 0 (See Figure 2). Staff's confidence in integrating SEL was significantly associated with the level of SEL integration into instruction. While staff perceived SEL as an essential element to student success, actual SEL instruction did not occur as extensively.

In interviews, staff expressed concern over the ability of a single curriculum to meet the varied and urgent social-emotional needs of diverse students. Several staff discussed the

disconnect between the general curriculum and the level of trauma experienced by some students, specifically post-COVID. When discussing the sense of urgency for support in addressing trauma in the classroom, one teacher remarked:

“You can see the trauma on these kids. You know what I mean? When you work alongside them and their arms have all these scars from them cutting...I'd like to see some [focused] lessons about that self-harming behavior, but there's none that I know of.”

Educators reported that even though administrators talked about the importance of integrating SEL, the rhetoric did not carry through to practice. SEL felt like an add-on and separate from the work of teaching. When discussing the role that SEL should play in the classroom one counselor stated: “Social-emotional learning shouldn't be something separate. SEL should be ingrained in every single lesson.” In short, both qualitative and quantitative data pointed consistently to the importance of SEL and anti-racist concepts in the classroom, but also noted the need for better supports and specifics on how. Staff who believed in the importance of SEL also perceived their own level of SEL competence as high. At the same time, they expressed concern that the current instructional curriculum was missing the mark, at a time when students' acute needs for social, emotional, and mental health support was so very apparent and intensifying.

Structural and systemic racism was perceived to affect both student and staff wellbeing, indicating a fundamental need for integrating anti-racism concepts in classroom instruction.

Broader social and political events affect educators' capacity to support students' social-emotional needs. In our study, the majority of staff (82%) reported structural and systemic racism affected their students' social and emotional wellbeing at least a moderate amount, while 11% of staff reported they did not know how racism impacted their students. Over half (53%) of staff reported they felt their students' social and emotional wellbeing was impacted by deaths of George Floyd, Andres Guardado, and Breonna Taylor, and related protests, while 27% reported they did not know. Furthermore, 66% of staff reported structural and systemic racism affected their own social and emotional wellbeing at least a moderate amount. Despite structural racism impacting students' and staff's wellbeing, even fewer staff were integrating anti-racism into instruction: 27% of the staff rated their own level of anti-racism integration into instruction at 7 or higher, on a scale of 0 to 10, and 12% rated 0. While the level of anti-racism integration did not vary by demographic characteristics, accounting for variation across campuses, staff who reported that racism impacted their wellbeing were more likely to integrate anti-racism concepts into their curriculum.

In interviews, staff described macro level dynamics (specifically the murder of George Floyd and related protests) as well as micro level aggressions. Several noted incidents of racist behavior across staff and students. For example, some reported that other staff demonstrated evident racial biases in the context of SEL. They reported teachers questioning whether “these” students had the ability to complete the project-based assignments. Several staff noted that even

with SEL, the problem of racialized school discipline inside of the organization persisted, with boys of color being punished more regularly and more harshly than a White boy.

District Leadership support was viewed as critical in integration of Anti-Racism and SEL into instruction but further support is necessary.

The majority of staff reported LACOE's training and resources (e.g., Implicit Bias training, Building Healthier Schools training) were at least moderately helpful in integrating a focus on equity/anti-racism (76%) and SEL (66%) into instruction in their school/classroom. Staff, however, perceived the level of support for anti-racism and SEL integration to be moderate ($m=2.43$; scale 0-4). Accounting for variation across schools and controlling for race, and gender, we found that staff's perception of school support was positively associated with integration of SEL ($\beta = 1.23$; $p < 0.001$) and anti-racism ($\beta = 0.97$; $p = 0.01$) into the curriculum. In other words, when staff reported higher levels of school support in implementing SEL and anti-racism instruction, they were more likely to integrate these concepts into their own instruction.

In interviews, staff reported more and different kinds of professional development is needed for both SEL and classroom instruction. There were concerns that staff lacked the content areas training and in some instances certification to teach in the content areas covered by the curriculum. Addressing educators' mastery over content areas was necessary to any project-based learning in that content area. One teacher expressed her frustration at the lack of content expertise that some teachers have and how it negatively impacts their ability to successfully implement SEL in the classroom. The teacher stated;

“You can't push a program [for students] if there is no support for content proficiency. First of all, project-based learning requires that teachers are content proficient. That's the first premise. Forget the social-emotional learning. I can't figure out how my content connects to science unless I've had a conversation about what you are exploring in science.”

While addressing the importance of acknowledging students' trauma, another classroom teacher shed light on how both culturally relevant content and trauma informed curriculum are germane to teachers' mastery of content. The classroom teacher stated:

“I do think the trauma-informed approach is important, but I think teachers really need to be supported with content. How are we implementing the culturally relevant content that Curriculum and Instruction is currently sharing with districts? Trauma-informed understanding is different from culturally relevant content.”

In order to be able to ensure that issues of anti-racism are being addressed teachers need to have a profound understanding of culturally relevant content. SEL cannot be included in the classroom

without addressing anti-racism and implementing culturally relevant content, which improves the classroom climate.

Recommendations and Policy Implications

In the wake of a global health pandemic and intensifying state violence against people of color, calls are mounting for greater investments in social and emotional learning (SEL). SEL is seen as a necessary component of addressing students' social and emotional needs and closing the opportunity gap, specifically for racial and ethnic minoritized youth. Drawing on findings from mixed methods university-county collaboration, we argue education leaders and policymakers prioritize the following.

While the integration of SEL into daily instruction is important, SEL cannot stand alone without the integration of anti-racism concepts. Priorities for SEL should include but not limited to equity-centered adaptations of existing evidence-based SEL programs, implementation of SEL programs in ethnically and socioeconomically diverse settings, revisiting SEL concepts to ensure cultural appropriateness, and tracking student outcomes for equity. Addressing racial disparities must be front and centered to ensure equitable processes and potential effects of SEL.

An explicit recognition of staff and teachers' racialized experiences within and outside of school grounds is warranted. Organizational support through trainings, retreats, and self-care, thus, should address the impact of structural and everyday racism on the wellbeing of teachers and staff. Professional and personal support for staff and teachers can lead to a better classroom as well as school environment in fostering students' social and emotional development.

Similarly, the impact of racism on students' social and emotional wellbeing must be recognized and addressed to foster an equitable school and classroom climate. Students of color, particularly those incarcerated attending juvenile court schools, have been victims of direct and indirect racism. SEL programs implemented in these settings must reflect the cultural and ethnic background and experiences of these youth. Training and support for SEL needs to target all levels of the organization and by design promote antiracist concepts, instruction, and practices.

Bibliography

- Allbright, T. N., Marsh, J. A., Kennedy, K. E., & Hough, H. J. (2019). Social-emotional learning practices: Insights from outlier schools. *Journal of Research in Innovative Teaching & Learning*, 12(1), 35–52.
- Aspen Institute. (2018). *Building Partnerships in Support of Where, When, & How Learning Happens*. https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Aspen_YD_FINAL_2_web.pdf
- Berkowitz, R., Moore, H., Astor, R. A., & Benbenishty, R. (2017). A research synthesis of the associations between socioeconomic background, inequality, school climate, and academic achievement. *Review of Educational Research*, 87(2), 425–469. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654316669821>
- Brackett, M. A., Palomera, R., Mojsa-Kaja, J., Reyes, M. R., & Salovy, P. (2010). Emotion-regulation ability, burnout, and job satisfaction among British secondary-school teachers. *Psychology in the Schools*, 47(4), 406–417. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.20478>
- California Department of Education (2020). *Juvenile Court Schools - CalEdFacts*. Retrieved November 2, 2020, from <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/eo/jc/cefjuvenilecourt.asp>.
- Chang, M.-L. (2009). An appraisal perspective of teacher burnout: Examining the emotional work of teachers. *Educational Psychology Review*, 21(3), 193–218. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-009-9106-y>
- Greenberg, M. T., Domitrovich, C. E., Weissberg, R. P., & Durlak, J. A. (2017). Social and emotional learning as a public health approach to education. *Future of Children*, 27(1), 13-32.
- Jäggi, L., & Kliwer, W. (2020). Reentry of incarcerated juveniles: Correctional education as a turning point across juvenile and adult facilities. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 47(11), 1348–1370. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854820934139>
- Jennings, P. A., Brown, J. L., Frank, J. L., Doyle, S., Oh, Y., Davis, R., Rasheed, D., DeWeese, A., DeMauro, A. A., Cham, H., & Greenberg, M. T. (2017). Impacts of the CARE for Teachers program on teachers' social and emotional competence and classroom interactions. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 109(7), 1010–1028. <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000187>
- Jennings, P. A., & Greenberg, M. T. (2009). The prosocial classroom: Teacher social and emotional competence in relation to student and classroom outcomes. *Review of Educational Research*, 79(1), 491–525. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654308325693>
- Jones, S. M., Bouffard, S. M., & Weissbourd, R. (2013). Educators' social and emotional skills vital to learning. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 94(8), 62–65. <https://doi.org/10.1177/003172171309400815>
- Jones, S. M., & Doolittle, E. J. (2017). Social and Emotional Learning: Introducing the Issue. *The Future of Children*, 27(1), 3–11. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44219018>
- Murano, D., Way, J. D., Martin, J. E., Walton, K. E., Anguiano-Carrasco, C., & Burrus, J. (2019). The need for high-quality pre-service and inservice teacher training in social and emotional learning. *Journal of Research in Innovative Teaching & Learning*, 12(2), 111-113. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JRIT-02-2019-0028>

- Ray, V. (2019). A Theory of Racialized Organizations. *American Sociological Review*, 84(1), 26–53. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122418822335>
- Ruiz de Velasco, J., & McLaughlin, M. (2010). Alternative schools in California: Academic on-ramps or exit ramps for Black, Latino, and Southeast Asian boys. In Edley, C. & Ruiz de Velasco, J. (Eds.), *Changing Places: How Communities Will Improve the Health of Boys of Color* (pp. 140-155). University of California Press.
- Weissberg, R. P., Durlak, J. A., Domitrovich, C. E., & Gullotta, T. P. (Eds.). (2015). Social and emotional learning: Past, present, and future. In J. A. Durlak, C. E. Domitrovich, R. P. Weissberg, & T. P. Gullotta (Eds.), *Handbook of social and emotional learning: Research and practice* (pp. 3–19). The Guilford Press.

Appendix A

Table 1

School Support enhanced integration of SEL and Anti-Racism Themes in the Classroom

	Incorporating SEL Themes			Incorporating Anti-Racism		
	Beta	SE	<i>p</i>	Beta	SE	<i>p</i>
Intercept	2.15	1.00	0.07	2.11	1.09	0.10
School support	1.23	0.32	0.00	0.97	0.35	0.01
Gender (Ref=Female)						
Male	0.76	0.53	0.15	0.36	0.59	0.54
Prefer not to say	0.87	2.07	0.67	-2.02	2.30	0.38
Race (Ref=White)						
Asian American	1.63	1.14	0.15	1.80	1.27	0.16
Black/African American	0.10	0.69	0.88	0.78	0.77	0.31
Latinx/Hispanic	0.25	0.77	0.74	0.11	0.85	0.90
Multiracial	0.93	1.19	0.44	1.59	1.33	0.24
Prefer not to say	0.41	0.99	0.68	-0.21	1.11	0.85