Pursuing Social and Emotional Development Through a Racial Equity Lens: A Call to Action

Both equity and social, emotional, and academic development are currently receiving much-needed attention, but neither can fully succeed without recognizing strengths and addressing gaps in these complementary priorities. **Rather than being pursued as two separate bodies of work, the field needs to identify ways in which equity and social, emotional, and academic development can be mutually reinforcing.** To accomplish this requires examining issues of race directly; this can be difficult and uncomfortable, but we cannot avoid race and let the challenges go unacknowledged and, therefore, inadequately addressed.

A good education is critical to success in college, career, and life. In addition to building academic knowledge, education also plays a vital role in helping young people build independence and the relationship skills that facilitate taking care of oneself and others, exercise the rights and privileges of living in a pluralistic and diverse democracy, and develop an integrated identity.[1] Indeed, the greatness of public education lies in its promise to take all individuals and provide them the opportunity to build the life they want. Our system of public education, however, hasn't been designed—and therefore has been unable—to meet this vision, especially for students of color and indigenous youth.[2]

Over half of public school students are now students of color, and the share of students of color is expected to continue to grow in the coming decades.[3] Students of color and their families bring tremendous assets to their schools and communities[4] and increasing diversity in the classroom can create benefits for all students.[5] Despite these assets, low-income students and students of color are adversely affected in nearly every measure of well-being—educational, social, financial, emotional,

and physical—which in turn affects both their readiness to learn and their long-term life outcomes.[6]

U.S. schools systemically provide fewer resources to students of color and students from low-income families, including less funding, fewer enrichment activities, less rigorous coursework, lower-quality materials and other physical resources, curriculum that doesn't reflect their background and culture, and unequal access to highly effective teachers.[7] These inequities not only hobble students' individual chances for success, but also undermine shared growth in an economy where most jobs that pay a living wage require some form of post-secondary education.[8]

In an equitable education system, every student has access to the resources and educational rigor they need at the right moment in their education, irrespective of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, language, disability, family background, family income, citizenship, or tribal status. Equity is not just about resource allocation, however. While there is a need for additional resources to allow schools serving students of color to provide rich educational experiences, **merely ensuring**

more equitable resource allocation won't ensure that schools are affirming of students' background and cultural and linguistic heritage.

It is well known that many students face adversity outside of school–in housing and food insecurity, inadequate access to health care, and disproportionate punishment by the criminal justice system, for example– which impedes their ability to learn in school. Too often, however, students of color also face adversity *inside* of school, including lower expectations, harsh disciplinary approaches, negative school environments, and racial microaggressions that disconnect rather than connect them to school.[9] Further, negative stereotypes about ability also play a role in suppressing performance and engagement in school; indeed, much of the psychological pressure students of color feel stems from their awareness of how students like them can be, and often are, perceived.[10] **In order to master academic content and successfully progress through K-12 schooling, students need to feel safe (physically and psychologically), be connected to teachers and peers, see the value of what they are being asked to learn, and believe they have a real chance to succeed.**[11]

Unfortunately, many efforts to advance educational equity focus only on inputs (e.g., money, teachers, materials) and outputs (e.g., test scores, graduation rates, college access) and not on improving learning environments, reducing bias (the unconscious association of attitudes or stereotypes toward particular groups) and building asset-based mindsets in students *and* staff. **To make substantive progress toward improving educational equity, education leaders need to tackle inequity with race in mind–or through a racial equity lens–and at multiple levels: individual, institutional, and societal.**

Our Vision: In an equitable education system, every student has access to the resources and educational rigor they need at the right moment in their education, irrespective of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, language, disability, family background, family income, citizenship, or tribal status. Equity is not just about resource allocation, however. While there is a need for additional resources to allow schools serving students of color to provide rich educational experiences, merely ensuring more equitable resource allocation won't ensure that schools are affirming of students' background and cultural and linguistic heritage.

Definition

Social and emotional development comprises specific skills and competencies that people need in order to set goals, manage behavior, build relationships, and process and remember information. These skills and competencies develop in a complex system of contexts, interactions, and relationships, suggesting that organizations must take a comprehensive approach to promoting social and emotional development–addressing adult skills and beliefs; organizational culture, climate, and norms; and routines and structures that guide basic interactions and instruction–and that such approaches are most effective when designed to match the needs and contexts of specific organizations and communities.[12] Put simply, social and emotional development is not just about the skills that students and adults possess and deploy; it is also about the features of the educational setting itself, including culture and climate.

The Opportunity

While it will take a concerted, multi-sector (i.e., housing, criminal justice, healthcare, etc.) approach to achieve full equity for all students and for society, **schools have an important role to play by creating environments that are safe and conducive to learning; helping students develop the skills, habits, and dispositions that support success in school and beyond; and helping to meet students' basic needs that may originate outside of school,** such as through food and clothing assistance. The prioritization of social, emotional, and academic development (SEAD) through a racial equity lens is one critical piece of the puzzle. Most educators and school system leaders have good intentions and are committed to equity. But good intentions do not obviate the need to understand historical context and the role of race, racism, white privilege, and implicit bias in holding students back. Research indicates that teachers, like everyone, are subject to implicit biases associated with race and ethnicity, which can affect their judgments of student behavior and their relationships with students and families.[13] As educators and school system leaders attempt to pursue more intentional approaches to social, emotional, and academic development, the absence of a racial equity lens has led to some challenges with implementation and unintended, negative consequences, particularly for students of color and indigenous youth.

The Evidence Base for SEAD

Decades of research in human development, cognitive and behavioral neuroscience, and educational practice and policy, as well as other fields, have illuminated that social and emotional development is central to learning. In addition to being broadly supported by teachers and parents,[14] a focus on social, emotional, and academic development in school results in the following benefits for students and society:

- Gains in student achievement, including test scores, on-time graduation rates, and post-secondary enrollment and completion;[15]
- Reduced incidence of delinquency and other challenging behaviors;[16]
- Improved long-term outcomes in employment, health, and civic engagement;[17]
- Reduced rates of depression, anxiety, and risky behaviors;[18] and
- Development of skills that are highly valued among employers.[19]

Considerations for Implementing SEAD with a Racial Equity Lens

Productive strategies for implementing SEAD have demonstrated how an equity lens can support strong gains for all students, including students of color.[20] In order for educators to address challenges, they must be aware of—and intentionally avoid—the causes, taking these considerations into account:

Build on strengths:

Efforts aimed at leveraging SEAD to improve outcomes for disadvantaged students may focus inordinately on addressing adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and trauma. While these approaches have value, an exclusive focus on deficits leads schools to try to "fix" students of color and students living in poverty, and thereby fail to recognize and capitalize on students' strengths and assets, including their tremendous resilience. In an effort to fix certain students or schools through SEAD programs, school systems can send the erroneous messages that students of color have greater deficits than assets, and that other—predominately affluent and white schools and students—do not need the benefit of SEAD, although they do.

➔ **Educators need to see students, families, and communities for more than their challenges and build on their already-existing cognitive, social, and emotional competencies, working to create environments in which they can thrive and targeting supports where needed.**

Attend to root causes:

Schools or programs that focus inordinately on self-management skills—such as anger management and impulse control or mindfulness—and characteristics—like grit and resilience—may ignore the existence of real trauma in students' lives as well as ignore or discount their lived experiences with racism and white privilege.

➔ **Students need supports that also address injustice and related trauma (including discrimination, violence, homelessness, and hunger) directly and need to understand that their negative feelings are legitimate and justified, even as students learn strategies to direct their feelings toward productive ends.**

Address stereotype threat:

The way students are treated in school can trigger or ameliorate stereotype threat, which occurs when people feel they are at risk of being stigmatized by assumptions that associate their social identity with undesirable characteristics. Students who have received societal or school-delivered messages that they are less capable as a function of race, ethnicity, language background, gender, economic status, or disability will often translate those views into negative self-perceptions of ability that suppress their academic achievement. [21]

➔ **Stereotype threat can be mitigated in the classroom through teachers' use of affirmations that the student is seen as competent and valued and by a focus on tasks as the basis for ongoing improvement, rather than as judgments of ability.**

Develop supportive learning environments:

Schools must be safe, welcoming, and supportive spaces for students to learn and for them to feel a sense of belonging and the freedom to develop their own identity and sense of self.

→ Building healthy school culture and climate is critical,[22] as is designing and utilizing space in a way that welcomes students, families, and community members and celebrates students' backgrounds, languages, and achievements.

Respect all cultures:

Some approaches to SEAD may teach students to conform to someone else's expectations of how they should look, dress, be, or act, and those expectations are typically associated with the dominant (white, middle-class) culture and do not take into consideration students' own cultures or values. For example, many schools and classrooms are built on more individualistic and competitive models of learning, versus the more communal and collaborative orientation of many communities of color and indigenous peoples.[23] At the same time, schooling must prepare students to act responsibly and professionally in ways that reflect societal norms.

→ While all people, regardless of background, need to learn common norms in order to navigate and thrive in American society, efforts to teach SEAD competencies should accomplish this while affirming and sustaining students' diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds and traditions.

Go beyond discipline:

In some schools and systems, discipline practices are being modified as a discrete initiative rather than part of a whole school culture and learning environment that promotes social and emotional development. A focus on improving exclusionary discipline practices is indeed important, as suspensions have a long-term damaging effect, especially for students of color, who are pushed into the school-to-prison pipeline.[24]

→ Effective discipline should be part of a holistic effort that teaches students skills and guides them in taking responsibility for their actions, which leads to safer, better organized, and purposeful learning environments; healthy school culture; and comprehensive social, emotional, and academic development that is much broader than discipline reform.

Provide needed resources:

Good implementation requires resources—people (e.g., curriculum specialists, counselors, and social workers), time (within the existing school day, out-of-school, and across multiple years), and money. Students of color tend to be in the most under-resourced schools with the least-prepared teachers (with low-income students of color especially disadvantaged in resource allocation).[25] When additional resources are available, schools with struggling students will often use them to provide remedial academic instruction, such as extra math practice, and test-prep, rather than enrichment, social and emotional development, music, art, and physical education.[26]

→ A focus on the social elements of learning—building relationships and trust—will strengthen and foster development in the cognitive domains of learning. Both areas need adequate resources and more integration. School systems and states should, where possible, allocate new funding from public and private sources to support this important work, and consider how to more effectively leverage existing resources, including funding, time, people, and content.

Invest in adult development:

Some schools do not provide staff with sufficient, relevant training on SEAD, cultural awareness, or trauma-informed care, which leads to schools treating social and emotional development as an add-on, failing to integrate the social and emotional dimensions of learning into academic instruction, ignoring cultural differences, and overlooking the range of children's developmental stages in favor of a one-size-fits-all approach.

➜ Proper implementation of SEAD requires tailoring strategies to the specific context. Stronger pre- and in-service training on human and child development as well as culturally responsive teaching is needed. Further, educators need support in how to effectively, frequently, and openly communicate with families to build mutual trust, understanding, and support.

Support adult social-emotional health:

Educators have social and emotional assets and needs as well, and educators—especially those working in the most disadvantaged schools and those in the poorest neighborhoods—can experience secondary traumatic stress from supporting students in crisis.[27]

➜ Teachers and administrators must be emotionally and physically healthy themselves in order to help students develop social and emotional competencies[28] and school and system leaders can do more to understand and attend to this issue by ensuring that educators have agency of their own, feel connected to their values, and have growth mindsets.

Engage families and communities:

Because they have historically been consigned fewer resources, less rigorous content, and less qualified teachers, some disenfranchised families may be skeptical of schools generally and of social and emotional development initiatives specifically,[29] seeing them as distracting from academics, or outside the scope of what schools should teach.

➜ When implementing SEAD initiatives, school leaders and teachers need to understand families' hopes and dreams, honor their culture, and provide them with the respect and appreciation they deserve. School leaders must also be clear that they are not making a choice between relationships or rigor, but that the two are inextricably linked and reinforce each other.

All students, and especially students of color, need to be in learning environments that reinforce their sense of academic belonging and send constant signals that they are valued for all their assets and deserving of investment and rigor. Improving learning environments by focusing on racial equity and integrating social, emotional, and academic development can improve individual academic and life outcomes and lead toward a more equitable society overall.[30] As schools and systems continue to invest in social and emotional development, it is critical that leaders apply a racial equity lens as they consider both opportunities and challenges.

Endorsers

This brief was authored by The Aspen Institute Education & Society Program, with the active participation of a broad cross-section of leading education practitioners and scholars. The following individuals and organizations endorse the content and join in a call to action to ensure education leaders actively integrate a culturally and racially responsive approach to social, emotional, and academic development in P-12 schooling:

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▲ Member of the Council of Distinguished Scientists, NCSEAD

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Endnotes

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