

**Transformative Social Emotional Learning in the ELA Classroom:
Promoting TSEL Skills through Writing**

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Introduction

When I started high school I felt very prepared. I was attending a school in downtown Spokane, WA which was considered one of the best public high schools for academics in the city. In middle school I took honors classes and did well in them. I made lots of friends, engaged in extracurricular activities, and mostly got along with my teachers. By all metrics that were presented to me, I thought I would thrive in the high school environment and was looking forward to it. By the end of my first month of freshman year, however, I felt depressed and disengaged. In the large brick building that housed my school, surrounded by so many new people, I felt lost and anonymous. I still had friends, but in my freshman year I failed to develop any of the warm connections with my teachers I experienced earlier in my school years. I was also put into the most rigorous academic track available. I was a “smart” student after all, so the purpose of high school was getting into college. I felt overworked and stressed, and I felt like I was constantly being presented with new hoops to jump through. I felt disconnected with the material being taught, and I disliked the overly competitive spirit of the honors program.

By the end of my freshman year I dropped some of my honors level classes to help balance my work load and relieve some of my stress, but things didn’t get much better for me. Though my school offered more AP classes than any other school in the city and had a lot of good opportunities for honors students, the general ed classes they offered were often a joke. I took one history class that was taught by a football coach who spent a good portion of the class chatting with the football players and cheerleaders, made a game out of making freshmen cry, and would give out the answers to the tests on a “study” sheet which we could use in our open notes tests. I felt caught between these two worlds, one which was overly ambitious and overly focused on future success to the detriment of my present reality, and the other which seemed to

have utterly given up on the students it served.

During my Junior year of high school I started experiencing symptoms of depression. I stopped participating in sports and student leadership, started skipping school more often, and generally became even more disengaged. Due to the chaotic nature of my homelife, school had always been my lifeline, but in high school it stopped being a safe haven for me. In the honors classes, academic ambition became something poisonous and polluting. It set students against each other and many students became motivated to cheat and cut corners in order to ensure they got the grades they wanted. Teachers and parents encouraged us to work as hard as we possibly could to achieve this very narrow goal which they alleged would secure us the right kind of future, college, career, and material success. The AP and honors classes, however, did not foster a strong sense of community among the students. They did not engage us in social emotional learning as academics trumped everything else.

Although I was falling apart mentally and emotionally, I was still getting A's in most of my classes, and that was all that seemed to matter to the adults in my life. During the most difficult time of my Junior year, one person reaching out to me ended up making a huge impact on me. My Rhetoric and Composition teacher, Ms. McKenzie noticed that I was struggling and offered me a sympathetic ear. She made me feel seen at a time in my life when I felt invisible, and she challenged me to do my best while being understanding about the challenges I was facing. I feel fortunate to have connected with teachers like Ms. McKenzie who helped me to graduate and keep my grades high enough to make it into college. Once I got to college, I enrolled in an alternative common core program based on the Great Books model of education which focuses on learning through engaging with original texts. This program, called the Saint Ignatius Program or SII for short, was also a "living and learning community", giving students

the option to live on campus with a community of people who were all enrolled in the same core classes. SII shaped my time in college by providing me with rigorous course work, engaging teachers, and a community of like minded learners who would become both academic collaborators and friends. We took seminar style classes and all lived in the only co-ed dorm on campus. Though the course work was challenging, the SII program did not have a GPA requirement to join, and it was focused more on the learning process than on high grades and accolades. Students enrolled because they were interested in the material, and we were encouraged to help each other rather than compete for the top spot. The SII program also invested in providing cultural and social enrichment for us. They sponsored trips to baseball games, the San Francisco Opera, and student retreats. Though I received a great education, the main thing I took away from my time in this program was a sense of community and belonging which has helped to shape the person I am today.

Reflecting on my learning history, I believe that one of the most important ways schools can support students is to address students as whole people, not just as numbers ranked on a page. Not all students excel at the class work that is assigned to them, but that does not determine their worth as a person. We must find ways to reinforce our shared humanity and to validate and encourage skills other than those that are deemed important by school curriculum. School is a community, for better or for worse, and teachers need to help students create their own community of co-learners and friends.

Guiding Pedagogical Framework

Critical Pedagogy is an educational theory developed by Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire which aims to help students develop a personal understanding of their own

power, their relationships to structures of oppression in the society where they live, and a consciousness of their innate freedom and ability to impact the world around them (Freire, 1970). Critical Pedagogy recognizes that education is inherently political, and that the lived experiences of marginalized members of society have just as much value as the lives and experiences of the dominant social group. The goal of critical pedagogy is to use education as a tool for liberation by helping students develop “conscientizacao”, or a critical awareness which then leads to action. This is accomplished through an emphasis on problem-posing education rather than a reliance on the banking model, critical examination of the lived experiences of the students rather than focusing on the lives and experience of the dominant class, and a co-teaching model, where students and teachers are working together to engage in critical thought (Freire, 1970). Rather than trying to make sure every student fits within the narrow rubric for success that already exists in our formal education system, Critical Pedagogy asks us to make sure that every student becomes aware that their value as people exists whether or not they succeed under the current school system. As Freire (1970) says, “the solution is not to ‘integrate’ them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become ‘beings for themselves’” (p.74).

A crucial element in countering systemic oppression is in encouraging students to develop their own conscientiousness. One way to approach this is by encouraging students to think critically about the structures of school as we engage with them, and to think critically about what is valued by the school systems. As Boggs (2012) explains “critical thinking can develop only when questions are posed as problems. This problem-posing method provides no automatic ‘correct’ answer. By contrast, students must discover their own understanding of the truth by developing a heightened awareness of their situation” (chp. 5). Problem-posing dialogue

is one of the central features of critical pedagogy. By relying on problem-posing, Critical Pedagogy challenges the traditional view that the teacher contains knowledge which is deposited in the minds of students. Instead, problem-posing asks students to access and cultivate their own stores of knowledge, which are often dismissed and delegitimized by the dominant social group. By engaging with students in a way that validates their worth as individuals and also encourages them to question the school processes we all take for granted, the teacher can help to develop critical consciousness through the problem-posing process.

The act of cultivating joy and justice in the classroom is an important element of teaching in a way that counters systemic oppression. Freire (1970) explains that “liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferals of information” (p. 80), which means as teachers we must work to create an environment where students are able to think critically about the world they are a part of. In order to do this, the classroom must in some way become an extension of their worlds, meaning the student should have some ability to act as co-creators of the classroom environment. Deloria (2001) states “the universe is personal and, therefore, must be approached in a personal manner” (p. 23). While Deloria encourages us to approach learning in a personal way, this does not exempt the student or teacher from moral considerations, and I believe this is where justice comes into play. By challenging these types of hierarchies which separate us, dividing us into classes of “worthy” and “unworthy” people, we also start to cultivate a joy in existence and in engaging in the world around us. This is something which must be modeled in the classroom, not just spoken about.

The ideas Deloria and Wildcat explain in their writings provide a point of view which contrasts sharply with views that are core components of White American middle class identity. In their view of the world, a grounding in community and place, and the act of learning who we

are through engaging with the place and the people who surround us is how we come to learn about ourselves. The self cannot be removed from the community and environment without losing essential aspects of its identity. Deloria states, “it is through these relationships, physical and psychological, indeed spiritual, that human beings begin to understand who, why, and even to some degree what we are” (Deloria 2001, p. 33). According to this logic, grounding my class in a sense of place and making room for my students to bring themselves fully into the classroom is vital to cultivating a liberatory learning environment. One way to do this is by challenging the idea that students need to leave their communities in order to be successful.

When we begin to think of students as young people learning how to be human, rather than future workers or statistics representing success and failure, it is impossible to separate the lives of these students from the communities they come from. In her writings, Boggs links the fate of community to the fate of the student, and this makes a lot of sense to me. If a student is over disciplined in school, becomes disillusioned, and drops out and then turns to crime to make money to survive, the whole community suffers. Boggs’ model of education centers the reality that children don’t just come “from” a community, they are a vital element of it. Her writing encourages us to engage in community building as an integral element of liberatory education. She asks us to “celebrate local excellence and innovations, let people teach each other, and allow students to organize themselves” (Boggs 2012, chp. 5). By following this model we are not just teaching our students how to be good citizens, but creating essentially a model democracy. This form of education does a lot more than prepare people to submissively enter the work force, when done right “it should give people an understanding of themselves and where they stand in the world and, from there, their obligations toward their neighbor” (Boggs 2012, chp. 5).

An important element of teaching from the bottom-up rather than the top-down is making

an effort to get to know the students as individual humans, and to find out who they are outside of the narrow confines of the classroom and the subject matter that I am teaching. This applies to the teacher as well as the student. As hooks (1994) describes this process in *Teaching to Transgress* “teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own wellbeing if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students” (p. 15). One of the defining characteristics of human civilization is our diversity of interests and abilities, but unfortunately our school systems tend to reward only a small number of skills like reading comprehension, math calculation, and punctuality. Finding ways to allow students to bring other parts of themselves into the classroom, and to create an environment that values and validates those parts of them can be a form of bottom-up learning. There are certain skills which I will be sharing with the class, but there are many things that I am not good at or don’t know very much about. By showing and being honest about things I struggle with, or things I am interested in but am still learning, I hope to be able to create an environment where students can feel comfortable sharing their knowledge with me. I think it is important not just to acknowledge students’ skills but to actively try to cultivate and appreciate them. Additionally, I want to encourage students to think critically about how their natural skills, hobbies, and other interests contribute to their overall wellbeing as a person. Freire (1970) explains that “education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination—denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people” (p. 81). In this way, I want to encourage students to bring things that are important to them from their world into the classroom. I think it is important to encourage living a full life, and nurturing the activities, skills, and hobbies that help each individual do just that. These are things which help us to form connections to the world around us and to find value in

ourselves outside of the narrowly defined values of being a “good” student.

Connections to InTASC Standards

By implementing the foundational principles of Critical Pedagogy in my classroom, I will also be able to meet the educational standard established in the InTASC document. Developing critical consciousness in the classroom requires that the content and skills students learn is deeply connected to real issues which affect students and their communities. Standard five of the InTASC asks that a teacher “understands how to connect concepts and use differing perspectives to engage learners in critical thinking, creativity, and collaborative problem solving related to authentic local and global issues” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013, p. 8). By creating opportunities for collaborative problem solving with students, it challenges them to actively examine their own world view, as well as that of their classmates.

Additionally, by engaging in intentional community building with students, I hope to create a positive learning environment where students feel safe and supported to engage in collaborative co-learning with their peers. This aligns with standard three which asks that “the teacher works with others to create environments that support individual and collaborative learning, and that encourage positive social interaction, active engagement in learning, and self motivation (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013, p. 8). I want my students to be actively engaged in co-creating their educational environment and for that environment to reflect their cultures and lives as well as their dreams for the future. I also want every student to feel that they are part of the classroom community and that their contributions to that community are valuable.

Finally, when planning for instruction, I want to use my content area knowledge to connect with the community knowledge of students. By engaging in co-learning with my

students I hope to create a curriculum that is relevant to their lives in addition to being rigorous and challenging. Standard seven asks that a teacher “plans instruction that supports every student in meeting rigorous learning goals by drawing upon knowledge of content areas, curriculum, cross-disciplinary skills, and pedagogy, as well as knowledge of learners and the community context (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013, p. 9). This type of instruction can only be achieved by engaging meaningfully with students, giving them multiple opportunities to share about their cultural backgrounds as well as personal interests, and by giving them space to cultivate dreams/plans for the future. I want to create a classroom which is responsive to student needs, and which can change or adapt to best accommodate students as they grow and change. I plan on building a classroom that welcomes the input of all students, while also challenging students to develop their academic as well as social and emotional skills.

Summary

Too many students already feel like they have failed before the first day of high school even starts. Students are taught by the subtle, or not so subtle cues in their learning environment that they are not important and that the skills they do possess are not valuable in the school environment. By engaging with Paulo’s theory of Critical Pedagogy, I want to create a learning environment in my classroom which allows students to gain access to their own power, gain mastery over their skills, and build meaningful community with their peers. I went to a high school which did not face the same challenges of poverty, or the same levels of cultural and language diversity as the school I am currently working in, however, my high school education still lacked an ethical or moral grounding which challenged students to raise their level of conscientiousness proving that material wealth is not the key to a just and liberated educational

environment. My educational experience taught me that a true education is measured in more ways than simply how well a student scores on a test. As teachers we are not called to produce effective and obedient adult workers, we are helping to cultivate the next generation of human beings into our local and global communities. It is important for us to recognize and nurture independent thought, emotional well being, and positive community engagement, both in our classrooms and in the community at large.

Chapter 2. Annotated Bibliography

In my Action Research Paper, I aim to examine how to best support the social and emotional needs of students as a classroom teacher. There are many factors that impact student success ranging from social and family support systems both in and out of the school environment, to individual students' educational backgrounds, to the emotional processing skills each student exhibits. Though many factors which impact student success are outside the classroom teacher's control, one thing we can do to help students is support their emotional resilience and help them build important social and emotional skills which will benefit them, not just in their academic careers, but in their professional and personal lives as well. Because students of color and other minority students face additional challenges which will impact the types of support they might benefit from, I decided to look into Transformative Social and Emotional Learning strategies (TSEL) in addition to the traditional SEL strategies. The TSEL frameworks aim to rectify some of the blind spots of the traditional SEL methodology, which has been criticized for not acknowledging the structural inequalities which impact many of our most vulnerable students. As I am teaching in a diverse school, I want to center the needs of my students of color who do not have the same structural advantages as my White students. My

research aims to build racial equity in the classroom, while also promoting healthy social and emotional skills for all learners.

Cipriano, C., & McCarthy, M. (2023). Towards an inclusive social and emotional learning, *Social and Emotional Learning: Research, Practice, and Policy*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sel.2023.100008>.

This article analyzed data from a systematic review and meta-analysis of thirteen years of SEL interventions in K-12 settings with the goal of examining the effectiveness of SEL interventions for minority students. The studies were analyzed through the lens of Universal School Based SEL best practices (USB SEL). The authors found that, while SEL has been shown to improve social and emotional skills and outcomes for students both inside and outside the classroom, studies have not done enough to measure the effectiveness of these universal interventions on minority and marginalized student populations. The authors emphasized the need for knowledge, flexibility, and representation when designing and implementing SEL curriculum to ensure that all students can benefit from the program. This article provided important information on the gaps in SEL research and how to better measure the effectiveness of implementation on minority students.

Cullen, J., Bloemker, G., Wyatt, J., & Walsh, M. (2017). Teaching a social and emotional learning curriculum: transformative learning through the parallel process. *International Journal of Higher Education*. . 6(6). <http://ijhe.sciedupress.com>

This article discussed the process and outcomes of training university faculty in an SEL curriculum designed to be implemented in freshman seminars with the goal of supporting students' transition from high school to college. This was a qualitative study which analyzed interviews with faculty who were facilitating freshman seminars to support students' social and emotional learning. The results were analyzed through the lens of parallel process, which is used in psychology to discuss the ways the process of teaching SEL affects the outcomes, including how the process of teaching creates the dynamics of the curriculum. The authors found that the process of learning the SEL curriculum and of teaching SEL skills to students deepened educators' understanding of their own SEL related skills. One skill in particular that the authors noted was a deeper self-awareness around their teaching style and its impact on student relationships. This article has deepened my understanding of the benefits of SEL implementation and its effectiveness in creating a more supportive learning environment for students.

Dowling, R., Jaciw, A., Waltower, M., Lin, L., & Zacamy, J. (2025) A study of the effectiveness of a social-emotional learning curriculum for high school students: a report of a randomized experiment conducted in the rock island milan school district, *Empirical Education Inc.* <https://www.empiricaleducation.com/how-are-the-children/>

This study was developed to analyze the effectiveness of an SEL curriculum developed for the Rock Island-Milan school district called “How Are the Children” (HATC). The study consisted of a one-year teacher level randomized control trial, where one group of teachers was trained in HATC, and the other group of teachers continued with their regular curriculum. The HATC curriculum was found to have no significant impact on

student behavioral referrals or academic achievement when compared to the control group. However, the school still found value in the program and made plans to implement the program schoolwide the following year. In discussing the results of this study, the authors found that the uneven implementation of the SEL curriculum, with only half the students participating and the other half acting as a control group, hampered the effectiveness of the curriculum. This reinforces other studies findings that consistent, school wide implementation of SEL is more effective than sporadic or partial implementation.

Feraco, T., Bonelli, R., Da Re, L., Meneghetti, C. (2025) Soft skills in high schools: integrating self-regulated learning and social, emotional, and behavioral skills frameworks. *Social Psychology of Education* 28(134) <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-025-10095-9>

The authors of this study wanted to integrate Social, Emotional and Behavioral skills (SEB) with the self-regulated learning (SRL) framework, so they developed a new SEB framework and integrated it into the five existing SRL skills to quantitatively measure how these skill sets impact each other. The study conducted a correlation analysis on SEB and SRL skills using a three-hour voluntary course on how SEB relates to SRL skills.

The course was offered to high school students in Italy from November 2023 to May 2024 and had over 5,000 respondents. Their findings were analyzed through the self-regulated learning framework. The authors concluded that SEB skills correlate to the SRL framework, and that SEB skills are connected to academic success and overall life satisfaction. There is clearly a value in continuing to integrate intentional SEB learning to improve both academic achievement and life satisfaction.

Ford, K., Anderson, A., Abel, Y., & Davis, M. (2024) A mixed methods approach to exploring social emotional learning program implementation in an alternative high school, *School Psychology Review*, 53(5), 523-537. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2023.2251369>

The goal of this study was to examine best practices for implementation of SEL frameworks and curriculum into new environments in order to maintain its effectiveness. This study was conducted during the 2018-2019 school year and consisted of a quantitative phase where data about teachers and administrators attitudes towards SEL instruction was gathered. The second phase consisted of semi structured interviews with teachers and administrators where they were asked to rate the degree of SEL implementation. Their findings were analyzed using CASEL's framework for SEL instruction and implementation. The study found only limited adherence to CASEL's framework in the implementation of the SEL curriculum, with only three of the five categories represented.

However, the authors of the study concluded that the most important outcome of a SEL curriculum is the cultural shift which occurs among the students, teachers, and the school community which empowers them to believe in themselves and their ability to overcome adversity. The authors also concluded that the SEL curriculum must be intentionally integrated into the school culture and cannot be simply added on as an afterthought in order to be effective in influencing school culture.

Gokhal, S. (2025). *High school practitioners' transformative social-emotional learning practices and how they influence high school students' sense of belonging and responsible*

decision-making (Publication no. 32044507) [Doctoral dissertation; University at Buffalo]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

The purpose of this study was to explore how the use of SEL practices implemented at the high school level impacted students' sense of belonging, engagement, and responsible decision-making skills. This qualitative study took place from October 2024 to May 2025 at an alternative high school in New York City and consisted of semi structured interviews conducted with individuals and small focus groups of students, teachers, support staff, community partners, and administrators. The outcomes were analyzed using CASEL's five areas of SEL competencies. School practitioners chose to focus on two of the five core competencies, responsible decision making and relationship building, as these two areas aligned best with the challenges the student body faced. Researchers found that educators believed the curriculum used helped to boost students' sense of belonging and their decision-making skills. This article is an important resource for my work as it examines implementation and outcomes for high-risk students. Many of the challenges faced by study participants, both students and educators, correlates with the challenges faced by the community I am teaching in. Many of my students have a great deal of autonomy from a young age, which could also be framed as a high level of responsibility placed upon them. They must balance their school work, jobs and financial pressures, responsibilities at home, and planning for their futures with the normal social pressures that come with being a teenager. The student population I work with could benefit greatly from more support as they navigate the decisions they are faced with on a daily basis. Truly, my students do not need adults to tell them what to do; they need

healthy support in making those tough decisions themselves, as students are the true authors of their future, not the teachers and caretakers which help them along the way.

Jagers, R. J., Skoog-Hoffman, A., Barthelus, B., & Schlund, J. (2021). Transformative social emotional learning: in pursuit of educational equity and excellence. *The American Educator*, 45(2), 12. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1304336.pdf>

This article explained the expansion of the traditional SEL framework to better address the needs of marginalized and minority students by expanding the existing SEL framework to better address the structural inequalities and unique challenges faced by historically underserved populations. By adding to the existing CASEL framework of the five competences (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making) the authors are able to build upon and expand these skills to address areas in which minority students face additional challenges and social stressors. Five new categories were identified for the Transformative SEL curriculum (TSEL), Identity, Agency, Belonging, Collaborative Problem Solving, And Curiosity. These new categories place an emphasis on affirming the experiences, identities, and strengths of students who are part of marginalized and minoritized communities. This document goes into detail explaining each of the five TSEL competencies and how each overlapping element helps to improve student engagement in academics as well as improving social and emotional competencies. This article had a significant impact on my understanding of what is missing from the original CASEL framework in relation to the lived experiences of marginalized students. Additionally, it provided a solid

foundation for understanding the foundational theory behind TSEL curriculums which are discussed by other researchers.

Johnston, E. R. (2025). Writing builds resilience by changing your brain, helping you face everyday challenges. *The Conversation*. <https://doi.org/10.64628/AAI.7et5jtpdq>

In this article Johnstone discussed how writing can be used to help people process traumatic events, making connections between neuroscience and her experiences as a writing teacher. She discusses the work of psychologist James Pennebaker who developed a writing technique called “expressive writing” in which a person writes about the same event over and over again in order to gain emotional distance and closure from their experiences. She also discusses how writing promotes memory consolidation, helps to calm the amygdala, and engages the prefrontal cortex. This article has strong implications on my research topic as it explores practical ways writing can benefit students' social emotional learning in schools by helping to build resilience, as well as making connections to other SEL skills. Johnstone discusses ways to incorporate writing for resilience into an everyday practice and as well as making meaningful connections between the neuroscience and practical application of these skills. Though this article does not discuss these findings in the context of high school students, I found that her research could be applied to the high school setting and TSEL instruction in the ELA classroom.

Markowitz, N. L., & Bouffard, S. M. (2022). Teaching with a social, emotional, and Cultural Lens: A framework for educators and teacher educators. Harvard Education Press.

In this book, Markowitz and Bouffard argue that incorporating TSEL strategies into schools is vital for ensuring students' academic success, as well as for creating a safe and inclusive learning environment for all students. It addressed five anchor competencies for TSEL education and argues that these anchor competencies should be included throughout teacher preparation courses in addition to being embedded throughout the school curriculum and broader school culture. This book provides practical strategies for integrating the TSEL anchor competencies into the classroom, as well as providing research to support the theoretical framework behind the creation of these anchor competencies.

Owens, C. L., Johnson, A. H., & Thornton, A. (2021). Addressing equity in schools: youth participatory action research and transformative social and emotional learning during COVID-19. *Children & Schools*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdab029>

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted and exacerbated existing racial inequalities in the public-school systems of the United States. By incorporating TSEL strategies within the framework of youth-led participatory action research (YPAR) and critical service learning (CSL) frameworks, the authors of this study examined how these interventions contribute to student empowerment. By expanding beyond the role of teachers and looking at how school social workers can build relationships with students using the frameworks mentioned above, this article provided a key piece of evidence of how to continue growing the community of people who are able to benefit students' social emotional skills. Though certain aspects of this article are outside of the scope of my research project, the examination of student-led projects which utilize TSEL frameworks

provides a valuable example for increasing student agency. Additionally, it provides a valuable example of how to involve more members of the community in TSEL instruction.

Pejic, V., Russo, K., Milord-LeBlanc, R., Mehjabin Parr, K., Whitcomb, S., & Hess, R. S. (2025).

Bridging disciplines: integrating mental health and education to promote immigrant student wellbeing. *Behavioral Sciences*, 15(9), 1254.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/bs15091254>

The purpose of this study was twofold; the first goal was to explore the creation and implementation of a culturally affirming SEL curriculum designed with the specific needs of immigrant and refugee students in mind. The second aspect of the study evaluated the reception of the study by students, including knowledge gains and cultural responsiveness, as well as examining the attributes and reactions of teachers administering the curriculum. This was a quantitative case study based in an alternative high school in New England which serves newcomer immigrant and refugee students. Their findings were analyzed through the lens of Social Determinants of Health (SDOH), culturally sustaining pedagogy, and transformative social emotional learning (T-SEL) frameworks. The authors found that the curriculum which was developed in collaboration between a school psychologist and classroom teachers and implemented throughout the entire school year had measurably positive outcomes for students. The learning environment created through the creation and implementation of the curriculum fostered deep reflective learning, an increased sense of belonging, increased mental health literacy, pride in personal identities, and increased sense of agency among students. This

article provides a comprehensive overview of an effective implementation of T-SEL instruction as well as highlighting the benefits of collaborating with mental health professionals when developing and implementing curriculum.

Puente, K., & Darwich, L. (2025). Bridging the gap between transformative social and emotional learning and motivation. *Journal of Education*. p. 1–12

<https://doi.org/10.1177/00220574251349728>

In response to the current lack of research which explores the overlap between the implementation of TSEL curriculum and motivation in minority students, this study aimed to examine the relationship between these two areas in existing literature to discover how motivation can be used to enhance TSEL skills in minority students. The authors conducted a literature review of current publications on TSEL and motivation and used the lenses of situated expectancy-value theory (SEVT), and self-determination theory (SDT) to create theoretical bridges between key components of each theory. The authors identified key areas of overlap between TSEL and student motivation. One particularly important area is the way student sense of belonging impacts motivation. When serving marginalized students, culturally relevant education (CRE) and affirming students' identities (which fall under the TSEL category of Belonging) are strongly correlated with student motivation. This article provides important insights into best practices for applying TSEL instruction in the classroom, as well as highlighting a blind spot in the way TSEL theory is discussed by highlighting the theory overlap between curriculum and student motivation.

Williams, B., & Jagers, R. (2022). Transformative social and emotional learning: work notes on an action research agenda. *Urban Education*. 57(2) 191–197.

[doi/pdf/10.1177/0042085920933340](https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085920933340)

This article examined how to most effectively implement transformative social and emotional learning (TSEL) to address the social inequality which currently exists in the school setting with the goal of promoting continuous improvement of the implementation of TSEL strategies. This article was a research agenda which outlines the steps researchers at CASEL planned to implement to further understand the needs of both youths and adults who participate in the CASEL curriculum. Their work was analyzed through the CASEL framework, with a particular focus on the long-term outcomes of engaged, or justice oriented, citizenship. Several key goals were identified, including establishing research practice partnerships with school districts who are implementing CASEL curriculum in order to test the accuracy of the researchers' predictions on the effectiveness of its implementation. Additionally, they emphasized the importance of families in the success of SEL instruction and established the goal of better understanding the roles families play in transformative social emotional learning environments. This article provided key insights for my work in examining how social emotional learning can be used to improve student outcomes. By acknowledging the blind spots of traditional CASEL frameworks when it comes to marginalized communities, and establishing actionable steps to address those limitations, this article provides important guidance for me identifying best practices when it comes to implementing TSEL strategies in the classroom.

As a teacher, I want to help students grow into independent adults who can function well in society and face whatever challenges life may present to them. In order to do this, it is important to integrate well-researched Transformational Social and Emotional Learning techniques which take into account students' diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Students are navigating many difficult aspects of life as they are moving through high school, including family relationships, friendships and social pressures, work responsibilities, and planning for their futures. As teachers we should be equipping them to face all of life's challenges with resilience. We are not simply teaching students skills they will need to pursue college or career paths; we are teaching them to be responsible citizens as well as engaged community members. In the following section I will go over the strategies I used to incorporate the TSEL framework into an English Language Arts classroom. The ELA classroom provides a unique opportunity for incorporating TSEL skills, as ELA already asks students to engage in reflective thinking and writing practices.

Chapter 3. Methodology

As our society continues to evolve, the educational needs and challenges faced by students receiving public education continually change as well. As educators, it is important to improve, and modify our instructional practices to keep up with student needs, and to stay abreast of innovations in the educational fields. Action Research provides educators with the opportunity to test out new methods in the classroom while gathering qualitative data on the impacts of these educational tools on their student body. According to Sager (2000), "The primary reason for engaging in action research is to assist the "actor" in improving and/or refining his or her actions." In the case of educational based action research, the "actor" is the teacher, teaching body, or school community which is attempting to improve student learning

outcomes over a period of time. While engaging in the seven action research steps laid out by Sager (2000) which include, selecting a focus, clarifying theories, identifying research questions, collecting data, analyzing data, reporting results, and taking informed action, the participating educator gains valuable qualitative insights into specific challenges faced by the student population they are teaching, as well as measuring effectiveness of actionable steps which teachers can take to address these issues. By approaching these challenges in an organized way, collecting a wide range of data, and examining the results using replicable methodology, the teacher's work can benefit not only their own students, but other teachers as well who may seek to replicate their approach. This contributes to the goal of professionalizing the teaching occupation, and helping to move it from an isolated model where teachers work independently to effectively administer state created curriculums, to a collaborative model where the community of teachers at a school can work together to improve outcomes and overcome challenges unique to their student body. Sager (2000) describes professionalized occupations as being "expected to be complex and nonroutine, and will generally require collaboration among practitioners to produce satisfactory results." He compares teachers using action research to medical professionals seeking best practices to treat their patients. In addition to contributing to the professionalization of the teaching profession, action research also helps to improve teacher efficacy and motivation, along with aiding teachers in meeting the needs of increasingly diverse student body populations (Sager, 2000). Both of these goals are important for creating a stable population of teachers. All teachers want to feel like they are actually making a difference for their students, and action research is a method for measuring the effectiveness of different techniques, which, in addition to providing valuable data, also helps teachers see the tangible results of their efforts.

Through my Action Research, I aim to analyze how to effectively integrate Transformative Social Emotional Learning (TSEL) strategies into an ELA curriculum. The guiding questions for my action research are: 1) How effective is direct instruction on TSEL principles for improving student understanding of the value of social emotional skills? 2) How does TSEL instruction impact students' sense of belonging in the classroom community? 3) What are the benefits of TSEL related writing assignments on promoting student SEL outcomes? By addressing these questions, I hope to discover best practices for effectively incorporating TSEL strategies into an ELA curriculum.

Context For This Study

The school, which I will refer to as East Portland High School is located on the East side of Portland, OR. I worked at the school for six months before beginning my research. Portland is the major urban population center for the area, and the East Portland neighborhood where this school is located has a high concentration of recent immigrants to the United States. The high school serves around 1,500 students who speak around 36 distinct languages. The cultural and racial diversity of the school is one of its greatest strengths, however the area of Portland where the school is located faces many economic challenges and does not benefit from the same type of urban planning and development as more affluent areas of Portland. The student population at this school faces significant social stressors from discrimination related to race, class, and immigration status. The area this school is located in has less access to parks and green spaces, is much more car oriented and less focused on pedestrian access, has higher rates of poverty and crime, and has a higher overall heat index due to the lack of trees and high concentration of strip malls, large roads, and parking lots. The neighborhood however, also has a strong immigrant presence, with many local businesses, restaurants, and grocery stores that serve the specific

cultural needs of the diverse population in the area. There are also several cultural centers located within the neighborhood including the IRCO Africa House, IRCO Pacific Islander and Asian Family Center, the Jade District, and the Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon (APANO).

Though I grew up in a midsized, predominantly White, city, and I had a very different high school experience than many of my students, my experiences post graduating high school have helped me to make connections with the diverse student body at my school. I completed my undergraduate degree at the University of San Francisco, which is one of our country's most diverse colleges, and which has a high rate of international students. I also spent a year working in a racially diverse high school in France after graduating from college. The experience of living in a new country where I was not fluent in the language helps me to connect with students who are newcomers to the country, as well as students who are both long and short term English language learners. I can relate to the challenges of completing course work in a different language, as well as the mental fatigue that can come from navigating language barriers on top of other school and social demands. Additionally, my life experience working in commercial kitchens, long term care facilities, and helping adults with disabilities navigate government services all provide me with valuable insights into some of the structural challenges faced by students, their families, and the larger community.

Data Collection & Analysis

To conduct this research I used the following sources for data: existing data, including lesson plans and student work, and observational data including teacher journals and data obtained by observing students through the school day, and conversations with my clinical teacher. I chose this variety of quantitative data sources based on the recommendations of Sagor

(2000), in order to provide multiple sources of data to help create a clear picture of student experiences. I did experience some limitations in my data collection as I unexpectedly moved clinical sites in the middle of spring semester. This limited some of my access to student data and caused me to rely more on my notes and recollections of events and assignments. When conducting my data analysis, I utilized traditional qualitative procedures in order to identify relevant themes which emerged from the TSEL instructional strategies and related writing assignments. When beginning my data analysis, I assigned a code to each piece of data to represent its meaning in the context of this study. Through data coding and sorting I was able to identify several relevant themes which helped me to shape my key findings related to the effectiveness of TSEL instruction, and student sense of engagement and belonging.

In order to ensure the validity of my findings, I utilized data triangulation by drawing on at least three different data sources for each argument which emerged from my initial research. I sought to confirm my findings by reviewing my data analysis and the themes which emerged with my university supervisor. Getting feedback from an outside source during the review process helped me to strengthen my data analysis and deepen my understanding of the themes which emerged which helped corroborate the validity of my findings.

Researcher Positionality

As a White, middle class, English speaking, college educated adult, my identity affords me many privileges in our society that some of my students do not have. I have had consistent access to professional mental health care, stable housing, and educational opportunities throughout my life. All of these factors contribute to my world view of what emotional and academic success should look like. It is important for me as a researcher to be aware of ways that my cultural bias' influence my data collection and interpretation, particularly as I am working

with students who come from diverse racial, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Therefore, it is important that I am able to understand the unique experiences of students and gain knowledge of their cultural backgrounds which influence aspects of community building and self assessment. As a member of a sexual and gender minority, in that I am bisexual and nonbinary, I do have first hand experience with the additional social pressures experienced by students who are part of a social minority. My particular positionality as a queer identified educator, and my personal history with mental health influence my view that building social emotional skills in students who come from vulnerable backgrounds is vital to educational success and the creation of a well balanced and supportive school community. Academic success is only one factor helping students succeed at the next stage of their lives, whether that student is pursuing college or career readiness. In my own experience, a strong academic community, supportive teachers, and the development of skills related to resiliency were key to my ability to succeed and thrive in my academic pursuits.

Chapter 4. Findings

Section 1.

Four major themes emerged from analyzing the data. They are that students included interests and cultural details in their stories, students examined challenging situations and how they grew from them, the learning environment, including teacher relationships, impacted student engagement, and that students shared vulnerable moments with their classmates. Each theme is discussed with supportive data.

Section 2. Cultural Integration

Culturally relevant educational materials and antiracist educational frameworks which acknowledge the individual and structural barriers faced by minority students are a key component to creating an effective TSEL curriculum (Jagers et al., 2021). Over the course of my unit on writing from personal experiences, students found opportunities to share elements of their individual cultures and their personal interests in both the summative assessment and through the daily quick writes. I attempted to build multiple opportunities for students to discuss personal experiences throughout the unit with a variety of writing prompts that allow them to explore both important milestones and lighthearted moments shared with friends or family.

In creating my lesson plans, I intentionally included materials from diverse sources which reflected some of the many different life experiences and cultural backgrounds of my students. I also intentionally included Black authors in my lesson plan as well as attempting to directly address the Black experience as we moved through the unit. About 25 to 30% of my students identified as Black or African American, and many of these students have experienced racism and marginalization because of their racial identities. One of the main critiques of the traditional SEL framework I encountered in my research is that it does not do enough to take into account the ways that structural oppression impacts students of color (Cipriano & McCarthy, 2023; Jagers et al., 2021; Markowitz & Bouffard, 2022; Owens et al., 2021; Williams & Jagers, 2022). On the first day of my unit, I had students read a selection from an essay by American author and theorist bell hooks. The selection came from her collection of essays, *On Writing*, and discussed her own struggles with the labels that get placed on her by society as a black female author. I had students read a short selection from her work and then reflect on their own experience navigating labels in society. Though this example comes from a Black author and centers the Black

experience, the message of the mini lesson applies to all students, and in particular to the experiences of minority students. One specific quote from hooks that I highlighted in my lesson was “identity matters simply because structures that silence and shut out are already in place to assault the consciousness of anyone who dares to live by the belief that we are always more than labels”. By bringing specific attention to the ways in which identity impacts our experiences in the world (and in the classroom as well) I was attempting to engage in critical pedagogy by helping students to name the systems of oppression which exist in our society (Freire, 1970). This is a key element of TSEL instruction, as the ability to recognize how systematic oppression impacts their lives helps students to navigate the complex social systems of our society.

After introducing bell hooks, providing biographical information, and discussing the impact of her work as a Black, feminist thinker, students read a short excerpt of her work. I then lead students in a discussion of the meaning of the piece of writing and a reflection on their own experiences with labels or stereotyping. We then made connections between hooks’ discussion of her experience navigating labels in society with an interview with Marjane Satrapi, an Iranian author who has written several graphic novels that explore her identity as an Iranian and a Muslim living internationally and dealing with stereotypes and bigotry. By incorporating multiple viewpoints into my opening lesson, I was attempting to make connections between different experiences of systematic oppression and build solidarity within the classroom community. I also wanted to show students that speaking about their own experiences and finding their authentic voice can be both personally and creatively rewarding, while also acknowledging that it comes with its own set of challenges and risks. As Pejic et al., 2025, discussed, reflective learning and discussion which allow students to examine both personal and cultural experiences benefit students' social emotional learning. Students who engage in this type

of curriculum are more likely to feel a sense of belonging at school as well as feel pride in their personal identities (Pejic et al., 2025). It is particularly important for educators to provide spaces for students to have these conversations, particularly in this era with increased political targeting and scapegoating of immigrant communities.

In order to increase the cultural relevance of my curriculum to my students, I worked to include specific cultural role models into my curriculum with the goal of increasing students' sense of belonging in the classroom. Puente and Darwich (2025), discuss the importance of cultivating a sense of belonging in increasing motivation for immigrant students. Immigrant students face a variety of academic and social challenges which can impact their success in school. One of my classes in particular had four students who had immigrated to the U.S. from Vietnam. Two students had immigrated within the last year, another within the last three years, and the fourth student had been in the U.S. for over a decade but still had strong family ties in Vietnam and traveled between the two countries on a regular basis. When planning my lessons I intentionally included a poem by Vietnamese born author Teresa Mei Chuc (Tuệ Mỹ Chúc). In addition to including a poem by this author as a mentor text, I included some brief biographical information about her and her experience in the U.S. as an immigrant from Vietnam. I made sure to include a photo of her and her Vietnamese name in addition to her American name. All of this was designed in order to make my Vietnamese students feel like their culture and their unique experiences were both acknowledged and celebrated in my classroom.

Several students incorporated elements of their cultural identities into their work. One student who I will call KT engaged in translanguaging, where she fluidly moves between the languages in her repertoire to accurately represent her linguistic experience. She wrote a story

about her move from the culturally diverse neighborhood where she grew up in New York City to Portland, Oregon. KT wrote:

We loaded up my Uncle Tito's truck, and before we left, we took a spin one last time around the vecindad. My parents said goodbye to los compadres y comadres; I'd lived near them since birth, so they were basically family. "Nos vemos pronto," every neighbor said. Will we, though? I thought.

By incorporating multiple languages into her story, KT was able to bring her authentic voice into her writing. Schools often demand that students leave elements of their personal identities which don't fit into the dominant culture of the school at home, however TSEL principles challenge schools to find ways to both incorporate and celebrate all aspects of student cultural identities (Johnston, 2025). Though I did not discuss translanguaging specifically during this unit on personal narratives, KT and I had discussed this principle earlier in the school year. I had also introduced a short excerpt in an earlier lesson from a Portland based Mexican-American author, Tehlor Mejia, who incorporates Spanish words into the fantasy world he writes about, creating space for Latino readers to project their own cultures into the Eurocentric world of fantasy writing.

One of my Vietnamese students, who I will refer to as DN, wrote a poem where he explored moments of his life in Vietnam through the lens of riding his moped. It explored small moments of daily life and reflected on emotions related to leaving the country and coming to the U.S. I was particularly impressed by this poem, as this student's writing from earlier in the year focused more on historical events and sociopolitical commentary. When talking one-on-one with this student at the beginning of the unit, he expressed doubt about his desire or ability to write a personal poem saying, "I'll probably just write about Vietnamese history." However, after going

through the unit and completing all of the brainstorming and prewriting assignments, DN was able to create a thoughtful and personal piece of writing which explored both his sensory and emotional experiences. Though he had lived in the U.S. for a long time, DN maintained deep cultural ties to Vietnam. Through his poem, DN was able to express his appreciation for his life in Vietnam and explore the emotional challenges of moving between cultural environments. His poem celebrated his dual identity as both Vietnamese and American, while also exploring the challenges and experiences of loss and displacement that have accompanied this unique life experience.

Section 3. Exploring Challenging Moments

Many students took advantage of the prompt to write from their own life experience to write about challenging situations they had faced in their lives, often reflecting on how they overcame or grew from these experiences. The topics that students chose covered a wide range of experiences, from moments where they pushed themselves to try something new, to major life events like big family moves or the passing of a close relative. Students were able to use the writing prompt to explore their emotional state at the time of the event and the meaning of these events in the greater context of their lives.

Several students chose to write about experiences where they pushed themselves to try something new, regardless of whether or not that attempt was successful. This is an excellent example of students building the SEL skills of developing self-awareness and emotional expression, which are important regulatory skills that can benefit students both academically and socially (Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020). Two students who I will refer to as MK and MG both wrote about situations where they each took a risk by trying something new. MK wrote about performing at an open mic night for the first time and what that experience was like for him. His

story detailed being invited to participate in the open mic night with a music teacher he trusted, and the experience of performing in front of strangers for the first time. He included many specific emotional details about how he was feeling leading up to the event, and his inner emotional experience as he performed on the stage. He was able to use this assignment to openly discuss his fears and discomfort, and how he moved through those emotions in the moment to participate in the event and try something new.

Similarly, student MG wrote a story about an unsuccessful attempt at auditioning for a play. Though this story had many similarities to MK's story, instead of being about trying something new and finding success, this story was about trying something new and discovering it was not a good fit for the student. MG story was a humorous account of an attempt to try out for a school musical where just about everything that could go wrong did go wrong. One of the elements included in the outline asked students to describe the tone of their story and MG indicated that it was supposed to be a humorous story. She described why she decided to try out, and then she provided many details about how things went wrong as she moved through the audition process. Writing about an embarrassing moment helps to build resilience in students as it helps students "reframe painful experiences and manage their emotions" (Jonston, 2025). This story reflects how students can use writing to process painful experiences and place them into a new context.

One of the stories about overcoming challenges that I found particularly interesting came from a student who I will refer to as VD. In order to provide flexibility to students, I gave them the option of writing their story in the third person, essentially writing about themselves as if they were a character. I emphasized that though this story should be based on their lives, with a main character who comes from a similar background as them, the story could modify or adjust

events that happened. VD was one of the few students who chose to write in the third person, and while his story was based on real events, he wrote an ending that was aspirational rather than reflecting his real experiences. VD wrote a story about a student who was bullied for being skinny his whole life before deciding to start working out and eating healthy. After making these life changes, his character became strong and was admired by his peers for his physique. The story ends with the character deciding to help his former bullies when they came to him for tips on how to get strong like him, though he briefly contemplates getting revenge on them before deciding to take the high road.

This particular story stood out to me for several reasons. First, based on conversations with this student during the year I knew that being skinny was a real issue in his life that he struggled with. This student participated in wrestling and often talked with classmates about his struggles to gain weight and put on muscle mass. Therefore I was impressed that he had chosen something real and vulnerable to discuss in this story. Secondly, I appreciated the fact that he was able to write a positive outcome for a real struggle in his life, using the writing assignment to explore a hypothetical outcome to this real situation he found himself in. Research shows that writing can help us to actively shape our identities (Jonston, 2025), which is exactly what VD was engaged in doing through this assignment. He created a story with emotional stakes that were authentic and meaningful to him, and then he envisioned a best case scenario outcome for himself through this writing assignment. Finally, this story stood out to me because, though this student had strong academic potential, he often struggled with motivation and failed to complete assignments on time if he completed them at all. However, with this assignment, not only did he complete every element of it, he also met the deadline for writing and submitting his story. VD showed a level of engagement with this assignment which I did not see from him in previous

units.

Though many students were able to use this experience to process challenging events in their lives, other students felt overwhelmed when asked to complete writing assignments which prompted them to examine major formative events. Some students who had experienced many significant traumatic events in their lives became emotionally overwhelmed or disengaged from the writing process. This was not a universal response, as other students who had similar experiences were able to successfully engage in the assignment. One student who struggled with the assignment was a very academically successful student who I will refer to as DG. This student experiences multiple marginalized identities, as they are gender non-conforming, come from a racial minority group, and experience poverty. When this student made a timeline of their life, they included many disruptive and traumatic events from their childhood including a period of homelessness where they were living in their car with their mother, and a period where they were separated from their parents and placed in foster care for a short period of time. This student struggled to choose a life event to write about for the final step of the assignment, however they did complete all of the prewriting elements including the Life Graph, Title/Synopsis assignment, and the story outline. This student was one of several students who expressed that they felt their life was not an appropriate source of inspiration for a creative writing assignment. In my journal I noted that “(DG) said today that they would feel bad for a character like them” in a story.

Section 4. Beyond Direct Instruction

One of my guiding questions when approaching this Action Research Project looked into the effectiveness of direct instruction on student acquisition of TSEL skills. As I moved through the Action Research Project I discovered that while direct instruction has value, TSEL strategies

implemented throughout the classroom environment are equally if not more important than direct instruction for ensuring student success. I made several intentional choices in the structure and planning of this lesson which helped contribute to a positive learning environment for all students by providing flexibility, building a trusting community, and highlighting diverse cultural experiences. Despite my best efforts, there were several environmental factors which I did not have control over that negatively impacted student learning. One significant source of disruption to the classroom environment was the abrupt departure of the main classroom teacher due to family illness, and as a direct result of this, my early departure from the classroom. The day before I began teaching this unit, I had to inform all of the Creative Writing classes that I had been working with that their primary teacher had left and would not be coming back for the rest of the school year. I also had to inform them that as a result of her departure, I would be leaving the classroom once I had finished teaching this particular unit. This caused a significant disruption in the classroom, as students were losing both of the teachers they had developed relationships with. Johnston, 2025, refers to the act of creating positive relationships with students as the “super anchor” from which all other TSEL anchor competencies can develop. Despite this significant disruption to the classroom environment, I was able to use many other strategies to create a positive learning environment which helped to promote TSEL principles. I used daily journaling prompts as a warm up for students, giving them an opportunity to reflect on aspects of their lives while also practicing writing skills. These daily writing prompts also gave students an opportunity to bring aspects of their own lives and cultures into the classroom. While students worked on these warm ups I would walk around the classroom asking students about their answers, giving out stamps for their work, and generally checking in. These types of activities feel small, but this is one example of how to incorporate TSEL strategies into the

classroom environment in a way which creates stability, connections, and promotes academic skills.

Johnston, 2025 makes the claim that a culturally responsive curriculum is a key element in making a classroom environment welcoming to all students. She states that, “new knowledge about human learning and development demonstrates that a positive school environment is not a “frill” to be attended to after academics and discipline are taken care of. Instead, it is the primary pathway to effective learning”. Many of my personal observations back up this claim, as I witnessed greater levels of student engagement when they were provided materials which reflected their cultural experiences. In particular, I noticed a striking difference between the way students reacted to reading O. Henry’s story “Hearts and Hands” with Kelly Norman Ellis’ poem “Raised by Women”. For example, the majority of my students struggled to connect with O. Henry’s story due to the vastly different cultural context in which the story was written. “Hearts and Hands” follows a chance meeting between an upper class White man and a young White woman who run into each other on a train in the 18th century American West. Though the story examines issues of class and stereotyping, students struggled to grasp the nuance of the social interactions between the characters, as they have no context for what was considered appropriate behavior in 18th century White, upper class culture. I spent a considerable amount of time explaining the language being used, the historical and cultural context, and I even had to explain the twist ending to many students as the reveal was dependent on understanding subtle cultural cues. Student engagement increased as they gained a greater understanding of the context for the story, however many students checked out early and stayed checked out during our study of this story.

The struggle to engage students with “Hearts and Hands” contrasts with the ease that

students were able to connect with Ellis' poem "Raised by Women". In this poem, Ellis discusses her unique cultural background and the characteristics of the community of women who surrounded her when she was growing up. She includes many references to Black culture, alluding to James Brown and Angela Davis, and including many specific phrases and language unique to the Black American experience. She goes on to both celebrate Black culture and challenge stereotypes about the Black experience in her work, discussing the creativity, entrepreneurship, and education of the women in her life. As students were initially reading this poem, I walked around the room getting students' reactions to the piece. One of my students, who I will call MW, said to me "I can hear my Mom's voice in my head when I read this." This comment stood out to me for several reasons. MW was a Black male student, who was very intelligent but struggled with untreated ADHD, was often distracted by other classmates, and underestimated his own academic abilities. He had been deeply sceptical of the "Hearts and Hands" story, and it was only after several days of in class instruction that he started to appreciate the story and engage in critical analysis. However, with "Raised by Women" MW jumped into the analysis right away. He was reading the poem outloud, talking about the meaning with classmates, and engaged in the creative writing assignment where students created their own version of the poem about influential aspects of their own childhoods. Not only does this poem provide a mirror for Black students to see their own experiences reflected back to them, it is also written in a style that is relevant to how students speak and act today. Due to all of these factors, this type of culturally relevant instructional material made the classroom more welcoming for students of color, and it increased the sense of belonging in the classroom which is a key element of promoting TSEL principals at school.

The final piece of incorporating TSEL principles into the classroom environment was in

providing flexibility in my lesson plan that would allow students who were absent to catch up, while also allowing students with different processing times to work at their own pace. As Cipriano & McCarthy, 2023, discuss, “Increasing an activities cognitive accessibility by providing flexibility for students to process information at a pace that best works for them, teachers can diversify participation opportunities during class time and outside of it.”

Diversifying participation opportunities is a matter of equity, as students who have less support at home, students who work, and students who are chronically absent still deserve a quality education, though they face more challenges in receiving on.

I used several different techniques to provide flexibility to my students when designing my lessons. First, I designed my lesson plans so that we would revisit certain brainstorming and prewriting activities on multiple days. This allowed students who were absent to catch up without being excluded from that day's classroom instruction. It also allowed students who had been present to revisit their work, revise, edit, and deepen their thinking. For example, I had the class start the Positive Negative Life Graph on a Tuesday, then add colors and drawings to their graphs during the next class period. I walked around the room giving feedback to students, and I prompted students who were gone when we started to look at their classmates' work for inspiration and guidance. I was able to praise student work, giving kudos to those students who had already started and community by having students help each other move through the project. The two weeks when I was teaching this unit had particularly high absences due to school events, so I had to increase my flexibility as I moved through my unit. In order to help students who had missed several days in a row catch up, I created several examples which I could hand out to students which they could use as models for their own work. I also used student examples with permission and asked tablemates to help students catch up. Additionally, though I had

intentionally built flexibility into my unit, I ended up needing even more flexibility or time than I accounted for. In order to accommodate the large number of absences on Thursday and Fridays of the first week of my unit, I added an extra work day into my unit, and I revisited certain lessons to provide more direct instruction. This type of flexibility becomes part of the classroom environment, and lets students know that there will always be a place for them at school.

Section 5. Vulnerability and Connection

TSEL writing gives students an opportunity to build community by sharing details about their lives with their peers. Fostering community between students is a key component of promoting TSEL skills in the classroom. Johnston, 2025 includes “creating community” and “building trusting relationships” as two of her seven anchor competencies for developing TSEL skills in the classroom, emphasizing the importance of this element. Since this element is so important in the TSEL classroom, I attempted to incorporate opportunities for community building by sharing elements of my own life with my students, as well as by giving students opportunities to share and connect with each other. I did this throughout my unit, including in daily short writing assignments, peer review circles, and finally through the summative assessment where students were writing based on their personal lived experiences.

Johnston, 2025, lays out four “teacher moves” as a good starting point for building trusting relationships with students. Those four moves are “developing rapport with students, engaging families, practicing reciprocal vulnerability, and employing trauma informed practices” (Johnston, 2025). Not all of these teacher moves were within the scope of my research project, however I did engage in some of them, particularly developing rapport with students and practicing reciprocal vulnerability with my students. Though I did not engage with student families directly, I did encourage students to write about their families, emphasizing the

importance of those relationships in the classroom environment.

As I had been working with students for around six months before the start of this unit, I had already done a lot of work in developing rapport with students. I continued to develop that rapport with students through daily short reflections throughout the unit. These reflections were designed to help students reflect on different moments in their lives, focusing on small moments that they shared with friends or family. Some examples of these quick writes were, “Think of a shared moment with friends or family that centered around food. Try to describe this moment using sensory details; Think of a story from your past that involved travel. It could be a trip out of town, or a ride on the bus. What happened and who was there with you?; Describe a time you played a prank on someone.” After giving students a few minutes to write, I would walk around the room to stamp student writing and ask them questions about what they chose to write about for this warm up prompt. This gave me an opportunity to connect with students at the beginning of class and share a fun moment with them before we got into our lesson for the day. This was an important part of building rapport with students, as it gave me an opportunity to chat with students over a low stakes assignment. It also gave me a chance to engage in reciprocal vulnerability, as I could share moments from my own life in response to their stories. After students engaged in these quick writes, I would ask them to share what they had written with a table partner. This promoted community in the classroom, allowing students to share fun or impactful moments with each other as well as with me.

Another way that I engaged in reciprocal vulnerability was by engaging in the core assignment with my students. I completed each piece of the brainstorming and prewriting which I assigned to my students. I started out my unit by making my own positive negative life graph. This served a dual purpose in my lesson plan. On the one hand, I was modeling how to engage

with the assignment for students by demonstrating how to make the graph. On the other hand, I was engaging in reciprocal vulnerability by putting real examples from my life on the graph. I chose to focus my life graph on ages 0 to 18 in order to align my graph with the life experiences of my students more closely. Then I thought of real, impactful life events from this time period. I also was able to model boundaries with my students in how I named and described events. Part of trauma-informed teaching is allowing students to share what they feel comfortable with, but not forcing them to reveal details they do not want to. I did this myself by writing more specific titles for some events, and broader or more vague titles for others. I continued engaging in reciprocal vulnerability throughout my assignment by choosing a story from my life about a real experience that challenged me at the time that I experienced it. I outlined a story about not getting to go to the prom with the person I wanted to due to friend group infighting. This type of reciprocal vulnerability helps to create a positive classroom community. I modeled both vulnerability and boundaries for my students, showing them how to share details about their lives while also respecting student privacy.

After most students had finished a draft of their summative writing assignment, I had students engage in peer critique circles. One goal of this activity was to help students improve their finished pieces through revision and editing, the other goal was to create community in the classroom by giving students an opportunity to share their stories and poems with their peers. As a class, we had engaged in one-on-one peer reviews, but had not done a group review process before. I knew students would need guidance to help them engage, so I adapted a group critique model from “7 Levels of Writing Feedback” by Rosanne Bane. I distilled her method into five levels to make it more accessible to students. The five levels of feedback were as follows: Level 1—Congratulate; Level 2—What Stands Out; Level 3—Tell Me More / Going Deeper; Level

4—Strengths Of The Writing (Glow Parts); Level 5—Areas That Need Improvement (Grow Parts). Each level came with directions for students to follow. The structure of this critique allows for a lot of praise and support, while also giving specific feedback on aspects of their writing which students could expand upon or deepen. The structure of this particular activity was challenging for some students, and not all students were willing to engage in the critique circles. The students who were ready with a piece of writing and willing to engage, however, did seem to get a lot out of this activity. Peer to peer acknowledgement of their hard work can be much more valuable to students than feedback from teachers.

Many students were able to share important and vulnerable moments from their lives through this writing assignment. One student who I will refer to as JK, wrote a moving poem where she reflected on a pivotal moment in her life in middle school where she was struggling to find her identity and having difficulties with her friends. In her poem she displayed many of the TSEL skills which I have discussed in this paper. She wrote:

“In 8th grade I was unknown.

Unknown like what that one friend calls me.

Unknown like that one person you just see in the hall.

Unknown like I wasn’t pretty enough to be seen.

In 9th grade I was known

Known by me

Known by my truest friends

Known by my family.

In 9th grade you'll find worth, love, and peace.”

JK was able to engage in self reflection through this poem, reflecting on a difficult moment in her life and how she was able to grow from that experience. This is a key feature in emotional resilience, which is one of the anchor competencies discussed by Johnston, 2025. For many students who come from economically disadvantaged or minority backgrounds, school is one of the only places where they get to engage in this type of self-reflection and vulnerability, as outside of school students are focused on their other life responsibilities. JK in particular was about to age out of the foster care program and was in the process of finding an apartment where she would begin to live independently once she turned eighteen. This is a huge emotional and financial responsibility for a teenager to be dealing with, however I believe that kids like JK deserve to have a space where they can reflect on their lives, not just focus on how they will survive or get their needs met day to day.

Chapter 5. Discussion, Limitations, and Conclusion

As I moved through this research project, engaging in planning, implementation, and analysis, I gained a greater understanding of TSEL principles and how they impact my own experiences in the classroom as well as in my personal life. This correlates with what Cullen et al. (2017) discuss in terms of parallel process, and how teaching TSEL curriculum deepens teachers' self-awareness of their own SEL skills and how those skills and attitudes impact the environment. This has interesting implications in terms of the importance of providing training in TSEL curriculum during the teacher formation process, as there is evidence pointing to the fact that TSEL instruction can help educators deal with job related stress as much as it can benefit students academically. I can only draw very limited conclusions from my own experience as I was not working with any other teachers during my implementation of TSEL principles in the

classroom. However, I did find that my foundational understanding of TSEL frameworks improved as I moved through the process of teaching, collecting, and analysing data with a TSEL lens. More research could be done to examine the impact of TSEL frameworks on the broader school environment and teacher longevity.

When approaching the teaching of SEL skills in school, it is important to understand the unique needs of the student body being served. For example, Jager et al. (2021) underscore the limitations of the traditional SEL framework when working with minority students who are facing structural inequalities and additional social stressors. That is why researchers have added five new competencies to address some of the specific needs of minority and historically marginalized students; identity, agency, belonging, collaborative problem solving, and curiosity. I was not able to address all five of these TSEL competencies in my own work, so I choose to focus on identity and belonging, primarily through creating a curriculum that provided cultural role models, engaging questions, and opportunities for students to reflect on their own lives and experiences within the broader context of our classroom community. Through a variety of writing assignments, students were able to reflect on their experiences and identities, exploring moments from their lives which helped to shape them, and bringing their cultures, identities, and interests into the classroom environment.

Dowling et al. (2025) emphasize the value of consistency of implementation of TSEL principles throughout the school environment and throughout the school year. This points to the idea that TSEL principles should be promoted by all educational sectors, from teacher preparation courses, to school district policies, to individual classrooms. I worked to create a classroom environment which supported students' social and emotional needs by using flexibility in implementation of the materials, providing support for students who regularly miss school,

and by providing culturally relevant instructional materials which help to validate student experiences and identities. I had several students who regularly struggle with engagement successfully complete this assignment which allowed them to build their academic skills while also developing self-reflection and a sense of personal identity.

Limitations

One theoretical limitation I encountered in my research was the ability to incorporate the problem posing method into my lessons. The problem posing method is an important element of Paulo Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy approach to teaching. Problem posing includes students engaging in co-creating the educational environment of the classroom by engaging in critical thinking and actively engaging in problem solving. Though some of the activities we engaged in are related to problem posing, I did not find this element of critical pedagogy to be within the scope of my research. My teaching focused more on the TSEL elements of self-reflection and community building, however problem posing is a valuable element of critical pedagogy and can benefit from further study.

My study faced significant methodological limitations, due to student absences and my unexpected departure from the school at the end of March. Student absences were a result of the timing of the unit I used for this study, which was taught in the two weeks before spring break and coincided with several major sporting and music events. For example, on one Friday only six out of thirty-six students enrolled in 5th period Creative Writing attended class. This impacted the data collection as students who were absent missed the instructional time and did not receive the same quality of information as their peers. It also impacted the instructional timeline as I needed to add more work time and revisit certain lessons. Additionally many students were not able to participate in the peer review exercise as they were still working on their drafts.

Furthermore, I was not able to collect the final drafts from students who submitted their writing after the deadline as I had already moved on to a new teaching assignment and no longer had access to the online homework portal. This means my data collection was skewed towards students who completed their work on time and excludes many students who may have struggled with the assignment and failed to meet the deadline.

Though TSEL instruction is valuable for all teachers regardless of subject, one of the central practical limitations of this study is finding ways to incorporate these TSEL principles into the current curriculum. My study looks at TSEL integration in an ELA classroom, and more specifically I was working in a Creative Writing class where I had a great deal of freedom to direct the curriculum and where it was expected that we spent a considerable amount of time on writing assignments. I do believe, however, that many of these principles and activities could easily be implemented in any ELA classroom. Daily quick writes, guided group activities, and larger projects that foster self-reflection are all achievable in an ELA classroom. Further research on best practices for implementing TSEL principles in STEM classrooms would be beneficial for teachers of those subjects.

Conclusion

As educators, we are faced with the ongoing question of how to best educate the nation's children. With a limited amount of time and resources, critical decisions on which skills to focus on and how to best support our students are constantly being negotiated. In this paper I chose to focus on the benefits of dedicating educational time to developing students' social and emotional skills. Social and emotional skills, or SEL, are not just a nice addition to students' more important academic work, but a crucial element of students' development, both academically and personally. Markowitz & Bouffard (2022) describe the importance of these skills for academic

achievement saying, “Decades of research confirm that academic outcomes are influenced by the capacity to be calm and focused, to persevere and be resilient, to cope with stress, to navigate relationships with family and friends, and lots of other social and emotional skills” (preface). Students can learn these vital skills through a specially designed SEL curriculum, however in my paper I look beyond direct instruction to explore ways to embed SEL principles throughout the classroom environment, from the curriculum, to the daily routines, to how teachers and students interact. In order for SEL to be most effective, it must be part of the larger school structure and must be embraced by individual classroom teachers in both their curriculum and classroom practices.

One key element in shaping a classroom environment built on SEL principles, is providing culturally responsive instructional materials to students, as well as recognizing the additional challenges and community stressors faced by minority and marginalized students. The Transformative SEL, or TSEL model, provides a valuable framework for supporting SEL skills in all students in a way which both acknowledges inequalities which exist and promotes equity between students. TSEL principles build upon traditional SEL framework to better address the realities faced by minority students

When conceptualizing the fundamental goals of the teaching profession, it is important to remember that we are not just educating students for their future careers, but equipping citizens of this country who will participate in our representative democracy. We are equipping students to make critical decisions about their lives, their futures, and the future of our country. In order to do this well, students must have a strong sense of their own identity, must be able to build safe and lasting relationships with friends and family, and must be able to work with and understand people who are different from them. As educators, we should give students space to develop,

explore, and understand who they are as people. Actively building TSEL principles into our curriculums and our classroom environments allows us to pursue these goals in conjunction with the academic educational goals which are central to the education system.

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