

Chapter 1

Introduction

Meeting the Moment with Systemic SEL

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In 2015, I (Sara) received a phone call from Dianne Garcia, a soon-to-be colleague from rural, western Virginia asking, “Our schools are trying to move from good to great. Do you think social and emotional learning can help?” The question surprised me. I immediately sized up the situation and asked, “What’s not working?” Little did I know that we were about to embark on a long-standing partnered process to cultivate systemic social and emotional learning (SEL) in two small rural school districts. Together, these two districts served 3,000 students—roughly 90% White, 10% Black, with just one or two students from other ethnic groups. About half of the students were eligible for free/reduced lunch. Geographically, one district served the small city and the other served the county that wrapped around it. There was considerable rivalry between these two districts, yet they shared common challenges. Both districts faced student population declines common in rural Appalachia. Both had difficulty accessing teacher professional development. And, most importantly, both districts experienced mistrust and/or disengagement from many of the families that they served.

Low kindergarten readiness and student behavioral problems were two big issues that the districts were confronting and SEL seemed like a natural place to start. Fortunately, this community has a unique asset in that it has a small foundation, The Alleghany Foundation, that was formed when the community sold its nonprofit hospital. Many foundations like this invest in community health or business infrastructure, but this foundation also focused on partnering with the schools

and channeling its efforts to support children and youth from birth into postsecondary education. My colleagues at the foundation, Dianne Garcia and Mary Fant Donnan, began work with the superintendents, school board, teachers, and other educators in the community to invite engagement in conversations about improving education in their districts.

In 2014, Dianne Garcia assembled a group of teachers, principals, and other school staff to look at SEL programs and identify pros and cons of different programs and approaches, find time to visit schools using these programs, and understand what school conditions needed to be in place to use them. Next, our research team conducted a needs assessment involving surveys and interviews of educators, families, and students. We used data gathered to guide next steps and worked with the school superintendents and foundation leaders to identify six main targets of growth (e.g., social and emotional learning, kindergarten readiness). For each, we created workgroups that included school leaders and community members. Each group was tasked to identify new ways to improve various aspects of children's experience from birth into postsecondary education. Once the workgroup developed proposals, these were shared with school leaders and the foundation, and if the stakeholders agreed, the work was funded and would move forward. The hope was that by engaging community members, a broader range of people would generate new ideas, and more people would be invested in launching these ideas and seeing them implemented well (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2018).

One workgroup focused on SEL. The group began to explore a full range of programs, identified a source of funds for professional development, and began to implement evidence-based SEL in their schools, starting with preschool and elementary years and working up. They began to think through how to evaluate the programs and discussed short-term and long-term goals for students. When these SEL ideas were brought forward to school leaders and foundation members, the early conversations covered reactive approaches to discipline to proactive approaches to cultivating social and emotional skills in students. Over a few months, I noticed that the conversation migrated to new and broader topics. Were teachers meeting the developmental needs of students? Did teachers feel prepared, valued, and energized to do their best work? Did teachers and administrators trust one another and did these trusting relationships lead to collaboration and elevate the quality of teaching in the schools? Was district leadership (central office) focused on SEL and did they "walk the walk" not just "talk the talk"?

Within the first 2 years of partnered work, we saw a shift in conversation. When people talked about SEL, they didn't just talk about students' skills. People were asking whether classrooms, schools, and organizations in the community were creating opportunities for students to develop, use, and practice their social and emotional skills. SEL was no longer viewed as a single program or a few programs tethered together, but rather as a culture that the districts were trying to cultivate with the goal of supporting students' development. At around this time, I recall

a question from the foundation director: “Is there such a thing as a community growth mindset?” My thoughts at the time were “Yes, there is a community growth mindset, and it is present here.”

What I observed was *SEL in action*. I watched this community work together to create systemic change in their schools.

Here are a few examples of the transformation. In 2016, the Virginia Department of Education released “The Profile of a Virginia Graduate,” designed to shift Virginia schools to focus on skills needed to help students be “life ready”—defined as “prepared for college and/or work and to be successful in life” (Virginia Department of Education, 2016). In this policy document, the Board of Education called attention to the “five C’s”—critical thinking, creative thinking, collaboration, communication, and citizenship. In essence, the expectation was that schools would trade out course expectations and replace them with opportunities for authentic workplace experiences, so that students would be “eligible and competitive” for job opportunities. The response in the Alleghany Highlands was exciting. The high school principals, community college, and district leaders gathered with people from local businesses to talk about some of the life skills that students need to develop. Then they worked with local businesses to design internship experiences that would help students develop adaptability, communication, and organization skills and identified ways that these skills could be integrated into high school life.

The schools leaned into SEL to respond to pressures present in their schools. For instance, one middle school principal realized the pressures of testing and accountability on teachers, not just students. He identified ways to tune-in on the needs of the teachers and to figure out how to improve the sense of connection and collaboration among the adults at the school. The teachers, administrators, and other school personnel met weekly for conversation and community building to improve teacher well-being, so that teachers had more capacity to meet the needs of their students.

Realizing that not everyone felt like they belonged at schools—especially given that many parents did not have a positive experience in school themselves—the schools found new inroads to connect with parents. Instead of expecting families to come to school for curriculum night, the teachers went to various church events, with the goal of connecting with local families. The community adopted the Dolly Parton Reading Program from birth to 5 that sent books to homes for free in an effort to support families in preparing children for school. The local librarians identified new ways to connect with families. At first glance, a skeptic might ask how these efforts relate to SEL. The answer is that connecting to families signaled community commitment to a *whole-child approach*—school is not just about academic learning, but about developing good human beings.

These districts are located in the southern United States and have inherited a history of slavery, then segregation, and now entrenched patterns of racial inequality. Key stakeholders in this process understood the barriers and the ways in which

schools may not have created a sense of belonging for the Black students in their community. The workgroups included Black families, and school leaders aspired toward not only producing achievement-oriented students but also creating a positive culture—one designed to give students a feeling of belonging and connection at school. How they navigate racial inequities in opportunities is still a work in progress.

Reflecting back, I realize that I witnessed a 7-year transformation of these districts as they aligned priorities. Initially, the schools viewed social and emotional skills as something students either had or didn't have. Now, there is a common shared understanding about the importance of developing a culture that supports student *and* adult development of SEL. In time, these districts underwent a transformation, and now *systemic SEL* is in the foreground of how the two districts function.

In 2022, these districts decided to merge. My colleagues reached out to me, because the community knew that the merger was much more than a business decision. The districts needed to consider the psychological experiences of administrators, teachers, and other school personnel who faced changes in their day-to-day life due to the merger. The leadership was keenly aware that the merger would only succeed if they planned carefully to address the well-being of the adults involved.

This example from two small rural districts in western Virginia shows SEL *in action*. Educators now speak a new language in which academic learning and SEL are viewed as complementary skills that come together to promote the healthy development of children and youth. Their conversations are forward-thinking and systemic in nature. At its core, the focus of these efforts has been to elevate students' social and emotional skills by creating opportunities for whole-child development in the spaces where students spend their time. Perhaps most importantly, the districts spent time and resources supporting the adults in schools, knowing that educators can only do their job well if they are supported, treated well, and given opportunities for professional growth, so they can bring their "best self" to their work and show up in school (and nonschool settings) with a positive attitude toward kids.

Goals of This Book

All three of us have engaged in research–practice partnerships involving close work with schools and districts as they cultivate SEL at a *systemic* level. Over the last three decades, we have seen the proliferation of SEL programs—including those to which we have contributed—and become aware of how SEL takes hold in school settings. High-quality SEL connects in meaningful ways with teachers and students, and improves attitudes, knowledge, and skills in the adults and youth in schools. Decades of research supports this finding (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017), and economic analyses show that the benefits of SEL outweigh the costs; \$1 invested in SEL leads to \$11 in gains to youth and society (Belfield et

al., 2015). However, just because a school has adopted an SEL program does not mean it will work. Many well-meaning SEL efforts fail because of poor implementation. Schools, communities, districts, and states need to create certain *conditions* to make SEL work. High-quality SEL—to reemphasize our point—only takes hold if the teachers, school leaders, and district and state goals are aligned and organized around improving students social, emotional, and academic learning in schools and creating equitable opportunities that engage all youth at their schools.

Systemic SEL involves creating conditions that are conducive to SEL implementation. The term *systemic SEL* has been defined as

aligned policies, resources, and actions at state and district levels that encourage local schools and communities to enhance the personal and professional capacities of adults to: implement and continuously improve evidence-based programs and practices (EBPs); create an inclusive culture that fosters caring relationships and youth voice, agency, and character; and support coordinated school–family–community partnerships to enhance student development. (Mahoney et al., 2020, p. 1129)

In the last decade, we have seen exciting examples of systemic SEL developing across the United States (e.g., Schwartz et al., 2022). Districts in Washoe County, Anchorage, Louisville, and Nashville offer just a few examples. Unfortunately, we often lack access to some of the most important insights from the stakeholders immersed in these activities. Educators are too busy to write these stories, and researchers (accidentally) bury some of the most exciting ideas in the methods sections of their research articles. We have come together to write this book with the hope that we can advance the field by unearthing ideas and practices that make systemic SEL come alive and work well in schools. In this book, we hear the stories of Capital School District in Dover, Delaware; Manchester–Essex Regional School District in Massachusetts; statewide efforts in Virginia; international examples from India, Bangladesh, and Ethiopia, and many others to gain a rich understanding of how systemic SEL takes hold.

Together with our contributing authors, we envision this book supporting and inspiring those who work to enable districts, schools, and classrooms to cultivate positive social skills, teach self-management, and instill an approach to ethical decision making. The chapter authors drew from practical experiences, as well as theory and research in developmental and educational psychology, to describe contemporary issues in systemic SEL. Issues of promoting equity and cultural competence are integrated throughout the book. When we talk about school and societal systems, we know that structural racism is a fixed feature that needs to be noticed and addressed so the systems can be rebuilt without perpetuating a harmful historic legacy. In each chapter, researchers worked closely with practitioner partners to develop the ideas in this book because we wanted each chapter to be relevant, authentic, and high quality. We know that the path toward systemic SEL is complex

and packed with successes and challenges. We applaud the effort and courage of all the authors in this book for their willingness to describe complex partnerships and share victories—as well as ideas that fell flat.

In this book, we address two broad questions: “What conditions need to be in place in systems (including states, local areas, districts, schools, classrooms, etc.) to support the development of SEL?” and “What actionable steps can we take to create those conditions?” In the rest of this chapter, we define SEL and systemic SEL, describe the contents of this book, and call attention to four common themes present throughout this book: equitable opportunities, intergroup understanding, adult development of social and emotional skills, and effective leadership.

What Is SEL?

Each generation faces its own challenges. In the 21st century, we need to come to terms with the reality that children and youth face an increasingly uncertain future. Global population growth, environmental issues, intergroup conflict, an intense racial reckoning, gun violence, trauma, and learning loss and mental health issues due to COVID present a tremendous range of challenges. Children and youth need opportunities to become fully equipped with all the skills, drive, and attitudes to meet these challenges now and in the future. The ability to listen to and communicate with people who are different than oneself, anticipate the consequences of individual and collective actions, show caring toward others even if it means giving up something one is privileged to have, take other people’s perspectives, and show courage to stand up in the face of injustice are all crucial skills needed for our society to advance.

The skills and attitudes we have mentioned all fit beneath the umbrella of *social and emotional learning*, defined as “the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions” (CASEL, 2022). Healthy SEL leads to a positive sense of one’s own identity, the ability to be aware of one’s own and others’ emotions, the ability to manage strong emotions, the capacity to establish and work toward goals individually and collectively, and skills to cooperate with others, show empathy and caring for people similar and different than oneself, and create and maintain healthy supportive relationships (CASEL, 2022). See Appendix 1.1 at the end of this chapter (pp. 28–32) for a description of social and emotional competencies, and the conditions that cultivate them. Like many competencies that people develop—whether it’s learning to sing or becoming a competent driver—these skills do not just appear magically. Children and youth learn new skills and knowledge from the opportunities and people around them. If the settings in which

youth spend their time create the conditions conducive to skill development, then youth are more likely to develop skills. In the absence of settings filled with opportunities, development will be slow and stunted at an enormous cost to society. We cannot afford to let this happen.

There is a reason why SEL is so important for people during the first two decades of life. Children and youth are constantly experiencing physical, social, emotional, relational, ethical, and identity development. Their back-and-forth interactions with activities and people are the engines of that development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). If the people around them create spaces and relationship opportunities that support their healthy development, children and youth thrive by latching onto some of the best opportunities available to them. If not, children and youth will find places where they fit in, where they feel like they matter, where they have a sense of agency—think of toxic middle school peer groups or neighborhood gangs—and those spaces are not necessarily productive and healthy. This means that it is our jobs as adults in youth lives to think carefully and creatively to create the best possible environments for youth.

One inherent challenge (and opportunity) of SEL is that children and youth are changing rapidly between the preschool years through high school. Efforts to teach SEL need to be finely attuned to youth's developmental needs, identities, and interests. Otherwise, the efforts will flop, because there will be no uptake from the students themselves. (This is akin to joining a gym but never going and then saying that the gym does not work.) Picture a fourth-grade teacher teaching a lesson about empathy and then showing a lack of empathy to students in their classroom. Fourth graders do not miss a trick! They will imitate their teachers' actions, thereby negating any skills taught. Imagine middle school students from racially/ethnically diverse classrooms rolling their eyes at SEL lessons that are designed for young kids, or lessons that are centered on stereotypical, all-White, middle-class characters. Those lessons will not work, and if anything, the efforts will backfire. Imagine high school students assigned to do community service without any choice about what service that will be. Those types of experiences feel irrelevant to them and will do nothing to produce engaged citizens.

As we strive to create engaging and meaningful SEL experiences, we need to remind ourselves that development of knowledge, skills, behaviors, and attitudes occurs (or does not occur) in the places in which youth spend their time. Classroom and school environments are important contexts for the development of these skills, as are families, communities, places of worship, peers, and afterschool environments, as well as the sociopolitical environments to which youth are exposed. Unfortunately, social and emotional development has become a political flashpoint in recent years, with politicians and families striving to ban SEL in schools and suggesting that SEL is a form of indoctrination (Meckler, 2022). Recognizing a few points related to the realities of SEL may help us understand a path forward.

First, students learn behaviors at school. Educators can either be intentional

and choose the behaviors they want students to learn or leave that up to chance. Let us imagine educators trying to do their jobs *without* SEL practices—whether or not they are formally identified as such. To start, it would be impossible for educators to create learning spaces that are physically and psychologically safe and therefore conducive to academic learning. Without SEL, teachers would have no way of teaching life and career skills that are highly desired by future employers (Solberg et al., 2022). Furthermore, it would be extremely difficult for teachers to confer discipline in ways that are healthy and keep students engaged in school.

Consider disciplinary action as an example. School suspensions are common, with roughly 5–6% of students having one suspension per year (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2018), yet they have been shown to have negative effects on youth, including absenteeism, lower grades, and decreased likelihood of graduating (LiCalsi et al., 2021). Also, disciplinary practices such as suspensions are disproportionately issued to students of color and students with disabilities. One recent study on suspension showed five times more lost days of school among Black than among White students and double the loss of school days among students with disabilities compared to nondisabled peers (Losen & Whitaker, 2018). Alternative approaches to discipline that incorporate SEL principles offer promise; for instance, Gregory, Ward-Seidel, and Grayman (Chapter 3, this volume) describe the role of restorative practices that balance empathy and accountability. Using these practices focuses on relationship-building prevention efforts, as well as disciplinary interventions that help youth understand the impact of their behavior on others and support them to make things right again (Gregory et al., 2016). Research on the responsive discipline strategies involving this approach shows promise for reducing misbehavior and discipline problems and enhancing school climate (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Work by Okonofua, Paunesku, and Walton (2016) examined the impact of empathic instead of punitive attitudes toward students. In their study, middle school math teachers were recruited into a randomized controlled trial of an empathic mindset intervention. Those in the intervention condition received two 45-minute sessions that led to understanding why students were showing behavior problems and gave suggestions for handling behavior problems in ways that conveyed respect and empathy. Results showed that students in the empathic-mindset classrooms were half as likely to be suspended during the school year compared to those who did not receive the intervention (Okonofua et al., 2016).

Recently we have heard a very loud, vocal minority protesting against SEL, but an even stronger, more prevailing call from educators acknowledges that SEL is critical to rebound from the damages of COVID. SEL practices are prevalent in schools. Recent survey work shows that 76% of principals said their school used a SEL program or curriculum in 2021–2022 (Schwartz et al., 2022). A national survey shows that 93% of principals believe that their schools should place fair or a great deal of emphasis on developing students' social and emotional competencies (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019). Further, stress has been stated as the most common reason

that people are leaving public school teaching (Dilberti et al., 2021), and many SEL strategies have been linked to improved teacher well-being, resulting in increased use of SEL.

Federal school reopening guidelines called attention to the importance of social and emotional learning after COVID, particularly for students who have been affected disproportionately by the pandemic, for instance, students of color, students with disabilities, and students from families with low incomes (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). The American Rescue Act of 2021 disbursed \$122 billion to schools for safe reopening, with the specification that at least 5% of each state's allocation must go toward evidence-based interventions that respond to students' academic, social, and emotional needs (Office of Elementary & Secondary Education, 2021). Between November 2019 and April 2021, the spending on SEL in schools and districts increased from \$530 million to \$765 million (Tyton Partners, 2021). Taking these developments together, we see that SEL is a force in today's schools. Whether the intended outcome is long-term career skills, student well-being, or issues of equity, it is hard to ignore the growing use of SEL to support students' skills for life and learning.

What Is Systemic SEL?

To understand systemic SEL, we need to talk about the definition of a *system*. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as “a regularly interacting or interdependent group of items forming a unified whole.” Children, youth, their families, teachers, school leaders, adults in the community, and all levels of policy (e.g., municipal, regional, state, federal) are indeed “items” of a system that interact with one another to form the “unified whole.” Items in a system are interdependent, so a change in one item impacts the others.

Here's an example. We know that when children make the transition into adolescence, their needs change. Picture a district that implements a new major policy that shifts schools from a K–5 to a K–8 structure. School leaders and teachers will need to reorganize their structures and routines, and think through how changes to the student body will impact other students, families, teachers, and so forth. (In other words, the decision to change school composition represents one “item” that will produce changes for students, families, and teachers that are also “items” in the same system.) New questions will arise. What does it mean that kindergarteners will be mixing with eighth graders? Are there ways to do this intentionally and well, so that positive, mentor-like relationships can form? With adolescents, it seems critical that relevant sociopolitical events outside of school are integrated into conversations, advisories, and the curriculum. Are there practices, such as whole-school meetings, that will need to be adjusted? Will shifting to a K–8 school mean that peer interactions on the morning bus ride will be affected? How can educators work with families and youth to create bus guidelines with intention?

Systemic SEL involves aligned policies, resources, and actions across administrative levels (states, districts, schools) and developmental levels (PreK to adulthood) to produce equitable learning conditions focused on the growth of social, emotional, and academic competence (Mahoney et al., 2020). When done well, all children and youth living in these systems will experience relationships, activities, and experiences that meet their developmental needs from the preschool years until after graduation. As such, we can think of systemic SEL as a universal intervention that can operate at the population level and improve public health for all people (Greenberg & Abenavoli, 2017). Just as we put fluoride in the water and conduct vision tests for all children in the early elementary school years, efforts to boost all students' social and emotional learning are intended to enhance their mental health and SEL skills so they can operate effectively in society (Greenberg et al., 2017).

When we establish SEL as a universal intervention, we need to think carefully about what that means. Universal interventions are about boosting skills for all children and youth, but the ways that these skills take form will vary. One of our greatest assets in schools is the diversity of our students (race, ethnicity, language, gender, sexual orientation and identity, religion). This diversity means that SEL as a universal intervention needs to be adjusted to meet people's individual needs in ways that match their desired outcomes of development, which may be rooted in religious, cultural, or even political stances. One sixth-grade teacher demonstrated this idea when I (Sara) asked him how he taught his students to be respectful. He explained:

“Especially working in a culturally diverse school where there are lots of different norms around respect, it's [about] really being explicit and clear and generative with the kids [and asking] ‘What is respect going to look like in this situation?’”

The teacher explained how he introduced a game called Tank, a communication game in which one student is blindfolded and moves around trying to pick things up and toss them at different objects with the help of their nonblindfolded peers.¹ Before introducing the game, he led a conversation about respect, eliciting responses from students about their families' ways of showing respect to one another, so the students and the teacher could notice and point out similarities and differences between home and school. Then he talked about the game and asked the kids to generate ways of showing respect while playing the game, so that they could have a common definition. By having this conversation, he showed that he valued students' home definitions while creating a shared common definition of respect in their classroom. In this scenario, the cultivation of respect was a part of a universal approach, yet the organic process to develop shared norms of behavior engendered curiosity about diversity and reflected the unique cultural experiences of the students in their classroom.

¹The nongendered pronouns *they* and *their* are used throughout this book when describing nonspecific or hypothetical individuals, or when preferred by a specific individual.

How Systemic SEL Can Lead to Equity

How do we make sure that all youth have opportunities to spend time with people in settings that support their healthy development of social and emotional competencies? The answer is complex—it includes teachers, families, schools, out-of-school activities, communities, neighborhoods, and religious organizations. The answer involves policies—standards and laws at the federal, state, and local levels that direct funds toward some settings rather than others. Unfortunately, we live in a society plagued by existing systemic inequities, where Black and Brown students and students from families with limited economic means have less access to opportunities that contribute to healthy growth and development, an issue that has been amplified by pandemic conditions (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2021; Institute of Education Sciences, 2022).

Many stakeholders need to come together effectively to make sure that SEL is promoting equity, not perpetuating existing systemic inequality. Our definition of equitable SEL draws from work by Ramirez et al. (2021); equitable SEL involves safe, inclusive learning environments that affirm diverse identities; the recognition and inclusion of family strengths, cultural values and practices; efforts to cultivate a positive sense of identity; promotion of students' voice and sense of agency; and explicit discussion of issues of inequality, bias, and power, accompanied by efforts to disrupt the status quo. Given this definition, equity at the systemic level means transforming the existing systems so that students can spend their time in spaces conducive to equity.

It is important to clarify what we mean by *equity*, because this term is used in so many different ways. For instance, a commonly uttered phrase at (co)editor Mike's son's preschool was "Fair is not always equal." Equity is a way of providing individuals with the resources they need to achieve the outcomes they deserve. This may mean providing some individuals different levels of resources to work toward the same goal. For example, a student with a reading disability may need more resources to reach the same grade-level expectation as a student who does not have a disability. We call this "equity in opportunity." This approach stands in contrast to the idea of "equality," which infers that everyone gets the same resources regardless of their needs.

But equity is also sometimes referred to as an outcome, as in "achieving equity" or "equitable outcomes." What does an outcomes-focused equity mean? Some view equitable outcomes as students achieving the same outcomes regardless of their condition or background. Certainly, there is great value in this conceptualization. For example, we do not want one's income or race to be a determining factor in their educational outcomes. However, in the SEL world, if we focus on SEL outcomes only, we expect all youth to conform to dominant cultural behaviors that conflict with norms learned at home and may invalidate youth's cultural identity (Ramirez et al., 2021). Even worse, we run the risk of using SEL with youth of color as a way of garnering compliance and control (Simmons, 2021).

A different perspective—the one offered in this book—focuses on *equity of opportunity*. This perspective argues for creating high-quality learning opportunities that are available to everyone—again, regardless of one’s background or condition. Critically, this view also acknowledges that providing the same opportunities to students may still result in *unequal outcomes* because of the different starting points coming in to school, different opportunities outside of school, or different priorities among students and their families. Equity of opportunities requires educators to be carefully attuned to their students to know who needs what and when. This requires cultural competence and psychologically healthy teachers who feel well supported by leadership and the systems around them.

We live in a country with systemic inequities. As a result, youth spend a lot of their time in spaces that lack equity in opportunities. For example, imagine two students who want to participate in a sports program after school that involves a small fee. For one student, the fee is not a concern. For the other, the fee means the student needs to go through the extra paperwork and possible humiliation to acquire a fee waiver, which means the student may not even try to engage. Our goal for schools is to make sure that the main places in which youth spend their time offer equitable access to the resources they need to buffer them against harmful realities and develop their strengths and skills. If schools are successful in creating equitable opportunities, youth will learn and be empowered not only to face but also to transform and improve the equity of those broader societal systems that limit progress.

Contents of This Book

Our book is organized in four parts. We begin with chapters that describe systemic SEL in action. The chapters in Part I, *Supporting Systemic SEL*, do the equivalent of opening the door to the kitchen so we can watch the chef make a glorious dinner and learn from our observations. In Chapter 2, Tia Navalene Barnes, Jocelyn E. Brown, Melissa Stoffers, Jurni Jackson, Yu Xia, Amanda G. Wells, and Alexcia Bryant describe partnered work in a diverse urban district to create systemic SEL that counteracts dominant White, middle-class-oriented approaches to SEL. Through those efforts, the district makes sure that all students (including those living in poverty and/or experiencing high mobility, students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities) have equivalent access to high-quality SEL. To mention just one of many gems in the chapter, the project team identified all of the current district and school initiatives, programs, practices, and processes (PreK–12)—140 in all—and examined whether they exacerbated inequities, were applied equitably, and were actually needed or could be consolidated to streamline the process.

Next, in Chapter 3, Anne Gregory, Allison Rae Ward-Seidel, and Dionne Grayman describe the integration of racial equity initiatives, restorative practices,

and SEL. They focus on the role of school leaders in systemic SEL and show the importance of alignment between ideas and actions. The chapter also describes the remarkable value of adult learning, reflection, and coach support to expand leaders' capacity to produce equitable opportunities. The inspiring real-world examples from a 6th- to 12th-grade school show the vulnerability that comes with leaders' efforts to break old habits to adopt equitable practices. We see bold efforts to engage students and improve upon existing practices.

Chapter 4 broadens the lens internationally. Andy Smart, Jean Bernard, James H. Williams, Aaron Benavot, and Margaret Sinclair show the role of textbooks in systemic SEL. Many countries around the world strive to meet the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals focused on human rights, peace, and appreciation of cultural diversity, and these ideas require students' development of social and emotional skills (NISSEM, 2022). The chapter draws from international contexts, particularly low- and middle-income countries, where pedagogical ideas printed in a textbook help teachers steer away from rote instruction and toward student-centered approaches that incorporate SEL. Examples from India, Ethiopia, and Bangladesh show efforts to create alignment between governmental policies and school practices.

In Part II, *Fostering Adult SEL: Insights for Preservice Education and Professional Development*, the chapters focus on the adults in schools, showing how adult skills, growth, and engagement are crucial for systemic SEL. Chapter 5, by Olivia A. Johnson, Bloodine Barthelus, Alexandra Skoog-Hoffman, Ednah Nwafor, and Robert J. Jagers, examines the skills and actions of adult leaders and describes *transformative social and emotional learning* (tSEL)—a form of SEL that brings an explicit, justice-oriented frame and creates opportunities for adults and youth to discuss inequities and construct solutions that are available to everyone. In doing so, tSEL is designed to engage people in civic and school life. In this chapter, the authors follow guidelines emanating from the Building Equitable Learning Environments (BELE) network and focus on how adults can engage in tSEL for their own growth and development so they can better meet the needs of youth. After the murder of George Floyd in 2020, the principal at one school launched into new conversations with her staff about racial inequities. These conversations led to a fresh vision for replacing a centrally placed mural at their school that depicted students in stereotypical ways. Instead, the new mural will affirm the racial and ethnic identities of the adults and students at school, offering an insight into adult tSEL.

Next, Chapter 6, by Deirdre Hon, Julie Sauve, Julia Mahfouz, and Kimberly A. Schonert-Reichl, describes what preservice teacher preparation programs can do to cultivate *SEL-ready teachers*. In their chapter, the authors identify foundational skills and knowledge needed by SEL-ready teachers and provide a framework that teacher education programs can use to improve practice. This chapter describes a range of teacher education programs; some offer SEL courses, others provide SEL specialties or certifications, and still others fully integrate SEL at the programmatic

level. The chapter offers rich examples throughout, engenders an understanding of what teachers know (or do not know) when they enter the workforce, and generates ideas for new approaches.

Shannon B. Wanless, Caitlin F. Spear, Jocelyn V. Artinger, and Jennifer O. Briggs wrote Chapter 7 to call attention to a crucial issue that tends to be sidelined in conversations about SEL. Districts all over the country rely on expert facilitators for SEL professional development in their schools. Yet we seldom consider whether these facilitators have developed the skills they need to lead challenging conversation about race. If facilitators have developed these skills, they can speak boldly and frankly, create safe spaces for conversation about racial equity, and craft conditions for educators to unlearn problematic habits that come (inadvertently) from living in a society that privileges some but oppresses others. If facilitators do not have these skills, these conversations get shoved under the rug, which perpetuates the status quo and leads educators of color and students of color to feel greater mistrust toward their schools and districts as they wonder: “Am I being seen for who I am? Am I being heard? Are my ideas valued here?” In their chapter, the authors describe the role of SEL in racial equity facilitation and draw from contemporary research and experiences.

Part III, *Cultivating Student SEL: Creating School Conditions Conducive to Skill Development*, focuses on the question: What are the skills that we want youth to develop? As we explore this question, we recognize that schools are a place where children and youth learn from the people around them. If educators are intentional about that learning, youth are more likely to develop the positive skills and attitudes that we envision for them. This section begins with Chapter 8, by Elise Capella, Stacey Alicea, and Natalie May, who focus on interpersonal skill development—cooperation, perspective taking, and empathy. These skills emerge in children and youth when they have daily opportunities for positive engagement with adults and peers around them. To foster the development of these skills, schools need to make sure that their school activities and routines are guided by values of equity so that all students, including those from groups who are often marginalized because of their race, ethnicity, language, income, (dis)ability, or gender, benefit from skill development opportunities. The authors remind us that the outward appearance of these skills vary by culture, disability, and age. The chapter describes how schools can shift their routines and activities so that the conditions are present for the healthy development of these skills.

In Chapter 9, Tyralynn Frazier and Brendan Ozawa-de Silva turn the focus inward by talking about the emotional life of children and the adults around them. They bring together SEL and contemplative frameworks, and give an example of how compassion-based meditation practices can change children’s inner dialogue, appraisal of themselves, self-control, and management of their strong emotions. For intrapersonal development to occur, students need to feel safe and secure, and experience settings that are culturally and developmentally aligned. In this chapter,

the authors provide a checklist of systems-level conditions that need to be met to create equitable opportunities for intrapersonal development.

Part IV, *Identifying Roadmaps for SEL in Action*, rounds out our book. We close with examples of SEL in action, with the goal of providing roadmaps for others making policy and practice decisions. In Chapter 10, Sheldon Berman, Jacqueline Jodl, and Joyce Barnes provide guidelines for action. This chapter explains that each district needs to make choices about SEL, and that integration and implementation needs to be customized for it to be effective. Berman and colleagues describe the need to align instructional practices, discipline systems, and professional capacity with SEL values, and they give examples of typical roadblocks. One common rut is organizing SEL around the dominant cultural norms and values without tapping into the racial, ethnic, and cultural heritages of the students in the classroom. Meaningful connections between classroom and community life need to be established. The authors close with two recommendations for success—make sure the first step is successful, and build from that by thinking through how the elements of a plan connect with each other. These closing points remind us that with systemic SEL, action in one component of the system creates reaction in other components.

Chris Cipriano, Gabrielle Rappolt-Schlichtmann, Julie Riley, Lauren H. Naples, and Abigail Eveleigh describe a new framework, the Collaboratory for Inclusion, to bring SEL practice to adults and students in school communities. Chapter 11 reminds us that during periods of school change, the same voices tend to get heard. There is seldom enough energy and effort expended to amplify the voices of those who tend to be most marginalized from decision making—students with disabilities, student of color, English learners, and/or students from families with low income. The focus on SEL for children with disabilities takes on new and exciting forms as the authors bring together ideas from culturally responsive pedagogy and universal design for learning, integrate perspective taking and youth voice, and apply these ideas in a school district striving to implement SEL.

In Chapter 12, Pilar Alamos, Jenna Conway, Tamilah Richardson, and Amanda P. Williford describe systemic SEL writ large by describing a statewide measurement effort. This chapter describes a 7-year process that led to the measurement of self-regulation and social skills for all kindergarten children in Virginia. These teacher-reported data can be analyzed at classroom, school, district, or state levels to assess growth, establish benchmarks, and identify patterns of inequity. Having access to these data is one important milestone, but interpreting these data effectively and using these data to improve practice is an equivalently important challenge. In this chapter, Tamilah Richardson, a former preschool teacher, reflects on how the teacher-reported data measure actual student behavior and teachers' perception of those students. These insights shed light on how measurement of social and emotional skills can be used to enhance equity and family engagement.

Finally, we close with Chapter 13, our Conclusion, led by Michael J. Strambler with Kimberly A. Schonert-Reichl and Sara E. Rimm-Kaufman. This chapter pulls

together several important themes on the current trends, ongoing challenges, and future directions of SEL and includes reflections from children and youth about their SEL experiences in schools.

Common Themes

Four common themes emanate from this book, as we describe here. Each of these speak to the way that this book meets the moment in our society.

SEL Can Be Leveraged toward Equity

Issues of equity are prominent in every chapter in this book. Considerable disagreement remains about the relation between equity and SEL. One ongoing question is whether we can work within our existing school systems to create equity or whether we need to transform them completely to produce educational improvement. The chapters in this book grapple with this question. They describe lessons learned in efforts to create equitable spaces and show a variety of approaches in pursuit of this goal.

Many schools implement SEL by adopting programs. The examples in this book show ways to use systemic SEL to create an overarching umbrella of aligned priorities and policies, then adopt programs to achieve goals within schools. Often, to be successful, the implementation of programs means retaining the critical aspects of the programs but making adaptations of those programs to match the student body with which schools or teachers are working. The chapters in this book also demonstrate the need for new programs that are designed to be culturally responsive by matching the culturally specific knowledge and providing instruction to facilitators on how to use culturally responsive strategies (Barnes, 2019). Furthermore, given the composition and training of the teacher workforce, adult capacity building is essential so that teachers can grow to better meet the needs of diverse youth (Ramirez et al., 2021). See Johnson et al., Chapter 5, Hon et al., Chapter 6, and Wanless et al., Chapter 7, this volume.

Each chapter raises crucial issues related to equity, leaving us perhaps with more questions than answers. For example, one action for addressing equity is to center practices around the students in the classroom. However, centering practices around some students means educators are decentering practices from others. We are drawn to the idea of systemic SEL because we see it as our best hope for achieving enduring change in the inequitable systems in which students spend their time. This begs the question—how do we strive toward systemic SEL that will be *better* than past approaches? We know that the existing systems are biased against groups of people who have been historically marginalized. If we have the same people sitting around the table examining the same problems, we are likely

to get the same answers we generated one or two decades ago. We need to expand the circle of people who are creating change (e.g., see Cipriano et al., Chapter 11, this volume). That means more than “checking the box” to make sure that decision-makers are from different racial groups. It means thinking broadly about the definition of diversity—making sure that age, racial/ethnic, disability, gender identity, and political diversity are fully present. It is not enough to just invite diverse people around the table. The increasingly diverse groups must be given the power to transform the existing processes and structures. Without such efforts, new systems will simply rebuild the old and inequitable systems once again.

SEL Can Support Intergroup Understanding

Unfortunately, in the United States, most people spend most of their time in segregated spaces—segregated by income, race/ethnicity, politics, or religion. However, there are many schools in the United States where considerable diversity is present. We hold out hope for schools as a place where students can learn to understand and respect people who are different from themselves. Using race as an example, between one-half and two-thirds of U.S. students attend schools with a diverse racial composition (defined as fewer than 75% of students from a single race; Nowicki, 2022). (Worth noting: This figure is far less than what is possible given that almost 8,000 highly segregated schools in the United States are within 5 miles of each other and thus could be integrated [Lehrer-Small, 2022] and that segregation within schools can be as stark as between schools because of tracking [Siegel-Hawley, 2020].) Our take-home message is that more than half of U.S. students are in schools where educators can leverage the existing racial diversity to create opportunities for cross-racial conversations and friendships.

Such diversity can elevate students’ awareness about people who are different from them and help students notice inequality and injustice. These experiences are a healthy step toward develop *critical consciousness*, that is, “the ability to recognize and analyze systems of inequality and the commitment to take action against these systems” (El-Amin et al., 2017, p. 18). For example, if teachers are sufficiently prepared for race-based conversations (Wanless et al., Chapter 7, this volume), these conditions lend themselves to opportunities to teach the language of inequality, create space to discuss issues of racism, and teach students how to take action against inequality (El-Amin et al., 2017). Even if some schools lack diversity, we need to prepare *all* youth to be curious and interested in people who are different from them, a topic raised by Capella et al. (Chapter 8, this volume). We need to give all students a chance to collaborate with people from different backgrounds so that students learn to take others’ perspectives and understand that there is more than one way to be in this world. There is a lot of room for innovative ideas to support intergroup understanding. Technology can be used creatively in classrooms to create intergroup experiences that otherwise would not be available. Smart and colleagues

(Chapter 4, this volume) describe exciting ways to embed SEL into textbooks and other educational materials that can be widely distributed. This approach can be scaled-up to be used in millions of classrooms.

Adult SEL Is Foundational to Successful SEL

Every chapter in this volume calls attention to the need to support adult SEL, not just growth in children and youth. These chapters were written during the pandemic period during which schools have witnessed a dramatic increase in mental health issues, overwork, burnout, and staffing shortages (Pressley, 2021; Steiner & Woo, 2021). A national survey conducted in January 2022 showed that teachers and principals were twice as likely to experience frequent job-related stress compared to typical workers. Burnout, symptoms of depression, and inability to cope well with job-related stress were all higher among teachers and principals than others in the workforce. Further complicating issues, many educational environments appear to be hostile toward people of color, with 48% of principals of color and 36% of teachers of color indicating that they had experienced at least one occurrence of racial discrimination since the beginning of the school year (Steiner et al., 2022). If we want to improve settings for students, we need to upgrade the adult experiences in school.

The importance of teacher–student relationships is just one of many reasons why adult SEL matters. One of the clearest and most consistent findings in education research is that high-quality relationships between teachers and students leads to improved student outcomes. When teachers are attuned to students’ interests, sensitive and responsive to students’ needs, and show caring and respect, students have fewer behavior problems, better social skills, improved emotion regulation, higher engagement in learning, and better academic outcomes (Merritt et al., 2012; Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2015; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011; Wentzel, 1997). These positive teacher–student relationships have even greater consequence for students of color (Gregory et al., 2016; Vega et al., 2015) and students from families with low income (Roorda et al., 2011). Yet teachers can only develop positive relationships with students if they have capacity to do so, which means teachers need to be psychologically and physically healthy themselves, which is a challenge given the stressful nature of teaching (Steiner & Woo, 2021). SEL interventions have been shown to improve teacher well-being (Jennings et al., 2019) and the quality of teacher–student relationships (Baroody et al., 2014).

Adult SEL is also critical for student SEL, because U.S. teachers teach students who are different from them. In U.S. public schools, 80% of the teachers are White, but 51% of the students are students of color (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016). Almost all teachers have college degrees, but 8% of students live in households in which no parent completed high school (NCES, 2022). The majority of teachers are middle class (NCES, 2018), but roughly one in seven children live in poverty (Children’s Defense Fund, 2022). For many reasons, teachers do not

automatically develop the skills needed to work with students who are different from them—an issue that plays out in unfortunate ways, such as low expectations and disproportionate disciplining of students of color or students with disabilities. Chapter 12 by Alamos et al., this volume, offers the example that teachers' past experiences and backgrounds affect their perception of the social and emotional skills of their students.

Just as teachers acquire skills to teach reading or math effectively, the skills to teach across difference can be learned, too. Teachers need to become increasingly self-aware and socially-aware. That means teachers need opportunities to unlearn prejudicial habits, learn about their students and their families, and listen carefully to the needs of their students (Rimm-Kaufman & Thomas, 2021). Professional development is necessary to develop key adult competencies including critical self-awareness that comes from reflecting on one's own practices, emotions, interactions and behaviors; the ability to build warm, reciprocal relationships that convey high expectations for youth; and the ability to shift power to students to create student-centered experiences in schools (Ramirez et al., 2021).

Teachers are the people who actually implement SEL programs and practices in school settings (Schonert-Reichl, 2017), and teachers' own SEL competence and well-being play a critical role in influencing the learning context and the degree to which they are successful at infusing new practices into classrooms and schools (Aarons et al., 2009; Larson et al., 2018).

School Leaders Matters for SEL

We see the crucial role of school leaders in successful systemic SEL. In Barnes et al. (Chapter 2, this volume), we see principals needing to “manage up” while also adjusting the district initiatives to meet the needs of students within their schools. In Gregory et al. (Chapter 3, this volume), we see the vulnerability of principals as they take challenging risks. In Johnson et al. (Chapter 5, this volume), we see a principal identifying a visible symbol of inequity in their school and creating unity among adults and students in the schools as they work to change that symbol.

Research evidence points to the important role of school principals. A large-scale meta-analysis (a study that summarizes results from many other, smaller empirical studies) shows that an effective elementary school principal has the equivalent impact of an extra 2.7 and 2.9 months of extra instruction in reading and math, respectively (Grissom et al., 2021). For a principal to be effective, teachers need to trust them. Each social interaction or communication between a principal and teacher offers an opportunity for teachers to discern whether their leader is trustworthy or not. Research tells us that teacher–principal trust hinges on genuine caring for teachers; honesty, integrity, and fairness; openness toward ideas of the staff; competence as a school leader; and consistency over time (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). What makes a principal's role especially difficult is the balance between effective social relationships and task orientation, so that the work of the

school gets accomplished well in the presence of supportive relationships. This feat unto itself requires adult social and emotional skills.

Most U.S. principals endorse SEL. For instance, a recent survey of nationally representative surveys of 884 public school principals in PreK–12 schools showed that almost all principals (98%), regardless of their location or type of school, believed that students from all backgrounds benefit from SEL in schools (DePaoli et al., 2017). We know that effective principals have profound impact on schools. Yet principals are more likely to be successful at implementing SEL extensively if their central office, superintendents, and district leaders showed buy-in to SEL (DePaoli et al., 2017).

For readers, we hope the theme of leadership calls attention to crucial questions that need to be addressed in every district. For example, who are the decision-makers in your district (or school)? Are there people around the decision-making table who think every day about the caring culture of the school and whether students feel like they belong? For instance, are there school psychologists or school counselors present? Are disciplinary approaches proactive, justice-oriented, and focused on child growth and development, or reactive and punitive?

Our Aspiration for This Book

We hope that this book will be read by school board members, administrators, and other educators from all over the country—rural, urban, and suburban districts—who have interests in SEL. As faculty ourselves, we were excited by the idea of including this book in undergraduate and graduate school classes. We envision this book being used by professional learning communities, grade-level meeting groups, school boards, educational organizations, innovators, and all-school book clubs in the United States and beyond.

As you read this book, we hope that you will naturally make connections to your work. We offer a few questions for reflection here:

- What are the connections of this chapter to your own practice?
- What challenges and roadblocks does this chapter raise about SEL? How have you addressed these challenges and roadblocks in your practice? Who have been your partners in this work? What have you learned from these experiences?
- Are there aspects of SEL that are available to some students but not others because of systemic inequities in your school and communities, or society at large? If so, what children and youth dwell on the margins and are not exposed to opportunities for social and emotional growth? What steps can you take to address these inequities? Who can partner with you in this work?
- Given what you have just read about SEL, what are two or three actionable steps that you can take tomorrow?

Every setting or organization has an opportunity to create a more equitable space in what, unfortunately, is an inequitable world. We have seen equity audits in which a group of community members or educators look at the policies and examine how they may advantage some students more than others. One take-home message from this book is that schools can reach out to students and families and look for their strengths—whether it is their ability to navigate complex systems as they immigrated to the United States, their tight family relationships that enable a teacher to connect to an uncle or brother to support a struggling student, or their linguistic skills in another language.

Yet another goal in writing this book is to address the big gap between what we know works and what actually gets implemented in schools. The most effective SEL educators can take programs or curricula and make them come alive in their classroom or school. That magic only happens when educators have a deep understanding of *why* a classroom practice matters. In these cases, they are not just implementing SEL practices superficially because someone told them to do so.

Knowing the “why” behind SEL deepens educators’ practices. For example, effective teachers know that children thrive when they feel safe, feel liked and respected by their teachers, and feel like they belong. If this is an organizing principle that a teacher has in mind as they enact SEL, the SEL efforts will flourish. For example, I (Sara) had the privilege of Zooming with a brilliant group of elementary school teachers who were preparing for their students to come back to school in person in February 2021, during COVID times. These teachers knew *why* they needed to implement SEL—they understood the magnitude of the transition ahead, they knew that children thrive when they feel safe and feel liked and respected by their teachers and peers, and they knew they could apply SEL principles and practices to their classroom to ease the students’ transitions back to school. The teachers met (virtually) and engaged in conversation. First, they took their students’ perspectives to understand the full range of experiences (and emotions) they had over the past 6 months. Then they discussed children’s needs to be social, yet safe, and brainstormed how to accommodate these needs in pandemic conditions. They also anticipated that their students would feel anxious about being near so many people after being told to avoid others. The results were exciting. The teachers planned conversations with students to adjust classroom norms to include physical safety, decided to offer opportunities for children to draw pictures about how school was different at home than in the school building, and created opportunities for young children to practice reminding others to wear their masks properly in ways that were kind and reflective of their shared safety goals. These teachers knew why they were implementing these practices. They knew students would have a lot of “big emotions” as they returned to school, and they thought through how to support students in their awareness and management of those emotions before focusing in on academic learning.

To cultivate an understanding of *why* we use SEL practices, each chapter concludes with questions for discussion and reflection. We know every reader will bring

their own point of view, and we hope these questions spark ideas for teachers, principals, school psychologists, occupational therapists, speech–language pathologists, school nurses, parents, and others who work with children and youth. We encourage readers to choose from these questions and discuss those that are most relevant.

Concluding Points

The field of psychology reminds us that we, as humans, go through tremendous mental exercises to protect our delicate sense of self-worth. It is human nature. We like being right. We like feeling wise. We all want affirmation for our hard work. As you dig into this book, we hope you will find affirmations of your best practices. When that happens, pause, and allow yourself to appreciate your accomplishments, the victories at your school, organization, or community. Take time to notice the progress that you have made since you've set out to improve the school and community conditions in ways that will contribute to SEL. But affirmation is not the only experience we want you to take from this book. We urge you to identify new ideas that you haven't tried and consider partnerships that may seem overwhelming at first glance but within reach upon further consideration. We anticipate that you will read ideas that are surprising, provocative, and question your assumptions. Sit with those moments of discomfort and learn from them. Our hope is that these moments will energize you to say, "I can think about SEL challenges in a new way" or "Our community can do more." Please use this book to first notice and then face new challenges that lie ahead. We—the readers, editors, chapter authors—are a community of people who care deeply about youth. Please view us as your partners in the challenging and important work that you do.

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