

# Cultivating Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Approaches to Social and Emotional Learning for Students with or At-risk for Emotional Dis/abilities

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## Abstract

School policies are largely driven by perceptions and expectations for how students should behave academically and socially, yet these practices often lack the cultural relevance and sustainability required to support racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse (RELD) students with or at-risk for emotional and behavioral dis/abilities (EBD). Similarly, many evidence-based practices for behavior do not consider internalizing behaviors, which demonstrates a critical need for equitable practices aimed at supporting the prosocial and emotional needs of RELD students with or at-risk for EBD. Given the complex and diverse social, emotional, and behavioral needs of RELD students with or at risk for EBD, social and emotional learning (SEL) practices are most effective when implemented through a culturally responsive-sustaining lens. Thus, this manuscript examines how the pervasive inequities within special education praxis can be mediated through culturally responsive-sustaining SEL practices. Through the lens of dis/ability critical race theory, we first problematize the current approaches to SEL curricula and address how they contribute to the pathologization of RELD students with or at risk for EBD. We then provide evidence-based recommendations for school leaders and practitioners to embed culturally responsive-sustaining pedagogy within SEL instruction.

## Keywords

equity, DisCrit, emotional behavioral dis/abilities, social and emotional learning, culturally responsive-sustaining practices

Research examining the disproportionality of multiply-marginalized students with or at-risk for emotional and behavioral dis/abilities (EBD; also known as emotional disturbance) continues to

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be a central focus in special education (Sullivan, 2017). In the United States, the majority of children identified as having EBD are school-age students from minoritized backgrounds (Office of Special Education Programs [OSEP], 2021). In years of research exploring the racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse (RELD) populations in special education, it has been discovered that Black and Latinx students are more likely to be diagnosed with or at risk for EBD than White students, regardless of the factors such as race, culture, language, disability, and poverty (Harper & Fergus, 2017; OSEP, 2021; Sullivan, 2017). Blanchett et al. (2005, 2009) expressed that the intersection of racist and ableist transgressions result in “double jeopardy” for multiply-marginalized students (e.g., an Afro-Latinx student living in poverty, an American Indian student with a learning disability, a Muslim refugee student from a conflict-affected country, or a non-binary Black student with dyslexia) who frequently encounter systems, structures, and educational curricula that are not culturally responsive or beneficial to the development of these students. The long and extensive history of inequitable practices and policies from the existence of these factors within the public education system increases the likelihood of adverse educational and behavioral outcomes (Artiles, 2013; DeMatthews, 2019). Such practices and policies often cause students with emotional and behavioral dis/abilities to be ignored or feel isolated, contributing to marginalization, exclusion, and prevention from accessing equitable learning opportunities.

Educational spaces have become more difficult for RELD students at-risk or identified with EBD to develop social and emotional skills due to discriminatory practices within their school environment (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Multiply-marginalized students with emotional or behavioral challenges from RELD backgrounds often require equitable resources and services to be socially and emotionally successful, yet they may not receive this level of support due to implicit biases. Several researchers (McIntosh et al., 2014; Migliarini & Annamma, 2020; Triplett et al., 2014) suggests implicit bias arises from unconscious, stereotyped perceptions of ability, causing disparate practices that lead to the overrepresentation of minoritized students in special education. As a result, research recommends creating inclusive and equitable educational environments that foster social and emotional growth and development is critical for students with or at-risk for EBD, despite their race or abilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

A culturally affirming framework for evidence-based practices that ensure minoritized students receive an equitable education is not only feasible, but imperative to eradicate the overrepresentation of RELD students in EBD programs. In this article, we examine how the pervasive inequities within special education praxis can be mediated through culturally responsive-sustaining social and emotional learning (CRSSEL) practices to support the well-being of RELD students with or at-risk of EBD in urban settings. We use the terminology *students with or at-risk for EBD*, *RELD*, and *multiply-marginalized* interchangeably to describe the characteristics (e.g., race, class, gender identity, dis/ability) and disparities of students with emotional and behavioral differences to align with the dis/ability critical race (DisCrit) theoretical framework.

### **The Effects of Students with or At-risk for EBD in Urban Schools**

Urban schools are becoming increasingly diverse, yet minoritized students are often disproportionately represented in them (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2022). Across

the U.S., urban schools serve the largest population of students from disadvantaged and historically marginalized backgrounds (e.g., racial minorities and students with disabilities). Even so, they are often exposed to a number of inequities in the educational environment, which negatively impacts their social and emotional well-being (e.g., lack of high quality teachers; Great Lakes Equity Center, 2020). For example, Burke and colleagues (2011) found that students with four or more adverse childhood experiences from urban communities are 32 times more likely to experience behavior and learning difficulties in school, which are often associated with high rates of suspension, grade retention, disproportionate special education placement, and school dropout (Bal et al., 2017; Harper, 2017). In addition, the systemic barriers that multiply-marginalized students continue to face have fueled and perpetuated a cultural dissonance between the school and home environments (Han, 2022).

As multiply-marginalized students with or at-risk for EBD continue to bear complex challenges, urban schools should put forth an effort to understand the racial and ethnic disparities in special education and examine how their school and district influences those discrepancies (Harper & Fergus, 2017). The lack of adequate intensive services and wraparound supports in urban schools accentuates the emotional impact of these disparities. Thus, multiply-marginalized students identified or at-risk for EBD require intensive school-based supports to address interconnected academic, social-emotional, and behavioral skills (Farmer et al., 2016). Due to cultural stigma, lack of awareness, and language barriers, multiply-marginalized students are often less likely to receive special services and supports, access necessary resources, or seek professional assistance in urban settings (Blanchett, 2006). Therefore, the complexity further exacerbates the need for urban schools to provide services tailored to their needs, despite the school environment and curricula not being designed to address the specific issues this population faces. Urban schools are in a unique position to utilize culturally responsive-sustaining practices to identify students with or at-risk for EBD cultural knowledge, lived experiences, voice, and educational needs and recognize them as resources rather than deficits, to enhance their social and emotional development and reduce stigma and other barriers (Gay, 2002a; Paris & Alim, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

### **Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Pedagogy and Social Emotional Learning**

Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Pedagogy (CRSP) and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) are two educational approaches that are often used in tandem to foster positive learning outcomes in diverse classrooms. CRSP is an approach that acknowledges and embraces the cultural backgrounds of students and provides culturally appropriate instruction (Gay, 2002b), while SEL is an approach that focuses on students' emotional, social, and cognitive development (CASEL, n.d., Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2010; Paris & Alim, 2014). CRSP is derived from two theories (i.e., culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally sustaining pedagogy) that focuses on a strand of teaching that recognizes the individual cultures of students and seeks to develop instruction relevant to their specific backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2014). Culturally relevant pedagogy is rooted in an understanding of the cultural backgrounds of students and aims to create an environment that is inclusive, equitable, and respectful of those backgrounds. Moreover, culturally sustaining pedagogy extends the ideals of culturally relevant pedagogy by emphasizing the need for educational practices to maintain the cultural and linguistic competence of students while providing access to dominant markers of social capital (Alim,

2012). When combined, culturally responsive-sustaining approaches centralize the belief that students can learn more effectively when their cultural backgrounds are acknowledged, affirmed, and incorporated into the classroom. By recognizing the multiple identities of students, teachers can create a classroom environment that is welcoming and supportive and giving students the opportunity to discuss their cultural identity, values, and feelings about their experiences within and beyond the classroom (Hickey-Moody & Horn, 2022).

SEL emphasizes the development of skills such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and responsible decision-making to improve students' social, emotional, and cognitive growth (CASEL, n.d.). These skills are essential for students to be successful in the classroom and in life. SEL also focuses on fostering positive relationships among students and creating a positive classroom climate. The relationship between CRSP and SEL is based on the understanding that students need to be in an environment that is culturally responsive-sustaining and that supports their social and emotional needs in order to be successful. Research has shown that when CRSP and SEL are used together, they have the potential for students to experience higher levels of academic performance and engagement, as well as improved social-emotional well-being (McCallops et al., 2019). In addition, students who experience both CRSP and SEL are more likely to be motivated and engaged in their learning.

CRSP and SEL can be used together in the classroom through the use of a culturally responsive curriculum. Culturally responsive curriculum is designed to be relevant to the cultural backgrounds of students and to address the social, emotional, and cognitive needs of students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). For example, a culturally responsive math lesson might include activities that involve the use of stories, symbols, and metaphors from the cultures of the students in the class. This type of lesson not only helps students learn math concepts, but also encourages them to think critically about their own identities and cultures (Abdulrahim & Orosco, 2020). Moreover, culturally responsive teaching practices include strategies such as modeling positive behavior, providing positive feedback and recognition, and promoting collaborative learning among students. By using these practices, teachers can create a safe and supportive learning environment where students are not only learning the content, but also developing social and emotional skills (Ferreira et al., 2020). Furthermore, CRSEL should address the interrelated experiences of marginalized students based on their intersectional identities. For instance, Black queer students experience societal pressures both in and out of school (e.g., homophobia) that are dissimilar from Black cis gender students (Brockenbrough, 2016). Thus, school personnel should adopt an intersectional lens that aims to address sociocultural differences of students based on their layered identities (Boveda & Aronson, 2019; Garcia & Ortiz, 2013).

### **A Critique of Social and Emotional Learning SEL**

Social and emotional learning programs have not been without critique. As more schools have adopted and attempted to integrate SEL standards into their curriculum and instruction, recent research has begun to identify the potentially harmful effects of SEL, particularly for multiply-marginalized youth (Clark et al., 2022). For instance, authors have found that the SEL standards perpetuate a hegemonic and normative agenda that prioritizes civility over the productive conflict necessary in the pursuit of equity and justice (Camangian & Cariaga, 2021; Clark et al., 2022). Moreover, by not acknowledging issues of racism, ableism, and other interlocking

oppressions, SEL perpetuates inequities by establishing norms that favor the status quo of dominant groups (e.g., western Eurocentric values, patriarchal values), signaling and labeling students who behave outside of this “norm” as deviant. As Simmons (2021) points out, SEL programs that fail to address racism and racial trauma serve to protect white comfort and are simply a guise for “white supremacy with a hug.” SEL programs that fail to address racism and racial trauma. In doing so, they fail to be genuinely transformative and perpetuate harm by failing to address the traumas associated with navigating multiple oppressions and living in both a racist and ableist society. Thus, for SEL to be equitable for all students, a new orientation and approach must be conceptualized and considered.

### **A Look into A New Direction**

The works of Simmons and other critical scholars, such as Williams and Jager (2022), Clark et al. (2022), and Rogers et al. (2022), have pushed for a transformative and critical approach to SEL; one that honors and sustains the identities of all students. *Transformative SEL* has emerged from the collective work of scholars and educators who recognize the importance of SEL for educational equity while acknowledging the limitations of SEL in its current form.

Transformative SEL acknowledges the impacts of racial oppression in the delivery of the core SEL competencies while also providing students and teachers with the skills to critically examine the root causes of inequities and collectively address the ways in which inequities emerge in the classroom (Jagers et al., 2018; 2019; 2021). While this framework serves as a promising new direction for the field, the experiences of multiply-marginalized students are often absent from the emerging literature on Transformative SEL. Valuing and acknowledging the identities of minoritized youth through Transformative SEL requires a deeper examination of and integration with critical theories that account for students’ experiences. Dis/ability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) is one theory that can help inform future efforts in Transformative SEL to be more inclusive and sustaining for all students.

Educator perceptions and expectations of students regarding academic and social engagement have significantly impacted how students engage academically and socially. (Lauermaann & ten Hagen, 2021). School policies and practices have been influenced considerably by only educators who oftentime ignores students' and their families' perceptions of what constitutes appropriate behavior. Although data-driven and evidence-based options negate subjectivity levels, the response to interventions/multi-tiered systems of support framework has emerged with great promise (Avant & Swerdlik, 2016; Sullivan & Proctor, 2016). However, until recently, such frameworks lacked the necessary systems to account for cultural sensitivity and equitable approaches to support RELD students with EBD. For instance, Mathur and Rodriguez (2022) highlighted biases of applied behavior analysis. They asserted that applied behavior analysis practices are based largely on the concepts of replacing behaviors deemed unacceptable with “appropriate” behaviors heavily based on Eurocentric societal norms. Furthermore, school-based interventions for students identified with or at-risk for EBD often focus heavily on externalizing behaviors (e.g., aggression, defiance) and neglect to address the internalizing behaviors of students (e.g., toxic stress, anxiety; McCallops et al., 2019; La Salle et al., 2018).

### **DisCrit as a Lens to Critique and Transform SEL**

There is a dire need to provide a framework that attributes to quality culturally sustaining-responsive practices in the classroom to support their academic, social, and emotional development to address the critical issue of the disproportionality of multiply-marginalized students with and at-risk for EBD. Moreover, many evidence-based practices do not consider students' diverse backgrounds, which provides an opportunity to explore alternative approaches that center on student identity and equity. Therefore, implementing social and emotional learning practices necessitates the need to come from a culturally responsive-sustaining perspective to meet the complex and diverse social, emotional, and behavioral needs of RELD students with or at risk for EBD. One alternative approach is to consider DisCrit theory, which provides an essential theoretical framework to support culturally responsive-sustaining practices that meet the needs of students with RELD, thus bridging the gap between evidence-based practices and culturally responsive-sustaining practices.

DisCrit provides a lens through which to critique SEL in its current form and to reimagine how SEL might indeed be transformative, particularly for multiply-marginalized students. DisCrit illuminates how racism and ableism have historically been mutually constitutive, used in tandem to marginalize students of color and racially minoritized students with disabilities. DisCrit views race and disability as social constructions with material consequences in a racist and ableist society (Annamma et al., 2013), perpetuated by initiatives that uphold the status quo. While in its current form, SEL risks perpetuating racism and ableism by not calling into question how its standards pathologize students whose behaviors are "different" from the "norm" of societal values.

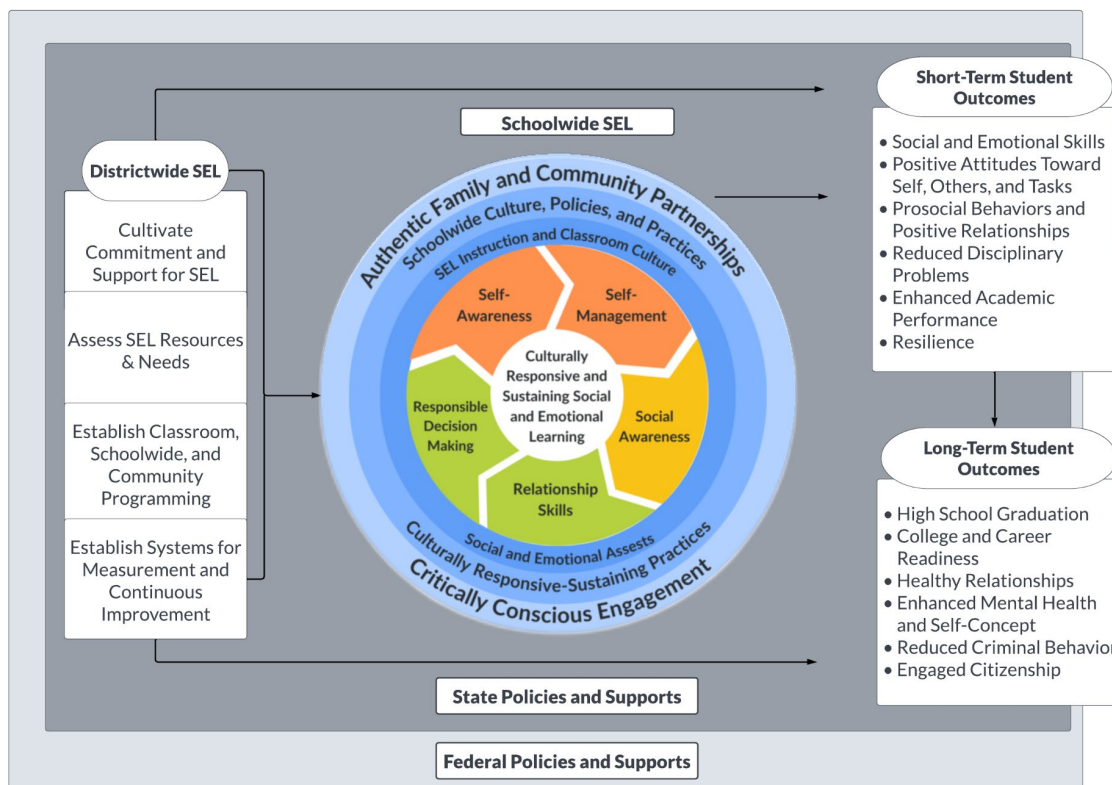
DisCrit consists of seven tenets that describe how racism and ableism operate in society and how to dismantle them. We have selected three principles to illustrate how DisCrit might support a transformation of SEL into an equitable practice that disrupts the status quo (Annamma et al., 2013). The first tenet, for instance, explores how racism and ableism have historically been mutually constitutive and used collectively to marginalize students of color. This tenet helps to shed light on how both racism and ableism operate within traditional SEL programming and the importance of instead examining how SEL might disrupt these interlocking oppressions. The second tenet states that we must acknowledge all aspects of an individual's identity, and to look at only one part of identity, such as race, is incomplete. This tenet suggests through SEL, stakeholders consider all aspects of an individual's identity, and students have space to explore and sustain their identities through SEL practices. The seventh tenet states that DisCrit requires activism and ongoing efforts to disrupt and dismantle systems of oppression. SEL may be a practice that supports dismantling these oppressions while helping to create a more equitable educational system.

Without a critique of the behavioral standards and "norms" put forth in SEL's core tenets, SEL risks signaling to students that certain behaviors are "good" or "acceptable" while others are not (Camangian & Cariaga, 2021). The lack of an intersectional and critical lens allows the behaviors deemed acceptable to align with the current White, middle-class norms dominating the educational system. Expanding and redefining SEL's five competencies is an opportunity aided by the DisCrit theory. For example, focusing on and integrating the DisCrit theory into SEL programming can ensure the inequities impacting students navigating multiple oppressions are central to the delivery of SEL.

## Recommendations

Effective culturally responsive-sustaining SEL offers a promising method for supporting the socio-emotional needs of RELD students with or at risk for EBD. However, to effectively implement and maintain CRSEL, support is needed through policies, practices, and procedures within a systems-wide framework that includes stakeholders at the local, state, and federal levels. Figure 1 displays a conceptual model for providing system-wide CRSEL supports and intended outcomes of these practices.

Figure 1  
*Preliminary Conceptual Model of System-wide CRSEL*



Note. Adapted from Weissberg et al. (2015).

### Federal and State Policies and Supports

It is crucial that federal and local initiatives support the implementation of CRSEL in order for these practices to be maintained and streamlined for all students. Federal and state policies and procedures should support the implementation of CRSEL by providing fiscal resources and mandating that all relevant personnel develop their intersectional and cultural competence and gain skills in providing culturally responsive-sustaining instruction. For instance, federal and state stakeholders could mandate that school personnel are provided with professional learning opportunities on adopting CRSEL practices. These efforts will ensure that all pertinent school members are equipped with the knowledge and tools to support multiply-marginalized

students with or at-risk for EBD from diverse backgrounds.

### **District Level Supports**

District support is needed to establish and reinforce more substantial initiatives to improve student, staff, and community relationships by creating a safe and inclusive environment for multiply-marginalized students. Districts can include diverse representation in advisory programs and culturally responsive and anti-racist professional development to support staff (DeArmond et al., 2021). For students, there needs to be initiatives focused on inclusion and healing over punishment. These initiatives also provide invaluable learning experiences for students and help them develop empathy and conflict-resolution skills. In sum, district support in inaugurating or improving initiatives of this nature can foster positive relationships and a sense of community by providing an environment of inclusion and healing rather than punishment.

Districts can help incorporate social-emotional curricula by providing educators and school staff with comprehensive professional development (PD). Effective PDs can consist of collaboration and discussion among educators and school staff to ensure that everyone is on the same page and can effectively support students' social-emotional learning. In addition, districts should provide resources, such as lesson plans and activities, to help educators teach curriculum that has CRSEL components (Marsh et al., 2018). When it comes to school support, districts need to provide ongoing coaching and support to teachers and staff in order to ensure that they feel comfortable. The purpose of ongoing support and coaching is to ensure teachers and staff are comfortable and knowledgeable about implementing the CRSEL curriculum and know how to measure outcomes effectively (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016).

### **Schoolwide Recommendations**

Teachers can create an environment where students feel comfortable and accepted by providing culturally responsive-sustaining and engaging materials. This can help foster a sense of belongingness in the classroom, which are critical components of CRSEL. With the rising number of RELD students being enrolled in U.S. schools, there is a great urgency to equip teachers with relevant skills and knowledge to navigate the cultural needs of their students (McIntush et al., 2019). This also emphasizes the importance of creating a safe space for students to express themselves and discuss their feelings. Teachers should think creatively and strategically plan activities and lessons that will engage all students and help them develop these essential skills (Ibarra, 2022). Other suggested strategies for teachers are compiled into Table 1, displayed below.

Table 1.

#### *Recommendations for Teachers*

| Strategy                | Description  |
|-------------------------|--|
| Start with the students | Speak with students before planning SEL activities so you can get a better understanding of their backgrounds and cultures. Ask them what they would like to learn and how |



|                               |   |
|-------------------------------|---|
|                               | they would like to be taught. This will help you create more meaningful and relevant activities for the students.   |
| Choose appropriate activities | Choose interactive activities pertinent to the students' lives. For instance, if the students are from a low-income background, you may choose activities focusing on financial literacy and budgeting.                             |
| Incorporate home culture      | Incorporate the students' cultures and backgrounds into the activities. For example, if the students are African-American, create activities that explore the history and contributions of African-Americans to society.            |
| Use visuals                   | Use visuals to help students understand the concepts and ideas you are teaching. Visuals can help to engage students and make the content more accessible.  |
| Incorporate media             | Use media to discuss relevant topics and issues. For example, use films or documentaries to help students understand the concept of racial justice.   |
| Role play                     | Role play is a great way to get students to practice their social-emotional skills in a safe environment. For example, you can have students role-play scenarios where they have to practice empathy or conflict resolution skills. |
| Encourage collaboration       | Encourage students to work together in small groups or pairs to complete activities. This will help students to develop teamwork, communication, and problem-solving skills.  |
| Provide feedback              | Provide students with feedback on their progress and performance. This will help keep them motivated and give you an opportunity to provide guidance and support.   |

Integrating these recommendations are about helping students to develop their whole selves. With thoughtful and strategic planning, practitioners can create activities that meet the needs of their students and foster self-awareness, empathy, and resilience (McIntosh et al., 2019). Furthermore, these practices must work in tandem with each level of SEL through: 1) authentic family involvement using critically conscious engagement, 2) schoolwide policies and procedures that embed CRSP approaches, and 3) instruction that emphasizes SEL assets at a cultural level.

## **Conclusion**

Historically, multiply-marginalized students with or at risk for EBD continue to be disproportionately affected by poverty, racism, ableism, and other forms of discrimination that can create educational barriers. These students generally attend urban schools and often find themselves at a distinct disadvantage based on implicit biases they encounter within the American educational system. The current practices for SEL in urban schools often fail to address the diverse needs of racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students with or at risk for emotional and behavioral dis/abilities. Integrating CRSP and SEL together can create an inclusive and supportive learning environment for students. CRSP is an approach to teaching that acknowledges and embraces students' cultural backgrounds and meet their complex and diverse needs and support their academic, social, and emotional development.. At the same time, SEL is an approach that focuses on students' social, emotional, and cognitive development. When used together, CRSP and SEL can foster positive learning outcomes in diverse classrooms and promote social-emotional well-being among students. Furthermore, by addressing the pervasive inequities in special education praxis and promoting culturally responsive-sustaining SEL practices, we can work towards creating inclusive and equitable learning environments for all students.

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