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The Lack of SEL with African American Male Students: Why and What Needs to Change

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Abstract

As education strives to meet the needs of the students and provide them with 21st century skills, there is a demand to understand how social and emotional learning positively impacts future shapers of the world. The paper develops an authentic analysis of why SEL is lacking effective results in education using thorough research of social and emotional learning as well as the academic tendencies of African American male students. Moreover, further information is provided on the needed progressive change in educators, ideas, educational institutions, and African American male students themselves.

Keywords: African American male students, social emotional learning, culturally inclusive, educational reform

What Is Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and Why Is It Important?

I. Definition

As a collective, people require healthy methods of processing emotions. The experiences of each individual are unique and, in turn, form our personality. Within each experience is a plethora of feelings that mold us into who we are, what we do in our future, and our expectations for ourselves and those around us. We are largely driven by our emotions and the actions they curate. For instance, how we feel determines how we treat others. Being able to simultaneously understand and communicate our emotions is an asset that is beyond value, yet it is not often taught in a major social unit where children, teens, and even adults interact for a significant part of their lives. Education systems are responsible for teaching all generations the importance of comprehending how we feel, why we feel this way, and their impact on how we treat others. For example, teachers often require students to sit down quietly, work well in group assignments, and demonstrate acceptable behavior during transitions. However, in depth explanation is necessary on each expectation to better equip students to notice, identify, and regulate emotions in social settings. Specifically, sitting down quietly shows respect for peers and their education opportunities, working well with others demonstrates that students can democratically agree and disagree. Participating in appropriate behavior during transitions illustrates comprehension of social cues. Teachers must convey the necessity of these expectations regarding the students' future and not only the present of the classroom. Additionally, perceiving the direct line between our emotions, social behavior, and goals in life is a major part of who we become. Social and emotional learning, according to Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2020), SEL is the ability to recognize and regulate emotions as well as build healthy relationships within ourselves and others. "SEL is 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, [and] feel and show empathy for others..." ("Foundations of SEL," 2020, n.p.) As young students in school, we learn how to calmly express our concerns or ideas by raising a hand or waiting patiently for a chance

to speak. Although the structure of the classroom is beneficial for the organization and presentation of ideas, educators are missing the element of students being able to self-manage their behavior and its relevance to both their failures and successes. Deborah Moroney and Jessica Newman (2019) reference the source for its definitions of each SEL category. "CASEL has identified five competency domains: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making" (Moroney & Newman, 2019, p. 16). All domains elaborate on the various ways social and emotional processes are involved in our daily lives such as managing our emotions in stressful situations, being aware of how our words and actions make others feel, building healthy relationships, and making responsible choices. The Mississippi Department of Education (2017) provides definitions and standards for each of the 5 competencies in SEL categories through 5 Domains. Domain 1, self-awareness, "is the ability to identify one's thoughts, values and emotions and recognize how these shape behaviors" (MDE, 2021, p. 10). Domain 2 is self-management, the practice of regulating emotions and the resulting consequences of your actions. Students who work on self-management skills become focused on personal and academic goals (MDE, 2021, p. 10). In Domain 3, students use activities to bring attention to their social affect considering their peers and social interactions. The social awareness skill is particularly beneficial during conversations, presentations, and interviews when students need to be able to determine the emotions of their audience and alter their behavior accordingly. Domain 4 pertains to relationship skills. Students should foster "the ability to effectively communicate, cooperate, seek and provide support to others, manage conflict, and effectively handle peer pressure..." (MDE, 2021, p. 10). Abilities pertaining to making wise decisions are assessed in Domain 5: Students obtain "the ability to make constructive choices and problem-solve based on safe, ethical, and social norms while evaluating the outcomes of previous choices" (MDE, 2021, p. 10). As learners progress in each domain, they develop valuable skills to be successful individuals and conquer goals.

II. Importance

Recently, states have implemented social and emotional learning (SEL) into state standards to provide educators with guidelines and methods of teaching import-

ant social and emotional skills. As Durlak, Dymnicki, Schellinger, Taylor, and Weissberg (2011) claim in their meta-analysis of SEL, “schools have an important role to play in raising healthy children by fostering not only their cognitive development but also their social and emotional development” (Durlak et al., 2011, p. 406). Learning social and emotional awareness is significant to the growth of students inside and outside the school environment. Practicing SEL coping methods, such as deep breathing, effective communication of concerns, and positive social interactions, increases the likelihood that students graduate from high school or a university. Moreover, students are more confident in their skill sets and prepared for the next step in their lives. Durlak and other co-authors (2011) state, “Extensive developmental research indicates that effective mastery of social-emotional competencies is associated with greater well-being and better school performance whereas the failure to achieve competencies in these areas can lead to a variety of personal, social, and academic difficulties” (Durlak et al., 2011, p. 406). Young adults are more likely to struggle with life stressors such as in college or the workforce when they are not able to understand and recognize their emotions, make wise decisions, and foster healthy relationships. SEL also makes students more engaged in their schoolwork because they feel heard and seen by their peers and teachers. Fulfilling the human desire to be understood and respected, social and emotional learning caters to the needs of the student to make their worth visible to themselves and foster a better sense of identity. Without a method of engaging students in SEL, “as many as 40%-60% of students become chronically disengaged from school” (Durlak et al., 2011, p. 405). It is imperative for all students to understand how their behavior has an impact on their future. Many students lack a connection between how they feel and how, consequently, the effect it has on their behavior and how others perceive them. On the other hand, regarding students’ well-being outside of school, those who struggle to socialize with their peers or in different environments will benefit from mindful practice of the metacognition process concerning how they act or feel around others and its relevance to their relationships. For social and mental wellness, students need grounding in their own identity to be adaptive to factors they cannot control. Durlak and other co-authors (2011) share that “mastering SEL competencies results in a developmental progression that leads to a shift from being predominantly

controlled by external factors to acting increasingly in accord with internalized beliefs and values,” (p. 406). Students become citizens in their society who understand how to manage inner feelings and beliefs externally rather than outside factors influencing them.

III. What Does SEL Need to Thrive in the Classroom?

After reviewing the benefits of SEL in the classroom, researchers are interested in the required ingredients to ensure all students are receiving this valuable instruction. To begin, SEL must be culturally inclusive. As stated before, all students have unique experiences; therefore, social and emotional learning cannot become a “one-size-fits-all” instruction. Specifically, minority students are exposed to systematic racism and poverty in education. In connection to the environment of each student, educators must ensure students feel safe and supported in an educational setting. Students need to feel heard and understood without judgment. Additionally, educators and other professionals in the education system must eliminate prejudice that prevents them from viewing each student for who they are without bias. Teachers have to understand that environments and social stances are not the only large factors in a student’s personality and character. In their article “International Journal of Education & the Arts, Eva Anttila, Mei-Chun Lin, Tawnya Smith, and Kristine Sunday (2020) further express the necessity for teacher understanding of student uniqueness. For instance, “Low teacher expectation is a school-based factor that impedes African American male’s academic performance” (Anttila et al., 2020, p. 4). Teachers need information on how to conduct SEL activities that incorporate all students. Every educator should strive to foster a positive environment. Students need a positive sense of belonging and identity. Lastly, when teachers and students engage in critical reading and discussions of current topics and emotions, all participants create a more in-depth understanding of who they are as individuals and how to communicate with others. Teachers should foster engaging and positive discussions and instructional material that is relevant to each child. Using these methods, along with understanding how to best implement SEL, will ensure our future generations are prepared to regulate their emotions and responses, build and foster healthy relationships, and create positive identities as individuals.

Are African American Male Students Receiving Equitable SEL?

I. Why Inquire into African American Male Students?

While social and emotional learning is imperative for all students, the following study focuses on African American male, high school students due to their poor position regarding whether or not they are receiving effective SEL instruction. The purpose of an analysis of high school students stems from the fact that students begin to internalize emotions and become less willing to socialize. Hans Frickle, Libby Pier, and Martin West (2018) explain “social-emotional skills do not increase steadily as students progress through school. Self-efficacy and social awareness in particular exhibit large declines in middle and high school” (2018, p. 1). Furthermore, I have chosen to elaborate more on African American males in particular since “White students report higher levels of social-emotional learning than African American and Latinx students;” and “Girls consistently report higher self-management and social awareness than boys,” (Fricke, Pier, & West, 2018, p. 1). In addition to their low academic performance, the lack of success does not stem from the work of the students alone. “Current and recent studies demonstrate that the academic difficulties African American males experience are not the results of a lack of ability or effort but are reflective of specific educational practices and policies that thwart high academic achievement and impede school completion” (Attila et al., 2020, p. 4). The educational practices and policies Attila and co-author’s (2020) refer to are the higher percentage of Black students referred to special education and behavioral management programs. Due to the African American culture and how students respond to teaching methods and instruction, they are at a disadvantage in a classroom that only teaches in consideration for predominantly White students. Specifically, African American culture does not embrace any image of weakness, especially in males, due to historical events such as slavery and the need to appear unbroken to society. It must also be noted, as seen in the research presented by Charity Griffin, DeLeon Gray, Elan Hope, Isha Metzger, and Dawn Henderson (2022), that “When Black students experience race-related stress, their attempts to address the roots of such issues must be supported by teachers and administrators in positions of power” (Griffin et al., 2022,

p. 216). Black students often develop negative feelings towards school when their experiences consist of racism from students, teachers, and other staff. I believe improving these issues will ensure that African American students receive equitable social and emotional learning.

II. Statistics - Showing Black Students Are Not Receiving Equitable SEL

For some, it is easier to understand major issues through the use of quantitative data. For the purpose of a numerical outlook on the tragic country-wide problem of the underachievement of African American students in comparison to other ethnicities, statistics are presented on the issue. On the elementary level, Black students perform primarily underneath their peers on the mandatory state tests. Evident in the statistics provided by Dennisha Murff (2020) in her novel *Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: Promising Practices for African American Male Students*, in 2012, African American students were passing both the English and Math test at 45.3% while Caucasian students succeeded at 59.5% (2020, p. 7). Similarly, African American students reached 44.8% in 2013 and 63.3% in 2014. However, their Caucasian peers reached 59.1% in 2013 and 81.8% in 2014 (Murff, 2020, p. 7). The disparities between success on state tests stem from the lack of cultural inclusivity and a sense of belonging in the classroom for Black students. “By the time African American students, primarily African American male students, reach Grade 4, there are many that feel defeated and disenfranchised by the educational system” (Murff, 2020, p. 5). Throughout their educational career, Black students begin to feel out of place in the school environment since it does not cater to their personal experiences. Their emotions and thoughts are less likely to be understood or welcomed in a classroom that does not consider who they are as a learner. As Griffin (2022) shares, “Black youth face a myriad of race-related stressors in school due to interpersonal and institutional racism and these experiences have serious consequences for academic achievement and school adjustment” (Griffin et al., 2022, p. 199). Examples of institutional racism are present in treatment and dialogue of both students and teachers. “Black students attending urban schools also report experiencing unfair treatment and harsh disproportionate punishment when they speak out against discriminatory practices and advocate for fairness” writes Griffin (Griffin et al., 2022,

p. 199). Outside influences such as institutional racism leads to interpersonal conflicts for Black students. For instance, the institutionalized theme that Black students cannot uphold high expectations becomes internalized by minority students. Furthermore, on the high school level, African American students are less likely to complete high school or take alternate routes for a diploma. The School Foundation for Public Education presents statistics on the dropout rate during the 2012-2013 school year. The “dropout rate for African American students is alarmingly high, with only 59% of African American male students graduating from high school, resulting in a 41% dropout rate” (Murff, 2020, p. 1). Leaving school and failing academic classes are signs of a need for change. Black students need an education that understands who they are as individuals, where they come from in relation to culture, and their aspiration to be better than the perceived stereotype of uninterest in performing well in education.

Why Are Black Male Students NOT Receiving the Benefits of SEL?

I. Problems in SEL

Although the aim of social and emotional learning is to promote self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, the activities used to practice these skills do not consider the element of systematic racism, which is seen through the higher numbers of Black students in special needs programs and disciplinary referrals in comparison to a lower average of participants in honors and Advance Placement programs. As Ellis and other co-author claim, “Black male adolescents are disproportionately tracked into special education and are more likely to be viewed by teachers and administrators as disengaged in the process of schooling than other students” (Ellis et al., 2018, p. 900). SEL should allow all students to share experiences and teach relatable aspects of life to their peers; however, it does not consider the systematic racism in schools. “If we truly want to prioritize the actual social and emotional learning of all students in schools, we need a framework that explicitly names inequalities, allows for collective agency, and acknowledges and enables access to emotions” write the authors of “(Un)Standardizing Emotions: An Ethical Critique of

Social and Emotional Learning Standards” (Clark et al., 2022, p. 132). Caroline Clark, Alyssa Chrisman, and Suzanne Lewis (2022) in the aforementioned article impart evidence of how SEL fails to consider the culture and ethnicity of groups and, therefore, does not reach the wide array of students in education today. For example, SEL Mississippi state standards ask students to “demonstrate the ability to recognize the positive contributions of other cultures and perspectives to the well-being of society,” and “analyze perspectives which differ from oneself and compare and contrast” (MDE, 2021, p. 30 & 33). These questions foster an inclusive environment; however, African American students, and other minority groups, are less willing to share their personal experiences in a classroom filled with people who are not open to listening or seeing past stereotypes. Weaver advises teachers to listen to their students with an open mind and be willing to learn from students and peers from other ethnicities. Shatera Weaver, in the article “To thrive, students need a ‘homeplace’ at school”, informs readers of the desire students have for feeling noticed and heard in educational settings. “To support students’ sense of belonging and their social and emotional development, educators have to continually listen, reflect, and learn about race and culture” (Weaver, 2021, p. 43). SEL cannot be a “one-size-fits-all” method of instruction, especially when it aims to create a healthy self-identity and awareness. By ignoring the element of racism in the process, SEL “suggest that things like ‘discrimination’ and ‘prejudice’ are universal and affect all individuals or groups similarly and equally... render[ing] the circulating forces of racism and ableism as ‘neutral’ and ‘invisible’” (Clark et al., 2022, p. 140). Facilitating SEL practices in a manner that does not factor the way minority groups feel in the classroom and their effect on both their academic and social emotional learning forms social barriers. Hoffman is another author who critically reviews SEL strategies and concludes what is missing in its instruction. Diane Hoffman (2009) quotes Sarni C. who wrote in 1977 that “In many respects, [the] skills of emotional competence reflect Western society’s notions of ‘how emotion works.’ [She] refer[s] to such beliefs as folk theories of emotion ... Other non-Western cultures do not necessarily view unexpressed emotions as accumulative or as explosive” (Hoffman, 2009, p. 541). Since SEL focuses on how students should manage their behavior and response to others to improve relation-

ships, decision-making, and self-management skills, it is significant for educators to take into account how different cultures consider various behaviors appropriate.

II. Problems in Professionals, Educators

Three main issues are seen in how educators influence SEL instruction. At the basis of systematic racism, educators show prejudice towards Black students, whether conscious or unconsciously. Furthermore, they are not trained in how to give Black students culturally inclusive instruction, defined as educational lessons that consider all ethnicities and races by being culturally appropriate for all students to comprehend. There needs to be more guidance on how to implement these ideas. Teachers and other education staff participate in SEL training and seminars, but they are missing a key component in ensuring all students are equally receiving valuable instruction. Teaching students to be open to listening to each other, socially aware of themselves and others, and foster good communication skills for relationships will ultimately change the course of society in which people continue to show injustice towards African Americans. For males who are already at a disadvantage in a culture and society that discourages illustrating emotions other than anger and confidence, these students will continue to suffer emotional distress, lower self-identity levels, and lack of relationships skills without SEL that considers who they are and the culture they are from. “For example, some African Americans may hesitate to use I-messages because of their upbringing...” (Hoffman, 2009, p. 541). To clarify, I-messages are statements students make about themselves that show vulnerability to practice self-awareness of emotions and behaviors. Once educators actively address their biases and go through proper training for culturally inclusive SEL practices, they must also advocate for their students and know what is best for them and their learning. Remaining silent or not caring to make a change does not help students in need. While it can be challenging to get the attention of professionals and implement change, educators must be willing to argue for the betterment of the students. When a teacher notices examples of unfair treatment or biased influences, they need to stand against them and explain why these issues are wrong but also how to change them. For instance, noticing a student is improperly labeled as having a learning disorder, needing behavioral management,

or suspended under unjust purposes requires someone to recognize what is wrong, explain its significance, and offer an alternate option that benefits the child’s learning.

III. Problems in Student Beliefs

Due to systemic racism in and outside of the educational setting, African American students have become accustomed to prejudice and do not expect to gain valuable knowledge from a system that has placed them to the side. African American male students illustrate this thought more so since they are also more likely to be marginalized within the school system than their female counterparts. African American students do not trust the education system. Schools need to make an effort to show they belong and are welcomed in the school without judgment. While not all educators and professionals portray these ideas to students, even one teacher who demonstrates racist ideas or actions can form a negative view of school for Black students. “Stress associated with racism can also erode one’s sense of self-efficacy that, in turn, can adversely impact overall college adjustment and academic performance” (Greer, 2021, p. 225). African American students often struggle to focus on schoolwork when they feel as if they have to watch over their shoulders or they are not welcome within educational settings. These feelings also lead to mistrust in the education system. When Black students believe their cultural barriers are less likely to be crossed, they accomplish less and are less motivated to stay in school and focus on academics: “...those who perceive barriers to be racially or ethnically motivated may have little expectation of success” (Irving, 2005, p. 479). Furthermore, students have often seen their culture portrayed in a negative way and need a better sense of identity and pride in their culture. For instance, some schools do not celebrate Black History Month or use culturally appropriate examples in activities such as literature or watching videos. Leaving out key parts of who Black students are as individuals creates a barrier between them and education. They believe the school or teacher does not value a large part of who they are, and their identities become tainted with lack of self-confidence. Students also lack confidence in the institution’s ability to provide them with knowledge that is useful for them since it does not include or portray African American culture appropriately in instruction or activities. School can help provide a sense of belonging by being culturally

inclusive and helping students change their perspectives on their cultures. For instance, rather than mentioning African American culture negatively in history, present students with positive and engaging activities and lessons that teach them the wondrous elements of both their past and present.

What Changes Must be Made to Include African American Students?

I. Beneficial Changes - SEL

As evaluated before, social and emotional learning must be culturally inclusive and vigilant to avoid any bias towards African American students. Although the standards include activities in which students discuss different cultures, SEL practices must remember how difficult certain activities can be for students who are not comfortable in the educational environment due to how others perceive their culture. More instruction towards being open-minded and not sharing harsh criticism or comments about cultures they may not understand. African American students are less likely to share when they are aware the majority of the class will joke or slander their experiences and lifestyles. Furthermore, SEL should include narrative literature from different ethnicities. It is not satisfactory to read an article or book written by a Black author. Instead, students need to learn more about personal experiences African Americans face through literature. Using narratives to teach students has been proven to increase empathy for others. By improving students' understanding of other cultures, they become accustomed to having a safe space to share their experiences and build healthy relationships.

II. Beneficial Changes - Instruction

Instruction itself can be biased when it includes examples for understanding or experiences that are known only to predominantly White or affluent students. For instance, asking students to describe how they would feel and respond to a friend who went shopping or to see a movie with a different friend rather than themselves is hard for students to consider when they typically do not visit these places on a regular basis. Culturally inclusive instruction would use examples that apply to all students from different backgrounds. The best way

to provide culturally aware instruction to students is through personal narratives and literature. As Roberta Gardner, Sandra Osorio, and Shashray McCormack (2021) claim, "Through using culturally conscious literature and personal narratives educators can model vulnerability and invite and empower their students to do the same" (Gardner et al., 2021, p. 303). Teachers make impressions on students that influence their lives beyond the classroom. After viewing their teacher's vulnerabilities in personal experiences as well as how strong and socially and emotionally conscious they can be, students are given a prime example of how to better themselves. Narratives are also significant to student overall development such as forming a space for creativity and professional growth. Researchers have found that "the textured memories and narratives of our past, no matter how painful, are instructive, create operational tools of cultural wealth that we must sustain because they help us personally and professionally" (Gardner et al., 2021, p. 304). Revisiting our memories through sharing experiences and listening to others develops empathy for others as well as knowledge of lessons others have learned in life that can be beneficial to each student's achievement inside and outside of school.

III. Beneficial Changes - Professionals/Educators

Cultural and SEL training are necessary for educators to foster a learning environment that uplifts all students. Professional training on how to eliminate bias towards students in any way is also beneficial for educators. Although teaching is a profession, teachers and other educational personnel are still human and form opinions about students based on how they look, where they are from, how they behave, and more. While prejudice is common and difficult to eliminate without active metacognition, educators have to be prepared to change how they view each student and be open-minded to foster culturally aware instruction. To start, they need to understand their biases and make a conscious effort to eliminate them. Also, listening to students and encouraging them to share emotions and experiences will help teachers gain a better insight into who their students are personally and how to best advocate for the betterment of their education.

IV. Beneficial Changes - Student Beliefs

Students also fit into the bracket of needing to evaluate their thought processes and make social change. Since systematic racism is prevalent in their lives, joining programs that elevate culture rather than criticize it are beneficial. Students participate in community programs such as clubs and other organizations that promote Black youth to appreciate and take pride in who they are as well as focus on making themselves better as a whole. Students should make a conscious effort to uplift themselves and develop a healthy identity. Whether understanding of their culture is found within the classroom, community organization, or by simply speaking with others, it is imperative that African American students maintain a healthy sense of identity and confidence to persevere in their academics and through life. As is true for both teachers and students, people must allow room for change in thoughts and be open to differences.

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