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SEL for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students

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SEL: From Theory to Practice

Abstract

There is abundant research about the benefits of SEL programs on social and emotional core competencies (e.g., increase in self-esteem, improvement of academic performance); however, general SEL programs are not necessarily designed with the English learners' (ELs) needs in mind. Aiming at exploring valid and reliable SEL programs that meet the needs of the ELs, the article first examines the theoretical groundwork on which SEL is built upon. Next, this paper will first discuss Piaget's, Vygotsky's, and Dörnyei's theories surrounding the cognitive, emotional, and sociocultural aspects involved in the learning process and language learning. It will then consider the needs for SEL programs adapted to the needs of English learners (e.g., cultural, linguistic, emotional). To conclude, this paper will propose a culturally and linguistically adapted SEL framework that would offer classroom practitioners, school administrators, and other instructional staff an adapted tool that can guide them when implementing SEL programs in settings with diverse student populations.

Keywords: adapted SEL, English learners, Diverse Students

SEL: From Theory to Practice

Introduction

According to the definition provided by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), “social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process of developing the ability to recognize and manage emotions, develop caring and concern for others, make responsible decisions, establish positive relationships, and handle challenging situations effectively” (p. 1). SEL offers an all-encompassing frame of reference for schools bringing together students, teachers, staff members, parents, and the community to stimulate every student’s learning. The SEL framework is an integrated approach involving every student, the entire staff, the family, and the community (CASEL, 2005). This framework focuses on several competencies: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, responsible- decision making, and relationship skills (Fredericks et al., 2005). Effective SEL approaches have at their core evidence-based strategies that model social-emotional skills in a cooperative, safe, nurturing learning space (CASEL, 2005). Successful learners acquire personal skills such as tenacity, determination, and resilience in parallel with social and emotional skills (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013).

There is a plethora of research about the positive effects that SEL programs have on social and emotional core competencies, such as positive mindsets, behavior, and academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011; Zins et al., 2004); however, the overarching question here is *do SEL programs have positive effects for all students, including English learners (ELs)?* In an attempt to answer this ardent question, our paper examines the theoretical groundwork on which SEL is built upon. In this vein, this paper will first discuss Piaget, Vygotsky, Dörnyei and Krashen’s theories surrounding the cognitive, emotional, and sociocultural aspects involved in the learning process and language learning. It will then present the needs for SEL programs adapted to the needs of English learners (e.g., socio-cultural, linguistic, emotional). To conclude, this paper will propose a culturally and linguistically adapted SEL framework that offers classroom practitioners, school administrators, and other instructional staff an adapted tool that can guide them when implementing SEL programs in settings with diverse student populations.

SEL Theoretical Framework

Piaget’s Development of Knowledge and Cognitive Psychology

Piaget’s influential theory of cognitive development follows a biological approach that focuses mainly on psychological, scientific, and logical development (Kitchener, 1992). The theory of cognitive development created by the Swiss “genetic epistemologist” suggests that knowledge develops through the interaction with the surroundings and occurs in different sequential biological stages. According to this theory, children go through four different stages which help them progressively acquire knowledge and understand the nature of intelligence. The first stage of cognitive development that Piaget identified is the sensorimotor stage, which unfolds during infancy. This stage is followed by the pre-operational stage, which develops in early childhood. The concrete operational stage occurs in the elementary and middle childhood years, while the formal operational stage occurs during adolescence and adult years. The mechanism of assimilation and adaptation enables an organism to progress through these stages using *schemas*, which can be described as patterns or specific protocols that can be developed, generalized and reapplied to new learning situations (Piaget, 1954). The use of schemas adapted

to each of the developmental stages that learners undergo emerges as an essential component of SEL programs. Furthermore, Piaget's biological approach to learning via the acquisition of essential cognitive structures is equally emergent in EL's learning and SEL.

Piaget saw the development of cognitive structures as the outcome of ongoing adjustments and readjustment of mental processes. Piaget argued that these processes were enabled by both the biological development and the experiences with the environment. All learners' experiences with their specific environment allow for learning and re-learning to occur; however, experiences are not sufficient for learning to unfold. A crucial element for knowledge to be acquired by learners is to make sense of the environment, to mentally organize both elements in their environment and their interactions with people and objects. Similarly, as ELs actively interact with and adapt to new environments and come to know, learning withstands varying degrees of depths that can be measured on a broad cognitive-structural development spectrum. In other words, ELs interpret, understand, and learn on par with their level of cognitive development emerging at the crossroad between biological development, active interaction with the environment, and ability to organize those experiences mentally.

Critics of Piaget's work mention the exclusion of culture and language in favor of biological aspects. Such factors were auspiciously taken into consideration by Vygotsky, who saw social interaction and cultural mediation as determining factors of learning and cognitive development. Seeking to address a theoretical gap, he then developed a different theory on cognitive development known as the sociocultural theory.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

When describing the construct of the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD), Vygotsky (1896-1934), a Russian psychologist, emphasized that cognition develops through peer interaction within social contexts (Vygotsky, 1962). He based his sociocultural theory on social interaction as the primary element influencing learning and cognitive development. An innovative concept that Vygotsky added to his previous theorized notions is the concept of mediation viewed as the avenue of human learning and action enabled by cultural devices (Vygotsky, 1981). These cultural devices that mediate human learning, thinking, and human action can be either physical or psychological (e.g., language). This compelling insight into how culture mediates learning, thinking, and human action is essential to understand that cultural artifacts, primarily language, influences how people internalize the world around them via mediated thinking and implicitly externalize themselves through mediated actions. Cultural artifacts and language could then be considered significant determinants of learning, thinking, and action. These determinant factors must be taken into account when developing SEL programs. Particular attention shall be given to cultural artifacts and language during the design process of effective SEL programs, as these components should be representative of all learners.

The Role of Emotions in Learning and Language Learning

The purpose of emotion in learning and more specifically in second language learning (SLA) has been substantially researched in the last few decades whether by looking at the influence of learner's attitudes and motivation (Gardner & Lambert, 1972) or by linking emotions, social context and learning environment (Dörnyei, 2005). Zoltán Dörnyei, a Hungarian-born linguist, postulated that the degree of motivation to learn is influenced not only

by individual factors but also by social and cultural factors (Dörnyei, 2005). Amongst numerous emotions stemming from the process of language learning, perhaps the most researched emotion is anxiety. Since the 1980s, anxiety and stress have been linked with language learning (Krashen, 1982) and achievement (Horwitz, 2001). According to Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, students' affective filter—stress level—must be low enough for them to comprehend input given and learn a new language (Krashen, 1982). Most recent research suggests that anxiety and educational stress could be regulated via the implementation of SEL programs (Dresser, 2012) by creating a positive learning environment and promoting learners' self-esteem.

Different theories have discussed the influence of various factors: cognitive development (Piaget, 1954), peer interaction within social contexts (Vygotsky, 1962), culture as mediator of learning (Vygotsky, 1981), emotions, social context, and the learning environment (Dörnyei, 2005; Krashen, 1982). In view of various theories developed during the 20th century, all students learn and develop cognition and emotion within socio-cultural environments; therefore, all learners benefit from SEL education adapted for their level of cognitive development, emotional needs and their specific socio-cultural environment. Similarly, as the command of the language is essential for learning, from a linguistic standpoint not all learners are equally equipped to receive the full benefits offered by the implementation of SEL programs. For instance, due to insufficient English proficiency, low self-esteem and anxiety that interfere with their language learners, English learners may miss out on acquiring valuable tools shared through SEL education such as learning about strategies to regulate their behavior and improve their academic performances (Dresser, 2012).

Since ELs come to the learning environment with different linguistic, socio-cultural and emotional needs, SEL teachers must consider the aforementioned factors when implementing an SEL program. These considerations should be made to close the social, cultural, emotional, and linguistic gap that exists between the ELs and the mainstream students. Firstly, from the socio-cultural perspective, ELs come to the classroom with a different background, culture and traditions than their non-EL peers (Hooper et al., 2016). Secondly, most ELs might have experienced emotional conflicts related with immigration, possible separation from family members or friends, emotional trauma caused by discrimination, poverty, or inability to make friends and feel accepted, anxiety, and low-esteem (Dresser, 2012; Graves et al., 2011; Niehaus, 2012; Niehaus & Adelson, 2013; Pappamihiel, 2002). Thirdly, ELs' linguistic background and limited English proficiency places them at a disadvantage in comparison to their non-EL classmates and may contribute significantly to their decreased self-worth (Niehaus & Adelson, 2013).

It is essential to keep in mind that ELs' sociocultural background, language, and emotions are different from other mainstream students; therefore, these differences must be accounted for when implementing educational support. Due to these differences, regular social-emotional learning programs might not be as successful for ELs as they are with regular, mainstream students due to a "one fits all" nature of a program that does not address critical socio-cultural and emotional factors. Based on the theoretical evidence mentioned herein (Dresser, 2012; Hooper et al., 2016; Niehaus, 2012; Niehaus & Adelson, 2013), underscoring the linguistic, socio-emotional, and cultural distinctions between ELs and non-ELs, SEL for ELs could be more beneficial and more effective for ELs if these contain adaptive and scaffolded

lessons that consider English proficiency, socio-emotional aspects such as poverty, immigration, trauma, discrimination as well as cultural dimensions regarding traditions, beliefs, cultural position of gender, religion, and understanding of power and privilege.

Cultural and Linguistic Needs of ELs

Regular SEL programs have been implemented in schools in the United States for quite some time; however, it appears that only a handful of studies have looked into SEL programs which are specifically adapted to English learners' needs (Castro-Olivo, 2014, Cramer & Castro-Olivo, 2016; Dresser, 2012). One of the first studies exploring the relationship between social-emotional resilience results and academic performance of culturally and linguistically diverse middle school learners was conducted about a decade ago (Castro-Olivo et al., 2011). According to Castro-Olivo et al. (2011), there was a positive relationship between social-emotional resiliency and the academic achievement of the Latino participants. Considering this positive relationship, Castro-Olivo continued to investigate SEL through the EL lens and conducted a study assessing the impact of an SEL program adapted for the EL Latino population on the academic achievement of the participants (Castro-Olivo, 2014). The treatment in this study was a culturally and linguistically adapted SEL program named *Jóvenes Fuertes* (Strong Teens). This study, comprising 102 middle and high schoolers, examined the relationship between socio-emotional learning (SEL) and academic achievements. The participants were randomly assigned to the treatment (n=49) and the control group (n=53).

As previously mentioned, the *Jóvenes Fuertes* program was culturally adapted from an existing SEL program named the Strong Teens program (Merrell, 2007). The program translated into Spanish and taught by bilingual (i.e., English, Spanish) and biliterate teachers encompassed 12 lessons and skills such as anger management, self-awareness, and social awareness, empathy, conflict resolution, etc. The findings of this study demonstrated that the learners in the treatment groups reported statistically significant SEL knowledge and resilience scores in comparison to the participants assigned to the control group. Similar results were obtained from a follow-up study with mostly male high school culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students no longer identified as ELs, assessing the self-reported resilience level after the implementation of the EL adapted SEL program named *Jóvenes Fuertes* (Cramer & Castro-Olivo, 2015). Interestingly, while the results were consistent with Castro-Olivo (2014), this study showed that significant resilience scores were not only revealed by the post-test measures, thus maintained two months after the treatment (as per the delayed test results).

While SEL programs adapted to the needs of ELs shown to significantly improve learners' SEL knowledge and enhance their resilience (Castro-Olivo, 2014, Cramer & Castro-Olivo, 2016; Dresser, 2012), recent studies have also shown that for SEL programs to use a culturally sensitive approach adapted to the needs of ELs, suggest that teachers may consider adopting a student-centered approach through explicit teaching, personalize instruction, as well as create a positive and caring classroom climate promoting collaboration and support (Cho et al., 2019). In a study with EL refugee elementary students, the teachers were influenced by their perceptions of the social-emotional (i.e., relationship skills, social awareness) differences between the ELs refugees in comparison with native English students. Teachers perceived their differences as a deficit instead of funds of knowledge, which led them to consider ELs students' social-emotional differences as "problems" (Bitew & Ferguson, 2012; Roy & Roxas, 2011).

Similarly, their experiences in adjusting to a new environment were perceived as burdensome instead of a strength that could be added to the wealth of knowledge every child brings to school (Dresser, 2012; Rousseau et al., 1999). Teachers' negative perceptions of ELs cultural difference must be addressed with care as they may tend to make pedagogical decisions that reduce their students' opportunity to learn (Birman & Tranm, 2017). An initial step into implementing a culturally sensitive approach adapted to the needs of ELs that places students at the center of instruction is to ensure that teachers exhibit cultural competence (Castro-Olivo, 2014, Cramer & Castro-Olivo, 2016).

Emotional Needs of ELs

Oftentimes the emotional needs of ELs are different than their non-EL peers. For instance, ELs might have experienced emotional trauma related with immigration, discrimination, alienation, possible separation from family members or friends, discrimination, social rejection, poverty, anxiety, educational stress, and low-self-worth (Dresser, 2012; Graves et al., 2011; Niehaus, 2012; Niehaus & Adelson, 2013; Pappamihiel, 2002). In school settings, two main emotional needs of ELs are prevalent: anxiety and low-self-worth.

Anxiety

Research has highlighted that one of the main reasons for ELs' anxiety in the classroom is the language barrier. In a study conducted in 2002, Pappamihiel (2002) used an EL-adapted instrument to measure the anxiety level of 178 middle school EL students who were both taking English development classes and mainstream classes. Using the English Language Anxiety Scale, which provides items in both English and Spanish, the researcher found that the EL students' overall English language anxiety was significantly higher in the mainstream classroom than in the ELD sheltered class. This finding suggested a need for language support in the classroom that can alleviate students' anxiety. Moreover, the EL students identified fear of being ridiculed as the primary triggering factor of their anxiety: "I feel when I say something the other students are going to laugh at me" (Pappamihiel, 2002, p. 339). In the same vein, this study revealed that there was a significant correlation between performance and English language anxiety. It was determined that as English performance increased, English language anxiety decreased.

Low Self-Esteem

ELs often struggle with low-self-esteem, which in turn impacts negatively their learning. For example, studies have shown that low self-esteem and anxiety negatively impacted ELs' literacy development (Dresser, 2012; Graves et al., 2011). In a seminal study, Dresser (2012) looked at the effect of anxiety on oral reading practices and revealed that reading-aloud methods, such as the Round Robin Reading method, lead to anxiety, fear of mispronunciation, and fear of being made fun of by the learner's peers (Dresser, 2012). These different causes of anxiety can damage students' motivation to read and impact their success at school and literacy development. It is especially true for ELs (Dresser, 2012). To avoid this, Dresser (2012) recommended that teachers use an instructional SEL approach to promote a positive learning environment. According to the author, positive learning environments can be achieved by increasing students' interests and learning experiences with content, which will improve their social-emotional, academic, and reflective skills (Dresser, 2012).

Teachers' interest in the class content and motivation to share knowledge with their students will lead students to enjoy said content. For example, teachers who enjoy reading and share their emotions regarding their love for reading are most likely to inspire students to read for enjoyment (Goleman, 2006). Teachers are encouraged to use research-based strategies to help ELs reach their goals (e.g., providing more time, opportunities to practice). A method of enhancing ELs' sense of wellbeing and confidence is providing rich reading experiences on culturally appropriate and emotionally charged topics such as fear, bullying, discrimination, immigration, etc. Teachers may adopt open communication to teach social-emotional skills required for students to deal with situations depicted in their readings or vignettes. Explicit teaching is necessary for ELs to recognize emotion (Cho, et al., 2019), learn to develop an accurate self-perception, and deal with emotions. Students should be given opportunities to self-reflect, provide peer feedback, and be coached via non-judgmental feedback to increase their social-awareness skills such as empathy (Dresser, 2012). Although focused on reading and literacy skills, Dresser's article provides several strategies to reduce ELs' anxiety and to improve their self-esteem, self-management skills, and the ability to set goals. These strategies foster reflection and feedback, which may help with students' social-emotional competency, literacy, and academic achievement (Dresser, 2012).

Low self-esteem ELs might also be doubtful of their ability to meet the expectations. Ardasheva et al. (2018) looked at the relationship between anxiety and self-efficacy on one side and on EL status and learning on the other side. "Self-efficacy is defined as people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives" (Bandura, 1994, p. 1), which manifests through several processes such as cognitive or affective processes. In this study, conducted with 252 participants in eighth grade, about a third of the participants were ELs (n= 78), approximately a sixth of the participants were non-ELs (n = 37), and almost a half of the participants were former ELs (n= 121). The findings of this study revealed that content anxiety (i.e., science anxiety) had a direct negative impact on content self-efficacy, meaning that students who were generally anxious about a specific academic content lost confidence in their ability to perform well in such academic content. In comparison, there was a positive relationship between the initial content knowledge, academic vocabulary knowledge, and content-self-efficacy, meaning that the level of content knowledge and academic vocabulary knowledge is directly proportional to ELs' content-self-efficacy.

Culturally and Linguistically Adapted SEL Framework

There is evidence that when SEL programs are designed with the ELs in mind, these programs' positive outcomes touch not only mainstream students, but ELs as well. SEL programs developed around cultural and linguistic considerations improve all students' social-emotional competence, academic skills and self-worth and decrease all student's anxiety. Providing language support is beneficial to the EL population as it develops their English proficiency, ability to understand the content, improve their social skills with their peers, and decrease overall anxiety (Dresser, 2012; Pappamihel, 2002). Creating a positive learning environment by adapting content both culturally and linguistically (Castro-Olivo, 2014, Cramer & Castro-Olivo, 2016), assigning content to learners based on their content knowledge (Ardasheva et al., 2018), as well as offering opportunities to develop emotional awareness, self-

management, and reflecting skills (Dresser, 2012) can reduce ELs' anxiety and fear of being mocked (Dresser, 2012; Pappamihel, 2002).

The table below depicts the framework of a potential SEL program that could be implemented in classrooms with an EL population. It follows the instructional scheme proposed by Cramer and Castro Olivo (2015); however, it contains eclectic elements synthesized from scholarly works and research. For instance, the framework presented in the table below (Table 1) designed upon five SEL competencies (CASEL, 2012) as seen in the first column, is divided into 12 lessons (Merrell, 2007) on various topics that may address one or more SEL competencies. Beside the SEL competencies, lessons sequencing and lessons' descriptions, the framework offers suggestions of cultural adaptations (Bernal et al., 1995) and linguistic adaptations (Nutta et al., 2018). The cultural adaptations encapsulate eight dimensions, including a language dimension, which refers to the language of intervention delivery. Ideally, diverse learners could choose between English as the language of delivery and their first language; however, in practice, this adaptation might not be available to the students. A convenient solution that addressed not only the language dimension contained within the cultural domain is suggested in the last column. The language support column drawing upon the work of Nutta et al. (2018) aims at giving the teacher appropriate tools to support ELs with language and content. Language tools such as graphic organizers, diagrams, animation (e.g., animated videos on a topic), teacher talk, leveled questions, and leveled text and/or modified text could be effectively employed during SEL instructions to address the needs of ELs. All in all, classroom practitioners, whether they are classroom teachers or English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) specialists, administrators, or support staff in schools and educational institutions working with EL students, may consider examining the culturally and linguistically adapted SEL framework here provided.

Table 1*Framework of a Potential SEL Program*

SEL competencies CASEL (2012)	Components of each lesson	Language support (Nutta et al., 2018)	Strong Teens Cultural adaptations on eight dimensions (Bernal et al., 1995)	Strong Teens Lessons (Merrell, 2007)	Lesson description (Merrell, 2007)
1.self-awareness	Presenting the objective for the lesson	Graphic organizer for SEL	Language: Use culturally appropriate language; students choose between English- and Spanish-delivered intervention	1. About Strong Teens: emotional strength training	Overview of the curriculum
2. self-management	Introducing new vocabulary and skills	Diagrams Animation (e.g., animated videos on a topic)	Persons: Identify and be sensitive to the cultural needs of the group	2. Understanding your feelings: part 1	Introduction to emotions, identify emotions as comfortable or uncomfortable (e.g., acculturation)
3.social awareness	Practical exercises	TPR	Metaphors: Explain the use of metaphors that may not be understood by other cultural groups; use cultural metaphors of the target group	3. Understanding your feelings: part 2	Discussion of appropriate and inappropriate ways of expressing emotions
4. relationship skills	Assigning homework	Teacher Talk Leveled questions Cooperative Discussions (e.g., Socrates circle)	Content: Encourage students to consider their own language, cultural values, customs, and traditions in application of SEL skills	4. Dealing with anger	Recognizing triggers to anger, practicing ways to change inappropriate responses (e.g., to discrimination)
5. responsible decision making		Leveled Text / Modified Text	Concepts: Introduce new concepts that relate to the target group(e.g., ethnic pride) Goals: Consider cultural values that relate to goals for home and school (e.g., cultural values, academic pursuit) Methods: Use cultural knowledge to better align intervention procedures to increase acceptability Context: Consider culture-specific life and family circumstances, such as immigration status and acculturation factors	5. Understanding other people's feelings	Identifying others' emotions by using clues
				6. Clear thinking: part 1	Recognizing negative thought patterns
				7. Clear thinking: part 2	Challenging negative thought patterns to think more positively
				8. The power of positive thinking	Promoting optimistic thinking
				9. Solving people problems	Conflict resolution strategies
				10. Letting go of stress	Stress reduction and relaxation exercises
				11. Behavior change: setting goals and staying active	Increasing time spent in enjoyable activities and meeting goals
				12. Finishing up!	Review of major concepts and selected activities in the curriculum

Adapted from the content of the article Effects of a Culturally Adapted Social-Emotional Learning Intervention Program on Students' Mental Health (Cramer & Castro-Olivo, 2016)

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