Social, Emotional, and Academic Development and Equity in Education

A good education is critical to ensuring success in college, career, and life. Education plays a vital role in young people developing a sense of identity, building independence and relationship skills that facilitate taking care of oneself and one's family, and exercising the rights and privileges of citizenship. Indeed, the greatness of public education lies in its mission to take all individuals and to enable the American Dream of opportunity and fairness. Our current system of public education, however, has not been able to meet this promise,[1] especially for students of color.

Over half of public school students are now students of color, and the share of students of color is expected to continue to grow in the coming decades.[2] Students of color and their families bring tremendous assets to their schools and communities[3] and increasing diversity in the classroom can create benefits for all students.[4] Despite these assets, low-income students and students of color are adversely affected in nearly every measure of well-being—educational, social, financial, emotional, and physical—which in turn, affects both their readiness to learn and their long-term life outcomes.[5] Many students face adversity outside of school that impedes their ability to learn in school. Too often, students of color also face adversity *inside* of school, including harsh disciplinary approaches and negative school environments that disconnect rather than connect them to school. While it will take a concerted, multi-sector approach to make meaningful improvements for all students, schools have an important role to play by providing environments that are safe and conducive to learning, and by helping students develop the skills, habits, and dispositions that support success in school and beyond.

Decades of research in human development, cognitive and behavioral neuroscience, and educational practice and policy, as well as other fields, have illuminated that social and emotional development is central to learning. But social and emotional development is not simply about the skills that students and adults in schools and in other settings possess and deploy. It is also about features of the educational setting itself, including the culture and climate. Social and emotional development comprises specific skills and competencies that students need in order to set goals, manage behavior, build relationships, and process and remember information. These skills and competencies develop in a complex system of contexts, interactions, and relationships, suggesting that organizations must take a systems approach to promoting social and emotional development—addressing adult skills and beliefs; organizational culture, climate, and norms; and routines and structures that guide basic interactions and instruction—and that such approaches are most effective when designed to match the needs and contexts of specific organizations and communities. [6]

This research and emerging brain science demonstrates that focusing on social, emotional, and academic development in school results in the following benefits for students and society:

o   Gains in student achievement, including test scores, on-time graduation and post-secondary enrollment and completion;[7]
o   Reduced delinquency and other challenging behaviors;[8]
o   Improved long-term outcomes in employment, health, and civic engagement;[9]
o   Reduced rates of depression, anxiety, and risky behaviors;[10]
o   Broad support from teachers and parents;[11] and
o   High demand among business leaders.[12]

The current approach to K-12 education fails to fully take advantage of what we know about how people learn, but an integrated approach to social, emotional, and academic development is becoming more widely accepted as a significant piece of that puzzle. To effectively take advantage of the known benefits of an integrated approach and the current momentum and interest, education leaders need to understand how to:

1. Effectively integrate social, emotional, and academic development strategies with other district- and state-level priorities to improve *educational outcomes for all students, particularly low-income students and student of color; and*

2. Implement social, emotional, and academic development practices and programs in a way that acknowledges and values students' lived experiences, and respects and sustains students' cultural identities.

Most educators and school system leaders have good intentions, but good intentions do not obviate the need to understand the role of race, racism, white privilege, and implicit bias in education. Implicit bias refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. The implicit associations we harbor in our subconscious cause us to have feelings and attitudes about other people based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, age, and appearance.[13] Such biases are a natural function of the brain's automatic processing of experience and the environment; educators and others should not be made to feel guilty for the existence of implicit bias, but they have a moral and professional responsibility to acknowledge it and address it. The goal of equity in education requires intentional effort to counteract implicit biases because of the ways in which these biases disadvantage students of color in American society.

Below are five big themes that have surfaced in previous conversations regarding the interplay of equity and social, emotional, and academic development, followed by list of challenges that need special attention.

- **Vision & Purpose** – The field lacks a compelling and positive vision of the purpose of public education to orient multiple actors toward a common goal. Many acknowledge that specific reforms have advanced too narrow a vision of success (i.e., test scores alone as the measures of college and career-readiness), but a comprehensive vision – and the measures to assess progress toward it – is not clearly articulated or commonly held. The purpose for integrating social, emotional, and academic development is vital to this broader definition of success; likewise, growing support for a more comprehensive definition of success is important to prioritizing the social, emotional, and academic development.

- **Fixing learning environments, not students** – In both narrative and strategy, work on social, emotional, and academic development needs to be re-framed toward improving environments for learning, and giving students opportunities to demonstrate and expand upon the competencies and assets they already have, rather than reinforcing stereotypes of students who are broken, "at risk", or need fixing. Similarly, we need to move from assessing just individual students toward also assessing learning environments.

- **Start with adults in the system** – Teachers need training and support to integrate social, emotional, and academic development, and they need to build cultural competency and self-awareness. Environment also matters for teachers; system leaders should think about how the current climate

in education breeds mistrust, stress, and unhealthy relationships among adults. This requires an intentional strategy and partnerships with teacher preparation.

- **Race and socio-economic class (SES) matter** – As leaders in education, all decisions should be made with equity in mind; it should not be separate from the work at-large. This means we have to tackle inequity at multiple levels: individual, institutional, and structural. It also is important not to conflate race and SES. Students of color are more likely to grow up in poverty, but the developmental needs of children in poverty are distinct from the developmental needs of children of color. Educators and policymakers need to recognize how privilege affects opportunity and how policy and practice contribute to sustaining inequitable outcomes (including through inaction).

- **Re-design has an important role** – To fully and successfully address purpose, learning environments, adults, and race, it is inadequate to merely introduce new concepts into a system that was designed to stratify students. We need to reimagine foundational systems. How are schools designed around engagement, connectedness, belonging, and empowerment? What supports do systems need to meet broader human needs, not just narrow academic goals?

As school systems and schools attempt to pursue more intentional approaches to social, emotional and academic development, there are some cases in which those efforts are misdirected, and/or have negative consequences, particularly for students of color, including:

- **Deficit orientation**: Some initiatives aimed at the social and emotional dimensions of learning may focus on "fixing" or "saving" kids (especially students of color) and thereby fail to recognize and capitalize on fostering their strengths and assets. Similarly, teachers – including teachers of color – are often indoctrinated into a system that teaches them to see students' and families' deficits and fix them.

- **Ignoring root causes**: Programs that focus inordinately on self-management skills – such as anger management and impulse control – and characteristics – like grit and resilience may ignore the existence of real trauma in students' lives as well as ignore or discount their lived experiences with racism and white privilege. Students need supports that also address trauma and injustice directly.

- **Overlooking the impact of environments**: Schools must be safe, welcoming, and supportive spaces for students to learn and for them to feel a sense of belonging and the freedom to develop their own identity and sense of self. Building healthy school culture and climate is critical,[14] as is designing and utilizing space in a way that welcomes families and community members and celebrates students, such as integrating artwork, different approaches to color and light, and recognition of students' achievements.

- **Privileging Dominant Culture**: Some approaches to social, emotional, and academic development may teach behaviors that force students to conform to someone else's expectations of how they should act, and those expectations are typically associated with the dominant (white, middle-class) culture, not taking into consideration students' own cultures.

- **Inordinate focus on discipline:** In some schools and systems, the initiatives are merely discipline reform. Indeed, a focus on improving discipline practices is important, as early suspensions have a long-term damaging effect, especially for males of color, who are pushed into the school-to-prison pipeline.[15] At the same time, a system's disproportionate focus on boys and aggression may ignore girls, who may be more likely to be compliant, but may not be receiving the social, emotional, and academic support they need. Racial disparities in discipline also extend to girls, with Black girls

being referred for disciplinary actions at higher rates than their White peers.[16] A comprehensive social, emotional, and academic development focus should be broader than discipline reform.

- **Developmentally inappropriate**: Some practices may ignore the range of children's developmental stages in favor of a one-size-fits-all approach. Proper implementation requires tailoring strategies to the specific context. Adolescents, for instance, experience both physical changes and psychological changes. This change in psychological development requires more focus on building identity, developing autonomy and expanding beliefs.[17] A keen eye on these areas is especially important among boys, for whom developmental differences can be reflected in limited language, aggressive behavior, and hyper-activity.[18]

- **Lack of resources, poor training**: Good implementation requires resources – people (e.g., curriculum specialists, counselors, and social workers), time, and money. Low-income students and students of color tend to be in the most under- resourced schools, with the least-prepared teachers.[19] Further, where there is inadequate training on social, emotional, and academic development, teachers and schools are more likely to implement it poorly, including treating it as an add-on program and failing to comprehensively integrate it with academics.

- **Lack of understanding of benefits**: Some educators and parents may see social and emotional development as secondary to academics, considering it to be outside of what schools should teach. Some systems may not allocate appropriate training or may not encourage the full integration of social and emotional development with other initiatives, most notably academics. Often, schools with struggling students will focus on providing remedial academic instruction; extra math, extra reading, and extra test- prep, rather than important enrichment opportunities, including explicit instruction in social and emotional development, music, art, and physical education.[20]

- **Adult social-emotional health**: There is a challenge with teachers' own social-emotional health, especially in the most disadvantaged schools and those in the poorest neighborhoods; educators working in these contexts can experience secondary traumatic stress from supporting students in crisis.[21] Teachers and administrators must be emotionally and physically healthy themselves in order to help students develop healthy social and emotional competencies.[22]

It is clear that building positive social, emotional, and academic development is highly valuable for the success and well-being of individuals, schools, and society at large. Importantly, this work has the potential to influence outcomes for everyone, driving change towards a more equitable society overall. Equity and an integrated approach to social, emotional, and academic development: both are currently receiving much-needed attention and resources. Neither can fully succeed with recognizing strengths and addressing gaps in these complimentary priorities. Rather than being pursued as two separate bodies of work, we need to identify ways in which equity and social, emotional and academic development can be mutually reinforcing.

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