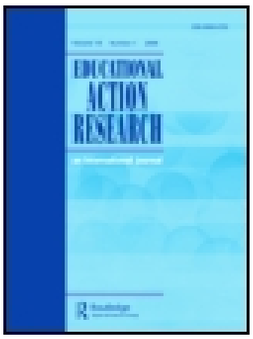

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ARTICLE

"It's because of community meeting:" toward a responsive reconceptualization of social emotional learning

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ABSTRACT

Exclusionary discipline disproportionally impacts low-income, students of Color. Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) offers a promising framework for reducing the use of suspensions in school. Prominent SEL literature and praxis, however, seem to assume a colorblind stance that neglects to respond to the sociocultural and political realities low-income students of Color experience. This action research inquiry evaluates the impact of an SEL program implemented in the third grade of a low-income, urban school serving children of Color. Students and teachers co-created a program grounded in critical and culturally relevant pedagogies, Black ethic of care, Freirean radical love, and restorative justice practices. This inquiry offers policy implications that might enable educators to further expand the development and enactment of similar responsive SEL programs.

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Introduction

Jermaine decided he needed a weapon. As his peers completed projects, and the substitute facilitated small-group instruction, Jermaine hid behind cubbies, disassembled scissors and threw half the pair across the room.[1] The substitute, unsure of the culprit, admonished the entire class for the distraction while Jermaine concealed the remaining half under his sleeve. Elijah withdrew from his group in the center of the carpet and continued working independently, his back firmly against the wall. Noticing his departure, the substitute approached Elijah, requesting he return to his team.

'No, ma'am;' Elijah replied, 'I'm not leaving the wall.' Puzzled, the substitute probed further. Elijah revealed, 'Jermaine's mad at me. I don't want him to stab me in my back.'

Exchanges like these characterized second grade for this class attending an inner-city elementary school. As early as kindergarten, children here exemplified E. Anderson's (1994) 'code of the street.' They cautiously negotiated social interactions, often resolving disputes violently, to maintain safety and status within their communities. Even students' families whose values contradicted them grudgingly recognized street ethics' utility, ensuring children quickly internalized the significance of reputations for emphatically finishing conflicts.

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Supplemental data for this article can be accessed here.

Street codes render non-culturally responsive consequences like exclusionary discipline (ED) impotent: students prioritize peer respect over institutional punishment and suspension can strengthen status. Part of Jermaine's reputational armor relied on adults responding, often with ED. Peers identified suspensions as evidence of Jermaine's commitment to his image. ED also returns youth to code-dominated environments, compounding their influence. Yet commonly-implemented Zero Tolerance policies mandate ED with little regard to their school's sociocultural context; their efficacy in curtailing aggressive student behavior or identifying its underlying cause(s) (Gladden 2002); or their negative, disparate effects on the educational attainment and life outcomes of low-income, children of Color (Gopalan and Nelson 2019; Gregory and Fergus 2017; Milner 2013).

From kindergarten, Jermaine and Elijah's school routinely suspended students in their cohort. As this class concluded second grade, my principal challenged me, a third-grade teacher, to identify methods that could diminish their misconduct next year.

Thus began my year-long Educational Action Research (EAR) inquiry (Carr and Kemmis 1986; Kemmis and McTaggart 1988) to co-design with children a responsive Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) program that examined complex issues underlying students' behaviors and reduced our school's ED rate.

Critical sel literature review

SEL researchers (Durlak et al. 2011; Greenberg et al. 2017; Jennings and Greenberg 2009; Jones and Doolittle 2017; Kress et al. 2004; Norris 2003; Osher et al. 2010) suggest specific techniques to cultivate students' social-emotional competencies, potentially decreasing ED use. Educators might employ these tools – morning meetings, role-playing, literary analysis, etc. – within discrete SEL modules, or weave processes providing students opportunities to develop and practice social-emotional competencies into the curriculum. Kress et al. (2004) assert 'a close reading of state standards often reveals social and emotional skills embedded within academically targeted standards' and thus consider the relationship between SEL and academic instruction a 'synergy' (70). These authors note public education's increasingly standardized nature and offer practical solutions to promote SEL within a system more readily prioritizing academic content. Therefore, to align with the standardization movement's principles, Kress et al. (2004) envision a highly structured, frequently assessed, standards-based curricular SEL approach.

For critical educators serving communities of Color and low socioeconomic status who recognize potential bias within SEL programs' construction and implementation, such practice provokes significant questions. While we critique state-sanctioned academic curricula for reflecting Eurocentric epistemologies (Delpit 2006; Ladson-Billings 1995b), we might similarly interrogate the SEL curricula Kress et al. (2004) propose. Who would write and assess such curricula? Whose standards would these programs and assessments reflect? Would the curricula reproduce hegemonic value systems, 'presum[ing] a single model of emotional competency valid across all cultural contexts' (Hoffman 2009, 538), or would they consider culturally specific demonstrations of social engagement and emotional expression? How would such programs treat legacies of cultural power and oppression or manifestations of sociocultural/political reality within students' social-emotional selves?

Hoffman's (2009) analysis echoes these concerns, exploring implications of various SEL literature and praxis. She posits that the tactics some current SEL researchers recommend 'reflect the cultural preferences of the American White middle-class' (541); behavior contracts, strict emotional regulation, copious rule sets, emphasis on sharing personal feelings, and private mediation focus more on the individual's emotional development in relation to her/himself. Contrastingly, cultures adhering to non-western values might position students' emotional development in relation to the community's wellbeing. Mediation would occur publicly since conflict affects all members. Personal feelings might not need exploration if their examination detracts from the whole group's advancement. Activities would prioritize empathy-building over rule-following; for example, children might consider abused school supplies' feelings, not memorize all materials' proper uses (545). Responsive SEL programs serving low-income Black and Brown communities would honor students' existing values, resisting outsiders' impositions.

Yeager (2017) compares a non-responsive SEL program to a culturally affirming initiative. The Quantum Opportunity Program (QOP), which presented a set of behaviors for low-income, young men of Color to emulate, actually observed an increase of participant adjudication ten years after students completed it. The Becoming A Man (BAM) initiative, however, yielded remarkable results. Participants' arrests decreased by 28%-35%, and longitudinal analyses revealed violent crime declining 45%-50% and high school graduation rising 12%-19% in the community. Where QOP insisted participants adopt its framework, BAM considered the complex sociocultural/political realities its students navigate:

> BAM doesn't ask young men to suppress their desire to fight or retaliate when they are disrespected on the street. BAM doesn't tell young people what they have to do, or what's right or wrong; it even acknowledges that sometimes it is important to retaliate to protect one's reputation. But the program helps young men find other ways to save face and maintain their status when confronted with a threat. It gives them a new mindset for interpreting threats, and it helps them develop different ways to be masculine, such as focusing on integrity and personal accountability. BAM features open-ended, student-led discussions with mentors from the neighborhood, along with a series of activities that build relationships and a sense of community with others in a small group. (77–78)

Understanding its students' code (E. Anderson 1994), BAM met participants in their social locations and affirmed their community values. Still, BAM provided youth with access to a 'culture of power' where the code does not apply (Delpit 2006).

Such SEL actively engages with marginalized communities' experiences and explores social inequalities shaping students' daily interactions. Kress et al. (2004) and similar researchers' (Durlak, et al., 20ll; Greenberg et al. 2017; Jennings and Greenberg 2009; Jones and Doolittle 2017; Norris 2003; Osher et al. 2010) methods, however, assume an opposite stance. Identity-neutral frameworks ignore cultural complexities and oppressive power dynamics functioning in students' lives. Consequently, 'colorblind' SEL approaches often adopt a 'white cultural frame of reference' when interpreting student behavior, 'prevent[ing] any exploration of other expressions of SEL that are tied to race … based marginalization' (Gregory and Fergus 2017, 128). Gillies (2011) located a similar theme when examining a Social Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) program:

> Curriculum resources supporting the SEAL initiative appear to assume a white, privileged standpoint, in which 'difficult feelings' rarely involve anything more testing than rowing with friends or feeling left out. There is no pedagogically acceptable language for voicing the fear, violence, hardship and racism that shaped the lives of the pupils in our research. (193–194)

Additionally, Brantlinger (1999) found school personnel more likely to identify the misbehavior of low-income students as 'personal pathology' (45) rather than valid responses to social inequality. These studies (Brantlinger 1991; Gillies 2011; Gregory and Fergus 2017) demonstrate how 'colorblind' SEL approaches stigmatize Black and Brown students of low socioeconomic status as behaviorally-deficient and prescribe remedies (Hoffman 2009) that reinforce white supremacy by situating success as conditional, attained only when students depart from their non-white cultural values. Conversely, SEL praxis that lovingly affirms children's ways of being while still facilitating their access (Yeager 2017) to the 'culture of power' (Delpit 2006), and co-creates spaces with youth to confront social inequalities affecting them (Freire 1968; Ladson-Billings 1995a,b) might lead to more substantively empowering outcomes for children and their communities.

Theoretical framework

Critical pedagogy (CP) – the foundation

Several theories undergird such a program's development at Jermaine and Elijah's school. Freire (1968) and critical educators he influenced (Duncan-Andrade and Morell 2008) establish frameworks for culture circles, codification, and conscientization. Essentially, these practitioners illuminate processes for discussing, interpreting, representing, and solving relevant social problems in ways that encourage communal respect and cooperation. Taines (2012) suggests these practices offer restorative paths for disaffected students demonstrating aggressive behavior:

> "to engage in school activism, such students need assistance deploying accepted school discourses and reconstructing relationships with teachers and administrators. Identifying students with these needs, customizing training, and offering steady support may foster political self-efficacy and more advantageous responses to school" (82).

Therefore, CP offers a promising foundation for SEL, inspiring children's collaboration to address urgent needs related to their communities' and their own liberation.

Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) – stepping further

Similar to CP in its dedication to developing youths' consciousnesses, CRP also galvanizes students to challenge dominant power structures (Ladson-Billings 1995b). Yet, this 'pedagogy of opposition,' is 'committed to collective, not merely individual empowerment' (160) and attends more specifically to how race shapes learners' shared sociopolitical experiences, promoting students' joint resistance to racialized oppression and encouraging expansion/preservation of children's cultural competence.

Ladson-Billings' (1995b) emphasis on communal liberation enables CRP to effectively frame SEL. Students can exercise prosocial skills while building strong coalitions to disrupt oppressive social stratifications. As a byproduct, collaborative, socio-emotionally and

culturally affirmed students might more likely experience the scholastic achievement that remains a central tenet of CRP.

Additionally, culturally relevant SEL would honor students' communal and racial identities, fostering cultural competence and decreasing ostracization and its negative impact (Delpit 2006; Ladson-Billings 1995a,b) on emotional health. This validation could benefit students' social-emotional wellbeing, yielding behavioral success measured through students' cultural perspectives. Employing a culturally relevant lens to evaluate students' social-emotional progress could more effectively synchronize community and school culture (Ladson-Billings 1995a,b), providing a path for the former to shape the latter, and quell the reproduction of destructive hegemonic value systems.

Black ethic of care (BEC), radical love – strengths-based approach

Students' cultural traditions and personal attributes comprise their many strengths. SEL spaces where students identify their own and peers' constructive qualities counteract 'deficit discourses which label, pathologize, blame, and over-emphasize youth vulnerabilities' (Gardner and Toope 2011, 88); resist stigmatizing and 'correcting' students' behavior (Gregory and Fergus 2017; Hoffman 2009); and build violence-diminishing interpersonal bonds.

BEC embodies rich communal practices and strengths (Knight-Diop 2010; Ladson-Billings 1995a) from which culturally relevant SEL might draw.[2] Knight-Diop (2010) describes BEC as 'collective efforts for survival of the race; high academic, personal, and social expectations; and political clarity' (159). Essentially, educators committed to Black children's achievement enact caring relationships with students through which they facilitate youths' success. Ladson-Billings (1995a) similarly defines this ethic as 'concern for the implications [educators'] work had on their students' lives, the welfare of the community, and unjust social arrangements' (474). Both authors identify that care might not appear effusive to cultural outsiders, assuming instead no-nonsense, 'tough love' approaches to 'get students to choose … excellence' (Ladson-Billings 1995b, 160) for themselves. Thus, to align with familiar cultural traditions, SEL programs must reflect care as its participants might understand it: honesty intended to promote growth, demarcation of roles and responsibilities within the community, and expectation of distinction over desire to 'make [students] feel good' (Ladson-Billings 1995b, 160). This dynamic, for many learners, signifies love. According to Freire (1968):

> Dialogue cannot exist … in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people …. Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself …. Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others …. As an act of bravery, love cannot be sentimental; as an act of freedom, it must not serve as a pretext for manipulation. It must generate other acts of freedom; otherwise, it is not love. (70–71)

Thus, foryouth to achieve success and employ it to deconstruct oppression, they must experience substantive love in their classrooms, and specifically, within their SEL program. Students must construct this love with each other, lest 'caring and community become lessons taught by teachers to children rather than deeply felt shared emotions embedded in the human relationships of the classroom' (Hoffman 2009, 546). The more actively students create this ethic, the deeper their interpersonal connections grow and the more

proficiently they draw from their own strengths to define their own safe spaces where they might consider switching out of street code (E. Anderson 1994).

Restorative justice (RJ) as pedagogy

RJ – a practical, organic response to misconduct – emphasizes reconciliation over punishment, creating self-reinforcing environments of care and love. Adopting a communal perspective, RJ invites transgressors, targets, and witnesses to discuss wrongdoings' contexts and consequences before cooperatively negotiating appropriate resolutions. Ethics of care and love must fundamentally shape such processes for them to productively function and inspire participants' trust and unfettered contribution, especially within sociocultural settings where vulnerability implies weakness (E. Anderson 1994). According to Braithwaite (2001), 'For [RJ] to change lives … it would have to break out of formal bureaucratic mould to become a ritual of caring … love is central to understanding what makes [RJ] succeed' (244). Hantzopoulos (2013) illustrates how an urban school intentionally designed to serve 'at-risk' students and committed to democratic ideals engendered fruitful RJ through establishing

> a safe and supportive mechanism by which one member of the community can confront another with his or her actions, and explain how they have affected others .... to … mend the community in the wake of actions inconsistent with its values, as well as discern ways to reintegrate the community member who violated school values back into the fabric and culture of the school. (8)

The practices Hantzopoulos (2013) describes 'reinforced a caring community' (9) that effectively supported student achievement within and beyond school, therefore providing valuable implications for implementing RJ pedagogically to buttress SEL. Students participating in a culturally relevant version of RJ enact BEC as they discuss each other's behavior frankly to activate peers' growth and excellence (Knight-Diop 2010; Ladson-Billings 1995a). Their dialogue, rooted in love (Braithwaite 2001; Freire 1968), occurs publicly to reinforce how their actions affect the group (C. Anderson 2004; Hoffman 2009) and advances students' collective consciousness-raising as they examine their behavior's sociocultural/political underpinnings and reunite with a community that values conscientization (Hantzopoulos 2013). RJ as a pedagogical tool reduces suspensions (C. Anderson 2004; Gopalan and Nelson 2019) and 'move[s] beyond discipline …, nurtur[ing] important relational bonds' (Hantzopoulos 2013, 9) as it humanizes and encourages solidarity between its participants that they can employ to jointly subvert the status quo (Ladson-Billings 1995a,b).

The EAR study

Demographic context

The 2018–2019 third-grade's racial demographics closely reflected our entire school's. 80% of the 65 participants identified as Black; 20% as Latino. Black students comprised 85% of the school's total population; Latino students 15%. Our children qualify for Free and Reduced Meals; we receive Title I funding.

Problem statement

Prior to the 2018–2019 academic year, our school suspended children at a rate the state deemed elevated. 102 and 91 suspensions in 2016–2017 and 2017–2018, respectively, substantiated the state's mandate to reduce ED. Yet, the district retained standard consequence systems. Administration, therefore, hoped to see fewer discipline referrals requiring suspensions.

Educators swiftly mobilized to implement Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) (PBIS 2019). While desire to capture teachers' attention and join children earning praise and rewards motivated some students, others, whom E. Anderson's (1994) 'code' governed, remained undeterred. E. Anderson (1994) documents this tension in the community between members who espouse prosocial values, and those who do not. Children belonging to this latter group composed my third-grade class more than any other grade level. For them, the rewards of peer respect superseded the institution's. This group's aggressive behaviors disturbed two smaller factions present in the classroom: adherents to school expectations until provoked and a few perpetual rule-abiders, whom others mostly ignored, because, as one child explained, they 'just minded their business' and 'didn't bother no one.'

As members of the first group negotiated respect, they often employed verbal and physical aggression toward peers and educators. These interactions incited Group 2's boisterous exasperation, along with their consequent retaliation when the first group's members inevitably responded to perceived infringements upon 'their business.' Children in Group 3 internalized these incidents and, when adults inquired, reservedly expressed frustration with the disruptions of their learning environment.

These dynamics contributed to a problem of practice (Carr and Kemmis 1986; Kemmis and McTaggart 1988). All three aforementioned groups interacted daily in my classroom. This confluence of behaviors required a SEL framework that served all children's unique and complex social-emotional needs, enabled learners to productively and peacefully navigate exchanges, and fostered universal inclusion and validation. Yet, PBIS (2019) only occasionally responded to some students' needs. The program compensated those inclined toward consistent prosocial behavior. It inhibited from earning rewards, however, students whose sociocultural realities demanded a different mode of social interaction (E. Anderson 1994). Many of those children rationalized their exclusion from incentives; one young man explained, 'I'm not mad. I did what I had to because he put his hands on me. My mother said don't let nobody put their hands on you.' Some developed callous attitudes toward PBIS(2019)and othered themselves, expressing defeatist sentiments like, 'that's for the good kids; I'm never going to get it.' PBIS (2019)failed to positively influence excluded children's behavior, who dismissed the program as not for them. Moreover, PBIS (2019)perhaps damaged their self-concept and delayed their prosocial behavior's development as they solidified peripheral status, a position with dangerous consequences.

Like other interventions (Durlak, et al., 20ll; Greenberg et al. 2017; Jennings and Greenberg 2009; Jones and Doolittle 2017; Kress et al. 2004; Norris 2003; Osher et al. 2010), PBIS(2019)assumes a superficial, 'colorblind' stance toward SEL (Gregory and Fergus 2017). Instead of seeking to understand student behavior's sociocultural/political underpinnings, and supporting learners as they develop code-switching proficiency to

access (Yeager 2017)and ultimately challenge(Freire 1968; Ladson-Billings 1995a,b) the 'culture of power' (Delpit 2006), the framework privileges children who can operate according to a collection of behavioral standards and ignores those who cannot until they assimilate within the desired structure (PBIS 2019). These benchmarks often reflect hegemonic values (Hoffman 2009), and therefore further marginalize students who live outside their parameters. These children become the 'behaviorally deficient' needing rectification (Gregory and Fergus 2017; Hoffman 2009), the ones for whom incentives 'aren't' because they prioritize continued safety and status within their immediate cultural context over ephemeral rewards. Disregarding this reality, or insisting students abandon it without allowing them to critically analyze its origins and create acceptable alternative modes of engagement (Yeager 2017), only reinforces inequity as children grappling with street dynamics (E. Anderson 1994)fall further behind their classmates who are not.

Inquiry

This problem of practice led me to adopt a critical EAR perspective (Carr and Kemmis 1986), examining whether critical/culturally relevant SEL grounded in BEC and radical love and incorporating RJ praxis could reduce third-grade ED and advance care and love as forces driving social interaction and activism.

Methodology

Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) 'action research spiral' involving several recursive stages – planning, acting/observing, and reflecting to revise/reimplement plans – framed our approach. Since EAR should genuinely serve participants, not solely practitioners and institutions, students' perspectives informed our process (Kinsler 2010). Children defined the problem in their own words and their insights shaped our intervention. We examined our progress a month later, and adjusted our plan according to student input. Circumstances soon dictated enhancing our action again to address participants' evolving needs. Learners authored these revisions, which responded directly to their concerns and interests. Essentially, three student-led, reflection-driven EAR cycles emerged during our study.

Cycle one

Solidarity-building

On the first day of school, I asked the class what excited and worried them most about third grade. Kenisha divulged,

'We fought too much last year; I'm worried we'll do it again.' Classmates agreed, describing the problem our inquiry sought to explore: 'second grade was crazy;' 'people did too much.' I prompted students to consider what might change this year's course.

'Maybe if we were better friends,' Kandace offered, 'Like, if we knew each other more.' Thus, we planned our initial intervention: connecting our experiences to form stronger relationships.

My students and I agreed to begin each of my three departmentalized classes everyday with thirty-minute 'Community Meeting' – named to reinforce our positions as relational

and communal, emphasizing belonging and responsibility for the group's wellbeing (Hoffman 2009). During this time, students answered imaginative questions designed to cull relatable information about their peers and nurture active listening and inquiry skills. For example, Jermaine shared that he would become a gorilla if able to transform into any animal because gorillas are 'strong, brave and fearless.' To build solidarity, I asked students if anyone else considered becoming, or, after hearing Jermaine's rationale, would now become a gorilla. Several children affirmed. We then contemplated what Jermaine's choice and explanation revealed about him as a person. Why did these 'gorilla traits' matter to Jermaine?

'Maybe he wants to be strong so everyone respects him!' Nico postulated.

Kandace offered, 'it could matter to him to be brave so he won't ever have to be afraid of anything again.' I asked Jermaine to confirm. Being physically diminutive, he disclosed,

'A lot of people like to try me because of my size. If I were a gorilla, no one would try me. People would just leave me alone.' We thanked Jermaine for sharing, urging him to continue.

'Sometimes they be shooting outside my house, and if I was a gorilla it wouldn't bother me.' Several children immediately related to Jermaine, prompting us to discuss our encounters with and strategies for managing disrespect and violence. Kandace connected with Jermaine when she described witnessing gunfire.

'It was so scary, Jermaine,' she expressed, 'My mother and uncle got me out of there fast! So, I understand what you're going through. Being scared doesn't make you a punk. You don't have to become a gorilla.' Discussing shared experiences strengthened our relationships and evolved our solidarity to something meaningful and deeply felt (C. Anderson 2004; Hoffman 2009).

Cycle two

Critical RJ – a different language for conflict resolution

After a month, students and I reflected on our initial intervention.

'We're cool but people keep getting in each other face,' Izzy elucidated. Though students' strengthened friendships withstood violent conflict, children still lacked tools to avoid interactions resulting in ED. Many male students resolved disputes violently, and several female students eventually fought if sufficiently provoked. Students proposed that we structure our thirty-minute meetings to retain solidarity-building but add 'Beef-Squashing,' or Community Meetings' version of critical RJ.

Resembling the community-building RJ process, 'Fairness Committee,' Hantzopoulos (2013) describes, 'Beef-Squashing' employed RJ practices to promote conscientization (Freire 1968). It encouraged students to appreciate the sociocultural/political sources underlying peer behavior, leading children to enact communal accountability and restore order (Braithwaite 2001) by confronting issues affecting them and consequently humanizing transgressions (C. Anderson 2004). Through this dialogue and reflection (Freire 1968), students negotiated alternative problem-solving methods more compatible with educational environments (Yeager 2017).

For example, two young ladies vigorously disputed the correct way to complete a project, disrupting classmates' learning. As we addressed the conflict during Community Meeting, Kenisha discussed her state when she offended Kandace.

'I'm sorry I said that. I didn't eat breakfast this morning. My mother didn't get food stamps.' Kenisha revealed her upsetting behavior's origin; and also provided an opportunity for us to build, explore, and codify a generative theme (Freire 1968) as we examined poverty's institutional causes. Ultimately, students problem-solved: both as means of interpersonal conflict resolution (Braithwaite 2001) and collective consciousness-raising (Ladson-Billings 1995a,b).

'I know you might've been hungry,' Kandace responded, 'but you still didn't need to fuss at me like that. It was disrespectful. Next time, tell me you're hungry; I'll give you my apple.'

Kandace preserved her status and constructively asserted her personal boundaries as she publicly held Kenisha accountable. Yet, their solution served Kenisha's physical and emotional needs, enabling her to feel 'in receipt of … love' (Braithwaite 2001, 244), and negotiate repairing the relationship. Both ladies also apologized to their peers for the disruption, who extended forgiveness but expected them to limit future commotion. Essentially, our community 'uncovered all the various truths of the situation' as we voiced and explored multiple perspectives, reestablishing a positive social climate (Hantzopoulos 2013, 8).

Other students eventually applied this paradigm to their own interactions. Izzy asked Andreas,

'Why're you fussing at me? You don't need to talk to me like that. Did you eat breakfast this morning? Here, I saved you some crackers because I know you like snacks. We got to do work.' Izzy 'humanize[d] the context of the offense' (C. Anderson 2004, 1204), holding Andreas accountable, as he courteously, yet candidly, confronted and lovingly solved Andreas' problem so they could succeed academically together (Knight-Diop 2010; Ladson-Billings 1995a).

These exchanges taught us to begin each Community Meeting inquiring, 'What do we need to know about you right now to help you succeed today?' One morning, Zeniah divulged feeling 'sad because [her] father is in jail.' We discussed mass incarceration's personal impact; every student present endured loved ones' imprisonment.

Positioning students as educators, I probed, 'What do you do with your feelings?' Kenisha advised,

'When my uncle was locked up, they took him far away so I couldn't really visit him like that, and it made me sad. But I drew him lots of pictures and wrote him stories. Then, I gave it all to him when he came home, and it made him really happy.' Kenisha's idea pleased Zeniah who also requested patience if she seemed 'out of it' or 'snappy,' promising that she would 'try hard' to 'not let her feelings get the better of' her throughout the day.

Appreciating that their individual actions affected our community's wellbeing, students often requested empathy and tolerance in exchange for personal commitments to overcome stressful events and 'have a great day.' Such vulnerability produced a different language for conflict resolution. This language promoted conscientization (Freire 1968) that inspired empathy even as children commanded their peers' accountability (C. Anderson 2004; Braithwaite 2001; Hantzopoulos 2013), excellence (Knight-Diop 2010; Ladson-Billings 1995a), and respect (E. Anderson 1994; Yeager 2017).

Communal accountability – demanding success

Cycle Two also involved students demonstrating care for and thus demanding success from each other (Knight-Diop 2010; Ladson-Billings 1995a) through our system of

communal accountability. Every Monday, learners drew from the previous week's 'Beef-Squashing' sessions to self-determine weekly objectives, ensuring representation of children's own values in our prosocial behavioral matrix (Hoffman 2009). During Friday's Community Meeting, students openly discussed their progress. Sometimes, children proudly asserted achieving goals like self-regulating in the midst of conflict. We 'shouted-out' these members, celebrating their accomplishments. Other times, students admitted shortcomings like cursing at teachers or peers. Instead of ignoring and excluding children who missed their marks, we engaged in alternative discourses actually promoting students' growth. We discussed events inhibiting learners' success, restored justice as necessary, and offered solutions for retrying. Practicing their different language for conflict resolution and accountability, children advised and encouraged each other, emphasizing that peers would 'get it right next time.'

When students falsely professed victory, candid contingents corrected them. 'You tried it! You know you raised your voice at Mr. Ramos!' or 'Nah, you ain't listen the first time Ms. Williams told you sit down, don't try to lie now! You're going to make us not trust you!' Threats of suspicion prompted children to amend dubious statements, indicating they valued community and aspired toward sincere contribution.

'Try harder next week,' peers encouraged, 'remember what actually happened.' Learners here enacted BEC as they rigorously committed to each other's achievement (Knight-Diop 2010; Ladson-Billings 1995a). Though this care might not appear 'demonstrative and affectionate,' (Ladson-Billings 1995a, 474), students demanded their peers' success and integrity because they viewed it as necessary for our community's continued fitness and ensuing collective ability to challenge social issues affecting it (Ladson-Billings 1995a,b).

Cycle three

Activism – affirming strengths, deepening relationships

Circumstances soon arose compelling our plan's third revision and transforming students' conscientization (Freire 1968) into acts of communal liberation (Ladson-Billings 1995b). In one meeting, Kandace appeared particularly distraught. Employing our existing format, she expressed anxiety and requested our patience. The recent government shutdown furloughed her mother's security guard position in a federal building and sustenance in Kandace's house gradually declined. Kandace worried that if the shutdown continued, the family's federally subsidized food stamps would also disappear. Many classmates shared Kandace's circumstances, sparking Kenisha's outrage.

'This is just not right!' Kenisha exclaimed, 'We need to do something! Can our community work together to protest? We need to tell the president to stop playing with people's lives and reopen the government!' Kenisha elucidated her vision for a coordinated effort to enlighten politicians about their disagreement's reverberating consequences.

'And after we march to the White House,' she persisted, 'we'll write letters to the President and Congress to show them what they're doing!' (Appendix A).

'If you want to write letters,' I responded, 'we'll revise them together, and I'll mail them.' We reviewed our intervention's current structure, and enthusiastically decided to devote two/three sessions per week to activism, initiating a written campaign to reopen the government.

Students leaned on each other to craft and perfect their letters, professing their peers' strengths and thereby forming deeper bonds. When Layla struggled phonetically, Sammy suggested she seek Jose's help because Jose 'was really good at spelling.' Even Kenisha, Jermaine's sworn rival until this cause united them, acknowledged his artistic prowess and solicited his skill in sketching illustrations to accompany her letter. He consented, and the two steadily, albeit bumpily, surmounted their differences.

This resolution facilitated Jermaine's acceptance. More prone to aggressive confrontation than his classmates, Jermaine established his reputation as someone to leave alone. However, as relationships flourished, he demonstrated desire for inclusion. Often, his attempts to forge connections with peers provoked conflict as his classmates noticeably hesitated to collaborate with him. They recognized a likelihood of violent interaction and avoided engagement until absolutely necessary. Yet, Kenisha, whose passion for justice galvanized her, noticed Jermaine's strengths and prioritized them above his behavior. Her commitment to this political cause enabled her to form a closer relationship with a previously ostracized student (Gardner and Toope, 20ll; Taines 2012). Engaging Jermaine's artistic talent contributed to our community's function. It sustained his newfound desire for inclusion by exhibiting his willingness to cooperate, ultimately limiting conflicts as his peers eventually accepted him. Fewer disruptions and an enhanced skill base from which to draw further advanced the group's social justice (SJ) work.

Critical literacy – connecting to the struggle and each other

As students completed their project, we examined theories and praxes of other nonviolent activists of Color that children applied to this and future work. We studied key Civil Rights and United Farmworkers figures like John Lewis, Fannie Lou Hamer, Dolores Huerta, and Cesar Chavez. We invited elder community members to speak with us about their experiences during these movements (Ladson-Billings 1995b). We also practiced critical literacy as we explored texts and documentaries about the young activists propelling the Children's March; voting rights demonstrations in Selma; Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's and Freedom Riders' desegregation efforts; Delano Grape Strike and Boycott; and decolonization endeavors worldwide. Ensuing discourse provided a lens through which students interpreted their own sociopolitical realities and connected to different communities'. They compared gentrification forcing families out of their neighborhoods, for example, to colonization, regarding recent protests as peaceful anticolonization actions. Additionally, upon discovering the condition of their own city's pipes, children created water filters for, and organized campaigns in solidarity with, low-income Flint, Michigan residents and the indigenous people of Standing Rock who also suffered from water crises.

Connecting their work to that of said historical figures and movements ignited students' senses of purpose and passion. They named themselves 'activists,' signaling that they viewed themselves as belonging to a larger SJ tradition, which encouraged prosocial behavior. For instance, Damian requested a few minutes to 'calm down' when a peer's bump agitated him so he could 'meditate like Cesar Chavez before a strike.'

Resembling Hantzopoulos' (2013) students who regulated peers and themselves because they firmly committed to, and considered transgressions undermining, their school's democratic core, children here also deemed interpersonal conflicts as distractions from larger missions. They settled disputes more efficaciously because they believed

strongly in their work and identified peaceful collaboration as the only path toward *collective* empowerment (Ladson-Billings 1995b, 160). SEL can therefore extend beyond imparting basic communication and resolution skills to promoting more meaningful coalition-building spanning across generation and culture (Hoffman 2009).

Results and discussion

Our program evolved organically through three cycles of planning, action/observation, and reflection (Carr and Kemmis 1986; Kemmis and McTaggart 1988). Each phase influenced the next: solidarity-building supported systems of communal accountability which generated the social awareness that drove collective youth activism. This progression yielded significant results. Overall, violent classroom disputes decreased, and peaceful reconciliation of preexisting conflicts increased. Adding to aforementioned examples, the following anecdotes illustrate several focus students' growth.

Damian progressed tremendously throughout the year. During the second week of school, he hurled desks at teachers blocking the door between him and his target. By the year's conclusion, Damian habitually requested self-regulation breaks, deescalated conflicts, sought peers with whom he previously clashed to collaborate based on their strengths (Gardner and Toope, 20ll), independently apologized for distracting misbehavior, and forgave children who offended him.

Diamond also threw objects when angered. In November, she pitched a broomstick at Jared who chided her for sweeping over his feet and eloped when a teacher insisted she apologize. Upon Diamond's return, the teacher calmly asked to speak with her before granting reentry. Diamond refused, pushing and pinching the teacher to pass her, receiving a two-day suspension for 'assaulting staff.' As she participated in our SEL program, however, Diamond's outbursts diminished. In May, I commended her progress. She replied nonchalantly, 'Coretta Scott King wouldn't yell or hit nobody.' Diamond reframed her social-emotional responses to reflect her activist predecessors'.

Additionally, some students with histories of specific interpersonal discord settled their longstanding disputes. Before learning a new conflict resolution language (Yeager 2017), Jake and Malachi often disagreed violently. In one particularly alarming episode, Malachi grabbed Jake around his neck and thrust him headfirst into pavement. Two months later, the boys reconciled. Malachi acknowledged Jake's strengths and requested to partner with him on a project so Jake could teach him how to draw, thereby forming a deeper relationship (Gardner and Toope, 20ll).

More entrenched than Jake and Malachi's dispute, John and Jared's conflict endured since kindergarten. When John felt Jared 'messed with him,' regardless of Jared's actual intent, he lunged, or hurled objects immediately within his grasp at Jared. Invariably, Jared retaliated. This deeply engrained behavioral pattern proved challenging for the boys to unlearn; they sparred daily. Yet, the pair gradually advanced in meaningful ways. John, a child processing trauma, began identifying offenses as accidental and less frequently responded to them aggressively. He also started alerting adults to escalating potentials for violence, thereby permitting intervention, and seeking respite to self-regulate. Once perceiving threats constantly, John ultimately declared, 'our community makes me feel safe.' Additionally, Jared soon voluntarily qualified his acts, such as bumping in line, as unintentional and apologized instantaneously. He also more

habitually walked away from John's hostility and became less likely to provoke it. By June, the boys' violent interactions ceased altogether for the first time in years.

Jermaine, however, developed most significantly. Encyclopedic disciplinary files followed this young man to third grade, fully documenting his behavior since he entered school. He accumulated many suspensions, some lasting over a week, for infractions such as concealing weapons, premeditating assaults, and vandalism. In first grade, Jermaine stashed a knife in his backpack, threatening to stab anyone who 'snitched on' him. The subsequent year, he injured a teacher by pushing a computer cart into her, explaining that he planned and executed this attack after she disciplined him the previous week. Routinely, smashed remains of computers, supplies, and projects littered floors after episodes of Jermaine's prolific rage. When administrators attempted to discuss his actions with him, he frequently absconded, compelling several adults to chase him down the street.

Yet Jermaine's behavior progressively changed in third grade. His physical altercations became less common and severe. When he did fight, he willingly participated in honest mediation, openly admitting to pieces of the dispute he felt he perpetrated. Eventually, he sought these sessions without educators' encouragement. He apologized voluntarily not only to his targets, but also to our community for the disruption. Appreciative that his peers noticed his artistic talent, Jermaine also began gifting original sketches. He cared for sick classmates, bringing them tissues and band-aids without prompting, and ushering asthmatic students to the nurse. Furthermore, Jermaine intervened in peers' violent conflicts, urging de-escalation.

Soon after Kenisha revealed his creative skills and cooperative capacity to the class, Jermaine started requesting opportunities to address his peers during Community Meeting. Assuming a cartoonish voice, he preached values of peace and cooperation to his classmates who affirmed his ideas, thanked him for sharing his wisdom, and delighted in his comical accent. Jermaine seemed to relish this positive attention. Once aloof, he now enjoyed a leadership position. Jermaine always concluded his sermons by imploring his peers to 'have a good day,' 'not fight,' and 'give the teacher a hug!' Affection and trust replaced his previously oppositional stance.

These anecdotes illustrate quantifiable findings. As Appendix B depicts, several individual students experienced fewer suspensions during third grade than the year before, contributing to an overall 50% reduction for the entire cohort. The following year, no former participant encountered ED. Students now self-regulate, permitting teachers to redirect minor aggressive acts without invoking standard consequences.

As the school year ended, I lauded students for their progress. I recalled how Kenisha expressed trepidation on the first day when recalling her peers' frequent violent behavior the previous year. I also asked the class to consider how and why these altercations decreased. Jermaine whispered, 'it's because of Community Meeting.'

Jermaine's statement suggests that our SEL framework's pieces synergized to produce these results. Through three student-led, reflection-driven EAR cycles (Carr and Kemmis 1986; Kemmis and McTaggart 1988), our program progressed from attending to the individual, then the interpersonal, and finally the collective (Ladson-Billings 1995b) – both our own and others'. We generated the solidarity necessary to explore, rather than merely correct, behavior (C. Anderson 2004; Hoffman 2009). We utilized culture circles (Freire 1968) to learn and exercise different conflict resolution languages, allowing students to extend restorative empathy (Braithwaite 2001; Hantzopoulos 2013) to peers, while still maintaining

personal respect, and access (Yeager 2017) the 'culture of power' (Delpit 2006). We caringly demanded success (Knight-Diop 2010; Ladson-Billings 1995a) while affirming cultural values (Ladson-Billings 1995b) through enacting communal accountability. We identified classmates' strengths (Gardner and Toope, 20ll), employing them to confront unjust power structures affecting us (Freire 1968; Ladson-Billings 1995a,b). We connected ourselves to our predecessors' activism; expanded our cultural competence (Ladson-Billings 1995a,b) and collaborative capacity (Taines 2012); deemed our work significant within a tradition of protest; and found common experiences with different communities. We operated familially, embodying deep connections born from shared emotions (Hoffman 2009), goals, and concerns, which compassionate, curative dialogue and critical social analysis (Freire 1968) generated. We ultimately positioned care (Knight-Diop 2010; Ladson-Billings 1995a), and love (Freire 1968) as forces driving our social interactions and activism. Therefore, we propose that critical, culturally relevant, caring, loving, restorative SEL notably benefits youths', and their own and even other communities', wellbeing.

Limitations, implications for future research

This study's promising results, and children's enthusiastic identification as activists, suggest a need to more deliberately position them as evaluators and presenters of their research. Elucidating Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), Duncan-Andrade and Morell (2008) depict learners not only authoring, but also evaluating and presenting their work – clearly aiming to influence policy. My students actively co-(re)created, (re)implemented, and (re) reviewed our intervention's three cycles (Carr and Kemmis 1986; Kemmis and McTaggart 1988); however, time-constrained, I assessed final outcomes for target learners and ED rates. I believe I unintentionally limited children's agency by not facilitating their own data collection/examination which might have included quantifiable progress-monitoring for specific student-selected criteria, youth-led self and peer social-emotional health evaluation and growth analysis, or final survey of the program's impact on ED use. Students could have utilized these or defined their own data collection methods to prepare formal presentations advocating for responsive SEL. Our SJ work corroborated Taines (2012): youth advocacy reengages disaffected learners. Had students leveraged their experiences and proposed policies benefiting the school and community to leadership officials, this inquiry might have generated more emancipatory outcomes (Kinsler 2010).

Policy implications and conclusion

Researchers (Durlak, et al., 20ll; Greenberg et al. 2017; Jennings and Greenberg 2009; Jones and Doolittle 2017; Norris 2003; Osher et al. 2010) suggest that strong SEL programs can nurture social-emotional competencies, potentially diminishing suspensions. Yet; given how ED excessively targets low-income youth of Color (Gopalan and Nelson 2019; Gregory and Fergus 2017; Milner 2013) navigating demanding sociocultural paradigms (E. Anderson 1994); a prescribed, top-down, 'colorblind' SEL approach fails to serve students ED most often harms (Brantlinger, 1991; Gillies 2011; Gregory and Fergus 2017), while reinforcing the injurious power structures that enable ED's prejudiced application. Education policymakers should earnestly consider embracing and funding opportunities for teachers in schools regularly punishing children with ED to design responsive SEL

programs 'organically and internally' (Hantzopoulos 2013, 10) through EAR/YPAR initiatives, which directly address learners' needs.

Lipman (1996) argues that if educators of historically oppressed children 'are to influence educational change, reformers need to legitimize their knowledge and sponsor their leadership' (41). Offering qualified teachers grants to examine relevant research, assume leadership roles, steer their colleagues' professional development, facilitate EAR/YPAR initiatives, and disseminate their findings to broader audiences could accelerate innovation with responsive SEL approaches.

Policymakers concerned about Black and Brown socioeconomically struggling students must appreciate such programs' roles in supporting the educational attainment of the children ED threatens. Consistently implemented, schoolwide pedagogical frameworks fashioned through EAR/YPAR would foster positive, responsive institutional cultures. Such SEL would inspire youth to passionately commit themselves to meaningful causes and ideals, holding each other accountable for deviating from missions. It would effectively disseminate prosocial values throughout learning communities (Hantzopoulos 2013), thereby limiting ED which separates students from instruction.

To elevate test scores, states and districts disproportionately regulate curricula and instructional time for teachers of impoverished students (Milner 2013). Many educators, like myself, must make calculated deviations from official mandates, even if doing so jeopardizes our positions, and employ instructional approaches to serve our learners' unique needs (E. Anderson 1994; Milner 2013), and benefit youth beyond assessments.

Test preparation cannot alleviate poverty's effects on children's learning and well-being; merely completing assessments will not improve students' social locations, especially if learners spend inordinate amounts of time suspended. Facilitating youth-led coalitions where students cultivate social capital and develop academic and social-emotional skills necessary to collectively confront inequities represents more robust solutions (Delpit 2006; Freire 1968; Ladson-Billings 1995a,b; Yeager 2017). Therefore, 'empowering teachers will enable them to exercise initiative and creativity to improve educational practices and school policy' (Lipman 1996, 44). Granting autonomy, flexibility, and funding to culturally competent, community-engaged educators to co-create responsive SEL can reduce ED, and, ultimately, erode the systems that permit its disparate use, changing the educational landscape and future prospects for underserved children.

Notes

1. Names are pseudonyms.
2. Knight-Diop (2010) uses term verbatim; Ladson-Billings (1995a) describes concept without naming it explicitly.

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