Truth Hidden in Plain Sight: How Social–Emotional Learning Empowers Novice Teachers' Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in Title I Schools

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Abstract

Educational inequity for students in highly impacted urban schools in the United States remains a persistent challenge despite efforts to reshape teaching practices. This article argues for the inclusion of holistic qualities of novice teacher effectiveness, including how the social and emotional learning (SEL) of teachers contributes to the development of critically informed pedagogies for teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students. Using data from 21 interviews with novice teachers, mentor teachers, instructional coaches, and school leaders, we argue that the skills and dispositions for student SEL can be used to inform understanding and implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy for novice teachers.

Keywords

teaching, social–emotional, equity, classroom, inclusion

Two compelling questions are prominent in the scholarship of novice teachers: (a) Why are attrition rates so high? and (b) What are the qualities of effective novice teachers? It is widely reported that nearly half of U.S. teachers leave the profession in 5 years (Ingersoll et al., 2018), and for high-poverty schools, the departure rate is even higher—50% in 3 years (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Ingersoll, 2001; Ingersoll & Merrill, 2012). For Title I and other underserved schools, the first question raises raw economic reasons for concern. Nationally in the United States, approximately US\$2.2 billion is consumed from school district budgets to recruit, hire, and train teachers replacing novice educators who have left the classroom (Barnes et al., 2007). Any reduction in teacher attrition has direct economic benefits, for funds can be reallocated toward teacher professional development, curriculum, staffing rates, and other factors known to support effective instruction in schools (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005).

There are equally pertinent costs associated with equity and justice for all learners in Title I schools where educational needs are typically greater and the consequences of ineffective instruction are more devastating to students (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Simon & Johnson, 2015). A well-prepared and stable work force is key to improving the academic performance of under-achieving students (Hanushek et al., 2004). Despite the dire rates of novice teacher attrition, some early-career teachers persist and become effective educators. How do they not only survive but also ultimately *thrive* (Valtierra, 2016)?

This study explores this question through interviews with five principals, five instructional coaches, four mentor teachers, and seven novice teachers in four highly impacted Title I schools. The 21 participants in this study work in a district committed to retaining early-career teachers, providing professional development in trauma-informed instruction, and promoting culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP). All four schools in this study were selected by district administrators to meet the following criteria: Title I, steady leadership, and a fairly stable teaching force. Each semistructured interview followed a standardized question protocol and was taped and transcribed for analysis.

Research Questions and Study Structure

The initial research questions guiding the study include the following:

> **Research Question 1 (RQ1):** How do various stakeholders (e.g., principals, mentors, and teachers) describe successful early-career teachers?

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Research Question 2 (RQ2): What experiences do various stakeholders attribute to the development of successful early-career teachers?

Research Question 3 (RQ3): What personal characteristics do various stakeholders attribute to the development of successful early-career teachers?

To answer these questions, the district partnered with faculty and graduate research assistants from a college of education to conduct an institutional review board (IRB)-approved study aimed at generating data on teaching qualities that could be used to train and retain effective novice teachers in Title I schools. The data revealed two differing but integrated narratives regarding definitions of effective novice teaching and ways to support novice teachers.

The first narrative (with important variations) is consistent with the prevailing literature in teacher education supporting the technical skills of early-career educators including classroom management, standards-based instruction, and competency-based instruction. The second narrative is equally robust in the data, yet nearly absent in the literature on the professional development and retention of novice teachers. It is the purpose of this article to tell the less told story, to illuminate the importance of supporting the social and emotional learning (SEL) attributes of novice teachers who are committed to implementing CRP in service of their students.

The data support the claim that teacher SEL is as essential to definitions of effective teaching in Title I schools as the technical and standards-based elements that form the taken-for-granted description of teacher effectiveness. A helpful way to understand the relationship between these two different and synergistic stories is through the lens of paradox—two different educational elements that cohere into an integrated unit. Michalec (2013) characterizes this as the wisdom of viewing educational effectiveness through the dual lens of the "common core and inner core" (p. 27). Laura Rendón (2012) in her book, *Sentipensante*, describes the ways that thinking and feeling can be integrated, through the Mesoamerican process of *difrasismo*, into a third and more inclusive vision of education for social justice. Palmer (1998) argues that the essential elements of teaching can be captured in four broad questions: (a) What is being taught? (b) How is it being taught? (c) Why is it being taught? and (d) Who is the self that teaches? *What* and *how* are more frequently associated with the technical domain of teaching, whereas the *why* and *who* questions are less prevalent and anchor the inner life of the teacher. Data from this study on the SEL attributes of novice teachers add balance and integration to the more traditional technical understandings of effective teaching in Title I schools by offering a holistic answer to Palmer's question, "Who is the self that teaches?" (p. 94).

Method

The four Title I schools in this study include two elementary schools, one K–8 school, and one high school. These schools are located in the second-largest public school district in the state, which serves approximately 86,000 students from urban, suburban, and rural communities. Student demographics from each of the four school sites range from 45% to 84% minority students. As previously noted, data for this study were collected using a semistructured interview protocol. The interviews were conducted, audio recorded, and transcribed by a team of seven university research assistants. Data analysis for each of the 21 interviews was conducted by both authors through a series of iterative stages and steps informed by the emerging themes of the study. For the initial analysis, each author read the full data set listening for dominant themes, consistent with Saldaña's (2016) approach for analyzing qualitative data. Based on this analysis, the initial themes of *growth, relational trust*, and *empowerment* were identified (each theme will be defined later in this article along with supporting evidence from the four participant groups).

Both researchers noted that running through the data were two subthemes that were present but not singularly affixed to the research question of the qualities of effective early-career teachers. Instead, the subthemes, *CRP* and *SEL*, wove their way through the interview transcripts as participants shared their thoughts and experiences. To confirm the robustness of these subthemes, each researcher conducted a second round of data analysis, specifically looking for examples of CRP and SEL. This data sweep confirmed the existence of these themes as well as their stable representation across the interviews for all 21 participants. However, what became immediately clear to the researchers was the lack of full representation of the five SEL elements outlined by Schonert-Reichl et al. (2017). *Social awareness, relationship skills*, and *self-awareness* were present, whereas *self-management* and *responsible decision-making* were almost nonexistent.

In addition, the themes of teacher SEL and CRP were fluid and intermingled across the data set. The dual patterns of CRP and SEL flowed back and forth, even in the same sentence, between a focus on student behaviors and teacher actions in ways more consistent with Rendón's *difrasismo* than more traditional notions of stable and static research themes. This finding invited the researchers back to the data for a third time in search of a more nuanced understanding of ways that SEL and CRP were related to each other as well as how they were situated relative to the three themes of *growth, relational trust*, and *empowerment*. Based on this final data analysis, we will argue in this article that for the four highly impacted schools in this study, CRP was an

essential instructional goal. However, the robustness of the implementation was reliant on teacher SEL, meaning the ability of a teacher to employ SEL qualities *for themselves*. Furthermore, the interplay of SEL and CRP were contingent on the presence of the three themes—*growth, relational trust*, and *empowerment*.

Conceptual Categories

In this section of the article, we will establish the conceptual foundations for the major themes and subthemes evident in the data. Later in the article, we will provide concrete evidence situating the themes and subthemes in the interview transcripts. What we attempt to argue in this article is not the creation of new categories for understanding the qualities of successful early-career teachers. Instead, we point out an innovative way of organizing the aspects of effective teaching that is inclusive *of* and responsive *to* the inner dimensions of teaching. This is particularly the case as it relates to the role of SEL as a fulcrum for elevating the instructional effectiveness of CRP.

Growth. The first major theme to emerge from the data is *growth*. The extant literature on this particular construct hinges on two primary bodies of literature—one directed toward the vulnerability of the psychological self, as in the case of Carol Dweck's (2006/2016) research on mindset. The other growth orientation is focused on teaching as an outward manifestation of inner reflection (Smyth, 1998). Dweck's work centers on a teacher's understanding of ability as either a fixed trait or something that can be developed. She stresses the importance of ability development, noting mindset and its relationship to success—teachers who perceive ability as malleable rather than fixed expend more effort to achieve their goals. They see instructional failure as a steppingstone rather than a stumbling block.

Smyth (1998) equates growth with reflection. For effective teachers, this means a thoughtful and attentive response to the current context of teaching, including elements of instruction such as pedagogy, analysis of student performance data, classroom management, and individual and class goals arrayed across four sequential stages—describing, informing, confronting, and reconstructing. Howard (2003) characterizes growth as a binding together of critical reflection and culturally relevant pedagogy. He argues that the former is an essential prelude to the successful enactment of inclusive instruction. Howard, drawing on John Dewey's (1910/1997) conception of "reflective thinking" (p. 15), underscores the importance of educators engaging in a process of deep self-awareness. This means acknowledging their deficit-based orientations and biases while also committing to a pedagogy that explicitly counters detrimental beliefs. Howard states,

To become culturally relevant, teachers need to engage in honest, critical reflection that challenges them to see how their positionality influences their students in either positive or negative ways. Critical reflection should include an examination of how race, culture, and social class shape students' thinking, learning, and various understandings of the world. (p. 197)

Relational trust. The second theme that *relational trust* in schools drives the effectiveness of educational outcomes is a familiar concept in educational leadership. One of the landmark texts describing trust and its relationship to school reform is *Trust in Schools* by Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider (2004). In their detailed study of Chicago Public Schools, the authors identified the attributes of schools that successfully initiated systemic change. According to Bryk and Schneider (2003), the most salient feature of reformed schools, as defined by student academic performance, was a concept they termed "relational trust." *Relational trust* has four main components: (a) *respect*: listening to and valuing the views of others; (b) *competence*: individuals possess the skills needed to complete tasks and perform role-based responsibilities; (c) *personal regard*: the ability to express an open and caring affect toward others in the school community; and (d) *integrity*: little discrepancy between what a person agrees to do and what they actually do. The higher the level of relational trust, the greater the likelihood of successful educational reform. In short, trust matters and it matters more than strategy.

Empowerment. The third theme in this study, *empowerment*, has a long history in conversations about improving the quality of education, in particular, the ways that empowerment creates opportunities for individuals to ascend social and economic ladders of success. More than 100 years ago, educational scholar and activist Ella Flagg Young critiqued the isolationist, oppressive, and reductionist movement in education (Blount, 2002). Young argued that teachers needed greater access to power if schools had any chance at improvement. More recently, William Ayers (2010) noted,

Teacher empowerment requires teachers to commit to the task of continuous experimentation, investigation, inquiry, and study, to negotiating the troubled waters of teaching, to growing and learning for an entire lifetime in the classroom. It requires that teachers create a space for problem posing and problem solving, historical and theoretical considerations, storytelling, and critical reflection. (p. 861)

Influenced by Paulo Freire and others, noted critical scholar Ira Shor (1992) describes empowering education as two competing paradigms—the first being the antithesis of empowering education. The "zero paradigm" treats students as deficits to be fixed with knowledge delivered from on high by the teacher. In contrast, the "critical paradigm"

perceives teachers and students as simultaneously "less than zero" and "more than zero," meaning they each have the agency to hinder or empower learning in the classroom. In the critical paradigm, Shor argues both teachers and students are impelled toward democracy, a sharing of agency. The synergistic weaving of empowerment and democracy brings together power, critical pedagogy, and teacher agency—all themes that hold particular resonance for the Title I schools featured in this study.

Overview of Subthemes

In addition to our three major findings of growth, relational trust, and empowerment, two subthemes were present in the data—*CRP* and *SEL*. The three major themes are consistent with traditional notions of data analysis, having high degrees of independence and stability across the data. In contrast, the two subthemes are more fluid and multifaceted, stable but heavily contextual to the teacher and school culture. They present more like Rendón's *difrasismo*, rising above the established themes in the data without discounting or diminishing their potency.

CRP. The educational roots of the first subtheme, *CRP*, begin as far back as 1908 in the writings of Jane Addams, the U.S. settlement house activist and advocate for immigrant rights. In that year, she wrote an essay encouraging Chicago Public Schools to foster a learning environment drawing on the home knowledge and experience of immigrant children instead of excluding their funds of knowledge. In more contemporary times, the research of Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994, 1995) argues for a shift away from deficit-based orientations to culturally diverse students and toward asset-based orientations of cultural competence, academic excellence, and sociopolitical consciousness. She developed the landmark term culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

In the footsteps of Ladson-Billings, other iterations of critical pedagogy have emerged in the educational lexicon, broadening and deepening our understanding of what it means to teach *to* and *through* a student's cultural identity. Culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010, 2013), culturally sustaining/revitalizing pedagogy (McCarty & Lee, 2014), and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014), have all served to affirm and extend Ladson-Billings' original framing of socially just and inclusive pedagogy. Other recent research has addressed dimensions of CRP, including perspective taking (Warren, 2018) and Instructional Conversation (IC; Mellom et al., 2018). Our use of CRP best aligns with Gay's (2010) view of

> Seeing cultural differences as assets; creating caring learning communities where culturally different individuals

and heritages are valued; using cultural knowledge of ethnically diverse cultures, families, and communities to guide curriculum development, classroom climates, instructional strategies and relationships with students; challenging racial and cultural stereotypes, prejudices, racism, and other forms of intolerance, injustice, and oppression; being change agents for social justice and academic equity; mediating power imbalances in classrooms based on race, culture, ethnicity, and class; and accepting cultural responsiveness as endemic to educational effectiveness in all areas of learning for students from all ethnic groups. (p. 31)

The data presented later in this article show that effective implementation of CRP is vital to the school culture of the four Title I schools in this study. School leadership and teaching practices strive for the goal of meeting and affirming the learning and social needs of the minoritized students, families, and communities.

SEL. The second subtheme, SEL, is widely researched and promoted by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). Through their mission of "educating hearts and inspiring minds," CASEL has developed an SEL framework consisting of five core elements: (a) self-awareness, (b) self-management, (c) social awareness, (d) relationship skills, and (e) responsible decision-making (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). These elements are broadly enacted in educational settings across three major domains: the learning environment, teacher SEL, and student SEL. When analyzed through the five CASEL elements of SEL, the data from this study offer a complex picture of the hidden ways that teacher wholeness, as defined through social and emotional competency, is present in school. However, for teacher SEL to reach its full potential, retooling and repurposing are required. For instance, most of the schools in the study were already attentive to the ways that attending to SEL for students improves student wellness, emotional stability, and enhanced capacity to learn. With little effort and resources, what is effective for improving student SEL can be turned 180 degrees and repurposed toward the goal of supporting novice teacher SEL. As Dewey, Rendón, and Palmer would claim, student and teacher SEL requires a both/and integration, not an either/or choice.

Results and Discussion

In the previous section of this article, we developed the conceptual groundwork for three major themes (growth, relational trust, and empowerment) and two subthemes (CRP and SEL). In this section of the article, we will provide data and specific examples supporting the validity of these findings.

Growth

The theme of *growth* included a considerable focus on the willingness of novice teachers to accept and act on feedback as well as their persistence in changing their pedagogy—often referred to by study participants as "having a growth mindset." Self-reflection and vulnerability around the social and emotional challenges of early-career teaching in Title I schools exemplified the growth mindset of novice teachers. For instance, the willingness to be a "lifelong learner" and to ask for help were recognized by experienced educators in this study as characteristics of a successful novice teacher. Novice teachers, in ways consistent with Howard (2003), noted that reflecting on their life and educational experiences, their social and cultural positionality, enabled them to better understand the life narratives of their students. The second feature of growth in the data centered on the thoughtful and informed responses to instruction (pedagogy, student performance, classroom management, and achievement goals) as well as the unique characteristics of many students attending highly impacted schools (trauma, sense of self-worth, academic achievement, and home life). The following participant quotes exemplify the theme of *growth* for novice teachers across both dimensions:

> The willingness to grow; not thinking they are finished products. When they come in, it's crucial—for anybody to be successful—for new teachers. I've had a teacher who got a lot of feedback—she'd been out of the profession for 10 years—and we gave her a lot of feedback about improvement and growth, and she just blamed the evaluators for not seeing everything. She has not gotten better this year; she's decided to leave the profession. This will be her fourth or fifth year, and she's unsuccessful because of the mindset, and the focus on deflection instead of reflection. (Principal)

> I try to have a positive attitude about things and here we are focused on having a growth mindset. I have this thing and most of my students can tell it to you: "it is not I can't it is I can." The can do attitude—just having a can do attitude. When you fall you get back on the horse. You are going to keep trying until we get there. Everyone learns at a different pace and we all get there at different times. The way we do it might not all be the same, but I just feel like being positive and we are going to try it again, we are going to try it again, let's try it again. (Novice teacher)

Growth in the data closely aligns with the SEL dimension of *self-awareness*—"the ability to accurately recognize one's emotions and thoughts and their influence on behavior. This includes accurately assessing one's strengths and limitations, and possessing a well-grounded sense of confidence and optimism" (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017, p. 6). In the first quote, the principal highlights the importance of self-awareness by talking about a teacher who focused on "deflection instead of reflection." The teacher was unable to see how her perceptions and beliefs—her mindset—influenced her instructional effectiveness; she lacked a growth mindset. In the second quote, a novice teacher accurately captures the sense of optimism and self-confidence that originates from a growth mindset grounded in persistence and a willingness to fail in meeting challenges effectively. Growth and self-awareness are intertwined. In addition, this quote points to a finding that we will return to later; what is good for the students as a growth mindset is also good for the teacher.

Relational Trust

Relational trust was a frequent topic for participants and was closely linked to a supportive school climate, culture, and leadership. A lack of trust can significantly impede school-based reform and directly affects climate, collective efficacy, and overall effectiveness (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). Because highly impacted schools often function as beacons for educational reform efforts, the theme of relational trust was cited by participants as a critical component of novice teacher effectiveness. This underscores the considerable importance of the novice teacher's willingness to share successes and failures by establishing and sustaining trustworthy relationships with experienced educators. As two participants noted,

> When you are working collaboratively with someone you have to agree with what that looks like and that helps with that organization piece. I think this definitely, not even that haphazardly, but we have a building-wide culture of problem solving. That supports the idea that "we are not, it is not you, you are not failing. We are all on this journey together." And we have that, which a lot of schools have, we have places for kid talk, and intervention and talk about what works and doesn't work with students. People open up and share their failures. I think overall it is a pretty safe place to say "I need help with this, this is not working for me. This is what I am experiencing. What are you doing?" And our professional development, when we have all staff professional development it tends to focus around those things. Like "here is our discipline data, we have all these students being referred because the conflict between teacher and student. Let's talk about this. Where does this drive our conversation and why." It evolves into deeper conversations. We always have staff sharing their failures. I think sharing failures is a powerful way to say "I have been there too. How do we go forward?" I think that is actually a really strong part of our culture here. (Instructional coach)

> My first year here it was not a positive culture. There was so much distrust in this building. They brought in a brand new team to turn the school around. So, we're about 4 years old with our new systems and our new organization. So, you know, there had to be some, there had to be some real crucial courageous conversations that took place that year.

And so, I will say 4 years ago, staff culture was not anywhere close to acceptable. And it still took me a little time with a handful to gain their trust. You know so they weren't walking on eggshells. And I had to literally say, "You don't have to have to feel this way. Like you don't have to feel like I'm out to get you—I'm not out to get you." (Principal)

Relational trust closely aligns with the SEL feature of *relationship skills*; "the ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups" (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017, p. 6). In fact, relational trust may function as an essential precursor to relationship skills, including the ability to "communicate clearly, listen actively, cooperate, and negotiate conflict constructively" (Schonert-Reichl et al.)—qualities particularly germane to effective instruction in highly impacted schools. The "building-wide culture of problem solving" described by the instructional coach encourages collaboration and a larger sense of collective action aimed at achieving the common goal of improved instruction through constructive and open dialogue around successes and failures.

Another dimension of relational trust, as highlighted in the quote from the school leader, is the impact on instructional feedback. The "crucial courageous conversations" that the principal described were guided by risk taking, dialogue, and sincere personal regard for the well-being of the community—the feeling that "we are all in this together." This sentiment was similarly echoed by a novice teacher who stated,

A really great part of being in this school is sometimes evaluation can be like an "I got you" kind of thing, like "oh, you are not doing this right." But here, the way the administration has worked, which has been really great for me as a new teacher, is here everyone is trying to highlight your successes and when there are things that you can improve upon, it is like a gentle— I don't know how to say it—a gentle push for what you could be working on. (Novice teacher)

With respect to this study, relational trust has a number of benefits that contribute to a school climate and culture that is conducive to the goals and outcomes of CRP. The instructional climate of schools with high levels of relational trust exhibited the following qualities: (a) risk taking and innovation targeting effective implementation of the reform, (b) engaged conversation and dialogue between educators about successes and challenges in the work, (c) continuous improvement is held in common by members of the community, and (d) the creation of a moral center anchoring reform and providing energy to continue in times of hardship. In combination, these attributes lead to widespread infusion across social networks in a school as the reform moves from concept to the lived experience for all members of the school community.

Empowerment

The third major theme, *empowerment*, aligns with the SEL competency of *responsible decision-making*, defined by CASEL as "the ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on . . . the realistic evaluation of various actions, and the well-being of self and others" (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017, p. 6). The following quotes from two instructional coaches illustrate the theme of empowerment and the SEL dimension of responsible decision-making toward better and more inclusive pedagogy:

He (school leader) had told me that my ability to work with difficult kids and move them even when previous teachers couldn't was something that he really saw as a strength. I was leading other professional development as a teacher so that leadership was already in me getting out there and helping teachers. I did so in a way that did not say I was better than you, but let's do this together—let's grow together. I was never in a place of "I am highly effective and you are not, let's fix you." I was never like that. So, he said to me when he was asking me to be a coach that the leadership in me was to not evaluate people or judge them, but just to be there with them. I do the work alongside them. (Instructional coach)

I think that as an instructional coach you have an opportunity to really help novice teachers and take them from where they start to where they can be because you look for all they bring and what they have already. Then you offer them the skills and the techniques and the supports that they need to become more successful. That's why I am an instructional coach. That leads to a lot deeper conversation, not just what's on the rubric. That gets us the insights we need, because we really need to work from where they are. Sometimes they don't even know what they need to do, or how they are perceived. It's really delicate. It can be really powerful. That's our big success, I think, is when we see people start to transform in those areas that we know that will help them feel successful. When a teacher comes back and shares they feel so much better about themselves from the work that we've had together and that they can see the difference in their classroom culture and the way they feel about themselves. All of those things happen when you are working with them in the right way. (Instructional coach)

In the first quote, we see how the astute observations and responsible decision-making of an administrator directly led to the empowerment of a teacher to see herself succeeding as an instructional coach. The instructional coach noted that her power to influence instructional practices emanates from humility, not judgment. Her reform-minded coaching draws from the SEL ability to "make constructive and

respectful choices about personal behavior and social interactions . . . based on the well-being of self and others" (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017, p. 6), in this case, constructive choices that value the voice and cultural knowledge of students. The second quote provides evidence of how an instructional coach supports novice teachers to critically reflect on issues that extend beyond technical pedagogical, such as CRP. The instructional coach develops a more holistic emphasis on "transformational" empowerment that is leveraged from the unique skills and dispositions the novice teacher brings to the classroom.

The Interplay of SEL and CRP

When viewed collectively, we contend that the three themes—*growth, relational trust*, and *empowerment*—in combination with the SEL elements—*self-awareness, relationship skills*, and *responsible decision-making*, respectively—lend robustness and structural support for the successful implementation of culturally responsive teaching. A major practice of CRP is to demonstrate relevancy toward students' cultural identities and communities requiring engagement in asset-based, rather than deficit-based, orientations and behaviors. As alluded to in the previous discussion, we argue that developing critically empowering beliefs and behaviors in Title I schools is influenced by an underlying and tightly woven structure of SEL.

First, the theme of *growth* and the SEL dimension of *self-awareness* complement the goals of CRP by establishing high expectations, presuming good intentions, and having a willingness to reflect upon and support novice teachers' lived experiences, including how their unique strengths and limitations are expressed (Howard, 2003). As one participant noted,

> That's where we have had some challenges this year is because one member hasn't felt like the other person has had a growth mindset. This becomes our job, policing their team. To come in and try to support them, to some extent it does, if they are not collaborating then we have to step in and say this is what we expect here. At first, when they start working, people in general presume positive intentions in just being who they are. They know that if they are novice they will be novice and aren't going to have a lot. We try to give them grace and acceptance and support them where they are at. (Instructional coach)

One mentor teacher explicitly connected the SEL attribute of self-awareness with the goal of social justice, noting with deep reflection the ways in which her own White privilege manifests in the classroom:

> I have been a teacher for 14 years. I learned about this thing called White privilege. I never knew. I thought, "I am down for everyone. I am totally not racist." I learned that I am a

racist. I need to accept that and understand where these biases come from, why they come, and what it is called. That for me have been very eye opening in the classroom. And what I am saying in the classroom, simple things like talking about my students and not using pronouns like "they" and "them." A lot of people don't understand their place, and they're privileged because of the fact that they are White or male. That plays out in education and automatically creates walls and divisions where it shouldn't. (Mentor teacher)

Second, the theme of *relational trust* and the SEL element of *relationship skills* augment the CRP attribute of fostering caring learning communities among diverse learners and working toward the mitigation of power imbalances in the classroom.

> I think that's what my whole staff as a community offers to each other. Is that they're always pushing each other and they're not afraid to come to one another and say, "I cannot connect with so-and-so. Do you have ideas?" So maybe last year's teacher or we have all sorts of different expertise in the building for different reasons, you know. If I'm struggling you know with a kid or with a behavior, I know that I can go to X, Y and Z. You know and maybe it's the social worker or maybe it's a kid that's still struggling to speak any English, I know that I have my ESL teacher to go to. You know there's just such a diverse—such a diversity among our expertise in the building and the more that I can help people see that expertise in each other. You know, like I said, I feel like I'm kind of a dating coordinator. But the more that I can help them see each other's expertise, the more they seek each other out. And it's pretty exciting. (Principal)

> [A successful novice teacher has] extremely high emotional IQ and has an ability to read children specifically and to empathize with the different levels of development that they are in. And to use those skills to build really strong relationships around a culture of achievement in the classroom, not just talking about what you did all weekend in class, but really able to make that classroom a place where kids want to be and see themselves in and see their work in that class as a pathway to their own success. (Instructional coach)

Third, the theme of *empowerment* and the SEL dimension of *responsible decision-making* is exemplified in the following quotes that explicitly connect instructional choices around student empowerment with teacher pedagogical transformation, a central goal of CRP.

> I just see it. [The novice teacher said] "I decided I am going to stay another year." I thought "Yes! That's really good!" You want people to feel that they are successful here. They are reaching the students and they are responsive to them and to have that feedback is positive. And I know she is

because she is involved in all sorts of things, but at first, we thought there was no way she would continue. It's like a transformation process, either you are going to make it here or you aren't. (Instructional coach)

SEL Undergirds and Elevates CRP

Many of the schools in this study exhibit one or more of the major themes outlined in this article—*relational trust, growth*, and *empowerment*. In addition, these Title I schools strive for a school climate supportive of CRP in an effort to support students holistically, including both well-being and academic achievement. What seems unique about some of the schools we studied is that attentiveness to CRP appeared elevated compared with other schools in the study. It was not the case that CRP was lacking from schools, in fact, CRP was core to the educational efforts of all schools. However, the data show that in some schools, a qualitative and instructional difference was evident. What was the extra element at play here? We argue, and presented evidence above, that the "hidden" factor undergirding more effective forms of culturally responsive teaching is teacher SEL.

We propose that one way to visualize an integrated and elevated CRP and SEL model is Jonathan Haidt's description of the "Z factor" in his book, *The Happiness Hypothesis* (2006), in which he examines the roots of "morality, religion, and the quest for human meaning" (p. 181). The model that Haidt develops relies on the distinctions between a two-dimensional world and living a three-dimensional existence. In a three-dimensional model, the ordinary two dimensions of life are elevated by the Z factor, which Haidt terms the "divinity factor." By divinity, Haidt means elements of human knowing, religious and secular, that invite communities to transcend individual interests, to "feel lifted up" (p. 183) for the benefit of the collected whole.

In his explanation of the "Z factor," Haidt draws on the book *Flatland* written in 1884 by Edwin Abbot, an English novelist and mathematician. Flatland is a place defined by two dimensions, the X and Y axes. Consequently, the principle geometric shape of Flatland is a square, the land of squares, and squares only. One day, a circle unexpectedly appears with the startling claim that the circle is really a sphere visible only when a third dimension—a Z axis—is included in descriptions of Flatland. The existence of a Z factor is transformational for the inhabitants of Flatland—they experience a sense of being "lifted up," transcendence, and expansiveness. The existence of a third dimension, which they had never known or realized existed, is both shocking and transformative. It takes the circle—the sphere—a long time to convince the members of Flatland to see the Z factor. Changing accepted orthodoxy of assumed knowing takes time, persistence, and experience. We argue that SEL for teachers is the hidden Z factor in

schools exhibiting exceptional attentiveness to CRP in our study. It combines *growth* and *relational trust* with *empowerment* to create a climate conducive to successful CRP implementation.

As indicated earlier in this article, the two elements of teacher SEL most prominent in the data are *self-awareness* and *relationship skills*. Less evident but present was the skill of *self-management*. In combination, these SEL attributes facilitate the professional development of teachers who are empathetic, "understand the perspective of others," possess a "growth mindset" around their "strengths and limitations," and can "effectively manage stress" while establishing and achieving instructional goals. The data from this study show that Haidt's Z factor, and Rendón's (2012) *difrasismo*, are essentially acting in the same capacity as energizers of CRP. As the robustness of teacher SEL increases—both in terms of presence and actual application—so too does the vibrancy of CRP as operationalized by *growth* and *relational trust*. The two-dimensional circle of CRP, for some schools in the study, became a three-dimensional sphere capable of attending to the multitude of contexts within which CRP is enacted.

The following quote from an instructional coach illustrates the claim that teacher SEL supports and elevates CRP. We used this same quote earlier in the article as supporting evidence for the theme of *relational trust*. We are using it again to show the ways that the themes of CRP and SEL are often intertwined and difficult to distinguish as distinct phenomena:

> When you are working collaboratively with someone you have to agree with what that looks like and that helps with that organization piece. I think this definitely, not even that haphazardly, but we have a building wide culture of problem solving. That supports the idea that "we are not, it is not you, you are not failing. We are all on this journey together." And we have that, which a lot of schools have, we have places for kid talk, and intervention and talk about what works and doesn't work with students. People open up and share their failures. I think overall it is a pretty safe place to say "I need help with this, this is not working for me. This is what I am experiencing. What are you doing?" And our professional development, when we have all staff professional development it tends to focus around those things. Like "here is our discipline data, we have all these students being referred because the conflict between teacher and student. Let's talk about this. Where does this drive our conversation and why." It evolves into deeper conversations. We always have staff sharing their failures. I think sharing failures is a powerful way to say "I have been there too. How do we go forward?" I think that is actually a really strong part of our culture here. (Instructional coach)

The SEL characteristic most evident in this quote is *relationship skills*, which CASEL defines as the ability to "communicate clearly, listen well, cooperate with others, resist

inappropriate social pressure, negotiate conflict constructively, and seek and offer help" (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017, p. 6). The instructional coach uses the following words to describe productive collegial relationships that suggest a strong sense of *cooperation* with other school professionals: "working collaboratively," and "we are not, it is not you, you are not failing. We are all on this journey together." Another key element of SEL relationship skills is "*negotiate conflict constructively and seek and offer help.*" Evidence of this SEL includes "agree," "a building wide culture of problem solving," "People open up and share their failures. I think overall it is a pretty safe place to say 'I need help with this, this I not working for me. This is what I am experiencing. What are you doing?'" and

> We always have staff sharing their failures. I think sharing failures is a powerful way to say "I have been there too. How do we go forward?" I think that is actually a really strong part of our culture here.

Although not stated directly, but given other contextual quotes from the school, the instructional coach demonstrates a commitment to the practices and principles of CRP when the coach states, "We have places for kid talk, and intervention and talk about what works and doesn't work with students," "people open up and share their failures. I think overall it is a pretty safe place to say 'I need help with this, this is not working for me. This is what I am experiencing. What are you doing?'," and "when we have all staff professional development it tends to focus around those things. Like here is our discipline data, we have all these students being referred because the conflict between teacher and student. Let's talk about this. Where does this drive our conversation and why. It evolves into deeper conversations."

It is our contention that SEL is the *Z* factor with the potential of transforming a mechanistic or mandated form of CRP into an invigorated form of CRP that meaningfully affects the cultural and instructional life of the school. With the support of SEL *relationship skills*, it is possible for an educator to note with pride and commitment: "We always have staff sharing their failures. I think sharing failures is a powerful way to say 'I have been there too. How do we go forward?'" We hear in this statement a claim from the instructional coach that without the ability to trust colleagues and speak honestly about instructional "failures"—lost opportunities to create space for "kids to talk"—the chances of operationalizing CRP with integrity would be reduced.

Discussion

In the hard-pressed world of teaching, critical elements for successful reform include school leadership, time, and resources. This was certainly the case for all the Title I schools we studied. The school day for teachers was replete with the usual responsibilities of teaching as well as additional professional development in CRP and trauma-informed instruction. As has been well documented, teaching in Title I schools requires a particular level of commitment, love for the work, and care for the intellectual and personal development of students. Teachers in the schools we studied were busy educating students, creating opportunities for growth, and acting on their concern for the well-being of their learners, actions consistent with CRP. The following question can then be asked: Where will schools and teachers find the time and resources to attend to SEL for teachers? This study demonstrates the importance of SEL for novice teachers, but is it fair to assume that teachers can and should attend another professional development session addressing their own SEL?

In a surprising turn, the data from this study suggest that the answer to this question is a truth hidden in plain sight. Many of the schools and educators in our study are already attentive to the SEL of students. They recognize that students who develop SEL skills and dispositions are often more open to learning content, show a greater willingness to accept teacher feedback, and are more reflective about their actions. In the following quotes, we see evidence from a principal, a mentor teacher, an assistant principal, and two novice teachers articulating the connection between SEL and student learning. And with a slight twist—replacing the student focus with a novice teacher focus—we can also see how these approaches to student success can support teacher success in the areas of *growth, empowerment*, and *CRP*.

> But if the student is shut out in any way from being a part of the learning, they will never- they don't tend to buy back into that so quickly, especially in schools of poverty and where kids are just a little bit more challenging to connect to the curriculum at times . . . they need to be culturally responsive in our building and connect to the relevancy of the diversity of our kids. (Principal)

> When students feel safe, they are willing to try new things and take risks and I feel like that helps that supports learning when they feel comfortable, they will try something new and say ok, like it didn't work out . . . (Novice teacher)

> I find successful teachers have successful students . . . If they're able to do things independently, own their learning . . . So, that's just building the community in the room to make them feel comfortable and have success. If they've had pasts that are tainted with anything, they also need to find that comfort here, to be able to be open to us, to let us help them with that so we can continue with our learning here and get them to a that point of success. (Mentor teacher)

> Kids want people to care about them. They come here they want to feel welcome and they want to feel taken care of. (Assistant principal)

These quotes suggest that teachers associate the ability of a student to take risks (academic and emotionally) with academic success—a growth mindset. Data from this study also suggest the same is true in the eyes of mentors and building administrators—successful early-career teachers show an element of risk taking when they implement new teaching strategies or demonstrate transparency in their ability to seek assistance. This description of effective student behavior—and novice teacher behavior—is congruent with the SEL category of *self-awareness*, including "knowing your strengths and limitations" (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017, p. 6).

In another example, the data suggest that an element of successful novice teachers is their belief that all students can learn. But sometimes, learning requires the ability to ask for help. And, in instructional spaces where students feel "safe," "cared for," or included in decision-making, they are more likely to "buy into" the learning experiences that make up the instructional day. Successful novice teachers improve their teaching skills in schools where asking for help is the norm or where novice teachers are valued for the innovative ideas they bring to the school, a teacher version of CRP's funds of knowledge. These attributes for students and teachers are remarkably aligned with the SEL element of *relationship skills*, which is defined as the ability to "communicate clearly, listen well, cooperate with others, . . . and offer help when needed" (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017, p. 6).

As was previously noted in this article, we argue that SEL is the *Z* factor, a form of *sentipensante*, allowing CRP to unfold with depth and dimensionality in Title I schools. The SEL quality of *social awareness* appears to be the keystone skill energizing CRP. Teachers with a high degree of *social awareness* exhibit the qualities of "understanding the perspectives of others and empathize with them, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures" (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017, p. 6). A good example of *social awareness* and its impact on learning are captured in an excerpt from a novice teacher quoted earlier in the article: "Everyone learns at a different pace and we all get there at different times. The way we do it might not all be the same." When this level of teacher *social awareness*, as it relates to understanding differences, is refined to include culture, the ability of educators to commit to robust CRP practices is increased. As noted by a principal in our study, "they need to be culturally responsive in our building and connect to the relevancy of the diversity of our kids."

Conclusion and Recommendations

In this article, we argue for a holistic conception of novice teacher effectiveness in Title I schools that prioritizes *growth, relational trust*, and *empowerment* while lending fidelity and authenticity to the necessary work of CRP within highly impacted schools. We suggest that SEL is the hidden "Z factor" and *sentipensante* supporting novice teachers in appreciating, affirming, and promoting their students' cultural identities.

This suggests that the well-established language and structures for creating academic and social–emotional spaces for students to be successful learners already exist. We contend that it is indeed worth considering the ways that these elements could be retooled or redirected toward the developmental needs of novice teachers. Data from this study point to the less obvious conclusion that *what is for good students is good for novice teachers*. Schools in our study are already well on the pathway toward teaching students the knowledge, skills, and dispositions associated with SEL. Nevertheless, what is good can be made better. Key to effective forms of SEL is self-reflection as demonstrated in the words and actions of participants in our study. And, it seems that through the act of radical institutional self-reflection, the SEL skills already evident in schools can be turned 180 degrees in service of early-career teachers. In this way, SEL can become the fertile soil out of which CRP for teachers and students can grow and flourish. In short, what is good for the student is good for the teacher.

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