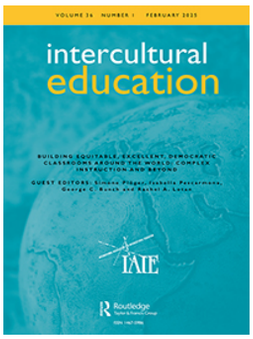

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Adult SEL and the racial equity imperative: three key commitments

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ABSTRACT

Most approaches to social and emotional learning (SEL) and adult SEL in schools inadequately attend to racism and other forms of oppression, which can deteriorate the social and emotional wellbeing of students and staff in schools. In this article, we argue that there can be no meaningful approach to adult SEL that is not rooted in racial equity at both individual and systems levels. We share three key commitments that can help ensure this racial equity rootedness, drawing on the basic principles of equity literacy and building on existing scholarship demanding antiracist approaches to SEL and adult SEL. We focus on adult SEL in particular, arguing that it must be infused with opportunities for educators to strengthen the knowledge and skills necessary to eliminate racism and to implement SEL in racially just ways.

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Introduction

'They're giving me strategies to survive dehumanising working conditions so I can support students' social-emotional growth', Ms Wilkinson told us as she hurried towards her classroom. We were visiting Lawrencetown Middle School as part of an equity audit. We had just observed Ms Wilkinson and her colleagues participate in an adult social-emotional learning (SEL) workshop. She wasn't impressed.

During an earlier conversation, she described an array of conditions with which she and many of her colleagues contended. She bemoaned the invalidating and deprofessionalizing impacts of intensely scripted curricula, the expectation that she use her own money to stock her classroom with basic learning resources, the growing class sizes, repeated requests from leadership that she and her colleagues 'do more with less'. She felt overworked and underappreciated.

On top of the working conditions, she told us, she was navigating what she called a 'double racist whammy'. She described how she's forced to invest

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energy she doesn't have into advocating for Black students – for all students of colour, really. She insisted that she shouldn't have to do that, that she was exhausted from trying to compensate for leadership's equity failures. 'But if I don't, who will?' she asked. As one of three Black teachers in a school where more than one-third of the students were Black, she felt the strain of responsibility for pointing out conditions many of her colleagues were not keen on confronting. So, she also endured increasingly hostile blowback from colleagues.

We could see her uneasiness during the workshop. She listened as colleagues traded strategies for regulating their emotions when frustrated by student behaviours. She sat quietly when they completed an exercise to practice noticing what happened in their bodies while trying to deal with 'difficult' parents. She listened as they talked about everything other than the primary threat to her well-being at Lawrencetown (and, in her estimation, a significant threat to the well-being of many students): racism.

As we neared her classroom, she paused. 'And because I refuse to shut up about racism, I'm a target. I'm shushed, told that I make people uncomfortable, that I'm too angry. Our approach to adult SEL is to ignore all of this, to do some breathing exercises, and then to hand out refillable water bottles'.

Ms Wilkinson was a pariah at Lawrencetown, a school four years into a supposedly all-in commitment to SEL, because she spoke up about racial harm SEL-trained adults were inflicting on students. We made special note of this reality because it is something we've heard from educators, especially educators of colour, all over the United States. In too many cases, racism – as well as heterosexism, xenophobia, and other forms of oppression – survive alongside schools' enthusiastic commitments to whatever variety of SEL does not require simultaneous commitments to equity and justice. Sometimes the people pointing out this reality, like Ms Wilkinson, are ploughed over by a sort of equity-dysconscious SEL: one that prioritises the wellbeing of people whose privilege protects them from having to navigate the hostile conditions with which Ms Wilkinson contends, and to do so while overlooking the well-being of most everybody else.

'I have to prepare for class', she told us. 'But let me say this: I don't need a water bottle. I need racial justice. The biggest barrier between me and well-being at this school is not student or parent behaviour. It's how I'm treated by other adults'. She wondered when, among all these conversations about adult SEL, her colleagues were going to grapple with *that*.

'I'm not holding my breath', she concluded as students began trickling into her classroom.

I don't need a water bottle; I need racial justice. Ms Wilkinson's statement is emblematic of the conditions we've observed widely in schools – the conditions that led us to write this article. How does racism – how do heterosexism, ableism, or other forms of oppression – survive in schools that embrace SEL?

How do they survive increasingly popular adult SEL initiatives? We've worked with dozens of schools and districts that passionately enact SEL. In some cases, those schools and districts imagined SEL as a path towards equity, which is something that, without a simultaneous profound anti-oppressive reckoning, it cannot be (e.g. Cipriano and Strambler 2024; Jagers et al. 2021; Mayes et al. 2022). We begin with this assertion: there is no such thing as a meaningful or effective approach to SEL or adult SEL that is not rooted fundamentally in equity. A commitment to justice is a prerequisite, not an optional consideration, for SEL.

With that assertion in mind, we present in this article three commitments for equity-based adult SEL – commitments that we argue should guide adult SEL design and implementation. As we discuss in more detail below, we focus on *adult* SEL because, as many SEL scholars (Jennings and Greenberg 2009; Schlund, Jagers, and Schlinger 2020) have argued, educators' abilities to meaningfully and effectively support students' social-emotional development and well-being depend on their own social-emotional development and well-being. We cannot expect educators who face harmful or even hostile conditions to optimally cultivate SEL in their classrooms.

We adopted *equity literacy* (Gorski and Swalwell 2015; Wessel-Powell, Panos and Weir 2021) as our grounding theoretical framework in the development of these core commitments. Equity literacy is a systems-oriented framework for transitioning educational institutions from the surface-level, mitigative, high-optics but low-impact equity approaches commonly embraced in schools (Gorski and Swalwell 2023) – detached diversity celebrations or stereotype-laden cultural 'awareness' workshops, for example – to deep, transformative equity commitments. A core component of equity literacy, and the aspect of the framework that partially inspired this article, is a series of evidence-based transformative equity principles meant to guide schools towards this more transformative approach, centred around identifying and eliminating the root causes of inequities (Bukko and Liu 2021).

We were especially drawn to the equity literacy framework's values orientation. It rejects the notion that schools can implement significant institutional change by embracing small shifts in practice within big, unjust systems (Gorski, DuBose, and Swalwell 2022). Many SEL scholars and practitioners have raised similar concerns about how SEL often is implemented in schools by adding small programmatic or curricular practices within classrooms or schools where policies and institutional cultures may continue to deteriorate the well-being of some students and staff (Durlak et al. 2011). So, rather than offering a blueprint for equity practices schools might cobble together while failing to attend in serious ways to the inequities that make those practices necessary, the core of the equity literacy framework is a series of transformative principles. These principles are derived from scholarship describing the values and commitments that distinguish schools that invest a lot of

resources into 'equity' but make little equity progress, usually due to the tendency towards high-optics, low-impact equity initiatives, and schools that can track measurable progress towards equity, especially based on the assessment and experience of the most marginalised people in those schools' communities (Gorski and Swalwell 2023). The four equity literacy principles that most inform this article include:

(1) The *direct confrontation* principle: Institutional equity transformation requires a process of honestly naming and directly addressing the root causes of inequity. Approaches, such as cultural competence, that research has shown to mask or sidestep the root causes of inequity (Beach, Price, and Gary 2005; Carey 2015; Pon 2009), must be replaced by approaches that expose and confront all the ways racism and other forms of oppression operate in schools.
(2) The *prioritization* principle: Equity efforts must prioritise the best interests, joys, and demands of the people bearing the brunt of inequity. This means that equity efforts should be conceived and paced in ways that reflect those interests, joys, and demands, and not in ways that protect the feelings or interests of the people whose privilege is fed by existing inequities.
(3) The *fix injustice, not kids* principle: Equity efforts never should adopt a deficit ideology, which focuses on adjusting the cultures, mindsets, values, grittiness, or behaviours of people who bear the brunt of inequity. Equity is not compatible with deficit ideology.
(4) The *just access* principle. Equity is not just about providing equitable access to this or that programme or learning opportunity. It is also about ensuring that the things to which we provide equitable access are, themselves, equitable. If the adult SEL programme fails to attend to the wellbeing of all adults or if it fails to prepare adults to attend to the wellbeing of all students, then it is an unjust adult SEL (Gorski and Swalwell 2023).

Consistent with the equity literacy framework, we chose to push against the culture of least common denominator implementation in education, the tendency to turn robust frameworks and programs into simplistic and detached strategies – adult SEL as refillable water bottles and brief mindfulness meditations before faculty meetings – by focusing centrally, not on equity-related adult SEL *practices*, but rather on value-based *commitments* steeped in equity-grounded understandings that can inform all aspects of adult SEL. We lay out a vision for an adult SEL steeped in equity, contextualised by an awareness of inequity. We don't want to provide Ms Wilkinson or her students with strategies to survive racism. We want all educators to be prepared as a core aspect of engaging with and leading SEL to identify and

eliminate racism and other oppressions that deteriorate people's learning and well-being. We want full integration of equity and SEL, starting with adult SEL.

In framing our three equity commitments for adult SEL, we also drew on existing SEL and adult SEL scholarship that describes the equity shortcomings of common approaches and describes how equity is essential to SEL. We synthesise much of that scholarship below to help contextualise this article in the existing literature.

Following that synthesis, we detail the three commitments, explaining their theoretical foundations and practical implications. Then we discuss how this approach to adult SEL can positively impact adults and students in schools, emphasising the importance of confronting systemic inequities *as part of an effective adult SEL practice* rather than merely teaching coping skills or other interpersonal competencies.

Contextualizing equity and adult SEL

In our experience, the well-documented forms of inequity that persist in most schools and districts, from racial discipline disparities (Allen, Scott, and Lewis 2013) to socioeconomic-based tracking (Osher et al. 2020) to hostilities endured by equity-demanding educators (Jagers et al. 2021; Schlund, Jagers, and Schlinger 2020; Simmons 2019) are just as likely to show up in schools that profess a commitment to SEL as they are in schools that do not embrace SEL. In too many instances, all the mindfulness, emotion regulation, contemplativeness and other practices common in adult SEL pose little threat to the racial biases, deficit-laced presumptions, and interpersonal microaggressions operating in schools. As we examined the increasingly robust literature that explores SEL and equity from a variety of angles, we found that we are not alone in this observation.

Notably, this disconnect exists despite efforts by CASEL (Jagers et al. 2021; Jagers, Rivas-Drake, and Williams 2019; Schlund, Jagers, and Schlinger 2020) as well as both SEL scholars (Baez and Baez 2023; Cipriano and Strambler 2024; McCall et al. 2023; Ramirez et al. 2021) and equity and justice scholars (Petrokubi, Bates, and Malinis 2019) to insist that, if schools hope to avoid reproducing inequity through SEL initiatives, SEL and adult SEL must be grounded in deep institutional equity values. Many schools appear to consider equity an optional aspect of SEL; many of those schools appear to be opting out (Forman, Foster, and Rigby 2022).

In order to contextualise the three commitments we propose, we next consider the existing literature on equity and SEL. We start by considering how equity often is overlooked in SEL and adult SEL implementation. Then we synthesise arguments in existing scholarship about why equity is important for adult SEL in particular.

A brief history of SEL and equity

The movement for SEL in schools can be traced back over 30 years to James P. Comer (Mayes et al. 2022). The Comer School Development Programme's (CSDP) approach to SEL reflected a deep understanding of the impact of racism and historically entrenched racist systems, based on Comer's scholarship and his lived experience as a Black man in the United States (Comer 1988). Comer's notion of 'low performing' schools was based on the U.S. historical context of injustice and highlighted complex interactional dynamics across identity groups; school personnel's biases, judgements, and stereotypes of children, families, and communities; and the role of internalised racism in child and parent behaviour (Comer 1988). This SEL approach focused on systems-level interventions to address adults' biases as well as interventions to improve adult relationships within school communities (Mayes et al. 2022).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was founded in 1994, and in 1997 published the CASEL 5 SEL Competencies Framework that has become well-known in U.S. schools and beyond: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL 2024). Since then, SEL has become increasingly popular in schools in many parts of the world, but in most contexts the focus has shifted significantly from long-term institutional and systemic changes to a deficit-laden skills-based approach meant to support students' individual development in these competency areas (Lin et al. 2023).

Today schools implement many different SEL programmes with varying levels of empirical support (CASEL 2024). Most consist of standalone curricular interventions designed to teach youth skills such as regulating emotions, navigating relationships, and problem-solving (Cipriano and Strambler 2024; McCall et al. 2023; Ramirez et al. 2021). Meta-analyses of these programmes indicate that at the school level, SEL programmes are associated with increased prosocial behaviours, SEL skills, and academic achievement, as well as decreases in emotional distress and conduct problems when implemented with fidelity (Durlak et al. 2022). What remains unclear are possible differential effects across gender identity, race, language, and sexual orientation, among other identities (Brown, Maggin, and Buren 2018; Ramirez et al. 2021). Even less is known about the interaction between such variables, leaving questions open about whether SEL is supporting the needs of all students or whether available data analyses obscure identity- or experience-related differences in response to SEL interventions (Cipriano and Strambler 2024; Durlak et al. 2022).

The absence or insufficiency of equity in SEL implementation

Notably, few existing SEL curricula focus on equity or talk about the profound impact of historical injustice, present-day oppression, or individual prejudice on

the mental, emotional, and spiritual health of students and adults in schools (Ramirez et al. 2021). Fewer still provide supports for educators to explore their own biases, grapple with inequity-laced ideologies, change their behaviours to identify and interrupt microaggressions or institutionalised injustice, and help transform schools into more just environments (Brown, Maggin, and Buren 2018; Ramirez et al. 2021).

In the last few decades, when equity was mentioned in the context of competency-based SEL, the focus was on equitable access to curriculum materials as opposed to access to school environments free of inequity or meaningful commitments to cultural responsiveness (Lin et al. 2023). In response, Simmons (2019) warned against the dangers of 'white-washed SEL'; she and other SEL leaders have called for SEL to be leveraged intentionally and strategically to help create equitable schools for all youth (e.g. Duane et al. 2021; Simmons 2021). While many SEL practitioners continue to embrace the potential of competency-based SEL, when provided in a decontextualised, race-dysconscious manner, or without the preparation of equity literate educators, these programmes run the risk of deepening the marginalisation of youth and adults who already bear the brunt of injustice in schools (Simmons 2019).

Too many schools implement SEL as disconnected classroom lessons rather than doing the deeper work of transforming institutional cultures based on core SEL values or attending to the root causes of the problems they imagine SEL will solve (Cipriano and Strambler 2024; McCall et al. 2023; Ramirez et al. 2021; Schlund, Jagers, and Schlinger 2020), resulting in SEL and adult SEL approaches that are devoid of any real consideration for equity and justice. Simmons (2021) has called these approaches 'white supremacy with a hug' (par. 11). This does not only impact students; it harms teachers like Ms Wilkinson, who might even experience racism while attending an adult SEL workshop.

Equity cannot be one vague value among a list of SEL elements. In the case of CASEL's most recent model, where there seems to have been an attempt to integrate equity more fully, the integration is somewhat soft, conflating goals of equity and justice with softer, less transformative intentions like belonging and inclusion, which might project a sense that, when it comes to SEL, equity and justice are optional, not integral (McMain 2023). A deeper equity grappling is in order.

The need for equity-grounded adult SEL

We spotlight adult SEL because educators' abilities to support students' social-emotional development depend on their own social-emotional well-being (Jennings and Greenberg 2009; Schlund, Jagers, and Schlinger 2020). Adult well-being also impacts teacher turnover, with approximately 8% of public school educators leaving annually, often due to stress and burnout (Diliberti, Schwartz, and Grant 2021). Turnover is highest in high-poverty districts serving high

percentages of students of colour. As legislation increasingly targets equity efforts, teachers advocating for equity may face heightened stress, especially if they are targets of oppression themselves (Gorski and Chen 2015).

Adult SEL with a core equity focus is essential for more than supporting teacher well-being and retention. Teachers' abilities to support the social-emotional development of students in an equitable manner without reproducing the institutional harms of racism, ableism, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression depends on the extent to which they understand the sociopolitical contexts of students and the extent to which they operationalise SEL in just ways that are responsive to those contexts (Jagers, Rivas-Drake, and Williams 2019). If teachers implement morning circle while also enforcing racist discipline practices, undoing for many students whatever equanimity and connection the morning circle was meant to foster, we cannot honestly say that teacher embraces the spirit of SEL.

The stakes might be highest for educators who, like Ms Wilkinson, are also targets of inequity in their schools, including teachers of colour, LGBTQ+ teachers, and teachers who, whatever their identities, openly advocate for equity (Irizarry 2007; Pour-Khorshid 2018). They often are asked to deliver SEL programming while coping with inequity or hostility for their equity advocacy (Grooms and Childs 2021). Similarly, the stakes may be especially high for students of colour, LGBTQ+ students, and other students who disproportionately are marginalised in schools, who may be required to participate in SEL programming in classrooms where unjust policies and inequitable institutional cultures deteriorate their wellbeing. If approaches for adult SEL do not attend directly with these sorts of realities, then we have to ask who, exactly, adult SEL is for, and what harms it might be masking.

In 2019, CASEL adopted a three-year plan to prioritise and advance SEL towards equity. This included the creation of a work group to reconceptualise CASEL's approach to SEL through an equity lens while strengthening SEL integration across curricular content and strengthening adult SEL (Jagers, Rivas-Drake, and Williams 2019; Osher et al. 2020). Jagers, Rivas-Drake, and Williams (2019), in partnership with CASEL, proposed a framework of *transformative* SEL meant to transform individuals, relationships, and systems through distributive justice and authentic partnerships with youth and families. At the individual level, this approach expands the CASEL 5 competency areas, highlighting the importance of cultivating identity, agency, belonging, collaborative problem-solving, and curiosity (Jagers et al. 2021). At the individual and systems level, transformative SEL is designed to recognise and address contextual and relational issues involving privilege, discrimination, and power within schools and interactional dynamics between families and schools (Jagers et al. 2021). However, as with SEL more broadly, the adult SEL literature has, with few exceptions, inadequately identified the equity knowledge and commitments teachers and other educators need to create validating and equitable learning

environments that promote social-emotional competencies (Herman and Baaki 2024).

To help fill that gap, we propose three commitments to guide meaningful shifts in adult SEL implementation. These commitments draw from the transformative spirit of the equity literacy framework (Gorski and Swalwell 2023) and transformative SEL (Jagers, Rivas-Drake, and Williams 2019) along with the insights and observations of scholars who have been advocating for an equity-based approach to SEL.

A transformative equity approach to adult SEL: three commitments

These three commitments for a transformative approach to adult SEL bridge foundational equity principles with actionable adult SEL approaches. For these commitments to be effective, school teams must agree to, and hold one another accountable to, them. The commitments include: (1) to make equity imperative, not optional, (2) to adjust systems, not just people, and (3) to reinvigorate and reimagine 'evidence'-based approaches. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of equity-related adult SEL values, but rather a point of departure for normalising equity and justice in adult SEL.

Commitment 1: make equity imperative, not optional

In any meaningful approach to adult SEL, equity must be foundational rather than an optional add-on or tangential theme. Consistent with the *direct confrontation* principle of the equity literacy framework (Gorski and Swalwell 2023), centring equity in this way requires an honest assessment of and confrontation with the ways inequity is perpetuated and maintained in schools. It requires schools to transcend softer goals such as diversity appreciation and belonging and strive towards a more vigorous reckoning with racism and other oppressions. The *make equity imperative* commitment demands that we approach all aspects of adult SEL through this lens.

This approach also requires schools, not only to adopt culturally responsive curricula, but also to embrace a more integrative and comprehensive commitment to promoting equity at individual and systems levels. When equity is integral to SEL and adult SEL in this way, the *first task* of SEL is to identify and eliminate all the ways school policies, practices, and institutional cultures threaten the social and emotional wellbeing of students, staff, and families. Central to this task is preparing adults in schools to do the identifying and eliminating, especially when it comes to policies, practices, and aspects of institutional culture that are disproportionately deleterious to people of colour, LGBTQ+ people, people who are learning English, people experiencing poverty, and other people who bear the brunt of injustice in and out of schools. These might include hyperpunitive discipline policies or racially and economically

tinged tracking practices. They also might include educator-facing policies and practices; they include addressing inequity in hiring processes, for example. Approaches to SEL that help students or staff *survive* inequitable conditions while failing to address those conditions enable injustice. (We return to this theme when we discuss commitment 2 below.)

Adult SEL initiatives must prepare educators to identify and eliminate injustice, not as an optional consideration for people already committed to equity, but as an integral part of effective SEL. If educators are incapable of or unwilling to identify and eliminate inequity, then they are incapable of or unwilling to implement meaningful SEL. The key is, if schools make this commitment, they must invest the resources required to prepare educators with the knowledge and skills necessary to do it. Adult SEL must include explicit learning about justice and injustice, supporting educators in understanding how racism, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression operate around and perhaps through them, how these and other oppressions are perpetuated individually and institutionally, and how to interrupt them. If educators cannot do this, they simply cannot support the social and emotional development of students who are experiencing those oppressions. Similarly, if the people tasked with training educators on SEL do not, themselves, embrace a justice-focused SEL, then they cannot prepare educators to implement meaningful SEL.

To clarify, SEL is not by itself a solution to educational or any other injustice, nor is adult SEL. If we do not insist that SEL can only be effective and meaningful in schools that also embrace transformative commitments to equity, SEL programmes are bound to reproduce inequity. We must ask, who, exactly, that kind of SEL is for. The starting point is adult SEL, preparing the people cultivating and facilitating student-facing SEL with the equity literacy to address inequitable conditions.

Adult SEL initiatives, then, must grapple with the hard realities of injustice. We must dispel the notion of adult SEL as disconnected practices, like those implemented in Ms Wilkinson's school. We can start with school policy. For example, SEL programmes that might prepare educators to appreciate diversity, while educators and educational leaders remain silent about policies that ban books and silence conversations about structural racism or heteronormativity, enable injustice. Such an invalidating, tokenising, dehumanising approach exemplifies how injustice can thrive at institutional levels even if teachers attend adult SEL workshops to learn emotion regulation strategies and mindfulness skills.

Systemic and institutional change is crucial for creating the context for meaningful, equity-integral SEL. But the individual skill development and ideological shifts required to support that level of change are also necessary, as systems are driven by people (Osher et al. 2020). For example, if equity is integral to adult SEL, then adult SEL must help educators develop the skills to immerse themselves in the discomfort of difficult conversations and increase

their motivation to strengthen their own and one another's equity literacy and to engage in meaningful equity practice. It is crucial to call people in, help them grow, and ensure that the labour of equity work does not fall solely on the shoulders of the people who bear the brunt of marginalisation.

Commitment 2: adjust systems, not just people

As we mentioned earlier, SEL is adopted too often as a curricular add-on or as brief exercises within contexts where injustice thrives. For example, in many of the schools with which we have worked, schools have adopted SEL and maybe even adult SEL while sustaining hyper-punitive discipline systems that have the potential to harm all students, but that do the most damage to students who already are marginalised in other ways (Marsh and Walker 2022). This is what Ms Wilkinson was attempting to address in her school, only to be further harmed in the process. If SEL does not attend to these harmful systems within classrooms and schools, and if adult SEL fails to attend to how adults are harmed through troubling, inequitable aspects of institutional culture (and prepare them to attend to how those harms are perpetuated in themselves and their spheres of influence), then schools essentially are adopting privilege-laden SEL.

When we make the *adjust systems, not just people* commitment, we focus on systems-level change rather than solely on individual interventions (Darling-Hammond 2024; Jagers, Rivas-Drake, and Williams 2019). Perhaps the most troubling of these individual interventions are those meant to adjust people bearing the brunt of injustice to that injustice. *Here is a breathing exercise to help you bear the weight of the racism you are experiencing at this school while we fail to eliminate the racism*. Consistent with the *prioritization* principle of the equity literacy framework (Gorski and Swalwell 2023), we demonstrate the power of the *adjust systems, not just people* commitment when we instead address the root causes of inequity and other harmful conditions in schools. In equity literacy parlance, we must eliminate unjust policies and practices, but we also must address the institutional conditions that ever allowed those policies and practices to do damage.

Certainly SEL-prepared educators need both interpersonal and institutional equity understanding and skills. But we must avoid confusing the former for the latter, imagining that when people reflect on their personal biases, systemic inequities magically disappear. They don't (Wyatt and Randall 2024). We should combine individual and interpersonal approaches to transform the systems-level conditions perpetuating inequities. What real impact can adult SEL initiatives have in schools that, due to systems-level breakdowns, continue to hire people who mindlessly perpetuate inequity? Hiring is a systems issue.

One place to start this process is by conducting a comprehensive equity audit (e.g. Radd et al. 2021) to identify the institutional practices that marginalise educators and students. This process should be built into SEL onboarding.

According to Radd et al. (2021), an equity audit includes two fundamental steps: a quantitative assessment of disproportionality in representation, access, and outcomes and a mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative) examination of environmental equity. If we want to understand whether schools are places where all individuals are seen, heard, and valued, we should focus data collection on the experiences of people from marginalised groups. While many equity audits in schools focus on student outcomes (proportional representation in AP class, for example), an approach for supporting adult well-being must also include analyses of data related to recruitment and retention, self-reported well-being and job satisfaction, experiences of discrimination in the workplace, salary equity, and representation in leadership positions.

Even if we do not have the resources to engage in a full-scale equity audit, we must commit as part of the SEL and adult SEL process to honestly naming and directly confronting, not just individual bias, but institutionalised inequity. Similarly, the goals and strategies we adopt must target systemic barriers to equity, not just individual biases. No amount of professional development on relaxation strategies and mindfulness will change inequitable systems; the presence of unaddressed inequitable systems undermines the meaningfulness of these SEL skills.

Commitment 3: reimagine and invigorate 'evidence'-based practice

Aside from scholarship specifically devoted to arguing for equity in SEL, existing research on SEL and adult SEL lacks adequate attention to equity and intersectionality (Cipriano and Strambler 2024); we need more studies examining the acceptability, feasibility, and effectiveness of approaches for cultivating and sustaining equitable schools and making SEL and adult SEL part of that cultivating and sustaining. In the meantime, we can rely on scholarship that does exist to inform our approaches. We highlight this tension because, as we mentioned earlier, we have observed in many schools a tendency among leaders to invest in ineffective or otherwise troubling interventions in the name of adult SEL, some of which we identified earlier, such as targeting only individual biases or equipping educators with coping skills while ignoring institutional conditions that do social, emotional, and other damage. Critical and justice-minded scholars have argued the need to make a shift towards more transformative approaches philosophically and theoretically (Simmons 2019), but research on the impact of more transformative approaches lags.

A key to invigorating scholarship on, and the practice of, adult SEL is to reimagine what constitutes 'evidence' of what works and 'evidence' of impact. The *reimagine and invigorate 'evidence'-based practice* commitment challenges us to build on traditional academic measures and evaluations that often lack any sort of equity analysis (Safir and Dugan 2021) by employing theoretical and conceptual frameworks and research methods that are informed by critical,

contemporary understandings of power and oppression. In this way, we ground an equity-based approach for adult SEL in contemporary critical conceptual and theoretical frameworks, which might include Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner 1978), critical race theory (McCall et al. 2022; Sullivan et al. 2023), intersectionality (Crenshaw et al. 1995), culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay 2002; Hammond 2014), and transformative SEL (Jagers et al. 2021). The key is to *normalize* the engagement of these frameworks to the point that scholarship on antiracism, for example, in adult SEL is not pigeon-holed into its own scholarship category. SEL scholarship *should be anti-oppressive* by nature because the nature of SEL and adult SEL must be anti-oppressive. When that is a measure of the usefulness of any particular piece of scholarship, when we no longer can decouple the equity-related adult SEL scholarship from 'adult SEL scholarship', then we will have achieved a key shift that supports the *make equity imperative, not optional* commitment and, because critical and justice-oriented frameworks are, by nature, systems-focused, not just individual-bias-focused, we will have buttressed the *adjust systems, not just people* commitment.

As researchers, school- or district-based programme evaluation specialists, and other scholars evaluate adult SEL interventions through this and other equity commitments, in keeping with the basic principles of equity literacy, we also encourage a critical analysis of methodology and of what constitutes 'data' and 'evidence'. One way to adopt the *reimagine and invigorate 'evidence'-based practice* commitment is to enact alongside traditional research and evaluation approaches those that purposefully account for the messiness of unequal distributions of power and access and that foreground the voices and experiences of people who are marginalised. We specifically recommend critical quantitative analysis (e.g. Garcia, López, and Vélez 2017; Stage and Wells 2014) and participatory action-based research (Meland and Brion-Meisels 2023).

For example, critical quantitative analysis acknowledges how some researchers have used quantitative research to justify inaccurate and oppressive findings, as in the eugenics movement (Garcia, López, and Vélez 2017). It attends to ways quantitative data might be misinterpreted to perpetuate deficit ideology and harmful narratives about people who are marginalised (Gutiérrez 2008). Critical quantitative researchers argue that quantitative methodologies can be used in service of equity if we acknowledge power relations, grapple with the difficult nature of quantifying racism and other oppressions, and remember that numbers are not neutral (Garcia, López, and Vélez 2017).

Beyond selecting research and evaluation methodologies that allow for justice-grounded analysis, we can begin to ask questions both about what constitutes 'data' and how those data are interpreted. At the most basic level, this means disaggregating data to show how adult SEL interventions affect people differently depending on identity and positionality. Much of the existing SEL research does not incorporate these disaggregations (Cipriano and Strambler 2023).

In keeping with a critical lens, we also should interpret all data in context and not engage in 'gap-gazing' or other deficit-laced interpretations of group differences (Gutierrez 2008). As Gorski and Swalwell (2023) have pointed out, one of the biggest barriers to equity progress in schools is that the big push for data-driven decision-making often fails to account for educational leaders interpreting data through deficit lenses. If we have data that show that Black students are suspended or expelled at higher rates than white students, for example, and interpret that data to say that Black students must misbehave more than White students – which more than a decade of research has shown to be the *wrong* interpretation (Girvan et al. 2019; Kunesh and Noltemeyer 2019) – then our responses to this disparity are bound to focus on adjusting something about Black students rather than eliminating racism. If adult SEL does not prepare educators with the skills to interpret data informing SEL practices, they are bound to make the same kinds of mistakes. Similarly, if a school like Ms Wilkinson's does not tease out her experience from a pile of data that might show that, on average, teachers at her school feel affirmed and respected, then her school's adult SEL will continue to be designed in ways that marginalise her.

We must be accountable to the results of our inquiry and, in this way, to adults and youth in schools. This accountability requires humility and adaptability as we refine and improve our interventions in response to feedback and data. Throughout this process, we should pay close attention to amplifying and listening to people in schools who are fighting for equity and those whose views may historically have been pushed aside. We need to listen to Ms Wilkinson and to the other equity champions in schools and build our adult SEL approaches around their interests, joys, and demands.

Finally, the conversation we had with Ms Wilkinson is, itself, data. If people are being harmed *right now* we don't need a multi-month evaluation process to confirm what they are sharing. What students report to us during side conversations about their experiences in school *are data*. Adult SEL initiatives must be responsive to these data. We recommend that schools develop mechanisms to capture this kind of feedback and consider how it can guide adult SEL.

Conclusion

We have argued the critical need for centering equity in adult SEL and presented three fundamental commitments to guide this process. These commitments – making equity imperative, adjusting systems rather than just people, and reimagining evidence-based practice – can be important guidelines for schools to implement meaningful adult SEL. The time for incremental change has passed. The experiences of educators like Ms Wilkinson underscore the harm caused by SEL and adult SEL programmes that fail to address the root causes of inequity while expecting people who are marginalised to cope with unjust systems.

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