

## Social and Emotional Learning Research Brief

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**The EAD Research and Evaluation Task Force is pleased to share these research briefs which summarize findings from research on various practices and priorities associated with EAD. The authors of each brief were asked to highlight main findings from research on the given subject. Additional briefs are in process and will be released periodically**

Relationships and emotional processes shape how people learn. Accordingly, scholars across disciplines recognize the importance of the social and emotional dimensions of schooling, and the role that cognitive, emotional, and behavioral skills play in strengthening civics education to prepare the next generation for democratic life.<sup>1</sup> Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) provides both the theoretical foundation and the methodology for tending to this development in school settings. Scholars define SEL as a learning process through which people of all ages acquire the ability to recognize and manage emotions, set and achieve goals, and develop effective interpersonal skills.<sup>2</sup> Though the definition, rationales, and skills that SEL comprises are subject to scholarly debate,<sup>3</sup> broadly describe the learning process as a “complex interplay of cognitive skills, such as attention and the ability to solve problems; beliefs about the self, such as perceptions of competence and autonomy; and

social awareness, including empathy for others and the ability to resolve conflict” (p. 4). This description illuminates the overlaps between SEL competencies and those needed for civic engagement in a constitutional democracy. The consensus around SEL, as well as the empirical evidence, support the underlying theory of change: through intentional and systematic instruction, students can develop cognitive, social, and emotional skills to critically and collaboratively engage with civic issues, and apply these skills in diverse community settings as part of their daily repertoire.<sup>4</sup>

### *Why Social and Emotional Learning?*



Research has shown that learning opportunities and environments conducive to SEL development have had significant positive outcomes

<sup>1</sup> Keegan, P. (2022). Teaching Critical Affective Civic Literacy through Social Studies Inquiry. *Mindful Social Studies: Frameworks for Social Emotional Learning and Critically Engaged Citizens*, 33; Jagers, R. J., Skoog-Hoffman, A., Barthelus, B., & Schlund, J. (2021). Transformative social emotional learning: In pursuit of educational equity and excellence. *American Educator*, 45(2), 12-17.

<sup>2</sup> Osher, D., Kidron, Y., Brackett, M., Dymnicki, A., Jones, S., & Weissberg, R. P. (2016). Advancing the science and practice of social and emotional learning: Looking back and moving forward. *Review of Research in Education*, 40(1), 644-681; Weissberg, R. P., Durlak, J. A., Domitrovich, C. E., & Gullotta, T. P. (2015). Social and emotional learning: Past, present, and future.

<sup>3</sup> Jones, S. M., & Doolittle, E. J. (2017). Social and emotional learning: Introducing the issue. *The future of children*, 3-11.

<sup>4</sup> Domitrovich, C. E., Harris, A. R., Syvertsen, A. K., Morgan, N., Jacobson, L., Cleveland, M., Moore, J. E., & Greenberg, M. T. (2022). Promoting social and emotional learning in middle school: Intervention effects of facing history and ourselves. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 51(7), 1426-1441; Cipriano C, Strambler MJ, Naples LH, Ha C, Kirk M, Wood M, Sehgal K, Zieher AK, Eveleigh A, McCarthy M, Funaro M, Ponnock A, Chow JC, Durlak J. (2023b). The state of evidence for social and emotional learning: A contemporary meta-analysis of universal school-based SEL interventions. *Child Development*. 94(5), 1181-1204.

for students across backgrounds.<sup>5</sup> Quality SEL programs that emphasize student voice have been shown to not only improve academic outcomes, but also foster autonomy, sense of belonging, and engagement with identity exploration, including among racial and ethnic minorities.<sup>6</sup> SEL has gained traction in the civic education space due to alignment of SEL strategies and learning outcomes with those needed to foster democratic, justice-oriented citizenship.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, SEL contributes to more holistic civic development by tending to affective dimensions of civic preparation, such as the role of emotion in democratic participation,<sup>8</sup> communication, leadership, and changemaking.<sup>9</sup> This brief introduces relevant SEL frameworks and summarizes evidence-based instructional practices keyed to EAD exemplar outcomes to highlight how SEL supports civic learning.

SEL frameworks provide models for conceptualizing and approaching social and emotional development, often across learning contexts or developmental stages.<sup>10</sup> Models have

been adapted and explicitly applied to the civic space, aiming to ensure cultural responsiveness and equal development and empowerment of young people from across all backgrounds. For example, transformative SEL seeks to foster the knowledge, attitudes, and skills required for youth to challenge unjust structures of power, prejudice, and discrimination and thus to create equitable systems.<sup>11</sup> It leverages SEL to cultivate an open classroom climate through which students can express vulnerability and feel a sense of safety and belonging—key conditions for democratic civic reasoning and empathic discourse across differences.<sup>12</sup> Another relevant framework is critical affective civic literacy, which calls for more robust attention to critical understanding of political emotions.<sup>13</sup> Through self and collective inquiry, it guides students in recognizing how they feel in the face of different political events or discussions, to prepare them to be more resilient and motivated to navigate civil disagreement and pursue social justice<sup>14</sup> further emphasize the importance of contextualizing SEL within youth-guided experiential

<sup>5</sup> Cipriano, C., Naples, L. H., Eveleigh, A., Cook, A., Funaro, M., Cassidy, C., McCarthy, M. F., & Rappolt-Schlichtmann, G. (2023a). A systematic review of student disability and race representation in universal school-based social and emotional learning interventions for elementary school students. *Review of Educational Research*, 93(1), 73–102; Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child development*, 82(1), 405–432; Greenberg, M. (2023). *Evidence for social and emotional learning in schools* [Brief]. Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/evidence-social-emotional-learning-schools-brief>.

<sup>6</sup> Barber, C., Clark, C., Torney-Purta, J., Campbell, D., Hahn, C., & Kuhn, D. (2021). Learning environments and school/classroom climate as supports for civic reasoning, discourse, and engagement. *Educating for civic reasoning and discourse*, 273–318; Rivas-Drake, D., Lozada, F. T., Pinetta, B. J., & Jagers, R. J. (2020). School-based social-emotional learning and ethnic-racial identity among African American and Latino adolescents. *Youth & Society*, 52(7), 1331–1354.

<sup>7</sup> Domitrovich, C. E., Harris, A. R., Syvertsen, A. K., Morgan, N., Jacobson, L., Cleveland, M., Moore, J. E., & Greenberg, M. T. (2022). Promoting social and emotional learning in middle school: Intervention effects of facing history and ourselves. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 51(7), 1426–1441; Keegan, P. (2023). What kind of affective citizen? An analysis of state social emotional learning standards. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 1–26.

<sup>8</sup> Keegan, P. (2022). Teaching Critical Affective Civic Literacy through Social Studies Inquiry. *Mindful Social Studies: Frameworks for Social Emotional Learning and Critically Engaged Citizens*, 33.

<sup>9</sup> Jagers, R. J., Skoog-Hoffman, A., Barthelus, B., & Schlund, J. (2021). Transformative social emotional learning: In pursuit of educational equity and excellence. *American Educator*, 45(2), 12–17.

<sup>10</sup> Osher, D., Kidron, Y., Brackett, M., Dymnicki, A., Jones, S., & Weissberg, R. P. (2016). Advancing the science and practice of social and emotional learning: Looking back and moving forward. *Review of Research in Education*, 40(1), 644–681.

<sup>11</sup> Jagers, R. J., Rivas-Drake, D., & Williams, B. (2019). Transformative social and emotional learning (SEL): Toward SEL in service of educational equity and excellence. *Educational Psychologist*, 54(3), 162–184.

<sup>12</sup> Keegan, P. (2023). What kind of affective citizen? An analysis of state social emotional learning standards. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 1–26; Mirra, N. (2018). *Educating for empathy: Literacy learning and civic engagement*. Teachers College Press.

<sup>13</sup> Keegan, P. (2022). Teaching Critical Affective Civic Literacy through Social Studies Inquiry. *Mindful Social Studies: Frameworks for Social Emotional Learning and Critically Engaged Citizens*, 33.

<sup>14</sup> Jagers, R. J., Skoog-Hoffman, A., Barthelus, B., & Schlund, J. (2021). Transformative social emotional learning: In pursuit of educational equity and excellence. *American Educator*, 45(2), 12–17.

approaches, so students develop skills—such as collaborative problem solving—that better equip them to actively participate in democracy.



Civic education research, predominantly surrounding action civics and service-learning programs, has uncovered active curricular and pedagogical ingredients that foster SEL-aligned civic outcomes. Studies show that student-centered, inquiry-based approaches like *Facing History and Ourselves* not only promote empathy, but also cultivate stronger civic commitment.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, inquiry-based action civics programs have been found to foster civic identity development,<sup>16</sup> which is a key developmental task during adolescence.<sup>17</sup> It enables students to hone cognitive skills to consider different models of civic engagement and reflect on their roles in their communities.<sup>18</sup> By prompting students to research and develop advocacy projects related to community issues, such programs nurture the SEL skills needed for students to make sense of, and engage with, their socio-political environments.<sup>19</sup> These elements

are found to cultivate problem-solving and decision-making capacities<sup>20</sup> for responsible civic engagement, and to foster domain-specific civic engagement in subjects beyond social studies.<sup>21</sup>

Opportunities to carry out civic action are emphasized in the research as empowering students to develop self-efficacy and a sense of agency. The fundamental idea is that



students are more likely to take action when they believe their voice or political action can make a difference.<sup>22</sup> Specifically, students that work on projects focused on issues beyond their school or have access to decision makers are more likely to develop a sense of efficacy.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, students that have a chance to express their work publicly, actively listen to peers, and collaborate, build relational and emotional skills including empathy, perspective taking, and sense of connectedness.<sup>24</sup> Student emotional engagement can fuel civic engagement through a diverse range of emotions students might share together,

<sup>15</sup> Domitrovich, C. E., Harris, A. R., Syvertsen, A. K., Morgan, N., Jacobson, L., Cleveland, M., Moore, J. E., & Greenberg, M. T. (2022). Promoting social and emotional learning in middle school: Intervention effects of facing history and ourselves. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 51(7), 1426-1441.

<sup>16</sup> Quinn, B. P., & Bauml, M. (2018). Cultivating a mindset of civic engagement among young adolescents. *The Journal of Social Studies Research*, 42(2), 185-200.

<sup>17</sup> Rivas-Drake, D., Lozada, F. T., Pinetta, B. J., & Jagers, R. J. (2020). School-based social-emotional learning and ethnic-racial identity among African American and Latino adolescents. *Youth & Society*, 52(7), 1331-1354.

<sup>18</sup> Smith, V. D., Magill, K. R., Blevins, B., & Scholten, N. (2022). Sorting through citizenship: A case study on using cognitive scaffolding to unpack adolescent civic identity formation. *The Journal of Social Studies Research*, 46(3), 223-235.

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<sup>20</sup> LeCompte, K., & Blevins, B. (2015). Building civic bridges: Community-centered action civics. *The Social Studies*, 106(5), 209-217.

<sup>21</sup> Rimm-Kaufman, S. E., Merritt, E. G., Lapan, C., DeCoster, J., Hunt, A., & Bowers, N. (2021). Can service-learning boost science achievement, civic engagement, and social skills? A randomized controlled trial of Connect Science. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 74.

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<sup>24</sup> Andolina, M. W., & Conklin, H. G. (2020). Fostering democratic and social-emotional learning in action civics programming: Factors that shape students' learning from Project Soapbox. *American Educational Research Journal*, 57(3), 1203-1240.

from the shared frustration at social injustice to the joy of engaging in collective action.<sup>25</sup>

## Challenges

While SEL holds unique benefits for cultivating a democratic citizenry through civic education, research has documented several barriers that could impede successful implementation. Attempts to introduce SEL in K-12 settings have engendered political backlash.<sup>26</sup> Studies show that school-wide alignment of values endorsed by district leaders, clear procedures to address conflict, and professional supports for teachers can help to navigate controversy and maintain environments conducive to SEL development.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, when SEL is applied unintentionally<sup>28</sup> or conceptualized as reflecting predominant cultural preferences, it can reinforce existing identity-based inequities.<sup>29</sup> Systematic school-wide implementation of transformative SEL or other adapted frameworks could help

mitigate the potential to cause harm to marginalized students.<sup>30</sup> Another challenge faces teachers: navigating the tension between maintaining a safe space and allowing students to explore their civic identities and exercise voice. These challenges require appropriate professional development to foster teacher self- and social-awareness alongside domain knowledge needed for equity-oriented SEL implementation in emotionally charged civic classrooms.<sup>31</sup> Finally, the high stakes assessment culture influences school and classroom priorities, to which SEL is still considered secondary.<sup>32</sup> Valid and reliable assessment tools for social and emotional civic competencies, beyond self-reported survey measures,<sup>33</sup> can begin to address this challenge. Despite these practical challenges, the intentional integration of SEL into the civic education space holds promise for enhancing the cognitive, behavioral, and interpersonal skills needed for informed and engaged civic participation toward a more equitable democracy.

## Annotated Bibliography

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