## SEL & CASEL Handout

Social and emotional learning (SEL) has had a large impact on schools and school districts in the past twenty-five years. While some of the outcomes of SEL have been positive, other (more recent) aspects are concerning. Of particular concern are some of the underlying concepts and potential outcomes related to the idea of transformative SEL.

To begin, one of the objectives of transformative SEL (CASEL, 2022) is to educate students with the purpose of examining the "root causes of inequity."  Even though it is vital for students to be able to identify and understand the inequities and injustices that marginalized people have faced, the idea of using social and emotional learning as an explicit lever to encourage this suggests an imbalance of pedagogical thought. For instance, by focusing primarily on inequities, transformative SEL may be encouraging "negative filtering"–a term which refers to a cognitive distortion in which a person "focuses almost exclusively on the negatives and seldom notices the positives" (Haidt & Lukianoff, 2019). Negative filtering is often found in people who are exhibiting signs of anxiety and depression. With this in mind, it is logical to wonder if SEL– specifically transformative SEL–is unwittingly encouraging students and children to think in cognitively distorted ways.

In addition, a laudable goal of transformative SEL is to create a culture where all students feel as though they "belong." (Jagers, et al. 2021) However, transformative SEL (in particular) encourages students to "belong" in large identity groups that are defined by race, class, gender, and sexual orientation (among others). At first blush, asking students to classify themselves by their identities may seem like an inclusive practice that acknowledges the communal aspect of a person's identity; yet, this practice ultimately ends up dehumanizing students because it fails to ask them to consider each other as imperfect human beings who are made up of a myriad of factors such as life experiences, ancestry, and cultural belonging (FAIR, 2021). By asking students to place themselves and others in large identity categories, teachers may be asking students and children to fractionate themselves and others into in/out groups, thereby creating binaries of belonging/not belonging. As a result, educators may be unintentionally undermining their own pedagogical aspirations even as they seek to create an inclusive culture of "belonging."

Finally, an understandable aspiration of transformative SEL includes developing students' identities (Jagers, et al. 2021). As children grow, they are often exploring who they are individually and in relation to their environments. However, by putting "equity" at the heart of

SEL, the term "identity" is situated within the frameworks of intersectionality and positionality. While many would agree that it is important to understand how group belonging impacts the formation of one's beliefs and opinions, teaching students to define themselves primarily in terms of their positionality encourages students and children to see themselves, first and foremost, as members of a broad identity group. Ultimately, this diminishes students' identities by teaching them to flatten themselves and others into stereotypes.

In conclusion, social and emotional learning has been and will continue to be an important piece of educational practice. While many of the aims of SEL are positive, some of the underlying concepts (such as transformative SEL) may ultimately produce outcomes that, even with good intentions, end up stunting the growth of our children for generations to come.

## References

CASEL (2022). *Transformative SEL*. https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/how-does-sel-support-educational-equity-and-excellence/transformative-sel/

FAIR (2021). *K-12 Pro-Human Learning Standards*. https://www.fairstory.org/

Lukianoff, G., & Haidt, J. (2019). *The coddling of the American mind: How good intentions and bad ideas are setting up a generation for failure*. Penguin Books.

Jagers, R. J., Skoog-Hoffman, A., Barthelus, B., & Schlund, J. (2021). Transformative Social and Emotional Learning In Pursuit of Educational Equity and Excellence. *American Educator*, *6*(2021), 7.