Social-emotional learning practices: insights from outlier schools

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Abstract

Purpose – There is a growing consensus in education that schools can and should attend to students' social-emotional development. Emerging research and popular texts indicate that students' mindsets, beliefs, dispositions, emotions and behaviors can advance outcomes, such as college readiness, career success, mental health and relationships. Despite this growing awareness, many districts and schools are still struggling to implement strategies that develop students' social-emotional skills. The purpose of this paper is to fill this gap by examining the social-emotional learning (SEL) practices in ten middle schools with strong student-reported data on SEL outcomes, particularly for African American and Latinx students.

Design/methodology/approach – Case study methods, including interviews, observations and document analysis, were employed.

Findings – The authors identify six categories of common SEL practices: strategies that promote positive school climate and relationships, supporting positive behavior, use of elective courses and extracurricular activities, SEL-specific classroom practices and curricula, personnel strategies and measurement and data use. Absence of a common definition of SEL and lack of alignment among SEL practices were two challenges cited by respondents.

Originality/value – This is the first study to analyze SEL practices in outlier schools, with a focus on successful practices with schools that have a majority of African American and/or Latinx students.

Keywords Social-emotional learning, Social and emotional development, SEL practices, School climate, Educational leadership, Middle school, Qualitative research, Case study, Positive outliers

Paper type Research paper

For the past decade, a growing number of scholars and educators have called for greater attention to aspects of student development beyond mastery of academic content, such as students' mindsets, beliefs, dispositions, emotions and behaviors. Interest in advancing these aspects of student development, broadly described as social-emotional learning (SEL), is gaining momentum among teachers, administrators, researchers and policy makers across the USA. Past studies have demonstrated that embedding high-quality SEL programs, curricula and activities into a school may improve academic performance, attendance, behaviors, culture and climate (Aos *et al.*, 2004; Belfield *et al.*, 2015;

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Berkowitz *et al.*, 2017; Duckworth and Carlson, 2013; Duckworth *et al.*, 2010; Durlak *et al.*, 2011; McCormick *et al.*, 2015).

Perhaps as a result of this emerging research base and popular texts (e.g. Tough, 2012), the growing consensus in education is that schools can and should attend to students' social-emotional development. This consensus is reflected in recent policy decisions at the state and federal levels, which require schools and districts to measure and attend to non-academic outcomes. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 requires states to measure at least one indicator of "School Quality or Student Success," defined broadly to include measures of student engagement, educator engagement, student access to and completion of advanced coursework, post-secondary readiness, or school climate and safety. Similarly, under California's Local Control Funding Formula and the supporting Local Control Accountability Plan process, districts are expected to develop and report indicators representing a wide range of educational goals, including measures of school culture–climate (CC) (California Department of Education, 2016). While no state has chosen to measure SEL at this time (Blad, 2017), in 2017, all 50 states had SEL standards at the preschool level, and eight states had SEL standards for K-12 (Dusenbury *et al.*, 2018). Additionally, many more states are working to build capacity in developing approaches to SEL. For example, 25 states are currently working with the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) through the Collaborating States Initiative (Weissberg, personal communication, March 23, 2018).

Despite this growing interest, many districts and schools are still struggling to integrate SEL programs and practices in ways that are meaningful, sustained and embedded (Jones and Bouffard, 2012). In many ways, this is a new instantiation of an old problem in education. This phenomenon – the disconnect between having a solid knowledge base and the actual work that occurs – is often referred to as the knowing–doing gap (Pfeffer and Sutton, 1999). Part of the challenge in implementing SEL is that understandings of what constitutes high-quality SEL support and instruction are often elusive and unclear (Berkowitz *et al.*, 2017; Jones and Doolittle, 2017). As such, several researchers have called for more research on schools' implementation of integrated SEL strategies (e.g. Jones and Bouffard, 2012). Similarly, policy makers and practitioners often request information about concrete practices and approaches that can provide a basis for action.

To this end, our research team examined the SEL practices in ten middle schools with high levels of student-reported SEL ("outlier" schools, explained further in methods) to understand what practices were being employed to advance students' social-emotional development. Specifically, we asked the following questions:

(1) What strategies do outlier schools use to enact and support the various conceptions of SEL?

(2) What challenges emerge in outlier schools' SEL efforts?

In the end, the experiences of these administrators, teachers and staff yield important insights for educators and policy makers in California and beyond.

In the remainder of this paper, we first describe the definitions of SEL and what we know from extant literature about effective approaches. Then, we present background on the research partnership that generated this study, and we describe our research methods. Next, we present the results of our analysis of how schools supported SEL, and the challenges that they faced in this work. We conclude with implications of our work for policy, practice and future research.

Grounding the study

CASEL coined the term "social and emotional learning" in the 1990s (Cherniss *et al.*, 2006), defining SEL as the process of acquiring "the ability to understand, manage, and express

the social and emotional aspects of one's life […]. It includes self-awareness, control of impulsivity, working cooperatively, and caring about oneself and others" (Elias, 1997, p. 2). In recent years, the term SEL has become associated with a broad category of beliefs, attitudes, personality traits and behaviors that are considered foundational for success in school and life. However, researchers have lacked a clear consensus on a name or definition for this category (Duckworth and Yeager, 2015); rather than using the term SEL, many scholars have referred to "noncognitive factors" (Farrington *et al.*, 2012), "success skills" (Conley, 2015), "mindsets, essential skills, and habits" (Gabrieli *et al.*, 2015), "character" (Tough, 2012) or "personal qualities" (Duckworth and Yeager, 2015). In this paper, we use the term "social-emotional learning" to refer specifically to student development in this broad domain, which includes beliefs, dispositions, attitudes, skills and behaviors that are distinct from academic achievement and are widely perceived as beneficial to individuals and society (Duckworth and Yeager, 2015, pp. 238-239).

Extant literature has suggested that SEL is foundational for students' well-being and academic performance, for example, researchers have demonstrated that SEL competencies such as self-efficacy, self-control and growth mindset are powerful predictors of academic, social, economic and physical outcomes (Almlund *et al.*, 2011; Bandura, 1997; Blackwell *et al.*, 2007; Borghans *et al.*, 2008; Duckworth *et al.*, 2010; Durlak *et al.*, 2011; Jackson *et al.*, 2015; Moffitt *et al.*, 2011; Sklad *et al.*, 2012; Strayhorn, 2013; West *et al.*, 2016; Zimmerman, 2000)[1]. Research has also indicated that many SEL constructs are malleable and can be influenced by educational practice (Almlund *et al.*, 2011; Berg *et al.*, 2017; Blackwell *et al.*, 2007; Yeager and Walton, 2011). The literature on SEL practices in the classroom has demonstrated an increase in positive social behaviors, fewer conduct issues, minimization of emotional distress and improved grades and test results (Benson, 2006; Catalano *et al.*, 2002; Guerra and Bradshaw, 2008; Weissberg *et al.*, 2003). Moreover, SEL programs have been tied to positive gains in school climate outcomes (Cohen *et al.*, 2009), demonstrating the relationship between SEL and a school climate that allows participants in the school community to feel socially, emotionally and physically safe.

Research using the survey data from the case districts discussed this paper have echoed these findings. For example, West *et al.* (2017) have shown that measures of growth mindset, self-efficacy, self-management and social awareness are predictive of proficiency on math tests, overall academic growth in mathematics and improvement on graduation rates and English Learner redesignation rate. Hough *et al.* (2017) found a close relationship between these SEL measures and measures of school culture–climate, and Loeb *et al.* (2018) have observed that schools contribute to students' social-emotional growth. In sum, the literature has suggested that SEL supports students' academic success and personal well-being, that SEL is linked to perceptions of a safe and supportive school climate, and that schools have an important role to play in fostering students' SEL.

Some researchers have also argued that SEL support could mitigate long-standing racial inequities in education (Aronson *et al.*, 2009; Borman *et al.*, 2016; Elias and Haynes, 2008; Strayhorn, 2013), and advocates have called for consideration of role of SEL and school climate in furthering racial justice (The Aspen Institute, 2018; Californians for Justice, 2017). Black and Latinx[2] students may experience stereotype threat, or an awareness of negative stereotypes about their racial group's intellectual competence that interferes academic performance (Steele, 1997). SEL supports may have the potential to counter this threat (Aronson *et al.*, 2009; Borman *et al.*, 2016), suggesting that SEL practices are particularly important for schools serving Black and Latinx youth. Additionally, compared to Whites, racially minoritized students may experience a less supportive school climate and lower quality relationships with teachers and peers (Blanco-Vega *et al.*, 2008; Cherng, 2017; Dinkes *et al.*, 2009; van den Bergh *et al.*, 2010), perhaps as a result of racial implicit bias among educators and students (Warikoo *et al.,* 2016). Moreover, limited resources and high teacher

turnover might be expected to interfere with school climate, and these challenges are more likely to impact Black and Latinx students than their White peers (Guin, 2004; Morgan and Amerikaner, 2018). Indeed, research on the case districts in this study has shown that White students perceive a more positive school climate and report higher levels of SEL than African American and Latinx students (Hough *et al.*, 2017). Overall, SEL practices might have the potential to improve school climate and mitigate stereotype threat among racially minoritized youth. However, researchers have yet to explore how schools might integrate SEL programs and practices in ways that promote racial equity.

Extant literature has, however, suggested a few key lessons for supporting SEL generally. Durlak *et al.* (2011) found that the most effective SEL programs featured four elements, summarized by the acronym SAFE: sequenced activities that lead in a coordinated and connected way to skills, active forms of learning, focused activities to develop one or more social skills and explicit targets concerning specific skills. Embracing these findings, in 2017 The Aspen Institute identified some promising SEL practices – including a strong and intentionally integrated curriculum – as key factors contributing to student success (Johnson and Wiener, 2017). Research has also demonstrated that successful SEL programs train personnel in the "languages and practices" to use in times when students have less structure (e.g. recess) (Schafer, 2016, p. 1). At the same time, other work has suggested that "kernels of practice" – low cost, targeted strategies that can be taught quickly and used multiple times per day – may be more feasible for schools and districts to implement and sustain as compared to more comprehensive programs (Jones *et al.*, 2017).

Nevertheless, while the research has suggested that comprehensive, integrated approaches are the most effective for school-wide change, questions remain about the kinds of district and school practices needed to facilitate SEL. In particular, there is a need for a knowledge base of concrete practices one can undertake in classrooms, schools, and districts to support SEL (Weissberg *et al.*, 2015). We designed our study to begin to address this knowledge gap.

Context of the CORE-PACE research partnership

This study was conducted as part of a research–practice partnership between Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) and the CORE districts, a consortium of eight California school districts (Fresno, Garden Grove, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Oakland, Sacramento, San Francisco and Santa Ana). The CORE districts began measuring SEL as part of the waiver they received from the US Department of Education that freed them from some of their federal obligations under No Child Left Behind. Under the terms of the waiver, the CORE districts developed an accountability system that featured measures of both academic and non-academic performance, including measures of SEL and school climate (see Marsh *et al.*, 2017 for further details on the CORE waiver and accountability system). With the passage of ESSA in 2015 and the termination of NCLB waivers, this accountability system was not fully implemented; however the CORE districts continued administering annual SEL and school culture–climate (CC) surveys to support educators' practice.

To develop measures of SEL and CC, the CORE districts consulted with SEL scholars and advocates, developing a survey instrument with four SEL constructs and four CC constructs (see Table I). SEL and CC surveys are administered annually to students in Grades 4–12. The districts also administer CC surveys to all parents and school staff (for on the development and validity of CORE's SEL and CC surveys, see Gehlbach and Hough, 2018; West *et al.*, 2017).

In 2016, the CORE districts set a common vision of accelerating math achievement among African American and Latinx students in Grades 4–8. CORE district leaders suggested that SEL might play a key role in shaping math outcomes and closing racial achievement gaps. To support these efforts, CORE district leaders asked our research team to pursue information about what SEL practices might support racially minoritized

SEL competency	Definition
Growth mindset	The belief that one's abilities can grow with effort. Students with a growth mindset see effort as necessary for success, embrace challenges, learn from criticism and persist in the face of setbacks
Self-efficacy	The belief in one's own ability to succeed in achieving an outcome or reaching a goal. Self-efficacy reflects confidence in the ability to exert control over one's own motivation, behavior and environment
Self-management	The ability to regulate one's own emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations. This includes managing stress, delaying gratification, motivating oneself and setting and working toward personal and academic goals
Social awareness	The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior, and to recognize family, school and community resources and supports
Culture–climate construct	**Definition**
Support for academic learning	High scores on this construct indicate that survey respondents feel that the climate is conducive to learning and that teachers use supportive practices, such as encouragement and constructive feedback, varied opportunities to demonstrate knowledge and skills, and support for risk-taking and independent thinking. Respondents report that the atmosphere is conducive to dialog and questioning, academic challenge and individual attention to support differentiated learning
Sense of belonging and school connectedness	High scores on this construct indicate that survey respondents report a positive sense of being accepted, valued, and included by others (teacher and peers) in all school settings. Students and parents report feeling welcome at the school
Knowledge and perceived fairness of discipline rules and norms	This construct measures the extent to which survey respondents report clearly communicated rules and expectations about student and adult behavior – especially regarding physical violence, verbal abuse or harassment, and teasing – clear and consistent enforcement, and norms for adult intervention
Safety	This construct measures the extent to which students and adults report feeling safe at school and around school, including feeling safe from verbal abuse, teasing or exclusion by others in the school

Table I.
CORE SEL and culture–climate constructs and definitions

students' math achievement. Our intent was to document practices in schools that could be shared across the CORE districts and inform policy makers and practitioners throughout the country. To support CORE's focus on math achievement among African American and Latinx students in Grades 4–8, in this study we chose a set of middle schools that had demonstrated higher-than-average performance in student-reported SEL for African American and/or Latinx students.

Methods

We designed our study to explore a set of positive outliers, or schools that, despite similar demographics and resource limitations to those of peer institutions, exhibit behaviors or strategies that have yielded better solutions and results (Pascale *et al.*, 2010; Marsh *et al.,* 2004). Such studies help surface strategies and practices that may be useful to others facing similar goals and challenges. We used a multiple embedded case study design (Yin, 2013) to address two key research questions:

RQ1. What strategies do outlier schools use to enact and support the various conceptions of SEL?

RQ2. What challenges emerge in outlier schools' SEL efforts?

Sample

In previous work, researchers using the CORE data found that among the available demographic measures, race/ethnicity is the factor most strongly associated with SEL and

culture–climate outcomes, after controlling for other student characteristics (Hough *et al.*, 2017; West *et al.*, 2018). Specifically, these researchers found that Black students, Latinx students and students in special education report the lowest levels of SEL and that differences between these groups and other student sub-populations persist even within the same school. The authors found wide variation in within-school gaps, with some schools demonstrating large gaps between student groups while others had relatively high levels of SEL for their African American and Latinx students in particular. Our goal in drawing the sample for this study was to identify schools that might be leaders in promising SEL practices.

Our school sampling plan was then developed in partnership with the five CORE districts that chose to participate in the study. Together, we decided that the following considerations were important for selecting schools for this study: that researchers felt confident that student reports of SEL were meaningfully high for selected schools; that the schools selected served large proportions of African American or Latinx youth and that those students reported high levels of SEL; that selected schools also were performing relatively well in mathematics; and that schools were selected in each of the participating CORE districts. To be considered for the sample, a school had to have SEL scores in the top quartile across both years SEL had been measured (2014–2015 and 2015–2016). By eliminating schools that had high scores in one year but not the other, we isolated schools where the high SEL reports are more consistent across time and thus more likely to represent "true" SEL for students (rather than being an anomaly or the result of measurement error). If this method oversampled schools, we then imposed further restrictions on the sample to include: only schools eligible for Title 1 designation, schools with a concentration of student subgroup greater than schools in that district at the 25th percentile and schools with math growth scores higher than a level 3 (out of 10) in 2015–2016 for the specified subgroup[3]. This sample selection resulted in five schools selected for high SEL for both African American and Latinx students, four for just Latinx students and three for just African American students.

Our final sample differs slightly from our sample design, because schools and districts could voluntarily decide whether or not to participate. In the end, five of the six CORE districts with available data agreed to participate in the study. In each participating district, we contacted principals via e-mail at the first two schools listed in our sample selection. If a principal declined to participate, we then contacted the next school on the list. In one case, district leaders recommended and connected researchers to another school within their district when a school on the list did not respond to requests for participation. Ultimately, we visited two schools per participating district, and the selected schools serve students that match the demographics of the districts.

To identify interviewees within each school, we asked the principal to suggest at least one math teacher for us to speak with and observe (due to the network's math focus) and at least one teacher who was explicitly involved in promoting SEL or culture–climate at the school. We also asked to interview administrators or non-teaching staff tasked with SEL or culture–climate issues, including counselors or social workers, afterschool program directors, as well as teachers, administrators or other staff managing campus–climate initiatives or SEL-related activities or programs.

Data collection and analysis

In each of the five participating CORE districts, the research team conducted semi-structured interviews with between one and three central office administrators responsible for SEL-related work ($n = 12$), including administrators overseeing measurement and evaluation, school climate, student discipline and SEL. Teams of two researchers visited each school in the spring of 2017 (March–June). In each school, we

conducted interviews with school leaders ($n = 15$), other adults responsible for social-emotional support ($n = 13$) and teachers ($n = 26$). We also gathered documents and other artifacts (e.g. program descriptions, data reports, school and classroom posters with SEL material) and observed school activities and classrooms (a total of 28 observations of classes, passing periods, lunch periods and other events) to understand how SEL opportunities played out on campus during and after the school day. We also interviewed three leaders from within the CORE office and two CORE non-profit partners. (See Table II for a tally of interviews by district and school.) We used semi-structured protocols in all interviews, which were audio recorded and transcribed. To protect the anonymity of respondents, we do not include the names of any organizations or individuals included in the research and changed details where necessary to protect their identity.

In our analysis we used an inductive, exploratory approach to understand how educators sought to promote SEL (Stake, 2005). We analyzed the data separately for each district and its schools, developing detailed case memos. These initial embedded case study memos helped to specify the local SEL strategies and practices, along with key contextual elements in each district and school. Next, we completed cross-case analysis, drawing on the case study memos and all transcripts to examine how definitions and implementation varied across cases (Miles *et al.*, 2013). To further understand patterns across districts and schools, the research team met in person for a two-day retreat to identify key findings. Whenever possible, we also triangulated findings among multiple respondents and data sources to strengthen the validity of our findings. Finally, we revised the report based on extensive review and feedback from two external reviewers.

Several caveats are important to keep in mind. First, our intent with this study is not to make causal claims or to identify "effective" practices. We have not evaluated the impact of the practices or strategies identified herein, nor can we attribute the schools' SEL outcomes to these practices or strategies. Instead, this is an exploratory study intended to highlight common approaches from which other schools and districts can learn and explore further as they advance SEL in their own contexts. Second, we selected schools based on the level of SEL score, not the extent to which a school influenced student growth in these schools; in this way, we cannot eliminate the possibility that students may come to the school already with high levels of SEL (though another study using CORE district survey data found evidence that schools contribute to students' SEL; Loeb *et al.*, 2018). Third, we acknowledge that a few of the schools studied are atypical in their enrollment process or context and may limit the applicability to other sites. Finally, while we started this study with an intent to understand SEL practices in the context of mathematics achievement among African American and Latinx students, our data collection ultimately surfaced a set of broader strategies that, in general, are not targeted to particular areas of academic content or specific student populations.

Table II. Number of interviews by school and district

	District A			District B			District C			District D			District E			Total
		School			School			School			School			School			
	Dist	A	B	Dist	A	B	Dist	A	B	Dist	A	B	Dist	A	B	
District administrators	2			1			3			3			3			12
School leaders		2	1		2	1		1	2		1	2		3	0	15
Other (e.g. afterschool coordinators, counselors)		3	3		2	0		0	0		1	1		1	2	13
Teachers		2	2		2	4		2	2		3	4		2	3	26
Totals	2	7	6	1	6	5	3	3	4	3	5	7	3	6	5	66

Findings

SEL practices in outlier schools

Overall, educators reported using multiple practices to advance SEL, which they broadly defined as encompassing students' emotional well-being, students' social and behavioral skills and a safe and inclusive school climate (we provide more detail on respondents' conceptions of SEL in a later section). We identified six common and overlapping categories of practice intended to support student SEL in schools. Table III summarizes the six categories of practice, including the number of schools reporting them and examples of specific strategies within each category. Given limited space, we highlight just a few examples in the text below.

Category 1: strategies to promote positive school climate and relationships. For many respondents, when we asked about how they support SEL, they discussed ways that they made the school welcoming and supportive for all students. These practices, listed in Table III, included building whole school culture, fostering trust and positive relationships and promoting inclusion. For example, in several schools, faculty and administrators spent the first one and a half to two weeks of each academic year building the campus culture through school-wide and classroom activities focused on values, expectations and relationship building. Throughout the school year, connecting with students by greeting them by name and shaking hands appeared to be a fairly common practice across outlier schools. Many interviewees also suggested that advisory periods were a key for supporting relationship building and school climate. In the words of one school leader:

> Advisory is the time where […] we do circles […], so you're connecting, you start to hear what's happened over the weekend with students or just where they are. […]. our goal around it is to get every student access to a caring and supportive adult [who] knows them way better than anyone else in the school. The idea is to create a safe group setting as well, so it's not just this access to this adult, but this environment is where home is. This is my base at this school.

Category 2: supporting positive behavior. Many schools described their approach to student behavior expectations as central to their SEL efforts, emphasizing strategies (listed in Table III) that focused on supporting rather than punishing students. In total, 7 of 10 schools had adopted some formal positive disciplinary approach such as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports and/or restorative justice. Typically, these approaches led teachers and school staff to focus on why a student acted as they did, to support students in developing self-awareness and self-regulation, to reward positive behavior, and, in schools with restorative justice programs, to mend damaged relationships. One school administrator explained the school's approach and its benefits:

> We have restorative responses to discipline. Instead of looking at a punitive approach for everything and also having a blanket zero tolerance policy, we have more case-by-case responses to students […]. Sort of look at the why behind it and start to dig around that. That's what we do with restorative practice, to sort of disrupt our punitive ways that we were used to going about responding to discipline.

Category 3: promoting engagement, relationships, and SEL-related skills using elective courses and extracurricular activities. As illustrated in Table III, many schools used elective courses, clubs and afterschool programs to promote student engagement, a positive climate, and relationship building. In four schools, educators reported using elective courses – such as music, art and PE – to promote SEL. For example, respondents described the music program at one school as the crown jewel of the school and as key to promoting school community and developing students' social-emotional skills. The music teacher explained the value of the music performances this way:

> Say if I play my wrong note, makes us all look bad, makes us all sound bad. And if I work really hard at doing the right part and play my part well, then we can all really rise up. Which I think is a real analogy for how we work as human beings, that we have to pull each other up, we have to support each other.

	Number of Schools ($n = 10$)	Examples
1. Strategies to promote positive school climate and relationships		
Whole school culture-building	6	Using the first two weeks of the school year intentionally to build school culture, promoting school values in messages around the school, or playing music outdoors between classes to foster a positive environment
Promoting personal interactions to build trust and relationships	8	Teachers greeting students by name and shaking hands at the beginning of class
Advisory periods	5	Using advisory periods to build relationships, learn social skills, discuss issues like bullying and process difficult events happening on or off campus
Organizing schedules and students to support relationships	9	Offering bridge programs for students just entering the school, grouping students into smaller communities or "families" within large schools and keeping groups of students with the same teachers for multiple years
Inclusion strategies	7	Organizing student volunteers to reach out to isolated or lonely students, and student clubs that specifically offer support to groups that might feel excluded at school (e.g. African American or Latinx students, special education students or female students interested in computer coding) (see Table I)
2. Supporting positive behavior		
Positive behavior management and restorative practices	7	That help teachers focus on why a student acted out, help students develop more appropriate skills, and in some cases, mend damaged relationships between educators and students. Strategies range from formal, packaged programs to everyday strategies such as "cooling off" rooms where students can get support and avoid suspension
Setting and enforcing clear values and expectations	8	Direct instruction, specific programs or events, rewards systems for positive behavior, and visuals posted throughout the school
Targeted approaches for struggling, at-risk, or historically marginalized students	7	Professional counseling, multi-tiered systems of support for struggling students, and programs meant to support equity, particularly for African American youth
3. Elective courses and extracurricular activities		
Elective courses	4	Music, PE or other classes as opportunities to model good communication and group interaction skills, and to form trusting relationships between adults and students
Student clubs	7	Clubs that specifically promote kindness, compassion, and positive behavior, with some clubs going further to support students facing trauma. Several schools also have leadership programs that teach students to model good behavior on campus, help other students, and mediate conflicts
Afterschool programs and activities	7	Music, yoga, sports and other activities that are intentionally designed to give students opportunities to connect with students from other backgrounds, form relationships with adults, or relieve stress
4. SEL-specific classroom practices and curricula		
Strategies for creating a positive classroom environment	6	Seating students in groups to reinforce norms of getting help from peers, taking on specific roles in a group, and learning to receive feedback

(*continued*)

Table III.
Reported school-level practices to support student SEL

	Number of Schools ($n = 10$)	Examples
Strategies for managing emotions	3	Permitting students to redo homework assignments and tests to reduce pressure and show students they can improve over time with consistent effort
Modeling appropriate language and mindsets	6	for example by providing concrete protocols for how students should communicate with one another or by coaching students to say "I can't do it YET" instead of "I can't do it"
5. Hiring, organizing and training personnel		
Staff leadership teams	6	Teams charged with overseeing the behavior and school climate approaches at the school
Mental and emotional health professionals	10	Offering internships to students in psychology or social work programs; partnering with non-profit therapy centers; bringing psychologists or social workers on staff
Use of non-instructional staff	5	Staffing a "Listening Room" where students can find a trusted adult, training PE teachers as life coaches for frequently truant students, or explicitly recruiting staff members who are a good fit with the values of the school and the racial/ethnic makeup of the student body
Opportunities for adults to learn about social-emotional learning	3	Professional development on topics like growth mindset; staff meetings where educators model the kinds of behaviors and language expected of students, or pairing experienced teachers with new teachers for coaching on social-emotional learning practices
6. Measurement and data use		
Use of CORE survey data to guide and improve school efforts	7	Often led by the staff leadership teams mentioned above
School- or staff-led local data collection efforts	2	Efforts to provide more rapid or specific feedback, such as developing short student surveys, administered monthly, to track whether students feel safe, have friends and have a trusted adult connection at school

Table III.

Category 4: SEL-specific classroom practices. Throughout our visits, we found evidence of explicit SEL-related instructional practices (listed in Table III), including physical arrangement of the classroom, routines, norms, modes of questioning and providing choices about assignments and tests. One common instructional practice was teachers' emphasis on growth mindset. In class observations, we heard statements like "mistakes make your brain grow" and "If I hear you say, 'I can't do it,' I want you to add three little letters to the end of that: 'I can't do it YET.'" One math teacher explained that they promoted growth mindset with a positive approach to mistakes:

> So we really put an emphasis on how making mistakes is the only way we can learn, how mistakes are really put in this special place where we applaud them, look at them […]. So we go through all of that to talk about how these things make your brain grow […] And every so often throughout the year we will pick […] our favorite mistake and have the students do error analysis on those mistakes.

Category 5: hiring, organizing and training personnel. The schools in our study invested in staffing to support students' SEL, using the specific strategies listed in Table III. For example, one school had a restorative justice coordinator who coached every teacher in RJ

practices and in building relationships with students. This coordinator spoke of the way he commonly helped new teachers:

> New teachers come in and they're overwhelmed and they just start teaching […] without really creating a relationship space. One teacher for instance, he was a musician […]. When I went to his room, I said, "I don't see one thing about your life, about you in this room. I see all this history stuff, the normal classroom stuff, it's textbook, good job, but your students don't know who you are […]" He admitted, […]"Yeah I keep that separate." I was like, "You might want to let them see a little, that's a cool thing. […] Maybe put up an old guitar." He said, "I have so many guitars, I could do that." I was like, "Yeah, have it up and they're going to ask what it is and that's a story and stories make relationships."

Category 6: measurement and data use. Some schools drew on the CORE-administered SEL surveys or other data sources to inform their SEL efforts (see Table III). For instance, one used the CORE data to identify growth mindset as a focus area for the year. Another school used their own monthly survey to track progress on campus climate. Responses to questions such as, "Do you feel safe, do you have friends, do you feel like there's an adult you can go to [in order] to have a conversation?" were paired with discipline referral, suspension, and attendance data in order to identify trends and to highlight students for intervention.

Cross-cutting themes and challenges

Looking across the case study schools, we observed two cross-cutting themes regarding their approaches to supporting SEL, as well as two common challenges. First, in outlier schools, we noticed that educators tailored approaches based on the school's assets and needs. For example, schools with strong music or sports programs built on those focal points to broaden and emphasize SEL skills. In these schools, existing programs were re-purposed to help build student confidence, promote teamwork, build positive relationships with peers and adults and improve student attendance and motivation. We also found that schools adjusted their SEL efforts to fit the specific needs of their sites. For instance, one school was concerned about large numbers of students skipping classes and socializing in hallways during class time. Considering their campus needs, educators decided that their SEL efforts needed to start with positive behavior. The school began by focusing on establishing expectations for attending class on time, and implementing clear routines, such as hallway passes. After addressing foundational concerns around attendance, educators were then able to bring in additional efforts to further SEL.

Second, we heard reports that efforts led by students not only helped other students to buy in and engage, but also promoted positive behaviors and a school culture of trust and inclusion. For instance, student-led clubs at several schools sponsored "Kindness Weeks," in which students engaged in activities such as writing public notes about what they appreciate about others. In other schools, students focused on promoting inclusivity by inviting other students to join their table at lunch. One school featured a peer-leadership program that organized teacher–student "Friendship Lunches" and trained students to mediate conflicts among their peers. This same school also had a peer mentorship program, in which student mentors offered support to their peers who were struggling with organization and time management.

Despite the positive results reported on surveys, our outlier schools nevertheless experienced two common challenges when implementing SEL practices. First, we found wide variation in how educators defined SEL within and across outlier schools. Some described it as supporting student mental and emotional well-being, while others emphasized creating a safe and supportive school climate, developing social skills and behavior, supporting adolescent development, building a culture of inclusion and

acceptance of difference, or addressing the needs of the whole child. A number of respondents conflated the terms SEL (which refers to an individual's competencies) and campus climate (which refers to the school environment). A lack of clarity or agreement about the definition of SEL, or the relationships among these different dimensions of SEL and school climate, could present problems for implementing SEL practices.

Relatedly, although the outlier schools were all engaged in a variety of SEL practices, as described above, the programs, practices and curricula we found were not always consistently implemented across an entire school or district. In some schools, this lack of coherence may have been due to the fact that some SEL practices were driven by individuals and not part of a school-wide strategy with broad buy-in. We found the strongest evidence of coherence in one district, which had an official SEL definition, SEL standards for both students and adults and had incorporated SEL into principal and teacher evaluation and the framework used to evaluate schools. Collectively these efforts built a shared understanding of SEL, and conveyed to educators that SEL was a priority throughout the district.

Conclusion and implications

In this paper, we explored the SEL practices in ten outlier California middle schools with high student self-reports of SEL. We found six overall categories of SEL practices and noted that outlier schools shared the common themes of tailoring SEL approaches to their site, implementing with intentionality and advancing student leadership. Our data suggested two challenges to this work: a lack of consensus around the definition of SEL and limited alignment of practices.

The experiences of the case study schools suggest several important implications for practice as well as state and district policy makers nationally. First, practitioners wishing to support SEL and school climate may find it helpful to consider the full range of strategies described in this report. While we cannot determine which approaches are most appropriate for a particular context, it was clear that every school drew upon multiple strategies, addressing most or all of the six broad categories: school climate and relationships, positive behavior, electives and extracurriculars, classroom instruction, staffing and professional development and data use. The array of efforts herein provides useful examples that educators could draw upon based on the unique assets and needs of their schools.

Given the wide variation in SEL conceptions and limited alignment of practices that surfaced in our research, it may behoove school, district and policy leaders to support schools in developing common understandings of SEL and aligning SEL activities within schools and districts. Common understandings of SEL – including articulation of the relationships among different dimensions of social-emotional development and school climate – might facilitate the enactment of SEL practices. Policy makers might also invest in SEL-related staff positions and adult learning activities, as such practices played a key role in the outlier schools featured in this study. Finally, as some of our outlier schools drew on various data sources as part of their SEL efforts, we suggest that policy makers could explore approaches to measuring SEL and related constructs, and provide support to school-level educators in using these data.

Our study also offers implications for the research field. Interestingly, we initiated this study to understand SEL practices as part of efforts to accelerate math achievement among Black and Latinx students. As noted, in the course of our data collection, however, our respondents did not describe their SEL efforts as tied to mathematics specifically, nor as targeted toward the needs of African American and Latinx youth (with a few exceptions, such as one school's efforts to recruit Black male educators). Future studies could examine emerging efforts that are more tailored to particular academic disciplines

or are intended to ameliorate long-standing educational inequities. For example, researchers could investigate efforts to build teachers' awareness of implicit racial bias, and impact of this work on student social-emotional and academic learning. Such research would align with calls from advocates to consider the role of SEL in furthering racial equity (e.g. The Aspen Institute, 2018).

Given our study's focus on middle schools, it may behoove researchers to also examine SEL practices within the elementary and high school contexts. Future research might also seek to evaluate the direct link between strategies and outcomes. As noted, we did not measure the impact of the practices or strategies identified herein, and we cannot attribute the schools' SEL outcomes to these practices or strategies. Future studies could be designed to pursue causal analyses, with a particular focus on identifying interventions, programs and strategies that not only yield positive SEL outcomes but also help narrow gaps between students from different racial groups in reported SEL.

While there is a growing consensus that educators should support students' social-emotional development, we lack a clear understanding about how schools might do so. By investigating schools with high student self-reports of SEL, this paper seeks to shed light on policies and practices that might foster students' mental and emotional well-being, quality relationships among students and staff and safe and inclusive school climates. In doing so, we aim to contribute to a broader conversation about how to advance students' success, health and happiness.

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Notes

1. While many researchers and educators have argued that SEL is beneficial, we note that others have critiqued SEL efforts for focusing on individual students rather than broader social systems (Hoffman, 2009; Kohn, 2014; Stokas, 2015); for relying on dominant values that may not be shared by all cultural groups (Hoffman, 2009, p. 540); and for prioritizing obedience over critical questioning (Hoffman, 2009; Kohn, 2014).

2. In this paper, we use the terms "Latinx," "Black" or "African American," and "White" to refer to three socially constructed racial/ethnic categories. We acknowledge that these terms are imperfect, and that others have argued for alternate language. For more discussion of racial group terms, see Tatum (2017).

3. CORE's academic growth measure takes into account an individual student's prior test history, socioeconomic disadvantage, disability status, English learner status, homelessness and foster care status, and uses this information to measure how quickly they grow relative to students similar to them in these categories. The CORE model also accounts for concentration of these characteristics within schools. In this way, the CORE growth measure is constructed as a "value added" model, estimating the school's impact on student achievement relative to that of other schools serving similar students. A school with a score of 10 has the highest growth, whereas a school with a score of 1 has the lowest growth.

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