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What are *social* and *emotional learning* and *culturally responsive* and *sustaining education* — and what do they have to do with *critical race theory?* A primer.

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Ensuring equity in education, whereby all student groups attain comparable positive outcomes, is an ongoing challenge for policymakers and practitioners. While there is no single strategy for meeting this challenge, two broad approaches have gained traction among those committed to equity. One, referred to as social and emotional learning (SEL), focuses on supporting development of students' social and emotional intelligence, which research affirms can improve students' attitudes about self and others, social behavior, connection to school, and academic performance and can also lead to a reduction in students' behavioral referrals and emotional distress (Payton et al., 2008). While equity was not a focus in early instantiations of SEL education, it has increasingly become so in recent years.

The other approach, culturally responsive and sustaining education (CRSE), focuses on affirming students' cultural identities and drawing on their culture and lived experiences as assets to support their learning and positive sense of self. Research and evidence linking CRSE to positive student outcomes continues to emerge (e.g., Bottiani et al., 2018; Dee & Penner, 2017). For instance, positive student–teacher relationships developed through CRSE are associated with better student academic and behavioral outcomes (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Gay, 2018).

Both approaches have recently been called into question in some states and districts for their perceived connections to critical race theory (CRT), which is itself the subject of contentious political debate. This brief explains each of these three concepts, how each one relates to addressing issues of equity, and how SEL and CRSE are distinct from the academic framework of CRT.

What is Social and Emotional Learning?

SEL is not a new concept, and it is defined differently by different people. But broadly speaking, it refers to the process by which individuals develop and learn the mindsets, skills, and competencies (e.g., collaboration, persistence, empathy, emotional self-regulation) that help them successfully navigate the world and their place in it.

Natalie Walrond, who directs the federally funded national Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety (CISELSS), describes SEL as "undergirding personal purpose; healthy relationships; a sense of place in community, success in school and the workplace; and engaged citizenship" (N. Walrond, personal communication, July 21, 2021). The concept of SEL is based on a comprehensive notion of human development as taking place in and across four domains: physiological, cognitive, social, and emotional. Hundreds of social and emotional skills and competencies have been identified, although they tend to be interpreted and defined differently. To help address these divergent perspectives, the Harvard Taxonomy Project

developed Explore SEL, an interactive tool to systematically explore SEL terms and crosswalk SEL frameworks.

In education, SEL programming — either stand-alone or integrated into academic instruction and general classroom practice — is intended to accelerate and support students' development in the social and emotional domains. SEL is often thought of as the process by which one develops important life skills. In fact, mindsets, skills, and competencies in the social and emotional domains are sometimes thought of as nonacademic because they appear to be distinct from the cognitive skills needed for academic learning. Yet, science shows that the four domains of human development are to some degree entwined, with health and well-being in one bolstering health and well-being in the others (Cantor et al., 2018). Moreover, research on high-quality SEL programming has documented improved academic outcomes; improved classroom behavior; increased ability to manage stress and depression; and better student attitudes about themselves, others, and school (Durlak et al., 2011; Carneiro et al., 2007). Equally important, having good social and emotional skills at an early age bodes well for later success. One longitudinal research study that followed all children born in a single week in Great Britain showed that children with good social skills at age 11 had better education outcomes, labor market outcomes, and social behaviors in adolescence and adulthood compared to those whose early skills were not as strong (Carneiro et al., 2007).

What is Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education?

Culturally responsive and sustaining education is an approach to advancing learning and equity in education by creating culturally affirming and inclusive learning environments and experiences that support the attainment of comparably positive outcomes for all student groups. Central to CRSE

is valuing students' cultural identities and lived experiences, substantively connecting them to the content and skills students will learn in school and doing so in ways that counter cultural assimilation and instead support cultural pluralism.

CRSE is informed by an evolving cross-section of research, theories, and fields of study, including culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally responsive teaching, racial identity development, bilingualism, student agency, critical race theory, and social and emotional learning. Its intent is to affirm, sustain, and help strengthen students' identities, which research shows contributes to positive outcomes for all students (Hammond, 2015). CRSE recognizes cultural identities (including those based on race, ethnicity, language, gender, sexuality, and ability) as assets for teaching and learning, something to be built upon rather than ignored or tamped down (Gay, 2013). In particular, CRSE aims to build positive identities of students of color who have been disproportionately impacted by deficit perceptions and low expectations based on their race (Diamond et al., 2004). CRSE leverages the skills and knowledge that students bring to classrooms and schools to support the development of positive identities and academic and social and emotional learning. Building on students' prior knowledge and experiences when introducing new content can increase students' motivation for learning and effective information processing (Byrd, 2016; Hammond, 2015). Through CRSE's asset-focused orientation, students also learn to recognize, critique, and redress systemic bias and social inequalities (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2014; Paris, 2012).

What is Critical Race Theory?

CRT is an academic theory and framework that identifies race as a social construct rather than a biological fact and attributes the prevalence of racism in American society not primarily to individual bias or prejudice but to its institutionalization in governmental systems, policies, and legal structures. In doing so, CRT challenges the long-held

claim, perpetuated at all levels of society, that America functions as a color-blind meritocracy.

CRT is not about criticizing or expressing disapproval of individuals or of any particular racial group or gender. Rather, it is intended to be used as a lens for carefully analyzing or examining systems, policies, and laws in order to understand if and how they create, perpetuate, or, conversely, help dismantle racism. Its basic tenets originated in legal scholarship of the 1970s in the form of a framework for legal analysis (e.g., Bell, 1973/2008; Matsuda et al., 2018). Critical race theorists recognized that the law can be complicit in maintaining an unjust social order and that, conversely, it can also be used to secure racial equality. By the 1990s, CRT was taken up in other fields as well, including education, where it has been used, for example, to examine and understand what underlies policies or practices related to school discipline, intelligence and achievement testing, student tracking, and the relative inclusiveness of history and other curricula (Ladson-Billings, 2003). CRT has also been one of a number of theories, frameworks, or research bodies from various fields that help inform implementation of culturally responsive and sustaining education.

CRT argues that even though race is not a biological reality, as a social construct it has undeniable significance. Critical race theorists note that racism affects the experiences of people of color, including African Americans, Asian Americans, Indigenous populations, Latinx/Hispanics, and others who identify as or are perceived to be people of color. CRT also recognizes that the social construct of race intersects with other identities, including sexuality, gender identity, ability status, and national origin. They argue that understanding this "intersectionality" of race with other aspects of identity is also critical to understanding the effects that systems and laws have on people of color.

What is the relationship between Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education (CRSE), and Critical Race Theory (CRT)?

SEL programs and CRSE are two distinct education approaches intended to help build or reinforce positive student identity and support learning. The former does so by helping strengthen students' social and emotional skills, from emotional regulation to metacognition; the latter does so primarily by recognizing, valuing, and connecting coursework to students' racial/ethnic identities and lived experiences.

Both approaches recognize the importance of students having a positive sense of self — a healthy identity — and its influence on students' success in school, home, and community. A key difference between the two is that, historically, SEL has looked at identity more generally, while CRSE focuses particularly on the development of positive racial and ethnic identities, which is found to be important for students of all racial and ethnic groups (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018). When educators acknowledge rather than intentionally or unintentionally ignore the roles that race and ethnicity play in identity development, they actively affirm the value of students' cultures. In doing so, they take an important step in creating a learning environment that is inclusive and feels welcoming and positive for all students — which is a goal for all educators whether they think of themselves as implementing SEL education, CRSE, or neither. Similarly, in teaching or promoting the social and emotional skill of metacognition — thinking about thinking — an educator is naturally offering a way for students to do something that aligns closely with the goals of CRSE: to reflect on their personal views and consider how their respective cultures may influence their judgments, assumptions, and conclusions about people and the world.

Even so, SEL has not typically been utilized to directly address racism. Historically, it has neither focused on students' racial or ethnic identity nor called out equity as a key goal. In fact, some scholars have noted that in some implementations, SEL education has reflected a deficit-oriented approach to students of color that focuses on "fixing" them or a color-evasive approach that refers to diversity of students in general terms but is not explicit about the social and emotional implications of race, racism, and racial identity (Mahfouz & Anthony-Stevens, 2020). A recent meta-analysis found that most SEL programs assume that interventions are neutral on issues of race and culture (characterized by the researchers as "color-blind") and that the values and strategies of SEL programs are universally relevant for all children (Jones et al., 2018). This finding suggests a collective need to ensure that all SEL programs are asset oriented for all students (and especially students of color) and that schools provide identity-affirming ways for students to develop the SEL skills that are linked to improved academic and behavioral outcomes.

This shift in SEL orientation toward a greater focus on equity is already underway. Since its launch in 2018, CISELSS has provided resources and technical assistance to SEL educators throughout the country. Integral to that work is its "recognition that inequitable experiences lead to inequitable outcomes" (2019, p. 1). Thus, the center identifies equity, which "introduces the notion of where power resides in leadership and decision-making," as both a key goal and key content for SEL programs. In striving for it, the center asserts, educators "must take a strengths-based approach to engaging with students, parents, and the community" (p. 2). In its first needs assessment, the center learned that getting help to ensure equity was, in fact, a top priority for the SEL practitioners it surveyed.

Over the last few years, education scholars and leaders have identified opportunities for achieving education equity by better aligning SEL education and CRSE and increasing the use of both approaches

(Gregory & Fergus, 2017). Those working at the leading edge of culturally responsive SEL contend that teaching students about critical consciousness and oppression is vital to students' social and emotional development. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a long-standing standard bearer for SEL education, issued a 2018 paper focused on SEL's potential to help "mitigate the interrelated legacies of racial and class oppression in the U.S. and globally," noting that, to date, that "potential [had been] underrealized" (Jaegers et al., 2018, p. 1). Two years later, in 2020, CASEL updated its SEL definition to "emphasize the skills, knowledge and mindsets needed to examine prejudices and biases, evaluate social norms and systemic inequities, and promote community well-being" (Neimi, 2020, para. 10).

Dena Simmons, SEL scholar and former Assistant Director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, challenges the field to grow into a more "fearless SEL" (para. 9) that explicitly centers students' lives, addresses sociopolitical context, and considers the ability and willingness to speak about difficult topics to be a core life skill. She sees SEL as a way to foster courageous conversations across differences in order to help students (and teachers) "confront injustice, hate, and inequity" (Simmons, 2019, para. 3).

Yet, even without an intentional effort to align or integrate SEL and CRSE, the development of some critical SEL competencies, such as social awareness, metacognition, and empathy, may lead students to apply their critical thinking skills to the world around them on their own initiative. With that inclination, they may be more likely to examine and question anything from how history is taught to how decisions are made about who gets accepted into what courses, as well as issues outside of school. But teaching these social and emotional skills, and others like them, is not the same as what some critics refer to as "teaching" or "doing" CRT. In fact, CRT is not a curriculum or a set of skills to be taught. Rather it is one framework, or lens, for

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thinking critically about the important social, cultural, economic, and other issues, including power, that affect all citizens. Those individuals who have developed strong academic and social–emotional skills will be prepared to make their own decisions about what they perceive through that lens.

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