SOCIAL EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE:
The Missing but Necessary Ingredient in Facilitating Black Children’s Academic Outcomes & Positive Development

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Fostering social and emotional health in children as a part of healthy child development must be a national priority. The integration of emotional, cognitive and social skills is needed for children to develop in age-appropriate ways, and promote their positive developmental and academic outcomes. This essay will focus on Black children’s positive social emotional development and ways in which teachers can support this development in classrooms. There will be a focus on utilizing culturally- and contextually-relevant strategies to support Black children’s social emotional development in schools.

As evidenced by the need for the National Black Child Development Institute to create briefs such as these, there is minimal research on the positive development of Black children. The extant research has overwhelmingly focused on Black children’s negative development with little to no focus on their normative or positive development. This lack of diversity and understanding of their normative and positive development is evidenced by the misperception and labeling of Black children. Many Black children’s emotions and behaviors are misinterpreted as problematic. There is a bias that Black children are loud, emotional and disruptive. There is an urgent need to understand emotional expression among Black children from a Black cultural perspective, and not to simply compare Black children to White children, deeming any differences as Black child deficits. Furthermore, if we truly want to facilitate their academic achievement, we must examine the connection between Black children’s emotionality and their academic outcomes, as well as how to support their emotional and social development in school.

Emotions are fundamental to children’s academic and cognitive achievement. Children’s learning can be facilitated or impeded by emotions. Children who are unable to regulate their emotions and behavior are unable to actively engage in learning. Research has found a significant relationship between low-income Black parents’ positive emotionality and children’s school readiness and academic achievement. Social emotional competence (SEC) abilities have been linked to school readiness and academic success. Social emotional learning (SEL) entails a child’s ability to identify emotions in themselves and others; manage their emotions appropriately; have positive interactions with teachers and peers; and solve problems effectively.

Over the last 20 years, there has been a push, in both research and school communities, to support children’s social emotional development in schools. In 2004, Illinois became the first state to adopt state learning standards for SEL. The purpose of SEL programs is to facilitate students’ positive social and emotional competence abilities, increasing academic performance and prosocial behaviors. However, these programs have, historically, been based on research that does not focus on the positive or normative development of minority children. Rather, this research has overwhelmingly focused on White middle-class children. Furthermore, minority children, especially those attending urban schools, have been targeted for SEL program implementation. As a result, these programs have been criticized for a lack of cultural diversity. If the SEL programs targeting Black children are not based on normative and positive development research of Black children, but, instead, on that of White children, what are these programs doing for and to our children? These programs do not align with cultural orientations of Black children and families. “There are many urban African American children who are well adjusted, and it is important to explore the factors related to their competency...”

The few programs that have attempted to address the lack of cultural diversity in SEL programs have merely changed the physical features of the characters in program materials to various shades of brown. Color alone does not address cultural issues. Cultural diversity of Black children and families is deeper than skin color. SEL program materials need to reflect and support the cultural backgrounds of their students. Teachers want and need curricula and materials to mirror the

BETWEEN 2011 AND 2014, THERE WAS A 3% INCREASE IN SUSPENSIONS AMONG BLACK STUDENTS IN GRADES PRE-K TO 8TH GRADE, WHILE WHITE STUDENTS EXPERIENCED A DECREASE OF 3% IN SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS.
The role of teachers is crucial in fostering students’ social and emotional development. Teachers help create a positive learning environment, which can prevent children from experiencing negative academic outcomes. For instance, children from lower-quality classrooms are more likely to face negative academic and emotional outcomes. However, teachers who create a positive emotional classroom climate are more likely to respond to and label children’s emotions positively, leading to improved social competence. Although society expects teachers to manage students’ emotions, the current structure and demands of schools can hinder SEL work.

In a recent qualitative study of early childhood teachers (pre-kindergarten through 3rd grade) from urban schools, teachers indicated that they believe it is their professional responsibility to teach and support children’s social emotional competence (SEC) abilities. This sentiment was reported in the face of mounting pressures reported by schools. Furthermore, teachers indicated that in order to instruct effectively, children need to have a solid foundation in social emotional competence abilities, and that these abilities need to be developed prior to addressing academics. This has significant implications for how school curricula are developed and implemented, as well as how schools of education and alternative pre-service education programs prepare and train teachers and school administrators. There is a need to have explicit instruction and training in SEL for pre-service teachers.

In order to facilitate SEL work, SEL programming should be integrated into the structure and academic curricula taking place in the classroom. Consistent with past reviews of early childhood classroom-based interventions, programs that were integrated into the culture of the classroom were found to be more effective. The seamless integration of SEL programming into the classroom structure increases implementation fidelity. For example, the integration of social-emotional skills into...
literacy instruction has been found to promote children's positive social-emotional and academic outcomes.\textsuperscript{20} This integration reduces the perception that SEC is separate from academics. When teachers deliver SEL programs, as opposed to non-school staff, they have been effective in promoting positive child development outcomes (e.g., SEC skill development, positive social behavior, increased academic performance), while also decreasing conduct problems and emotional distress.\textsuperscript{21}

Black children's positive behaviors and abilities often go unnoticed. Teachers often miss their positive behaviors because there is an over-focus on the negative or problematic behaviors of Black children, especially those from urban and economically stressed environments.\textsuperscript{22} Teachers may view children's engagement and interactions with their peers in the classroom (i.e., being off task, talking) as interfering with the learning environment,\textsuperscript{23} and not see how these behaviors also highlight children's positive social skills. The lack of attention to Black children's positive social and emotional behaviors yields a one-dimensional and incomplete presentation of their abilities.

Children's social and emotional skills can also suffer benign neglect due to the increased focus on high-stakes student testing.\textsuperscript{24} The connection of standardized test scores to teacher salaries, job security and school closures has resulted in schools singularly focusing on academic content like mathematics, reading and science. School administrators have diverted attention and resources away from supporting students' social emotional competence abilities. There is a false and dangerous assumption that, by singularly focusing on the academics of reading, mathematics and science, we will elevate children's academic performance, and reduce the education gap between White and Black and Brown students. This false assumption is crippling Black children. The focus on the achievement gap and engaging in “gap gazing” distorts the educational issue of Black children. Biased assessment methods facilitates and widens the gap. This singular and distorted focus reifies racial stereotypes and negative believes about Black students. We must move beyond achievement gap rhetoric to acknowledge the promise of Black children.\textsuperscript{25}

Teaching academic skills (including math and literacy) should not be in opposition or competition with developing children's social emotional competence abilities.\textsuperscript{26} It is very difficult for children to engage in and learn academic material, as well as interact socially in age-appropriate ways with classmates, if they are unable to manage their social and emotional selves. Successful schools and teachers not only prepare children academically, but support children's social emotional competence skills, thereby promoting success well into adulthood.\textsuperscript{27} Academic success in the classroom is not achieved by ignoring the fact that children are human beings. We need to develop the whole child. The inclusion of SEC and SEL into schools is a way of supporting the whole Black child.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

To facilitate Black children's positive social emotional development in classrooms, the following culturally- and contextually-relevant strategies are proposed:

- Conduct and utilize research on the normative and positive development of Black children's social emotional competence abilities. Utilize this developmental research to develop culturally-relevant SEL programs.
- Integrate social emotional competence strategies into academics. For example, utilizing literacy as a means to promote and teach Black children social emotional competence skills.
- Implement effective teacher training, both pre- and in-service, in SEL. This includes educating future teachers on the importance of supporting Black students SEC abilities, understanding how SEC abilities are related to academic outcomes, and how to integrate SEC into their lesson plans.
- Explicit training for educators on the intersection of race and SEL. This includes how specific SEL standards and Black children's positive racial identity facilitates positive academic and developmental outcomes.
- Incorporate the voices of key stakeholders, from both the school and children's communities, in the development of SEL programs. This inclusion can potentially improve SEL programs by making them more contextually and culturally relevant.

**CONCLUSION**

Social emotional competency (SEC) and social emotional learning (SEL) programs are gaining national acclaim and momentum given that they encourage students' successful academic performance and prosocial behaviors.\textsuperscript{28} Although these programs, in general, have shown empirical promise, there is still much to be learned in terms of implementation with Black children and in diverse urban school contexts.
There is an urgent need to understand emotional expression among Black children from a Black cultural perspective, and not to simply compare Black children to White children, deeming any differences as Black child deficits.