Reframing Social-Emotional Learning: Moving from Behavior to Holistic Development

Social-emotional learning (SEL) has deep historical roots, dating back to Plato's emphasis on character and moral judgment. Today, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines SEL as "the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions" (2025).

However, despite its growing adoption in U.S. schools, there remains an overemphasis on student behavior in SEL practices. This focus inappropriately centers emotional regulation as the primary goal, potentially perpetuating punitive disciplinary practices and cultural biases while overlooking ecological variables that influence student behavior.

by Brittany Collins

The Evolution of Social-Emotional Learning

1   Traditional SEL

Focuses on five core competencies: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills (CASEL, 2025).

2   Transformative SEL (TSEL)

Shifts focus to include "skills for individual success, interpersonal relations, and community-building, as well as skills needed to ensure democratic, fair, and inclusive communities" (CASEL, 2024).

3   Trauma-Sensitive Teaching

Addresses "educational practices and approaches that are intended to cultivate a safe learning environment and mitigate the impact of trauma symptoms on student learning" (Jennings, 2019).

4   Healing-Centered Engagement

A strength-based approach to trauma that promotes a collective view of healing and recognizes the importance of culture in well-being (Ginwright, 2018).

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Trauma's Impact on Student Development and Presentation

Neurobiological Effects

Early childhood maltreatment can impact brain structure, function, and connectivity, affecting development (Teicher, Samson, et al., 2016).

Systemic Inequity

Oppression itself can constitute trauma, with physical impacts of "weathering" (Geronimus, 2006) confirmed by research.
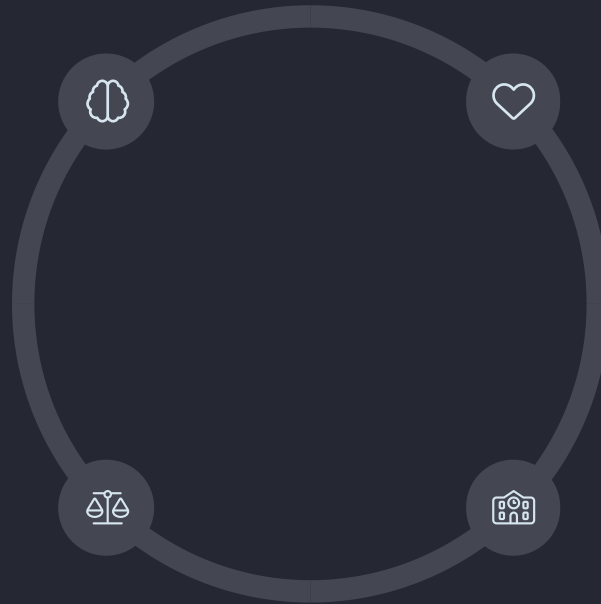
Emotional Adaptations

Students develop coping strategies that serve them in trauma contexts but may become maladaptive in school settings.

Behavioral Manifestations

Stress impairs higher cortical function, potentially leading to angry outbursts, emotional withdrawal, or connection-seeking behaviors.

Cultural Biases in Behavioral Interpretations

Biased Perceptions

Research shows teachers were 71% more likely to report feeling anger rather than concern when reading about potentially challenging behavior from a Black student compared to a white student (Legette et al., 2023).

Disciplinary Disparities

Bias can lead to inequitable frequency and severity of disciplinary practices, contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline (ACLU, 2008).

Cultural Coding

Concepts of "appropriate" and "inappropriate" behavior are not neutral but often rooted in ableism and centered in whiteness (Venet, 2021).

Pathologizing Differences

Students may move from being labeled "disorderly" to "disordered," pathologizing them based on noncompliance with dominant cultural norms (Venet, 2021).

The Limitations of Behavior-Focused SEL

Overemphasis on Regulation

Many SEL programs prioritize impulse control and emotion regulation while deemphasizing justified emotions associated with traumatic experiences or systemic injustices (The EASEL Lab, 2021).

This narrow focus can lead to harmful emotional repression; perpetuate punitive disciplinary practices rooted in behaviorism; and encourage students to keep their inner lives secret.

Conflation with PBIS

Some programs mistakenly conflate Positive Behavioral Intervention Systems (PBIS) with SEL, though they are distinct frameworks with different philosophical underpinnings (and even SEL itself has hundreds of frameworks; see the **EASEL Lab Taxonomy Project**).

PBIS emphasizes rewards and punishments for externalized behaviors, which can reinforce cultural and ableist biases about what constitutes "appropriate" behavior.

Ignoring Systemic Factors

Behavior-focused approaches often fail to address the ecological variables that constitute etiologies for perceived student misbehavior, including trauma, inequity, (dis)ability, and cultural differences.

This can lead to punitive discipline and punishments of behaviors that are themselves (often innovative) adaptations to traumatic stimuli, causing further harm for students already experiencing adversity.

Transformative Approaches to SEL

Expressive Practices

"Challenge by choice" writing, drawing, or storytelling activities that invite—but don't force—students to describe and share their feelings / lived experiences authentically.

Communication Skills

Teaching students to articulate their wants, needs, emotions, and boundaries effectively through scripts and practice.
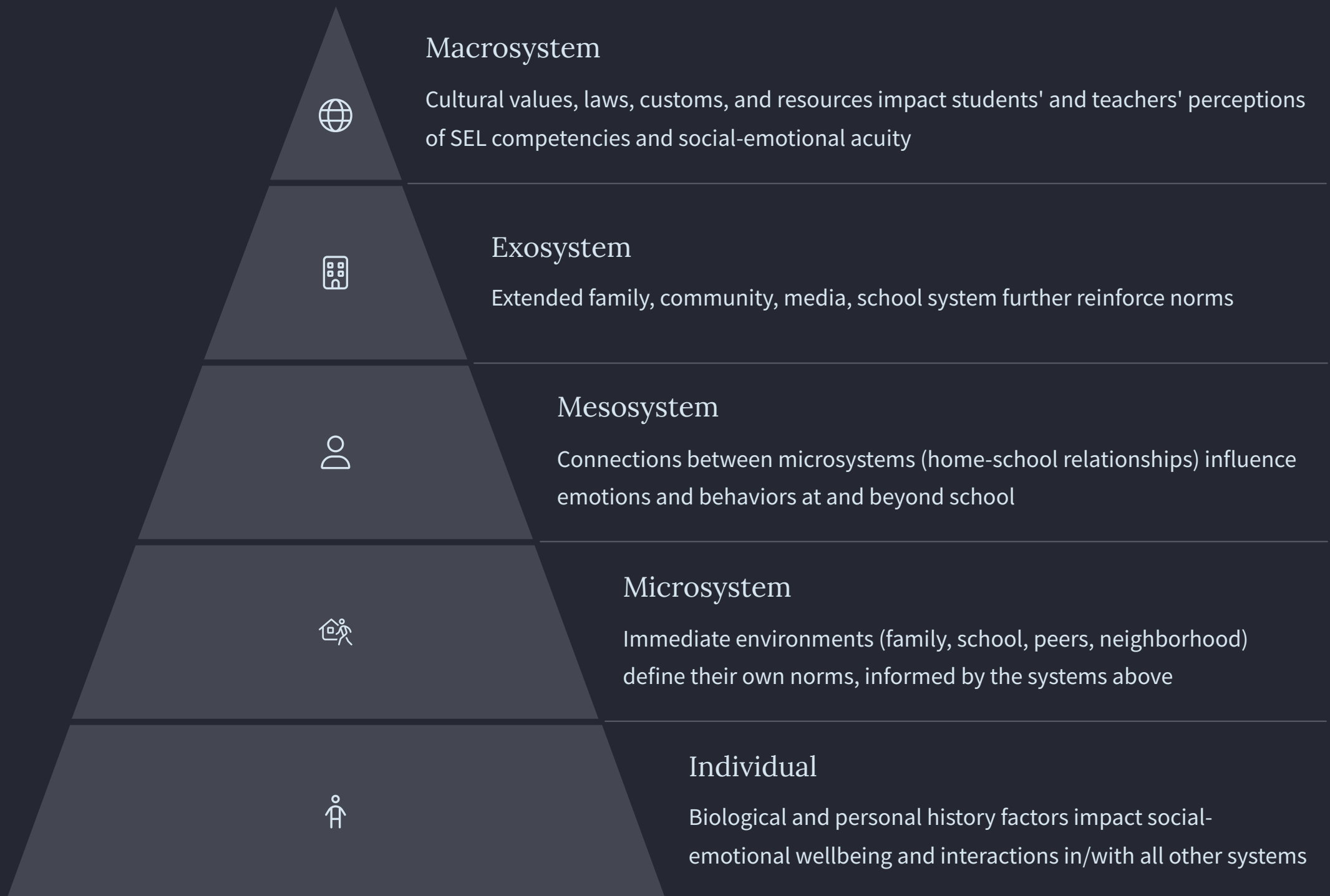
Empowerment Activities

Organizing peers and adults to advocate for systemic change and work toward equitable solutions that are beneficial and fair for all. Practicing the five competencies while working toward justice.

Mindfulness Practices

Lovingkindness meditation encourages mentalization and consideration of others' thoughts and feelings. Reframe mindfulness as a tool for fighting injustice, not a way to pretend injustice doesn't exist or should be better coped with.

Applying Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (1977) to Student Behavior & SEL

Macrosystem

Cultural values, laws, customs, and resources impact students' and teachers' perceptions of SEL competencies and social-emotional acuity

Exosystem

Extended family, community, media, school system further reinforce norms

Mesosystem

Connections between microsystems (home-school relationships) influence emotions and behaviors at and beyond school

Microsystem

Immediate environments (family, school, peers, neighborhood) define their own norms, informed by the systems above

Individual

Biological and personal history factors impact social-emotional wellbeing and interactions in/with all other systems

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Creating Holistic, Equity-Centered SEL Environments

Consider Systemic Context

Take a wider view that considers behavior and regulation within the contexts of systemic oppression, trauma exposure, and the role of bias in educational settings. Identify your own biases. Consider starting with staff-wide **implicit bias tests**.

Legitimize Students' Feelings

Focus on encouraging students to label their feelings using open-ended questions and emotion words; doing so helps them process emotions productively rather than suppress or receive punishment for authentic emotional expressions.

Use Representative Materials

Incorporate mentor texts that engage themes of emotionality, identity, interpersonal skills, and resilience in diverse cultural contexts to promote SEL competencies while making space for authentic articulations of emotion according to students' cultural norms.

Create Wraparound Support Systems

Develop systems through curriculum, instruction, and assessment that counteract harm and facilitate healing for both students and educators. Define practices for your own adult wellbeing and staff connectivity; adult wellbeing directly correlates with student wellbeing.

Prompts for Group Discussion

Prepare to share in a community of practice:

In your teaching/learning context, when have you...

1. Seen curricular and instructional practices that supported students' social-emotional skills: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and/or responsible decision-making, in ways that were **effective and equitable**? What made these practices impactful?

2. Seen social-emotional learning be **ineffective** or used as a guise for **inequitable practices**, such as punitive discipline? What made these practices harmful?

Next, consider:

- What is one concrete way you might apply culturally responsive social-emotional learning to your work? **How might your content encourage students' social-emotional wellbeing?**

Key References & Citations

Delve into the essential sources that underpin our exploration of social-emotional learning. Uncover influential studies, publications, and scholars that shape our understanding of holistic student development.

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