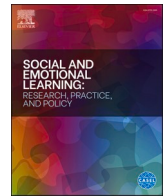






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## Collegial relationships as a vehicle for adult SEL: Educator relationships and the development of adult social and emotional competencies

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### ABSTRACT

Inclusion of adult social and emotional learning (SEL) in research, practice, and policy signals a paradigm shift towards a more equitable and ecological approach to schoolwide social and emotional well-being. Educators who demonstrate strong social and emotional competencies (SECs) can co-create safe, supportive, and encouraging relationships not only for their students, but also for their colleagues as well as the whole school community. In this paper, we explore how educator relationships can facilitate the development of adult SECs amidst complex inequities and professional challenges inherent in school systems. We analyzed focus groups and interviews with educators nationwide ( $n = 61$ ) using the CASEL model of SEL as a framework. We wanted to understand the role of educator relationships in adult SEC development, and how adult SECs may reciprocally reinforce educator relationships. Educators provided insights across several dimensions of SEL, demonstrating the interdependence of relationships and adult social and emotional well-being. Practical strategies and approaches for educator relationship building, organized by adult SEC categories, are also presented as a tool for practitioners. This study's findings highlight the significance of cultivating positive educator relationships as part of Transformative SEL initiatives to ensure that all educators have what they need to promote social and emotional well-being for themselves, their students, and their school communities.

We want our teachers and our paras and all of our staff members to approach the students in a way where it really focuses on the students' assets so that we know how to make them fly versus constantly just dragging down with what they're not good at. Well, heck that should be the same case for our other relationships. If what you're doing with the students is best practice, chances are it's a human thing. And that should probably be done with the adults. -Saul, Administrator, OH (White, male, 3 years at current school)

Over the past decade, social and emotional learning (SEL) has become a subject of popular interest, particularly in school settings as evidence-based SEL programs have become increasingly more available (Jones & Doolittle, 2017; Meland & Brion-Meisels, 2024). Many such programs focus primarily on the social and emotional well-being of *students* and sometimes only tangentially address the internal capacity among *adults* in education (e.g., teachers, administrators, specialists, coaches, program leaders, and support staff at the school and district levels; Meyers et al., 2019). Current models of SEL, such as Transformative SEL (tSEL) and systemic SEL (Jagers et al., 2019; Mahoney

et al., 2021; Yoder et al., 2021), explicitly mention adult SEL as part of a holistic approach to promoting social and emotional well-being in schools for students and adults alike.

The widely-used SEL model created by The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) applies to both youth and adults (Humphries, 2020) and enumerates 15 social and emotional competencies (SECs) organized by five SEL domains: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Center for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2020). Research has long shown that teachers who model SECs promote student SEL holistically through a) building strong relationships with students, b) thoughtfully designing lessons tailored to students' needs, c) fostering an attitude of cooperation and prosociality, and d) implementing SEL interventions with fidelity (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Research on educator SECs also demonstrates the importance of adult SEL in reducing educator burnout, increasing retention, and, while not the explicit focus of this paper, improving student outcomes (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Jennings et al., 2017). There exists an assumption that school-based professionals possess the requisite social and emotional

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competencies to effectively promote SEL, but that is not always the case (McMahon et al., 2024; Oliveira et al., 2021), perhaps especially during these challenging times in U.S. and global society.

Given the rising rates of teacher turnover, job dissatisfaction, and chronic burnout - especially since the COVID-19 pandemic (Bristol, 2020; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Goldhaber & Theobald, 2023) - educators must cultivate resilience against the pervasive challenges they face. Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, co-author of *Happy Teachers Change the World* (Hanh & Weare, 2017, p. xxv) states, "If teachers are unhappy, if they do not have harmony and peace with each other, how will they help young people to suffer less and succeed in their work?" There is a clear need to understand more about how educators can work together to cultivate SECs in this complex national and global climate. In this paper, we draw on qualitative data from educators nationwide to explore the connection between adult relationships and adult SEC development.

## Relationships and SEL

Healthy adult relationships can buffer the social and emotional challenges educators face as part of their line of work (Meyers et al., 2019). They also help foster a supportive school relational climate and provide students with a model of healthy relationships, which supports students' social and emotional well-being and academic performance.

Although our paper focuses on adult SEL and SECs, research with young people shows that developmental relationships (Houlberg et al., 2023) characterized by care, authenticity, and reciprocity are essential to implementing culturally sustaining SEL in schools (Meland & Brion-Meisels, 2024). In a study of nearly 13,000 6th-12th grade students, only 50 % said having the 5 SECs outlined by CASEL was "mostly" like them; but 68 % of students who reported strong developmental relationships with teachers and staff reported strong SECs, versus just 38 % with moderate developmental relationships, and 22 % with weak developmental relationships (Search Institute, 2020). A small but growing body of research on adult SEL and school climate (Hornsby-Griffin, 2023; Pressley & Hornsby-Griffin, 2022; Sanderlin, 2022), combined with a strong theoretical alignment of adult SECs as part of a holistic approach to SEL (Center for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2020), suggests a positive association between school relational climate and adult SEC development.

While it is evident that both young people and adults can benefit from SEL, the methods by which SEL is taught must differ to be developmentally appropriate. Youth and adults each navigate a distinct landscape of relationships and responsibilities; particularly, in educational settings, adults navigate not only their relationships with students, but also with colleagues, administrators, and families, to name a few. While students often participate in SEL as part of their schedule of activities, there is little time for adults to cultivate their own SECs in the context of their school day. Although professional development for increasing educators' SECs has a useful role to play (Jennings et al., 2017), the limited time available suggests that SEL for educators must be grounded in their everyday work and interactions.

Successful SEL implementation depends on how educators collaborate to facilitate SEL instruction, foster a positive school community, and model SECs (Center for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2024; Meyers et al., 2019). To effectively model SECs to students, educators need to demonstrate SECs from the inside out: deep learning that sustains throughout one's career takes place when one can apply learnings holistically in daily life (Loeng, 2020). As such, relationships are an important catalyst in the development of adult SECs. Educator relationships can serve as a foundation for deep learning and application, while potentially providing educators with the necessary social support to persist in the face of adversity and promote social and emotional well-being for their students and themselves.

## Current models of holistic SEL

Transformative SEL (tSEL), or the process by which young people and adults build relationships that facilitate learning as well as SEC development in the context of equity (Jagers et al., 2019), is one prevailing model that includes both young people and adults in systemic SEL implementation. TSEL emphasizes the roles of cultural competence and SEC development among adults in schools, including an awareness of the systems of inequity that perpetuate racism and discrimination. In alignment with this perspective, Osher et al. (2020) posit that robust equity in schools can be realized through improvements to both relational climate and adult SECs. While some school systems and districts are currently legally prohibited from implementing SEL practices and programs, others are implementing models of tSEL which include adult relationship building and SEC development as important components (California Department of Education, 2024; Williams et al., 2020). Currently, there is a tremendous opportunity to deepen the research base on what role adult SEC development plays in promoting social and emotional well-being in schools, as well as what it looks like and how to cultivate SECs in practice. This study aims to build upon the knowledge base on adult SEL to understand the role of educator relationships in the development of adult SECs.

## Current study

To examine the development of adult SECs through collegial relationships, we asked one central question: how do relationships between and among educators support their SEC development? Beyond demonstrating the association between relationships and adult SECs, we also sought to situate our findings within the context of current holistic models of SEL, and provide practical strategies for relationship building aligned with the CASEL model of SEL. Taken together, we provide rich empirical data that yield practical insights into how educator relationships can be a critical vehicle for adult SEC development.

## Method

### Data and participants

The data used to answer our research question came from 16 focus groups and 5 interviews collected in March 2022 as part of a larger study on educator relationships. The larger sample included teachers, specialists, paraprofessionals, and administrators. For the present study, we excluded focus groups and interviews attended solely by school leaders to center the experiences of teachers and specialists (e.g., school psychologists, paraprofessionals) who interact with students every day (mixed focus groups of teachers, staff, and administrators were included).

We recruited participants online with electronic flyers disseminated through email listservs and social media channels (See Supplemental Material 1). Interested participants completed an eligibility form which collected their availability and demographic information. Researchers selected participants to ensure the study sample contained educators with diverse racial/ethnic identities, gender identities, as well as different types of schools and locations. Focus groups and interviews were conducted in English online via Zoom and lasted from 60 to 90 minutes. Whether an educator participated in a focus group or individual interview depended on their availability and preference. We also offered an individual interview option for educators of color in recognition of the potential power dynamics inherent in a focus group with majority White educators (Pezalla et al., 2024). Of the 21 educators of color, 10 were offered interviews for this reason (47.7 %) and 3 accepted (14.2 %). We found that among educators of color who chose an interview over a focus group, the information shared was qualitatively more critical of systemic inequities (Pezalla et al., 2024). All study procedures were approved by the Solutions Institutional Review Board

(IRB#: 2022/01/28). Each educator received a \$150 electronic gift card for their participation.

Sixty-one educators participated in the 21 focus groups and interviews in this study (see Supplemental Material 2 for more information). Seventy-four percent of participants were teachers, 16 % were instructional coaches or specialists (including counselors), 7 % were paraprofessional educators, 3 % were administrative staff, and 5 % were school leaders.<sup>1</sup> Similar to the broader U.S. teaching force (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023), most participants identified as female (72 %; 26 % male, and 2 % non-binary) and White (66 %; 15 % Black/African American, 8 % Asian American, 7 % Multiracial, and 5 % Latina/o or Hispanic). At the time of data collection, educator participants worked in their current schools from 4 months to 30 years (median = 6 years).

### Analysis

The same eight semi-structured questions (Supplemental Material 3) were asked to participants in each focus group/interview. We analyzed the transcripts deductively in three steps. First, the authors each coded five transcripts using CASEL's five dimensions of adult SEL (Center for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2024; see Supplemental Material 4 for our codebook). The authors then wrote brief code interpretation memos for the first 10 transcripts, meeting to discuss the interpretations until reaching consensus. Two rounds of iterative coding followed. Finally, to ensure reliability, we randomly selected 20 % of the excerpts from each SEL dimension ( $n = 78$ ), to be coded by each author (agreement = 94 %). All coded excerpts were then examined by the lead author for common themes and iteratively reviewed by the second author for accuracy. The quotes most illustrative of common themes within each SEL domain were included in the results section below.

### Researcher positionality

We acknowledge that we bring our own subjective lenses into the interpretation of these data. We subscribe to a constructivist epistemology (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) meaning there is no "objective" truth to discover and there is not an absolute "right" way to interpret how educator relationships are associated with adult SEL and SECs. Rather, how we interpret the association is inseparable from our identities, backgrounds, and experiences, which we share below. Attending to the influence of our positionality on the analysis, the authors wrote and shared memos during coding and met weekly to discuss how aspects of our backgrounds may have influenced our process and findings.

Lex Nappa: Educators' stories about the challenges of working in schools resonated with me as a former school psychologist who exited the field due to burnout. I respect educators who stay against many odds and I advocate for their collective well-being alongside students and their communities. I am aware of how the systemic privileges related to my White (U.S. second-generation American from mixed European descent) identity could influence the research process in ways that decenter the experiences of educators of color. I adopt a sensibility of intellectual humility and engage in frequent self-assessment to identify oversights with the aim of promoting equity in research and practice.

Ta-yang (Diane) Hsieh: I have never been a formal educator nor trained in the SEL field, so I acknowledge the "outsider" lens I bring to this study. I approach this work with humility knowing that my research findings are only as good as they resonate with and support educators' practical wisdom. I identify as Asian and I acknowledge that my racial identity might have made me more attuned to the educators of color in this study.

<sup>1</sup> The sum of percentages for participants' roles in schools exceeded 100 % because some participants held multiple roles.

## Results

The following sections present our findings on how educator relationships facilitate adult SEL through the development of SECs. We use the term "educators" broadly to describe all school-based professionals (e.g., teachers, administrators, specialists, etc.), including their specific job titles when relevant.<sup>2</sup> We organized the findings by CASEL's five dimensions of SEL and their corresponding SECs (see Supplemental Material 4 for definitions). Although it is not the purpose of our study to analyze or interpret differences in code frequencies, we found that relationship skills (97) and self-awareness (86) appeared most frequently in the dataset, with self-management (84), social awareness (57), and responsible decision-making (53) occurring somewhat less often. Due to the nature of our study design, caution should be taken not to imply strength or directionality in the frequencies above. More demographic information about each educator quoted in this section can be found in Supplemental Material 2.

### Self-awareness

#### Emotional self-awareness

Awareness of internal emotions can be a useful resource that helps in responding effectively to difficulties as they arise. Participants shared that strong collegial relationships offer an opportunity to explore and express thoughts and feelings in a way that provides insight into their emotional states. Receiving emotional support and accurate reflection can be a powerful byproduct of talking with a trusted colleague, which reciprocally strengthens the relationship. Several educators mentioned how others' emotions affect the school relational climate. Specifically, someone with a bleak or pessimistic outlook can unintentionally spread this attitude to others through negativity in speech or action. Likewise, colleagues who maintain a positive outlook are likely to "lift each other up" and contribute to a positive relational climate.

I really owe my long-term health and my happiness to some of my coworkers in the middle school because they're so darn positive and they made me a better person. And now I'm back up on the third floor again around the grumpy people and I'm trying not to get sucked into that black hole of negativity because it definitely has an impact. You just don't want to spend all day being unhappy when there's not that many things to be unhappy about. We have great jobs. We got a great, safe school, but it's easy to get pulled into that. And I noticed that when I worked with people who were much more positive than myself, it brought me up. - George, Teacher, NY (White, male, 24 years at current school)

#### Identity and self-knowledge

Educators with strong SECs are able to understand how their backgrounds influence their interactions at school. Educators can understand what they value in relationships as well as how they are similar and different from others. Particularly for educators from marginalized backgrounds, it can be helpful to know at least one colleague who shares an aspect of identity, which cultivates an expansive, rather than exclusive, school culture. As educators J.D. and Lee discussed:

J.D.: My school does a lot of talking about talking about diversity, but not actually walking the walk, and there's no diversity to look at, so it feels very vacant. I do think that affects relationships in the building. I'm not quite sure how ...

Lee: Well, I think that it's hard to create a relationship, or make an overture with another human, if you feel you might not be able to connect with them. So if there's not a diversity around you, or

<sup>2</sup> All educator names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

somebody who looks or speaks or sounds or believes like you or has an identifier like you, then you might not be able to have strong relationships. It's a little bit harder to forge that path, I think.

J.D.: Yeah. I think if there's no diversity, it also creates a culture that is more exclusive rather than expansive.

Lee: Or certainly a culture of, 'This is what is valued here.' - J.D., Teacher, NY (White, non-binary, 2 years at current school); Lee, Learning Specialist, CA (Multiracial, female, 5 years at current school)

When educators take inventory of their intersecting identities, they are more able to understand those of others. Similarly, when educators understand how their identities impact the privilege they receive or marginalization they face, they are more able to empathize with colleagues and can work to create a culturally responsive school climate.

#### *Growth mindset and purpose*

Participants often shared that collegial relationships are vital to retention and their desire to grow professionally. Several educators mentioned how strong relationships with colleagues are the reason they stay in their school and/or profession, suggesting that relationships themselves can become part of their purpose for teaching. As Perry remarked:

[...] The relationships with the adults that I have are the reason that I have stayed at the school that I've been at. I've been there for eight years but my colleagues are the reason that I have not left. So I think it is a big deal. Even when I have the worst day, it's like I have these people in my corner who care about me and I know they do. - Perry, Teacher, NY (White, male, 8 years at current school)

Crucial to adopting a growth mindset are the virtues of humility, asking for help, and curiosity, among others (Yu et al., 2022). When collegial relationships are strong and trusting, educators are more likely to engage with one another in a generative way that values professional growth. As Margaret shared:

When you have good relationships with your co-workers, you feel safe saying, 'I have no idea how to teach this,' or 'My lesson plans aren't working. What are your ideas?' You're not ashamed to not be perfect at everything. - Margaret, Teacher, CA (White, female, 2 years at current school)

#### *Self-management*

##### *Managing emotions*

Emotion management is particularly salient for educators in that they are expected to remain composed and in charge at all times, while managing the pervasive stress of stretching beyond their capacity in a culture of chronic underappreciation. Emotion management can occur through a process called *co-regulation*, which often takes place through educator relationships, according to participants. Co-regulation in the adult context has been defined as a "bidirectional linkage of subjective experience, expressive behavior, and autonomic physiology between partners, which contributes to emotional and physiological stability" (Butler & Randall, 2013). Research on co-regulation among adults is scarce (Murray et al., 2023) and tends to focus on adult romantic relationships. It can be argued that a similar process occurs between educators who spend much of their time together managing emotions in a high-stress environment. Loretta spoke to the intimacy of such relationships:

You have to have somebody. A lot of people talk about their work wives and their work husbands and that sort of thing. And it's just somebody that you have at work that's close to you that you can trust with your secrets, whatever they happen to be. Whether they're work or home or whatever. You need that. Because if you don't have

anybody at all to talk to, then yeah, it's just not a happy place. We're human. We need that connection to one another. Otherwise, we really do fall apart. We just can't handle that, otherwise. - Loretta, Teacher, DE (White, female, 18 years at current school)

Co-regulation in adult relationships contributes to each person's well-being. Trusting one another with sensitive information creates space for vulnerability and the opportunity to give and receive emotional support. Managing emotions through mutual support reciprocally reinforces educator relationships: relying on a colleague to "talk you down" or "bring you back to the light", as educator Sophia (Teacher, NY [White, female, 2 years at current school]) said, likely strengthens the bond between both parties.

Kathryn shared a powerful instance when a colleague who she previously trusted and with whom she had a strong relationship filed a grievance behind her back, causing friction in their relationship, which resulted in Kathryn experiencing overwhelming negative emotions ("I still can't talk about it without crying"). Just as strong educator relationships reciprocally reinforce emotion management, weak relationships can lead to emotional dysregulation, deeply impacting well-being at work.

Often overlooked in SEL frameworks is the case of emotion management among educators of color and other marginalized backgrounds (Humphrey, 2022). Just as with SEL interventions for marginalized students, the onus of regulating emotions "in ways that don't negatively impact others" (Center for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2024) can be unrealistic at best and harmful at worst. Particularly in schools where educators are predominantly White, educators of color are expected to not only manage emotions that arise from everyday stressors, but also carry the burden of coping with systemic injustices. Ray, a male of educator of color, recounts his experience:

They're asking me when they see me, "Hey, are you a gym teacher?" As if somebody of my stature can't be an English teacher. They're questioning my ability to be able to teach or even my education level. These are the things I got to deal with. But yeah, I still have to come in and teach with a sane mind. I still have to come in and make sure everyone is comfortable. - Ray, Teacher, NC (Black, male, 2 years at current school)

##### *Motivation, agency, and goal setting*

Educators are in a unique predicament where performance evaluations encourage educators to set goals, and yet they are beholden to administrators to implement practices in a "top-down" fashion, which limits their agency. When educators can leverage relationships to work together towards common goals, they can collaborate to support motivation, agency, and goal-setting. Lee recounted a fruitful PD session where they took time to build relationships to achieve challenging yet attainable goals: "It was a way of relationship building, very much. We went together, we took the train together, a sense of camaraderie. But we were working and we were enjoying each other."

Conversely, when educators lack the support inherent in positive relationships, it can deplete agency and motivational drive. Betty (Paraprofessional, MI [Asian, female, 5 years at current school]) reflected on this phenomenon: "The teachers' hands are tied. We're not getting support from the administration. I look at it and I'm like God is it worth it? I don't know. I could do something else. I could work at McDonalds and make more money."

##### *Planning and organization*

Educators must multi-task, remain flexible, and pivot plans at a moment's notice amidst high performance expectations. Strong relationships can support job satisfaction, which is crucial for educators seeking work/life balance in the current landscape of overwork and underappreciation (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012). The need for balance became especially salient in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, which



is when our interviews and focus groups took place. Philip talked about how his relationship with fellow educators helped facilitate work-life balance:

We understand that sometimes you have to get away from the building, do things for yourself and we used to, before COVID, we had wellness programs where we had a workout group and we'd all work out at lunch. We'd actually meet some places sometimes and go hiking outside of work. Our administration has given us hours to see therapists and stuff if we want to as well, so it doesn't go against our leave time...so all that I think helps the workplace because just going, going, going drains you. - Philip, Teacher, NM (Latino/Hispanic, male, 13 years at current school)

When relationships are strong, educators are more likely to move closer to one another to help each other meet their needs for work-life balance.

#### *Social awareness*

##### *Empathy and compassion*

Empathy and compassion occur in relationship to both self and others. Educator relationships provide the grounds necessary to develop and foster empathy and compassion for one another. As Sue (Teacher, MO [White, female, 3 years at current school]) said, "Having colleagues who you have trusting relationships with lets you know that at the end of the day, you have someone who will listen and validate your feelings."

Likewise, empathic connection reciprocally strengthens educator relationships when people feel heard, valued, and supported. Strong educator relationships are conducive to the development of empathy and compassion, which in turn grows the relationship. As Diana (Teacher, MN [White, female, 7 years at current school]) succinctly shared, "you get what you put in."

The qualities of empathy and compassion have a particularly powerful impact on collegial relationships where power imbalances exist. Educators from marginalized backgrounds field prejudice and discrimination on all fronts. As Kathryn's story below demonstrates, when educators have positive relationships, they feel more empathy and compassion for one another - even and especially across lines of difference - and are motivated by an intrinsic desire to help.

I really love talking with our custodian. He'll come in during the day and he'll talk your ear off. I feel like some teachers look down on him like, 'Oh, Juan offered to do this, but he painted it the wrong color.' It's like, 'Well, did you tell him what color you wanted it?' So that's not his problem. Or there's a teacher who will never turn her lights off and so he's always, every night, having to turn off her lights. I'm like, 'How can you be ...' [...] It's like they look down on him. I'm like, 'Man, that's kind of crappy. He's a really nice guy.' - Kathryn, Teacher, MN (White, female, 19 years at current school)

##### *Perspective taking*

Educators who approach collegial relationships with humility and respect are able to understand their colleagues' viewpoints, even when they differ on issues directly related to their position and indirectly via differences in background and identity (educators of color, LGBTQ+ educators, etc.). Educators said that perspective taking also includes accepting the good and the bad; understanding that even if a colleague is unable to perform their best or keep a positive attitude, there are still qualities to appreciate about them. Educator Don (Teacher, MN [White, male, 1 year at current school]) said, "there's a few crabby people that you see, but you just learn to appreciate and accept some of the disconnections and the crabbiness. That's okay because we got to have them to appreciate other things."

In addition, trusting collegial relationships enable educators to meet one another where they are and grow together. Tim shared his experience with an administrator who could attune to educators' needs, and

how that impacted staff well-being:

[...] they know the pulse of the faculty, they can see where everyone is and they can give them room to breathe and room to excel at what they're great at, has been a lifesaver. And I think having this person in there the last couple years through this pandemic produced a staff that was less stressed out, more excited about collaboration and doing what's best for the students in a really peculiar world over the last couple of years. - Tim, Teacher, CA (White, male, 7 years at current school)

##### *Understanding social context*

When educators reflect on their own social location and the contexts in which they operate, they are better able to understand the systemic factors and dynamics that serve to foster or undermine relationships. A particularly salient social context for our educator participants was the disparaging treatment of paraeducators and support staff. As Sophia recounted, understanding the social context and unequal power dynamics that paraeducators face was related to not only relationships between educators, but the students and larger school climate as well. "I think a lot stems from the environment in the school. In schools where paraprofessionals are treated as a subspecies, and I've seen it and it's horrible - they're not valued, they're paid terribly, the kids don't respect them - that totally changes the dynamic of everyone's relationship." Administrator Saul reckoned with the pressure he felt to ask educators to do more, and the negative effect it could have on relationships, morale, and school climate:

I didn't think I could continue to be the face of a school that the board was putting pressure on me to implement what I thought was sort of abusive workplace habits [...] there's no union to protect them. To say like, really they're working 12 hours now. Like, is that okay? And so being the boss man, I can't sign off on that. I'm not that kind of a person...that's the school climate right there out the window, if that's what you're doing to people. - Saul, Administrator, OH (White, male, 3 years at current school)

Strong relationships, particularly among educators from diverse backgrounds, identities, and staff roles, can help one understand social contexts more deeply. As Richard explained below, trusting relationships and cultural affinity with support staff foregrounded the inequitable social contexts through which they navigate.

Our school makes a lot of people feel invisible. I'm cool with the janitor staff because they'd get me pupusas [stuffed tortillas] in the night because I'd be there until like eight or nine all the way to the security guards. These are ancillary people, but they're important. They keep our schools safe and running [...] I think the people who are hidden that's by choice of our school... Invisible people include our staff, our janitor staff, our security. And I'm cool with all of them. Not because I want something from them, but just they're people. They're literally my people. This is like my uncle in terms of who they remind me of, and so always making time to say good morning, checking in, talking about their kids. Because they're people. And I think sometimes our school's elitism, or snobbiness, makes people not want to see them. Because why would I talk to the janitor staff? They're these Latinx guys... This is them talking, 'These Latinos, why would I talk to them? They're not in my class.' I go, 'Well, they keep your class clean and they keep the rats away.' - Richard, Teacher, CA (Black, male, 6 years at current school)

##### *Relationship skills*

##### *Communication*

When strong educator relationships are present, communication occurs more frequently and effortlessly, which benefits educators and students alike. Tim shared that "having such a great relationship that we

literally are communicating daily to benefit our work really is benefiting the kids." Negative educator relationships can perpetuate harm and pressure educators into censoring their communication. As Laura elaborated below, they had to be cautious about communicating without a strong relational foundation.

I have to be very careful what table I choose to sit down at and what I say as I'm at the table. Like I have to be very mindful. And I've had colleagues like if I say anything negative at lunch, they're like you shouldn't say anything negative to these three people. And it's like oy, it's exhausting to hold all of that. - Laura, Teacher, CA (White, female, 7 years at current school)

#### *Building relationships and teamwork*

Activities that build relationships often also synergistically build teamwork and support. Aurora (Teacher, CA [Multiracial, female, 2 years at current school]) mentioned how relationship building activities created an encouraging environment: "We begin our meetings with a circle of gratitude and it's very personal so if anyone's having any outside of school things, like everyone is just there as a support." The reverse is also true: as Dave alluded to below, when relationships feel inauthentic, educators are less likely to engage, which discourages them from working together and building real relationships.

We get all of these emails from the top people that say, we're a family, we're this and we're that, and it's really not true. And it's been very disappointing to not have chances to really connect with my colleagues and have meaningful opportunities to engage in things that inspire us to be in the classroom every day, and I think it's really unfortunate that we don't have that environment. And so I'm trying to kind of figure out what my role in that is, and not to be too outspoken because outspoken people tend to get targeted and I don't want to be targeted. - Dave, Teacher, NY (White, male, 4 years at current school)

#### *Conflict management*

Conflict management is a hallmark of sustaining positive educator relationships over time. When conflict arises, how it is handled sets the stage for whether relationships will grow or deteriorate. Educators with strong relationships are more able to remain open and curious about the conflict, can separate the issue from the person, and work to find compromise based on mutual trust and respect. For example, as Gillian explained below, successfully resolving a conflict with a colleague grew their respect for one another.

I mean, and honestly, we just eventually got to a point where I think he did something that I respected and I noticed that and I apologized, and we have been fine ever since. I think it was just seeing each other in a different light that helped to build that relationship versus when we first started, and not really knowing each other [...] I don't know, it just kind of organically grew from there, but just a simple apology and sorry that we weren't seeing eye to eye and let's move on from there, goes a long way. - Gillian, Teacher, OH (White, female, 10 years at current school)

When conflict is managed ineffectively, particularly between administrators and teachers, it can strain relationships to the point where one or both parties quit. Susanna recounted an experience of how poor conflict management on behalf of leadership led her to strongly consider leaving the school:

This spring, we had an instance during an IEP meeting where a parent was verbally assaulting the team. It was awful. He was using curse words, all of these things that were just not at all appropriate. The administrator there, who was the second in charge of special education, so she's high up, she didn't stop the meeting. She didn't interject. She just kind of let it happen. That was the day that I made

a phone call to another district and was like, "Here's my resumé. I would love to work with you." Because especially that instance, I was like, "Okay, I'm kind of seeing a pattern. When something bad happens, they're not going to protect us." - Susanna, Instructional coach, CA (Multiracial, female, 2 years at current school)

#### *Responsible decision-making*

##### *Problem analysis*

Strong educator relationships make it easier to gather diverse and honest perspectives on a given problem of practice without raising the defense structures indicative of weak relationships (e.g., blaming, denial, projection, etc.). Engaging those who are disproportionately impacted before deciding on a solution is also critical. Educator-led initiatives conducted in a weak school relational climate are likely to fail without a shared vision, which can lead to stagnation. As Dave elaborated below:

And so I think that's what's really missing from us is that the people, we don't build community intentionally in my school, so consequently, the only people that I'm close to are the people that are in my department because of our just face time. And I wish that our school did that more. And I think it's just so ironic that we don't have opportunities to teach because we are still students and we want to bring something into the classroom every day that allows our students to learn more and learn better, and how are we going to do that if we're kind of stagnant in our own practice? - Dave, Teacher, NY (White, male, 4 years at current school)

##### *Identifying solutions*

Strong educator relationships also lend themselves to working collaboratively to solve problems based on a shared understanding of the issue and vision for change. Lee talked about how their strong relationship with the school counselor helped them resolve student issues as a team: "We talk to the teachers, we talk to the family, and the student, and we're in it together."

##### *Reflection on impact*

When educators can be open and honest in their relationships, they can critically evaluate their role in a situation and learn from their mistakes by recognizing the impact of their actions when made aware. Educator teams who can reflect from a position of curiosity and humility are more likely to stay flexible and adjust course from an informed perspective. Conversely, negative educator relationships can stymie the process of reflective inquiry due to the defenses that arise as a result of animosity or fear (e.g., judgment, blame, etc.), limiting their ability to honestly evaluate themselves and the impacts of their actions.

Bill recounted how relationships with other educators enable him to reflect on his own practice, welcome new approaches, and make a positive impact on students.

I've had teachers say that I'm able to come and observe without even sending an email [...] And to know that I have that option to walk into a classroom unannounced really in the long run helps the students too because then I can hold them more accountable, I can have an idea that maybe wasn't working in my classroom and then I know a new way to approach it. So having that relationship there really allows me to be better and going with that, it allows the students [to] have a better time in my class. - Bill, Teacher, MN (White, male, 1 year at current school)

Laura gave a poignant example below of how her strong relationships with colleagues allowed her to receive difficult feedback and make adjustments. She also mentioned how the relationships protected her from personal judgements that can occur when positive intent is not assumed:

[...] One of my 10th grade colleagues said, "The impression is that in protecting the lower school team you're not trusting us to carry through this project well. And I know you don't want to feel like you don't trust us or have us feel like you don't trust us. So we need you to step back and listen more instead of being the lead on this." And I was like, it was hard to hear. But it was also really valuable. Like that's a gift, right? Like I see that as such a better gift for team building and collaboration and friendship forging than if they just were like, "Eh, [Laura's] being such a bitch, right? Like oh my God. Like who does she think she is? - Laura, Teacher, CA (White, female, 7 years at current school)

In sum, strong and trusting relationships enable educators to reflect on their impact honestly and non-judgmentally, which ultimately benefits their teaching practice as well as the students they serve. When adults model the social and emotional competencies expected of students, the impact on both student and adult SEL is additive.

They are absorbing every single thing that we do. So if they see two teachers being sneaky and quiet, then they're going to think that that's okay. Or if they see teachers arguing and then that teachers can overcome and still work together and figure it out, then they'll see, okay, everybody argues. And then you get beyond it and continue on.  
– Margaret

## Discussion

Our study highlights how strong collegial relationships serve as a vehicle for the development of SECs in adults. We focus on educators' capacity to cultivate SECs through their working relationships because we know that educators who possess strong SECs are better able to support student SEL (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009) and promote a healthy school relational climate (Cohen et al., 2009). As one study participant remarked, "there is no school without teachers." Aligning with the literature on student SEL (Center for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2020), we found that adult SECs can be learned and practiced within the context of relationships.

We found that educator relationships influenced SEC development such that educators were better able to demonstrate and develop SECs in the context of strong and healthy relationships, whereas disconnection and disharmony bred withdrawal behavior that stunted opportunities for SEC development. For example, educators who reported high-quality relationships also tended to report both a more positive school relational climate and demonstrated SECs, such as managing emotions and resolving conflicts effectively. In addition, stronger SECs reciprocally reinforced educator relationships such that when educators demonstrated SECs (e.g., emotional awareness), the reported effects on the relationship were almost always positive. Conversely, when educator relationships were tense, distant, or lacking, the conditions were poor for developing SECs. Educators in weak school relational climates shared stories of disconnection, reactivity, defensiveness, lower job satisfaction, and desire to exit the field. Our data suggest that adult relationships provide opportunities to learn and practice SECs, especially in the context of a healthy school relational climate. When relationships were weak or absent, educators withdrew and conducted their work in isolation, limiting their ability to practice prosocial behavior related to SECs (e.g., empathy, compassion, and relationship-building) and increasing their qualitative reports of job dissatisfaction and burnout.

This finding aligns with the foundational premise of developmental systems frameworks, which posits that all these interactions are bidirectional (Lerner & Overton, 2008), and so it is entirely possible that those with stronger SECs are also more likely to form stronger relationships; and yet, the cross-sectional nature of the current study's design prevented researchers from exploring that dynamic more fully.

Our findings also include educator participants from marginalized backgrounds. For example, educators of color as well as queer and

nonbinary educators gave examples of prejudice and discrimination they faced in school. Ray's experience of being mistaken for a gym teacher as a male educator of color is just one example from this study, emblematic of the experience of structural racism and the pressure to "carry the weight" of those interactions by centering the needs and expectations of White colleagues (Kohli & Pizarro, 2022). Some found it helpful to know at least one other educator who shared their identity (educator Lee), and others mentioned how cultural affinity with other adults in the building builds a sense of solidarity against racial inequities in school (educator Richard). Participants also reported discrimination between teachers/specialists and paraeducators (paraeducator Betty and educator Sophia), highlighting potential class-based inequities that further divide the educator community.

Aligning with principles of tSEL, these findings highlight the need to examine and dismantle structural injustices faced by educators from marginalized backgrounds so that each and every educator has the opportunity to develop healthy adult relationships and expand their SECs. Doing so may help educators maintain a healthy sense of identity at work, promote agency and belonging, and create more opportunities for curiosity and collaboration with colleagues. With regards to how tSEL at the adult level can benefit students, take for example the wide racial differences in student discipline in American schools. TSEL might help educators think more deeply about their student discipline practices, tapping self- and social-awareness domains, and in what ways they (especially White teachers) might not be providing an equitable context for considering the severity of violations and appropriate consequences, tapping into responsible decision-making in order to analyze the issue, reflect on their impact, and generate solutions.

## Implications

Prevailing holistic models of SEL posit that cultivating a strong school relational climate that promotes SEL among adults alongside students creates a more equitable learning environment in which SEC development becomes the responsibility of all members of the school community (Jagers et al., 2019; Mahoney et al., 2021; Yoder et al., 2021). The results of our study align with these models in that educator relationships played an important role in the development of their own SECs, which research has shown increases their ability to model SECs to students and promote a positive school relational climate (Center for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2024; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Meyers et al., 2019).

Much like how student-focused SEL interventions implemented in a color-evasive and value-neutral way can exacerbate racial inequities and contribute to harmful practices within schools, particularly for Black, Indigenous, and other students of color (Attaya & Hilliard, 2023), adult SEL initiatives must consider perspectives of educators of color and other marginalized identities to avoid the same pitfalls. Adults can benefit from tSEL practices, including structured opportunities to teach and learn from each other as well as professional learning and collaborative experiences that center adult well-being. Practical recommendations for adult tSEL in schools could involve professional learning communities for staff with shared cultural backgrounds and identities to engage critically around the unique experiences they face, offer support to one another, and build collective efficacy to impact change at the school level. Perhaps equally important are professional learning opportunities for White, cisgender, and/or heterosexual educators to recognize their privilege and critically reflect together on how to create caring and equitable learning environments for other educators as well as students.

Because SECs can indeed be learned and practiced in the context of adult relationships, this study led to developing a list of relationship-building strategies and approaches for educators aligned with the CASEL dimensions of adult SEL. The resulting list, as shown in Supplemental Material 5, could serve as a practical guide for how educators can cultivate their relationships and facilitate the development of adult SECs

in practice. Many of the relationship-building strategies and approaches correspond to multiple SECs due to the high degree of interrelatedness. An example is the following approach in Identity and Self-Knowledge: “Understand that what makes an educator different can also be a source of strength (e.g., an educator with a disability advocates for an accessible workplace for all)” is also conceptually related to elements of Social Awareness, including Perspective Taking (i.e., “I can learn from those who have different opinions from me”) and Understanding Social Context (i.e., “I honor and celebrate the cultural differences within my school community/workplace”). Educators using this list are encouraged to identify SECs they wish to strengthen and reference the accompanying strategies and approaches for guidance.

#### *Strengths, limitations, and future research*

One of this study’s strengths, although serendipitous, was the timing of focus groups and interviews with educators. Amid the combined global COVID-19 pandemic, the national reckoning with systemic racial inequity, and debilitating teacher shortages, participants were perhaps more vulnerable, candid, and shared more about their emotional and relational experiences than they might have otherwise.

Among the study’s limitations, it is possible that recruitment was affected by self-selection bias, in that educators with a higher relational capacity might have been more likely to respond to a study on relationships. Also, in our sampling, we intentionally excluded five administrator-only interview and focus group transcripts from coding and analysis to center the experiences of teachers, para-professionals, and other direct service workers. Because administrator transcripts were excluded from this study, we could not draw comparisons or conclusions regarding relationships and SEC development among administrators, whose experiences may very well differ. Larger future studies might include administrator experiences to explore how administrator-educator relationships might differently influence adult SEC development. Another limitation involved the cross-sectional and qualitative nature of our study design, in which we explored the association between educator relationships and adult SECs at one time point. Given that relationships evolve over the course of a school year and are shaped by contextual experiences, it would be relevant for future studies to explore the longitudinal relationship between relationships and SEC development at multiple time points.

To explore the nuanced associations between adult SEC development in the context of relationships, future studies might also explore: the strength and directionality of the impact of adult relationships on SEC development across each dimension; whether an educator’s current level of SECs impacts their relationships at work; the influence of school relational climate on relationship quality and SEC development; and the structural and institutional supports and constraints for cultivating adult relationships and SEC development. Doing so would contribute to the relatively small literature base on adult SEL and relationships in schools, which would help researchers and practitioners alike understand how best to promote a positive school relational climate more holistically.

#### **Conclusion**

Our findings highlight the centrality of educator relationships as a vehicle for adult SEL, as well as the potential benefits for students and the broader school relational climate. This study also contributes to the empirical knowledge base and offers pragmatic strategies for strengthening educator relationships in the context of SEC development. Increased knowledge, skills, and action in the area of adult SEL may lead to more widespread evidence-based professional development and adult learning opportunities in the service of strengthening educator relationships and SECs in a movement toward a more holistic approach to SEL in education.

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#### **CRedit authorship contribution statement**

**Nappa Lex:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Hsieh Ta-yang:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

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#### **Appendix A. Supporting information**

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at doi:10.1016/j.sel.2025.100099.

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