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Socio-emotional learning

Promising synergies with academic development in early adolescence

1. Introduction

Picture Spring Middle School[1], a school serving youth between age 11 and 13 in a small northeast city in the United States. Historically, the city was mostly populated by white, middle- and working-class families and their children. Since 2000, the city experienced an influx of immigrants and now roughly 1 in 10 people in the city are immigrants (Office of New Americans Report, 2023). Now, Spring Middle School has about 480 students with 32 % born outside of the U.S., representing 28 different home countries. 47 % of the students speak a first language other than English and this school has 21 home languages represented. Students come from Guatemala, Burundi, Angola, Sudan, Ethiopia, Iraq, Honduras, Namibia, Gabon, Rwanda among others (LeClaire, 2022).

Like most U.S. middle schools, the school strives to meet the needs of early adolescents who are experiencing dramatic developmental changes in physical, emotional, cognitive, and social domains. What makes Spring Middle School particularly unique is the tremendous ethnic diversity of students and the varied needs of youth and families who are very recent immigrants. This scenario calls attention to a question: How can schools meet psychological needs *and* promote academic growth among youth with such a wide range of backgrounds and experiences?

The solution for this school has been complex. Instead of focusing on academic achievement as the sole focus, they broadened their goals to advance a three-dimensional vision of student achievement that includes mastery of skills and knowledge, cultivation of character attributes, and high-quality student work on topics that are relevant and engaging to their students (Berger et al., 2021). Engaging in Crew – daily meetings with about 15–20 students and one adult—is one practice that contributes to this multifaceted vision of student

1 Spring Middle School is a pseudonym.

success. Crew creates an opportunity for students to develop positive relationships with adults and other students, have courageous conversations about issues in students' lives, create a sense of community, experience belonging, and reflect on the purpose of school learning (Berger et al., 2021).

This anecdote sets the stage for a conversation about how schools can cultivate social and emotional competencies and create meaningful academic experiences. This chapter describes the basic definitions of social and emotional learning (SEL), explores typical trajectories of growth of social and emotional competencies (SEC), and examines the ways in which meaningful learning creates classroom experiences that optimize academic learning while also meeting the psychological needs of youth. The paper closes with implications for educators striving to meet the needs of early adolescents.

2. What is social and emotional learning?

The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is an organization at the University of Illinois-Chicago that is the central-most hub in the U.S. for SEL research, practice and policy. The CASEL definition of SEL is "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" (CASEL, 2025). There are two attributes of this definition that require careful attention. The definition points out that *all young people and adults* can experience SEL. This is important because many people assume that SEL is just for children and youth. In fact, SEL also occurs in adults. For example, when educators learn and apply new intercultural skills for working with students of color or recent immigrants, that represents an aspect of adult SEL.

A second attribute of this definition refers to what people *learn and can apply* – SEL involves the development of more than skills. SEL also involves new knowledge and attitudes that people acquire. For instance, in the U.S. there has been a movement to increase cultural responsiveness of SEL. To achieve this goal, educators have had to learn and apply new skills, develop new knowledge about cultures, and change their attitudes about people who were unfamiliar to them in the past (Wanless et al., 2023). All this is necessary before teachers are ready to apply these competencies in their classrooms.

By definition, SECs occur as a product of SEL. SECs fall into three broad categories: self-skills, social skills, and decision-making (CASEL, 2025), as shown in Figure 1. The broad category of self-skills corresponds to the intrapersonal

Figure 1: CASEL model showing the development of social and emotional competencies

competencies of self-awareness and self-management. *Self-awareness* refers to a person's ability to understand their own values, thoughts, and emotions and the ways these ideas link to their behavior. Self-awareness involves identifying one's own emotions, their personal and cultural assets, examination of one's own prejudices and biases, developing self-efficacy, a growth mindset and a sense of purpose. When an eighth grader describes themselves as viewing mistakes as a normal part of learning and indication that they need to try a different idea to solve a problem, they are demonstrating growth mindset, which is one aspect of self-awareness. *Self-management* refers to the ability of a person to regulate and manage their thoughts, behaviors, and emotions and to adjust those behaviors to match different contexts. Use of stress management strategies, managing strong emotions, existing self-discipline, showing initiative and directing their attention to personal and collective goals are examples of self-management. Codeswitching, the modification of one's behavior or way of speaking to match their immediate cultural environment, also requires self-management skills.

The broad category of social skills also has two subcategories and includes social awareness and relationship skills. *Social awareness* refers to the ability to understand the perspective of others, even if they are from cultures and backgrounds that are different than oneself. It involves an understanding that

other people have had different experiences than oneself and have beliefs and actions that derive from those experiences. It means showing compassion for others and understanding what was considered right in one historical period is not necessarily considered noble in another. Being able to identify injustices fits within social awareness. *Relationship skills* refer to people's ability to create and maintain relationships and manage social situations with diverse groups. A person with strong relationship skills can communicate well, listen carefully to others, work with others to solve problems, navigate conflict well, lead or follow, when the situation calls for it. Relationship skills can mean showing cultural competency, resisting negative social pressure, seeking or offering help.

The fifth competency is *responsible decision-making*, reflecting people's ability to make effective choices about one's own behavior in a variety of different situations. Responsible decision-making involves being able to think through the consequences of one's actions and how those actions will influence oneself, others, and society collectively. Responsible decision-making requires open-mindedness, learning how to size up complex situations and make judgments, and identifying and enacting solutions for social and personal problems.

Social and emotional skills, knowledge and attitudes are multiply determined. People learn these at home, school, neighborhood, through social media and via other social interactions. Because classrooms and schools are malleable, a great deal of attention has been given to SEL in those contexts, corresponding to the classroom and school effects described in Figure 1.

3. Educating for social and emotional learning

SEL is certainly not new. Educators have been teaching students manners, kindness, empathy, self-control, and other related skills for decades—even centuries (Osher et al., 2016). What is new is that efforts to improve youth SECs have become an explicit aspect of the school experience of children and youth. There are two main ways that SEL takes shape in schools – by introducing programs designed to enhance SEL or by using SEL-practices organically as a part of the culture of the school.

SEL programs are prevalent in the U.S. as evidenced by the $ 765 million spent on such programs between November 2019 and April 2021 (Tyton Partners, 2021). SEL programs typically include a paper or online manual, training, and coaching that can be purchased and used for in-service professional development. These programs can be described in a few main ways; some integrate SEL into academic instructional content, others offer free-standing lessons on SEL topics, yet others are school-wide approaches that involve classroom and

school-level activities designed to enhance students' attitudes, knowledge and skills while also striving to create a school culture that is conducive to learning social and emotional competencies. Programs can be implemented in individual classrooms or school-wide, depending on the program and district.

The adoption of SEL programs contrasts to SEL that occurs without programs in place. SEL can be naturally embedded into the culture of a school as teachers model social and emotional competencies toward students. For instance, when youth see respectful interactions among teachers and between teachers and other students, children learn how to interact with peers. Teachers cultivate emotion learning through the daily experiences of classroom life (e.g., a teacher getting frustrated and then talking aloud to calm themselves down when the technology is not working).

Whether SEL is delivered through a program or organically via the culture of the school, SEL can be universal and delivered to all students or targeted and designed for people with moderate or chronic, severe needs requiring intensive, one-on-one work between a school counselor or teacher and the student. Universal SEL resembles the idea of fluoride in water – it is an intervention that can benefit each and every student. However, many students need more intensive support to develop SECs, in which cases offering more one-on-one opportunities to touch base with adults or access to clinical services can address those needs.

4. Trends in social and emotional learning

Researchers at the RAND Corporation conducted a nationally representative survey of almost 28,954 teachers and 12,954 principals asking them to rate the importance of teaching a range of social and emotional skills (Hamilton et al., 2019). The survey asked about *self-skills* including understanding and managing emotions, setting and achieving positive goals, developing a sense of identity, *relationships skills* including establishing and maintaining positive relationships and feeling and showing empathy toward others, as well as *decision-making skills* such as making responsible decisions. For all skills measured, over 90 % of principals and teachers described these skills as fairly or very important. For most skills, 97–99 % of educators reported them as fairly or very important. The importance of SEL has been evident in recent policies with 27 states having state standards for SEL for grades K-12 in place as of 2022 (Dermody & Dusenbury, 2022).

On one hand, the U.S. has shown a rise in SEL priorities and policies yet there are counterforces at work, as well. SEL has emerged as a political flashpoint. Many conservative-leaning politicians and conservative parent groups

have pushed back on SEL stating that teaching social and emotional competencies is outside of the scope of schools and that youth should be learning those values from their families and religious organizations. Most left-leaning politicians and parent groups agree with the premises of SEL. Yet, some left-leaning scholars and educators raise issues because typical SEL is too focused on "mainstream" white U.S. values and does too little to adapt to cultural diversity present in the schools. For example, many strengths in students of color are not recognized as strengths nor are amplified by typical SEL (e.g., the ability of Black students to codeswitch) (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2023).

SEL is not only a U.S. phenomenon. Many schools in Germany use SEL. Some programs focus narrowly on anti-bullying and anti-violence, for instance, whole school anti-bullying problems using approaches by Olweus (1993), the 'Faustlos' curriculum-violence prevention, the ProACT+E approach and use of the 'Fairplayer Manual' (Scheithauer & Bull, 2008). Other schools focus more broadly on cultivating SECs. For instance, Second Step has been adapted from the U.S. program to be used in Germany, as has the Mindmatters program. Yet other schools have focused on mental health needs of students by adopting programs such as Lion's Quest that supports adolescents' development of sense of self, teaches listening, empathy, and wise decision-making through a series of lessons (Cefai et al., 2018).

These are all examples of efforts to enhance social and emotional competencies. New meta-analytic work shows the ways in which SEL contributes to short- and long-term gains in social, emotional, academic and behavioral outcomes (Cipriano et al., 2023; Taylor et al., 2017). SEL approaches have garnered widespread attention impacting both policy and practice. Despite this focus, we know too little about how SECs change over time, especially during adolescence.

5. The development of social and emotional competencies

It is easy to assume that children and youth learn steadily and gradually as they mature. Achievement provides a basis for that assumption in that we know, on average, youth show gains in reading and math skills over time with the greatest magnitude of growth annually in early childhood and then smaller increases during the middle and high school years (Hill et al., 2008). Unlike achievement, youth development of SECs does not show a simple, upward trend. Instead, there are qualitative shifts in development that can lead to interruption and even U-shaped patterns (Soto & Tackett, 2015). Take self-management as an example. One longitudinal study (Ross et al., 2019) showed that self-management (e.g., deciding on a goal and sticking to it) was best modeled quadratically;

self-management decreased from age 10 to age 17 followed by an increase to age 18.

Findings like this question assumptions in the field. Before investigating further, there are important issues related to measurement of these constructs to raise. Some SECs, such as self-efficacy or growth mindset, can only be assessed through student-report which means outcomes reflect actual presence of SECs as well as students' perception of themselves relative to others around them. Interpretation of student-report data has some advantages, for instance, the work elevates youth voice and helps researchers understand students' actual lived experience. However, student-report also introduces bias based on the variation in students' internal appraisal of their competencies.

To pursue inquiry about how SECs develop, the author (S. Rimm-Kaufman) and two colleagues (J. Soland and M. Kuhfeld) identified an ideal data set. A group of California school districts called the CORE districts started conducting annual surveys about youth's development of SECs in 2015 (West et al., 2018). These data were available to researchers for analysis and were ideal because of the large sample and use of standardized measures.

Thus, the paper by Rimm-Kaufman and colleagues (2024) was designed to better understand developmental trends in SECs. The study was informed by the Stage-Environment Fit Theory (Eccles et al., 1993) which posits that developmental declines in motivation and perception of self in adolescence "result from a mismatch between the needs of developing adolescents and the opportunities afforded them by their social environments" (Eccles et al., 1993, p. 91). Despite the theory being thirty years old, early adolescents still experience a problematic stage-environment fit. Early adolescent youth develop more need for autonomy and become very sensitive to social comparison, yet they continue to need close relationships with adults (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2019; Yu et al., 2018). Further, young adolescents desire respect and status and traditional schooling can seem uninteresting as they develop a fundamental need to use their skills to improve the contribute to the world around them (Fuligni, 2019). Just as these developmental changes are occurring, most youth are moving from elementary to middle school. In elementary school, students typically stay in a classroom with one adult and roughly 25 students. In middle school, students typically move from classroom to classroom and teachers have as many as 130 students in any given day. The demands of middle school are high – teachers expect students to come to class prepared, open only certain tabs on their computer without being distracted by the internet, and work on long term projects without waiting until last minute to complete them. Middle school also means high-stakes grading, ability grouping, more disciplinary action, and an increase in the public eval-

uation of academic work (Deutsch, 2022). Taken together, this new context creates a challenge for the developing child. To pursue deeper understanding of development of SECs, analyses were conducted to examine how much growth occurs in social and emotional competencies from Grades 4–12?

6. Quantitative analysis and results

The CORE data collection included nine districts in California that administered surveys to all students each year starting in 2015, resulting in a sample of 95,998 students in grades four through 12 (roughly ages nine to 18). Collecting data each year resulted in longitudinal data for up to four years. Thus, the analysis included students who took the survey at least once between 2015 and 2018. The sample of students was almost evenly split between girls (49 %) and boys (51 %).[2] Roughly 25 % were from families with parents with low educational attainment (i.e., high school or below). The sample was 73 % Latine, 11 % White, 10 % Black, and 7 % Asian.

Table 1. Measures Collected in the CORE Districts with Selected Items

Constructs	Example Items	# items	Alphas
Growth Mindset	I can change my intelligence with hard work. I am capable of learning anything.	4	.70
Self-Efficacy	I can master the hardest topics in my classes. I can do well on my tests, even when they are difficult.	4	.86
Self-Management	I came to class prepared. I paid attention, even when there were distractions.	5	.85
Social Awareness	How often did you compliment others' accomplishments? How well did you get along with students who are different from you?	5	.81

The 18-item measure administered assessed growth mindset, self-efficacy, self-management, and self-awareness, as shown in Table 1. To address the key re-

2 Gender data were limited to binary categories of girl and boy.

search question, an Accelerated Longitudinal Design (ALD) Growth Models was used. First, multilevel growth curve models were estimated and then linear, quadratic, and cubic growth curves were tested. See Rimm-Kaufman et al. (2024) for more details.

For three of the four constructs, findings showed a shift in students' perceptions of their intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies around 6th or 7th grade. Figure 2 shows the patterns. Results for growth mindset generally showed increases in scores over time. Self-efficacy showed a somewhat different pattern: students tended to show consistent declines as they moved from 5th to 6th grade and beyond, but that trajectory flattened or even curved upwards in 11th and 12th grade. For self-management, students were level in 4th and 5th grade, then showed declines between 6th and 8th grade, followed by increases in late high school. For social awareness, students showed declines between 6th and 8th grade, and, then increases from 9th through 12th.

Yet another point requires attention. The models indicate considerable student-level variability in the latent slope parameters suggesting that growth in

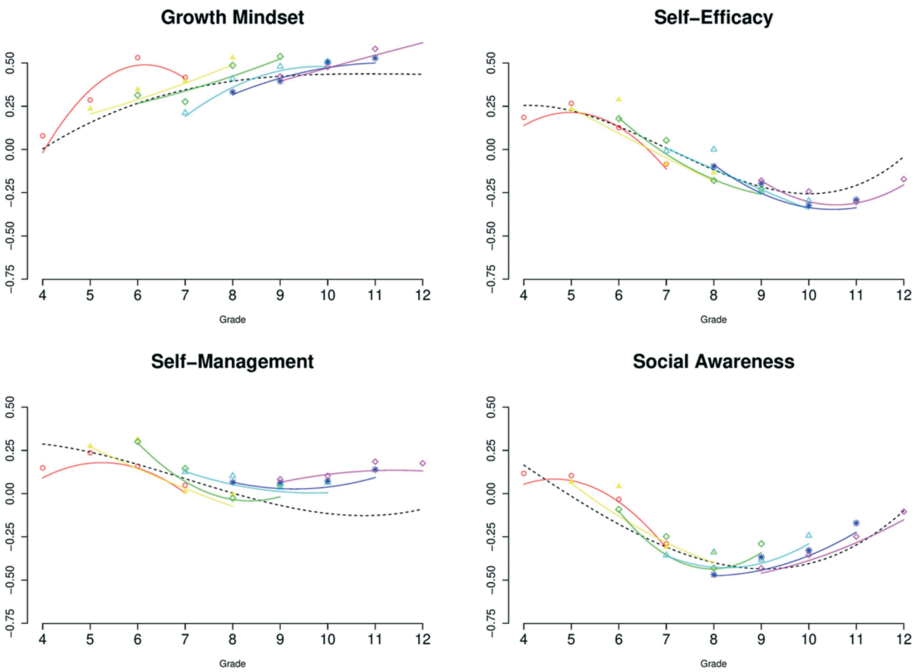

Figure 2: Plots of Model-Based Growth Estimates by Construct
Note: The dotted black line represents the model-implied trajectories using the accelerated longitudinal design. The other lines each represent cohort-specific estimates. The Y-Axis is the number of standard deviations from the average in grade 4. Reprinted from Rimm-Kaufman et al. (2024, p. 366).

these constructs differs considerably dependent on the student. For example, while students tended to decline in self-efficacy in the early grades, a non-negligible percentage showed growth during those years. To describe this phenomenon quantitatively, as an example, the mean of the linear slope for growth mindset was .17 SDs. If one were to take the square root of the slope variance, it would equal .4 SDs. Thus, a student approximately 2 SDs above the slope mean would have a linear coefficient of .97 SDs, and a student 2 SDs below the slope mean would have a linear coefficient of -.63 SDs. Examples like these indicate that relying only on averages masks considerable variability in these SEC trajectories, a point discussed further in Rimm-Kaufman et al. (2024).

7. Changes in SECs

SECs develop in relation to one another and changes in one developmental domain influence another domain. As an example, the findings show a gradual decrease in self-management from 4th through 11th grade with a slight uptick between 11th and 12th grade, findings that match other longitudinal work (Ross et al., 2019). Also, during early adolescence, the demands of school and the need for self-management intensifies as students shift to middle school. Middle schoolers may perceive drops in their self-management because of the heightened demands. In the presence of dips in self-management, self-efficacy is also likely to drop (Musci et al., 2022). Lower self-management and feeling inefficacious may create stressful situations that means youth will put their own needs first and show lower social awareness.

These developmental changes occur in context of students' school experiences. Middle schools tend to be larger than elementary schools. Youth are rating themselves in comparison to others just as their comparison group grows to include a wider social circle at school and likely, online. Growth mindset is an anomaly in that it shows continued growth. Growth mindset interventions have become more common in school, which may be one possible explanation. Another plausible explanation is that some aspects of intelligence (e.g., vocabulary, working memory) increase during the teen years (Hartshorne & Germine, 2015).

The declines in self-efficacy, self-management and social awareness have consequences for action among the educators who are a part of youths' developmental experience. Youth are at a turning point. If adults offer scaffolding to meet the new demands and show positive regard for youth, students will remain engaged in learning. If adults respond with discipline and blame, negative relationships will emerge and students will disengage from school (Engels et al.,

2016; Hughes & Cao, 2018; Thomas et al., 2025). The interconnection among the SECs and the dynamic interactions between youth and their environments calls attention to the importance of Stage-Environment Fit for youth to thrive and raises a question: What is it that educators can do to create school environments that improve stage-environment fit? As shown in Figure 1, youth have experiences in classrooms (e.g., SEL instruction, classroom climate) and schools (e.g., schoolwide culture, practices and policies) that contribute to increases (or declines) of SECs. EL Education (formerly Expeditionary Learning) is a school model designed to improve middle school, as described below.

8. Can school-wide SEL approaches meet the needs of early adolescents?

To address this question, we explore a school-wide approach to teaching called EL Education. EL Education has developed curriculum, and a training and accreditation system that allows for schools, both public and private, to engage in their model. EL Education developed a theory of change that states: "when students are engaged in work that is challenging, adventurous and meaningful, learning and achievement flourish" (Berger et al., 2021).

EL Education emerged in 1991 from a partnership between Outward Bound, an organization that focuses on self-exploration, teamwork, courage and compassion in youth, and the Harvard Graduate School of Education. There are 150 schools in 30 states from around the U.S. that use the EL Education school-wide model. In addition, many U.S. schools use components of EL Education but not the school-wide model (see https://eleducation.org/).

EL Education has several signature practices. Learning expeditions are a key EL Education curricular structure. These long-term, in-depth studies resemble project-based learning and/or service-learning. Expeditions offer real-world connections that inspire students toward higher levels of academic achievement. Learning expeditions involve students in original research, critical thinking, and problem solving, and they build character along with academic skills. Crew refers to the daily meetings that occur across the school with each Crew involving about 20 students and one adult. Crew focuses on community-building, academic accountability, and civically engaged activities that contribute to the school or broader community.

Students' character development is a crucial part of the EL Education model and is as important as producing high-quality work and mastering knowledge and skills. By design, EL Education strives to support students to become ef-

fective learners, ethical people, and contributors to a better world, which EL Education define as "three aspects of strong character."

Yet another hallmark attribute of EL Education is the goal of establishing partnerships in historically underserved areas, particularly with high percentage of youth of color, high percentage of students from families with low educational attainment, and many students identified as having special needs (SEN).

Starting in 2019, Sara Rimm-Kaufman, Lia Sandilos and their team conducted a two-year quasi-experimental study of the EL Education model. Upon joining the team, Allison Ward-Seidel, a doctoral student embedded a mixed methods study to better understand one aspect of the EL Education model – the premise that instruction needs to be designed in ways that give students purpose and agency. This work investigates meaningful work, defined as "relevant content, favorable conditions for learning, and positive social interactions" (Ward-Seidel et al., 2024, p. 3). Meaningful work fits into the CASEL model in Figure 1 and corresponds to features of classrooms and schools.

Two research questions were addressed: 1) To what extent do students at EL Education middle schools experience school as more or less meaningful than students at comparison schools? Is this difference present for Black and Latine youth? 2) How do middle school students describe meaningful school experiences? Do these definitions differ between EL Education and comparison schools?

A sequential explanatory mixed methods design was used involving survey data were collected in the first year (n=258) and then follow up interview data in year 2 (n=32) to explore and explain findings. For the quantitative data collection, study participants were 5th and 6th grade youth across nine schools in the U.S. Five schools were using the EL Education school-wide model and were compared to four comparison schools that were similar in demographics and in the same city as the EL Education schools. In total, 258 students participated in the study (107 EL Education, 151 comparison).

Based on family-report data (typically parent-report), students were 49 % male, 47 % female, 2 % gender non-binary, 1 % missing gender; 41 % Black, 33 % White, 16 % Latine, 6 % Multiracial, 1 % Asian, 0.4 % Native American, 3 % missing; 31 % from families with low income, 53 % not low-income, and 17 % missing. Eleven percent of students were students with special needs (SEN) and 13 % were English Learners. Students were surveyed on their school experiences between January and March 2020 at their school. Due to COVID-19, some surveys were sent home to youth after the pandemic began. (Pre- versus post-pandemic shut down was noted as a variable and treated as a covariate in the analyses.)

Data collection occurred in two phases. In Year 1, student participants re-

sponded to four questions about students' sense of purpose at school using the Revised Youth Purpose Survey (Bundick et al., 2006). Participants rated four items ($\alpha = .97$) on a Likert scale from 1 (not meaningful at all) to 5 (extremely meaningful). The survey included questions such as: How meaningful do you find participating in class? How meaningful do you find working with others at school?

In Year 2, purposive sampling was used to select students for follow-up interviews. The resulting sample included 32 6th and 7th grade youth; 20 were EL Education students and 12 were enrolled in comparison schools. Students reported gender and race/ethnicity with 50% girls, 44% boys, and 6% gender non-binary; 44% Black, 47% White, 6% Latine, and 3% multi-racial. According to school administrative data, 31% were from families with low income, 16% students were SEN, and 6% were English learners. The interviews were conducted via phone call from March – July 2021 and lasted 20–40 mins. Students were asked the following interview questions using a semi-structured interview protocol: Think about work that you do at your school. Does it feel meaningful and important to you? Can you give an example of work that you have done at your school that is meaningful and important to you? Tell me more about that work and why it felt meaningful and important to you. Could you see the purpose of that work?

8.1 Quantitative analysis and findings

The quantitative results showed that on average, EL Education students rated their school experiences as meaningful at a 3.12 on a scale of 1 to 5 ($SD = 1.25$). Comparison students rated their experiences at a 2.9 out of 5 ($SD = 1.25$). Regression analysis showed that students in EL Education schools reported significantly more meaningful school experiences than students at comparison schools ($b = 0.26$; $SE = .12$; $p < .05$). Race/ethnicity, post-COVID, and age were also significant predictors of students' reported meaningfulness at school.

Comparable analyses were conducted on subgroups of students. Findings showed that among Black students (n=107), those in EL Education reported significantly more meaningfulness in school than their Black peers in comparison schools ($b = 0.83$; $SE = .27$; $p < .05$). This was also true among Latine students (n=34): those in EL Education schools reported significantly more meaningfulness in school than their Latine peers in comparison schools ($b = 0.84$; $SE = .14$; $p < .05$).

8.2 Qualitative analysis and findings

Qualitative analyses were conducted to explore and explain these quantitative findings. Once transcription of the interviews was complete, four research team members followed a descriptive-interpretive approach to identify themes that emerged related to students' perceptions of meaningfulness of school, work that is fully described in Ward-Seidel et al. (2024). Three themes emerged including the following: (1) sociopolitical development (i.e., real-world issues and development processes); (2) engaging schoolwork (i.e., content in school was personally relevant, hands-on, or socially interactive); and/or (3) future-oriented (i.e., teaching academic skills, social-emotional skills, goal-oriented skills); each are described below.

Sociopolitical development. The most prevalent theme related to youth's sociopolitical development focused on the content of *what* students were learning. Students found real-world issues meaningful in their learning. Variations within this theme included: racism, environmentalism, gentrification, feminism, human rights, and historical events. Almost one third of the students (31 %, n=10) described meaningful schoolwork as working on activities that address real-word issues. More EL Education students (45 %, n=9) mentioned this theme than comparison students (8 %, n=1). As one student described:

> *"Because I feel like, how do I say this,* ***they try to connect it with real problems in the world****. Because the other day, I think last quarter, we were learning about gentrification. And we learned about all the problems and what's happening around the world, and how you can relate to it because we live in DC. That's a big problem. So yeah.* ***The work informs us, basically, of what is actually happening in the world, but also learning from it.*** *And when you know and you can relate to that, it makes you remember. And how we could make a difference in the world and all that stuff. And yeah."* (Teri, EL Education)

An equivalent percentage of youth (31 % of the sample, n=10) related to the theme of youth's sociopolitical development but focused on the content of *how* students were learning. For instance, themes including awareness/reflection, efficacy, and action and activism were common in their description of meaningful learning. As one example:

> *"It all connects to,* ***what's our life like right now****… when Ruth Bader Ginsburg [a U.S. Supreme Court Justice] died, we were learning about her… some students made posters for her, some students made a slideshow about her and we also did another 'inspirational topics.' We picked an inspirational person and then connected it to how we find it inspirational."* (Edie, Comparison)

Processes of sociopolitical development were more common in EL Education (45 %, *n*=9) than comparison schools (8 %, *n*=1).

Engaging schoolwork. Engaging schoolwork was a theme that emerged in more than half of the students interviewed (56 %, *n*=18). Specifically, work was deemed meaningful if it was personally relevant (25 %, *n*=8), hands-on (22 %, *n*=7) or socially interactive (13 %, *n*=4). This theme was more prevalent among EL Education students (75 %, *n*=15) than among comparison students (25 %, *n*=3).

One student gave two examples of how socially interactive experiences made learning meaningful. First, she said that a morning meeting was meaningful "Because [I] got to talk in front of the whole middle school." Second, she said that her experiences "focusing on the community commitments [are] meaningful because they make me and a lot of other people feel safe in our learning environment" (Genny, Latina female, EL Education).

Future orientation. Approximately half the sample (47 %, *n*=15) reported meaningful schoolwork as developing skills that would be useful in their future. These included academic skills (e.g., math for taxes), social-emotional skills (e.g., relationship building, empathy, respect), or goal-oriented skills (e.g., developing goals for getting good grades to get into college). EL Education and comparison students mentioned this theme equivalently (45 %, *n*=9 of EL Education; 50 %, *n*=6) of comparison students. As one example,

> *"I mean it's important that we're learning this stuff because … **it's just good to have like a wide variety of things that you know you can do for the future**. And if we're learning about kindness then it's good to just be kind."* (Kate, EL Education)

Several key findings emerge. First, the findings demonstrate that school-wide changes that connect SEL and academics *can* produce more meaningful learning for youth. In this case, students at EL Education schools found working with others at school, studying and doing homework for class, participating in class and doing school projects were more meaningful than students at comparison schools. The differences between EL Education and comparison schools were particularly prominent for students of color (Black, Latine). Often, schools strive to create equity by improving the quality of experiences in school, particularly to better meet the needs of students of color. EL Education appears to be successful in this goal.

Findings also reveal ways that educators can meet the needs of developing youth by refreshing their curriculum so that learning is more meaningful. Example practices include: focusing content on contemporary issues, engaging in processes that enervate sociopolitical development (enhancing reflective prac-

tices, enhancing awareness of contemporary issues, creating opportunities for efficacy, action and activism), using socially interactive activities, and linking learning to students' future goals.

9. Call to action

The anecdote at the start of the chapter aligns with the Stage-Environment Fit Theory and exemplifies the synergy between academic and social-emotional learning (SEL). Early adolescence is a particularly vulnerable period when youth often perceive their SECs as lower than in the late elementary school years. Classrooms and schools can respond during this delicate time by providing supportive learning experiences that are well-matched to youths' developmental needs. Further, this match seems most important for youth who have experienced marginalization because of their race/ethnicity. The findings here highlight that the highest quality practices geared to create meaningful learning may matter most for youth of color, thus resulting in recursive cycles of meaningful engagement in learning that leads to affective connection to school contexts and academic achievement (Thomas et al., 2025).

Decades of research underscore the value of caring and responsive teachers, a sense of classroom community, and rich opportunities for SEL (Durlak et al., 2025). While these features are necessary, they are not sufficient for academic learning. Educators can leverage caring and responsive classroom experiences to enhance academic learning by recognizing the unique features of adolescence, especially those youth who tend to be underserved in educational settings. By building classroom environments that meet students' social, emotional, and academic needs, educators can make learning *matter* for youth.

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