

Goggins II, L. (2017) The Emergence of Social Emotional Learning and the Implications for the Black child. *Black Child Journal: Education and the Black Child*, Summer, 51 - 63.

How can we capitalize on the recent emergence of social-emotional learning, critical thinking and positive identity formation, mentoring, healing circles, African centered schooling, job and entrepreneurship training, while resisting current movement towards profit models and corporate oriented schools?

### **The Emergence of Social Emotional Learning and the Implications for the Black child**

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#### **The Emergence of SEL**

The recent emphasis on social emotional learning (SEL) can be tied to the continued frustration of the “ineffectiveness” of American public education, the growing evidence of regarding the significance of SEL on academic achievement, and the subsequent passing of legislation mandating SEL strategies.

The term "social and emotional learning" was coined at a meeting hosted by the Fetzer Institute in 1994. The meeting's purpose was to address concerns about ineffective school programming and the lack of coordination at the school level. Schools were being overwhelmed by the number of youth development programs focusing on drug and violence prevention, sex education, civic education, and moral education. These initiatives and various "wrap around" services were a response to the 1983 A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform report.

SEL was introduced as a framework to align and coordinate services and programs meant to address the need of young people (students). Along with SEL as a framework, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was formed to support research and advocate for policy (which evidentially would include legislation) that supported adoption of the SEL framework. Since the mid 1990's, many organizations have come to

advocate for SEL, however, CASEL remains a leading force in the promotion of SEL and evaluating evidence-based SEL programming.

The SEL framework identifies five core competencies essential to enhance a student's capacity to integrate skills, attitudes, and behaviors to effectively and ethically perform task and meet challenges (i.e. learn): (1) self-awareness, (2) social-awareness, (3) self-management, (4) relationship skills, and (5) responsible decision-making.

Figure 1.



According to CASEL:

Self-awareness is the ability to accurately recognize one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior. The ability to accurately assess one's strengths and limitations, with a well-grounded sense of confidence, optimism, and a "growth mindset."

Self-management is the ability to successfully regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations — effectively managing stress, controlling impulses, and motivating oneself. The ability to set and work toward personal and academic goals.

Social awareness is the ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures. The ability to understand social and ethical norms for behavior and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.

Relationship skills is the ability to establish and maintain healthy as well as rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. The ability to communicate clearly, listen well, cooperate with others, resist inappropriate social pressure, negotiate conflict constructively, plus seek and offer help when needed.

Responsible decision-making is the ability to make constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards, safety concerns, as well as social norms. The realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and a consideration of the well-being of oneself and others.

Over the last 20+ years, a growing body of research has documented the impact of SEL on achievement. Some important findings include:

- 75% of the words students use to describe school are negative (tired, stressed, bored) (Bracket, 2015)
- Growth in occupations that require the mastery of social and emotional skills outpaced the growth in all other occupations (Deming, 2015)
- 80% employers identify social and emotional skills as most important to success and yet they are also the hardest skills to find (Cunningham & Villasenor, 2016)
- For every \$1.00 invested integrating SEL with academic learning produces \$11.00 of benefit realized by increases in high school graduation rates, postsecondary completion, employment rates and average wages and/or by decreases in drop rates, school and classroom behavior

issues, drug use, teen pregnancy, mental health problems, and criminal behavior. (Kautz et. al., 2014)

Moreover, according to Durlak et al. (2011), an analysis of SEL programs involving 270,034 K-12 students shown that improved SEL skills reflected an 11 percentage gain in grades and test scores. On the other hand, students who lack social-emotional competencies become less connected to school as they progress from elementary to high school.

As aforementioned, the 1983 A Nation at Risk report is a significant marker spawning various educational reform legislation. Most notably No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and its replacement the ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act). The ESSA has many provisions, including:

- Advancing equity by upholding critical protections for America's disadvantaged and high-need students.
- Support and grow local innovations—including evidence-based and place-based interventions developed by local leaders and educators—consistent with our Investing in Innovation and Promise Neighborhoods.
- Maintains an expectation that there will be accountability and action to effect positive change in our lowest-performing schools, where groups of students are not making progress, and where graduation rates are low over extended periods of time.

In addition to ESSA, the HR 4223 Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Act of 2009 supports social and emotional learning programming that have proven effective in addressing the academic, social, and emotional development needs of students and in creating safe and drug-free learning environments. HR 4223 amends the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to include: (1) programming that meets the social and emotional needs of students as part of the School Dropout Prevention program and the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities program; and (2) teacher and principal training in practices that address those needs as part of the Teacher and Principal Training and Recruiting Fund program.

Other legislative pressure comes from court decisions and amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to require schools to use evidence-based approaches to proactively the behavioral needs of students. Schools must identify whole-school approaches which scientifically based positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS). For example, Ohio mandates that districts must implement:

a school-wide systematic approach to embed evidence-based practices and data-driven decision-making to improve school climate and culture in order to achieve improved academic and social outcomes, and increase learning for all students, and that encompasses a range of systematic and individualized positive strategies to reinforce desired behaviors, diminish reoccurrences of challenging behaviors, and teach appropriate behaviors to students.

To date, all 50 states have incorporated SEL into their preschool standards. Twelve states have incorporated SEL through elementary and four states have fully incorporated SEL pre-k through 12th grade.

The legislative pressure has often been accompanied with budget cuts and mandates for accountability. This has forced districts to "do more with less." Subsequently, school districts have focused more on "effective" "evidence-based" programs. For example, review of data revealed to the Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD) senior administration that a 2% increase in SEL was the best predictor for academic achievement (*even more than attendance*). (Osher, Friedman, & Kendzior, 2014)

CASEL has published *Promoting Social Emotional Learning (1997)* and *Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning: Research and Practice (2015)* and along with commissioning numerous studies. While the work lead by CASEL has been profound and they assert that *Promoting Social Emotional Learning* was the first book of its kind, the fundamental concept at the core of SEL, *how and what we learn (academics) is influenced by the relationships and emotional processes (social-emotional context) in which the learning takes place*, has been argued nearly 100 years prior to CASEL's formation.

## **Educating the Whole Child**

In classics, such as, *The Soul of Black Folks (1903)* and *The Mis-Education of the Negro (1933)*, both W.E.B. Dubois and Carter G. Woodson describe education as not just instruction, but "full personhood" development.

Education is that whole system of human training within and without the school house walls, which molds and develops men. W.E.B. DuBois (1903)

The mere imparting of information is not education. Above all things, the effort must result in making a man think and do for himself. Carter G. Woodson (1933)

John Dewey argued that it was the duty of a "good teacher" to connect to/draw upon the experiences of the student. In *Experience and Education* (1938), Dewey identified the experiential continuum as the criterion for determining if an experience was educative or mis-educative. He stated every experience takes something from those experiences which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those experiences which come after. The extent to which this connection is made is the determinant between educative and mis-educative experiences. Educative experiences empower students to exercise freedom and move toward fulfillment of their purpose, while mis-educative experiences are disconnected and do not move students towards empowerment and fulfillment. Dewey also argued that disconnected experiences form the inability for self-control. He suggested that such a person would reach a point of insanity; the students are robbed of their ability to successfully cope with their life circumstances.

Therefore, a teacher who does not connect experiences (i.e. lessons, classroom, curriculum) to students' experiences (i.e. sense of self and purpose) should not expect intelligence (the ability to strategize to execute purpose) nor discipline (the commitment to the strategy to execute purpose). In fact, according to Dewey, if the sense of self is removed from an experience (mis-educative) the result (what a teacher/society should expect) is a slave - a person who executes the purposes of another (Dewey, 1938/1963, p. 67).

Though Dewey does not explicitly say "build a relationship," it does stand to reason that only way to ensure experiences are connected to a student's sense of self and purpose, a teacher must establish a "meaningful" relationship with that student.

Jomo Kenyatta (1962), describing the Gikuyu community system of education (a family-based community-linked rites of passage), states, very specifically:

The first and most obvious principle of educational value which we see in the Gikuyu system of education is that the instruction is always applied to an individual's concrete

situation; behavior is taught in relation to some particular person.... the African is taught how to behave to father or mother, grandparents, and to other members of the kinship group.... The striking thing in the Gikuyu system of education and the feature which most sharply distinguishes it from the European system of education is the primary place given to personal relations.... While the Westerner asserts that character formation is the chief thing, he forgets that character is formed primarily through relations with other people, and that there is no other way in which it can grow. (pp. 116 - 117)

Similarly, the Comer Model, first established in 1968 by Yale psychiatrist James Comer, M.D., stresses the importance of establishing a "meaningful" relationship with parents and family to develop the whole child. At a recent meeting of the Aspen Institute's National Commission on Social Emotional Academic Development, Comer (2017) reiterated, "child development is learning... you cannot separate the two."

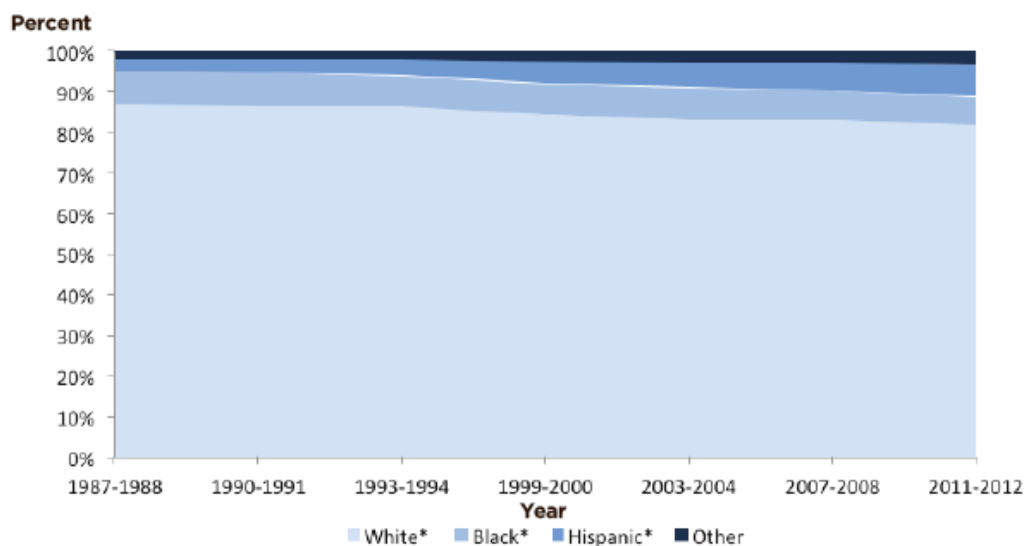
### **The Problem Still Remains**

While the significance of SEL and relationship have re-emerge, the problem of disconnect between schools/teachers and African-American students still persist. It has been well documented that U.S. student population is becoming more and more diverse (i.e. "brownier" and less likely to speak English as their first language or the only language spoken at home). While at the same time the U.S. teacher ranks continue to be...white and female. Many teachers/professors do not do so maliciously perpetuate racist beliefs and assumptions about African American students. At town meeting to address the Quality of Education, Dr. McClendon (1995, December) pointed out that the "typical" teacher was a white female about 40 years old, who grew up in a rural or suburban community, and have very little common life experiences with the increasingly urban and diversity students in their classrooms. He summarized that:

Some of the problems related to the ineffective and poor schooling of African-American children is surely relate to who is currently teaching them, and it may not be a matter of blatant racism but rather a matter of teaches not being able to relate to the "otherness" of the students. Who is teaching our children?

Though more than twenty years ago little has changed.

**Figure 2. Percentage distribution of teachers in public elementary and secondary schools, by race/ethnicity: Selected years, 1987-88 through 2011-12**



#### The State of Racial Diversity in the Educator Workforce (2016)

Speaking at Howard University on March 8, 2016 Education Secretary John B. King, Jr., asserted, “Without question, when the majority of students in public schools are students of color and only 18 percent of our teachers are teachers of color, we have an urgent need to act. ... The question for the nation is how do we address this quickly and thoughtfully?” One could conclude from the data it is doubtful that systemic change will occur anytime soon.

Despite the long (and well documented) history of the need to develop cultural competence, teacher preparation programs rarely require more than one diversity course for graduation. The one course that maybe require is generally an introductory survey course. There is practically no expectation for teachers to develop cultural competence or have little to no prior training regarding SEL. (Goggins & Dowcett, 2011; Harper, 2017). Given the dearth of opportunities to develop cultural competency in the pre-service preparation program, it is not surprising that the implementation and effectiveness of SEL strategies often fall short.

Moreover, given two of the SEL competencies, self-awareness and social awareness, specifically focus on the ability to accurately assess one's strengths and limitations - "a growth mindset" and the ability to understand social and ethical norms for behavior, respectively. What are the implications of becoming aware of one's self in a social context (society) that is toxic to



one's self? That is, my authentic sense of self is perceived to be a threat to the society in which I find myself.

What to do when African-American students become aware that their potential (self-efficacy, self-confidence, sense of purpose and agency) is in direct conflict with societies restrictions on their human and civil rights based on racist notions of (lack of) their humanity and intellect? This conundrum has been a recognized for years:

"I am an invisible man...I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me." -Ralph Ellison (1952) *Invisible Man*

How does it feel to be a problem?... It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others...One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. W.E.B. DuBois (1903) *The Souls of Black Folks*

This crisis of awareness must be addressed. Otherwise, trauma may be an unattended consequence.

In a post for the Greater Good, *How to Change the Narrative of Students of Color (2017)*, Dena Simmons, Director of Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, discusses concerns about tendencies regarding SEL and students of color:

When they describe how students of color behaved before they participated in an SEL program, they tend to use words like “rowdy,” “misguided,” “disengaged,” and “violent,” as if to highlight the urgent need for SEL programs for “these kids.” In other words, they frame SEL as a sort of savior—one that transforms students of color from being unmotivated, loud, lazy, and uninterested students into motivated individuals suddenly enthusiastic about school and quiet enough to learn... Here's the problem: ... subtle messages that harm students inside and outside of the classroom.... Students of color begin to believe these messages about themselves in ways that influence their social

and academic functioning at school, as demonstrated by research on teacher expectations and “stereotype threat,”

Simmons concludes with a warning, "although research has documented impressive benefits of SEL programming, we must be careful about viewing or describing it as a corrective to character flaws in some groups of children, and not others. Despite good intentions, these types of narratives about our young people of color do more harm than good."

Likewise, Zaretta Hammond, author of *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*, warns,

the brain has what is called a *negativity bias*, meaning it remembers and responds to negative experiences up to three times more than positive experiences ... The brain reads these negative microaggressions as feedback on the environment and codes them ... it only reinforces and amplifies a student's negative academics script, leading him to believe school is an unwelcoming place where he cannot be himself.

There is a growing recognition that the prolonged exposure to these stressors (i.e. trauma) impacts students' ability to learn. Recent neurobiological, epigenetic and psychological studies have shown that persons (students) opposed to prolonged trauma will demonstrate symptoms consistent with PTSD. These include diminished concentration, memory, and organizational and language abilities. If not properly addressed, prolonged exposure to trauma for many students will lead to inappropriate behavior in the classroom; difficulty developing meaningful relationships (with peers and teachers); trouble processing information; and interfere with the capacity for creativity.

Events such as exposure to sexual and physical abuse, witnessing domestic violence, homelessness and exposure to various explicit unsafe environments are generally understood as traumatic. However, a growing body of research, such as that of Howard Stevenson (2014), recognizes prolonged exposure to racial oppression; be it explicit discrimination and bigotry or implicit insults of microaggression, as traumatic. Moreover, students' exposure to racial oppression, and the lack of racial socialization and authentic identity development diminishes students' ability to cope (i.e. trauma). Thus, leading to inappropriate behavior in the classroom; difficulty developing meaningful relationships (with peers and teachers); trouble processing information; and interfere with the capacity for creativity.

Methods that engage students in discussions that assist in their journey to find themselves, search for meaning and to make sense of "their world" is critical to effective SEL strategies, particularly for students of color. Moreover, effective SEL providers and services who are specifically competent in the richness, complexity, and nuances in the African cultural heritage and are uniquely capable of addressing the crisis of dual consciousness must be identified. These providers must partner with district and schools to embed facilitators to work with students and support and nurture an authentic sense of self. It is this need that is an opportunity and call to action.

### **Implications and Opportunities**

As practitioners and advocates for authentic identity development, our overarching goal is to empower youth (students) with the knowledge, skills and support to achieve their highest potential as family members, nation builders and leaders. We must challenge the prevailing deficit narrative in our communities and projected into our communities; while at the same time, equip young people with the critical thinking skills, and experiences that allow them to shape and write (and in some cases rewrite) their own narrative. Thus, becoming the "hero in their own story." The greater implication is as Joseph Campbell (1988) stated, "by saving one's self the hero saves the community." By the youth finding solutions for their own dilemmas they are transformed into better human beings, and thus, their communities transformed into better communities. We must identify, promote and develop models of engagement in schools in which our children are enrolled that "generally":

- enhances and improves both the social and emotional learning of participants,
- helps keep youth in school through graduation and into college and/or career, and
- equips them with the skills and knowledge to make good (i.e. just) choices and chart their futures with hope and confidence. And ensure, "specifically" that African-American youth have opportunities to;
- develop and practice attitudes, disciplines, and skills (i.e. disposition and knowledge) to become "good" family members and community leaders;
- develop an appreciation and affection for African heritage;
- become steeped in the traditions and philosophies that are the foundation of Pan-Africanism and African liberation with the over arching intentions that African-American youth develop an

authentic sense of self and commitment to express the Creator's intent on their life (i.e. their unique genius).

To capitalize on the current educational context in light the emerging SEL framework, consider the following recommendations:

1. Review and become familiar with CASEL's five SEL competencies - Any good youth development program/process will address these competencies.

- Translate what you are already doing into the five competencies.
  1. Identify existing activities that teach and/or practice one of the five competencies
  2. How does your vision and mission statements connect to the five competencies?
  3. How can you incorporate the language of the five competencies into your stated goals and objectives?
- Assess your outcomes through the lens of the five competencies
  1. Identify existing reports, artifacts (i.e. evidence) that documents the effectiveness of your program/process participants learning and practicing the five competencies
  2. Review CASEL's Program Guides for Effective Social Emotional Learning Programs (<http://www.casel.org/guide/>)
    - a) Do you currently meet the criteria for an Effective SEL provider (If so, consider inviting CASEL to conduct a review)
    - b) How could your program better document the five competencies outcomes?
    - c) Consider commissioning a formal independent assessment (i.e. consultant, university department, or graduate student writing a thesis or dissertation) of your program's effectiveness using "at least" a two-tailed multiple regression analysis.

2. Articulate

- Incorporate the five SEL competencies into your program's pitch, marketing, and social media
- Raising questions about effective practice, competent practitioners, and culturally relevant strategies
  1. Express concerns about the impact on African-American children/students

3. Partnering with schools

- Contact principals and district leaders regarding your SEL programming
- Identify "good" and "conscious" teachers in your district. Have a dialogue about your SEL components in your program, and identify which of those components could be (most need to be) used in classrooms.

1. Collaborate to develop an in-service(s) that will cover (1) description of the your program's SEL component, (2) its cultural significance (3) the connection to SEL competencies (4) how to implement the practice (5) discuss expected outcomes and artifacts (6) time to practice doing the component
2. Approach principals and district leaders about providing SEL professional development (PD).

#### 4. Community/Village Proactive Engagement - Organize community leaders and families to:

- Hold schools accountable for engaging families and the community by:
  1. Meeting with the superintendent and district human resources director to discuss hiring requirements, priorities, and expectations for new and veteran teachers regarding cultural responsiveness and SEL competency. *Note - This is not the same as teacher diversity.* Share the communities expectation for and get the districts commitment to culturally responsive and SEL competent practitioners (principals, teachers, and counselors)
  2. Setting an appointment with your neighborhood school principal to review and discuss their school's academic plan. General a principal is required to outline their school's priorities/goals for the academic year. *Your local district may call this plan a School Improvement Plan (SIP), Academic Achievement Plan (AAP), Academic Success Plan (ASP) or etc. In any case, "the plan" should outline the priorities/goals that the school will focus on over the academic year. It should also identify measurable progress indicators. Often there is an expectation of family and community engagement. Unfortunately, this often means a family night, parent university, and/or parent-teacher conference where school staff talks to/at parents and community. Too seldom, are examples in which family and communities engage in a conversation with school staff.* The review and discussion of the academic plan should be seen as an opportunity to open a dialogue and establish meaningful relationships (trust) between students, families, communities, and the school. Ideally, these discussions will lead to sharing information about organizing available resources (human, socio-cultural, and financial); including effective culturally responsive SEL competent services and programs.
- Identify and develop effective, meaningful and authentic youth development programs, services, and opportunities. No health community solely depends on "mainstream" institutions

to socialize their children. *Of course, public institutions should be held accountable to provide just and equitable service to "our" communities.* Some things are too sacred and only known to "us" to be in the control of the American public. African-American families and communities should make black child development a critical priority; including:

1. Developing deliberate restorative community framework (i.e. Village). For example, see <http://Afrocentric.Info/AkronAfricanVillage>
2. Developing and identifying existing series and programs that effectively teach the five core SEL competencies and organizing them into (be a part of) an African-centered rites of passage processes. Visit the following resources: <http://nropi.org> and <http://Afrocentric.Info/CACRoP>

## **Final Thoughts**

The emergence of social emotional learning in education has reminded us of the centrality of meaningful relationship to the educative process. Dr. Asa Hillard III most succinctly stated, "There is no mystery on how to teach them. The first thing you do is treat them like human beings and the second thing you do is love them." Unfortunately, black children too often find themselves in classrooms with teachers lead by principals who do not know how to or, at worst, do not care to love them.

Rita Pierson (2013) in her TED Talk, *Every Kid Needs a Champion*, asserts, "Kids don't learn from people they don't like." No educational reform or initiative will be effective without establishing meaningful relationship with black children and the families and communities from which black child come. However, given U.S. society's history with people of African descent, and the overwhelming likelihood that U.S. teachers would have had little to no training on how to engage effectively or authentically with black children and their families and communities, it unlikely that the current SEL efforts will have the desired impact for black children. In fact, in some cases SEL will further traumatize children of color. Clearly, more needs to be done to equip pre-service, new and veteran teachers with the knowledge and skills adequate (i.e. build responsive cultural and social emotional competency) to engage black children and build meaningful relationships with their families and communities.

As practitioners of and advocates for black youth development, we can facilitate the effective use of SEL by identifying components of our services and programs that correspond to

the SEL framework and partnering with schools to become SEL providers. And for some, to further partner with teachers and principals to provide the needed professional development.

As families and communities of black children, we must understand education is a process that not contained in a classroom or a school building. It requires our active participation. Therefore, we must open dialogues with school officials to insist that principals and teachers engage "with" us (families and communities) to provide educative experiences and not talk "at" or "to" us about black children. Moreover, we must understand that the foundations of an educative process/experiences lies within a cultural context; a context which we must provide for our children. It is both dangerous and foolish to assume a school will properly educate our children without parental and community engagement. Furthermore, there are some aspect of identity too sacred to be left to others. It must be done by us.

Black families and communities must provide cultural heritage opportunities to form cultural memories and meaning. These cultural memories and meanings can be used to construct authentic identity (i.e. self) and identify one's purpose. African-American students equipped with an authentic sense of self (positive racial identity, African cultural lens and memory, and commitment to purpose) are able to interpret and making meaning, so that "even" mis-educative experience can be transformed into educative experiences (Goggins II, 2012; Obiakor, 1995; Somè, 1994).

Both "practitioners and advocates" and "families and communities" should organize to support a network of culturally responsive services, programs, and opportunities to learn and practice SEL core competencies. These networks can be used to construct an African-centered rites of passage process, facilitate formation of authentic self, and engage schools. Thus, reinforcing the benefits of SEL beyond the classroom.

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