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“Breathe and Be Ready to Learn”: The Issue with Social-Emotional Learning Programs as Classroom Management

Molly E. McManus

Abstract

As social-emotional learning (SEL) has become a more acknowledged and central part of early schooling in the last two decades, many schools and educators, particularly those in progressive spaces, have adopted SEL programs to supplement or substitute other systems of classroom management. While research demonstrates that children's social, emotional, and cultural practices and experiences are central to inclusive, humanizing, and culturally relevant learning, SEL programs are often implemented to more closely resemble behaviorist systems of classroom management. This article presents findings from a progressive first-grade classroom of Latinx children from immigrant families led by a white teacher. Examples from ethnographic observations of the classroom illustrate the ways that the teacher used an SEL program alongside a discourse of “readiness to learn” to manage and control children's behavior. These classroom experiences proved to be closely connected to the ideas about learning that children in Mr. Walsh's class shared in video-cued interviews, namely that students need to be calm, quiet, focused, and “ready” in order to learn. The article considers the ways that larger systems of whiteness, individualism, and control weaving through SEL programming and progressive schooling create, foster, and perpetuate discourses of control and “readiness” that ultimately prevent children from meaningfully contributing and engaging in the type of deep learning that results from focused, structured agency and relationships of mutual trust and respect.

Keywords: *Early childhood education, classroom management, social-emotional learning, school readiness, Latinx children, immigrant families*

Introduction

Early childhood education in the United States has a long history of controlling students' voices and bodies in order to "effectively" teach the values, knowledge, and ways of being deemed necessary to be compliant, productive members of society (Apple, 2019). What constitutes the necessary values, knowledge, and ways of being is largely determined by members of white-dominant culture and reflective of the values and knowledge they prioritize and the ways they believe children should comport themselves. For young Black, Indigenous, and Children of Color and young children from immigrant families who may have been socialized around slightly different sets of values and taught different knowledge (Colegrove, *In press*; Keller, 2017), part of the early schooling process is forcefully exchanging one set of cultural practices and values for another more "acceptable" set of cultural practices and values (Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009; Souto-Manning, 2010).

Historically, this exchange has been forced in many ways. In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, American Indian boarding schools forcefully removed American Indian children as young as 6-years-old from their families and attempted to strip away their languages and cultures by forcing them to adopt European-American names, dress, language, and religion (Davis, 2001; Gregg, 2018). Through the end of the twentieth century, many schools enforced English-only language policies across grade levels, particularly targeting Latinx communities, in which immigrant children were physically punished for speaking their native languages (Gándara et al., 2004; Gándara & Rumberger, 2009; Macias, 1985). And up through today, behaviorist approaches to classroom management used in "no-excuses" charter schools serving low-income communities, Black, Indigenous, and Communities of Color, and immigrant communities regulate at a micro level the way children as young as kindergarten sit, walk, stand, speak, and interact in the name of high expectations, efficiency, and academic achievement (Dishon & Goodman, 2017; Sondel et al., 2019). These approaches are grounded in behaviorist

theories of learning and classroom management from the mid-twentieth century that emphasize the role of the teacher in manipulating stimuli and environments to reinforce desired student behaviors and discourage undesired student behavior (Palardy, 1970; Skinner, 1954).

As the approaches for controlling young Black, Indigenous, and Children of Color and children of immigrants in their schools and classrooms have changed over time and geography, so have the justifications for those approaches. In the last three decades, a pervasive discourse in child development and early childhood education has framed young Black, Indigenous, and Children of Color, and children of immigrants as lacking the social and emotional capacities necessary to be successful in school (Hoffman, 2009; Stearns, 2016). This discourse often centers children's social-emotional "readiness" to handle or take on certain educational experiences such as kindergarten or collaborative learning (Akaba et al., 2020). In an effort to support young children in acquiring the predetermined set of social-emotional skills deemed necessary to be a full participant in early childhood classrooms (Bates, 2019), many early childhood educators (prekindergarten to third grade), school administrators, and policymakers have begun to supplement or even exchange traditional behaviorist models of classroom management with structured social-emotional learning (SEL) programs (Bierman et al., 2008; Foster, 2020).

Particularly in progressive schools serving Black, Indigenous, and Children of Color and children of immigrants, SEL is seen as a way to move from teachers externally maintaining control and enforcing order in the classroom to children exercising self-discipline and self-regulation (Bear et al., 2015; Bierman & Motamedi, 2015; Elias & Schwab, 2014). This transition from behaviorist classroom management to SEL aligns with the efforts of progressive schools to offer an alternative to the "traditional" factory model of education, wherein the teacher imparts knowledge to children through direct instruction (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). Rather, progressive schools frame learning as a constructive process and employ approaches

such as multicultural education, child-centered curriculum, multi-age classrooms, inquiry learning, flexible learning environments (Cooper, 2017; Garte, 2017; Kloss, 2018; Tobin, 2005), and now, SEL. While there are as many definitions of progressive education as there are schools that claim a progressive approach, a focus on the whole child and supporting learning and development beyond academics has always been central to the progressive education movement (Kohn, 2015). Traditionally a staple only in white-suburban communities, progressive schools are becoming more common in urban centers and more available to Black, Indigenous, and Families of Color, immigrant families, and low-income families—often as an alternative to “no excuses” charter schools (Garte, 2017; Theisen-Homer, 2020).

Recognizing and centering the social and emotional lives of Black, Indigenous, and Children of Color and children of immigrants is central to inclusive, humanizing, and culturally sustaining pedagogies (Fránquiz & del Carmen Salazar, 2004; Lee, 2017; Paris, 2012; Payne et al., 2020). Unfortunately, SEL programs rarely recognize children’s existing social and emotional skills rooted in the cultural ways of being in their families and communities (Mahfouz & Anthony-Stevens, 2020). Rather, in accordance with developmental perspectives, SEL programs often frame young children, and young Black, Indigenous, and Children of Color and children of immigrants especially, as ego-centric beings who must be explicitly taught basic skills such as empathy, self-regulation, and problem solving (Bierman & Motamedi, 2015; Higheagle Strong & McMain, 2020; Hoffman, 2009; Mahfouz & Anthony-Stevens, 2020). In some progressive schools, this ego-centric framing of young children combined with a push to impart self-regulation (also referred to as self-control or self-management) has led to a skewed implementation of SEL programs as something more akin to scripted classroom management rather than a way to recognize and expand children’s social-emotional capacities through authentic, interactive, and agentic classroom learning experiences (Adair, 2014; Hoffman, 2009; Payne et al., 2020).

Young children's experiences in their early years of schooling. I set a foundation for their ideas about learning as a process and their understanding of their own roles and potential in school (Daniels et al., 2001; Haimovitz & Dweck, 2017; Stipek et al., 1995). Research over the last three decades shows that students' early ideas about school and learning are connected to learning objectives, motivation (Daniels et al., 2001; Haimovitz & Dweck, 2017; Lerner et al., 2015), conceptions of knowledge, academic engagement, and school belonging (Lecce, Caputi, & Pagnin, 2015; Skinner, 1995; Stipek & Mac Iver, 1989). With these connections in mind, it is important to examine how implementing SEL programs in ways that closely resemble traditional behaviorist approaches to classroom management may be impacting Black, Indigenous, and Children of Color and children of immigrants in progressive schooling contexts, particularly attending to the ways these experiences shape their ideas about school and learning. Part of this examination includes understanding the ways that larger discourses of "readiness" at the system and policy levels are being taken up by educators to justify using SEL programs as a way to allow or deny Black, Indigenous, and Children of Color and children of immigrants full participation in early childhood classrooms (Bates, 2019).

What Does it Mean to Be Socially and Emotionally "Ready to Learn"?

The concept of "readiness" has a long history in education research and practice (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Graue, 2006; Hains et al., 1989; Hess et al., 1984; Iorio & Parnell, 2015). At the policy and programmatic levels, "readiness" has largely been operationalized through the discourse of "school readiness," which encompasses the effort to prepare children with the academic, social, and emotional skills deemed necessary to be successful in the early elementary grades (Duncan et al., 2007). At the classroom and practice level, readiness is additionally operationalized in more temporal and everyday ways including whether children demonstrate "readiness

to learn” in any given moment by exercising self-regulation, following directions, and paying attention to the teacher (Bettencourt et al., 2018; Brooks-Gunn et al., 2016). Both of these applications of “readiness” emphasize the need for children to meet predetermined cultural expectations of what is necessary and appropriate for school.

Particularly in early childhood classrooms, “readiness to learn” expectations are characterized as social-emotional, but in everyday practice they often play out as behavioral expectations that closely align with traditional classroom management structures (Bettencourt et al., 2018; Foster, 2020). While there is some obvious overlap between children’s social-emotional capabilities and children’s classroom behavior, the two should not be conflated. Social-emotional capacities encompass the ways that children interact and relate to themselves, one another, and the teacher as part of a classroom and school community, and classroom behavior is only a small part of that. Furthermore, for Black, Indigenous, and Children of Color and children of immigrants, the behavioral expectations that demonstrate their “readiness to learn” often boils down to having quiet voices and still, obedient bodies (Adair, Colegrove, et al., 2017; Milner IV et al., 2018, Simmons 2021). In many cases, children’s ability to adhere to these behavioral expectations in a given moment or lesson determines whether they are included as a full participant or separated from their peers due to their inability to comply. In practice, this looks like children being forced to leave the group or even leave the classroom entirely and invited to return only when they can show that they are “ready to learn.” In this sense, the “readiness to learn” discourse can serve to exclude even after children have cleared the not insignificant hurdle of demonstrating “school readiness.”

Rebranding behaviorist classroom management and narrow behavior expectations as SEL, as is becoming more common in progressive schools serving Black, Indigenous, and Children of Color and children of immigrants, does not change the outcomes for children who continue to have their voices and bodies controlled in order to demonstrate their “readiness to learn.” Furthermore,

these practices constrain children's agency to engage in authentic, culturally sustaining SEL. In an early childhood education context, children's agency refers to their ability to influence how and what they learn in order to expand their capabilities across academic, social, emotional, cognitive, cultural, and physical domains (Adair, 2014). In their research examining children's agency in early childhood classrooms, Adair and colleagues have found time and time again that when Black, Indigenous, and Children of Color and children of immigrants have agency, they choose to collaborate, solve problems on their own, care for their peers and teachers, offer help and support, and advocate for each other (Adair, Phillips, et al., 2017; Adair & Colegrove, In press; Colegrove & Adair, 2014; Payne et al., 2020)—all capabilities central to authentic, culturally sustaining SEL (Jagers et al., 2019; Mahfouz & Anthony-Stevens, 2020).

The Overlap of Classroom Management and Social-Emotional Learning

Classroom management and SEL approaches to ensure children are "ready to learn" may look similar in practice because they share similar language and goals. In the second edition of the *Handbook of Classroom Management*, Gettinger and Fischer (2014) identify "teachers' effective management of behavior [as] an important mechanism for promoting young children's school readiness" with the goal of children demonstrating "a high level of task engagement, self-regulation, and social competence" (p. 141). In the first edition of the *Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning*, Bierman and Motamedi (2015) similarly discuss the importance of promoting "the acquisition of the core social-emotional skills that foster readiness to learn, including the capacity to function effectively in a group context, get along with other children, follow classroom rules and routines, focus attention, and enjoy goal-oriented learning" (p. 135). Both handbooks also use dichotomous, culturally relative language to describe children's classroom behaviors as good or bad, appropriate or inappropriate, and acceptable or unacceptable.

Traditional behaviorist classroom management and more recent SEL approaches are also grounded in the same deficit research of low-income communities and Black, Indigenous, and Communities of Color. To justify the use of both approaches in early childhood classrooms, researchers often cite evidence showing that Black, Indigenous, and Children of Color and children from economically disadvantaged families enter school without being able to pay attention, sit still, follow directions, remain engaged (Pianta et al., 2007), exhibit daily challenging behaviors (Huaqing Qi & Kaiser, 2003; Willoughby et al., 2001), and demonstrate significant delays in self-regulation and social competence (Bodrova & Leong, 2006). These deficits and delays are often attributed to stressful home experiences and low levels of early learning support on the part of families (Bierman & Motamedi, 2015; McClelland et al., 2006) and then connected to negative developmental and social outcomes later in life (Campbell et al., 2006).

The dismal picture painted by this selective set of literature does little to acknowledge the strengths of families of color, those experiencing economic instability, and immigrant families and the expansive funds of knowledge and cultural social-emotional competencies that children do bring with them to the classroom (Bang & Medin, 2010; Gonzalez et al., 2005; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003; Yosso, 2005). Furthermore, it blames families for the fact that schools are often not responsive and flexible to the needs of diverse students and often fail to utilize culturally sustaining pedagogies that would enable them to recognize children's social-emotional strengths and support them in the ways they may need in order to be successful (Adair, Colegrove, et al., 2017; Paris & Alim, 2017). Due to these failings on the part of schools and education policy-makers, early childhood educators are pushed to adopt controlling approaches to learning in their classrooms, whether that is rigid behaviorist classroom management systems or SEL programs that center self-regulation and compliance.

Real Impacts on Children's Ideas and Identity

Beyond teaching children how to behave and control themselves in the classroom, these types of learning experiences also play a role in shaping children's ideas and beliefs about what school is, how learning works, what it means to be academically successful, and who they are as students and learners (Adair et al., 2017). In their theorizing of critical sociocultural literacy, Moje and Lewis (2007) situate the learner not only in a sociocultural context, but in "discourse communities" or groupings of people across time and space that "share ways of knowing, thinking, believing, acting, and communicating" (p. 16). The act of learning delivers access to and control over these discourses—a limited resource. As a social process, learning necessarily takes place within relationships where the learner takes up existing discourses or disrupts and transforms fixed discourses. The process is itself an expression of power with constantly developing influences on the learner's identity and agency. The discourses of "readiness" and experiences of being controlled that undergird educators' pedagogical decisions around classroom management and social-emotional learning are either taken up or disrupted and transformed by children in ways that impact their understanding of school and learning as well as their identity and agency.

Young Latinx children from immigrant families are particularly subject to controlled classroom learning experiences in the early grades (Adair & Colegrove, *In press*; Fuller et al., 2019). As one of the most segregated communities in U.S. schools (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014), Latinx children find their language skills, cultural wealth, and funds of knowledge are often overlooked as they are subjected to rote, didactic learning experiences that target basic skills and vocabulary (Colegrove & Adair, 2014; Fuller, 2007; Gonzalez et al., 2005). This article presents findings from a progressive first-grade classroom of Latinx children from immigrant families led by a white teacher who implemented a school-wide SEL program intending to foster students' independence, agency, and self-regulation. However,

examples from ethnographic observations of the classroom illustrate the ways that the teacher actually used the SEL program to continue to manage behavior and exert control over students and data from video-cued interviews with the first-grade children demonstrate the ways that children integrated discourses of “readiness” and compliant behavior into their ideas about school and learning.

Methods

The data presented in this article were drawn from a larger study investigating the relation-ship between the learning experiences offered to Latinx children from immigrant families and their ideas about learning. The study used ethnographic observations to capture children’s classroom learning experiences in three first-grade classes serving Latinx children from immigrant families, as well as qualitative interview methods informed by video-cued ethnography (Adair & Kurban, 2019; Tobin et al., 1989), to elicit children and teachers’ ideas, perspectives, and beliefs about learning as a process. In this article, I present data from the most progressive of the three first-grade classes in the larger study.

Site and Participants

Skeller Elementary School was established in 2012 as part of a district initiative to revamp and reinstate neighborhood schools in specific underserved neighborhoods in the city. The school was founded on progressive values that advocate a whole-child approach to instruction and learning, including a focus on arts-based learning, exploratory learning, personalized learning, and social-emotional learning. Their mission statement articulated the goal of instilling in students a passion for learning as well as a sense of personal agency to discover and advocate. School administrators and teachers also advocates and worked towards strong school-community partnerships rooted in the neighborhood and the families that they served. The school is located in an urban city in Northern California and served 461 prekindergarten through fifth-grade students, 94% of whom are Latinx and 86% of whom qualified for free or reduced-price meals.

Three key features guided Skeller Elementary School's progressive approach to learning. The first feature was flexible learning environments in which classrooms were arranged with couches, bean bags, risers, small tables and chairs, and area rugs instead of an individual, stationary desks for each student. In these flexible learning environments, students were meant to choose how and where they did their work and were not tied to a specific space or desk. The second feature was one-to-one technology. All students had their own laptop provided by the school on which they engaged in a majority of their daily schoolwork. The third feature was a school-wide, research-based social-emotional learning program called The Toolbox Project. Toolbox aligns with the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning's framework for social-emotional learning (CASEL, 2020) and self describes as a "simple and practical metaphor directing children to the experience and awareness of 12 innate 'Tools' that already exist inside them" (*The Toolbox Project*, 2020). The 12 tools include: *the breathing tool* (I calm myself and check-in), *the quiet/safe place tool*, *the personal space tool*, *the using our words tool* (I use the "right" words, in the "right" way, at the "right" time, for the "right reasons), *the garbage can tool* (I let little things go), *the taking time tool*, *the please and thank you tool*, *the apology and forgiveness tool*, *the patience tool*, and *the courage tool*. Teachers at every grade level received annual professional development for the SEL program and most of them implemented it in their classrooms to some extent, though rarely with complete fidelity to the curriculum.

Mr. Walsh, the teacher of the first grade classroom I observed, was a 35-year-old white man in his 10th year of teaching lower elementary school at Skeller. Mr. Walsh spoke Spanish but taught an English-only class. He earned a bachelor's degree in history and Spanish and teach credential from a nearby university. He explained that he chooses to work at Skeller because "there is something addictive and obsessive about seeing what kind of person these young kiddos will grow into. I just got to know what happens in their next chapter."

The 22 students in Mr. Walsh’s classroom were between 6- and 7-years old. The 10 focal students that I interviewed after classroom observations all had at least one parent who was born outside of the United States, in Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Venezuela, Honduras, or Peru (see Table 1). The children were curious, talkative, physically active, and confident inside and outside of the classroom.

Table 1
Skeller Elementary School Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Race	Native Language	Language Proficiencies	Parents’ Country of Origin
Mr. Walsh	35	Male	White	English	Bilingual	U.S.
Alessandra	6	Female	Latinx	Spanish	Bilingual	Mexico & U.S.
Alma	7	Female	Latinx	Spanish	Bilingual	Mexico
Violeta	6	Female	Latinx	Spanish	Bilingual	Guatemala & U.S.
Elizabeth	6	Female	Latinx	Spanish	Bilingual	Mexico & U.S.
Josué	6	Male	Latinx	English	Monolingual	El Salvador & U.S.
Carlos	6	Male	Latinx	Spanish	Bilingual	Venezuela & Peru
Samantha	6	Male	Latinx	Spanish	Bilingual	Mexico
Valeria	7	Female	Latinx	Spanish	Bilingual	Honduras
Wilma	7	Female	Latinx	Spanish	Bilingual	Mexico
Zoe	7	Female	Latinx	Spanish	Bilingual	El Salvador & U.S.

Procedures

Once I recruited Mr. Walsh through my educational networks in Northern California, he and I worked together to identify the 10 focal students who met the criteria of Latinx, bilingual, and having

at least one parent born outside of the U.S. I then obtained consent from the parents of the 10 focal children in each classroom who planned to participate in the video-cued interviews and arranged to spend a week at the school conducting ethnographic observations in the classroom and video-cued participant interviews. In the spring of the school year, I spent three full school days in the classroom recording field notes, photographs, and short videos of children's daily learning experiences. During these observations, I attended to the experiences of the 10 focal students I would later interview, as well as the everyday routines, schedules, student and teacher interactions, types and structure of learning activities, language, and classroom-management approaches used in the classroom.

After the ethnographic classroom observations, I conducted one-on-one interviews with the 10 focal students and Mr. Walsh, using a qualitative method informed by video-cued ethnography. Video-cued ethnography is a method developed by Joseph Tobin and colleagues in the Preschool and Three Cultures Studies (Tobin et al., 1989, 2009) and further adapted to use in interviews with young children by Jennifer Keys Adair in the Agency and Young Children Study (Adair, 2014). One aspect of the method involves sharing films depicting everyday learning in one cultural setting with individuals in a different community to elicit their reactions, explanations, and ultimately their own cultural ideas, values, and beliefs related to the topic of study. In this study, I used parts of the film from the Agency and Young Children Study (see Adair, 2014) created in a first grade classroom in Central Texas that served Latinx children from immigrant families at El Roble Elementary School to cue interviews with children and teachers focused on their ideas about learning. During interviews, the video served as a standardized prompt for participants to reference, critique, or relate to in their interviews eliciting responses that could then be compared in data analysis.

The three film clips from the Agency and Young Children Study that I shared with participants included a scene in which a

boy helps a girl reference the class calendar to figure out how to write the number 21, a scene where students work together using flashcards without a teacher to make combinations of 10, and a scene where students are engaged in “choice time” or centers. I also shared three to five short videos collected during ethnographic classroom observations in the current study with each participant that captured learning experiences in their own classroom environment. Because these videos were captured just days before the interviews, children were often able to recall the events and share their ideas about how those experiences related to learning and teachers were able to explain their thinking and decision-making around the learning event.

I conducted the one-on-one interviews in the unoccupied school library. Children’s interviews took place during the school day and Mr. Walsh’s interview took place after school. After showing parts of the film from El Roble Elementary School in Texas, I asked children “What did you think?” and “Is that what your class is like?” followed by questions more specific to the scene, such as “Can students learn when the teacher is not there?” Then I showed children videos of themselves in their own classrooms and asked questions such as “What were you doing in this video?” and “What were you learning?” In Mr. Walsh’s interview, I asked questions about his beliefs about learning as well as his intentions with certain lessons and his desires for his students.

Coding and Analysis

After data collection in the three classrooms that participated in the larger study, I typed up all field notes, transcribed all interviews, and uploaded that data to the qualitative coding software, Dedoose. For the classroom learning experiences analysis, I read through each set of field notes and teacher interviews multiple times and conducted open coding to identify themes related to classroom learning experiences. I organized this initial set of themes into 10 larger categories of classroom learning experiences.

For this article, I turned back to the *classroom-management systems and practices category* and re-analyzed the data from Mr. Walsh’s classroom, focusing on his approach to classroom management and social-emotional learning. Eight themes emerged from this analysis that I used to more finely code the Skeller field notes and Mr. Walsh’s interview transcript: *Children’s agency, collaboration, routines and systems, social-emotional learning, controlling children’s bodies, controlling children’s voices, compliance, and readiness.*

For the analysis of children’s ideas about learning, I followed a similar process. After reading through all the interviews multiple times and writing memos for each, 16 themes emerged across the three classrooms that participated in the larger study that captured children’s ideas, beliefs, and conceptualizations of learning. I organized these themes into six different categories and coded all child interview data according to the themes (see Table 2).

Table 2
Categories and Themes used to Code Children’s Ideas about Learning

Categories	Theme/Code
Process of Learning	Brain/mind and learning Operationalization of learning Evidence of learning Language
Environmental factors that Influence Learning	Auditory environment Physical environment
Social Aspects of Learning	Learning with teachers Learning with and from peers
Enjoyment and Learning	Playing and learning Fun and learning Choice and learning
Importance of Learning	Constructing knowledge or intelligence Long term ideas about learning
Behavior and Learning	Following rules and obedience Consequences and rewards Students’ bodies

For this article, I conducted a within-classroom analysis of the Skeller data examining the relationship between the approach to classroom management, implementation of a social-emotional learning program, discourses of “readiness,” and children’s ideas about learning.

Findings

A Social-Emotional Curricular Approach to Classroom Management

Students began arriving at Mr. Walsh’s first-grade classroom around 8:15 a.m. They played games, looked through books, or played with musical instruments in small groups. One morning, Mr. Walsh sat down for a few minutes with a small group of girls playing ukuleles and helped them tune the instruments. He asked them about their weekends and they talked about attending family parties and visiting Chuck E. Cheese. Around 8:25 a.m., Mr. Walsh would tell students it was time to clean up and go outside to line up in the yard. Most students did not move right away, and many did not put their activities away before they walked in pairs or small groups down the hall to the yard. At 8:30 a.m., the whole class would walk from the yard back to the classroom for a mixed-grade-level project time, followed by readers workshop, recess, math workshop, lunch, reading time, writing time, a read aloud, choice time, and then dismissal at 2:45 p.m.

Throughout the day students moved around in their “flexible learning environment” to sit and work on couches, risers, small tables and chairs, balls, and large area rugs instead of individual desks. Students worked on their personal laptops, which they carried around in messenger bags, for the majority of the day. Once or twice per day, each student would be called to work in a small group with Mr. Walsh who taught exclusively in English but sometimes spoke Spanish in casual conversation with students or families. Mr. Walsh did not use a formal classroom-management system that tracked student behavior but centered the school-wide SEL program *The Toolbox Project* in his approach to managing student behavior. While

he fostered student agency to choose where to be and work in the classroom, he had clear expectations of students being individually focused and quiet while they worked. However, as demonstrated in the data presented below, Mr. Walsh often employed the SEL program in a way that resembled behaviorist classroom management, though his efforts rarely resulted in students meeting his behavioral expectations.

As noted earlier, *Toolbox* is an SEL program that directs children to 12 tools that they already possess including *the breathing tool* (I calm myself and check in), *the quiet/safe place tool*, *the personal space tool*, *the using our words tool* (I use the "right" words, in the "right" way, at the "right" time, for the "right reasons"), *the garbage can tool* (I let little things go), *the taking time tool*, *the please and thank you tool*, *the apology and forgiveness tool*, *the patience tool*, and *the courage tool*. During my three days of classroom observations, only one of the 12 strategies was ever discussed or used by Mr. Walsh and his students. Up to 22 times a day, Mr. Walsh encouraged or instructed students, individually or as a class, to use their *breathing tool*—the strategy the SEL program prescribed for children to calm themselves and check-in. Mr. Walsh usually explained that the child or children needed to use the *breathing tool* because they were not "ready to learn." In addition to encouraging students to calm down, think about their behavior, and get ready to learn, Mr. Walsh used the *breathing tool* to redirect students, give a consequence for disruptive behavior, and remove the child from the classroom. For example, Mr. Walsh often instructed students to step outside of the classroom and use the breathing tool to calm down and reflect on their behavior.

Back from lunch recess. Students go to the carpet, risers, and stools at the small table. They are chatting and Juan goes outside to take deep breaths because Mr. Walsh says he's "not ready" to be in class. The rest of the students continue to chat. Mr. Walsh explains what opinions are in writing and just talks over students' chatter. "We're going to start a new topic."

He pauses looking exasperated. "If I touch you take two deep breaths outside." He touches three boys who then leave the classroom. The rest of the students mostly quiet down after this, but not completely [Skeller field notes 03/12/18].

The *breathing tool* as a strategy was often unsuccessful in achieving the compliance Mr. Walsh sought from students. Sometimes, Mr. Walsh would direct a student to go outside and breathe and he or she would ignore the direction completely and continue with his or her activity. After a few attempts to get students to use their *breathing tool*, Mr. Walsh would usually resort to delivering a lecture on listening, remaining calm, or explaining how students can show that they are ready to learn.

Mr. Walsh explains that he doesn't want to waste time and he wants to do a read aloud before recess. They count five deep breaths together but students continue talking. Mr. Walsh talks over them and asks, "Who can raise a quiet hand and tell me about visualizing?" Students continue chatting. "I can tell we are not ready" he says. Jordan plays with a paper airplane. Mr. Walsh takes it from him. Jordan yells, "I already know that book!" Mr. Walsh says, "This is the last warning before I send you outside to breathe." Jordan and the rest of the students quiet down a bit. Mr. Walsh starts reading. He tells the class to whisper their visualization to a partner. They turn and talk, but not about their visualization. Mr. Walsh asks Brian to share, but Brian doesn't hear because it's too loud so Mr. Walsh asks again. Mr. Walsh tells the students that he's feeling frustrated because it's hard to read with so many distractions [Skeller field notes 03/13/18].

Much of the whole group class time consisted of Mr. Walsh alternating between teaching a lesson and pausing to ask students to breathe, turn around, quiet down, and pay attention.

The majority of the school day, however, was actually spent in workshops, meaning Mr. Walsh rotated through small groups while the rest of the class spread out and worked on their laptops

reading, writing, or playing games related to literacy or math. During this time, Mr. Walsh expected students to complete their individual work but allowed them to decide where to work and who to work with. He would often call out redirections to students who veered from the assigned activities on their laptops, but most of the time students ignored these requests.

Students switch centers for a third time. Jordan gets out a soft adjustable chair and puts it on top of Cara who is sitting on the carpet. She moves to the risers and Jordan rolls around on the carpet. Mr. Walsh reminds them to be working, but they don't do anything different. Jordan sits on a stool and reads aloud to Alex. Josué reads nearby but on his own and shows his pictures to Jordan and Alex. Josué then moves to lay on the carpet and reads "Can I Play Too?" He stops every once in a while, to ask Jordan how to read a word. Cara and Elizabeth sit on the risers and talk and work on finishing the cut and paste writing words project they started in a small group with Mr. Walsh [Skeller field notes 03/14/18].

A few times a day during the two workshops, more students tended towards not working than working and Mr. Walsh would pause the whole class to give a gentle lecture emphasizing his need for quiet.

Carlos is being very playful at Mr. Walsh's table smashing cubes and taking other students' cubes. Mr. Walsh tells him to take a break and breathe on the rug. Students measure their third or fourth fish. Mr. Walsh stops the whole class and gives them a short lecture. "I need voices off. If you all are this noisy, I won't be able to hear my group. It's not a big deal, but I want to be able to hear. Don't worry about it, but try to be quiet in your work" [Skeller field notes 03/14/18].

If certain students have been particularly off-task during a workshop, Mr. Walsh would occasionally keep them in at recess to write a reflection on their choices and behavior, determine a way that they could give back to the community, and sometimes make them finish their work at the end of the day when the rest of the class had choice time.

The students who stayed in from recess wrote a reflection about how they subtracted from the community when they were talking and how they can make it up to the class now. Mr. Walsh gives Brian a job to give back to the community. "Make sure everything on the white board is in place." Juan is tasked with organizing the caddies in order to give back. [Skeller field notes 03/14/18].

During another observation, Mr. Walsh notified Alma, "Alma, I know you've lost your computer before, since you two didn't work during this time you're going to have to talk with me during recess and finish during choice time" [Skeller field notes 03/12/18].

In his interview, Mr. Walsh shared how he thought about student agency and why he rarely insisted students comply with his requests and directives, emphasizing the need for students to develop "independence." He explained: "I think at this young age, you can't force anything, students are going to do what they want to do, and it's my job as a teacher to offer up suggestions or options that capture their curiosity and motivation so that they are interested in pursuing the content." Mr. Walsh talked specifically about children's ability to make choices, "I think engaging in that process where students are making choices, feeling validated for that choice, and feeling success so that they are able to repeat that cycle is truly what will create curious and independent thinkers." He acknowledged that he sometimes struggled to "manage" children's agency and get them to comply, particularly within the flexible-learning environments.

I feel like I am still stumbling through the best ways to use [flexible learning environments] and implement them. As frustrating as it can be at times, I think that the power in deciding where you are sitting goes a long way into feeling independent. I think where it gets hard as a teacher is trying to manage 22 students making independent choices with the potential conflicts that arise.

Mr. Walsh did not directly discuss the SEL program, his philosophy on classroom management, or the concept of "readiness" in his interview,

as these were not the focus of the original larger study. Rather, he focused on how and why he chooses to support children's choices and agency even if it often meant they didn't listen to him, follow directions, or complete their school work.

Children's Ideas About Being Quiet, Focused, and Ready to Learn

Mr. Walsh's approach to classroom management and social-emotional learning showed up in his students' ideas about learning that they shared in their video-cued interviews. Following much of the messaging in the SEL program, students emphasized the importance of breathing outside of the classroom, being ready to learn, and making good choices. Elizabeth explained that if people in her class are talking "Mr. Walsh needs to send them outside." I asked her why and she responded, "Because the other people who are ready to learn, the people who are not ready to learn may distract the people, the other people." I then asked her what it meant to be ready to learn and she explained, "Like it means like I'm ready to do like the test." Finally, I asked how Mr. Walsh knows who is ready and who is not, and Elizabeth said, "Like the most quiet." Zoe said that some students in her class "they choose their friends [to work with] and they don't do their... even do their stuff that they are supposed to do." Josué agreed, "Like there is a good way to learn, like a good way to be a better learner, like don't sit next to a silly partner that will make you distracted to not be good learning."

Children also shared ideas that reflected the main discourses in Mr. Walsh's frequent lectures on being quiet and focused in order to learn and the ways he tried to enforce those by sending students outside or keeping them in from recess. Alessandra spoke to the benefits of being in a quiet space, "Then that means the people that are quiet, they can get like um, they can get quiet and they can focus on their work." Valeria said that in the classroom "Sometimes it's really loud and we cannot learn." When I asked Carlos why the classroom being loud was a problem for learning, he said, "I don't hear and I don't remember anything." Josué explained the consequences

of talking or being noisy: “We can’t learn and our teacher get mad at us.” Similarly, Valeria explained what happens when students are not focused: “Sometimes when you don’t see at teacher, he will ask you some questions and they will say ‘um’ and they will get kind of in trouble.” Alessandra discussed the consequences of not paying attention: “Sometimes, you go outside and breathe and be ready to learn or you might stay with Mr. Walsh for recess and have a reflection.” Finally, Elizabeth explained, “When the teacher, like when the other people are like focusing, the teacher needs to like choose, the other people that are not working nice in their spot they too that means Mr. Walsh needs to do the spot for them.”

Mr. Walsh’s application of the *breathing tool* in the SEL program and his frequent lectures were clearly reflected in children’s ideas that students need to demonstrate a “readiness to learn”—make good choices, have calm bodies, and be quiet and focused in order to learn.

Discussion

As social-emotional learning (SEL) has become a more acknowledged and central part of early schooling in the last two decades (Hoffman, 2009), many schools and educators, particularly those in progressive spaces, have adopted SEL programs to supplement or substitute other systems of classroom management (Durlak et al., 2015; E. Emmer & Sabornie, 2014). This article presented findings from a progressive first grade classroom at Skeller Elementary School that served Latinx children from immigrant families and was led by a white male teacher, Mr. Walsh, who (mis)used an SEL program alongside a discourse of “readiness to learn” to manage and control children’s behavior. These classroom experiences proved to be closely connected to the ideas about learning that children in Mr. Walsh’s class shared, namely that students need to be calm, quiet, focused, and “ready” in order to learn.

The Toolbox Project was adopted at Skeller as a school-wide SEL program made up of 12 tools or strategies for children to use.

In practice, Mr. Walsh only drew on a modified version of the *breathing tool* in his first-grade class—a strategy children were meant to use to calm themselves and check-in. When children were off task, talking too much, turned away from him, unfocused, or not following his directions, Mr. Walsh would tell the student to *first leave the classroom* and then take deep breaths, calm down, reflect on their behavior, and return when they were “ready to learn.” If this approach did not lead to a change in student behavior, Mr. Walsh would have them stay in from recess to continue breathing and write out a reflection. His application of the *breathing tool* resembled a time-out and loss of privilege punishment common in traditional behaviorist classroom-management approaches, but with breathing and reflection added on. Children who could not or would not comply with teacher expectations were excluded from the group until they could demonstrate that they were “ready to learn.”

One outcome of this approach to SEL and behavior management that children in Mr. Walsh’s class either experienced or witnessed dozens of times per day was the way it seemed to shape children’s ideas about learning as a process and about themselves as learners. In their video-cued interviews, children talked about the importance of sending students outside of the classroom or keeping them in from recess if they were not “ready to learn.” They defined being “ready to learn” in terms of being quiet, taking a test, not distracting others, and following teacher directions. Students also qualified quiet and obedient behaviors as a “good way to learn” and “a good way to be a better learner.” Finally, they discussed the need for Mr. Walsh to direct student behavior if students were unfocused or when they failed to make good decisions about who to work with. As Moje and Lewis (2007) might explain, children took up the discourses of being “ready to learn” and the behaviors that they came to understand as “good learning” and not only integrated them into their ideas about learning as a process, but also into their identities as good (or bad) learners.

While children encountered and experienced the discourses shaping their ideas about learning in relationship with Mr. Walsh,

ultimately, it is the larger systems of whiteness, individualism, and control weaving through SEL programming and progressive schooling (Castagno, 2013; Leonardo, 2009) that create, foster, and perpetuate these discourses. Hoffman (2009) writes:

“[SEL] programs tend to undermine ideals [of caring, community, and diversity] by focusing on emotional and behavioral control strategies that privilege individualist models of self. SEL in practice thus becomes another way to focus attention on measurement and remediation of individual deficits rather than a way to redirect educators’ focus toward the relational contexts of classrooms and schools.”

Mr. Walsh’s approach to SEL and behavior management represents a larger trend in the version of progressive education available to Black, Indigenous, and Children of Color and children of immigrants. Progressive educators, like Mr. Walsh, are in the impossible position of balancing genuine beliefs in the importance of SEL and children’s agency with entrenched expectations that Black, Indigenous, and Children of Color and children of immigrants should behaviorally demonstrate a “readiness to learn” with their quiet voices and still, obedient bodies (Baker, 2017; Dishon & Goodman, 2017; Vaughan, 2018). Not only does this contradiction in discourse and pedagogy limit the opportunities for children to demonstrate and practice their cultural, social, and emotional capabilities, it also leads educators to try to maintain control by only providing superficial opportunities for children to use their agency in their learning—such as allowing children to choose where they sit rather than what or how they learn (Adair, 2014; Milner IV et al., 2018). As a result, children often push to more meaningfully exert their agency in ways that clash with teachers’ behavioral expectations. In Mr. Walsh’s class, this meant that children’s learning experiences were often unfocused, sometimes chaotic, and peppered with attempts by Mr. Walsh to regain “control.”

Even in the most progressive schooling contexts where teachers intend and even believe they are creating learning experiences where

children have agency, the instinct to control students often interferes—especially for white teachers. In a study conducted by Paradise et al. (2014), two European-American and two Mexican-heritage research assistants each followed a script calling for them to casually assist children in a task rather than control their attention or motivation. The European-American research assistants struggled to allow children to use their agency and continuously attempted to control children's attention, motivation, and behavior. The Mexican-heritage research assistants collaborated and coordinated with children while supporting their agency. One of the European-American teachers reflected, "It's really hard to stay away and not interject your own ideas... I guess I just, even though I was trying not to do it, did it anyway" (p. 142). This urge to control is an example of the insidiousness of whiteness in progressive schooling that sidelines other cultural ways of learning and ultimately perpetuates the oppression of students with different cultural backgrounds in the name of necessity, efficiency, and readiness (Castagno, 2013; Leonardo, 2009).

For young children from Latinx immigrant families, such approaches to SEL and schooling are often disconnected from children's cultural repertoires of practice and learning (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003) and disconnected from Latinx immigrant parents' desires and expectations of their children in the classroom (Colegrove, In press). Rogoff's research with the Learning by Observing and Pitching In framework shows that when Latinx children have the time, space, and opportunity, they tend to contribute to their family and classroom communities in shared, collaborative, and meaningful ways (2014). Related to social-emotional learning, this process of contribution provides value and allows children to be valued by their communities and develop a sense of belonging. Similarly, Colegrove's research (Colegrove, In press; Colegrove & Krause, 2017) with Latinx immigrant parents of young children found that parents felt it was important for their children to develop a culture of *convivencia* and *respeto* in their early childhood classrooms. They wanted their children to be able to support and be supported by their peers, and establish a

community of mutual care and respect. Furthermore, Latinx immigrant parents stressed that they also wanted their children to pay attention to the teacher, follow directions, and listen. The oscillation between unruly and highly controlled learning experiences in Mr. Walsh's class prevented his Latinx students from meaningfully contributing and engaging in the type of deep learning that results from focused, structured agency and relationships of mutual trust and respect (Adair & Colegrove, *In press*).

Conclusion

Supporting SEL grounded in children's agency and cultures is not antithetical to the *Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning's* (CASEL; 2020) widely used framework that breaks SEL down into self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making in the context of classrooms, schools, families, and communities. Many SEL programs that align with the CASEL framework could in fact be implemented in early childhood classrooms in ways that center children's agency. But the pressure teachers face around issues of "readiness," standardization, high stakes testing, and maintaining "control" of their students often causes them to deny children agency (Adair et al., 2017; Milner IV et al., 2018) and implement SEL programs in ways that were never intended by the SEL program designers. In practice, the goal of SEL becomes narrowed and aligned with the goals of behaviorist classroom management—supporting children in exercising self-regulation and compliance in order to move through grade-level curricula according to the plans, desires, and pressures faced by teachers (Bierman & Motamedi, 2015; Hoffman, 2009; Simmons et al., 2018; Simmons, 2021). If we truly want to support the social, emotional, cultural, and academic learning and development of young Black, Indigenous, and Children of Color and children of immigrants we need to begin with the unwavering understanding that "all children are ready to learn, but what they are expected to learn varies widely from one cultural setting and historic period to another" (Abo-Zena & New, 2012, p. 28). All children need and deserve the opportunity

to authentically practice their social and emotional capacities in their early childhood classrooms and develop expansive, dynamic, and sophisticated understandings of learning and themselves as learners.

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