

Unsettling Socio-Emotional Learning: Perspectives From Working With Resettled Refugee Youth

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic ushered in significant shifts in how youth experience both in-school and out-of-school learning. One of the most notable changes was in where and how group interactions took place. This paper argues that in the transition from in-person to virtual programming, socio-emotional learning (SEL) requires additional planning and intention. We explore how facilitators and refugee youth negotiate SEL in a virtual summer program. Our findings reveal authentic SEL when facilitators use an ethic of care through technological troubleshooting. We also present nuances that youth offered to SEL, which trouble uniform depictions of what SEL might mean. From this, we share implications for further SEL work and intergenerational learning supports that extend beyond the challenges posed by a global crisis.

Introduction

Resettled refugee youth face significant challenges acclimating to a new society, including language barriers, unfamiliar social norms, values, belief systems, practices, institutional environments, and unwelcoming contexts of reception (Bennouna et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the challenges that refugee youth face. Attending to, and supporting, socio-emotional Learning (SEL) skills serve as a powerful tool to support acclimation, sense of belonging, and continued learning in a new place (d'Abreu et al., 2019). This poster shares facilitative moves in a segment from a virtual summer program that centered Socio-emotional Learning for refugee, immigrant, and asylum seeking youth (grades K-12). We utilize discourse analysis to explore facilitator and children interactions as they read a book "Pete the Cat and His Magic Sunglasses". We highlight findings that demonstrate how facilitators can embody and implement authentic SEL and moments when youth expanded what counts as SEL.

Background

SEL is widely described as "the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (CASEL, undated). The layered traumas, grief, uncertainties, and isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in the midst of increased racialized violence, has amplified calls for re-imagining teaching and learning that centers care and socio-emotional development (de Royston et al., 2020; Bang, 2020; Bang et al., 2021). Despite the promises of SEL to support students' learning and center relations of care, SEL curriculum often follows rigid scripts, which has negative consequences for the health and wellness of students of color (Camangian & Cariaga, 2021; Simmons, 2019; Simmons, 2020). Authentic SEL responds to students' cultural contexts, affirms those contexts, and addresses traumas. Facilitators need training that supports them with modeling and embodying SEL through an ethic of care.

Contexts, participants, and data

Researchers and participants

Participants are from a research practice partnership (Coburn & Penuel, 2016) started in 2017 with Refugees Around the World (RAW), a nonprofit refugee organization located in a large midwestern city. For the past several years, the research team has partnered with RAW to support after school and summer programming for local youth. Additionally, the research team takes on the responsibility of training summer interns for their work with the youth. An intern, Jamie, and the youth program coordinator, Myra, co-facilitated a session with five kindergarten-aged children. Jamie read aloud a book "Pete the Cat and His Magic Sunglasses" with an animated video to accompany the reading.

All participants use she/her pronouns and pseudonyms are used for participants and the organization. Jamie was not formally a teacher and was in a masters program for social work. Myra had led youth programming

at RAW for one and a half years and has a background in trauma-informed and culturally-responsive pedagogies. The researchers were second and third-year Learning Sciences graduate students.

Methodological framework

Using discourse analysis (Gee, 2004; Rogers, 2011) we examine the interactions between facilitators and kids as they read and discuss the book “Pete the Cat and His Magic Sunglasses”. Two vignettes highlight contrasting forms of 1) supporting youth as they struggled with the logistics of participating virtually, and 2) not fully acknowledging emotional sensemaking from youth that diverged from the learning material and facilitator’s expectations.

Findings

Two findings demonstrate how facilitators and kids engaged with SEL. In the first finding, we notice moves enacted within the constraints of the virtual platform to model and embody SEL within an ethic of care. In the second finding, we share tensions around cultural framings that surfaced during a discussion of the book.

Discussion

The book and discussion serve as the primary artifact that Jamie used to implement her sensemaking around SEL with the kids. The discussion surfaced negotiations and tensions around cultural framings and assumptions tied to SEL goals in this session. In the second case, we see Myra’s interventions to troubleshoot microphones as a move to value each kid’s participation and part of a larger effort to lower the barrier to participation. Beyond a set of skills that can be developed, SEL is an embodiment of empathetic response and attending to oneself and others. Zoom required a level of slowed down attention from Myra and other facilitators, which reflected their goals of a SEL rich summer experience.

Implications

Existing scholarship argues that intergenerational, home contexts might offer a space and relationships to engage in authentic socio-emotional learning.

Conclusion

We see glimpses of possibilities for enacting authentic SEL that engages students, facilitators, and family members in embodying SEL skills beyond scripts. Future training for facilitators needs to articulate the dominant cultural framings of SEL that perpetuate ideas of SEL as scripts, and support sensemaking toward SEL rooted in relationships that attend to the layered contexts for youth.

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