



## **Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Inclusive Practices Research Brief**

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Social-emotional learning (SEL) is widely recognized as a significant predictor of academic achievement, long-term employment, and overall well-being; however, students with disabilities are often excluded from SEL research and programming despite having equal or elevated social-emotional needs. This research brief examines how culturally responsive and inclusive SEL approaches can support students with disabilities in global contexts. To address disparities, it analyzes key barriers such as cultural mismatches, deficit views of disability, and the idea that universal SEL programs can and do prioritize individual behaviours. Three complementary frameworks, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Survey on Social and Emotional Skills (SSES), the CASEL 5 competencies, and Transformative SEL (tSEL), are evaluated to illustrate how SEL can be adapted to honor cultural identities, promote belonging, and cultivate agency. Findings suggest that inclusive SEL does not begin with student intervention but requires educators to develop capacity in perspective-taking, awareness of bias, cultural responsiveness, family and community engagement, and professional learning supports through collaborative relationships to create authentic, identity-affirming environments (Sheffield, 2022; Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, n.d.). When adapted rather than replicated, SEL frameworks can reduce exclusion, challenge inequitable norms, and support the academic, social, and emotional thriving of students with disabilities worldwide.

SEL skills strongly predict academic performance and future employment and are closely tied to health and well-being (Chernyshenko, Kankaraš, & Drasgow, 2018; OECD, 2015; Kankaraš & Suarez-Alvarez, 2019; Steponavičius, Gress-Wright, & Linzarini, 2023). An effective learning climate at both the classroom and school levels depends on structure and support. Educators can be practical and culturally responsive by building strong relationships and consistently showing commitment to helping all students meet high academic and behavioural standards (American Psychological Association [APA], 2023). Culturally responsive teaching centers culture as a key lever for creating an inclusive learning environment. This approach means structuring learning around students' culture, holding all students to high expectations, including those with disabilities, and celebrating the diversity (e.g., diverse family backgrounds, multilingualism, cultural values) each student brings (National Education Association, n.d.).

Students receiving special education services have the same social and emotional needs as their peers, but often have additional needs (APA, 2023). Studies found that students with intellectual and specific learning disabilities exhibited higher rates of internalizing and externalizing behaviors than their peers (Donolato et al., 2022; Sorrenti et al., 2019). These students also report greater dissatisfaction with educator relationships, weaker school bonds, and a perception of the school as dangerous. Therefore, it is important to specifically consider the social-emotional needs of students receiving special education services. Education team members can better meet student needs through family and community engagement and by using professional learning supports such as community liaisons, community based organizations, and other family support associations (e.g., parent-teacher association). Implementing culturally responsive and inclusive SEL requires overcoming complex social, cultural, and structural barriers. For students with disabilities, these challenges often involve the intersection of cultural norms, systemic inequities, educational limits, as well as implicit and explicit bias.

International research demonstrates that school-based SEL improves social behavior, emotional well-being, and academic performance (Greenberg, 2018). For students with disabilities, emerging evidence shows modest but meaningful gains in emotional regulation and social participation following SEL interventions (Sabella, 2021), with notable benefits for students with learning disabilities who often struggle with self-regulation (Johnson, Masser, & Spears, 2023). For those with emotional or behavioral disabilities, trauma-informed SEL approaches outperform punitive models, improving coping and resilience (Gray et al., 2024). Taken together, global data indicate that students with disabilities stand to benefit substantially from intentional, inclusive SEL. To advance equity, SEL must be designed using universal design principles, emphasize identity and well-being, and actively foster peer inclusion. Positioned as a core element of inclusive education, SEL can help reduce social-emotional and academic gaps worldwide.

## Definitions

Below we summarize key elements identified in the literature from three frameworks, Survey on Social and Emotional Skills (SSES, 2024); Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning-5 (CASEL-5, 2026); and tSEL, (2020), that can help educators deepen their understanding.

**Culturally Responsive Teaching.** Structuring learning around students' cultures, holding all students to high expectations, and celebrating the rich diversity each student brings to the classroom; the ability to interact with others in ways that validate and build on their cultural background. It is the skill and desire to be self-aware of one's own culture to learn from and relate respectfully with people from one's own culture and those of others. (National Education Association, n.d.).

**Disability.** This encompasses various meanings, depending on the context in which it is used. Disability can be defined through the lens of a medical, social, charity, or human rights model. The World Health Organization recognizes disability as a complex, dynamic, and multifaceted concept interpreted in relation to the environment. (World Health Organization, 2020). For the purpose of this module, disability is defined using the social model. People are often disabled by the systemic barriers, negative attitudes, and social exclusion experienced in society versus their

individual experiences with differing abilities in their physical, emotional, or cognitive life (Olkin, 2022).

**Inclusion.** Inclusive education ensures equal opportunities, participation, belonging, and achievement for all learners in their school community, regardless of their diversity or special educational needs (Kavkler, Košak Babuder, & Magajna, 2015). Inclusion supports improved learning and social outcomes across a diverse group of students (Görel et al., 2023).

**Inclusive mindset.** The willingness to embrace and respect the fact that everyone is unique, with different abilities, backgrounds, and learning preferences, involves vigilance to recognize bias (Bugaj et al., 2021).

**Social Emotional Learning (SEL).** The process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible, caring decisions (CASEL, n.d).

**Transformative Social-Emotional Learning (tSEL).** A form of SEL where the relationships between adults and young people facilitate critical examination of individual and contextual factors that contribute to inequalities and lead to collaborative solutions to improve personal, societal, and community well-being (CASEL, 2020).

### Barriers & Challenges

Research shows that students with disabilities benefit from social–emotional learning (SEL), yet they remain largely excluded from programming and research. Students with learning disabilities often face social isolation, low self-esteem, and emotional dysregulation; challenges SEL aims to address (Cavioni, 2024). When SEL addresses disability directly, it can support both emotional growth and academic inclusion by reducing labeling and stigma, providing supports for developing academic competency, encouraging healthy peer relationships, and teaching skills for effective work habits. However, this potential is mostly unrealized. Daley and McCarthy (2021) found that just 19 of 166 SEL studies meaningfully included students with disabilities, and even fewer reported outcomes by disability status. While current research shows small but positive effects for students with social–emotional needs, these gains depend on cultural relevance, contextual fit, and implementation quality (Hassani & Schwab, 2020). Furthermore, exclusion is more common at the intersection of disability and culture. Cipriano and colleagues (2023) found only 7.4% of 269 SEL studies included students with disabilities, with almost no studies examining how race and disability influence student success.

There is a lack of literature to guide educators in implementing SEL in a way that is culturally responsive, accepted, and safe (Simmons, 2021). Additionally, universal SEL programs often emphasize individual responsibility, urging students to demonstrate self-management or “grit” without acknowledging systemic injustice. As a result, this focus can unfairly shift the burden of adaptation to marginalized students, including those with disabilities, who may face discrimination. Consequently, supports may aim to change individual behavior (e.g., self-control) rather than build belonging, community knowledge, or inclusive rights. Thus, SEL may inadvertently reinforce inequity by measuring students against unsuitable norms.

In response, scholars argue that SEL should be culturally grounded and co-created through family and community engagement. For example, Cipriano and McCarthy (2023) suggest five design levers (i.e., community partnership, developer diversity, culturally responsive pedagogy, flexible curricula, and student voice) that align with tSEL's emphasis on equity, identity, belonging, and collective well-being. Additionally, Barnes and McCallops (2019) note that educators' cultural responsiveness is key; without training in cultural systems, students see SEL as imposed rather than authentic. Beyond these perspectives, communities worldwide challenge Western SEL models. For instance, Māori-informed frameworks in New Zealand, Indigenous SEL in the United States, and global-majority scholarship on decolonizing psychology demonstrate that SEL can be rebuilt around community values rather than focused on Western norms (Ruedas-Garcia & Tiwari, 2023).

Collectively, these movements affirm that SEL cannot be a one-size-fits-all framework. Instead, SEL must be intentionally adapted to sociopolitical realities and disability experiences, honoring community strengths and cultural knowledge. Only through co-construction with the communities it seeks to serve can SEL deliver on its promise of meaningful identity development, belonging, and emotional well-being for all learners.

### Evidence-Based Strategies and Practices

This module examines three well-established frameworks designed to support both students and the educators who serve them (see Table 1). Although these frameworks are used worldwide, many were developed in Western contexts influenced by individualistic norms and values. When they are replicated without adaptation, they can unintentionally impose cultural assumptions that do not align with local knowledge, identities, or community histories. When these frameworks are adapted rather than duplicated, they honor diverse cultural meaning systems and lived experiences, ensuring that SEL is shaped by community values rather than exported from another context. In doing so, they move beyond surface-level adoption to become tools that truly center equity, belonging, and the holistic well-being of students, particularly students with disabilities.

Although SEL can benefit all learners, the impact on students with disabilities depends not only on what is taught but also on how educators conceptualize disability, design learning environments, and build relationships with students and their families. Inclusive SEL must begin not with student-focused interventions, but with educators themselves. Educators are encouraged to first examine their own social-emotional competencies, perspectives, and biases before applying SEL to student practices. This shift acknowledges that adult beliefs and behaviors shape access to SEL just as strongly as curriculum choices. For example, educators who cultivate an inclusive mindset are better positioned to support students with disabilities' emotional and academic growth. In many global contexts where disability continues to be framed as a deficit, such a mindset directly challenges exclusionary expectations and enables educators to view students' identities, abilities, and learning pathways as valuable rather than problematic.

Table 1. Description of Social-Emotional Frameworks

| Framework           | Emphasis                                                         | Contribution                                             |
|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| OCED's SSSES Skills | Persistence, empathy, creativity, stress resistance, cooperation | Foundational skills applicable across ages and contexts. |

|            |                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                              |
|------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| CASEL Five | Core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making | Highlights traits linked to well-being and achievement across a range of countries from across the globe.    |
| tSEL       | Identity, agency, belonging, collaborative problem-solving, curiosity                                                  | Centers equity, cultural identity, and community co-creation to support different contexts and demographics. |

### Survey on Social and Emotional Skills

The OECD's SSES (2024) provides foundational insights into the global SEL landscape and is the largest international assessment of students' social-emotional competencies. OCED's SSES measures skills across five categories: task performance, emotional regulation, engaging with others, open-mindedness, and collaboration, capturing malleable traits such as persistence, optimism, curiosity, and empathy that influence life outcomes (Kankaraš & Suarez-Alvarez, 2019). Findings show that these skills are strongly associated with students' well-being, academic achievement, healthy behaviors, and ambitions for future education and careers (OECD, 2024). OCED's SSES also surfaces global inequities: skills decline with age, differ by gender, girls report higher empathy but lower well-being, and vary significantly by socioeconomic status (OECD, 2024). These disparities affirm that SEL must be adapted to developmental and cultural contexts rather than applied uniformly.

### CASEL Five

CASEL's five competencies include: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, offering a globally applicable framework for cultivating social-emotional learning (CASEL, 2020). When considered in an international context, these competencies hold particular importance for students with disabilities who commonly experience heightened risks of social exclusion, stigma, and emotional regulation challenges across educational systems worldwide (Johnson, Masser, & Spears, 2023; Sabella, 2021).

Culturally responsive SEL further expands this perspective by recognizing that social and emotional expression is shaped by cultural norms, histories, and lived experiences, highlighting that effective SEL requires educators to understand and validate students' cultural backgrounds, including how they communicate, cooperate, and regulate emotions. This principle is especially critical for students with disabilities, whose behaviors and ways of interacting are often misinterpreted through biased cultural lenses. Without this awareness, SEL risks reinforcing marginalization instead of promoting authentic belonging, emphasizing that SEL must extend beyond classroom strategies to include meaningful family and community engagement. For students with disabilities, family perspectives often reflect a long history of advocacy in the face of stigma, limited resources, or exclusion; honoring these experiences deepens SEL's relevance and ensures that identity development is supported both in school and at home.

Finally, while disability-inclusive SEL often starts with personal commitment, it cannot endure without collective responsibility. Instead, professional collaboration and ongoing learning are needed to develop and maintain bias-aware, culturally grounded SEL practices across school systems. This aligns with international research demonstrating that SEL yields stronger academic and emotional outcomes when embedded within inclusive school cultures rather than delivered

as isolated lessons (Learning Policy Institute, 2018). When educators collectively prioritize identity, agency, belonging, and emotional safety, SEL becomes transformative rather than corrective. In this way, SEL supports not only the personal development of students with disabilities but also their right to equitable, culturally grounded, and meaningful participation in school communities worldwide.

### **tSEL**

Jagers and colleagues (2019) argue that tSEL advances equity by leveraging students' cultural assets and supporting the well-being of all learners, especially those from disenfranchised or under-resourced communities. Unlike traditional approaches that focus primarily on individual well-being, tSEL emphasizes both personal and collective thriving. It acknowledges what earlier SEL research often overlooked; power structures, cultures, identities, social class, histories, and shared lived experiences shape opportunities and outcomes.

Moving toward equity-centered SEL requires more than surface-level reforms or a single professional development session. It demands a personal and collective commitment to equity, along with a school culture that actively embodies SEL principles. Such work takes time, vulnerability, and a sustained resolve to ensure that students gain the skills they need to succeed in a culturally and linguistically diverse society (Sheffield, 2022). When schools invest in this ongoing equity work, they not only promote inclusivity and safety (Taylor et al., 2017) but also yield meaningful academic benefits. Research demonstrates improvements in critical thinking (Jagers et al., 2019), executive functioning (Immordino-Yang et al., 2019), student engagement, and overall academic performance (CASEL, 2020). These gains are most impactful when SEL approaches reflect the unique cultural and contextual needs of the students they serve (CASEL, 2020), reinforcing that one-size-fits-all models inadequately support diverse learners (Wigelsworth et al., 2016).

To address these shortcomings, CASEL promotes tSEL as an equity-centered approach that strengthens collaboration among schools, families, and communities. tSEL expands on traditional SEL by integrating cultural responsiveness and prioritizing fairness, inclusion, and shared responsibility. CASEL identifies three forms of SEL: Personally Responsible SEL (focused on self-management), Participatory SEL (focused on relationships and community), and tSEL (which adds civic engagement and social justice). Although most programs emphasize the first two, current research and partnerships aim to elevate transformative practices.

Central to tSEL is the idea that students and adults co-learn through meaningful relationships and critical reflection on inequities. This approach cultivates five core competencies—identity, agency, belonging, collaborative problem-solving, and curiosity—which together nurture both individual development and societal well-being. In practical terms, tSEL includes culturally responsive instruction, youth-guided learning, and authentic opportunities for students to use their voices to advance social change. It also relies on strong partnerships across families, schools, and communities, as well as ongoing professional learning that supports educator well-being and collaboration with students. Ultimately, tSEL reframes education as a collaborative, justice-driven process that empowers learners, fosters inclusive communities, and promotes equity both within and beyond the classroom.

### **Discussion**

Social, emotional, and behavioral inclusive practices begin with the educator. Educators can strengthen students with disabilities' social, emotional, and behavioral well-being by first

developing their own capacity for inclusive practice. Meaningful implementation begins with adults examining their own beliefs, experiences, and skills. Educators are called to build skills in perspective-taking, cultural responsiveness, and identifying implicit and explicit biases, while engaging families and communities as partners in the learning process. When educators invest in their own growth, they are better positioned to create learning environments that validate student identities, foster belonging, and actively remove barriers to participation.

The CASEL 5 emphasizes core competencies while the OCED's SSES highlights skills linked to long-term academic and well-being outcomes. Finally, tSEL builds on these by centering equity and elevating students' cultural identities, promoting belonging, agency, and collaborative problem-solving; critical areas for students with disabilities who may experience marginalization.

These frameworks are most effective when paired with intentional classroom practices. Educators are encouraged to reflect on how their cultural lens shapes expectations for student behavior and ability, and to examine whose cultural values are represented or overlooked within learning environments. Building ongoing partnerships with families and communities further reinforces student well-being and strengthens support systems. Together, these strategies create inclusive SEL practices that nurture identity, promote equitable learning opportunities, and support the academic, social, and emotional growth of students with disabilities.

### **Conclusion**

Across global contexts, social-emotional learning holds significant promise for advancing equity, well-being, and academic opportunity, particularly for students with disabilities (Jez, 2020). Yet this promise remains largely unrealized when SEL frameworks are implemented without attention to culture, identity, and systemic barriers. As the research demonstrates, students with disabilities benefit not simply from learning SEL skills, but from learning them within environments that honor their lived experiences, affirm their identities, and elevate their voices. While the OCED's SSES, CASEL 5, and tSEL each offer valuable guidance, their impact depends on how thoughtfully they are adapted to local cultural norms and disability experiences.

Therefore, successfully implementing inclusive SEL requires more than curriculum adoption; it requires transformation in educator mindset and practice. Educators must lead this work by building their own capacity for cultural responsiveness, examining bias, and collaborating with families and communities. When schools view SEL as a shared, equity-centered practice rather than a behavior support tool, they shift from expecting students to "fit in" to redesigning learning spaces that foster belonging. In doing so, SEL becomes not a supplemental program, but a foundational approach to inclusive education. Ultimately, SEL should be co-created with families and communities, grounded in cultural responsiveness and disability justice, and designed for all ng students to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. By aligning SEL efforts with principles of identity, agency, and collective well-being, educators can ensure that all learners, in every context, are empowered to learn, connect, and contribute to their communities.

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