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Journal

Social and Emotional Learning: Research, Practice, and Policy, 8

ISSN

27732339

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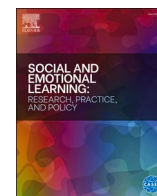
Publication Date

2026-12-01

DOI

10.1016/j.sel.2026.100217

Peer reviewed



Linking teacher mindsets to equity-oriented SEL integration: The role of teachers' culturally relevant skills

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Social emotional learning
Culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies
Equity
Skills
Mindsets
Academic integration

ABSTRACT

Scholars have called for the field of SEL to become more explicitly equity-oriented and culturally relevant, and for equity-oriented SEL to be integrated into academics. Teachers' favorable mindsets are foundational to these goals. However, it is not enough for teachers to simply *believe* in culturally relevant approaches to SEL; they must also possess *skills* to integrate culturally relevant SEL into instruction. Currently, the types of skills needed remain unclear in the literature. Among a sample of California teachers ($N = 366$), we used parallel mediation modeling to understand general SEL skills and culturally relevant skills as mediators in the relationship between culturally relevant mindsets and the integration of equity-oriented SEL into academics. Exploratory analyses indicated that teachers' culturally relevant skills and general SEL skills fully mediated the relationship. Furthermore, culturally relevant skills had a stronger mediating effect than general SEL skills in linking teachers' culturally relevant mindsets to SEL academic integration. These findings highlight the need for specific training on culturally relevant skills to bolster teachers' mindsets and deliver inclusive, equitable SEL across academic subjects.

Impact statement

This paper highlights that linking culturally relevant mindsets to the integration of equity-oriented SEL into academics necessitates diverse skills. Culturally relevant and general SEL skills can ensure SEL is accessible throughout the day. Policymakers should invest in teacher mindsets through professional learning and supports to strengthen skills for SEL implementation.

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has been popularized as “the process through which children and adults understand and apply emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (Collaborative for Academic, Social, & Emotional Learning, 2019). Promoting students' social emotional competence through SEL can improve opportunities for academic learning (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Learning, after all, is fundamentally a social and emotional phenomenon (Darling-Hammond et al., 2024). Substantial research supports that the implementation of SEL programs generates positive academic outcomes for students, including academic competence, grades, and achievement test scores in reading, mathematics, and

science (Corcoran et al., 2018; Mahoney et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2017).

The vast majority of SEL intervention research has been conducted on student SEL *programs* (i.e., curricula or other sequenced and explicit free-standing lessons to facilitate student SEL). However, the literature points to limitations of program-based approaches to SEL, where instruction of SEL is not well integrated into daily classroom learning, and many teachers report feeling that it is an “add-on” to curriculum (Sugishita, 2019). Furthermore, a recent study found that SEL programs seldom attend to the role of race and racism, thus resulting in limited evidence of SEL program effectiveness for students from racially minoritized backgrounds (Jones et al., 2025). For these reasons, we must build upon the successes of SEL to date with an emboldened approach to SEL for the future.

Joining calls for substantive engagement with racism in SEL interventions (e.g., Jagers et al., 2019), there are calls for a more system-oriented approach to SEL implementation (Mahoney et al., 2021). Although less intensively studied than *programs*, SEL can take several alternative forms, including *schoolwide reforms*, the promotion of *adult SEL*, and *academic integration* (Domitrovich et al., 2017). The

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integration of SEL into academics provides students with the opportunity to learn and apply SEL skills in the classroom and life (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2014). In fact, a recent survey found that a majority (54%) of educators report integrating SEL into academic content to support students' academic success (Skoog-Hoffman et al., 2024). In describing a vision for academic integration, Rimm-Kaufman et al. (2025) ask, "What if, before every academic lesson, teachers asked themselves, 'What social and emotional skills, knowledge, and attitudes do students need to succeed in this lesson?'" (p.245). This approach is distinct from efforts to implement an SEL program; academic integration asks educators to use particular skills to do something differently in their classrooms.

We assert that these interrelated calls to embolden SEL are connected. If the goal of integrating SEL into academics is to support learning for all students, SEL integration into academics needs to be culturally-relevant and equity-oriented, which also requires specific mindsets and skills from educators. Yet, there are no known studies exploring the relationship between the culturally relevant mindsets (i.e., the attitudes, motivations, and beliefs required for culturally relevant teaching) of educators and their success with SEL integration into academics. Culturally relevant SEL includes using cultural experiences and the perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching more effectively (Gay, 2010; Legette et al., 2021; Meland & Brion-Meisels, 2024). Equity-oriented SEL includes every student receiving what they need for thriving (Jagers et al., 2019). It is increasingly understood that culturally relevant pedagogies, necessary for the equitable impact of integrating SEL into academics, requires "an increased focus and attention on equitable environments and adult development, acknowledging that these contextual factors play a key role in how SEL is delivered and experienced by students" (Meland & Brion-Meisels, 2024; p. 3). When equity-oriented SEL, using culturally relevant and sustaining practices, is well integrated into academics, it can reach all students in all parts of their day, and especially for students of color, help to promote more positive social, emotional, and academic development (Byrd, 2016; Larson et al., 2018). To yield such benefits for all students, teachers must believe in culturally relevant teaching and see its value (Ebersole et al., 2016). Yet, we posit that it is not enough for educators to simply *believe* in culturally relevant approaches to SEL; they must also possess specific *skills* to integrate culturally relevant SEL into instruction. However, the types of skills needed are unclear in the literature. Thus, in an exploratory analysis, we investigate and compare *general* SEL skills and *culturally relevant* skills as mediators between culturally relevant mindsets and SEL academic integration.

Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Practices

At the core of adopting culturally relevant and sustaining practices is a requisite shift in teacher mindsets, where educators work to move from asking what is wrong with students of color to what is *right*—and to "bring an appreciation of their students' assets to their work" (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 74). Originally conceptualized from research on "excellent teachers of African American students" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 159) culturally relevant pedagogy encompasses: academic success (i.e., literacy, numeracy, technological, social, political skills; p. 160); cultural competence (i.e., utilizing culture to support learning); and critical consciousness (i.e., skills to critique cultural norms and values that maintain inequities). Subsequent iterations of this approach have included culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010, 2015), that seeks to amplify the experiences and perspectives of different ethnic and racial identity groups to improve academic instruction, as well as culturally sustaining pedagogies, which "support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence" (Paris, 2012). Importantly, research has found that these approaches have a positive impact on students' academic learning, achievement, and engagement (Wah & Nasri, 2019), as well as ethnic-racial identity

development (Byrd, 2016), critical thinking (Abdulrahim & Orosco, 2020), identity affirmation and belonging (Zeng et al., 2025). Additionally, a systematic review found that culturally relevant and responsive education was tied to increases in student motivation, confidence, and interest in content (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). In the present study, we combine culturally relevant and sustaining practices (henceforth: CRSPs) to uphold the spirit and tradition of these overlapping yet distinct approaches that emphasize critical and asset based ways of understanding, teaching, supporting, and interacting with students.

Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Practices and Social and Emotional Learning

Scholars have proposed leveraging an interdisciplinary lens that integrates culturally relevant and culturally sustaining practices within SEL delivery. For example, Mahfouz and Anthony-Stevens (2020) argue that educators must approach SEL as a "cultured practice" (p. 61) and be prepared to tailor SEL delivery to the cultural norms of local communities, specific races/ethnicities, and the social/political climate (p. 65). Several studies have investigated the benefits of integrating CRSPs within SEL programming. A 2024 meta analysis of "culturally responsive SEL" found that the implementation of the culturally responsive SEL promoted students' social emotional competencies ($g = .39$), positive racial identity ($g = .44$), academic achievement ($g = .90$) and reduced negative affect ($g = .25$) (Lim et al., 2024). In a study of 209 Black youth ages 12–18, Redmond et al. (2025) examined the role of culturally responsive SEL practices on SEL-related outcomes. They found that these practices (e.g., considering cultural needs, encouragement to share culture or backgrounds) positively predicted generalized sense of purpose (e.g., understanding what gives life meaning; $\beta = 0.13$, $p < .001$) as well as resilience (e.g., one's ability to bounce back from stress; $\beta = 0.09$, $p < .001$). Barnes and McCallops (2019) examined educator beliefs around use of CRSPs in SEL implementation. Focus group participants emphasized that educators need a culturally responsive school environment to support the development of their own CRSPs, and highlighted practices such as reflecting on biases as important SEL skills. Research has found that when CRSPs are integrated with SEL, those programs showed higher effect sizes compared to universal programs that were not tailored (Lim et al., 2024). The tenets of CRSPs— which include validating students' cultural identities and lived experiences—strengthen SEL competencies, which are foundational for students to critically analyze social inequities and act toward change (Barnes & McCallops, 2019; Lim et al., 2024). In this way, CRSPs do more than support academic success—they enable students to recognize systemic oppression, question inequitable practices, and engage in transformative action within their schools and communities offering a pathway for fostering individual growth and structural change in educational settings.

Importantly, accumulating research indicates that CRSPs as part of SEL strategies are more than an instructional strategy—it is a pathway to developing students' critical consciousness (i.e., sociopolitical consciousness to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities; Ladson-Billings, 1995) by integrating social, emotional, and cultural awareness. For example, Caingcoy (2023) and Hernandez (2022) demonstrate when teachers center students' cultural backgrounds and lived experiences, this in turn strengthens students' awareness, student-teacher relationships, and belonging, which are foundational for developing SEL skills and skills to examine inequities in schools and communities. To effectively support students' critical consciousness, Kondo (2022) suggests that teacher education models equip educators with tools to interrogate power, privilege, and systemic injustices while fostering emotional safety for students. Supporting these practices for teachers supports their enactment of CRSPs in classrooms to not only cultivate culturally relevant SEL skills, but validate students' diverse emotions and voices, thus, enabling

them to engage critically with SEL learning and making connections to real life (Tanase, 2022). However, despite the growing body of evidence that suggests the effectiveness of these CRSPs for more equitable outcomes, more work is needed to understand how to implement such approaches well to achieve the aforementioned results. Although the assumption is that SEL benefits all students, shifting SEL practice towards equity requires resisting deficit perspectives which seek to “fix” students, developing educators capacity for implementation and equity, and prioritizing people over programs (Shapiro et al., *In Press*). Specified capacities include the mindsets and skills needed to make such changes (see Shapiro et al., *In Press*) for more information), and below we describe their role in supporting the integration of SEL into academics.

The culturally relevant mindsets needed to do something differently

Mindsets, also known as beliefs, attitudes or values, are abstract and/or concrete views a person holds about their own abilities and intelligence and precede behaviors such as decision making (Dweck, 2008; James, 1890). Rather than an approach or method (Kelly-McHale, 2019), CRSPs have been described as “a mindset that requires careful thought in regards to content, context, and instruction” (McKoy & Lind, 2016; p. 97). Arguably, teachers’ culturally relevant mindsets begin with teachers being willing to learn about their students’ cultural backgrounds (Tanase, 2020). To continue to cultivate culturally relevant mindsets requires critical self-reflection and cultural consciousness, where teachers examine their beliefs and instructional practices related to their valuing of diversity in their classroom (González-Carriedo et al., 2024). Civitillo et al. (2019) demonstrated that teachers’ with more positive culturally relevant mindsets reported greater self-reflection on their own teaching practices. Notably, similar to culturally relevant mindsets, intentional integration of SEL into academic outcomes also requires teachers to reflect on their teaching and learning (Taylor & Lein, 2023). Mindsets, as documented in the literature, are critical indicators of teachers’ perceptions and judgements of students, culture, and learning, which inevitably influence their teaching practices (Brckett et al., 2012; Yu et al., 2022).

Teachers typically report seeing the value in culturally relevant teaching and believe they are important (Kotluk & Kocakaya, 2018). However, research has suggested incongruences in teachers’ mindsets and subsequent behaviors (Civitillo et al., 2019). Some studies have found that although teachers report positive culturally relevant mindsets through surveys, observational assessments suggest low use of culturally relevant teaching (Debnam et al., 2015; Guerra & Wubben, 2017). Intention without action is not enough (Gay, 2018). In fact, some argue that rather than accessing our own cognitions, we rely on contextual cues to rationalize behavior after the fact, making self-reported mindsets an unreliable indicator of actual practice (Markowitz & Bouffard, 2022). Although studies find that teachers express the importance of equity-oriented attitudes and/or endorse culturally relevant mindset, yet engage in behaviors that do not align with these values. Accordingly, there may be a disconnect between reported beliefs and enacted practices (Michalec & Wilson, 2022; Ura et al., 2025). Thus, it may be important to focus on observable behaviors, such as educators’ skills for validating students’ cultural identities, facilitating inclusive dialogue, and integrating social-emotional learning strategies—rather than self-reported mindsets, to accurately assess the implementation of culturally responsive and equity-oriented SEL in classrooms. This specialized set of *skills* may be required to enable teachers to challenge the status quo which creates barriers to CRSPs (Banks, 2011; Gay, 2018; Howard, 2010) and the integration of SEL into academics (Airin & Md Sharif, 2025).

The skills needed to do something differently

Research on the breadth of teaching skills required to support student learning is vast and spans beyond those skills solely for academic

instruction (Kim et al., 2019). Skills most beneficial for enhancing teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes can include: open communication, cultural sensitivity, leadership skills, critical thinking skills, and organizational skills (Paolini, 2015). To intentionally support the integration of SEL into academics – and align with calls in the field for SEL to be more culturally relevant – teachers need multiple specialized skills, which we argue are: culturally relevant skills *and* SEL skills. These skills may help support the mindsets that provide a foundation for the integration of SEL into academics, and can support long term outcomes such as critical consciousness and critical action among youth.

Recent research emphasizes equity-oriented SEL not only supports emotional and academic development but also fosters critical action among youth. Nash et al. (2024) and Lozada et al. (2025) show that when students engage in youth participatory action research (YPAR), SEL skills like self-awareness, emotion regulation, and relationship-building intersect with sociopolitical awareness, which enables youth to not only identify injustices within their communities, but equips them with the knowledge to take action. By affirming students’ lived experiences, CRSPs can enhance SEL competencies, thus creating a sense of agency, particularly among Black youth, to transform social inequities (Redmond et al., 2025). Teachers’ skills in SEL and CRSPs may effectively support integration of SEL in classrooms which can cultivate students’ critical consciousness and knowledge of social change, thereby turning emotional awareness and cultural affirmation into tangible, transformative action.

Culturally relevant skills

Consistent in the literature are the skills, or behaviors, required to support culturally relevant teaching and student outcomes. Importantly, achieving the goals of culturally relevant and sustaining practices involves teachers developing skills that are “academic as well as social, political, moral, personal, intra-cultural and intercultural, national and international” (Gay, 2015). In practice, teachers’ culturally relevant skills include: a) infusing multicultural perspectives into curriculum; b) modeling a variety of instructional and assessment strategies; and c) creating classroom environments where students can express themselves without fear (Prater & Devereaux, 2009). These skills, grounded in asset-based approaches, dynamic views of culture, and the centering student voice (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2014; Gay, 2010; Stein et al., 2024) are pivotal for “bringing out the best” in students (Lipman, 1995; p. 204). Moreover, these skills stress the importance of teacher empathy, the ability to reflect on their cultural beliefs and own cultural backgrounds, and knowledge of other cultures (Rychly & Graves, 2012). Many teachers, despite holding positive attitudes towards culturally relevant teaching, report limited skills which subsequently discourage them from implementing such practices in their classrooms (Min et al., 2022). For teachers who are in fact able to acquire such skills, there are lasting benefits for students. Research finds that teachers’ skills surrounding CRSPs promote students’ interest in school and belonging (Byrd, 2016), reading achievement (Cantrell et al., 2023), and graduation and college-going rates (Howard & Terry Sr, 2011). However, a significant barrier to teachers’ utilization of these skills lies in their beliefs that the infusion of culture is incompatible with academic learning, particularly in subjects such as math and science (Min et al., 2022). For culturally relevant teaching to support student outcomes such as SEL skills, teachers must use their specialized skill set to integrate this learning into all aspects of student learning (Lim et al., 2024).

SEL Skills

The very basis of SEL lies in its foundation of a particular set of social and emotional skills that students *and* adults must acquire for healthy development (Choquette et al. 2024). Arguably, for teachers to

effectively teach these skills to students, they must first possess these skills themselves (Brackett, 2019; Ibarra, 2022), but many report a lack of knowledge and confidence (Todd et al., 2022). Research finds that the skills that teachers may use to facilitate SEL in classrooms includes setting a positive classroom tone (i.e., providing opportunity, assistance and encouragement), suggesting solutions when navigating conflict between students, and building on children's responses with questions or comments (i.e., extension; Ng & Bull, 2018). It has been acknowledged that there is a learning curve that teachers may experience when developing these skills, however these practices empower teachers to incorporate SEL into every social or academic situation a student will encounter (Todd et al., 2022). Teachers' SEL skills enable them to foster SEL through explicit and implicit instruction, build environments that support SEL instructions, and form multi-shareholder partnerships to holistically support student development (Buchanan et al., 2009).

Theoretical framework

In the current study, we utilize Social Cognitive Theory (SCT; Bandura, 1989) to understand teachers' skills (i.e., CRSPs, SEL) as mediators in the relationship between culturally relevant mindsets and academic integration of SEL. SCT emphasizes a dynamic interaction between one's environments, thoughts, and behaviors. In fact, SCT views this process as reciprocal, where individuals and their environments mutually influence each other (Ignacio, 2024). According to SCT, a key indicator of positive school outcomes is teachers' beliefs in their own efforts to forge change (Bandura, 1997, Bandura, 2001), as teachers' "actions are based more on what they believe than what is objectively true" (Bandura, 1997, p. 2). Teachers's beliefs directly shape their ability to implement SEL programs in their classrooms (Ignacio, 2024). Moreover, teachers enter their classrooms within a framework of particular mindsets which can directly or indirectly affect their teaching methods and student outcomes (Soleas & Hong, 2020). Many argue that students' mastery of skills is dependent on the relevance of the content to their own lives (Payton et al., 2000). We posit that the classroom environments teachers create, such as those which support the integration of equity-oriented SEL into academics, must be in alignment with the cultural backgrounds of their students and their own mindsets surrounding culturally relevant teaching. Based on SCT, this process requires teachers believe this is important and possess a particular set of skills, however, in the literature it remains unclear what exactly those skills are to enact such change.

In addition to SCT, we draw from transformative social and emotional learning (tSEL; Jagers et al., 2019; Jagers et al., 2021), which appropriately complicates popularized approaches to SEL by explicitly focusing on issues of power, privilege, and social justice. tSEL aims to empower educators to "reflect, cultivate, and leverage cultural assets" to promote learning and well-being. Specifically, the architects of the framework argue that educators– and the field of SEL broadly– must focus on cultivating the "knowledge, attitudes, and skills required for critical examination and collaborative action to address root causes of inequities" (p. 163). Taken together, both theories provide the foundational basis of our study which looks to understand both the mindsets and skills needed for equity-oriented SEL academic integration.

The current study

Academic integration of equity-oriented SEL is critical to promote the healthy development of students across cultural backgrounds, and teachers are critical to this process. Research suggests that mindsets matter, but are they enough to support intentional integration of SEL into academics? As mindsets must precede action, we employed an exploratory analysis of teachers' diverse skills as mediators. Employing a general-specific framework (Jones et al., 2019), which organizes contributors to outcomes into general and problem-specific components, we investigated teachers' use of culturally relevant skills and general

SEL skills. First, we tested the direct relationship between culturally relevant mindsets and academic integration. Next, we assessed whether culturally relevant skills and general SEL skills mediate the association between culturally relevant mindsets and SEL academic integration. Finally, we compared the magnitude of the mediators to determine which is most effective for supporting SEL academic integration. Identifying the skills necessary to leverage teachers' culturally relevant mindsets into the integration of SEL into academics is critical to inform pre-service education, in-service training, and developing other supports for teachers.

Methods

Participants & procedures

We employed a secondary analysis of survey data collected from teachers enrolled in Social and Emotional Learning Foundations (henceforth: SEL Foundations) through University of California, Berkeley in the Spring of 2024. SEL Foundations is a 12-week, graduate level course designed to provide teachers with foundational knowledge on classroom-based social and emotional learning. To learn more about the course objectives, content, and assignments, we invite readers to see (Duane et al., 2025).

At the start of instruction in February 2024, course participants completed an initial reflection assignment (i.e., pre-course survey), which was primarily designed to provide an opportunity for learner reflection, inform instruction during the course, and catalyze course improvements. Students were asked whether they consented for their responses to be used, secondarily, for research purposes, in accordance with a protocol approved by the University of California, Berkeley Institutional Review Board. Similarly, students completed a second reflection (i.e., post-course survey) during the last week of instruction in April 2024. All students were assigned the online surveys as part of their course participation. A total of 699 students completed the pre-course survey, and 418 completed the post-course survey. The analytic sample consists of participants (N = 366) who completed both pre-and-post course surveys and consented to research. Participants in the study identified as mostly cisgender, White (57.7%) females (87.1%). Most participants were general education teachers (62.3%) and were experienced working in education (M=10.7 years, range = 1–34 years).

Table 1
Study demographic characteristics.

	Frequency (N)	Percent (%)
Gender		
Female	317	87.1
Male	47	10.4
Non-binary	4	1.1
Other	2	.5
Prefer not to answer	9	2.5
Race		
American Indian/Native Alaskan	8	2.2
Asian/Asian American	29	8
Black/African American	11	3.0
Hispanic/Latinx	103	28.3
Middle Eastern/North African/Arab American	3	.8
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	2	.5
Non-Hispanic white/European American	210	57.7
Other	15	4.1
Prefer not to answer	16	4.4
Grade Level		
Pk/Tk	63	17.3
K–2nd	119	32.6
3rd–5th	139	38.1
6th–8th	108	29.6
9th–12th	86	23.6

Note. Some variable percentages exceed 100% due to a 'select all that apply' response format.

Table 1 includes study demographic characteristics.

Measures

The pre-and post-course surveys included selected items adapted from the Berkeley Assessment of Social and Emotional Learning - Teacher Voice (BASEL-TV; Shapiro et al., 2022). Researchers have previously used BASEL items to assess educators’ and educational leaders’ perceptions and self-reported actions in the context of teacher PD (Duane et al., 2025) and the implementation of systemic SEL (Metzger et al., 2026). The majority of BASEL survey items use response options on a 4-point Likert scale: 4 = NO! definitely not true, 3 = no mostly not true, 2 = yes mostly true, 1 = YES! definitely true. This scaling technique has been validated and used in multiple studies over the past 40 years (Social Development Research Group, 2005-2019). Items were reverse coded where higher reports indicated higher endorsement. Scale scores were derived from the mean of scale items for culturally relevant mindsets, culturally relevant skills, SEL skills, and SEL academic integration. The CRSP items were developed using the Ladson-Billings CRP framework: “I am able to use my students’ cultural background to help make learning meaningful” (cultural competence); “I am able to examine curricula to determine whether they reinforce negative stereotypes,” and “I consider the impact of race and racism on experiences in school” (critical consciousness); and “drawing on existing literature of CRSPs that encourages CRSP student self-report surveys to “direct[ly] focus on race and culture in the classroom” (Byrd, 2016, p. 6): “I consider how bias may shape my interpretations of behavior.”.

Demographic control variables

We examined teachers’ self-reported demographic characteristics including gender and race. Gender was assessed with the question, “Are you...” Response options included: A woman, A man, Non-binary, genderfluid or genderqueer, Other (write-in), or Prefer not to answer. Each response option was then transformed into a dichotomous variable (0 = not selected, 1 = selected). Race was assessed by asking, “How do you best describe your race and ethnicity?” Response options included: American Indian/ Native Alaskan, Asian/Asian American, Black/African American, Middle Eastern/North African/Arab American, Non-Hispanic white/European American, Hispanic/Latinx, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Other, and Prefer not to answer. Each response option was then transformed into a dichotomous variable (0 = not selected, 1 = selected). In our analyses, female gender and White race were included as control variables because they were highly represented in the sample and were not primary variables of interest in the present study.

Culturally relevant mindsets

Culturally relevant mindsets were assessed with two items: “I consider how bias may shape my interpretations of behavior,” and “I consider the impact of race and racism on experiences in school.”

Skills

To assess teachers’ skills, we examined two distinct skill sets. Culturally relevant skills were assessed with two items: “I am able to examine curricula to determine whether they reinforce negative stereotypes,” and “I am able to use my students’ cultural background to help make learning meaningful.” General SEL skills were assessed with two items: “I model SEL skills for students every day” and “I create opportunities for students to practice SEL skills every day.”

Academic integration

Academic integration was assessed with two items: “I have confidence that I can integrate SEL into academics” and “I integrate SEL practices in

daily activities and routines.”

Data analysis

Study analyses were conducted using SPSS version 29.0.2.0. We began by exploring the correlational relationships between the demographic covariates, culturally relevant mindsets, teachers’ skills (i.e., general SEL, culturally relevant), and academic integration of SEL. To address our research aim, we employed a parallel mediation analysis using the Hayes (2012) PROCESS macro. Using PROCESS Model 4, we tested the indirect effects of culturally relevant mindsets on teachers’ academic integration of SEL through general SEL skills and culturally relevant skills, controlling for gender and race. The PROCESS macro generates direct effects in addition to bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals (CI; 10000) for the indirect effects.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Table 2 includes correlations, means, and standard deviations of relevant study variables. Findings indicated that women reported increased general SEL skills ($r = .11$). Culturally relevant mindsets were significantly related to greater culturally relevant skills ($r = .29$), general SEL skills ($r = .12$), and academic integration ($r = .17$). Culturally relevant skills were positively correlated with general SEL skills ($r = .45$), and both types of skills were significantly correlated with academic integration ($r_s = .52, .59$, culturally relevant skills and general SEL skills respectively).

Parallel mediation analysis

In this exploratory analysis, we ran a parallel mediation model. The parallel mediation indicated full mediation, in that the association between teachers’ culturally relevant mindsets and academic integration of SEL was fully explained by their use of culturally relevant skills and general SEL skills. Fig. 1 illustrates that after controlling for gender and race, culturally relevant mindsets predicted increased culturally relevant skills ($a_1 = .29$, 95% CI .19, .39) and general SEL skills ($a_2 = .13$, 95% CI .03, .24). In turn, culturally relevant skills ($b_1 = .31$, 95% CI .22, .40) and general SEL skills ($b_2 = .43$, 95% CI .35, .52) were associated with increased academic integration of SEL. While the direct effect of culturally relevant mindsets did not significantly predict academic integration ($c = .02$, 95% CI $-.06, .09$), there was a significant indirect effect through culturally relevant skills ($a_1b_1 = .09$, 95% CI .06, .14) and general SEL skills ($a_2b_2 = .06$, 95% CI .01, .11). These findings indicate that the association between culturally relevant mindsets and academic integration is only present when teachers possess skills, and stronger when they have culturally relevant skills compared to general SEL skills.

Table 2
Correlations, means, and standard deviations among study variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Gender (female)	-					
2. Race (White)	.05	-				
3. Culturally Relevant Mindsets (T1)	-.08	.00	-			
4. Culturally Relevant Skills (T1)	.12	-.07	.29**	-		
5. General SEL Skills (T1)	.11	-.09	.12*	.45**	-	
6. Academic Integration (T2)	.03	-.03	.17*	.52**	.59**	-
Mean	-	-	3.25	3.45	3.49	3.54
SD	-	-	.48	.48	.48	.46

Note. *p < .05; ** p.01.

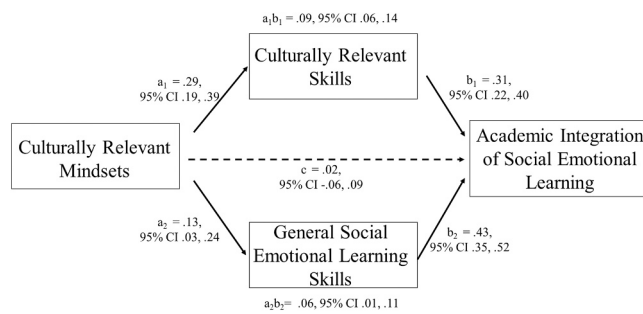


Fig. 1. Parallel Mediation Effects. *Note.* Solid line indicates significant effects. Dashed line indicates nonsignificant effect.

Discussion

While SEL programs have documented benefits for the academic performance of students, it is clear that innovation is needed to deliver SEL in ways that are equitable for students across diverse backgrounds. Among a sample of California in-service teachers, we found that although culturally relevant mindsets are important, they did not significantly predict teachers' academic integration of SEL. Instead, this relationship was fully mediated by teachers' skills. Specifically, we found that while culturally relevant skills and general SEL skills were each significant mediators, it was culturally relevant skills that more strongly explained the relationship between culturally relevant mindsets and academic integration. The findings from this exploratory study help to ensure that the benefits of SEL are equitably accessible to all students—particularly those from historically marginalized backgrounds—throughout all aspects of their day.

As we consider how to advance collective efforts towards integrating SEL and academics, we must consider the similar barriers teachers may face with infusing equity through CRSPs. SEL that is both integrated into academic learning and the lives of students must begin with changes in mindsets and practices that center students' personal experiences and cultural backgrounds (Schwartz et al., 2023). This process not only involves integration with core academic content, but development through teachers practices and pedagogies, and project-based learning (CASEL, 2012). Despite the long history of SEL in relation to promoting the academic, social, and well-being of students (Mahoney et al., 2018), efforts to fully support academic integration remain elusive. Although a recent report suggests that compared to math teachers, English and Language Arts (ELA) teachers are more likely to integrate SEL into their curriculum, fewer than 20% of elementary, middle, and high school teachers felt supported in integrating SEL into academic instruction and curriculum (Skoog-Hoffman et al., 2024). SEL is best understood as promoted through programs. While this yields significant gains for student outcomes, this is often treated as stand alone lessons or becomes one more task that teachers must incorporate into their day, rather than a seamless part of the school's culture and climate (Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018). Much like CRSPs, SEL, although beneficial for students, has been pushed to the margins of learning, often deemed only suitable for ELA. In fact, studies have found that science and math are often viewed as incompatible with SEL (Ingram et al., 2021), as these are viewed as "factual subjects" (Ee & Cheng, 2013). This similarly remains a challenge facing CRSPs, where its teachings have been described as "sporadic and underwhelming" (Neri et al., 2019). Equity-oriented SEL that leverages CRSPs can honor students' backgrounds throughout all aspects of the day and ensure learning of SEL and other academic content is more relevant to students. We examined whether advancing towards equitable integration of SEL begins with teachers possessing culturally relevant mindsets, which are then enabled by their various skillsets. Our results illustrate the need for ongoing training to help teachers move from believing CRSPs matter to leveraging synergies between SEL, CRSPs, and academic learning to address students' needs.

Mindsets matter, but more may be needed

Our findings suggest that while teachers' may in fact have culturally relevant mindsets, indicated by a mean score of 3.25 (range= 2–4), this may be insufficient to support the integration of SEL into academic learning. This does not negate the importance of teachers possessing these mindsets. Blazar (2021) highlights that currently, the research base causally linking culturally relevant mindsets to student learning is limited. Thus, more work is needed to understand culturally relevant mindsets as the foundation to teachers' practices and students' learning. Research finds that culturally relevant teaching is more than just practices, it begins with teachers possessing culturally relevant dispositions, or beliefs that cultural diversity is necessary for teaching (Comstock et al., 2023). In turn, these teachers are more likely and more willing to adapt their teaching methods to the needs of their diverse students (Hachfeld et al., 2015). Educators who have these mindsets are more successful employing CRSPs across all academic learning, including SEL, and can tailor its delivery to different cultural norms, social climates, and racial groups (Mahfouz & Anthony-Stevens, 2020). Although our findings did not support an association between culturally relevant mindsets and academic integration, this remains an important area of future research.

Integrating SEL into academics calls for diverse skills

We found evidence that the relationship between culturally relevant mindsets and SEL academic integration is only present when teachers possess culturally relevant and general SEL skills. This highlights the need for not only mindsets, but skills developed through training teachers, which remains a significant barrier to effective integration of SEL (Airin & Md Sharif, 2025). Teachers are most often responsible for implementing SEL programs, but many lack the necessary training and professional development to do this well (Airin & Md Sharif, 2025). The skills that precede SEL integration include classroom management techniques (e.g., positive discipline) in addition to empathy, emotional regulation, and conflict resolution (Newman & Dusenbury, 2015; Razza & Brann, 2025). In our study, although general SEL skills were a significant mediator, culturally relevant skills proved to have stronger effects. Like the variation in the expression of SEL skills exhibited across diverse students, teachers must have the skills to recognize and respond to this cultural variation (Mondi et al., 2021). Thus, highlighting that equity-oriented SEL should be presented in ways that are accessible by all students, and teachers are integral in facilitating this process.

Limitations

Despite the strengths of this study for illuminating the skills needed to integrate culturally relevant SEL into academic instruction, it is not without limitations. First, participants in this study are California teachers, whose practice is shaped by state-specific teaching standards and local student demographics. These contextual factors may limit the extent to which findings can be generalized to other regions. Second, although there were no out-of-pocket costs to teachers (they received an enrollment subsidy), there may be selection bias based on who may enroll in a graduate level course. Mitigating the selection bias, some teachers may have worked in counties which provided financial stipends for teachers to complete the course, thus, individuals may have been incentivized to participate who may not have otherwise done so. Considering this, it remains unclear how self-selection biases may impact the generalizability results. Future studies should replicate this study among a sample of teachers who have not enrolled in graduate-level professional learning. Third, our sample consisted of predominantly White females. Although consistent with the demographics of U. S. public school teachers, this did not allow for meaningful exploration or interpretations around race. Future research should prioritize exploration into these processes among teachers of diverse racial-ethnic

backgrounds, particularly considering the variation in teachers' cultural consciousness and biases across race.

In this study, we only included data for teachers who completed both the pre-and-post survey, therefore excluding those who dropped, withdrew, or failed to complete one or both assignments. A previous study did not find significant differences at pretest between teachers who enroll and complete the course and those who do not complete the course (Duane et al., 2025), although it is possible that unmeasured differences between these groups biased our results. This study was not designed to assess the impact of the course on culturally relevant mindsets or teachers' skills, as there was no relevant comparison group. Further, we did not test for differences by teachers' school site racial composition or other relevant school contextual characteristics, as school names were not collected. It is important that we consider the use of self-report data in this study. It is possible that social desirability may have influenced teachers' reported processes and reflections. Additionally, we did not include other sources of data, such as interviews or observational assessments, to assess teachers' mindsets, skills, or academic integration of SEL. Future research should include observational assessments and triangulate self-report data to identify whether differences between teachers reported and observed mindsets and skills explain SEL outcomes. Finally, these self-report items were originally designed for non-research purposes and have not yet been assessed for measurement validity and reliability. Although not ideal for research purposes, these measures offered valuable insights given the limited existing research on these processes and the exploratory nature of this study. Moreover, they are readily interpretable outside of a research context—particularly in ways that can inform and improve teaching practices.

Implications

Findings from our study have implications for research, practice, and policy. First, findings underscore a need to explore both mindsets and skills, perhaps even simultaneously as we did, to illuminate how a possible combination of beliefs and action may contribute to shifts. Future research could connect mindsets and skills to student and teacher-level outcomes to explore the relationships between equity-oriented SEL, academic integration, and concepts such as engagement, performance, and well-being. At the policy level, investment in teacher mindsets—through professional learning opportunities— and explicit supports to bolster skills (e.g., training, tools, funding), could be an important way to move the needle towards more equitable practices in schools. Additionally, we echo Muñoz (2019) who calls for the development of comprehensive professional teaching standards that incorporate CRSPs to improve the current systems of teacher preparation and development. In California, SEL and CRSPs have been established as a state priority, resulting in changes to the California Standards for the Teaching Profession (CSTP), which guide teacher preparation and teacher induction (Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2024). Similarly, if policymakers and advocates were to champion academic integration, we other states may begin to implement such changes too.

Findings also deeply connect to the work of educator practice. At the post-secondary level, teacher educators can, and should, explore how to cultivate favorable mindsets towards CRSPs and SEL, empower pre-service teachers, and see the value in explicitly training to develop skills on CRSPs and academic integration. For example, teacher educators can embed mindset work and skill building directly within their credential programming, course design and delivery, student teaching opportunities, and supervision experiences; doing so could enable pre-service teachers to have multiple opportunities before they formally enter the classroom to practice, reflect, collaborate, and grow. Classroom teachers in Barnes & McCallops' (2019) study argued that in order for them to successfully implement CRSPs in SEL, a school-wide culture of CRSPs is needed. They assert that school leaders should prioritize CRSPs in schools, and co-construct a vision for SEL. This argument could

be extended such that foregrounding cultural relevance may also support the integration of SEL into academics. On-going professional learning opportunities for teachers to continue enhancing their mindsets and skills in these areas could also be greatly beneficial. Specifically, by building CRSPs training into existing professional development offerings or communities of practice, teachers will have the opportunity to both shift their mindsets and practice the necessary skills (e.g., learning *how* to use students' cultures to make learning meaningful). Finally, those at the heart of this study—teachers—can continue to explore the integration of SEL within academics, while also simultaneously holding the importance of CRSPs. For example, an elementary teacher who wants to teach the social and emotional competency of relationship skills may, as Ladson-Billings (1995) compels us, plan to suffuse the academic, social, and political skills needed to critique cultural norms and values that maintain inequities while also learning about relationship building. This may bring them to examine their existing ELA curriculum for ways to infuse the culturally relevant *and* SEL skills into an existing lesson. Indeed, there are endless opportunities to build a more culturally relevant and sustaining learning environment, beginning (but not ending) with teacher mindsets.

Conclusion

The current study contributes to the field with an initial examination of the mindsets and skills required of teachers for equity-oriented integration of SEL across all aspects of school. Although teachers' culturally relevant mindsets did not significantly predict their academic integration of SEL, centering equity in SEL allows teachers to reflect on their own identities and amplify the experiences of their students. We found evidence that the relationship between culturally relevant mindsets is fully explained by teachers' culturally relevant and general SEL skills. Together, these skills can help to integrate SEL into academics, which may strengthen students' academic outcomes, promote school climate, and bolster students' SEL skills. However, as culturally relevant skills were demonstrated to have stronger mediating effects than general SEL skills, this may suggest that teachers' ability to recognize broader historical contexts and confront and respond to disparities may be more effective to achieve equitable academic integration of SEL in schools.

Funders

Aspects of this work were supported by the California Department of Health Care Services. The contents may not necessarily reflect the official views or policies of the State of California.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgments

Funding for SEL Foundations course development, associated enrollment subsidies, and evaluation efforts were provided by the California Department of Health Care Services (DHCS) through CalHOPE Student Support. CalHOPE Student support is led by the Sacramento County Office of Education (SCOE), directed by Brent Malicote and Mai Xi Lee. We thank the County Office representatives who nominated local educators and supported their participation in SEL Foundations. We wish to acknowledge the following additional people for their contributions to course dreaming, design, operation, and implementation: Keith Annis, Jeanette Banashak, Autumn Boylan, Linda Burton, Erin Carenzo, Anne Childers, Amy Chung, Linda Darling-Hammond, Shirley Davis, Kamilah Drummond-Forrester, Ryan Eaverill, Aliza Elkin, Raymond Fong, Lisa Fuller, Chao Guan, Dana Kowalski, Kathy Leviege,

Michelle Mandujano, Pamela McVeagh-Lally, Mike McLaughlin, Jennifer Miller, Emiko Moran, Kurt Norton, Chris Oakden, Andy Peterson, Stacie Roberts, Richard Russo, Robert Sherman, Heidi Stevenson, Denise Schiller, Susan Stone, Henry Tsang, Luis Valencia, Miho Walczak, Frederick Wehrelle, Erica Wilson, Tian Yu, the Academic Design, Innovation, & Technology team, and a tSEL Advisory Council of practitioners, scholars, & leaders. Last but not least, we acknowledge all the students and instructors of SEL Foundations, for their efforts and commitment to advancing SEL across California. The contents of this paper may not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the State of California or any of these acknowledged individuals or institutions.

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