

# The Use of Social and Emotional Learning to Improve Academic Success at Historically Black Colleges and Universities

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**Abstract**—Social and emotional learning and understanding is not only important in childhood but in adulthood as well. Social and emotional learning has been found to shape the academic motivation of undergraduate freshmen at historically black colleges and universities (HBCU) specifically those who are STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) majors. Social and emotional learning (SEL) involves a coordinated set of evidence-based programs and practices for enhancing social-emotional-cognitive development, positive behavior and interpersonal relationships, and academic performance (Mahoney et al., 2020 as cited in Ruprecht, 2023, p. 5). This learning is helping children and adults both in and outside of the classroom. However, there is a gap in the literature that reflects how social and emotional learning can shape the academic success of HBCU students in all disciplines. This article will provide findings that suggest social and emotional learning can not only be successful in helping adults but HBCU students in any discipline.

**Keywords**—social and emotional learning, historically black colleges and universities, academics, interventions

## Introduction

Social and emotional learning (SEL) has gained notable significance in educational research over the last three decades (Jones & Kahn, 2017 as cited in Rogers et al., 2022, p. 187), and has been widely estimated to promote students' academic learning (Garner et al., 2014 as cited in Rogers et al., 2022, p. 187). However, there is a gap in the literature that reflects how social and emotional learning can shape the academic success of HBCU students in all disciplines. Moreover, traditional academic motivation research and theory have not adequately represented the motivational and educational attributes of African American students. Despite the study of academic motivation of African American students having a long history within the field of educational psychology, cultural integrity approaches are lacking in the extant research, and this has limited the validity and utility of the knowledge base (Usher, 2018 as cited in Freeman et al., 2021, pp. 1-2). There is also a lack of deep

knowledge about the development of African American students' academic motivation in varying educational contexts (Freeman et al., 2021). Thus, social and emotional learning (SEL) involves a coordinated set of evidence-based programs and practices for enhancing social-emotional-cognitive development, positive behavior, and interpersonal relationships, and academic performance (Mahoney et al., 2020 as cited in Ruprecht, 2023, p. 5). Therefore, this article tries to address this gap in the literature by exploring the present state of research, policy, and practices of social and emotional learning among HBCUs.

## Literature Review

Freeman et al. (2021) used semantic thematic data analysis and found three major themes and corresponding sub themes that were salient in the development of students' academic motivation: place (institutional climate, HBCU mission and tradition, and absence of marginalization); pedagogy (culturally relevant pedagogy, positive faculty-student relationships, African American curriculum and instruction, racial socialization); and people (people "like me"; student, faculty, and alumni models of high achieving African Americans). Freeman et al. (2021) discovered that HBCU institutional factors engendered academic motivation that is rooted in students' racial identity and suggest the construct of racial identity-rooted academic motivation. Given the important and unique realities of African American students that impact their educational experiences, engagement, identity development, and achievement in various types of school contexts, self and sociocultural variables must be included in research and theory on the motivational psychology of African American students (p. 1). Accordingly, students need support in developing social and emotional skills alongside academic skills.

Consequently, SEL supports the development of empathy, awareness of one's own and others' feelings, effective communication, and problem-solving. SEL is a form of the "life skills" that have been part of education for decades. It is an essential part of education and human development. Moreover, SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes

to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel, and show empathy for others, establish, and maintain supportive relationships and make responsible and caring decisions. Presently, there are many challenges that our students continue face because of COVID as their world has changed so considerably over the past two years. Accordingly, our students need the skills taught through SEL such as empathy, collaboration, conflict resolution, and self-regulation to be successful in our present society's active economy while developing responsibility for themselves and their community (The Education Trust, 2023).

Despite the challenges Black students face, previous research has reported positive findings within this population. Compared to White students, Black students have been found to deal with stress in a more adaptive manner, also known as resilient coping (Oliver et al., 2017 as cited in Mushonga, 2021, p. 320). Thus, Mushonga (2021) highlights the benefit of viewing this population from a positive perspective which can aid in improving well-being and academic success that can be compared to SEL. Hence, SEL skills can be learned in that students are nurtured to connect with, embrace, and comprehend their own emotions. An increasing number of studies have reported that SEL skills support students to achieve success in school and in life. Consequently, educators around the world are modifying their curriculum to include SEL in response to this data mentioned above (Advance Students Forward, 2021).

Durlak et al. (2022) conducted a meta-review that covered 12 meta-analyses, encompassing 523 studies, with 61% randomized control trials, accounting for a total of 1 million students on the impact of SEL. Their data showed that SEL programs improved students' social-emotional skills and has a positive impact on academic outcomes and student behavior. Additionally, the authors found that universal, school based SEL programs led to all student demographic groups developing skills such as identifying emotions, teamwork, and self-management once applied. The results also showed that students had more positive social behaviors and attitudes, and reduced conduct problems and emotional distress. Durlak et al. review showed an increase in students' academic performance after providing a SEL program. Students also received continuing academic gains over the long term. Moreover, the authors found that SEL programs had positive benefits for all students, regardless of race, gender, or geographic area. The impact of SEL programs on social-emotional skills, academics, and behavior was equally strong across all these demographic groups (Durlak et al., 2022, pp. 765-782).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) in collaboration with the National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention suggests that research reveals the significant role of SEL in promoting the healthy development and academic achievement of all students. It also shows that SEL reduces problem behaviors and emotional distress that interfere with the learning and development of some students. Research also indicates that SEL programming increases test

scores while it lowers levels of emotional distress and disruptive behavior. Therefore, SEL is an effective approach for addressing safe learning environments and violence prevention activities; behavioral, social, and emotional supports; mental health services; and early childhood SEL programs (CASEL, 2023, pp. 1-2). CASEL also found that students, based on a meta-analysis of SEL programs published through 2007 that included school, family, and community interventions who received school based SEL, scored 11 percentile points higher on academic achievement tests than their peers who did not receive SEL, and they also attained higher grades. Additionally, they found that even as grades and achievement test scores improved, classroom behavior, feelings about self, and emotional problems improved as well (2023, p. 2).

Similarly, CASEL propose that there is massive evidence that the two key elements of evidence based SEL programs are creating positive school learning environments and providing social emotional competency instruction that results in greater academic performance and better long-term life outcomes. They indicate that these two key elements of SEL programs are equally strengthening. CASEL thinks that classrooms filled with socially and emotionally skilled students are more caring and safer, and positive learning environments provide opportunities for students to use and further develop social and emotional competencies (2023, p. 4). However, to participate fully in a relationship centered environment, students need basic social and emotional skills. They need to manage themselves appropriately and interact positively with others. Social and emotional competency instruction helps all students to engage in these behaviors more effectively. SEL instruction can also produce significant improvements in school-related attitudes, behaviors, and performance (Zins et al., 2004 as cited in CASEL, 2023). Socially and emotionally competent students are better able to take advantage of classroom learning opportunities and experiences and facilitate rather than disrupt the learning of their peers (Linares et al., 2005 as cited in CASEL, 2023). Moreover, when teachers integrate the teaching of SEL with academic content, student understanding of subject matter improves (Elias, 2004; Schaps et al., 2004 as cited in CASEL, 2023). CASEL also suggests that there is evidence that providing emotional regulation skills improves cognitive functioning.

### Resilience Theory

The resilience theory addresses the strengths that people and systems demonstrate that enables them to rise above adversity (Van Breda, 2001). Resilience theory is a powerful framework used in social work to understand how individuals, families, communities, and even organizations bounce back from adversity and challenges. It emphasizes a person's strengths and capacity for growth, rather than solely focusing on deficits or problems. Social workers use this theory to identify and build on a client's existing strengths and resources. This empowers individuals to cope with difficulties and develop a sense of mastery. Furthermore, resilience means the individual has the skills, abilities,

knowledge, and insight that accumulate over time as they struggle to surmount adversity and meet challenges. It is an ongoing and developing fund of energy and skill that can be used in current struggles (Garmezy, 1994 in Saleebey, 1996, p. 298 as cited in Van Breda, 2001, p. 5). Since a great contribution of resilience theory has been to help us understand how an individual's perspective on life difficulties fundamentally affects the individual's experience of and response to the difficulty, it is quite useful when applied to HBCU students (Van Breda, 2001, p. 8). Similarly, Hobbs (2022, p. iii) conducted a quantitative study where she sought to operationalize academic resilience through social engagement, family support, capacity for tolerance, and commitment to college among African American first-year males at a private, urban HBCU in the United States. A finding of her study was that the role of family support, social engagement, capacity for tolerance, and commitment to college was important for African American males.

### **Strengths Perspective**

An approach that puts the strengths and resources of people, communities, and their environments, rather than their problems and pathologies. The strengths perspective in social work is a philosophy that flips the script on traditional approaches. Instead of focusing on a client's problems and deficits, it prioritizes their strengths and resources. This empowers individuals and communities to find solutions and build on their existing capabilities (Kam, 2021).

### **Core Principles and Benefits of the Strengths Perspective are as follows:**

- a. Client-centered: The social worker acts as a guide and facilitator, working collaboratively with the client to identify their strengths and goals.
- b. Empowerment: The approach fosters a sense of self-efficacy in clients, believing they have the power to make positive changes in their lives.
- c. Focus on potential: Strengths-based social workers see challenges as opportunities for growth and development.
- d. Holistic view: This perspective considers not just the individual but also their environment and social support systems (Kam, 2021).

### **Benefits of the Strengths Perspective:**

- a. Increased motivation: Individuals feel more hopeful and engaged when their strengths are acknowledged, leading to a greater desire to work towards goals.
- b. Improved self-esteem: Focusing on strengths helps individuals build confidence and a positive sense of self.
- c. Collaboration: The strengths perspective fosters a collaborative partnership between the social worker and the individual, leading to more effective communication and outcomes

(Grant et al., 2018)

### **Strengths Perspective Application to Social Emotional Learning**

The strengths perspective is just as valuable in Social Emotional Learning (SEL) as it is in social work. Just as in social work, the strengths perspective in SEL doesn't ignore weaknesses. It acknowledges them but uses them as an opportunity to identify strengths that can be used for improvement.

- Focus on Character Strengths: Embrace the strengths perspective go beyond just teaching students how to manage emotions or navigate social situations. They identify and nurture a student's character strengths, like kindness, perseverance, or leadership.
- Empowering Students: It helps them see themselves as capable individuals who can overcome challenges and achieve goals.
- Building on Existing Skills: Just like social workers don't start from scratch, SEL programs that use the strengths perspective build on a student's existing emotional and social skills (Jones & Kahn, 2017).

### **Application of SEL**

SEL can be utilized as an intervention approach. For instance, Goleman is one of the leading researchers for social-emotional learning. He connected emotions to learning and found that students who can control their emotions have better academic achievement (Duginske, 2017 as cited in Kroese, 2020, p. 6). Accordingly, the classroom is one of the most significant settings where occurrences of social-emotional learning take place (Chin Ng & Bull 2018 as cited in Kroese, 2020, pp. 6-7). Chin Ng & Bull (2018 as cited in Kroese, 2020, pp. 6 – 7) found that social-emotional learning is intentional teaching of social-emotional skills, rather than informal or casual teaching. Thus, social-emotional skills contribute to strong social skills among peers. So, if students start learning these skills from a young age, this will give students more time to catch up to their peers, close gaps in their academic achievement and be ready for college and the future (Duginske, 2017 as cited in Kroese, 2020). Thus, teachers will gain more instructional time by taking the time to teach these important social-emotional skills in classrooms in the long-term.

Many guidelines and teaching frameworks exist around the world today to support social-emotional learning (Chin Ng & Bull, 2018 as cited in Kroese, 2020). There are some challenges that exist for teachers when implementing social-emotional learning. One of the largest challenges educators face is lack of time. Educators are pressed for time and with the importance of teaching academic subjects, social-emotional learning sometimes gets put on the backburner. Teachers also may be strapped for resources (Chin Ng & Bull, 2018 as cited in Kroese, 2020).

Furthermore, many teachers take an informal approach to teaching social-emotional skills. This can mean that teachers use situations that arise throughout the day to teach these skills and feature the use of the skills right alongside other learning (Chin Ng & Bull, 2018 as cited in Kroese, 2020). Often this happens through daily problem-solving, turn-taking, sharing, and self-regulation of emotions (Chin Ng & Bull, 2018 as cited in Kroese, 2020). Teachers may help students work through a problem as it arises and walk students through the proposing of and finding of solutions (Chin Ng & Bull, 2018 as cited in Kroese, 2020). Another way in which teachers casually teach social skills is through active monitoring and stepping in to give positive feedback and scaffolding (Chin Ng & Bull, 2018 as cited in Kroese, 2020). The more interactions a teacher has with students, the more opportunities exist to address social-emotional learning (Chin Ng & Bull, 2018 as cited in Kroese, 2020).

If students can be helped to work through their social-emotional intelligence, not only are their future success being helped but managing behavior within our classrooms, allowing for more time to focus on content areas. SEL can be implemented in many ways within the classroom, the whole group read-alouds, activities, lessons, and many districts are adopting programs or curricula. "SEL programs enhance the student's capacity to integrate skills, attitudes, and behaviors to deal effectively and ethically with daily tasks and challenges." (Jager et al., 2019, p. 162)

## Conclusion

The gaps in research reflect implications for higher education practice and the need for future and/or further research (Freeman et al., 2021). BlackDeer et al. (2022, pp. 181-196) research surrounding behavioral health within HBCUs highlight the exclusive cultural context of historically Black colleges and universities for Black students' overall wellbeing. However, BlackDeer et al. found that HBCUs are disadvantaged in comparison to other institutions of higher education due to lack of funding and resources that other universities may take for granted (Chance, 2019 as cited in BlackDeer et al., 2022, p. 195). Therefore, comprehensive support services such as mentorship opportunities are needed to support behavioral health at HBCUs (Walker, 2015 as cited in BlackDeer et al., 2022). Overall, Black students fare much better at HBCUs academically, socially, and emotionally, but further research is still needed to understand how this social and academic environment protects HBCU students' mental health (White-Cummings, 2017 as cited in BlackDeer et al., 2022). Ultimately, SEL researchers and practitioners agree that by methodically promoting students' social and emotional competency and by establishing learning environments that meet the social and

emotional needs of students, schools help them succeed in school and life (CASEL, 2023, p. 8). (White-Cummings, 2017 as cited in BlackDeer et al., 2022). Ultimately, SEL researchers and practitioners agree that by methodically promoting students' social and emotional competency and by establishing learning environments that meet the social and emotional needs of students, schools help them succeed in school and life (CASEL, 2023, p. 8).

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