

THE SCHOOL COUNSELOR'S CORNER: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN SUPPORTING STUDENTS FACING TRAUMA

Joel Ontiveros, Ed.D.

ABSTRACT

Trauma-informed practices (TIP) and social-emotional learning (SEL) are essential frameworks for supporting students affected by trauma, ensuring that schools foster safe, nurturing, and equitable learning environments. Research indicates that approximately 25% of children in the U.S. experience at least one traumatic event by age 16, significantly impacting their emotional well-being and academic performance. This paper explores the intersection of TIP and SEL, emphasizing their role in helping educators recognize trauma responses, build trusting relationships, and cultivate resilience in students. SEL equips students with the skills to regulate emotions, develop empathy, and build strong relationships, while also empowering educators with strategies to create inclusive, supportive classrooms. Furthermore, SEL promotes systemic equity by fostering collaboration among educators, families, and communities. By integrating TIP and SEL, schools can become spaces of healing and growth, ensuring that all students—regardless of their experiences—have the opportunity to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

KEYWORDS: Trauma-Informed Practices (TIP), Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), Student Well-Being, Emotional Resilience, Educational Equity, Trauma and Learning

INTRODUCTION

Every school day, millions of students walk through the doors of schools across the country, carrying with them experiences that shape their behavior, emotions, and ability to learn. For many, those experiences include trauma events that leave lasting psychological and emotional impacts. Research reveals that approximately 25% of children in the U.S. will experience at least one traumatic event by the age of 16. (The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2018) These experiences can manifest in ways that interfere with a child's ability to engage, learn, and thrive in the classroom. As a middle school counselor, I have seen how adopting trauma informed practices combined with social emotional learning (SEL) can change the trajectory for students facing these challenges. SEL not only equips students with the tools to navigate their emotions but also empowers educators to create environments where all children feel safe, supported, and understood.

UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA IN THE CLASSROOM

Trauma affects children in different ways, but common signs include withdrawal, lack of motivation, or behaviors that might initially appear as indifference or defiance. For educators, these behaviors can be confusing or even frustrating. However, they are often protective responses a way for the student to cope with stressors they may not yet have the words or tools to express. Schools play a pivotal role in supporting children who have experienced trauma. Administrators, teachers, and staff can help by recognizing trauma responses, creating

accommodations within the classroom, and referring students to outside professionals when necessary. But addressing trauma is not just about reacting; it's about being proactive. This is where Trauma-Informed Practices (TIP) and SEL come into play. According to the National Education Association, TIP involves strategies that prioritize creating safe and nurturing environments for students. These strategies emphasize building trust, fostering strong relationships, and helping students develop a sense of self-efficacy. By adopting these practices, schools can reduce the impact of trauma on learning and behavior while supporting students in developing resilience.

WHAT IS SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL)?

Social Emotional Learning is a foundational framework for both education and personal development. Defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), SEL is the process through which individuals learn to manage emotions, build relationships, set and achieve goals, and make responsible decisions.

For students, SEL provides the tools to:

- Build healthy personal identities.
- Develop empathy and understand others' perspectives.
- Navigate relationships based on trust and respect.
- Overcome challenges with resilience and confidence. (CASEL, 2022)

But SEL extends beyond students it creates a shared language and set of practices for educators, families, and communities. By fostering collaboration, SEL supports the development of equitable learning environments where students not only succeed academically but also grow emotionally and socially.

EMPOWERING EDUCATORS WITH SEL STRATEGIES

One of the most impactful aspects of SEL is its ability to equip educators with strategies to better understand and respond to students' needs. When teachers are trained in SEL, they can recognize early signs of trauma, such as withdrawal or a lack of motivation, and respond with compassion instead of misinterpreting these behaviors as insubordination or apathy. For example, instead of immediately referring a student showing signs of distress to a school counselor, a teacher can use SEL strategies to:

- Create a classroom culture of trust and respect.
- Offer students opportunities to express their emotions in a safe space.
- Foster connections and relationships that help students feel valued and supported.

This proactive approach empowers teachers to become key players in supporting students' emotional well-being while reinforcing the vital role of counselors and mental health professionals in providing specialized care when needed.

THE BIGGER PICTURE: SEL AND EQUITY

The benefits of SEL extend far beyond individual classrooms. When implemented effectively, SEL addresses systemic inequities by fostering inclusive and equitable learning environments. Schools that prioritize SEL cultivate partnerships with families and communities, creating a collaborative approach to student success. In these environments, students are not just taught to

navigate their own challenges they are empowered to contribute to the creation of safe, healthy, and just communities. By focusing on the holistic development of students, SEL provides a pathway for building resilience, fostering empathy, and promoting long-term well-being.

A CALL TO ACTION

The integration of trauma informed practices and SEL is not just a strategy it's a necessity. As educators, counselors, and community leaders, we have the opportunity to make a lasting impact on the lives of students by providing the tools and support they need to overcome adversity. Through SEL, we can create schools that are more than places of learning; they become places of healing, growth, and connection. Together, we can ensure that all students, regardless of their past experiences, have the chance to thrive academically, emotionally, and socially.

REFERENCES

- CASEL. (2022). *Fundamentals of SEL*. CASEL. <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/>
- NEA. (2023). *Trauma-Informed Practices* / NEA. [Www.nea.org.
https://www.nea.org/professional-excellence/student-engagement/tools-tips/trauma-informed-practices](https://www.nea.org/professional-excellence/student-engagement/tools-tips/trauma-informed-practices)
- Peterson, S. (2018). *School Personnel*. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. <https://www.nctsn.org/audiences/school-personnel>

About the author

Dr. Joel Ontiveros serves as an Assistant Part-Time Professor at the School of Counseling, Occupational Therapy, and Education (SCOE), specializing in Applied Behavior Analysis, School Psychology, and Educational Counseling. In addition, he functions as a Middle School Counselor at Chula Vista Learning Community Charter School. His research investigates the impact of restorative practices on disciplinary incidents among middle school students, as well as the fields of Social-Emotional Learning and trauma-informed care. Dr. Ontiveros may be reached at jontiveros@nu.edu.