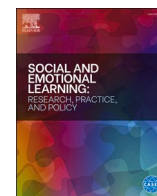




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Critical well-being as a paradigm: Applying indigenous wisdom to transforming systemic SEL

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines Systemic SEL through the lens of Critical Well-Being (CWB) and calls for a shift from traditional, performance-based success metrics toward a transformative, equity-centered approach. By centering belonging, community-driven priorities, and holistic well-being, CWB reimagines SEL as a tool for fostering healing, justice, and cultural sustainability. Case studies from Kia Aroha Campus and Paseo Robelita Unified School District illustrate how integrating youth and community voices enhances SEL's alignment with cultural, social, and collective well-being, creating environments where both students and educators thrive. These examples demonstrate that prioritizing holistic flourishing over economic or political outcomes can drive sustainable educational improvements, even amid systemic barriers and politically conservative contexts. This article contends that for SEL to fulfill its transformative potential, educational systems must embrace authentic collaboration, co-creation, and iterative improvement. Placing youth, parents, and communities at the center of decision-making requires redefining success metrics, supporting educators' well-being, and embedding sustainable infrastructure for long-term community engagement. A CWB-informed approach fosters equity and resilience while addressing mental health and racial trauma. Research highlights that reconnecting communities of color with cultural practices supports both healing and resilience (Chávez-Dueñas et al., 2019), reinforcing the need for culturally sustaining SEL initiatives. This paper reaffirms education's role as a space for liberation and healing, offering concrete examples of culturally sustaining SEL practices in both global and U.S. contexts. It concludes with key implications for research, policy, and practice, honoring the legacy of Dr. Roger Weissberg and advancing more equitable, community-driven approaches to SEL.

1. Introduction

In recent years, increasing attention has been directed toward the mental health challenges faced by students and educators, particularly in communities disproportionately impacted by systemic inequities (Harding et al., 2019; Shah, Mann, Singh, Bangar, & Kulkarni, 2020). These challenges have been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to a significant rise in anxiety, depression, and trauma within school-community ecosystems (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2020; Turner & Garvis, 2023). Concurrently, the pandemic has coincided with a rise in racial trauma, driven by incidents of racial violence and the subsequent civil unrest

(Liu and Modir, 2020). In response, systemic social and emotional learning (SEL) frameworks have emerged as a promising public health approach to address these compounding crises (Cipriano, Rappolt-Schlichtmann, & Brackett, 2020; Greenberg, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Durlak, 2017).

Historically, SEL has emphasized emotional regulation, relationship-building, and responsible decision-making as essential components of supporting the social and emotional development of students and educators, as well as fostering authentic partnerships between schools and families (Albright & Weissberg, 2010; CASEL, 2021).¹ In addition, scholars have called for SEL to move beyond individual competencies and adopt transformative aims that explicitly address systemic

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¹ I was fortunate to have Dr. Roger Weissberg as a mentor and advisor during my graduate training. I served as a teaching assistant in his Social and Emotional Learning course at the University of Illinois–Chicago for two years and as a guest lecturer for more than five years. Roger consistently affirmed the importance of examining the intersections of youth voice, cultural relevance, and SEL, while also encouraging deeper attention to parent and community voice as essential components of SEL implementation. My ongoing research and practice continue to reflect these commitments, and this article aims to honor his influence on my work.

inequities and promote equity and justice (McKay-Jackson, 2014; Slaten, Rivera, Shemwell, & Elison, 2016). This call has contributed to the emergence of transformative social and emotional learning (tSEL), which expands the scope of SEL to include fostering critical consciousness, nurturing positive racial identity, promoting collective well-being, and advancing social equity (Jagers, 2016; Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Williams, 2019). In response to these developments, CASEL updated its definition of SEL in 2020 to more clearly articulate how these transformative aims can be implemented systemically across schools and districts (CASEL, 2023).

Despite these iterative efforts, the broader SEL discourse has received critique from both progressive and conservative orientations. Critical scholars argue that in practice, SEL remains insufficiently aligned with social justice goals and may inadvertently perpetuate colonial and hegemonic structures (Camangian and Cariaga, 2022; Jagers et al., 2019). Yet, despite these critiques, the field has offered little guidance on what an explicitly anti-colonial form of SEL might look like, or how it could be implemented at scale in systems committed to SEL. Conversely, conservative critiques frame SEL as a vehicle for liberal indoctrination (Gonyea, 2022). Moreover, the field lacks published research on how community-responsive, culturally sustaining approaches aligned with tSEL have been successfully implemented and gained momentum within socially tumultuous contexts.

To address these critiques and ensure that SEL continues to support students, educators, and communities in anti-colonial ways, this conceptual article argues that SEL must undergo both cultural and systemic shifts. Specifically, it advocates for the adoption of a Critical Well-Being (CWB) paradigm, one that centers youth and community voices, embraces culturally sustaining and asset-based approaches to well-being, and builds what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called a “beloved community,” where all members: students, staff, families, and community partners feel valued, affirmed, and supported (Alsup, 2009; Rivera, 2023). While this approach may appear innovative within dominant frameworks, its foundational principles are deeply rooted in First Nations perspectives and long-standing Indigenous knowledge systems that have supported communities through persistent social, political, and ecological adversity.

Terry Cross (as cited in Gathering Wisdom, 2016) outlined five interrelated strategies used by settler colonial regimes to maintain dominance over Indigenous peoples: the occupation of Indigenous land; the appropriation and control of natural resources, particularly vital sources such as food and water; the disruption of Indigenous sovereignty and the dismantling of traditional leadership; the delegitimization of Indigenous worldviews, spiritual practices, languages, healing traditions, and epistemologies; and the forced removal and assimilation of Indigenous children. When enacted in a coordinated manner, these strategies dismantle the social fabric of Indigenous communities and ensure the persistence of intergenerational oppression. Education systems have played a central role in this colonial process. Across the United States, Canada, Australia, Norway, and New Zealand, schooling has been used as a tool for cultural erasure and assimilation (Bombay et al., 2014).

Studies confirm that children as young as three were removed by law from their families and forced into residential schools designed to “kill the Indian in the child” (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Many did not survive, and those who did were often subjected to conditions that produced long-lasting individual, collective, and intergenerational trauma (Brave Heart et al., 2011). Despite these atrocities, Indigenous communities have resisted and reimagined education as a site of healing, cultural regeneration, and well-being. They have developed counter-systems that foster academic, emotional, and cultural thriving for Indigenous youth (Kahakalau, 2002; Milne, 2016; Sosa-Provencio, Sheahan, Desai, & Secatero, 2020; Yamane, Pourier, Jake, & Around Him, 2024). Many of these practices have been studied and conceptualized within the emerging paradigm of Critical Well-Being (CWB) within educational spaces (Rivera, 2021; 2023).

This article applies the CWB paradigm, grounded in Indigenous perspectives and lived experience, to critically examine systemic SEL and offer strategic recommendations to improve its impact and sustainability (Rivera, 2023). The CWB paradigm is rooted in a commitment to building beloved communities that support intersectional identities, nurture self-worth, and foster both resilience and self-actualization. Additionally, the CWB approach advances shared leadership and participatory structures to confront systemic injustice, while promoting what Solórzano and Bernal, (2001) refer to as transformative resistance: actions that oppose oppression and are motivated by love, dignity, and a vision for justice (Osher and Pittman, 2024; Yamane et al., 2024).

2. A journey toward a new paradigm: the emergence of critical well-being

The CWB paradigm emerged from prior research aimed at identifying educational ecosystems where historically marginalized students were thriving academically, culturally, socially, and emotionally, with sustained success for more than two decades (Rivera, 2021; 2023). Drawing from the literature and engaging with leaders in SEL, critical pedagogy, healing-centered engagement, trauma-informed care, ethnic studies, and related fields, three exemplary sites that created conditions for marginalized youth to thrive were described in depth in the original research: Kia Aroha Campus in Aotearoa New Zealand, Kanu o ka ‘Aina in Hawai‘i, and the Native American Community Academy in New Mexico (Rivera, 2021). Each of these education ecosystems integrate Indigenous philosophies and educational practices to serve primarily First Nations youth. While their work aligns with the aims of SEL, trauma-informed care, and youth participatory action research, the leaders of these ecosystems did not describe their efforts using those terms. Instead, their practices were grounded in a more robust Indigenous paradigm that we identify as Critical Well-Being within educational contexts (Rivera, 2021), a framework that subsequent research has shown to be adaptable and impactful across a broader range of educational settings (Rivera, 2023).

The CWB paradigm was developed through a grounded theory process embedded within a digital ethnography that revealed consistent practices across the three original sites (Rivera, 2021). CWB is defined as a human-centered educational paradigm that prioritizes meeting the basic needs of students and staff while fostering self and community actualization. This approach recognizes that deep student engagement emerges when individuals feel loved, supported, and empowered to apply academic learning toward addressing enduring community challenges through critical and creative means (Rivera, 2023). Rooted in cultural sustainability, CWB seeks to resist oppression through a liberatory and loving approach that nurtures students’ interconnectedness to one another, their communities, and the broader world. The CWB paradigm was further refined and articulated through collaboration among the identified partner sites (Rivera, 2021). These partners later formed the Alliance for the Seventh Generation in 2021 (Alliance for the 7th Generation, n.d.) and implemented the model within a politically diverse U.S. school district during the first Trump administration. Research in this context provided insights into how the three tenets of CWB can be advanced during socially and politically tumultuous periods (Rivera, 2023). A description of these culturally sustaining and community-responsive tenets is provided in the section below.

3. Tenets of critical well-being

Cultivating beloved community. The first tenet of CWB emphasizes countering systemic racial and social subordination through an ethos of critical love, grounded in intergenerational cultural sustenance. This begins with educators engaging in deep personal reflection to develop critical consciousness and racial literacy, which serves as the foundation for creating a beloved community among staff. Once this

foundation is established with educators, the culture of love can be authentically extended to students (Rivera, 2023). This process requires safe relational spaces and a commitment to growth-oriented learning around race, identity, and power (Sealey-Ruiz, 2011). Within these educational ecosystems, educators and leaders are invited to be called into a community of care and grace rather than called out in a culture of judgment (Rivera, 2023).

Kahakalau documented how Kanu o ka 'Āina in Hawai'i developed a pedagogy of aloha (unconditional love), as one of the aforementioned identified educational ecosystems, by first cultivating a strong foundation among staff to love themselves, one another, and their community (Kahakalau, 2002). This effort involved affirming cultural and racial identities and developing multicultural competence among staff and students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The resulting culture of 'ohana, or family, and aloha created the conditions necessary for youth to thrive.

Educators also need time and space to reject static views of culture and reflect on the evolving nature of their own identities and those of others. Culturally sustaining pedagogy emphasizes that cultures are dynamic and adapt in response to contemporary challenges (Paris and Alim, 2017). From this perspective, educators can guide students through meaningful conversations that cultivate critical consciousness and foster a sense of community and belonging (Rivera, 2023). Scholars in Black psychology, liberation psychology, and community psychology highlight that building critical consciousness and strong cultural identity are essential to healing from racial trauma (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2019; Comas-Díaz et al., 2019).

Culturally Sustaining Well-Being. CWB emphasizes meeting the holistic needs of students, educators, and families: emotional, physical, spiritual, and cognitive; through culturally grounded and locally defined practices. The compounded effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and social unrest have intensified educator burnout, grief, and chronic stress, particularly among educators of color (Horsford et al., 2021; Shah et al., 2020). These conditions call for educational ecosystems that align internal policies and practices with collaborative partnerships involving community-based organizations.

At the Native American Community Academy (NACA), institutional efforts are aligned with the well-being needs of students and staff. The school uses the medicine wheel, a circular framework with four quadrants representing physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual domains, as an organizing structure for all educational pedagogical practices and programming. Academic learning addresses the intellectual domain, SEL supports emotional wellness, physical education and food sovereignty programs work to enhance bodily wellness, and service learning and school rituals promote spiritual purpose and wellness. The school also partners with local organizations grounded in cultural traditions and community voice to support in areas that the school itself cannot (e.g. dental health, physical check ups, and sweat lodges).

This CWB paradigm not only celebrates culturally sustaining practices but also encourages critical reflection on oppressive or assimilative norms (Paris and Alim, 2017; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). These practices support both students and staff, recognizing that well-being must be shared across the school community. Research shows that meeting educators' basic needs in culturally affirming ways can reduce burnout and increase engagement (Burciaga and Kohli, 2018; Kohli, Pizarro, and Nevárez, 2022). Developing critical consciousness among staff, especially those from historically marginalized groups, also helps prevent emotional exhaustion (Kohli, 2018). Moreover, research indicates that schools are more effective in supporting student well-being when they partner with community organizations and elevate the leadership of parents and caregivers (Warren, 2007).

Activating youth and community voice. The third tenet of CWB emphasizes the importance of elevating student, parent, and community voices as key agents of change in educational equity and well-being. Jagers and colleagues argue that participatory action research is particularly effective for advancing these goals (Jagers et al. 2019). Rivera documented how youth influenced school and district decisions

related to mental health and wellness through youth participatory action research (Rivera, 2023). Students used locally meaningful data to inform policies and engage in ongoing cycles of improvement.

Similarly, Milne documented how Kia Aroha Campus co-constructed academic goals through community voice and supported students in conducting youth participatory action research as part of their curriculum (Milne, 2016). The school, which serves a predominantly Māori, Samoan, and Tongan population, centered community definitions of success that integrated cultural identity, language, and service alongside literacy and numeracy. This case study (highlighted in depth later in this article) demonstrates that building infrastructure for authentic student voice may require first engaging the community to define success on its own terms, even when those definitions differ from mainstream Western standards.

Research in culturally sustaining education affirms that school systems must reject singular, White middle-class definitions of achievement in favor of more pluralistic approaches shaped by the communities they serve (Paris and Alim, 2014, 2017). As this article will later show, districtwide efforts to create well-being committees composed of students, families, and staff can build structures that ensure shared decision-making and sustain progress beyond the tenure of any individual leader or funding cycle (Rivera, 2023).

Taken together, these tenets - cultivating beloved communities, sustaining holistic well-being, and activating youth and community voice - form the foundation of the CWB paradigm. They offer a culturally grounded, equity-driven, and systemically aligned approach that supports and extends the aims of transformative and systemic SEL. These tenets were consistently evident across the original sites identified in prior research (Rivera, 2023), each blending cultural sustainability and community responsiveness, with systemical innovation rooted in First Nations ways of knowing.

4. Looking back to move forward: SEL in the current context

This section situates the current focus of research and practice in SEL, clarifies definitions and approaches to systemic implementation, and explores how a CWB paradigm can enhance the global impact and sustainability of SEL through an anticolonial and culturally sustaining lens.

To prevent transformative SEL (tSEL) goals from becoming peripheral or superficial, leaders at the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) have prioritized cultural relevance, belonging, and empowerment in their updated definition of SEL (Jagers, Skoog-Hoffman, Barthelus, & Schlund, 2021). CASEL now defines SEL as "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" (CASEL, 2023). This definition reframes SEL competencies within a more inclusive framework: identity as an element of self-awareness, agency as a component of self-management, empowerment and belonging as dimensions of social awareness, inclusion and respect within relationship skills, and collaborative problem-solving toward shared goals (Jagers et al., 2021).

The SEL discourse community has continued to evolve as research has offered strategies for integrating SEL systemically across district, state, and community levels (Mahoney et al., 2021). Mahoney and colleagues (2021) proposed a four-part approach to systemic SEL implementation that includes: (a) developing foundational support through broad stakeholder engagement and intentional planning; (b) strengthening adult SEL via professional learning and consistent modeling; (c) promoting SEL for students through coordinated efforts across schools, homes, and communities; and (d) practicing continuous improvement through data-informed reflection and refinement. While these practices provide a useful roadmap for systemic SEL, deeper inquiry - guided by questions of purpose, process, and sustainability - reveals opportunities for strengthening this approach through a Critical Well-Being (CWB)

perspective.

5. Systemic SEL: for what purpose?

A CWB lens invites reflection on the foundational purposes of education and the processes that underlie performance-based SEL approaches. Historically, public education has been shaped to prepare students for participation in the industrial workforce, enhance national economic competitiveness, and promote individual upward mobility (Bowles and Gintis, 1976). However, this technocratic orientation is deeply entangled with structural inequities. For example, funding mechanisms based on property taxes reinforce privilege in wealthier, predominantly White communities while systematically under-resourcing schools that serve communities of color (Apple, 1990; Freire and Macedo, 1987).

These inequities are perpetuated through practices such as academic tracking, which disproportionately misidentifies students of color for special education; by some estimates, up to 60 % are misdiagnosed (Harry and Klingner, 2006). Disciplinary systems also target students of color at rates four times higher than their White peers, increasing dropout risks and fueling the school-to-prison pipeline (Skiba et al., 2002; Love, 2019). Without critical reflection on who defines success and how it is measured, systemic SEL risks reproducing the very inequalities that tSEL aims to dismantle.

For example, the five core SEL competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, are often measured through indicators such as standardized test scores, high school graduation, college attendance, and career earnings (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). These metrics prioritize individual achievement and economic utility while neglecting structural inequities and alternative forms of flourishing. Derald Sue (2003) and others have noted that these dominant definitions of success often conflict with the collectivist values held by many racially and culturally diverse communities, which emphasize community stewardship, cultural continuity, civic engagement, and moral development.

Although research demonstrates that authentic family and community engagement improves student outcomes (Ishimaru, 2014; Warren, 2005), district-led parent engagement initiatives often replicate power imbalances that limit meaningful participation in school decision-making (Anderson, 1998; Auerbach, 2012; Olivos, 2006; Ishimaru, 2019). While CASEL has developed tools to support family and community engagement in SEL, many of these resources are not yet designed to explicitly disrupt power asymmetries (CASEL, n.d.). To fulfill the equity-centered goals of tSEL, schools must move beyond performative engagement and meaningfully center marginalized youth, families, and communities in defining educational success (Ginwright, 2018; Jagers et al., 2019; Rivera, 2023).

Emerging scholarship offers an alternative purpose for education: to cultivate lifelong well-being and flourishing (Martela, 2024). Advocates of this approach argue that schools should prepare students not only for future employment but also for meaningful, connected lives in the present and future (Curren, Boniwell, & Ryan, 2024; de Ruyter, Oades, & Waghid, 2022; Kristjánsson, 2017; Ryan, Reeve, Kaplan, & et al 2023). This perspective challenges utilitarian models of education and instead views student thriving as an end in itself (Osher & Pittman, 2024; Martela, 2024).

Indigenous scholars and communities further expand this view by calling for an educational purpose rooted in interdependence, responsibility, and thriving for all living beings, including the land (Yamane et al., 2024). International institutions such as UNESCO and the OECD have echoed these values, advocating for educational policies that prioritize sustainability, equity, and collective well-being (Duraiappah et al., 2022; Stevenson, 2022).

From a CWB perspective, questions arise about whether current SEL implementation strategies, such as building foundational support,

enhancing adult capacity, promoting student skills, and engaging in continuous improvement, align with broader, community-driven definitions of success. A CWB-informed critique suggests that addressing inequities and supporting human flourishing requires granting youth and communities authentic decision-making power to define and measure success within their local contexts (Rivera, 2023). The intention and sequencing of SEL implementation are critical to achieving these outcomes.

Adopting the ethos of critical love, with an emphasis on inclusion, suggests that those closest to the problem are also closest to the solution. As such, amplifying the voices of youth and communities must take priority (Ishimaru, 2020; Weis & Fine, 2005). Contrary to traditional systemic SEL guidance, authentic engagement requires integrating youth and community voices from the outset, not as an afterthought once administrators have predetermined the vision, strategy, and resource allocation (Rivera, 2022; 2023). Students, families, and community members must collaborate with administrators as part of a shared decision-making team. Success must be defined and evaluated through locally relevant metrics that align with the values, identities, and aspirations of the communities served (Rivera, 2023).

While this may seem aspirational, it is grounded in real-world practices observed in thriving educational ecosystems. By redefining success, co-creating metrics, and aligning implementation with culturally sustaining and community responsive priorities, systemic SEL can become a transformative force that advances equity, inclusion, and collective well-being.

6. A practice-based evidence case study of youth and parent engagement in New Zealand

Kia Aroha Campus, a public school serving students in grades K–13 in South Auckland, New Zealand, offers a compelling example of community-driven education that challenges colonial legacies embedded in public schooling. As previously noted, Kia Aroha was identified as an exemplary educational ecosystem supporting the holistic thriving of marginalized youth (Rivera, 2021). Like many public education systems in colonized nations, New Zealand's has historically avoided addressing Whiteness, White privilege, and systemic inequities, often defaulting to Eurocentric definitions of success in shaping national policies and practices. Milne (2016) explains that Kia Aroha Campus emerged in the 1980s as a counter-narrative to the covert colonial project, cloaked in terms such as “accountability,” “academic standards,” and “achievement gaps”, which frequently marginalized community voices, hindered cultural sustainability, and limited equity for Indigenous populations. The school was created through the merger of Te Whānau o Tupuranga and Clover Park Middle School, following sustained efforts by parents to preserve bilingual education and establish a public charter school serving Māori, Samoan, and Tongan communities.

Central to Kia Aroha Campus's mission is the active involvement of parents and community members in defining success. Parents expressed their desire for students to achieve high levels of literacy and numeracy while maintaining strong cultural identities, fluency in Māori, Tongan, and Pasifika languages, and cultivating healing, well-being, and responsibility to their community and the land (Milne, 2017). These community-defined goals were embedded across all levels of the school's operations, including its mission, policies, job descriptions, assessment frameworks, pedagogical practices, programming, and daily rituals. Visitors to the school observe these aims integrated across academic subjects, particularly through initiatives that emphasize healing and social justice (Milne, 2017).

In response to racial trauma, Kia Aroha Campus advances a critical, culturally sustaining pedagogy that promotes radical healing, supports individual and collective well-being, and sustains high academic rigor; cultivating what Milne (2017) describes as “Warrior Scholars.” This concept aligns with critical pedagogy's goals of fostering empowered cultural identity, academic excellence, and the capacity to lead social

change (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Paris & Alim, 2014; 2017). Through inquiry-based learning and youth participatory action research (YPAR), students explore three interconnected forms of knowledge: self-knowledge (language, culture, and identity), school knowledge (mandated curriculum), and global knowledge (awareness of broader societal contexts). Research shows that reconnecting communities of color with cultural practices supports their healing and resilience in the face of historical and racial trauma (Chávez-Dueñas et al., 2019; Comas-Díaz, 2019). Kia Aroha students are thus positioned to apply their knowledge and skills to real-world challenges that address both individual and collective goals.

This community-informed, systemically implemented approach has yielded remarkable outcomes. Students have conducted original research presented at the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and New Zealand's Ministry of Education. The school also reports some of the highest graduation rates for Indigenous youth in the nation (Milne, 2017). In conversations about post-secondary transitions, school leaders noted that students were not underprepared but were often misjudged in higher education settings, where their advanced writing skills sometimes led to accusations of plagiarism. Correspondence with school leaders further indicated that 66 % of staff are former alumni of the school, a factor that may contribute to the school's capacity to sustain this work across decades and leadership transitions (Milne, personal communication, June 23, 2025).

Despite national political shifts toward conservative, accountability-focused policies, Kia Aroha Campus has continued to thrive by meeting or exceeding national standards while integrating community and youth voices and advancing cultural sustainability. Its contributions to education and civic life position the school as a model for implementing culturally sustaining, equity-driven practices rooted in CWB (Milne, 2024).

6.1. A practice-based evidence case study of youth and community voice in the United States

Inspired by Kia Aroha's model and seeking to address the worsening mental health and academic disengagement following COVID-19 and civil unrest, a small, diverse district in the southwestern United States, referred to here as Paseo Robelita Unified School District, adopted a CWB paradigm to enhance student engagement and educator wellbeing. Located in a politically conservative state where critical discourse faced legislative resistance, the district strategically reframed its efforts as "building a culture of love" to gain broader support. This rebranding allowed the district to initiate implementation of a CWB approach centered on elevating youth and community voices while challenging systemic inequities (Rivera, 2023).

The initiative began with a youth participatory action research (YPAR) project in which high school students, in partnership with researchers, defined key constructs of well-being. The students co-developed a survey and advocated for its district-wide administration. The survey reached 1350 students, ten times the participation of previous district surveys. Data revealed that students were experiencing significant mental health challenges, felt unsupported in voicing their perspectives, and lacked affirmation of their racial and cultural identities. Students also cited strained relationships with staff (Rivera, 2023). Collaborative discussions between students and scholars connected these findings to broader literature on youth development and identity, including research indicating that cultural identity buffers against discrimination and promotes achievement (Chavous et al., 2003) and that supportive adult relationships enhance youth engagement and ability to thrive (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2011).

Students presented their findings during a town hall meeting with parents and community members and engaged participants in co-dreaming actionable solutions. This community dialogue generated qualitative data that students documented and later analyzed to identify emerging themes and strategies. Community priorities included

increasing student voice in decision-making and affirming cultural identities through creative expression within and beyond school settings (Rivera, 2023).

Students then shared their recommendations with the school board, superintendent, and city council. While stakeholders initially expressed support, challenges such as leadership turnover and insufficient infrastructure initially hindered consistent implementation (Rivera, 2023). Nevertheless, the students' findings prompted one city council member, who also served as a middle school principal, to apply CWB principles and student- and community-driven solutions in his school context. Although district-wide progress stalled for 18 months, students persisted in their advocacy, hosting cultural events rooted in Hip-Hop as a vehicle for healing and empowerment. Through music, spoken word, dance, graffiti, and visual art, they continued to reach a broad audience, including local leaders, to support holistic needs in culturally relevant ways.

A turning point occurred when the former principal became superintendent of the district in Paseo Robelita. Drawing on his school-based experience with CWB and on research documenting its implementation by education leaders (Rivera, 2023), he emphasized staff wellbeing as an essential step to supporting youth. With support from researchers and consultants, he initiated a district-wide process in which staff co-designed, administered, and analyzed a wellbeing survey. Staff was then organized into small groups where they reviewed the findings and engaged with empirically validated strategies for improving workplace wellbeing. Educators in these small groups also proposed practice-based policy and program ideas, which were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. Staff subsequently voted on which strategies, both evidence based practice and practice-based evidence, should be prioritized for implementation the following year. Leadership observed that engaging staff in this process and centering their wellbeing created a foundation for more authentic student voice and wellbeing support later on, strengthening the foundation for system-wide improvement cycles using metrics that mattered to each stakeholder (Personal communication, March 15, 2025).

To sustain these efforts, the superintendent established a Well-Being Department led by a full-time director. The department coordinates ongoing improvement cycles by gathering and analyzing student, parent, and staff data, using metrics identified by each group as central to their wellbeing to inform priorities, revise policies and practices, and monitor progress. This embedded infrastructure was intentionally designed to maintain CWB practices even amid leadership transitions. The district's experience offers a promising model for integrating well-being and equity into educational systems and provides valuable insights for systemic SEL implementation.

7. Discussion of the case studies

These case studies provide critical insights into the intersection of purpose, process, impact, and sustainability when applying a CWB paradigm to a systemic approach to SEL. Specifically, they illustrate systemic and cultural shifts that align with a four-pronged approach to systemic SEL to maximize equity, impact, and sustainability.

Developing foundational support and a plan. The case of Kia Aroha Campus exemplifies how integrating community voices into the foundational support of systemic SEL can drive both equity and academic success. System leaders institutionalized community-defined success metrics by embedding them into policies, job descriptions, lesson rubrics, and evaluation frameworks, demonstrating a direct connection between equity goals and systemic change. By collaborating with parents and the broader community, Kia Aroha expanded the definition of success beyond conventional academic outcomes, such as literacy and numeracy, to include cultural identity, native language fluency, healing, and relational and ecological responsibility. This holistic approach reflects the CWB paradigm in action, illustrating how culturally sustaining practices not only foster well-being but also

contribute to strong academic outcomes (Milne, 2017).

This case supports Jagers et al.'s (2021) assertion that authentic partnerships among families, school staff, and communities are essential for fostering young people's holistic development. Moreover, Kia Aroha's approach demonstrates that engaging parents and community members early in the systemic planning process not only promotes short-term equity gains but may also sustain long-term academic success. The impact of this model is evident in students' high graduation rates, college matriculation, and participation in original research presentations at national and international conferences (Milne, 2017). This demonstrated success highlights the necessity of centering parents' and community members' voices in educational planning from the outset, especially in the design and implementation of SEL and well-being initiatives.

Strengthening adult SEL and capacity. In the case of Paseo Robelita, the district demonstrated how framing SEL within the semantics of "well-being" and "building a culture of love" enabled the implementation of transformative practices, even within a conservative political context. The case also highlights a significant insight: educators cannot authentically support students' holistic well-being if they are not supported in their own well-being (Rivera, 2023). Garcia (2019) also underscores this insight - that while much of the healing work targets youth, educators also need support for their mental health and well-being. Research affirms that supporting educators' mental health enhances both their well-being and students' academic success (Hirshberg et al., 2022).

Rivera (2023) found that educators, particularly staff of color, wished to identify and prioritize well-being metrics meaningful to their experiences and cultural contexts. This aligns with research indicating that staff of color face higher burnout rates than their white counterparts, despite being highly valued by students (Kohli et al., 2022). Supporting adult SEL therefore requires creating opportunities for educators to articulate the competencies and culturally grounded practices they identify as most supportive of their mental, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being, and to meaningfully implement those practices across schools and districts.

Promoting SEL for students. The Kia Aroha case further illustrates how aligning efforts with community-defined success metrics can foster holistic student development. The integration of culturally sustaining practices and community-responsive engagement into programming supported students' academic success while fostering holistic well-being. These practices align with transformative SEL principles and illustrate how approaches such as YPAR can operationalize tSEL efforts across classrooms, schools, homes, and communities (Jagers et al., 2021; Owens et al., 2022; Ozer, Shapiro, & Duarte, 2021). The Kia Aroha case underscores the importance of aligning SEL implementation with community-defined outcomes to ensure that pedagogy, programming, and evaluation remain transformative and responsive to community priorities.

Practicing Continuous Improvement. The Paseo Robelita case highlights the importance of data-driven decision-making in sustaining systemic SEL efforts, particularly in politically conservative contexts. By framing SEL within the language of well-being, a youth-led well-being survey garnered support from district leaders; including those initially hostile to SEL and critical discourse. Students presented their findings at district and municipal levels, demonstrating that locally relevant data can be a powerful tool for advancing transformative practices under the auspices of wellbeing; even in socially and politically tumultuous contexts.

For SEL efforts to be sustainable and impactful, stakeholders, especially youth, parents, and staff, must have ownership over the metrics used to assess their well-being. When data collection is community-centered and meaningful, SEL initiatives can align more effectively with local priorities. These case studies also emphasize the need for infrastructure that enables ongoing stakeholder engagement. As seen in Paseo Robelita, the absence of such structures can marginalize youth

and community voices and inhibit systemic improvement.

Building on Ishimaru et al.'s (2019) concept of social dreaming, the Paseo Robelita case underscores the transformative potential of involving communities in identifying solutions not visible to system insiders. To this end, combining quantitative measures of well-being with qualitative insights may help ensure that continuous improvement efforts remain responsive, inclusive, and culturally sustaining.

Taken together, these cases demonstrate the importance of infrastructure that facilitates authentic collaboration and iterative feedback. They also highlight how semantics: such as framing efforts around "well-being" or "a culture of love", can bolster equity-focused initiatives even in conservative contexts. Centering the voices of youth, parents, staff, and community members makes such initiatives more resilient, especially when supported by meaningful data and designed for sustainability.

8. Implications for research, policy, and practice

Research implications. Applying the CWB paradigm to SEL reveals new directions for inquiry. These case studies underscore the importance of documenting strategies generated through youth and community engagement and evaluating their systemic impact. Longitudinal research could assess the sustainability of such strategies amidst leadership turnover. Comparative studies examining locally defined or locally developed SEL solutions in contrast to externally imposed interventions could yield important insights into community-driven efficacy. Metrics such as changes in student emotional competence, parental involvement rates, disciplinary actions, GPA, and graduation rates could provide robust evaluation tools for such research.

Research could also explore how community-defined success metrics shape and sustain SEL programs. Applying the principles of reality pedagogy (Emdin, 2011), rooted in the specific cultural nuances of each locale, could reveal ways to engage youth in contextually meaningful SEL. Further, studies might explore the impact of designing for local spread, rather than national scale, as a model of cultural sustainability and responsiveness.

Practice implications. In practice, CWB emphasizes aligning SEL with community voice and metrics of success. These case studies show how engaging parents, youth, and community members can shape culturally responsive pedagogies, programming, and policy. Kia Aroha's integration of language fluency, cultural identity, and well-being into the curriculum demonstrates the potential of culturally affirming practices to guide systemic SEL.

Pedagogical strategies such as Project-Based Learning (PBL) and Critical Service Learning (CSL), widely discussed in SEL literature (Jagers et al., 2021; McKay-Jackson, 2014; Ozer et al., 2021), and implemented at Kia Aroha, extend SEL beyond the classroom. These approaches create reciprocal pathways between schools and communities, ensuring SEL is both rigorous and community responsive.

Practitioners should consider how Hip-Hop pedagogy, rooted in asset-based, community-informed models, can support student engagement and critical reflection. For example, Slaten et al. (2016) found that a Hip-Hop-based SEL curriculum in Chicago empowered youth of color in an alternative school to build community, explore cultural assets, and engage in critical service learning. Students expressed a desire for similar engagement across other academic areas. Such research suggests that localized and culturally relevant programming may ensure SEL resonates with and serves the communities it intends to support.

Moreover, education leaders must prioritize staff well-being, as research consistently demonstrates that educators' health directly shapes their capacity to support students (Harding et al., 2019). In Paseo Robelita, insufficient institutional support for staff well-being, particularly for educators of color, hindered educators' ability to fully meet the well-being needs of their students (Rivera, 2023). Similarly, Pizarro and Kohli (2018) found that racially hostile environments significantly deteriorate the well-being of educators of color. To counter such

realities, studies indicate that strategies such as creating identity affirming spaces, integrating healing-centered practices, and engaging in sustained anti-racist professional development can help foster educator resilience and capacity (Garcia, 2019; Irby, 2021; Kohli, 2018; Pizarro & Kohli, 2020). Additional considerations for practice include centering educator voice in shaping professional development and planning processes, which has also been shown to bolster belonging, reduce burnout, and improve well-being outcomes (Haim-Litevsky, Komemi, & Lipskaya-Velikovsky, 2023).

Policy implications. The disability rights slogan “Nothing about us without us” is especially relevant to SEL policy. Co-created policies developed in partnership with community members may help operationalize equity and elevate historically marginalized voices, thereby enhancing policy relevance, impact, and successful implementation. When aligned with metrics that matter to the community, these policies can reflect cultural identity, relational responsibility, and well-being more fully, as demonstrated in Kia Aroha’s model.

Policy must also support infrastructure for continuous engagement, including youth-led surveys, participatory research, and embedded feedback loops. Tools like town halls, digital platforms, and well-being committees can help ensure SEL remains grounded in lived experience. Additionally, framing initiatives around well-being and cultural relevance, as in Paseo Robelita’s “culture of love”, may secure broader support in socially and politically contentious contexts. Framing these efforts as being focused on wellbeing, may further strengthen resilience and advance SEL equity goals despite potential political opposition.

9. Conclusion

When examined through the lens of CWB, systemic SEL presents both an opportunity and a challenge: to move beyond traditional, performance-based success metrics and instead embrace a transformative, equity-centered approach that prioritizes inclusion, community-driven priorities, and holistic well-being. The cases of Kia Aroha Campus and Paseo Robelita Unified School District illustrate how centering youth and community voices in defining success allows SEL initiatives to better align with cultural, social, and collective well-being, thereby creating the conditions necessary for both students and staff to thrive. These examples demonstrate that reimagining education’s purpose, one that prioritizes holistic flourishing over economic or political outcomes, may yield meaningful and sustainable improvements, even in contexts constrained by systemic barriers or socially or politically tumultuous climates.

For SEL to realize its full transformative potential, educational systems must adopt practices that foreground authentic collaboration, co-creation, and iterative improvement in ways that place youth, parents, and communities at the center of decision-making. This requires redefining success metrics to reflect local priorities, supporting educators’ well-being, and embedding sustainable infrastructure to ensure long-term community engagement. By adopting a CWB-informed approach, systemic SEL can evolve into a powerful mechanism for fostering equity and resilience, addressing mental health and racial trauma while equipping students not only to thrive individually but also to contribute to collective well-being and social justice. Research underscores that reconnecting communities of color with cultural practices fosters both healing and resilience (Chávez-Dueñas et al., 2019; Comas-Díaz, 2019), reinforcing the need for SEL efforts to be culturally sustaining.

This vision of education reaffirms its role as a space for liberation and healing, honoring the voices of youth, parents, and communities. Furthermore, it highlights a potential path forward in ensuring SEL’s adaptability, transformative impact, and resilience even in the face of political and systemic challenges. This commitment to collective resilience and sustainability pays tribute to the life and legacy of Dr. Roger Weissberg, whose contributions have impacted, and continue to inspire these transformative efforts for generations to come.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the manuscript preparation process

During the preparation of this work the author used Open AI in order to format the references into APA 7 format, and to aid in light editing including grammar, punctuation, and spelling. After using this tool/service, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the published article.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Roberto Rivera: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization.

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