

Early Education and Development

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/heed20

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To cite this article: Akiko Hayashi, Jeffrey Liew, Samantha Dyanne Aguilar, Juliet M. Nyanamba & Yingying Zhao (2022): Embodied and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in Early Childhood: Situating Culturally Relevant SEL in Asian, African, and North American Contexts, Early Education and Development, DOI: 10.1080/10409289.2021.2024062

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2021.2024062

Published online: 05 Jan 2022.

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EARLY EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT
https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2021.2024062

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Embodied and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in Early Childhood: Situating Culturally Relevant SEL in Asian, African, and North American Contexts

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ABSTRACT

School-based Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programs emerged in North America and have not traditionally focused on embodied learning processes that are situated in the learners' contexts and lived experiences. Thus, we present evidence and advance the case that transferable social-emotional competencies are inherently culturally responsive or situated in learners' authentic experiences and are inherently embodied. We also introduce a conceptual model grounded in bioecological and embodied theoretical frameworks to help guide future research and practice for culturally relevant SEL. *Research findings*: We used parts of the scoping review methodology to search and screen the published empirical literature on SEL and embodiedlearning. Findings highlight the increase in SEL researchover the past 2 decades but with extremely limited work done outside of North America, particularly in Japan and South Africa. Consequently, we explored what culturally responsive, situated, and embodied SEL would look like across three different cultural contexts (i.e., in North America, Japan, and South Africa). *Practice or Policy*: While the principles, goals, and key skills of SEL might apply to most or even all cultures, an emic approach where culture-specific values, beliefs, or customs drive the development and implementation of SEL curriculum, and incorporates the meaningful inclusion of key community members is needed to be effective for specific groups of students. To implement and facilitate effective SEL programs within diverse and multicultural settings, policies and practices related to SEL curriculum need to consider the backgrounds and needs of the children, families, and communities that are being served.

Social emotional learning (SEL) skills have been proposed as foundational for all students' school and life success regardless of their geographic location, with school-based SEL programs or interventions as a method to ensure that all students attain social-emotional skills that are part of SEL (Durlak et al., 2011). Key SEL skills, consisting of self-awareness, self-regulation or self-management, social awareness, responsible decision making, and relationships skills, have shown to contribute to children's school readiness, academic success, and achievement (Denham & Brown, 2010; Liew & McTigue, 2010). However, school-based SEL programs emerged in North America and have not traditionally focused on embodied learning processes situated in the learners' contexts and lived experiences. In this paper, we advance the case that SEL skills are inherently culturally responsive or situated in learners' authentic experiences, and SEL skills are inherently embodied. Given that there have been few empirical studies that examined SEL in Japan and Africa, we explore potential SEL approaches and outcome goals that are

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contextualized in the sociocultural values and practices of Japan and Africa and also examine culturally responsive SEL approaches in North American multicultural early education contexts. We also introduce a conceptual model grounded in bioecological and embodied theoretical frameworks and offer recommendations to spark and advance future research and practice for culturally relevant SEL. We conclude by exploring implications for policy and practice regarding SEL curriculum and programs for learners from diverse sociocultural and socioeconomic backgrounds and geographic regions.

The term "social and emotional learning" or SEL and the establishment of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was formed in 1994, with SEL referring to explicit instruction and learning approaches that help students acquire skills and attitudes in five competency domains of self-awareness, self-management (e.g., self-regulation), relationships skills, social awareness and responsible decision making, all of which are noted as important for short- and long-term academic success and positive social and behavioral adjustment (Weissberg et al., 2015). In 2020, CASEL updated their definition of SEL to emphasize educational equity through authentic school-family-community partnerships to co-create rigorous and meaningful curriculum and instruction that contribute to safe, healthy, and communities (Niemi, 2020; also see Mahoney et al., 2020). This shift and emphasis for SEL to address educational equity by including families and communities in the design of authentic and meaningful curriculum for students in specific communities is consistent with situated and embodied learning approaches, defined as learning through engagement in "authentic activities, contexts, and cultures of the learners" (Liew, Erbeli et al., 2020, p. 645). Furthermore, when SEL programs and interventions do not take learners' sociocultural contexts nor their neurobiological and behavioral assets or vulnerabilities (i.e., children's executive functioning abilities and temperament traits, including possible morphological, neurophysiological, biochemical, and metabolic phenotypes) into consideration, SEL can inadvertently champion or problematize social, emotional, and behavioral skills that are common among specific, particularly minoritized or marginalized, groups of children and youth in society.

Existing Literature on SEL and Embodied Learning

While school-based SEL programs and interventions have been implemented and studied for several decades, the majority of these were in North American contexts. A systematic review of school-based SEL interventions in urban schools conducted by McCallops et al. (2019) focused on the intervention studies conducted during the second decade of the 21st century. Among these studies, McCallops et al. (2019) identified 51 interventions with 38 of them (approximately 75%) conducted in the United States, four in the United Kingdom, three in Australia, two in Spain, one in Canada, one in China, one in Vietnam, and one in Portugal. Notably, no intervention studies in Japan or South Africa were identified in this systematic review even though social and emotional development in early childhood is highly valued in Japanese (Hayashi et al., 2009) and South African (Goldschmidt & Pedro, 2020) societies. While 78% of the studies in the systematic review were conducted in the United States, only five of the 51 studies (less than 10%) were classified as culturally responsive SEL interventions and none of the interventions addressed discrimination based on differential treatment or inequalities among members in society.

Given that there were no school-based SEL intervention studies conducted in Japan or South Africa (McCallops et al., 2019) and the updated definition of SEL in 2020 to emphasize educational equity, we used parts of the scoping review methodology to search and screen the published empirical literature on SEL and embodied learning. Specifically, we aimed to provide an overview of the published research on SEL and embodied learning in Japanese, African, and North American multicultural early education contexts. To capture a broad range of literature on the specific topic, key terms such as embodied learning, social-emotional learning (SEL), early childhood, children, kindergarten, primary school, culturally relevant, Asian (Japanese), African (South Africa), and North American (US and Canada) were identified.

Table 1. Distribution of studies by year.

Year	Frequency	Percentage %
Pre 2000s	2	5
2001–2005	4	10
2006–2010	6	15
2011–2015	15	35
2016–2021	15	35
Total	42	100

Table 2. Distribution of studies by location.

Location	Frequency	Percentage %
South Africa	0	0
Japan	2	5
North America	40	95
Total	42	100

To include publications on SEL and embodied learning related to not only North American but also Asian or African contexts, APA PsychoInfo was utilized as this database includes interdisciplinary and international or worldwide behavioral and social science research and literature. The initial search (n = 617) produced 107 duplicate articles that were then removed prior to the title and abstract screening (n = 510). In order for articles to be included, they must meet the criteria of specific study location (i.e., Japan, Africa, or North America), sample age (average age of 8 years or younger, i.e., early to middle childhood), and be an empirical study. Article titles and abstracts were double screened and excluded based on the previously outlined criteria (i.e., study location, average age of sample, and empirical study). The first screening of the articles resulted in a total of 133 studies for the full-text analysis. After the full-text analysis, 42 articles were included in the final review of the literature.

Worth noting is that though multiple articles were relevant to SEL, many did not meet the formerly mentioned criteria for inclusion in the final review, and thus did not align with the purpose of the present paper. In particular, several articles examined or measured one of the five competency domains (i.e., self-awareness, self-management, relationships skills, social awareness, and responsible decision making) included in CASEL's definition of SEL, but did not use, include, or define the term social-emotional learning in the article. Additionally, many articles focused on school readiness that emphasized social-emotional competence as a necessary skill but did not explicitly define what domains should be captured within these competencies.

Findings from our review of the extant literature are consistent with those from McCallops et al. (2019) and highlight the increase in SEL research over the past 2 decades (see Table 1) with extremely limited SEL research in areas outside of North America, particularly Japan and South Africa (see Table 2). In addition, our review attests to how limited the extant SEL literature is on work that integrates embodied learning or culturally relevant practices. Given the limited work on culturally relevant and embodied SEL, and our aim to explore potential SEL approaches and outcome goals that are contextualized in the sociocultural values and practices and examine culturally responsive SEL approaches, we discuss in the following sections what culturally relevant and embodied SEL could look like not only in North America (i.e., in the U.S. and Canada), but also in Japan and South Africa.

A Bioecological Systems and Embodied Framework for the Affordances and Development of Social-Emotional Competencies

SEL curriculum and instruction have traditionally been implemented in formal learning environments such as the school or classroom. However, activities and experiences that take place outside of the schools, such as in the home or family and in the community or neighborhood, could be included,

coordinated, and aligned with children's developmental needs and goals to maximize the likelihood that social skills learned in the classroom are relevant to diverse children's lives and transferable across contexts (Divecha & Brackett, 2020; Top et al., 2017).

To understand and to guide research on understanding factors that contribute to transferable social-emotional competencies, we present a conceptual model of culturally relevant and embodied social-emotional learning (SEL) for social emotional competencies that is built on bioecological and embodied theoretical approaches (Figure 1). According to a bioecological systems perspective (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), the development of SEL skills or social-emotional competencies must be understood within the interconnected societal and environmental influences on children and youth. Such interconnected influences are represented by subsystems that are nested within one another. These nested subsystems include microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, macrosystems, and chronosystems that influence one another to impact children and youth's development and adjustment outcomes. Furthermore, the concepts of *situated and embodied learning* emphasize that deep learning and knowledge transferability happens when learning takes place through authentic activities, context, and cultures of the learners (Liew, Erbeli et al., 2020; also see Gee, 2004; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Consistent with bioecological systems and embodied learning perspectives, we propose that the interconnections between the home and family, the school, and the community and neighborhood contexts, along with the goodness of fit of individuals' neurobiological and behavioral assets and vulnerabilities in those interconnected contexts, serve as resources that dynamically afford individuals with opportunities and lived experiences (or lack thereof) to engage in deep and embodied social-emotional learning, resulting in the development of transferable social-emotional competencies (see Figure 1). Our model of culturally relevant and embodied social-emotional learning (SEL) for social-emotional competencies is consistent with CASEL's Framework for Systemic Social and Emotional Learning (see Borowski, 2019) that highlights five SEL competencies (i.e., self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making) promoted through multiple nested contexts (i.e., homes and communities, schools, classrooms). However, our

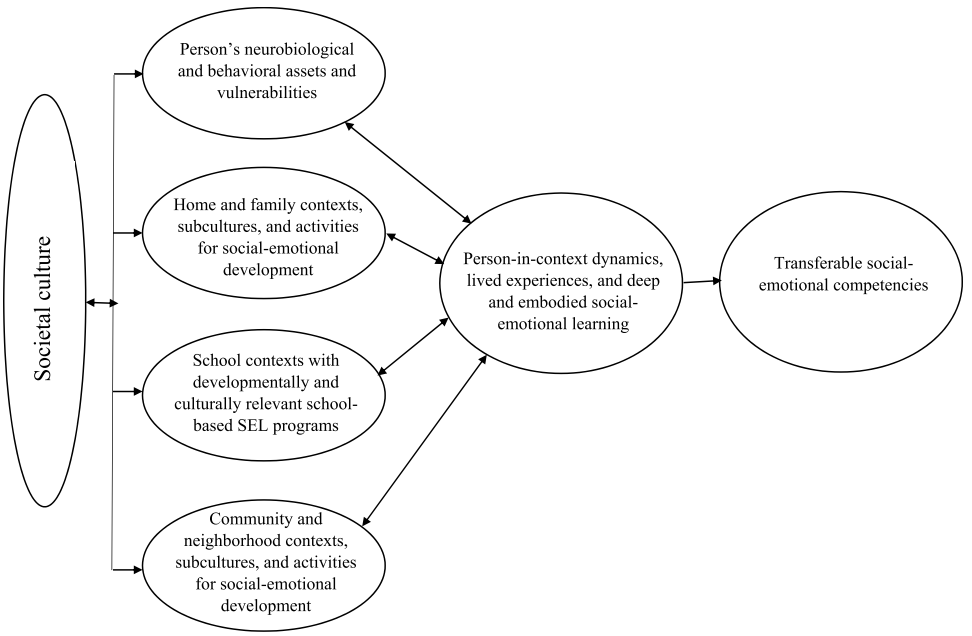


Figure 1. Conceptual model of culturally relevant and embodied social-emotional learning (SEL) for social-emotional competencies.

model adds value and pushes the field forward by emphasizing the need to consider culture and the importance of situated and embodied learning if we want the SEL competencies that are learned in the school and classroom to be transferable or applied in other contexts.

Beliefs about Social-Emotional Development across Sociocultural Contexts

In North America, parents and teachers frequently have mental models of the abilities or skills young children need to effectively engage with others and achieve in school that are partly shaped by societal culture, but also the subcultures of people's home, school, and communities (see Figure 1). *Societal culture* is defined as "sharedness" in the value and belief systems among group members of a societal group (Hofstede, 2000; Schwartz, 2014). Parents and teachers in North America (i.e., the United States and Canada) typically view positive emotional expressiveness, enthusiasm, and ability to regulate emotions and behaviors as behavioral markers of children's school readiness and social-emotional competence (Denham, 2006; Schonert-Reichl, 2019). Similarly, parents and teachers in Japan view social-emotional development and social-emotional competencies as important developmental tasks in early childhood. In Japan, there is widespread agreement among Japanese policymakers, teachers, and parents that the most important function of the Japanese preschool is to support children's learning in how to function as members of society. While some preschools in Japan emphasize academic preparation (Holloway, 2000), they are clearly in the minority (Oda & Mori, 2006). Just as in North America and Japan where the home, school, and community contexts have an influence on children's development of social-emotional competencies through parents, teachers, and community officials or leaders, South African stakeholders (i.e., parents, teachers, and health officials) acknowledge that early social-emotional development is vital for school readiness and that collaboration and cooperation between stakeholders fosters optimal development (Goldschmidt & Pedro, 2020; Munnik & Smith, 2019). Whereas there is no formal SEL curriculum taught in South African schools, Early Childhood Development (ECD) programs cater to the physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development of a child from conception up until the age of six, offering a course (Life Orientation) that promotes SEL (Ashley-Cooper et al., 2019, p. 87).

Social and emotional skills, including the ability to send and receive emotional messages and experience emotions, are basic skills needed for all members of a social group in any culture to effectively coexist and interact with group members (Halberstadt et al., 2001). Research has shown that while there are some aspects of emotionality that are similar or the same across cultures (Eisenberg et al., 2006), there are also culture-specific or culture-bound ways of feeling, showing one's feelings, and responding to the feelings of others (Lebra, 1976; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Examples of culture-specific or culture-bound social and emotional behaviors are well described in the psychological anthropological literature on acculturation (e.g., by Briggs, 1999; Hayashi et al., 2009) and in some conceptualizations of observational learning. For example, Gaskins and Paradise (2009) suggest that children learn culturally structured rules about social behavior and social roles, in large part by observing the interactions that go on around them (i.e., through vicarious reinforcement).

Situated and Embodied Learning Processes in Early Childhood

Situated and embodied learning can include physical or virtual experiences that involve perceptual, affective or experiential, somatosensory, and motoric processes (Gee, 2004; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Beginning as early as infancy, physical or body movement is one of our most basic or primary modes of affecting change in, and for learning about our environments. Research using the mobile paradigm has shown the critical role of body movement in infants' exploratory and associative learning, as well as memory (Rovee & Rovee, 1969). The mobile paradigm involves having infants lay supine with their wrists, arms, and/or ankles connected to a mobile so that voluntary arm or leg movements would cause movement of the mobile (e.g., Watanabe & Taga, 2009). Through their

body movements, infants learn that they can cause a change in their environment. Although rudimentary, this type of associative learning acquired through physical actions or body movements situated in contexts that are familiar to many infants can be considered one example of situated and embodied learning that occurs as early as infancy.

However, situated and embodied learning is not confined to only embodied cognition processes. We view situated and embodied learning processes as inclusive of processes such as situated and embodied motivation, and emotions that are important for learning (e.g., Niedenthal, 2007; Wilson, 2002). Particularly for social emotional learning, situated and embodied learning occurs when learners interact with others in physical or virtual environments to engage in activities and practices that are authentic and culturally responsive. Thus, teachers who intentionally align and simulate learning activities and learning contexts to real-life contexts will increase the likelihood for deep learning, transference, and application of the skills attained.

Education in the 21st century, particularly since the era of COVID-19, includes learning in virtual environments that particularly call upon learners' perceptual and affective or experiential processes. These processes could be considered akin to the embodied learning concepts of "legitimate peripheral participation," "observational learning," and "intent participation." Rogoff et al. (2003) described intent participation as "keenly observing and listening in anticipation of or in the process of engaging in an endeavor" (p. 176). Gaskins and Paradise (2009) wrote, "Observational learning typically occurs in familiar contexts in which one person performs an activity while another person, who knows less, watches them do it" (p. 85). Lave and Wenger (1991) defined legitimate peripheral participation as active engagement in the meaning of learning "configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a socio-cultural practice" (p. 29). These types of observational and participatory learning involve the integration of perceptual, cognitive, affective, and experiential processes that contribute to meaning-making. However, in the domains of social-emotional competencies, situated and embodied learning processes have received little to no attention in the scientific literature to date. We discuss how situated and embodied learning processes could be incorporated into social emotional learning in various geographic locations and cultures around the world, namely in North American, Japan, and South Africa.

SEL and Embodied Learning in North American Sociocultural Contexts

American and Canadian societies at large are characterized as having highly individualist cultures (Oyserman et al., 2002). Consistent with a tendency toward individualism, in North American early education settings, social competence is considered one of the major markers of positive social emotional development and school readiness. Social competence is gauged through observable interactions, behaviors, and engagement that is congruent with the mainstream values and norms (Chen & French, 2008; Denham, 2006; Eisenberg et al., 2006).

The dominant sociocultural norms in North America are prevalent in the salient values in the early education setting. For example, assertiveness and leadership skills are highly valued in North America (e.g., the U.S. and Canada), which are typically considered highly individualistic social assets. Consistent with the cultural orientation toward individualism, many North American preschool teachers engage children in activities and lessons that promote independence, achievement, and creativity (Tamis-lemonda et al., 2008). These values are communicated to young children in activities such as when students are assigned classroom jobs and leadership roles. These role assignments socialize and encourage young children to assert their individuality and uniqueness, and to develop autonomy. These values are further reflected in the embodied practices and activities in the North American early education classroom.

The concept of collaborative preschool play inherently involves situated and embodied learning. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) set standards for developmentally appropriate practices for early educational programs in the U.S. One area that NAEYC emphasizes is the importance of peer interactive play (National Association for the

Education of Young Children (NAEYC), 2005). Through cooperative constructive play, children interact with each other in a manner that typically involves physical movements and emotional reactions, such as screaming, laughing, and role assignment (Brownell, 2011; Russ & Dillon, 2011). Children focus on manipulating objects (e.g., creating, building, or inventing) through intentional joint efforts toward a common goal (Houser et al., 2016). The joint effort needed to participate in constructive play demands children to be actively engaged in communicating with their peers while simultaneously constructing an understanding of each person's role in the collaboration (De Lisi & Golbeck, 1999). Example activities can include building a puzzle together, creating art together, or participating in online multiplayer interactive games. This type of play allows for collaborations where children engage in deep and embodied learning of social and problem-solving skills that are likely to be transferred to a variety of contexts outside of the classroom (see Figure 1). Furthermore, this type of collaborative and embodied learning of social-emotional skills can be integrated into literacy or math learning (e.g., Gable et al., 2020).

Contextualizing SEL Skills in North American Cultures

Though North American culture has historically leaned toward an individualist orientation, considering the diversity in the U.S. and Canada, there are likely a substantial number of children who are socialized by their parents with heritage cultural values and practices that clash or are dissonant with those of the dominant culture that shapes the definition of what skills and practices are considered socially competent. The projections of ethnic demographic changes in the United States for the early- and mid-21st century indicate that the population's ethnic and racial composition will increase and change exponentially, with multicultural individuals (those who identify with two or more racial/ethnic groups) projected to be the fastest-growing category over the next several generations (Vespa et al., 2020). These multiracial children and youth will continue to enter the U.S. school system, making these schools and classrooms the most culturally and ethnically diverse in U.S. history. Similarly, Canada is a multicultural society, consisting of people from British, French or other European origins, as well as substantial growth of "visible minorities," such as people of Asian and African origins (Li, 2000). Multiculturalism is central to Canadian national policy and the education systems, and the Canadian metaphor of "cultural mosaic" is used to emphasize the value of having people integrate into Canadian society while retaining, celebrating, and valuing the diversity of their identities, cultures, ethnicities, histories, and experiences (Campbell, 2021; Schwartz et al., 2014).

Children from homes that emphasize a collectivistic orientation may have parents who focus socialization on showing respect and obedience to adults or authority figures, and to prioritize group harmony over individuality or autonomy (Tamis-Lemonda et al., 2008). For example, Latino and Chinese populations which have increased in North American societies over the past several decades, have cultural values that are frequently considered highly collectivistic. For Latino families in the U.S. and Canada, many children are raised to show *respeto* (i.e., adhering to authority) that signifies to the public that the parents have done a good job socializing their children with *bien educado* (i.e., to be well mannered and act appropriately in or to reflect positively on the family and community). Similarly, in Chinese families in the U.S. and Canada, many parents raise their children to show respect to elders in the family and the community which is consistent with Confucian tenet of *filial piety* (孝). Proper public behaviors and good manners such as showing respect and obedience to elders helps protect one's *face* (*mianzi* or 面子) or personal and family dignity, reputation, honor, or prestige (see, Liew & Zhou, 2022).

SEL and Embodied Learning in Japanese Sociocultural Contexts

While Social Emotional Learning or SEL is a relatively foreign or novel concept in Japan, Japanese parents and early childhood educators highly value and emphasize social-emotional development for young children. In Japanese preschools, social-emotional development is considered and seen as

a set of experiences that are tied to embodied learning processes. Hayashi and Tobin (2015) discussed how activities such as peer play or peer interactions are connected to embodied emotions and embodied learning in Japanese preschools. Japanese young children frequently transfer forms of emotional exchange learned at home with their family members to their interactions with their classmates in preschool. The embodiment of emotions can be observed when children engage in peer aggression in the classroom or on the playground, including behaviors such as biting, screaming, hitting, kicking, or fighting.

For example, young children frequently engage in play activities in the preschool classroom. When two children want to play with the same toy during playtime, it is not uncommon to see children fight over that toy. This type of peer interaction is often full of embodied emotions. Imagine the two children shoving each other and falling and rolling around on the floor, followed by the teacher rushing over to separate the two and then the children wiping away their tears before apologizing and hugging one another as a resolution to this interpersonal conflict. This scenario of peer aggression and conflict resolution in the classroom highlights embodied cognitions and embodied emotions from the confluence of the perceptual, cognitive, affective, and experiential experiences (e.g., sights, sounds, kinesthesia, and smells) afforded by such persons in context interactions.

What may be less readily apparent is how these interactions provide an experience of embodied learning not only for the protagonists, but also for the bystanders who observe and participate from the periphery. Rather than being passive, the *gyarari* (ギャラリー) children (translated as the gallery with spectators or observers) are engaged in "legitimate peripheral participation." However, unlike an audience member at a show (e.g., movie or live theater) who passively observes and is detached or not part of the scenario in the show, the members of the *gyarari* are active participants who can choose to intervene or alter the course of the situation, sometimes approaching close enough to touch the protagonists, sometimes moving back, and sometimes imitating with their bodies the protagonists' movements.

Social-Emotional Competencies in Japanese Culture

Japanese preschool teachers emphasize giving children experiences not only of feelings such as sadness, anger, and frustration, but also of feelings that are more directly sensory, such as hunger, tiredness, and being cold, dirty, and wet. As Eyal Ben-Ari (1997) and Walsh (2002, 2004) have emphasized, there is a premium in Japanese preschools on embodied experiences including running, jumping, and climbing; fighting; engaging with the natural world; and gathering so close together that bodies touch, which Ben-Ari calls "grouping" that is consistent with Japanese collectivist culture. This closeness or "grouping" is also reflected in the practice of co-sleeping, where parents and children sleep in sensory proximity to one other. Through these activities and practices, children develop a sense of membership in Japanese society.

Hayashi and Tobin (2015) described several embodied interactions among children in the preschool classrooms as part of socialization and emotional development. One of the important socialization approaches for Japanese children is to match their behavior to contexts they encounter in their everyday experiences in preschool. In all cultures, people are expected to adjust their behavior to specific contexts. However, not all cultures mark contexts as explicitly as is the case in Japan, or require such dramatic shifts in comportment. Nancy Rosenberger (1989) observed that in Japan, "central to movement among modes of self is the principle of contextualization; by moving among contexts, Japanese can shift among modes of self-presentation. Contexts can change according to place, time, and/or social group" (p. 99).

Contextualizing SEL Skills in Japanese Culture

What Japanese children need to learn is not simply a formality but alterations of conduct in different situations (e.g., self-awareness, self-management, and social-awareness skills): in formal and informal contexts; with insiders and with outsiders; in different places (temples vs. baths); in different parts of

the same place (front vs. rear doors of houses); and at different times (the ceremonies that open and close events vs. during the events themselves). Japanese employ formal and informal registers, both linguistically and with their bodies. Children are required to identify the context, know what words and bodily movements are appropriate to that context, and then use the appropriate words and movements. Japanese preschools present young children with a variety of temporal, spatial, and situational contexts, calling for a variety of language registers and modes of bodily comportment.

Contexts are *spatial*. Entering a home, temple building, or traditional restaurant in Japan is marked by the removal of shoes and a bow. Children are removing their shoes in the entrance way/entrance hall of the building, and teachers, parents, and children are bowing to greet each other. The school or classroom entranceway marks a divide not only between a literal inside and outside, but also between children's sense of being at home and being at preschool, and between the comportments that each of these contexts requires. Contexts are also *temporal*. Changes in seasons are clearly defined in Japan, with, for example, summer ending and fall beginning on October 1. This date marks a series of transitions including a change from summer to fall clothing and a change from chilled to warm tea. The preschool curriculum follows this seasonal variation, with changes in school decorations, uniforms, and an emphasis on the observances of holidays, such as the sports festival in May and the rice-planting festival in June, occasions that call for both more formal and more informal bodily comportment than usual. Contexts are also *relational*. When addressing someone younger, different language and postures are used than those for addressing one's senior. We see this in the structured mixed-age activities at preschool. Among age mates, role and status differences come into play during periods of the day when some children take on the role of class monitor.

Another good example of embodied learning as a process of socialization in Japanese preschool is the social practice of bowing. Japanese people bow in a variety of situations, for a variety of reasons, and in a variety of ways. People bow to greet each other on the street, to show gratitude, respect, or apology. Learning how to bow is not only an exercise in coordinating bodily movements and learning how to bend one's back, shoulders, and head in synchrony. The practice of bowing in Japan involves learning when to bow, and just how far to bend in accordance with specific contexts and to communicate specific meaning and social relationships. For example, children learn to perform a deep bow in front of a temple altar or person of status from whom one wants a favor and to perform a slight nodding and dipping motion when greeting a friend. Other variations include the hand position during the bow, with hands on thighs, clasped in front at the waist, or held behind one's back. This modulation of bowing and of other bodily techniques is based on context, sociocultural meaning, and interpersonal relationships. In essence, knowing and showing how to bow in accordance with Japanese social norms and customs is an example of person-in-context dynamics at work, enabling individuals to apply or transfer those skills to a variety of situations or contexts (see Figure 1). Thus, SEL curriculum and programs that are developed and implemented need to consider what attitudes, skills, and practices constitute social-emotional competencies in specific sociocultural contexts.

SEL and Embodied Learning in South African Sociocultural Contexts

Even though there has not been any formal or structured SEL curriculum implemented in South African schools, their high regard for children's social-emotional development is observed in early childhood development (ECD) program components and in stakeholders' expectations for children's development (e.g., Richter et al., 2019). ECD programs are situated in public schools, community facilities, or private homes, involving collaborative partnerships between parents, teachers, and health professionals to support children's overall development. ECD programs were developed in South Africa to narrow the socioeconomic inequality gap that existed in the society at the end of apartheid in 1994 by improving school readiness in all children (Atmore, 2013). According to Atmore (2013), families' access to ECD programs and government support have exponentially increased but there remains a disparity in the quality of programs offered, especially in unregistered centers.

Quality ECD programs have been shown to support social-emotional development by providing optimal learning environments for children to develop or learn social-emotional competencies (Deacon & Rensburg, 2012). Specifically, the quality ECD programs are effective because of the positive interpersonal relationships between the children and the ECD providers (e.g., teachers) who are "tailoring interactions to fit the needs of each child; using responsive language; fostering independence; proactively preventing and redirecting challenging behavior; and responding to a child's needs with warmth and respect"(Ashley-Cooper et al., 2019, p. 91). Whereas research in the South African context has not examined this direct link between quality programs and social-emotional development, a sizable body of research conducted in North America has shown associations between positive school-based interpersonal relationships (e.g., warm and supportive teacher-student relationships) and social-emotional development or school readiness (e.g., Liew et al., 2019; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). In line with our conceptual model (see Figure 1), these quality ECD programs provide school (and sometimes home) contexts with developmentally and culturally relevant programs that support social emotional development.

In essence, ECD programs serve some of the aims of SEL programs by supporting children's social-emotional and school readiness skills. In a study on South African stakeholders' account of early childhood developmental milestones, Dawes et al. (2004) found similarities in the expectations and standards of South Africa and the U.S. In terms of social-emotional development, *social interaction with adults, social interaction with peers, dealing with diversity*, and *social participation* were domains of social development that were valued by stakeholders. As for emotional development, stakeholders identified milestones in *emotional regulation* (Matsuba et al., 2021) and *coping with death and bereavement*, reaching some consensus on when children should exhibit behavior such as "can go and play with a group of friends for a morning without the parent being nearby." However, there are some indicators of social-emotional development that appear unique to the South African context (Goldschmidt & Pedro, 2019). For example, South African children venture and explore without direct adult supervision in their play as indicated by the milestone of "can go and play with a group of friends for a morning without the parent being nearby." In the South African context, this type of behavior is viewed as a sign or indicator of emotional maturity.

Even within the South African context, cross-cultural differences in stakeholders' expectations of social emotional development milestones were seen. For instance, considering children's *social interaction with adults*, black African participants predominantly brought up the need for obedience and respect compared to other cultures. There were also differences in parental expectations depending on SES backgrounds, with low SES children guided into more social responsibility tasks (e.g., house chores, taking care of younger children) than those from the middle class. Similarly, social and emotional competencies were defined differently depending on the cultural context. For instance, some communities outlined the value of boys controlling their emotions (e.g., boys don't cry) and, in these contexts, *emotional self-regulation* and *emotional display rules* were fostered at younger ages. Other groups (e.g., middle-class families) were more comfortable with children expressing their emotions. It is important to note that some indicators of social-emotional development, particularly *coping with death and bereavement*, were salient because of the prevalence of HIV-related deaths in this context. Moreover, the prevalence of HIV cases encourages children's growth in social participation (e.g., taking care of family members).

Essentially, people in the South African context hold children's social emotional development in high esteem and despite not having SEL programs in schools, stakeholders actively promote and look out for milestones as their children mature. Their cultural contexts however, determine which behaviors and milestones are highly regarded and this should be taken into consideration as SEL programming is developed for this context.

Contextualizing SEL Skills in South African Cultures

Looking at some of embodied learning activities in the South African context, the indigenous way of learning in Sub-Saharan Africa supports children's social-emotional development in embodied ways by embedding learning into "family traditions, daily routines and social and community life" (Pence & Nsamenang, 2008, p. 22). Children are often expected to teach themselves or engage in self-directed learning as they participate in social and economic activities which are usually "work-play" in nature. For instance, in rural areas, children are assigned to take out the family's herd to graze. As they do this some children playfully learn to craft slingshots and play hunting games. In this work-play scenario, children develop their motor and visual-spatial skills while grasping lessons that might be useful for future adult roles. Pence and Nsamenang (2008) noted that children "are expected to demonstrate competence and learning at key points of life, but often without direct instruction. The operative approach that facilitates growth in intellectual and functional abilities is not instruction but *participatory pedagogy*." (p. 23).

Chikovore et al. (2012) point out that children's sociocultural environments in South Africa can offer rich opportunities to learn and practice social-emotional skills. For instance, the simple activity of sharing a meal from a single plate teaches children prosocial behavior.

Moreover, they learn the cultural meaning of specific foods and appetite self-regulation (see Liew, Zhou et al., 2020) as they monitor themselves and wait until the very end of the meal to eat meats. Meat is a highlight of supper, and children often eat the starch first. Social awareness (especially showing respect) is developed as they take turns while following the order of seniority. This is an example of culturally responsive and embodied or situated social-emotional learning in the home and family context (see Figure 1). Whereas these social-emotional skills are learned in the informal learning environments of the home, these culturally relevant and authentic activities can be adapted and practiced in the school or formal classroom environment during lunch or snack times to promote social-emotional and embodied learning (Goldschmidt & Pedro, 2019).

Another example of culturally responsive, embodied social-emotional learning is through participation in community-based activities such as storytelling sessions (Chikovore et al., 2012). The stories themselves often support moral or character development, as seen in the sample folktale below:

> A DUTCHMAN was walking by himself and saw Snake lying under a large stone. Snake implored his help; but when she had become free she said, "Now I shall eat you."
>
> *The Man answered, "That is not right. Let us first go to Hare."*
> *When Hare had heard the affair, he said, "It is right."*
> *"No," said the Man, "let us ask Hyena."*
> *Hyena declared the same, saying, "It is right."*
> *"Now let us ask Jackal," said the Man in his despair.*
>
> Jackal answered very slowly and considerately, doubting the whole affair, and demanding to see first the place, and whether the Man was able to lift the stone. Snake lay down, and the Man, to prove the truth of his account, put the stone again over her.
>
> *When she was fast, Jackal said, "Now let her lie there."*
> (Honey, 1910)

In this folktale, children learn about fairness and gratitude, developing their social awareness and responsible decision-making skills. Moreover, South African folktales are told in suspenseful, engaging ways, requiring children to pay attention and follow instructions as they usually involve responses from the children (i.e., antiphony or call-and-response), allowing for culturally relevant and embodied learning. Lastly, Chikovore et al. (2012) state that these group-based forms of learning support the cultural principle of *Ubuntu* (the "capacity in African culture to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony, and humanity in the interests of building and

maintaining community" p. 306) whereas formal schooling tend to teach practices that are more consistent with individualism. The above folktale is an example of a culturally relevant way that South African children learn about interdependence or community instead of turning on or against one another.

In essence, South African ECD programs are tailored to promote SEL, and different stakeholders (e.g., parents, teachers, and health professionals) work collectively to create optimal environments that support social and emotional development for young children that allow them to engage in deep and embodied learning of social-emotional skills that can then be applied or transferred to a variety of situations and contexts (see Figure 1).

Contextualizing SEL Skills in Multicultural Settings

In schools that serve multicultural families, SEL curriculum that focuses on social emotional skills from only the dominant cultural values and goals without inclusion of the values and goals of families from culturally diverse and minoritized or marginalized backgrounds, will not serve the needs of all members in the schools, communities, and society at large. This principle likely applies to schools in any country or any part of the world as heterogeneity of cultural values and norms is salient globally. Thus, context matters and sensitivity to recognizing diversity and educational equity in school children's sociocultural backgrounds is essential in effectively implementing SEL. Socializing children to understand where and when certain social emotional skills that are taught through SEL would be adaptive and appropriate is important. This is aligned with CASEL's updated definition of SEL (Niemi, 2020) that highlights the inclusion of community members as co-creators of shared values, norms, and practices for SEL curriculum through authentic school-family-community partnerships that promote safe, healthy, and just learning and school environments for community members (Mahoney et al., 2020).

For some children, the early education setting may be the first time that they are socially engaged with others from different cultural backgrounds. Particularly for children with immigrant parents or who are bi- or multi-cultural, the preschool is likely a context where they are confronted with the pressures to assimilate to the dominant sociocultural norms or values in order to be socially accepted and viewed as socially appropriate or socially competent (Kowalski, 2003). For these children, they are often expected to participate in practices or activities structured around a culture that does not reflect their lived experiences at home. Furthermore, minority or marginalized children who do not exhibit the expected social emotional skills of the dominant culture are often viewed as socially incompetent or socially deficient. Such attributions foster a cultural deficit perspective and implies that children raised in cultural minority homes come into early education settings under-prepared and in need of remediation or referrals for supplemental programs, because they do not share or were not raised within the mainstream culture (Coll et al., 2000).

The distress and struggle to adapt when faced with different cultural norms than one's own is described as acculturation stress. Studies have shown that acculturation stress is associated with a host of problems at school, including social-emotional, behavioral or conduct, and academic or learning problems (e.g., Schwartz et al., 2007; Suarez-Morales & Lopez, 2009). Furthermore, the well documented negative effects of acculturation stress on minority children and adolescents have been noted as one of the most prevalent risk factors for minority youth development (Li-Grining, 2012; Motti-Stefanidi & Masten, 2017). In an effort to potentially mitigate acculturation stress, preschool teachers work to implement practices, activities, and materials that take into consideration multicultural perspectives (Wright & Masten, 2015), including the use of culturally responsive teaching.

Culturally responsive teaching is the facilitation of culturally relevant educational practices that promotes the learning and engagement of historically underrepresented students.

For educators, teaching in a culturally relevant manner includes the acknowledgment and integration of minority students' cultures within the everyday learning and physical activities of the classroom setting (Garner et al., 2014). The practice of culturally responsive teaching aims to challenge the dominant sociocultural norms of schooling that have historically limited the engagement and success of students of color (Vavrus, 2008). Teachers who practice culturally responsive teaching are expected to be conscious of how the dominant sociocultural norms, attitudes, and beliefs impact the development and perception of minority populations' educational experience. Through the incorporation of culturally responsive teaching, the responsibility of creating culturally diverse and appropriate opportunities that reflect the child's lived experiences becomes the shared responsibility of multiple key members within the education system (e.g., community members, families, teachers, and the child's peers). Furthermore, culturally responsive teaching is not limited to educators' chosen teaching approaches, but also the inclusion of diverse perspectives, behavioral practices, and the bi-directional social interactions between teachers, community members, and students.

Conclusion

In this paper, we advanced the case for how culture and culturally-relevant embodied learning that takes place across the home, school, and community contexts can inform the development of SEL curriculum and SEL instructional approaches or activities that ultimately lead to transferable social-emotional competencies. We presented a model that advances the field by calling for the need to consider culture and embodied learning if SEL skills that are learned in the school and classroom through SEL curriculum or programs can be transferable or applied in other contexts, such as in the home or in the community (see Figure 1). Furthermore, different cultures around the world often have differences in values, beliefs, and norms or customs. Such differences in cultural values, beliefs, norms and customs have implications for what is considered as social competence because social competence is partly or largely defined by observable interactions, behaviors, and engagement that is congruent with the mainstream values and norms (Chen & French, 2008; Denham, 2006; Eisenberg et al., 2006). Even when some cultures share similarities in values, beliefs, or customs, there are frequently culture-specific nuances that distinguish one culture from another. While the principles, goals, and key skills of SEL might apply to most or even all cultures, an emic approach where culture-specific values, beliefs, or customs drive the development and implementation of SEL curriculum, and incorporates the meaningful inclusion of key community members is needed to be effective for specific groups of students (Jagers et al., 2019; Mahoney et al., 2020; Niemi, 2020).

Looking across three different cultural contexts and within each context, we make a case for the imperative to be inclusive of students' or learners' historical and sociocultural context, and their indigenous and embodied learning activities in the design and implementation of SEL programs. Characteristically Japanese embodied learning includes cultural practices such as taking off shoes to enter a room, eating with chopsticks, and bowing. Characteristically South African embodied learning includes common or cultural practices such as exploratory and participatory work-play activities and antiphony or call-and-response during reading or storytelling of folktales. In South Africa, there is racial and ethnic diversity with a complex mix of languages- English, Afrikaans, nine indigenous languages, and five Indian languages (Chikovore et al., 2012). Most South Africans agree that cultural expectations and norms greatly impact the teaching of social-emotional skills to children, and parents from different cultural backgrounds prioritize and teach some skills depending on their cultural values (Munnik & Smith, 2019). Similar to South Africa, the racial and ethnic diversity in North America is prevalent and apparent in the interpersonal experiences within the classroom context.

We highlight two possible practical and policy implications for creating culturally responsive SEL programs from our argument in this paper. One implication is that we should pay attention to sociocultural and historical contexts when we design, implement, and assess SEL curriculum and programs. A one-size-fits-all approach to SEL will not work well across cultures or in multicultural

settings and will not advance educational equity nor contribute to safe and inclusive learning environments and communities. For instance, Marsay et al. (2021) sampled high-school teachers across 4 different African countries (including South Africa) to find out which SEL skills students should use in learning and that will help them successfully transition to the workplace. They found some overlaps in the SEL categories with the CASEL framework (such as decision-making skills) but noted differences in definition and other categories (such as respect skills) that were unique to the African context.

A second implication is that we should leverage the indigenous ways of learning and multi-stakeholder approach that already exists in places, instead of introducing new ways of learning (such as simply transferring Western-based curricula) that seem to go against their cultural values. Explicit transformative SEL curriculum, activities, and facilitation have been implemented to better promote social emotional development within the multicultural classroom setting (Jagers et al., 2019). Culturally responsive teaching approaches in schools have been increasingly adopted to serve the academic and social-emotional learning needs of culturally, racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students. Culturally responsive SEL also requires the meaningful inclusion of community members (e.g., children, parents, and educators) as co-creators of the SEL curriculum based on shared values, norms, and practices (Jagers et al., 2019). Culturally responsive and embodied learning approaches that are aligned with the lived experiences and histories, as well as the authentic activities, contexts, and cultures, of the learners will increase the likelihood that SEL skills will be adopted, retained, and practiced beyond times designated for SEL programming, but applied to other parts of the school day and outside of the school context (Liew, Erbeli et al., 2020). For example, one pedagogical approach is to use music, songs, and dance that come from the learners' culture, which has been found to be an effective culturally responsive and embodied learning approach for SEL. Latino dance activities have been used for SEL with an emphasis on developing respect, effort and persistence, self-regulation, and leadership skills among Latina students (Cook et al., 2016).

We offer a framework (Figure 1) for examination of the bidirectional interactions of societal culture, individual assets and vulnerabilities, environments and contexts in the child's gains within social-emotional domains and advancements in transferability of the learned social-emotional competencies, when developing SEL interventions. The present conceptual model is used to examine the transference of SEL skills in North American, Japan, and South African contexts, however, can and should be adapted to guide SEL curriculum implementation directed for its targeted population as it views the process of attaining and maintaining social-emotional skills as interrelated to an individual's authentic lived experiences. To implement and facilitate effective SEL interventions within diverse and multicultural settings, educators must consider the children, families, and communities they are aiming to serve and their developmental trajectories within the larger society. In conclusion, SEL is centered on the premise that the skills learned through SEL programming will not only improve school climate for all learners, but SEL skills will transfer and be applied in learners' everyday, real-world contexts. Culturally-relevant embodied learning needs to be part of SEL because SEL is very much about the whole child and whole-body experiential learning grounded in real-world, cultural contexts (Diamond, 2010; Liew & McTigue, 2010).

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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