

An unwavering commitment to culturally responsive sustaining education & social emotional learning

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Through an analysis of both SEL and CR-SE practices at an urban school and a social skill building afterschool program conducted through outside support staff, this paper demonstrates the process of providing social-emotional supports with a culturally responsive lens. The authors suggest, without a culturally responsive-sustaining lens, social and emotional supports can lack the trust and connection needed to meet students where they are while acknowledging their unique identities and cultures.

At the Thurgood Marshall Academy Lower School (TMALS), an urban elementary school in Harlem NYC, a school leader in collaboration with an afterschool organization, The Meeting House (TMH), focuses on the social skill building of children through recreation, friendship, and community to support children and families holistically, while meeting their social-emotional needs through a culturally responsive approach. The relationship between TMALS and TMH began in 2017. The outside organization sought to support the school's mission and vision through an expansion of learning and social opportunities for the students. An important aspect of the relationship between the school leader and the afterschool social skill program is the involvement of clinical social workers as well as community and volunteer educators and teaching artists. TMALS is a small elementary school with approximately 200 students. Its student body is 97% Black and Brown students and 82% of its students qualify for FRPL. Though its special education population is 25%, its small enrollment size has resulted in a reduced budget and staff designated to meet the needs of these students. The Meeting House Afterschool Program is a nonprofit organization that provides afterschool programming focused on social-emotional learning through recreation and therapy. Paula Resnick, founder and visionary created the program out of a desire to support the vulnerable population of students who were experiencing a loss of social connection, isolation, low self-esteem, social anxiety and bullying in school environments. These students are often framed as loners. However, through a more culturally responsive lens, these students can

be valued for the perspectives, gifts, and talents they bring.

Social Worker, professor, and social-emotional learning and restorative practices specialist, Ife Lenard, serves as the Director and liaison between The Meeting House and the Thurgood Marshall Academy Lower School. Through music, arts, dance, social-emotional learning, social skill-building activities, games, and a focus on friendship management, the children have the opportunity to experience a sense of belonging and connectedness to each other within their school community. TMALS and TMH targeted the program's services towards the most vulnerable students, but in the end, ultimately expanded those supports not only to students with special needs, but also to children in the general education population who were in need of social skill building and opportunities to foster belonging, connections, and friendships. The children participating in the program receive services from TMH twice weekly in afterschool from clinical social workers, volunteers, and trained staff. Moreover, this additional staff allows for approximately 25 students to receive small group or one-on-one support during the school day. The children chosen for participation in the program include children who are new to the school, students who have struggled making and sustaining friends, students with special needs, and other students who struggle socially and emotionally. The thoughtful planning and preparation of the clinical social workers as well as the community and volunteer educators includes a deep dive into research-based practices in social-emotional learning and an exploration of perceptions of race that the community educators hold and how those perceptions impact their interactions

with children of color. This complements the school's mission that focuses on the holistic support of the child, recognizing and celebrating identity while concurrently supporting their social and emotional well-being.

TMALS was founded in 2005 in a collaboration between a historical Harlem organization Abyssinian Development Corporation, New Visions for Public Schools, and the Department of Education. The school was created through the vision of Reverend Dr. Calvin O. Butts III with a mission of social justice, cultural responsiveness, activism, community, and family. Continuing the vision of the founding principal, Dr. Sean Davenport, the current principal, Dr. Dawn Brooks DeCosta, incorporated social-emotional learning as a key addition to and core value of the school's mission. Through support, study, and self-exploration, community educators and actors participate in a supported ongoing process of learning and analysis of culturally responsive approaches to social-emotional learning. Similar to the day staff, staff working with TMH participate in article and text studies in antiracist training and pedagogy, and racial identity development self-reflective work as preparation for ensuring that students' identities, cultures and voices are honored and included in the work. This allows staff to be supportively guided as they enrich their own understanding and learning while simultaneously building a sense of trust with students through social skill building activities. Through an action research analysis, the authors of this essay, as key participants and leaders in the two organizations, examine both organizations, the context in which they work and the quality and intentionality of the relationship that in turn impacts a school community.

An Urban School Perspective

According to the NYC Opportunity Annual Report released in May 2019, for the past 12 years, New York City's poverty rate has fluctuated between 19-21% (NYC Opportunity Annual Report, 2019). According to New York University Furman Center Core Data from 2011-2015, close to 1.7 million New Yorkers were living in poverty (NYU Furman Center Core Data, 2011-2015). Structural racism plagues Black and Brown communities with disproportionate policing, a criminal justice system that targets them, poor-performing schools, lack of job opportunities and

decreased access to higher education. African Americans and Latinos are more likely to live in impoverished neighborhoods (New York University Furman Center, 2016). Although gentrification projects sprout throughout New York City with all of its fixings to purchase, renovate, and resell property in order to transform and conform neighborhoods to the standards and aesthetics of middle class status, many Harlem families continue to live below the poverty index at a rate of 25% as compared to the citywide average of 17% (NYU Furman Center, 2018).

Located in the culturally rich neighborhood of Harlem, home of the Harlem Renaissance, TMALS's school community enjoys the wealth of culture, arts and history of Harlem. Among the staff, students, and families there is a strong sense of connectedness and commitment to work as a village to provide the highest quality learning experience as possible. The school's motto, "We are the village that raises the child," is based on the African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child." The school community prides itself on a commitment among and collaboration between the staff and families to collectively raise the children with a sense of identity, culture, and academic ability as evidenced in their curricula, policies, and practices. As part of the village mission, the school community seeks community and cultural partnerships to enhance the learning experiences of students to interrupt the impact of poverty and systemic racism. TMALS's predominantly Black student body reflects the experiences of Black students in urban schools across the country who experience poverty at a higher rate, as compared to their White counterparts. Art Munin (2012) interrogated the effect of racism on the most marginalized children, citing historic data on race and socio-economic discrimination. The disproportionate poverty rate is an outcome of the systemic racism that exists in communities like Harlem, where historically racist systems and structures in housing, lack of generational wealth, job opportunities and access negatively impact Black and Brown families. Munin noted in his research:

In an equitable society, if Whites constitute 65% of the total population, they should also make up 65% of those in the low-income bracket. But this group is actually 23.6 percentage points lower in representation in

the low-income family category. Conversely, Blacks make up a larger percentage than their overall size in the low-income population by 9.8 percentage points. (pp. 4-5)

The inequity that Munin describes has become even more glaring through the health and economic crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. Disparities can also be seen in the educational opportunities for Black and Brown children. Milner (2013), who examined the ways in which poverty can impact Black children in the learning environment, noted, “Inside of school, there are pedagogical approaches that have important implications for students living in poverty—instructional practices that are responsive to the complex needs of them ” (p. 2). The poverty levels of Black children in the



Through a culture of care, the school encourages all members of the school community to listen to and attend to the needs of others while practicing daily strategies of mindfulness.

New York City public school system have historically been quantified according to data obtained through the Free and Reduced Lunch price forms collected yearly by all NYC public schools. The U.S. Department of Education (2001) conducted a study

of 71 high-poverty schools in New York City and found that across those schools, students experiencing poverty achieved at lower levels, as compared to those students not living in poverty. Poverty impacts the quality and quantity of resources available to children (Lacour & Tissington, 2011). Studies have shown that there is a concentration of Black and Latino students in high-poverty schools (Saporito & Sohoni, 2007). According to the New York City Department of Education school database, TMALS's poverty rate is approximately 82% (New York City Department of Education 05M318 School Quality Guide, 2018-2019). The factors that impact the lives of children and families living in poverty may also decrease their access to effective learning (Evans, 2004).

Poverty also has harmful effects on the physical, social-emotional, mental health and wellness of children and their families. Several researchers (Levanthal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Garo, Allen-Handy, & Lewis, 2018; Bowman, Comer, & Johns, 2018) noted the factors that exist in the lives of children living in racism and

poverty that include more punitive parenting strategies, physical illness, high stress, violence, crime, substance abuse, and single-parent homes. The negative side effects of systemic racism and disparity in adequate schooling and employment, despite families' desire to provide for their children, places an undue financial strain on their lives. To further compound these challenges, the stress levels that poverty places on families and their children can impact the ability of parents to attend to the needs of their children.

The prolonged, unjust realities of historical and generational poverty often propel families to seek safe havens for their children. For some, school has long been a temporary shelter away from the realities of oppression and poverty for children. In order to combat the effects of stress and emotional strain on the students, staff and families at TMALS actively interrupt systemically racist policies and practices. TMALS creates daily social emotional experiences rooted in culturally responsive practices that provide the members of the community with ways to identify, express and validate emotions, assert voice and agency in managing emotions, and practice self-care. Through a culture of care, the school encourages all members of the school community to listen to and attend to the needs of others while practicing daily strategies of mindfulness. Mindfulness practice has been proven effective particularly in African American communities in helping mitigate stress related health challenges (Woods-Giscombé, & Gaylord, 2014). TMH, in collaboration with TMALS's mission, seeks to build a sense of connectedness and belonging through engaging social skill building activities, arts, music, community and restorative circles all through a social emotional needs lens. Because of TMALS's commitment to CR-SE, TMH worked to develop their staff and approaches to include cultural responsiveness as a way to connect with students through the celebration and value of their identities. TMALS students experience a curriculum that centers their identity through text, historical perspectives, and a culturally responsive approach that encourages their voice. Part of TMALS's mission towards a holistic approach to learning understands and seeks to address the individual needs of students. The collaboration with TMH allowed TMALS to support students who experience challenges with making friends, regulating negative emotions and building connections with teachers and peers. TMALS's focus on

family engagement and support aligns with TMH's inclusion of parents in the process of addressing the needs of the children. Students selected for the program are based on staff recommendation as well as by parent request. This school-family approach allows all those caring for the children at school and at home to collaborate in the design of programming that best meets their needs.

Why Social and Emotional Learning Matters?

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), once commonly referred to as “soft skills,” has more recently been acknowledged as essential non-cognitive skills that are needed in higher education and the workplace (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014). In addition to academic and cognitive abilities, character, personality, and social skills are key to the success of the individual and the collective (Wagenheim, 2016). SEL is therefore a worthy and needed investment in preparing students to become collaborative citizens who contribute positively to their communities and the world. Social Emotional Learning has a direct impact on a student's physical, mental, and academic development (Cherniss et al., 2006). Researcher James Comer began his work in the 1960s examining the effects of building relationships on academic achievement and ultimately created a process for conducting SEL work. The Comer Process (1996) fosters and nurtures positive relationships between students, educators, and parents that would in turn positively impact the learning experiences of students. SEL is also built on the findings in the research on Emotional Intelligence. The ability of students to recognize and identify emotions, regulate emotions when necessary, show compassion, exhibit positive relationships with others, and make well informed decisions in challenging situations are skills identified as Emotional Intelligence (Goleman, 2007). Further, Emotional Intelligence (EI) is defined by Salovey and Mayer (1990) and explained by Brackett and Rivers (2014) as the “mental abilities associated with processing and responding to emotions, including recognizing the expression of emotions in others, using emotions to enhance thinking, and regulating emotions to drive effective behaviors” (p. 4). Students who experience the effects of poverty, trauma, and systemic racism can benefit from a social emotional approach

that allows them to identify their emotions and the emotions of others, and practice strategies that help them regulate and manage emotions towards positive outcomes. SEL work in the classroom allows for validation of emotions and feelings, which can strengthen the self-esteem and positive self-concept of students. For example, TMALS students were able to engage in a lesson analyzing the many moods experienced by activists historically and currently and the need for them to utilize feelings such as anger, oppression, and rage towards designing a strategy for change. The many moods an activist may experience from pain, to sorrow, to fury and at the same time, a feeling of joy and a calling shows a clear example of how all feelings are valid and have purpose.

Students who receive SEL support showed enhanced positive relationships with peers, decreased aggressive behavior and poor decision making, decreased disciplinary action needed, and received fewer suspensions, compared to their peers who do not receive SEL support (Rivers, Brackett, Salovey, & Mayer, 2007). Students with increased SEL are also more likely to enjoy school and attend more regularly. Moreover, knowing students well and utilizing SEL with knowledge of the experiences and lives of the students allows educators to more accurately interpret and contextualize student behaviors. Educators can cause further damage to students when their perceptions of race impede their ability to determine whether students' behavior is justified or reasonable within a specific context (Ford, 2020). Cherniss et al. (2006) also found that children who were exposed to more social and emotional supports had increased achievement in academics.

The Meeting House program and TMALS's SEL approach are both informed by The CASEL Framework (2017). The CASEL Framework (2017), a framework for social emotional learning, features elements that include Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Responsible Decision-Making, and Relationship Skills as key components of what they consider a well-rounded comprehensive approach to SEL. Knowledge of self is important in SEL and the ability to self-reflect in the management of one's emotions. According to the CASEL Framework (2017), Self-Awareness includes the ability to “identify emotions,” hold an “accurate self-perception, recognize one's strengths, possess self-confidence and self-efficacy.” The next key skill in the CASEL

Framework (2017) is Self-Management, which is the ability of students to “successfully regulate one’s emotions,” and exercise “impulse control, stress management, self-discipline, self-motivation, goal setting and organizational skills.” In addition to knowledge of self is the ability to recognize and understand the effect of the self on others. The TMH program allows for space for students to practice self-awareness, identify and examine their feelings and reactions while collaborating with teachers and peers. Collaboration, a cornerstone of the TMH approach, requires social awareness, another key SEL skill. Social Awareness, according to the framework, includes “perspective taking” and empathy building. Through role play and work on managing competition, TMH encourages the perspective taking process as well as the practice of exercising empathy. More recent developments of the CASEL framework include attention to cultures and diverse backgrounds within the frame of social awareness, an important inclusion of CRSE and the engagement of multiple perspectives. Again, empathy is required to take on diverse perspectives, particularly perspectives of the oppressed and marginalized. Along with social awareness, another CASEL cornerstone of the TMH approach is Relationship Skills. The framework identifies Relationship Skills as “the ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups” (CASEL, 2017). These are skills that must be taught and practiced as they are in the TMH program through interactive engagement and relationship building between peers and teachers through the development of social skills. The framework as in the TMH approach, also outlines the skill of “listening well, cooperating with others, communication, social engagement and teamwork” along with “resisting inappropriate social pressure and negotiating conflict constructively.” The TMH approach to social skill building is based on the CASEL tenet that relationship skills must be learned in the context of interaction with others and are not skills that always come naturally. The last key skill in the CASEL Framework is Responsible Decision-Making. This component includes the ability to “make constructive choices about one’s personal behavior and social interactions.” It includes the ability to “identify problems, analyze situations, solve problems, evaluate, reflect and consider ethical responsibility.” Students who struggle in these areas have challenges in experiencing positive interactions

with others in school. These students can feel a disconnect from their peers and teachers, which can negatively impact their learning experiences and ability to connect with what is being taught. TMH’s approach to socialization through art, music, and play encourages students to practice the responsible decision-making skills needed in positive socialization with peers. The connections between SEL and a students’ success in the overall learning environment is clear and is multi-faceted.

When opportunities are not created for SEL to occur with consistency, it can negatively impact a student’s academic success. The teacher is the most important factor in the delivery of SEL in a classroom. Brackett, Reyes, Rivers, Elbertson, and Salovey (2011) examined the connections between SEL and student behavior, and found that teachers’ relationships with students were a key driver in positive behaviors in the classroom. It is the ability of the teacher to create an environment where emotions and feelings are valued and acknowledged, a culture of care is created, supportive relationships are nurtured, and students can thrive. Students who feel cared for, acknowledged, and celebrated can approach the challenges they may have in learning and socialization with increased confidence (Okeke-Adeyanju, N., Taylor, L. C., Craig, A. B., Smith, R. E., Thomas, A., Boyle, A. E., & DeRosier, M. E. 2014).

The current need for SEL in the midst of a pandemic, distance and blended learning, uncertainty, fear, grief, trauma, racial unrest, and stress is particularly high. Many are recognizing that SEL is as essential and crucial as academic learning in this current climate. Students cannot effectively learn in a state of trauma, and teachers concurrently cannot teach to the best of their abilities while experiencing trauma. SEL seeks to provide the supports that students, staff, and families need to be their best selves in the midst of stress and trauma. Again, educators must consider the cultural context when applying social-emotional approaches. Dena Simmons (2019) explains that, “Eurocentric values and content dominate U.S. schooling, so these reflection questions are also relevant to educators of color who may have internalized negative messages about Black or Brown people” (p. 2). She also warns against using SEL to control students’ behavior, stating that in this way, SEL can become, “White supremacy with a hug” (Simmons, 2019). Relevant to the current climate of protest against racial violence, in her 2019 article, “Why We Can’t Afford

Whitewashed SEL,” she describes the effects of racial violence on young Black and Brown children and the need for educators to engage students in work around their emotions with special attention to their life experiences so as not to further traumatize them. Simmons’ view illustrates and encourages that SEL frameworks such as the CASEL Framework (2017) continue to evolve to include the cultural responsiveness required in SEL work.

The Need for a Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Approach

Killman, Saxton, and Serpa (1986) defined culture as “shared philosophies, ideologies, values, assumptions, beliefs, expectations, attitudes and norms that knit a community together” (p. 89). Siddle-Walker (2009) argued that Black schools employed cultural relevance before the historical precedent case *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). She described the wholesome care and advocacy that represented their culturally responsive ways of being. Black educators taught with excellence and focused on civics and responsibility, while serving as role models for the community. She also described the Black educators and leaders dating back to the 1930s, who exercised a level of care and attention to the emotional well-being of Black children by engaging families to advocate for the needs of the children in a time of blatant and violent acts of racism. The reinforcements of such racist systems and beliefs can thwart the optimal development of one’s social-emotional self; Siddle-Walker’s emphasis on the “aspirational” and “interpersonal” care of Black educators highlighted the necessary armor required to thwart the very penetrating effects of racism onto Black children. Her emphasis on this “ethic of care” idea reflected how teachers would help students “see past where they could see,” in terms of their own beliefs about their own ability to succeed. Institutional care and its alignment with interpersonal care demonstrate the idea that there must be alignment between philosophy and practice for the benefit of the children (Siddle-Walker, 2009). Much can be learned from this era of Black schools by identifying ways in which modern schools can and must reclaim the focus on care and advocacy that many Black educators emanated before desegregation.

One culturally relevant approach follows a framework designed by Gloria Ladson-Billings

(1995), based on her research around what she coined *culturally relevant pedagogy*. The three major areas include a focus on “Academic Success, Cultural Competence and Critical Consciousness” (p. 160-162). Dedicated, invested teachers who believe and know that “all students can and must succeed” are essential to this approach (p. 163). Through the use of culturally relevant texts and culturally competent lesson planning, Ladson-Billings explained that teachers can use the culture of the students as “a vehicle for learning” where parents and family members are also engaged to participate and share their “cultural knowledge” (p. 161). Ladson-Billings noted that “students must develop a broader socio-political consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, mores and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities” and “engage the world and others critically” (p. 162).

Dr. A. Wade

Boykin, a psychologist and scholar focused on Black child development and their academic learning in American society, conducted a series of experimental studies, which showed that African American fourth and fifth graders saw higher performance when they engaged in what he called “communal learning” (p. 379). The connectedness that students experience in relationship building in a supportive environment directly and positively impacts their academic success. Social-emotional learning allows for the connections that students can build with each other in a learning environment that creates a sense of belonging. CR-SE additionally builds connections through the recognition and sharing of real-world identity, experiences and culture. C. D. Lee (2001), another leader in the psychology of Black children illustrated in her work the concept of “cultural modeling” as a way to connect the students’ everyday experiences and knowledge with academic content. In addition, Tillman (2008) explained how Dr. Hilliard:

argued that people of African descent must know their culture, schools must recognize and include African culture

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The connectedness that students experience in relationship building in a supportive environment directly and positively impacts their academic success.

in instructional materials, teachers and leaders must have high levels of cultural proficiency and African American communities must use their culture as a foundation in the academic and social development of its children. (p. 600)

There is an important connection to be made between SEL and CRSE because social-emotional awareness can surface in contexts that are unique to the cultural characteristics of the students. For example, Hammond and Jackson (2015) and Muhammad (2018) included skill-based instruction centered on intellectuality through challenging content as a part of their definition of a culturally responsive approach. Their approach is more aligned with Geneva Gay's (2018) definition: "using cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them" (p. 29). This definition attends to the intellectual needs of the students, while also addressing the need for an identity-centered focus. Hammond and Jackson (2015) went further to identify "affirmation and validation" as part of their Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching. They noted in the Framework the need for building a "sense of self efficacy, positive mindset, reducing social emotional stress, providing care and a push, building a socially and intellectually safe environment and using a restorative justice frame" (p. 17). Paris and Alim's (2018) work detailing CRSE goals describe what they call a "loving critique" of historical educational practices of Black and Brown children and the ways in which we must practice "asset pedagogies" which "allow us to see the fallacy of measuring ourselves and the young people in our communities solely against the White middle-class norms of knowing and being that continue to dominate notions of educational achievement" (p. 85-86).

Dr. Ghodly Muhammad (2018) studied literacy in a historically Black context, examining the ways in which literacy was taught to Black students pre-*Brown v. Board of Ed* that promoted a stronger and deeper learning and understanding for Black students. As Muhammad noted, "Youths need opportunities in literacy pedagogy not only to explore multiple facets of self-identity but also to learn about the identities of others who are different from them" (p. 138). She upheld the need to

return to a framework that includes identity and criticality focused not only on individual identities, but on collective identities as well. In Muhammad's text *Cultivating Genius* (2020), she outlines her "historically responsive literacy model," a "four layered equity model" that details the needed elements in curriculum and lesson design that values and centers the lives and experiences of Black and Brown students in their everyday learning. The four layers include Identity, Skills, Criticality, and Intellectualism (Muhammad, 2020). Identity as Muhammad (2020) describes it is, "composed of notions of who we are, who others say we are and whom we desire to be" (p. 67). Skills and "proficiencies" she defines as "denoting competence, ability, and expertise" as it relates to the area of study (p. 85). Intellectualism by her definition, is "what we learn or understand about various topics, concepts, and paradigms" (p. 104). Finally, criticality "helps teachers understand and explain inequities in education and is a step towards anti-oppression" (p. 117). This approach, utilized by the teachers of TMALS who were trained by Dr. Muhammad, cultivates students' excellence and genius.

Racial identity development builds a strong sense of self that is shaped over time by experiences. Yolanda Sealey Ruiz's (2009, 2011, 2013) work shows the relational ways educators can lift and value the lives and everyday experiences of Black students to enhance their connections to learning through multiple literacies. Sealey-Ruiz (2009), in her work with culturally relevant curriculum, argued that, "our culture is an intrinsic part of who we are and how we identify ourselves. It molds our experiences and how we interpret those defining moments in our lives" (p. 58). If living within a society that stereotypes groups of people, most often people of color, in negative ways, then it is important to have a foundational, strength-based racial identity development approach for children. Culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy also affords children long-lasting racial identity development over time. This teaching and learning is incremental, scaffolded and woven into curricula, school culture and relationships. It is not linear but rather circular, meaning that children can go in and out of stages of development, returning to an old way of thinking or remaining in one particular stage for a long period of time. Hence with multiple entry points, schools can build a framework where children take pride

in their racial group identity within an entire school community with cohesive messaging for positive racial pride.

What a Social Emotional and Culturally Responsive Program Looks Like in Afterschool?

Having a partnership with an afterschool program that has a mission akin to that of the school is purposeful and non-negotiable. The consistent planning and collaboration between TMALS and TMH is a model of an effective and intentional relationship. TMALS chose to collaborate with TMH, a program aligned with CR-SE, to provide a unique platform of play during extended learning time that cocoons children in enrichment and recreation activities in concert with therapeutic support. In determining the needs of the students, TMALS and TMH were purposeful in customizing the approach based on individual student life stories and experiences in school. The TMH process features a combination of play, emotional intelligence, and socialization skill building that helps children blossom personally and build meaningful friendships. The TMH staff engages the TMALS students in a variety of experiences that allow for the development of socialization skills. As in the TMH approach, friendships and relationships are both a key in SEL and CR-SE--the ways that we connect in supportive collaboration with one another. Lead staff prioritize professional development of the adults who are supporting the children. The ongoing thoughtful development of staff is key to the success of the activities and connections built with the students. Legette, Rogers, and Warren (2020) note the importance of the educator as social-emotional “focal agents in rehumanizing Black students in an education system predicated on their dehumanization” (p. 2). Examining race, perspectives, beliefs, and the impact on practice is a key part of the professional development of TMH staff. Clinical social workers guide staff through daily sessions with students and debriefing protocols. TMH engages children fully in play, while simultaneously weaving in aspects of therapy into recreational group activities. Helping children foster relationships with their peers and learning friendship management is an intricate process and the premise of this afterschool program. Being able to enhance a child’s resilience and self-concept and

provide liberated space for creative expression; sports and games offers gentle and enriched experiences (Vandell, 2013). TMH’s program was designed to cultivate opportunities for children to develop a variety of SEL skills in the context of a diverse community of teaching artists and educators. This afterschool team relies heavily on collaborative communication and directs their efforts toward an individual child’s goals for enhanced skill development. Such an interdisciplinary approach, focused on socialization and communication goals, provides coordinated activities that allows children practice, time, and space to utilize skills and learning in real time. Through art projects, role play, music, chorus, creativity, crafts, games, etc., students collaborate, connect, and problem solve while building friendships. Hale (1982) notes the affective cognitive style of Black children and the environments where they thrive being more engaging integrated with arts, music, and human interaction. This active reinforcement, guided by an integrated professional team, positively impacts a child’s social and emotional development. A key to the success of the partnership greatly depended on how intentional and thoughtful both organizations were towards their commitment in keeping the students’ needs at the center. The comprehensive approach to the TMALS and TMH included the following:

- Getting to Know One Another Well
 - Leadership walkthroughs/Inter-visitations of both programs
 - Classroom visits and observations/school and partner program
- Leadership conversations with staff and students from both programs
 - Identifying Key Lead Staff/Enlisting Experts/Specialists
 - Partner and school identify key staff from both school and partnering organization to best lead the work
 - Determine a liaison between school and partnering organization
- Getting to Know the Families
 - Partnering organization information sessions with families
 - Surveys of interest for families

- Conducting a Needs Assessment
 - Partnering organization gathers information on the school's needs
 - Communication between partner leadership, school leader and key school staff
 - Identification of students for the program and individual student needs
- Creating Programming and Logistics
 - Designing a program that meets the needs of the population
 - Introduce support staff to school wide expectations and culture
 - Ensure schedule is planned, activities, transitions, etc. with school staff
- Adapt as needed and maintain flexibility
 - Professional Development and Ongoing Learning for Staff
 - Building trust & creating a safe space for learning
- Training for support staff and volunteers in SEL and CRSE
 - Ongoing article, text study, and discussion using protocols
 - Racial identity development and examination of perceptions of race and culture
- Debrief sessions after each class to determine successes, challenges, and adaptations
- Maintaining consistent and transparent communication between school, partner, & families
 - As challenges and new information arises, ensure constant flow of communication, problem solving and adaptation

Maintaining Emotional Connection During Physical Distancing

Unexpectedly in March 2020, all NYC public schools were closed due to the global COVID-19 pandemic and students were transitioned to distance learning. In an effort to continue to support the school's students and families, the day and afterschool organizations transitioned with the students and families into a virtual environment. The transition for families into a distance learning

environment required devices for students, WiFi for families who previously did not have access, troubleshooting and supporting families who have varying levels of technology ability, as well as managing the stress and trauma of living in a global pandemic. Recognizing the need for a social-emotional approach to supporting families, the staff at both TMALS and TMH utilized the work of leading scholars in antiracist pedagogy, CRSE, and SEL to develop the transition to online learning with the goal of providing the same culture of care that families were accustomed to, during in-person learning. In the midst of the pandemic, students and families experienced additional trauma after the public murder of George Floyd at the knees of a police officer. The Harlem community, a community familiar with police violence against Black bodies, felt the pain of the George Floyd murder and were impacted by two other recent murders and the remnants of countless others. Now burdened by twin pandemics, along came the impounding realities of economic strain caused by loss of employment, health and in some cases life, the need for support for families intensified. TMALS had to increase supports beyond social emotional learning and culturally responsive practices to securing food pantry locations for families, daily breakfast and lunch for students, as well as trauma and grief supports. The staff at TMH concurrently worked to help support adults, teachers, parents, and community members in processing the trauma of the pandemic as well as the racial unrest that resulted in mass protests across NYC and worldwide. Zaretta Hammond (2020) delivered a webinar, "Moving Beyond the Packet: Creating More Culturally Responsive Distance Learning Experiences," sharing the message that distance learning opportunities should be a chance to focus on the more affective cognitive aspects of learning, where educators can offer more real world culturally responsive, engaging learning opportunities rooted in the social justice of the moment. Major (2020) outlined the opportunity for more independent, project-based learning with increased opportunities for student voice and agency. To that end, TMH continued its collaboration with TMALS through an interactive self-paced website featuring online versions of the socialization skill-building activities students were accustomed to.

The students who participated previously with the afterschool social skill building program were the most vulnerable: students with social skill building challenges, students who were new to the school, students with special needs. Many special needs students struggled with the distance learning format, needing more of a physical connection and proximity to their teachers. During the pandemic, these students experienced increased anxiety and feelings of isolation among a variety of barriers and successes with distance learning. Distance learning in many ways forced innovation and learning for both organizations. When the school abruptly transitioned into full remote learning at the beginning of the rise of the pandemic in NYC, TMH also shifted its focus to supporting another vulnerable group in the school community that needed immediate support by offering: “Parenting Through the Pandemic,” a weekly series of evening support sessions with parents, which parents came to see as a lifeline. A parent participating in the parent support group shared, “I’m trying to do my best with the kids. I honestly joined the parent group because it’s my only socialization with other adults, and other parents that have become family to me. I have learned from it, and it helps me hear coping strategies and manage. I really appreciate it because I feel alone here dealing with all of this.” Brown, Doom, Pena, Watamura and Koppels (2020) find that many parents experienced a feeling of isolation and anxiety as a direct or indirect reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the face of these crises, the two organizations have maintained their relationship through the pandemic and their commitment to the community. TMH continues to exercise its profound commitment to intentional spaces, service-leadership, and building relationships for New York City children and families in a different, more human way. In late Spring 2020 as local, national, and global protests grew, they also began to engage the wider community in a series of weekly town hall conversations about race-centered research and training, antiracist practices and white fragility. Both TMALS and TMH have an unwavering commitment that Black and Brown families and their children are worthy, divine, and beautiful, and it is for that reason alone that CR-SE and emotional intelligence remain at the forefront of their collective work. As the pandemic continues, this partnership between TMALS and TMH provides a source of holistic consistency in the midst of confusion

and upheaval, support in a time of fear, and a culture of care that has become a survival mechanism for a school community striving to emerge with their mental, emotional, cultural and physical health intact.

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