Addressing Equity in Schools: Youth Participatory Action Research and Transformative Social and Emotional Learning during COVID-19
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In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and rise in racial injustices signaled the need to engage students in macro-level interventions to maximize their contributions to their schools, communities, and society. School social workers are uniquely positioned to elevate student voices, hone their critical thinking skills, and capitalize on their strengths and assets. Critical thinking skills can help students analyze the world around them by engaging them in addressing equity issues in their schools and communities. This article introduces the concept of transformative social and emotional learning (TSEL) within the context of youth-led participatory action research (YPAR) and a critical service learning (CSL) framework for school social workers to promote student empowerment. Through CSL, students cultivate advocacy skills by identifying, investigating, and taking action to address concerns. Authors include a case example demonstrating TSEL and YPAR, using CSL as a school social work intervention that recognizes and promotes students’ strengths and assets.

KEY WORDS: critical service learning; equity building; student voice; transformative social and emotional learning; youth-led participatory action research

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and rising racial injustices signaled the need to engage students in macro-level interventions that address equity in schools. Macro-level interventions can maximize school social workers’ contributions to their schools, communities, and society (Goode et al., 2020; Redondo-Sama et al., 2020). Engaging students to address oppression and equity issues, in a developmentally appropriate way, is a skill that can be taught (Johnson et al., 2018). Promoting student voice in the context of school and community complements adolescents’ desire to contribute to decision-making processes that affect their lives (Tyler, 2020). School social workers play a pivotal role by proactively promoting positive student development and introducing skills that develop student voice (Sprague Martinez et al., 2018). Equity building and civic engagement in schools offer opportunities to satisfy such desires. This article introduces the concept of transformative social and emotional learning (TSEL; Jagers et al., 2019) within the context of youth-led participatory action research (YPAR; Ozer, 2017), using critical service learning (CSL) as a conduit to promote youth’s capacity to actively contribute to their community.

In the context of this article, equity is defined as fairness and justice to ensure that all students receive a comprehensive and inclusive education. Often students of color are marginalized by systemic racialization, which excludes them from civic participation, decision making, and avenues of power (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2015). School settings are ideal institutions to elevate student voice, particularly for students of color who often do not have opportunities to express their opinions. Students of color have active and authentic connections to their communities and thus can be direct stakeholders in eliminating racism.

YPAR
YPAR is a process for bringing students together to examine issues that affect their lives, allowing them to create action plans for implementation (Smith et al., 2010). YPAR cultivates leadership and problem-solving skills (Ozer, 2017) and can signifi-
cantly improve the capacity for students to advocate for change in their schools and communities (Ballonoff Suleiman et al., 2021). Grounded in principles of equity, YPAR engages students in problem solving and advocating for change on issues that are relevant to their lives (Ozer, 2017; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). Thus, YPAR empowers marginalized students to address real-world problems (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003). It is also consistent with promoting TSEL and calls attention to the development of personal and collective efficacy (Jagers et al., 2019) while enhancing social identity through civic engagement.

**TSEL**

*TSEL* is an emerging framework that promotes equity and social justice through increased engagement in school and civic life (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2021), defined as a process whereby students and adults build respectful solid relationships founded on an appreciation of similarities and differences, learn to examine the root causes of inequities, and create collaborative solutions. TSEL provides a unique opportunity to help address various forms of inequity and empower students and adults to contribute to educational equity in schools and communities (CASEL, 2020). Social and emotional learning (SEL) is defined as the process of acquiring skills to regulate emotions in order to achieve personal and collective goals, illustrate empathy for others, maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2020). The TSEL framework examines five components for fostering equity: (1) culture of one’s school or community, (2) student identity, (3) agency, (4) belonging, and (5) engagement (Jagers et al., 2019). In essence, TSEL builds equity through relationships and experiences that facilitate a culture of engagement in schools. In this way, culture affects students’ senses of identity, agency, and belonging.

Issues around equity and social justice are essential in K–12 education. They empower school-based professionals to help students realize their intellectual potential and engage in conversations about their racial identities (Noguera, 2009). The elevation of student voice can ignite student interest in solving issues that directly affect them. When school-based staff encourage students to examine social and political issues critically, it engages them in equity-building education (Meza, 2020). Rooted in equity building, TSEL informs school-based practices by examining inequity and collaborative problem solving (Saavedra & Nolan, 2018). Despite the connection between equity and social and emotional education (Jagers et al., 2018), school social work practice literature has not thoroughly examined the development of SEL through an equity framework and cultural lens. Furthermore, TSEL focuses on examining manifestations of power to build equitable relationships (Jagers et al., 2019). Such relationships are built by engaging in activities where students examine issues of equity, thereby increasing their sense of empowerment.

Involving students of color in analyzing the social, political, and economic conditions in their communities and schools provides opportunities to engage them in meaningful community activities through civic engagement, which helps to hone their leadership, analytical, and advocacy skills (Jagers et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2018). This framework reflects a core assertion that students are capable of sharing expert knowledge about problems that affect their development and well-being.

**CSL**

CSL is a strengths-based framework that builds on social justice principles that promote student empowerment by encouraging students to interrogate systems and structures of inequality and distribution of power and seek authentic relationships among all participants (Mitchell, 2008). CSL also encourages participants to examine power, privilege, and oppression within the service activity by questioning hidden biases and assumptions concerning race, class, and gender, and by challenging the status quo by working toward changing inequities within the social and economic system (Cipolle, 2010). As an intervention strategy in school settings, CSL allows students to contemplate community and social justice issues through critical thinking that raises questions about the root causes of social inequities (Johnson et al., 2018). CSL can help students seek social change by questioning how resources and power are distributed in society, combining academic goals and community service to enhance both student voice and academic skills. CSL is “a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs, together with structured opportunities for reflection designed to achieve desired learning outcomes” (Jacoby, 2015, p. 2).
Like YPAR and TSEL, CSL is rooted in equity building. In CSL, social workers can use the community web mapping activity to engage students in identifying issues they would like to change in their community or school (Lantieri, 1999). In this activity, the web is built by making a bull’s-eye target chart with the word “community” in the center and asking students to discuss the components of a perfect and an imperfect community. The facilitator guides students through a visualization in which they imagine an ideal community, discuss problems that keep their ideal community from being a reality, and focus on possible solutions. The students share ownership of crucial decisions regarding the problem they identify and how to solve it. This process helps them understand the advocacy and activism process, confirming their ability as change agents.

TSEL, YPAR, and CSL empower students to examine inequities in the world around them to influence change (Jagers et al., 2019; Lantieri, 1999; Ozer, 2016). The adult’s role is to be a facilitator, guiding the students through the process by introducing tools to critically analyze their communities and schools from a social justice and equity lens (Johnson et al., 2018). In the issue selection brainstorming phase, the facilitator aids the generation of topics based on students’ concerns regarding their schools and communities. The students present the issues based on their own lived experiences or those of others in their environment, such as parents, teachers, and peers. Using their group process, decision-making, and consensus-building skills, students choose an area of focus. The facilitator helps the students consider factors such as feasibility, time frame, and the possibility of allies to help support actions for change stemming from the project. Students move from identifying the problem to information gathering, where they use the information to understand the issue more deeply. The facilitator becomes critical at this phase, helping the students negotiate the project’s political and logistical complexities (Ozer, 2016). Finally, the students progress to the action phase, determining specific actions they could take to address the problem.

Together, YPAR, TSEL, and CSL can foster identity development (race, gender, and sexual orientation), learning skills, executive functioning skills, advocacy skills, and critical consciousness. The integration of these frameworks can also help develop leadership, critical decision-making, and conflict resolution skills while enhancing self-efficacy, self-respect, community awareness, civic responsibility, and awareness of social factors that shape life’s outcomes. Critically important for marginalized students of color is the opportunity to learn how to use their voice in proactive, positive ways, developing action plans, and learning how to implement those plans to get desired results.

**CASE EXAMPLE: VIRTUAL SOCIAL MEDIA PROJECT**

This case example demonstrates the use of CSL, TSEL, and YPAR as a framework to address equity virtually in schools during a global pandemic. The project emphasized a student-led activity to bring to light concerns regarding equity in their school and community. A school social worker assisted eight 11th- and 12th-grade students in implementing their CSL project. Of the eight students, three identified as African American, three as Latinx, and two as White. Five of the students identified as male and three identified as female. All students were identified as having learning, emotional, and/or developmental disabilities and received targeted (Tier 2) group work interventions. The students were part of the same classroom and had transitioned to virtual learning because of COVID-19.

This framework was used in this existing group of students who needed targeted support in executive functioning and self-regulation. In addition to the therapeutic intervention, students were interested in finding ways to give back to their school and community during this period. The school social worker used CSL to address the students’ social and emotional needs and to engage them in articulating their concerns about the pandemic and racial injustices. In CSL, community web mapping is used as a brainstorming tool to help students articulate their concerns. In this instance, the students were concerned that their community did not understand what COVID-19 was and what precautions were needed to be in place to protect themselves. Additionally, students were directly affected by family and friends contracting the virus.

Since the students were working remotely, they participated in the community web mapping using virtual platforms, including Google Docs, Classroom Hangouts, and other audio/visual connections. The school social worker used mentimeter.com as a tool to engage students virtually. Using
this website, the students engaged in responding to questions, creating word clouds, and giving real-time input while providing interactive visuals for participants (Hanifan, 2021). Students were able to quickly respond when the facilitator posed a polling question to build consensus and make decisions on various activities. For example, the facilitator would pose a question such as “Do you understand your role and the next steps we are taking?” Students who were uncomfortable sharing with the entire group would be able to anonymously respond (yes, no, somewhat), letting the group facilitator know if more time needed to be spent reviewing and explaining. This resource could also be used to gather information about what the students already knew and create a shared understanding. For example, the facilitator could ask, “What gets in the way of our community being perfect?” and students could respond with multiple entries creating a word cloud. This would show the students visually what words were most common as they became the largest in the word cloud. These strategies were engaging and encouraged participation, especially for students who were initially uncomfortable responding in a virtual learning environment.

Through community web mapping, students identified and discussed their concerns and fears and brainstormed solutions. When discussing the imperfect community, they described inequalities that existed, particularly those related to a lack of understanding and adherence to safety protocols in their own community. In discussing what would make a more perfect community, they recognized the need to educate their own to reduce existing fears and anxieties. The students decided that they wanted to develop a social media tool to help raise awareness around COVID-19 safety practices to prevent or reduce the spread of the virus.

The students researched the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website for safety guidelines in the planning process. Based on their research, they agreed to develop culturally relevant information safety protocols (handwashing, wearing a mask, and social distancing) to help make their friends, family, and community safer that could be shared through social media. The students spoke to the school principal and assistant principal to negotiate their plan and share their progress.

Once the school social worker assisted the students in gaining administrative approval, they used canva.com and other web-based design platforms to educate community members on safety measures related to the pandemic. With the assistance of the school social worker, the students created social media posts to help people understand what six feet of social distancing looked like with everyday visual references (Guzman, 2017). The students designed templates and came to a consensus on the presentation for the social media post. The final product was posted on the school’s social media website and the students’ social media accounts.

The student-led CSL project engaged high school students in voicing their concerns about community safety and COVID-19. In response, the students launched a culturally sensitive social media campaign that reached their families and the larger community. The immediate impact of this CSL project included engaging student voices through a student-led project in which high school students enhanced their sense of agency and belonging while identifying communication barriers in their community that created a lack of culturally sensitive information regarding the pandemic.

DISCUSSION

This case example illustrates that YPAR, TSEL, and CSL are an integrative framework that provides tools to elevate student voice. Participants were motivated to contribute to projects that helped them feel connected to their school and community, while other connections were lost or severely decreased due to social distancing. The CSL project also provided an accomplishment for participants when other typical rites of passage that acknowledge student growth, such as graduation or other celebrations, were not happening. One of the most common responses was realizing the hard work and time it takes to complete a project. The project offered participants “real-life experience” in community needs assessment and developing and implementing an action plan. As students used their leadership, research, and critical thinking skills, their social identities were enhanced. Based on group reflections, the students’ sense of agency also flourished as they used their social media prowess.

The case example supports the theory that TSEL empowers students and adults to build respectful relationships while addressing social justice issues (Jagers et al., 2019). For instance, the school social worker’s role shifted from traditional micro-level
interventionist to facilitator of a macro-level decision-making process that elevated students’ voices (Johnson et al., 2018; Tyler, 2020). The case example provides new insight into the relationship between the concept of TSEL within the context of YPAR and using CSL as a channel to promote social justice while building respectful relationships between students and adults. This integrative framework guides the process of engaging students in macro-level interventions that can maximize their contributions to their school, community, and society.

In the case example, the school social worker gave the students a space to identify safety concerns about COVID-19 as a community problem. The school social worker guided the students in advocating for change by assisting them in launching a culturally sensitive social media campaign. The process of problem solving around student-identified safety concerns builds on existing evidence that YPAR augments students’ ability to advocate for change in their school and community, enhancing their problem-solving and leadership skills (Ballonoff Suleiman et al., 2021; Ozer, 2017). Building a sense of identity, agency, and belonging is critical for students as they transition to adulthood and re-define what belonging to their community outside of the school setting means. School social workers, and other school-based practitioners, can help students develop these competencies as they transition into young adulthood and work toward their career and education.

Based on the experience of the case example, the key challenges of YPAR, TSEL, and CSL included engaging students virtually and gaining administrative and community buy-in. To help engage the students, the school social worker facilitated a process to help students address equity issues and create opportunities to bring about social change. This engagement is a practice example that addresses equity issues that impact students’ lives and is a skill set that can be taught in a developmentally appropriate way (Ballonoff Suleiman et al., 2021; Ozer, 2017). Building a sense of identity, agency, and belonging is critical for students as they transition to adulthood and re-define what belonging to their community outside of the school setting means. School social workers, and other school-based practitioners, can help students develop these competencies as they transition into young adulthood and work toward their career and education.

To gain buy-in from school administrators, the school social worker reviewed the school’s mission, educational priorities, and key stakeholders. This process is documented in the literature (see Johnson et al., 2018). Realizing that the school, like many other urban schools, had competing priorities (i.e., COVID-19 safety precautions, facilitating academic achievement, adhering to Common Core Learning Standards, and promoting SEL), the school social worker met with school administrators to articulate the connections between the YPAR, TSEL, and CSL integrative framework and specific school priorities. For example, the virtual engagement complemented COVID-19 safety precautions, and the focus on critical thinking and advocacy skills complemented the promotion of SEL.

Finally, it is important to recognize that TSEL challenges the adult engaged with youth to assess their own bias and stereotypes which, if not appropriately addressed, can further inequities by allowing the dominant group to affix blame on the disadvantages for their life circumstance; justify unearned privilege; and engage in dehumanization, codification, and marginalization of students (Goff et al., 2014; Jagers et al., 2019; Salter & Adams, 2013). Schools tend to prioritize prevailing middle-class America culture, which means that diverse and marginalized students are met with low expectations, discrimination, microaggressions, and implicit biases by adults.

Implications for Practice
As demonstrated in the case example, the integrative framework highlights the positive, rather than the negative, aspects of a student’s life, acknowledging their capacities to achieve their potential, and offers an opportunity to expand the strengths-based perspective in school social work practice (Saleebey, 1996, 2012; Weick et al., 1989). Often, students are referred to school social workers because of perceived mental health or behavior concerns. The case example also showcases how TSEL, YPAR, and CSL, when used in tandem, not only promote student empowerment, but also inform and support a collaborative change process. This integrative framework has strong implications for school social work interventions where students can cultivate their advocacy skills by identifying, investigating, and taking action to address concerns (London et al., 2003).
Additionally, the case example illustrates how the integrative framework promotes school belonging and engagement, helping students and adults connect real experiences in their schools and communities to classroom curriculum, thus aligning school social work practice and academics. TSEL, YPAR, and CSL place students and adults at the center of the change process, positioning them as experts in articulating their perspectives regarding changes needed in their schools or communities. Helping students learn to critically examine the root causes of racial and economic inequities promotes the development of self- and social awareness, decision making, and leadership skills (Jagers et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2018).

**Future Research**

As integrative frameworks, TSEL, YPAR, and CSL all have transferable features that challenge the status quo, helping students acquire important life skills by learning to interrogate systems of oppression, collect information, and propose change. Empirical research is needed to fully understand the benefits, limitations, and outcomes of a pedagogical framework incorporating TSEL, YPAR, and CSL. Specifically, research should evaluate the efficacy of CSL as an intervention that promotes youth empowerment and assess the effectiveness in helping youth actualize their self-advocacy skills utilizing their strengths and assets. Through anecdotal narratives from school social workers, teachers, and other school staff, the benefit of CSL is noted particularly in increasing school engagement and the cultivation of students’ advocacy skills. Expansion of this framework by school social work practitioners in elementary and high schools and the collection of longitudinal data will aid in moving this framework toward an evidence-based practice model. Suggested areas for future work should examine the correlation to academic achievement and the long-term impact of youth commitment to advocacy and social change, which is the foundation for healthy citizenry.

**CONCLUSION**

This conceptual article introduced TSEL, YPAR, and CSL as foundations for building collaborative relationships between school social workers and students to elevate student voice and address equity issues. Together, these frameworks encompass a paradigm shift that brings attention to the importance of school social workers and other school-based practitioners guiding students to acknowledge and address issues of oppression, power, privilege, prejudice, discrimination, and social justice in the world around them, using their strengths. By utilizing TSEL, YPAR, and CSL together as an integrative framework, school social workers can help students cultivate their critical thinking skills by analyzing their schools and communities and addressing the issues identified. The case example demonstrates how student-led CSL activities can be used as a school social work intervention that recognizes and promotes student strengths and assets focusing on the positive aspects of a student’s life and the capacity to achieve their potential. This strengths perspective for social work practice cultivates growth for students and adults (Weick et al., 1989). Both students and adults have the power to be strong contributors to this change process, but educators must authentically incorporate their voice in the changing education landscape.

School social work practitioners are in unique positions to create spaces for students to articulate their perspectives, incorporate their views in the change process, and help them see the value of their contribution. At the same time, they must proactively challenge school staff and acknowledge their own implicit and explicit biases, thus promoting greater equity in schools. Starck et al. (2020) found that teachers’ bias levels are representative to those of the larger population and suggest that if schools are to effectively promote racial equity, teachers should be provided with training to either shift or mitigate the effects of their own racial biases. School social workers can lead the way in providing training and support in addressing equity in schools. Ultimately, engaging students and school staff in YPAR, TSEL, and CSL enhances their social and emotional skills as they begin, or continue, their lifelong journeys as positive and productive citizens.

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