

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING - CRITICAL THEORY IN THE CLASSROOM (K-12)
24 JANUARY 2021
HOUSE COMMITTEE - BUDGET - EDUCATION K-12

Chairperson Williams, Vice Chairperson Hoffman, committee members:

Good afternoon. Thank you for the privilege of addressing the committee today. My name is Denise Roberts. I am not an expert on education or a professional in the field of mental health. I am an engaged and invested parent of three children. I am here today to speak to “my lived experience.”

My easy-going second child has always enjoyed school, both academically and socially. In 6th grade, she began expressing anxiety and stress over social situations, specifically, the idea that some girls were using pronouns as a power play. It worried her that something she said without ill intent was being perceived as aggressive and insulting. If you have experienced an early adolescent girl, you will know that they can be obsessive over the health of relationships.

In October 2021, I received notification that surveys would be performed on students before and after the “so-called” Second-Step social emotional learning lesson ([see attachment 1](#)). Permission was requested with instructions to call KDHE with any questions. Our district was apparently partnering with them in a bullying prevention program ([see attachment 2](#)).” I called that number, and messages left were not returned.

So I asked my son, age 11, “What is Second-Step?” He said, “That’s just circle time. We don’t really pay attention.” My daughter, now in 7th grade, responded differently. She said, “Remember last year when I told you girls were being mean about pronouns, that’s Second-

Step.” So I went to the experts - I googled — and I started learning all I could about CASEL, Committee for Children, and Second-Step social emotional learning.

What is social-emotional learning? The Kansas Education Systems Accrediting body’s portrait of a high school graduate includes social-emotional factors, measured locally, which are considered non-academic, soft skills.

In December 2021, in testimony to the special committee, a State Board of Education member stated that social emotional growth was even more important to student success than academics, and that academics should make up 15-20% of a student’s total education.⁽¹⁾ This was based on feedback from listening tours across the state.

Research suggests that SEL skills are malleable, meaning they can be taught and learned.⁽²⁾ Long accepted psychosocial developmental theory defines early adolescence as the most critical period for the development and content of identity, to include feelings, beliefs, and attitudes. The goal of SEL is to influence students perceptions of themselves, others, and their environment.

So that I am clear, if we are talking about my child’s feelings, perceptions, and attitudes, and a survey is being performed before and after the SEL lesson, then what is being sought is evidence of change in my child’s feelings, perceptions, and attitudes.

According to the KSDE website, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, or CASEL, provides the model for SEL standards.⁽³⁾ In 2019, CASEL announced a 3-year strategic plan to “prioritize advancing SEL in the service of equity and excellence... ensuring integration of SEL throughout the instructional process.”⁽⁴⁾ This fits well within the KSDE rubric for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, which calls for “system-wide social-emotional

instruction, policies, and practices (to be) fully embedded in school culture ([see attachment 3](#))”

Per CASEL, this is a new emphasis on the strengths, experiences, and identities of all students, especially those who have been marginalized and minoritized by our society.” This new approach is designated “transformative” SEL. The aims of the new format are: Redistributing power to promote social justice; helping cultivate change agents and leaders; and to be woven into the daily life of school.”⁽⁵⁾ According to CASEL, “transformative” equates to emphasis on identity, marginalization, equity, just communities, and the collective.”⁽⁶⁾ In this setting, students and teachers collaborate in a never-ending cycle of critiquing societal structures, examining their own identities and biases, and working together to become change agents with the goal of becoming collectively effective. SEL proponents referenced by CASEL claim that transformative SEL is necessary because “dominant groups, especially upper-income White people... affix blame on the disadvantaged for their life circumstances; justify unearned privilege; and engage in dehumanization, commodification, and marginalization of large segments of the domestic and international populations.”⁽²⁾ According to CASEL President and CEO, Karen Niemi, SEL *is* diversity, equity, and inclusion and can be used as a *lever* to implement so-called equity and anti-racism.⁽⁷⁾

CASEL partners and contributors include the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Chan-Zuckerberg Initiative, and NoVo Foundation. I have attached goals for each entity with my testimony ([see attachment 4](#)). Some of the SEL research that I relied upon heavily was actually funded by the Chan-Zuckerberg Initiative. So they fund the research that props up the standards, and they fund the company that dictates the standards. Also note that the seed money provided for Panorama, the company that does these before and after surveys on our children, was also provided by the benevolent Mr. Zuckerberg.⁽⁸⁾

Per an article from the American Federation of Teachers, transformative SEL is “animating critical self and social analysis and action” and “engaging in a cyclical process of

action, assessment, reflection, and adjustment.”⁽⁴⁾ In other words, the work is never done. According to Jagers, et al., When SEL becomes transformative, it will “effectively address issues such as power, privilege, prejudice, discrimination, social justice, empowerment, and self determination.”⁽²⁾

My conclusion — Social-Emotional learning does not mean what I would have guessed. Transformative SEL aims to train children as tools of social justice. My children are not tools. I have spent hours with CASEL’s publications, webinars, and sample lessons. What I found was that this brand of SEL is based on ideas like deconstruction, intersectionality, standpoint epistemology or “lived experience,” Whiteness, anti-racism, social analysis from a Critical Theory lens so as to develop a Critical Social Consciousness, identity, and systemic power. These ideas are put forth as objective truth and not merely supposition. If you have been brushing up on Critical Race Theory, you will recognize these ideas to be hallmarks of the theory, which it turns out is actually quite specific and does not mean “everything under the sun,” as has been reported.⁽¹⁾

Second-Step is a product of Committee for Children, who states that social-emotional learning is fundamental to achieving social justice. A matrix is provided by the Committee for Children that incorporates CASEL and Learning for Justice lessons into the Second-Step program ([see attachment 5](#)). This was designed “to be used to incorporate diversity, equity, and social justice in the classroom in elementary and middle schools.” Learning for Justice, founded by the Southern Poverty Law Center, is a leader in anti-racism and anti-bias training. This work is intended to begin at the Kindergarten level. In middle school, kids are provided opportunities to reflect on fairness and discrimination, examine their own biases, and explore different aspects of gender. Children are also taught the facts about sex assigned at birth, sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression and how to advocate for LGBTQ youth.⁽⁹⁾

Second-Step discussion based curriculum is done in the classroom and includes videos, embedded links, and prompts for discussion of admittedly sensitive topics. To my thinking, this is essentially a group therapy session that could potentially be uncomfortable to both students and instructors. A male 6th grade teacher has disclosed to me that he is uncomfortable discussing some of the subject matter with children.

I wanted to see Second Step for myself, but it is copyright protected. Moreover, as a Kansas resident I do not have the right to view it, even though it is labeled curriculum and is used in the classroom. In the state of Utah, however, parents are entitled to view *all* curriculum, and I found a group in Utah who had done an extensive review of the program, which is published on-line.⁽¹⁰⁾

I personally contacted the two women who spent 30 hours with the program under supervision in the administration building and wrote the review. After a 3-hour zoom call spent looking at the material, I can summarize by saying it is exactly as expected given the source: Social justice, equity, identity, introspection, self-analysis, ally-ship, civic engagement, activism, and on and on. Society is viewed as collective. Instead of “don’t be a bully,” kids are now told standing up to bullies is a duty. The Golden Rule is redefined as “Treat others as they wish to be treated.” References to adults either suggest or directly state that adults today are not able to understand the issues that kids are facing. Children are told to contact a trusted adult but never a parent. If mentioned at all, parent is given the role of antagonist.

Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development informs us that adolescents are at their most vulnerable in terms of identity at this stage.⁽¹¹⁾ A teacher taking on the role of identity counselor for all students in a group is problematic. Traditionally, identity integration is to be done with feedback from peers and self reflection, not teacher feedback. By the very nature of

their role, a teacher is an authority figure, from whom a child *must* seek approval. After all, the teacher assigns the grade and makes the rules. I am reminded of the Asch experiment on conformity.⁽¹²⁾ The pressure to conform is immense, and these are children.

In almost every scenario provided for the kids to examine in Second-Step, the underlying message applies to ideas of power and privilege and how identity politics is playing out in school. Unit 2 is focused on harassment, but harassment and bullying are solely based on identity groups. The kids asked to provide a list of community based organizations for support regarding gender identity. They are encouraged to discuss significant stressors in their lives in a group of their peers.

This is an invasion of privacy. With all due respect, teachers are not licensed counselors or social workers. This is an imposition and is outside of their role. Moreover, this veers far into the lane of what the state of Kansas has determined is the right of parents and not the public school. Why are we doing this? This past year, parents were informed by our elementary school principal that incidents of harassment based on race have increased ([see attachment 6](#)). With relentless focus on identity groups and power dynamics, who would have seen that coming? How much are we suggesting to these children? This has so much potential to cross the line of ethics, I don't know where to start. But I have not yet arrived at the most concerning part of Second-Step.

Eighth grade, Unit 4, Lesson 2, a prompt tells kids that if they have questions, they can go to [LovelsRespect.org](https://www.LovelsRespect.org). Starting at this website and merely following embedded links, the things I encountered were shocking. At every turn, I found an invitation to visit with an anonymous counselor on-line about gender and sexuality issues. I followed up and in a span of 10 minutes was asked if I was suicidal three separate times. Instructions for easily exiting the website are given with reassurance that browser history will be erased. Why?

I found "scarleteen.com," which is "Sex Ed for the Real World - Inclusive, Comprehensive, and Supportive Sexuality and relationships info for teens and emerging adults." Recall, this is middle school; ages 11, 12, and 13. I have attached articles from the front page of this website, one of which discusses normalizing and de-stigmatizing abortion in discussions with children ([see attachment 7](#)), whom the author refers to as "the little ones." Another is entitled "Learning my Way Through my Poly Fears" ([see attachment 8](#)). I learned about what to expect "your first time" and how to procure a safe and confidential abortion. I was able to easily access a YouTube channel where porn stars answer questions about working in adult films. Because this is youtube, the algorithm will make new suggestions. In the encyclopedia, I learned about fisting. I easily made my way to a site where I could purchase a life-like artificial penis with a reservoir so that I can urinate while standing up (Emisil). I will not show you that website in this forum, but I have provided a link with my testimony⁽¹³⁾.

If you read the article about explaining abortion to children as early as possible, it will appear extreme. However, part of Theory is the idea that childhood innocence is a construct. Professor Hannah Dyer, a critical theorist of childhood with concentration in queer theory and social analysis, is the winner of the 2021 Faculty Award for Teaching Excellence in the Department of Child & Youth Studies at Brock University. Her book The Queer Aesthetics of Childhood, published by Rutgers, won the 2020 Choice Outstanding Academic Title award. In an article from 2017 in *Global Studies of Childhood*, Dyer claims children are born queer. She says, "There is on one hand the necessity of supporting LGBTQ children and on the other, the related need to reimagine our theories of childhood so that they are not constrained by rhetorics of childhood innocence that invalidate the child's potential queer desires."⁽¹⁴⁾ I have attached this article in its entirety to my testimony ([see attachment 7](#)). Queer theorists view childhood innocence as a social construct used to reenforce the dominant culture of

heteronormative monogamy and the nuclear family, which supports colonialism and White patriarchy. Abortion. Pornography. Gender confusion. Polyamory. Sex work. Some things, once seen, cannot be unseen. Childhood innocence once lost cannot be recovered. Contrary to the opinions of Professor Dyer, I believe this community values the innocence of our children.

I am profoundly aware that I am standing in the state Capitol building in Topeka, Kansas, the birthplace of Brown v. Board of Education, and I cannot express the respect that I have for this building. I do not wish to dishonor it, but I feel that it is necessary for the committee members to understand exactly and specifically is being peddled to children under the guise of social and emotional learning.

This is supposed to be about supporting our children's mental health. In testimony in December, a state Board of Education member told us that the #1 concern voiced by the community regarding students was mental health. She stated, "**We all know**, good mental health is important to student achievement."⁽¹⁾

Who is responsible for my child's social and emotional growth? Who is responsible for my child's mental health? I'm going to tell you what motivated this parent to come to Topeka and stand here nervously before you to tell you our story. On November 2, I was told by my 12-year-old that a substitute school counselor pulled her from class and discussed scheduling meetings with her on a weekly basis, a so-called "intervention." This was done without our knowledge or consent — based on a survey that was performed despite our opting out. Upon my inquiry, I was informed that this intervention was done by a social work practicum student, and that meeting with a counselor weekly was considered "surface-level" intervention; thus, parental notification is not required (see attachment 8). Based on my research of social

emotional learning, this particular parent no longer trusted the judgment of our district or its social workers.

Social-emotional learning is a worthy goal, and great results have been reported in the past. This occurs when specific issues are addressed with specific students with the help of qualified professionals. However, once we introduce the idea of transformation and embed this into pedagogy at every level, top to bottom, inside out, what has emerged is, at best, an unqualified social experiment and, at worst, an effort to engage children toward a goal of fomenting dissatisfaction with and resentment toward institutions of Western society — to include the nuclear family.

In early committee meetings, Senator Molly Baumgartner expressed that parents have two priorities: 1) Is my child safe, and 2) will my child learn.⁽¹⁾ The answer for our family was emphatically — No. We have chosen to withdraw our children from the Shawnee Mission school district. I do not expect we will be the last.

I have no control over the reception of my testimony, but I am compelled to voice it nevertheless. Maybe, 10 years from now, if you find yourselves wondering what happened to our children, I humbly request that you recall that concerned mother stood in this intimidating building with her voice shaking and told you — they are breaking children — they are and they will — But they will no longer have an opportunity to break **my** children.

Thank you for being so generous with your time today. There is nothing more important than the health of our children. I hope I served the issue well, and I look forward to discussion.

- (1) "Special Committee on Education 12/01/2021." n.d. Www.youtube.com. Accessed December 28, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Njp4q_hMJPY.
- (2) Jagers, Robert J., Deborah Rivas-Drake, and Brittney Williams. 2019. "Transformative Social and Emotional Learning (SEL): Toward SEL in Service of Educational Equity and Excellence." *Educational Psychologist* 54 (3): 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2019.1623032>.
- (3) Social, Emotional, and Character Development Model Standards, Kansas State Department of Education, July 2018. [https://www.ksde.org/Portals/0/CSAS/Content%20Area%20\(M-Z\)/School%20Counseling/Soc_Emot_Char_Dev/Kansas%20SECD%20Model%20Standards%20Revised%20July%202018.pdf?ver=2018-07-12-114624-670&TSPD_101_R0=0812b43512ab20002daa08d04dee7242bdfd98fe72d6ba8967a8872691f81e0dc2c4b2f3c7bf2319083bc9ce4814300030728392d9ca6c37e7b12288cdcf203931a7c2fe4776092909fbe7cf38d63d86ae81cda07d7fa65337554b1792dcfca6](https://www.ksde.org/Portals/0/CSAS/Content%20Area%20(M-Z)/School%20Counseling/Soc_Emot_Char_Dev/Kansas%20SECD%20Model%20Standards%20Revised%20July%202018.pdf?ver=2018-07-12-114624-670&TSPD_101_R0=0812b43512ab20002daa08d04dee7242bdfd98fe72d6ba8967a8872691f81e0dc2c4b2f3c7bf2319083bc9ce4814300030728392d9ca6c37e7b12288cdcf203931a7c2fe4776092909fbe7cf38d63d86ae81cda07d7fa65337554b1792dcfca6)
- (4) "Transformative Social and Emotional Learning." 2021. American Federation of Teachers. June 3, 2021. https://www.aft.org/ae/summer2021/jagers_skoog-hoffman_barthelus_schlund.
- (5) Niemi, Karen. n.d. "Niemi: CASEL Is Updating the Most Widely Recognized Definition of Social-Emotional Learning. Here's Why." Accessed March 2, 2021. <https://www.the74million.org/article/niemi-casel-is-updating-the-most-widely-recognized-definition-of-social-emotional-learning-heres-why/>.
- (6) "CASEL CARES: SEL as a Lever for Equity and Social Justice." n.d. Www.youtube.com. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UPWrnBA2274>.
- (7) "SEL as a Lever for Equity: 5-Part Webinar Series from CASEL." 2020. Conscious Discipline. August 11, 2020. <https://consciousdiscipline.com/sel-as-a-lever-for-equity-5-part-webinar-series-from-casel/>.
- (8) "Mark Zuckerberg Puts His Money in Ed-Tech Startup." n.d. NBC News. Accessed January 21, 2022. <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna53335011>.
- (9) "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion." n.d. Committee for Children. Accessed January 21, 2022. <https://www.cfchildren.org/about-us/diversity-equity-and-inclusion-dei/>.
- (10) Logan, Lisa, and Stacie Clayton. 2021. Review of *8th Grade Second Step Curriculum*, by Utah Parents United. https://www.utahparentsunited.org/uploads/1/3/3/6/133631373/8th_grade_review-second_step_detailed_.docx.pdf.
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(13) "Products." n.d. Emisil. Accessed January 21, 2022. <https://www.emisil.com/collections/all>.

(14) Dyer, Hannah. 2016. "Queer Futurity and Childhood Innocence: Beyond the Injury of Development." *Global Studies of Childhood* 7 (3): 290–302. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2043610616671056>.