



Building
Equitable
Learning
Environments
Network



EDUCATOR WELL-BEING AS A PATHWAY TOWARD INVESTING IN EDUCATION STAFF: INSIGHTS FROM THE TRANSFORMATIVE SEL (tSEL) ADULT LEARNING SERIES PILOT



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ABOUT THE BELE LEARNING SERIES

The Building Equitable Learning Environments (BELE) network is a diverse collaborative of organizations working together to advance equity in education. These organizations range from academic institutions to fellow intermediary organizations. BELE partners share a bold vision of thriving youth, families, caregivers, and communities—and of education systems that are co-created with those they are intended to serve—to foster academic, social, emotional, and cognitive growth and well-being. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), the National Equity Project (NEP), and the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research (UChicago Consortium) are part of the BELE Network research and learning team, and are responsible for documenting the network learnings, which are grounded in seven “Essential Actions” and reflected in shared annual aims.

Within BELE, we are producing a series of briefs documenting insights from our efforts to understand how the implementation of initiatives in our BELE partner districts show evidence of social and emotional learning (SEL) in service of equity and excellence, including for students, educators and school and district leaders. These briefs highlight the conditions necessary to begin and sustain the work of systemic transformation.

In this series, we explore our learnings with our partner districts, aligning each paper to one of seven BELE Essential Actions. These Essential Actions describe the changes and processes necessary to realize systemic transformation and are meant to give educators, caregivers, and practitioners concrete actions for centering student experience in education.

The goal of this learning series is two-fold:

1. To share our action research agenda and the collaborative learnings of CASEL, NEP, UChicago Consortium, and our partner districts regarding the conditions necessary to create and cultivate transformative and equitable learning environments.
2. To provide education practitioner-facing recommendations for those looking to begin equivalent work in their district or school.

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As part of the BELE Network, CASEL and NEP work alongside school districts who seek external collaborators to co-design sustainable models for equitable learning environments adaptable to their local context. Coaching assistance, network resources and tools, and research capacity are aligned with district practitioners' expert knowledge of their learning communities, key stakeholder relationships, and access to learning environments to formulate, implement, and test student- and adult-level frameworks that are both adaptive and scalable. Underpinned by a collaborative approach, these research-practice partnerships allow cultivated relationships with districts already committed to develop solutions to the persistent challenge of providing equitable learning opportunities for all students.

As organizations committed to the testing of innovative strategies and actions that are in service of building equitable learning environments for young people and adults, BELE Network partners co-designed a set of design principles known as Essential Actions to guide districts in their programs and initiatives prioritizing equity efforts. The [BELE Essential Actions](#) describe the processes ("how") to make changes necessary ("what") to realize the systemic transformation needed to create resilient school systems that foster the academic, social, and emotional growth of all young people and their communities. This shared framing can help ensure that ALL students, and particularly those students who have been historically underserved, meet universal goals of whole child well-being and academic excellence (BELE Network, 2022).

These actions are supported by extant literature and field-based evidence serving as a set of practices, processes, and conditions that the BELE Network has collectively identified as imperatives for transforming the education system and ensuring that all students are afforded high-quality educational experiences. The BELE Essential Actions include:



Make systems human-centered



Invest in staff



Transform teaching and learning



Measure what matters



Empower BIPOC youth



Create equitable policies



Partner with caregivers and communities

CASEL and NEP both offer technical assistance models increasing the capacity of people to achieve thriving, self-determining, educated, and just communities. While CASEL's approach to this level of capacity-building is through evidence-based, systemic SEL implementation, NEP approaches systems improvement through coaching, facilitation, and training grounded in their Leading for Equity Framework. UChicago Consortium reinforces this work by conducting and translating academic research that best supports learning and positive development for students and adults in diverse learning settings. Despite the differences in approach, this partnership is predicated on the reality that all organizations use a set of action-oriented principles that align with the BELE Essential Actions in guiding their coaching and technical assistance to districts.





HIGHLIGHTS OF THIS LEARNING BRIEF

This brief will share learnings from BELE district partnerships around the fifth Essential Action: invest in staff. Investing in staff requires taking a critical look at the educational environment—examining if it enables every educator to actively participate in their roles, feel prepared to cultivate meaningful connections with students, and positively contribute to students’ daily school experiences.

To support this Essential Action, CASEL developed the Transformative (tSEL) Adult Learning Series, a set of six interactive workshops that build an opportunity for adults themselves to deepen their self-awareness and discover how they can curate equitable learning environments for young people by leveraging the five focal constructs (identity, agency, belonging, collaborative problem-solving, and curiosity).

Through this series, education leaders are making investments for in-service professional learning that supports educator well-being and promotes equitable learning environments for adults and young people. Investing in staff actualizes the value of continuous improvement, which fosters a culture of expansion, growth, and development among educators.

It is our hope that these investments translate into a sense of agency in practice and ultimately enhanced student experiences and lead to improved school outcomes for all students. In the current educational landscape, educators often have little time to critically reflect on how their personal backgrounds shape their professional stance and teaching and learning efforts.

Intentional professional development and learning can empower educators to reflect deeply, refine their skills, and experiment with innovative approaches to better recognize the existing local assets and adapt to the changing needs and aspirations of their students. The return on this investment in staff creates a dynamic learning environment, one that can yield higher levels of well-being for educators by offering a place where they feel valued and are prepared to support students.

This Essential Action suggests several pathways toward investing in staff:

- Provide professional learning opportunities to teacher teams to work with various types of qualitative and quantitative data so they can engage in continuous improvement cycles with students as partners.
- Ensure that staff, particularly BIPOC (i.e., Black, Indigenous, and people of color) educators, are engaged in decision-making at the school, district, and state level on a variety of topics, including curricula, assessments, and the design and delivery of professional learning.
- Prepare educators to facilitate developmentally appropriate conversations about race, culture, socioeconomic status, gender, geographic location, and other important topics in a way that empowers students and avoids marginalizing students from diverse backgrounds and settings.



- Create structures to support the well-being of educators—providing time, resources, and opportunities to care for themselves and one another—so they are able to prioritize the well-being of their students.
- Ensure professional development is grounded in holistic child development that centers the experiences and voices of students and their families and communities ([BELE Network, 2023](#)).

Research indicates that educator well-being must be a priority. For example, only half of educators are reporting being satisfied with their job, and a third of teachers report that they will be leaving the profession within the next two years ([Will, 2023](#)). More than half of teachers said that the mental health and wellness of teachers in their school has declined over the course of the 2022-23 school year. Forty-two percent of teachers said their teaching and professional growth had suffered this year because of the state of their mental health.

As the BELE work within CASEL continued to unfold with partner districts, CASEL coaches began hearing similar themes. They also found that even educators who volunteered to receive student feedback regarding their instructional practices struggled to find the mental and emotional bandwidth to respond objectively to that feedback. Students spoke about their perceptions of the care they received from teachers, whether assigned schoolwork seemed meaningful and relevant to their lives, and how much teachers valued their voice. It soon became clear educators needed an investment of time and resources to help foster the conditions necessary to center their own social and emotional competence through critical reflection and adjust their practice in developing learning environments that support the needs of all students.

We launched the tSEL Adult Learning Series to deepen educators' personal and professional practice through increased awareness, real-time implementation practices, and strategies anchored in their understanding of [transformative SEL](#) and the aligned focal constructs (i.e., Identity, Agency, Belonging, Collaborative Problem-Solving, and Curiosity). Relationships are at the heart of supporting co-learning, increasing student agency, and encouraging the naming and mitigation of inequities in classrooms, schools, and communities. TSEL provides a research base and framework to build those relationships.

In the series, educators pursued the following objectives:

- Articulate foundational understanding of tSEL and the aligned focal constructs
- Identify the steps needed to shift educator mindset regarding their influence on creating supportive and equitable learning spaces as a precondition for change
- Deepen and strengthen individual self-awareness to recognize the power of personal authenticity
- Identify and leverage personal power to create spaces that are empowering for students and adults



The series leans into the theoretical underpinnings of adult learning and harnesses CASEL’s approach of learn, connect and collaborate, and model as a means of increasing the capacity and skill of the educator to partner with youth and support the development and sustainability of equitable learning environments. Rooted in [the five focal constructs of tSEL](#), the series provides opportunities for educators to deepen their awareness, knowledge, and application of each in their classrooms and schools. It leans on the collective wisdom and experience of participants to drive deep learning, reflection, and growth. All sessions are designed to be experienced in two-hour increments engaging in each of the five focal constructs:

Session Title	Overview
<p>1 Identity</p> <p>Educator Mindset: Positioning for Impact</p>	<p>Healthy identity buffers against negative or traumatic experiences and contributes to positive outcomes. Before adults can nurture and support SEL in students, they must first be fully grounded in their own sense of self. Educators’ understanding of their identity allows for reflection on the impact their identities have on those they are tasked to serve, positions them to develop supportive relationships with youth of differing identities, and creates an openness to the identities, cultures, and assets of others</p>
<p>2 Agency</p> <p>Freedom: Empowered Action</p>	<p>Agency involves creating and taking opportunities for voice, choice, and ownership. It recognizes that individuals are experts of themselves and have the capacity to enact appropriate self-direction and management that supports them in setting and achieving personal and collective goals. When we create environments that foster agency, we also support the development of critical hope among youth and adults. Fostering agency requires constant evaluation of implementation and impact to ensure equitable outcomes.</p>
<p>3 Belonging</p> <p>Building Community</p>	<p>Building a sense of belonging requires an intentional focus on identity, encouragement of empowered action, and a commitment to fostering community. Community is co-created—and offers a place where all members are fully recognized and experience an increased sense of self-worth. We acknowledge the relationship between the individual and collective and create paths to strengthen both for the sake of deepening a sense of belonging.</p>
<p>4 Collaborative Problem-Solving</p> <p>Leveraging our Collective Brilliance</p>	<p>Collaborative problem-solving combines the strengths, skills, and intelligence of the community to create the necessary space to work together to solve challenges. Sharing of power and responsibilities becomes the norm. This process prioritizes developing a deep understanding of the problem and desired outcome to pinpoint multiple ways to solve/resolve it. By making connections that thread similarities and acknowledge/identify the differences in approaches, individuals and communities strengthen opportunities for collective learning and for meaningful change.</p>



5

Curiosity

Increasing Understanding with Courage

One of the ways to keep this work going is to adopt a desire to continuously develop and pursue a sense of curiosity about self, others, institutions, and systems. This stance acknowledges that there is always more to learn and understand and accepts that “no one knows everything about anything.” It supports the position of being a learner to contribute and collaborate. Compassionate curiosity with reflection supplants judgmental questioning and enhances self-development and social analysis, supporting responsible decision-making that yields authentic partnerships with students, caregivers, and colleagues.

6

Bringing it all Together

Strategies at the Student Level

A more authentic and connected life experience is a byproduct of taking time to deepen our understanding of self, others, and the world around us. It opens up the possibility of having richer and more supportive relationships with students, caregivers, and communities by leaning into the necessary curiosity and being open to learn, reflect, and follow through with aligned actions that support individual and collective well-being. This session is focused on how to take their learnings from the previous five sessions and identify actionable strategies that can be implemented in classrooms with students.

PARTNERING TO PILOT THE SERIES

As a next step, series creators and the CASEL research team wanted to see how the series would operate in the field. By piloting the series with many districts, we’d have the opportunity to examine which conditions, strategies, and activities are the most successful in shifting mindsets and ultimately influencing educator behavior. A pilot would also give us access to the wisdom in the field, partnering with educators to collaborate and learn from them as we explore how best to deliver this professional learning centered around critical self-reflection of the five focal constructs.

The Sacramento County Office of Education (SCOE) was quickly identified as a valuable partner for a pilot. CASEL has had a strong working relationship with SCOE for more than five years. In early 2022, SCOE leaders spearheaded SEL professional learning opportunities with county stakeholders. Both CASEL and the district had much to gain from the work: it would answer the need and demand for SEL professional learning in SCOE educators while providing CASEL with an opportunity for input and feedback from a valued partner.



Sacramento County Office of Education (SCOE)

Committed to excellence and equity in education, SCOE nurtures and fosters a thriving educational community in the diverse Sacramento County.

The Office serves and supports:

- 13 urban and rural school districts
- More than 240,000 students
- Over 13,000 educators

By providing:

- Professional development opportunities
- Special education programs
- Curriculum support



The tSEL Adult Learning Series pilot was part of a larger CalHope project between SCOE and The Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley. The CalHope initiative focuses on the well-being of students and involves training teachers and school staff through existing educational Communities of Practice (CoPs).

The training encompassed crisis counseling equipping educators with essential skills to create supportive learning environments. Through these comprehensive sessions, teachers and school staff gained the skills to provide essential supportive interventions to students contributing to a safer and more nurturing educational environment. The addition of the Transformative SEL Adult Learning Series content was seen as a value add that aligned well with the established CoP professional development offerings.

The series content, activities, and discussion were facilitated in-person by series creators. Each session ran approximately two and a half hours. Participants engaged in the series activities over five sessions during the 2022-2023 school year.

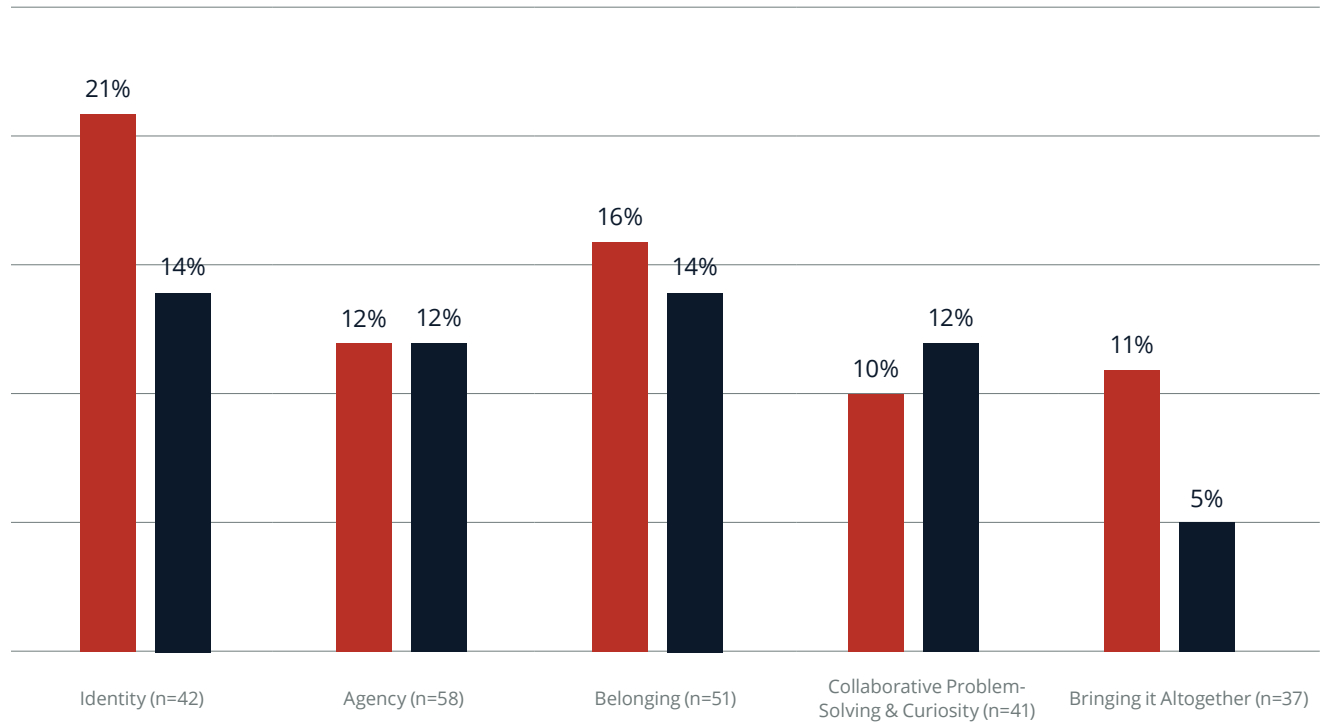
Session Dates & Number of Participant Responses		
Session Date	Session Topic	Number of responses to the feedback survey
October 27, 2022	Identity	42
December 8, 2022	Agency	58
February 9, 2023	Belonging	51
April 20, 2023	Collaborative Problem-Solving And Curiosity*	41
May 11, 2023	Bringing it All Together	37

Table 1. Displays the date of each session, session title, and number of participants that responded to the end-of-session feedback surveys. *Note: For scheduling reasons, SCOE combined sessions 4 and 5 into a single session.



Participants represented SCOE administrators and staff from multiple districts that SCOE serves. District-level roles were the most represented across all sessions.

Percentage of the Two Most Commonly Reported Roles by SCOE Participants



Session	Other	Missing
Identity	29% (n=12)	2% (n=1)
Agency	35% (n=20)	7% (n=4)
Belonging	29% (n=15)	8% (n=4)
Collaborative Problem-Solving & Curiosity	42% (n=17)	12% (n=5)
Bringing it All Together	43% (n=16)	8% (n=3)

■ District Staff Member ■ District Administrator

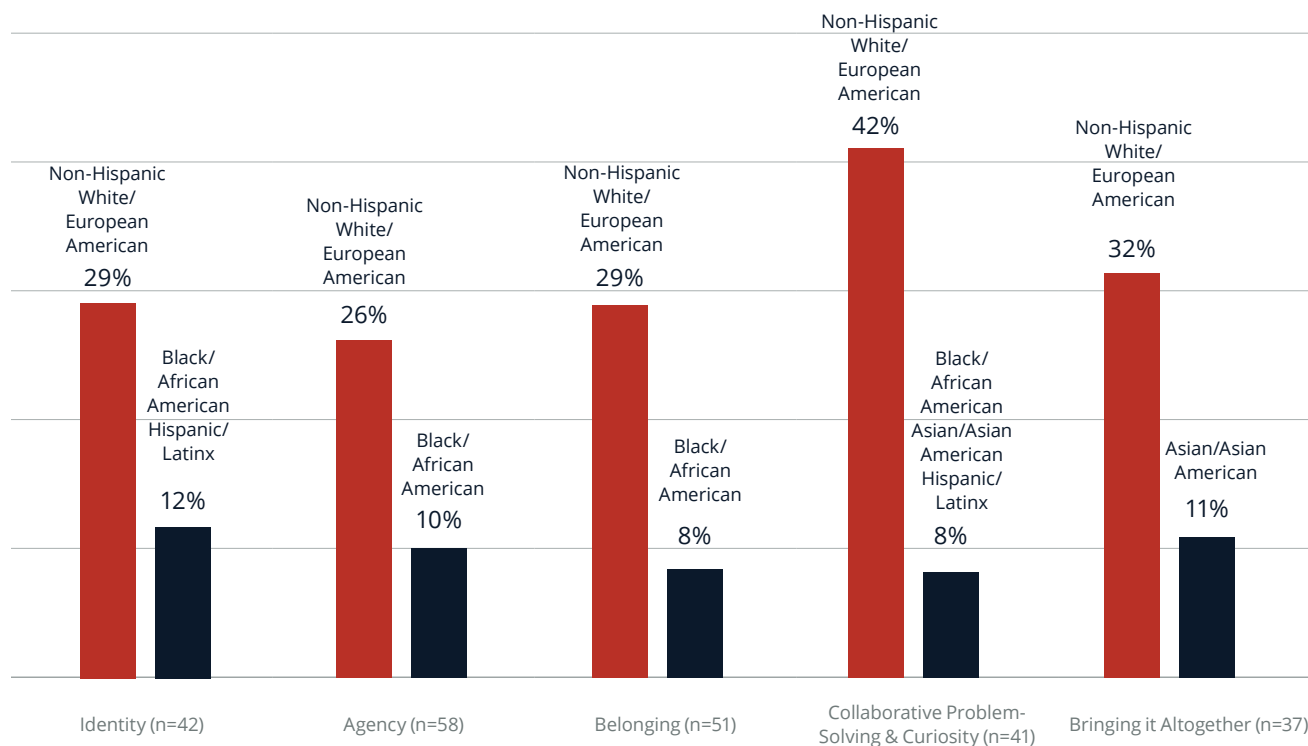
Figure 1

Bar graph displaying the top two roles (i.e., district staff member and district administrator) that were reported for each session. Legend includes the number of participants that selected 'other' or chose not to respond to the item.



Non-Hispanic European Americans were the most represented racial/ethnic group across all sessions.

SCOE Participants Racial/Ethnic Breakdown: Percentage of the Two Most Commonly Selected Groups



Session	Missing
Identity	2% (n=1)
Agency	36% (n=21)
Belonging	43% (n=22)
Collaborative Problem-Solving & Curiosity	12% (n=5)
Bringing it All Together	35% (n=12)

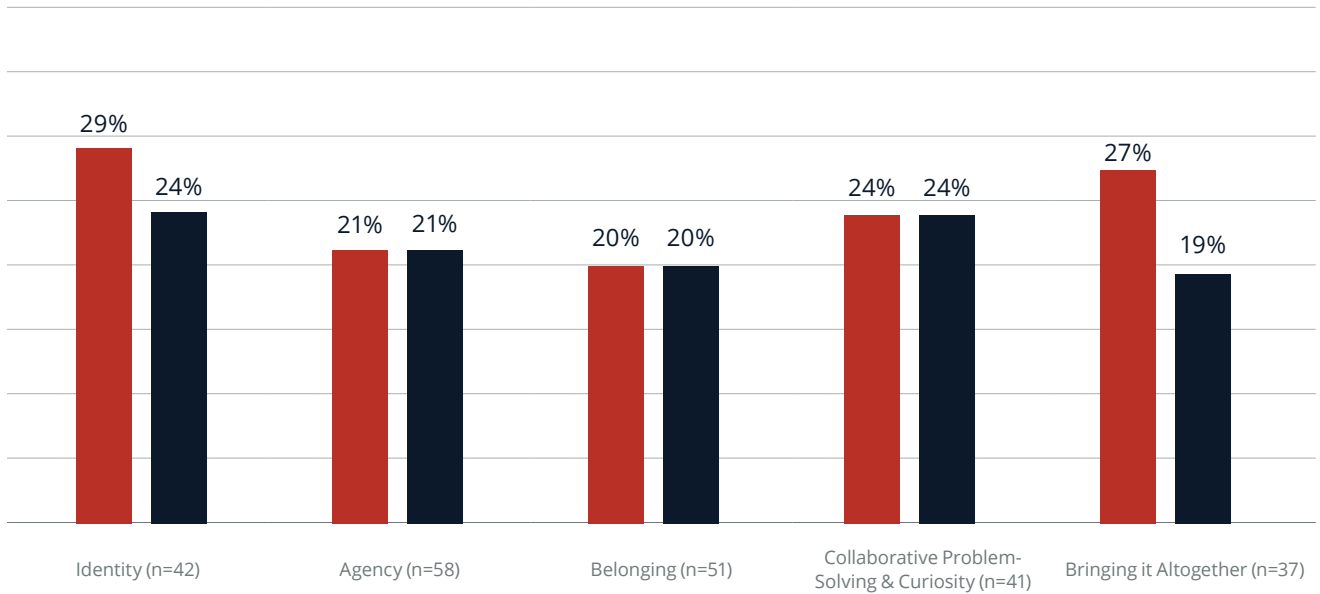
Figure 2

Bar graph displaying the top two racial/ethnic sub-groups that were reported for each session. Participants that self-identified as Non-Hispanic European Americans represented the largest subgroup at each session. Legend includes the number of participants that chose not to respond to the item.

Most SCOE participants in the series were long-time, veteran educators who have been in education 16 or more years.



Percentage of the Two Most Commonly Selected Ranges for Years of Experience by SCOE Participants



Session	Missing
Identity	26% (n=11)
Agency	36% (n=21)
Belonging	43% (n=22)
Collaborative Problem-Solving & Curiosity	24% (n=10)
Bringing it All Together	35% (n=13)

- 20+ Years / Most Reported Number of Years of Experience
- 16-20 Years / 2nd Most Reported Number of Years of Experience

Figure 3

Bar graph displaying that veteran teachers of 16 or more years made up most participants. Legend includes the number of participants that chose not to respond to the item.

As a research-practice partnership, CASEL and SCOE teams co-developed research and learning questions to serve as the foundation for our inquiry around the impact of the series.

The shared questions were:

- What are the conditions needed for educators to deepen their awareness, knowledge, and application of tSEL and its five focal constructs?
- How does the educator mindset evolve when going through the adult learning series? Does an educator's sense of agency become activated after undergoing the professional learning series?

These questions helped guide the research process, shaping the direction and focus of inquiry and establishing clear objectives for the work.



The CASEL team employed a mixed methods approach to research design and analysis. This approach combines both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Its purpose is to gain a more holistic, richer understanding of the research and learning questions being studied. When engaging in an approach, stakeholders collect and analyze both numerical data (quantitative) and textual or narrative data (qualitative) to triangulate findings, validate results, and provide a fuller context for interpretation.

By combining these two approaches, researchers can connect the strengths of each method to document the complexities of and potential solutions to problems of educational practice. The benefits of utilizing a mixed method approach is that it grants the integration of multiple, diverse data points for triangulation, yielding a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of how educators are critically reflecting on SEL and its focal constructs.

CASEL included both end-of-session feedback surveys and focus group interviews in this project. In terms of surveys, we asked series participants to complete a feedback survey at the end of each session. Incorporating surveys into our data collection methods allowed us to capture participant perceptions about the content presented during the sessions. Each session's feedback survey included three types of questions. All item scales were on a five-point agreement scale (1= Strongly disagree to 5= Strongly agree).

Measures used to collect survey data included the following:

- **Session-specific/post attributional items** measured if participants agreed, from their perspective, that the session's objectives were met. Participant perspectives are based on what they were able to do because of their participation in the session.
- **Catalyze, a tool developed by BELE Network Partners**, offered a way to measure six organizational conditions that can be reviewed to make actionable decisions as a school community:
 1. **Collective Vision**—Educators are invited to contribute to their organization's vision and become increasingly motivated and invested in organizational change efforts.
 2. **Inclusive Empowerment**—Educators experience higher levels of motivation and commitment when they feel comfortable sharing their perspectives, have opportunities to participate in decision-making, and believe that the organization is willing to make changes.
 3. **Learning Culture**—Educators feel more satisfied and willing to innovate and share knowledge when they work in organizations that prioritize collaboration, experimentation, and reflection.
 4. **Supportive Leadership**—Educators feel cared for and are more committed to their organization when they work with leaders who invest in relationships and model competence and humility.
 5. **Transformative Equity**—Educators feel more informed and purposeful when collaborating to identify, understand, and address equity issues in their organization.
 6. **Trusting Community**—Educators feel a sense of increased well-being and are more likely to help each other when they work in an organization that prioritizes relationships.



- **CASEL SEL Implementation Survey items** captured educators' general SEL beliefs and attitudes, as well as perceptions around relevant working condition items (i.e., educator retention).

CASEL conducted focus groups with nine SCOE educators who participated in the series to deepen our understanding of the impact of the sessions and their subsequent understanding of the focal constructs. Participants also spoke about how engaging with the series made them feel and whether they felt confident in transferring the learnings from the series into the activities they lead and manage.

KEY INSIGHTS FROM THE TRANSFORMATIVE SEL ADULT LEARNING SERIES PILOT

Three key insights emerged from the quantitative and qualitative data gathered in the project:

1. A unifying collective vision for equity is essential to supporting the conditions that create opportunity for educator critical self-reflection and increase educators' sense of agency.
2. Cultivating a culture of trust for educators to practice and actualize their agency is paramount to their ability to take action disrupting inequities in schools.
3. Educator agency is critical for progress but remains the most difficult to enact.



INSIGHT

1

A unifying collective vision for equity is essential to supporting the conditions that create opportunity for educator critical self-reflection and increase educators' sense of agency.

A collective vision, with equity at its center, serves as a shared purpose unifying educators, guiding them towards a clear and common direction toward creating equitable conditions and outcomes within schools. When educators, from leadership to student support staff, collectively envision a more equitable school environment, it fosters a sense of purpose and commitment.

Developing a collective vision that draws on a range of perspectives and experiences results in a more robust, collective vision equipped to address a broad array of challenges and inequities that schools face (BELE Network, n.d.a). Schools also build a culture of collaboration through a collective vision that reflects the perspectives of all stakeholders in the community (Carswell, 2021; Neigel, 2006). This inclusivity fosters a sense of ownership amongst educators, promoting a higher level of commitment to articulating and achieving the common vision's goals and objectives, and retention (Waddell, 2010).

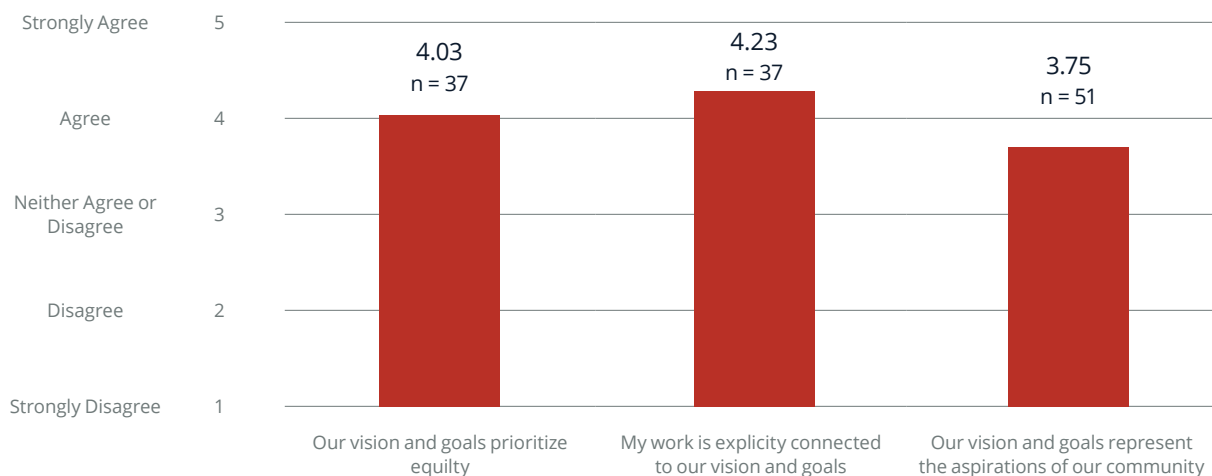


Figure 4

Bar graph of items from the Collective Vision Catalyze construct. Means demonstrate participants mostly *agreed* with the item statement. Items were administered via feedback surveys.

In the examination of SCOE's experience with the series and the conditions that support critical reflection and sense of agency, collective vision was revealed as a top condition that speaks to walking in unity towards a collective equity goal. This shared commitment translates into a strong sense of collective and individual agency that leads to purposeful actions and strategies aimed at creating an environment where both adults and students alike can thrive and reach excellence.

There were significant, positive relationships between collective vision and participants' perspectives around their preparedness to support or create spaces of connection and belonging. This finding furthered our understanding of connections of collective vision and educator beliefs about their agency. As educators' feelings of being more connected to their school community's vision and goals increase, so do the perceptions of their ability to engage in actions that promote equity.



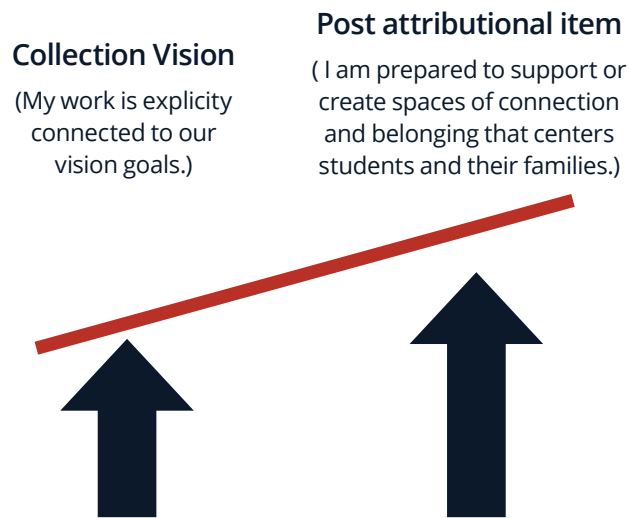


Figure 5

This visual illustrates the significant, positive relationship between participants’ perspectives of their work being connected to the collective vision and around their preparedness to support or create spaces of connection and belonging (skill).

Additionally, having a collective vision and goals representing the aspirations of their community was significantly associated with participant perceptions that their organization (e.g., COE, district, school) supports an overall culture of SEL in schools, which positions SEL as a benefit for the entire school environment (Taylor et al., 2017; Osher & Berg, 2017).

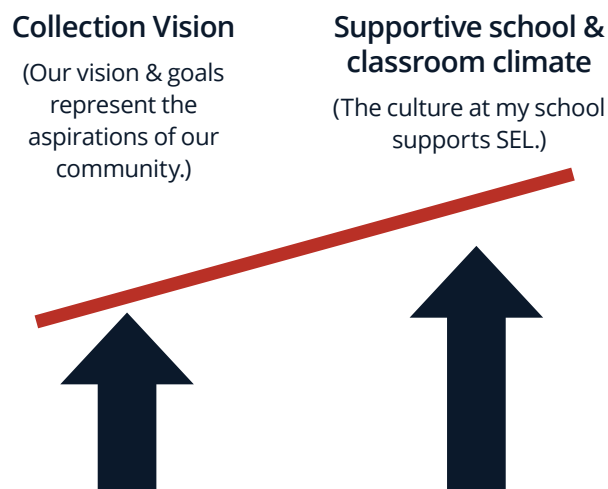


Figure 6

This visual illustrates the significant, positive relationship between participants’ perspectives of their collective vision and their school culture supporting SEL.

It is also important to note a key context related to leadership support: SCOE has been prioritizing efforts to build adult capacity to support their other priority around equity and implementing tSEL in the county’s districts and schools. This was evident in participant response to items about previous opportunities or exposure to equity centered or SEL-related content.

- A majority (96 percent) of SCOE participants responded with overall agreement (i.e., strongly agree and agree) that they had reflected on the idea of their own identities as was discussed prior to the identity session.
- Nearly all series participants (95 percent) reported feeling comfortable engaging with the topic of identity as it was discussed.
- The exposure to the series' content continued to give SCOE educators opportunities to think about their identities. When asked, 98 percent agreed that due to the session they attended, they were given an opportunity to reflect deeply on how their personal identities impact their professional practice.

SCOE leadership is a key factor in making sure educators are exposed to quality professional learning and development that allows educators to engage with content that calls for collective and individual cognitive shifts that support action.

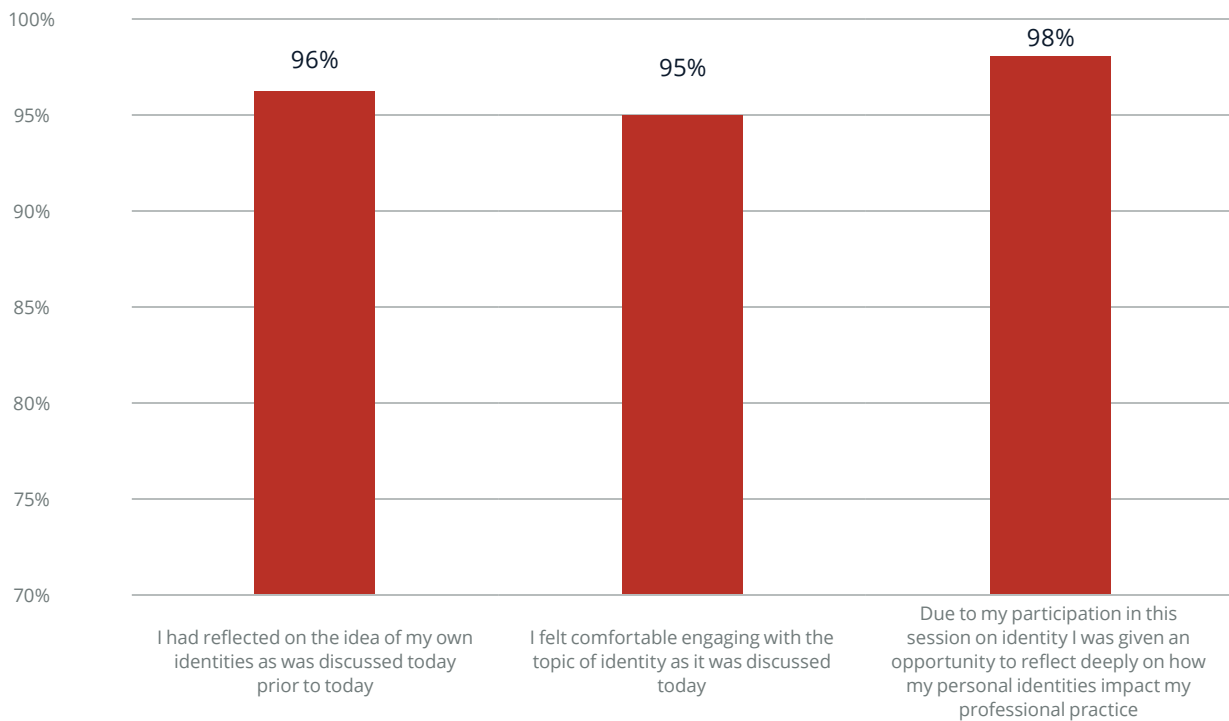


Figure 7

Bar graph illustrates the high percentages of overall *agreement* to prior exposure to identity-specific content.

As an action step going forward, leadership can continue to lean into providing opportunities for all stakeholders to critically self-reflect and contribute to their school's collective vision and goals so that it reinforces educators' belief in their skill to create an inclusive space of belonging for students and their families. Sustaining that support of educators' cognitive beliefs about their agency can eventually lead to behavioral changes, according to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1989), which suggests that individuals must first cognitively process and understand information before they can effectively change their behavior.



INSIGHT 2

Cultivating a culture of trust for educators to practice and actualize their agency is paramount to their ability to take action disrupting inequities in schools.

An existing body of research has provided sufficient evidence of the effects of organizational conditions on educator agency and ultimately student outcomes (Hart et al., 2020; Slegers et al., 2014; Firestone & Pennell, 1993; Collinson, Cook, & Conley, 2006). These conditions within the educational environment play a pivotal role in shaping educators' sense of safety, which allows them to practice their agency (PERTS, 2023). Educator agency is therefore heavily contingent on context, ever-changing in response to an arrangement of dynamic factors. This emphasizes the significance of educators being in environments with organizational conditions that foster professional growth, enhancing the potential for increased agency in their practices (Hong et al., 2020).

Findings from the SCOE pilot of the adult learning series added to our understanding of how organizational conditions can be nourished to lead to positive educator perceptions about their agency. Participating educators highlighted trusting community and learning culture as conditions present within the SCOE context that proved to affect an overall positive school environment and educator agency.

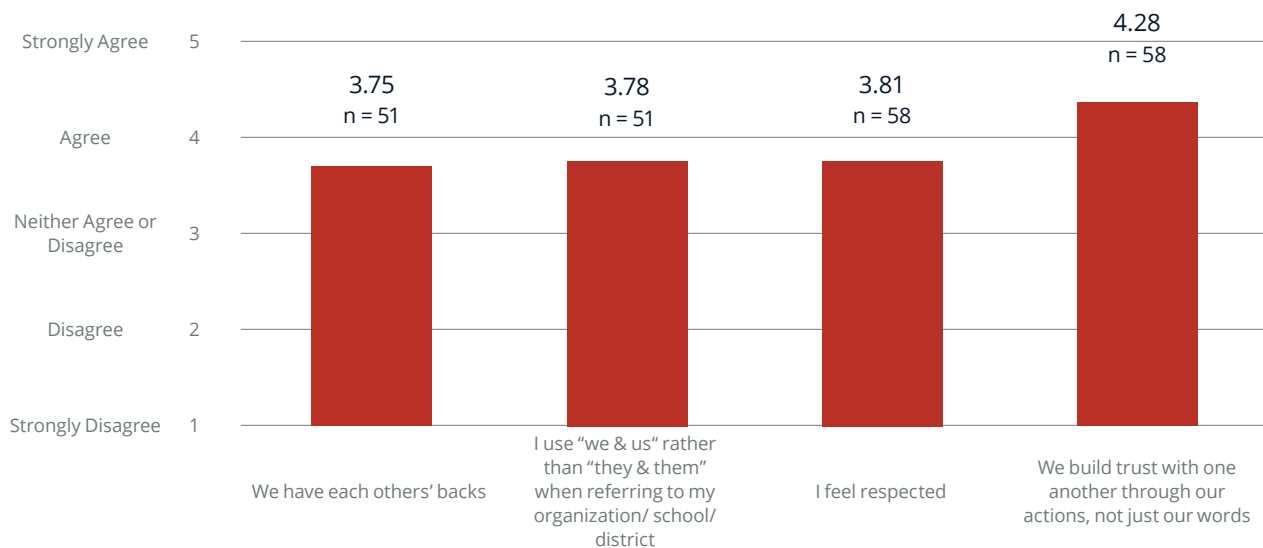


Figure 8

Bar graph of items from the Trusting Community Catalyze construct. Means at or approaching agreement.

As an organizational condition, trusting community provides a stable foundation for building a sense of belonging. This particular condition was one of the highest rated for SCOE participants. Having a sense of belonging and trust within an organization supports adult well-being, which in turn supports the likelihood that educators will be motivated to be more efficacious ([PERTS, 2023; Jagers, Skoog-Hoffman, Barthelus, & Schlund, 2021](#)).

As mentioned, our findings are in alignment with existing research. For instance, a study by Gray (2016) demonstrated a connection between collective trust, collective efficacy, and enabling school structures for overall school effectiveness. Collective trust was found to be a significant predictor of overall school effectiveness. Gray's findings contribute to findings that were evidenced in other studies (Tarter & Hoy, 2004; Mitchell et al., 2015).

Despite these perceptions about high levels of trust in their organizations, SCOE participants expressed there was a lack of organizational trust hindering educator agency within their own district context. A lack of professional trust and disempowerment corrodes educators' sense of efficacy (Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, & Hoy, 1998).

"Thinking about my system that I'm in, there's a lot of control and I'm learning that control a lot of times is rooted in fear, which is a lack of trust."

These data demonstrate the nuances of collective trust. Many districts and schools are traditional systems with top-down hierarchies where decisions and policies are made at higher levels. These organizations exclude the very people the policies are intended to support. These issues present real challenges to building and maintaining a culture of trust.

The disparity between the survey data and the focus group data reflects the complexity of trust, how it is defined, and how it is built in educational environments. The SCOE participant's quote (above) highlighted some factors (i.e., control and fear) that reinforce the barriers to trust that they face in their own district contexts.

Like many other occupational settings, there are structural and systemic barriers that actively work to undermine a strong sense of community and the connections that end up obstructing the development of trusting relationships in many educational environments ([BELE Network, n.d.e](#)). Building organizational trust among adult educators requires ongoing effort that addresses the lack of effective communication, transparency, and shared power, yet if there is a commitment to addressing these challenges, organizations can create a positive and productive educational environment.

Furthermore, learning culture was highly rated by SCOE series participants. Learning culture as a condition supports forward thinking, innovation, and continuous improvement as a value for change ([PERTS, 2023](#)). Educators are satisfied and willing to innovate and share their knowledge when their working environment prioritizes collaboration, experimentation, and reflection ([BELE Network, n.d.c](#)). The concept of learning culture speaks directly to the purpose of this series to deepen educators' personal and professional practice through increased awareness, critical reflection, and learning equity-centered practices.



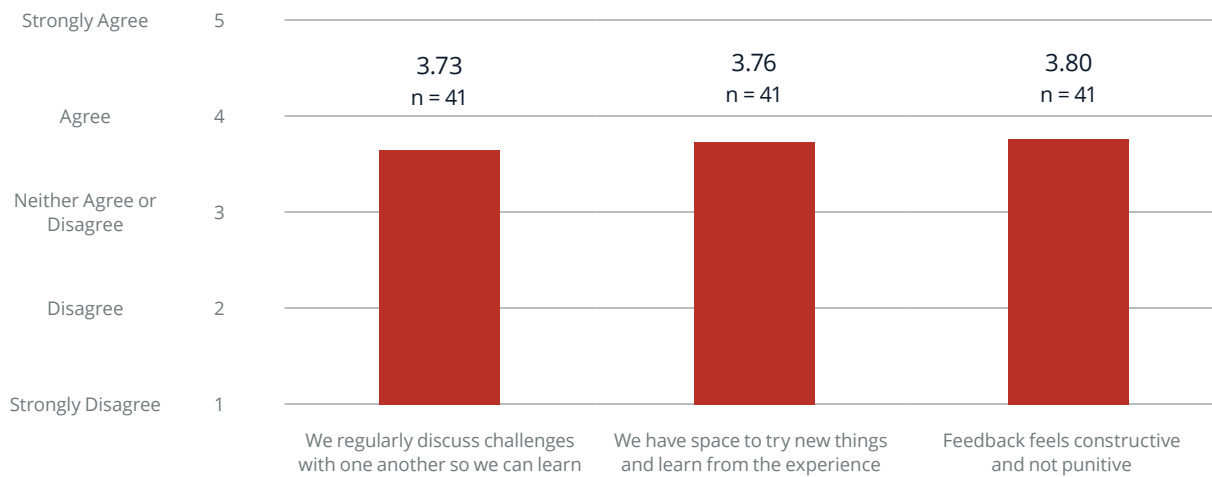


Figure 9

Bar graph of items from the Learning Culture Catalyze construct. Means leaning towards agreement.

Features of the learning culture condition for the SCOE sample also proved to have promising connections to collective action amongst school teams in service of students. Having the space to try new things and learn from that experience was significantly related to participants' perception to actively work to disrupt inequitable systems and structures. Examples of "new things" ranged from participants deepening their sense of belonging and connection with one another by sharing the stories of their names to unpacking an ongoing challenge within their context using a collaborative problem-solving process.

Learning Culture
(We have the space to try new things & learn from the experience.)

A continuum of integrated support
(Interdisciplinary teams work together to support students' social, emotional, and academic development.)

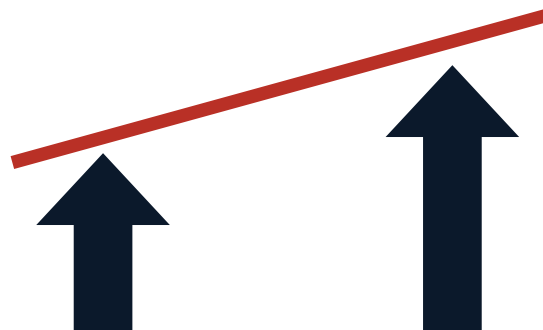


Figure 10

This visual illustrates the positive relationship between participants' perspectives of their learning culture and the practice of inter-team collaboration.



This significant relationship illustrated in figure 10 can be leveraged. As educators' perceptions of their school environment being a space for learning and innovation increase, so do their perception of engaging in collaboration with their colleagues to support students.

The learning culture condition also taps into the focal construct curiosity, indicating the deep need to continuously reflect on relevant information and prioritize informed decision-making based on inquiry. This curiosity gives rise to individual and collective development and eventually the agency to engage in innovative practice ([Jagers, Skoog-Hoffman, Barthelus, & Schlund, 2021](#)).

Critical reflection and reflective practice are related concepts rooted in continuous improvement and curiosity that can be connected to the learning culture. Adult educators benefit from opportunities to engage in critical reflective practices to gain insights into their practice and identify areas for improvement (Shandomo, 2010; Akella et al., 2021).

Results from a study examining the impact of professional development in a teacher preparation program showed that teacher candidates' deep, critical understanding of their teaching styles enhanced their ability to challenge the status quo of practice and define their growth toward greater agency as teachers (Shaver & Elfreich, 2021). Critical reflection and reflective practice will be measured concepts in future research and learning agendas related to the series.



INSIGHT

3

Educator agency is critical for progress but remains the most difficult to enact.

Building a sense of agency and empowering educators is required if progress and transformation will occur in learning environments (Mincu, 2022). Despite the importance of educator agency for change, it proves to be the most difficult to build and activate. The challenges to building educator agency are similar to those for building trust. Previous research spoke about hierarchies and models of power and dynamics that promote agency in educators.

In their study, Acker-Hocevar and Touchton (1999) found that teachers who exercised the most agency had supportive, empowering principals and work contexts and conditions that promoted empowerment in their work. Disrupting this traditional model to empower educators with agency requires a significant shift in organizational culture and leadership practices (Datnow, 2020). Resistance to change, limited or constrained resources, and varied perspectives and values are just a few other factors that disempower educators and thwart progress. Despite these challenges and obstacles, the field must build capacity and shift the mindsets of adults to transform schools to be more inclusive and supportive.

One of the learning questions we posed for the pilot was, “How have participants’ perceptions evolved over the course of the adult learning series?” We learned that there was some evolution observed in their perceived agency. The CASEL team was encouraged to find that the facilitation and tailored content appeared to be a major contributor to the increase in perception. Each of the items that saw growth were specifically aligned to the objectives of the sessions.

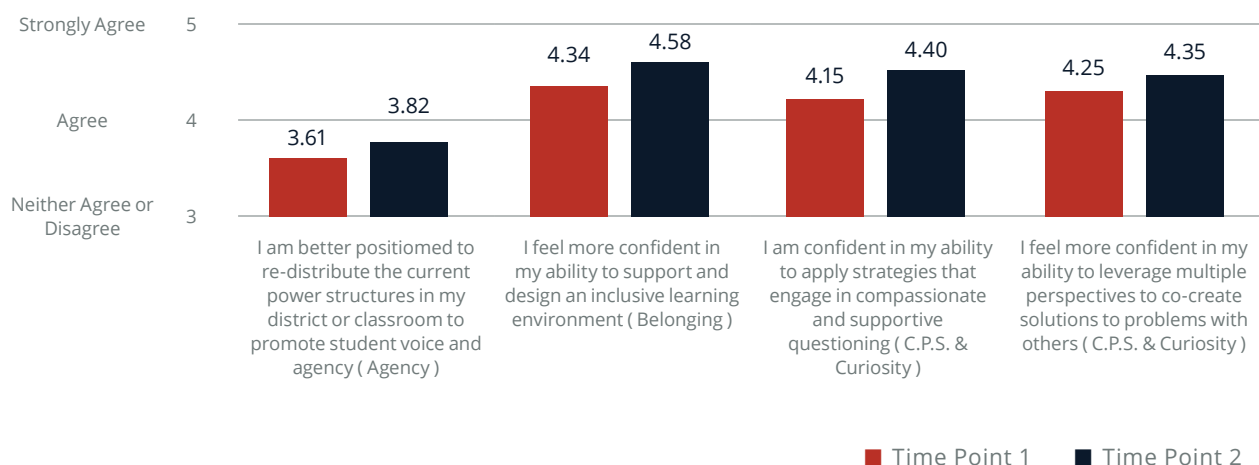


Figure 11

Bar graph of increases to participants’ perceived agency from time point 1 earlier in the series until time point 2 at the final session.



The growth we witnessed was expected; however, there was also a significant decrease that we observed related to a sense of agency, which drew attention back to the challenges of agency-building.

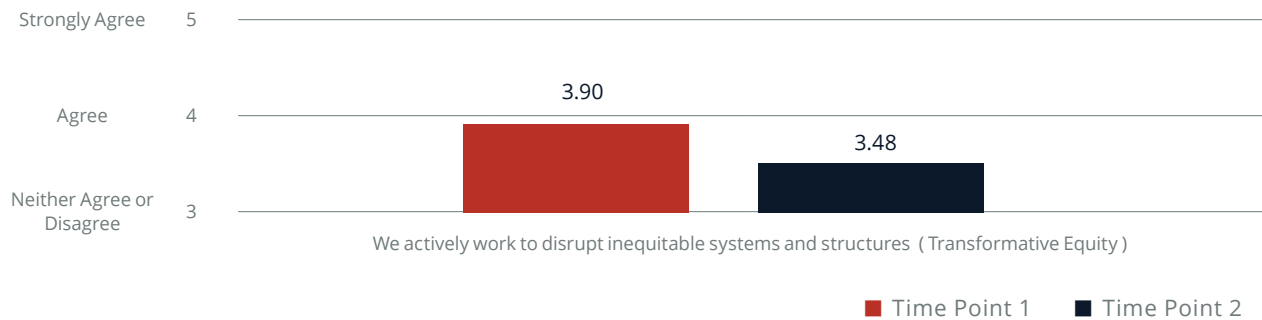


Figure 12

Bar graph of significant decrease to participants' perceived agency from time point 1 earlier in the series until time point 2.

Additional organizational conditions of inclusive empowerment and transformative equity align well with enacting agency as potential opportunities to create working environments in which educators can actualize their sense of agency.

The organizational condition, inclusive empowerment, speaks to the agency educators can exercise when sharing what they know and think with leadership as one of the highest conditions from this group of educators. Educators are more motivated and committed when their perspectives are valued; they participate in decision-making and believe that the organization is willing to make changes ([BELE Network, n.d.b](#)).

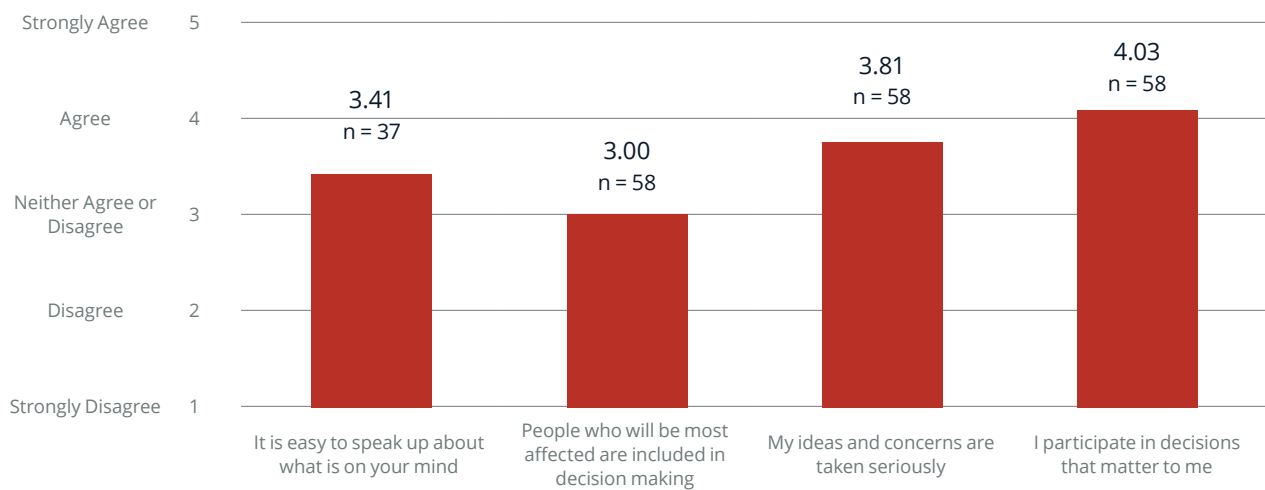


Figure 13

Bar graph of items from the Inclusive Empowerment Catalyze construct. Most means at or approaching *agreement*.



Participants expressed their thoughts about the challenges of inclusive decision-making and collaboration. They described feeling that at times leadership expectations were low or there was little follow-through, which has made educators see acts of inclusive decision-making as performative acts or just talk.

“ *We have been conditioned that if we manipulate situations, we'll get the outcomes that we want instead of just allowing things to kind of be right. And so, when you say 'shared power,' I don't feel that sense of the power is being shared. And I feel like there's a lot of talk of collaboration ... It so resonated with me when Kamilah said sometimes we're in these spaces that are supposed to be collaborative, but the real collaboration is not happening. And so, there's a lot of talking. I believe that what we do is evidence for what we believe. And so if you believe that we're going to be doing things for Black and Brown kids, where does that show up?* **”**

Transformative equity is also lifted up as a condition that specifically centers agency. Items measuring transformative equity were found to be significantly related to cross-team collaboration and supporting belonging. Transformative equity allows educators to identify that there are inequities impacting the outcomes for marginalized groups and tries to recognize that the collective has to express willingness to transform and challenge these historical systems (BELE Network, n.d.d). Commitments to transformative equity can lead to redistribution of power in a system and making systemic changes so that all members of the school community can experience a sense of belonging and opportunities to thrive.

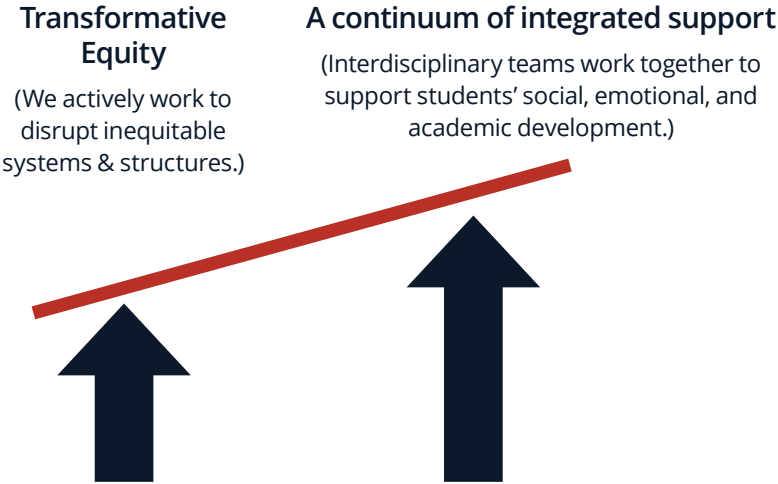


Figure 14
This visual illustrates the positive relationship between participants' perceptions of their ability (sense of agency) to actively disrupt inequities with inter-team collaboration to support student development.



Transformative Equity

(We have shared language and understanding around the concept of equity.)

Post Attributional Item

(I am prepared to support or create spaces of connection and belonging that centers students and their families.)

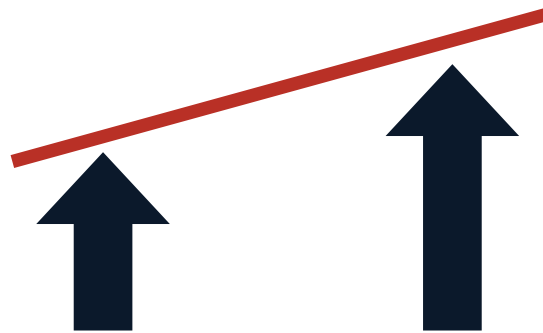


Figure 15

This visual illustrates the positive relationship between participants' perspectives of their mental models related to the concept of equity and the skills to create an inclusive student centered environment.

When participants were asked about their sense of agency via focus groups, SCOE participants noted feeling like they lacked agency. Some participants talked about their struggle conceptualizing agency. They mentioned not having a shared definition of agency, so they struggled with the vocabulary used in the session.

“ We have no shared power to shape or effect change.”

“What does agency even mean? And we were like, “Oh” That’s just not a word I use all the time in my world.”

“Agency for me was the most difficult because I don’t always feel powerful in my space to be able to speak up. And then also , as a woman of color, oftentimes being shut down or disregarded or not valued in a space, it has gotten me to the place where I just have just shown up and not necessarily try to advocate or participate in on a high level. It’s like, ‘Okay, what do you want me to do? I’m just going to do my job. I’m not going to fight for what I believe in or think is right.”

While the surveys and focus groups appear to offer conflicting findings about sense of agency, this discrepancy reflects the mixed feelings educators have about their positions. Understanding the limitations of engaging in educational research, a mixed methods approach allowed us to understand more deeply how participants were processing and internalizing the content beyond survey items.



CONCLUSION

The journey toward building an equitable learning and work environment where educators feel well and are efficacious hinges for efforts to intentionally invest in educators. Through the Transformative Adult Learning Series, we learned three key insights that speak to the conditions that support those investments.

Firstly, collective vision was seen as a key condition amongst SCOE participants coming from various district contexts. Arriving at a collective vision for equity urges for all stakeholders to invest, collaborate, and take action towards a supportive, inclusive learning environment.

Secondly, having a culture of trust is necessary for transformation. Experiencing trust to make professional decisions, matched with a strong learning culture that supports collaboration, innovation, and sharing, is a part of the bedrock that educators can practice and actualize their agency. If educators work in environments where they feel empowered to take bold actions, they could initiate vital actions that disrupt oppressive systems and address issues of equity in schools.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge that while agency is critical for transformation, it is one of the most challenging aspects to build and support. Enabling educators to be agentic requires a profound shift in mindset and a deep commitment to creating an environment that encourages and supports inclusion of diverse perspectives and individual and collective empowerment. Recognizing and addressing these challenges is an integral part of the ongoing effort to promote equity and excellence in education.



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