Whose Emotions Matter?
Student Disability and Race Representation in USB SEL by the Numbers

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The intersectionality of disability and race has deep roots in our nation’s education system that are inextricably tied by historical oppression and structural racism. This formidable bond is evidenced by patterns of over-identification, under-servicing, exclusionary placements, and discipline practices that yield inappropriate consequences on students’ academic, social, and economic outcomes, as well as their long-term health.1

Who Are Students With Disabilities?

Students with disabilities (SWDs) include those who qualify for special education under ESSA and have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). It also includes other students with a formal disability diagnosis, some students with 504 plans, and some students who have been informally identified with disabilities. These students collectively make up about 20–25% of the student population. It’s important to know that the majority of students receiving special education services are included in general education classes for at least 80% of the school day.

Did you know that students of color are more likely than their white peers to be identified as having a disability? As a result, students of color are disproportionately represented in special education,2 and this can have profound effects on their outcomes:

- For example, despite an overall decline in the use of punitive discipline in U.S. schools over the past decade, Black students and students with disabilities are currently more likely to receive out-of-school suspensions without educational supports.3, 4

- And in 2019, Black students with disabilities lost upwards of 77 more days of instruction per 100 students enrolled than white students with disabilities, according to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.5 Missed class time and exclusionary practices have been associated with increased likelihood of students being retained, dropping out of school, or being involved in the juvenile justice system.6, 7
In the past two decades, there has been a surge of interest and investment in universal school-based (USB) social and emotional learning (SEL) interventions to support whole-child development and to fully attend to learner diversity.

**What Is USB SEL?**

Universal school-based (USB) social and emotional learning (SEL) interventions support the development of intra- and inter-personal skills to promote physical and psychological health for all students in a given school or grade. These skills include emotional intelligence, behavior regulation, and identity formation, as well as the skills necessary for establishing and maintaining supportive relationships and making empathic and equitable decisions in the best interest of the entire school community.

Alongside academic achievement, social and behavioral outcomes are now recognized as a primary goal of education in the United States. There is considerable momentum to implement USB SEL as a pathway to educational equity for minoritized youth, particularly toward the end of dismantling structural racism.

To support the generalizability of USB SEL interventions at the intersection of student disability and race, we conducted a systematic review to update the current state of evidence available for elementary school USB SEL interventions and their intersectional identities within. We are working to finalize and publish our paper, but in the interest of fueling data-driven decision making in real time, here’s a first look at the results.

11,082 studies were generated from the initial search

395 studies were advanced to full-text screening

242 articles were included in final analyses

(See our inclusion criteria here: [https://osf.io/6csqz/](https://osf.io/6csqz/))
Regarding Students With Disabilities

Only 11 studies (4.5%) explicitly excluded SWDs.

What this means...
Most studies since 2008 didn’t outwardly exclude SWDs. This represents progress toward the inclusion of all learners.

But only 64 studies (26.4%) in our sample reported on student disability status.

What this means...
More than 3 in 4 studies since 2008 did not report on SWDs at all.

Of those that did report, only 53 studies (21.5%) provided the proportion of SWDs at the sample level.

About 1 in 5 studies since 2008 mentioned SWDs in a way that shows these students were included in their intervention.

Only 19 studies (7.9%) analyzed student outcomes by disability status, including 11 as moderators, 6 as covariates, and 2 only looking at outcomes for SWDs.

What this means...
Fewer than 1 in 10 studies since 2008 reflected SWDs in their results.

- Two studies told us what an intervention was like only for target students.
- 6 studies controlled for student disability status in their model of intervention effects.
- 11 studies told us what the intervention was like for SWDs compared to their peers.
Regarding Student Race

195 studies (80.6%) reported on the race/ethnicity of the participants in the study.

What this means...

1 in 5 studies since 2008 did not talk about the race of participants at all.

Of these, 162 studies (66.9%) reported student race/ethnicity at the sample level.

What this means...

Fewer than 3 in 4 studies since 2008 presented the race of students who participated in the intervention.

Only 64 studies (26.4%) analyzed intervention outcomes by race/ethnicity, including 29 with race as a moderator and 32 with at least one racial group as a covariate.

What this means...

Nearly 3 in 4 studies since 2008 did not report student race in their results.

Only 1 in 10 studies since 2008 reflected how students benefited from the intervention differently by racial/ethnic membership.

Only 13% of studies accounted for student race/ethnicity in their analytic models of intervention effects.
Lastly, of the 242 studies that were reflected in 146 peer-reviewed manuscripts and 96 dissertations, theses, conference abstracts, and commissioned reports, *just one study since 2008 analyzed outcomes at the intersection of disability and race/ethnicity.* One. Ten studies analyzed outcomes by disability status and race independently but not together.

So, as of 2021, what do we know about the impact of elementary USB SEL interventions on SWDs? Next to nothing. We know slightly more about the effects of USB SEL interventions on students by race/ethnicity. However, the inconsistent, varied ways in which race/ethnicity was categorized at the sample level within interventions significantly limits our ability to say much about intervention effects.

**We share these findings now because we’re worried. And you should be too.** Not knowing what works (and what doesn’t) for students can result in the implementation of ineffective SEL interventions that perpetuate inequities for students who are multiply marginalized.

**Here’s what we can do about it.**

1. **Educate yourself and collect student demographic data.** Know what data you should be collecting and how you should be reporting it. Check out Child Development’s sociocultural guidelines for best practice as of Fall 2020.

2. **Examine your papers.** How have you published participant race and disability status in your manuscripts? Did you collect the data and not report it? Can you submit an update?

3. **Are you federally funded? Let’s address the standards.** Why doesn’t the What Works Clearinghouse require a minimum demographic reporting index for intervention efficacy like the FDA does for clinical trials?

**Let’s grow together.** Please direct inquiries to christina.cipriano@yale.edu to learn more.
Endnotes


3 Ibid.


6 Ibid.


Suggested Citation:

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