
Emotion, Language, and Learning: A Transformative Approach to SEL for Multilingual Students

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ABSTRACT: This study explores how a third-grade teacher implemented culturally responsive social-emotional learning (CR-SEL) to support multilingual learners (MLs). The teacher adapted SEL lessons through an action research self-study to affirm students' cultural and linguistic identities while promoting emotional well-being and academic engagement. Findings highlight that CR-SEL practices grounded in MLs' home languages, cultural values, and community knowledge fostered identity formation, emotional regulation, and deeper engagement. This research offers practical implications for teacher preparation and school-based SEL implementation in linguistically diverse classrooms, particularly in the Hawai'i context.

KEYWORDS: Multilingual learners, culturally responsive teaching, social-emotional learning, teacher practice, identity affirmation, Hawai'i

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Over the past two decades, the number of multilingual learners (MLs) in U.S. public schools has grown significantly, now representing over 10% of the total student population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). MLs bring rich linguistic and cultural assets that enhance educational environments. This increasing diversity underscores the need for instructional approaches that support both academic achievement and social-emotional development. However, MLs often face distinct challenges that shape their educational experiences, including language barriers, cultural adjustment, and difficulties with social integration (Adams & Richie, 2017; García & Weiss, 2016). For recently arrived MLs,

navigating a new cultural and linguistic environment can contribute to acculturative stress, which has been linked to increased levels of anxiety, depression, and lower academic performance (Albeg & Castro-Olivo, 2014).

Hawaii's public schools are among the most culturally and linguistically diverse in the United States, with over 60% of students identifying as Asian or Pacific Islander, approximately 26% identifying as Native Hawaiian or Part-Native Hawaiian, and nearly 11% classified as English learners, speaking more than 30 home languages across the PK–12 system (Hawai'i Data Exchange Partnership, 2021). In response to this diversity, the Hawai'i Department of Education (HIDOE) has invested in social-emotional learning (SEL) initiatives to support student well-being and belonging. Schools commonly implement "Choose Love," "Leader in Me," and the "Nā Hopena A'o (HĀ: BREATH)" framework. While the first two SEL programs reflect Eurocentric traditions from the continental US, HĀ offers an Indigenous Hawaiian approach centered on belonging, responsibility, excellence, and total well-being. However, because HĀ training and implementation are limited (Briggs & Smith, 2025; Moreno et al., 2025), most public schools rely on imported curricula that were not designed with Hawaii's Indigenous, Pacific, or multilingual contexts in mind and may not fully meet the needs of local learners.

Currently, there is limited research on how SEL practices can be adapted in culturally sustaining ways for Hawaii's uniquely diverse MLs, including both recent immigrant youth and the many Pacific Islander and Native Hawaiian students who navigate multiple linguistic and cultural repertoires. Existing SEL programs in Hawai'i, particularly those imported from the continental U.S., often assume a universal model of social-emotional competence that may not fully align with Pacific, Asian, or Indigenous epistemologies. As a result, a significant gap remains in the literature regarding culturally responsive social-emotional learning (CR-SEL) and how teachers in Hawai'i can meaningfully integrate students' cultural, linguistic, and community assets into SEL instruction. This study addresses that gap by examining how culturally responsive SEL practices can inform and strengthen SEL instruction in a Hawai'i classroom serving MLs.

Specifically, this study explores how a third-grade teacher implemented equity-oriented SEL strategies to support the holistic development of MLs. Drawing on a CR-SEL framework, the study describes how SEL practices were adapted to affirm MLs' cultural and linguistic identities and foster emotional well-being and academic engagement. Grounded in an action research self-study, this research documents the contextual factors shaping SEL implementation in a linguistically diverse classroom and highlights teacher decision-making aligned with culturally sustaining pedagogy and local Hawaiian values. The study contributes to a growing body of scholarship advocating for equity-driven CR-SEL approaches and offers insights into teacher preparation and school-based practices that support MLs as both language learners and whole individuals within Hawai'i classrooms.

Review of the Literature

Social emotional learning (SEL) is the process by which individuals acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve meaningful goals, demonstrate empathy, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions, as defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2024). As one of the leading national organizations in SEL research and policy, CASEL has played a central role in defining SEL competencies and guiding implementation across U.S. school systems. SEL now extends beyond academic instruction, playing a vital role in students' overall well-being (Greenberg et al., 2017). Research shows that social and emotional competencies contribute to students' success in core academic subjects such as reading and mathematics as well as to their overall cognitive and emotional development (Oberle et al., 2014).

Integrating SEL into education can significantly benefit MLs. Programs focusing on emotional intelligence, self-regulation, and relationship skills are particularly effective in helping MLs adapt to their new environments and overcome language barriers (Adams & Richie, 2017; Herrera & Darragh, 2024; Pentón Herrera & Darragh, 2024). In Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) education, SEL is particularly significant as it strengthens students' emotional intelligence, resilience, and interpersonal skills (Heineke & Vera, 2022; Pentón Herrera, 2024). Moreover, emotional intelligence (a core component of SEL) has been linked to improved second-language acquisition, as students who can manage emotions effectively are more likely to take risks in communication, persist through challenges, and engage in meaningful interactions (Thao et al., 2023). SEL frameworks that incorporate translanguaging and culturally sustaining pedagogy have been found to enhance student engagement and comprehension, allowing learners to draw on their linguistic resources while developing proficiency in English (Cramer & Castro-Olivo, 2016; Peercy et al., 2023). When educators embed CR-SEL strategies, such as self-reflection, peer collaboration, and culturally responsive teaching, MLs are more likely to develop confidence in their language abilities and feel empowered in multilingual environments (Cuocci & Arndt, 2020; Lau & Shea, 2024). However, mainstream SEL approaches often assume universal norms for emotional expression and behavior, which may not fully align with MLs' cultural ways of knowing. This underscores the need to integrate SEL with culturally grounded pedagogies so that MLs' strengths, not only their challenges, shape teachers' SEL implementation.

Asset-Based and Culturally Responsive Pedagogies for Multilingual Learners in Hawai'i

Asset-based and culturally responsive pedagogies challenge deficit perspectives that often frame MLs in terms of what they lack (such as English

proficiency or familiarity with U.S. schooling) and instead highlight the cultural, linguistic, and community knowledge they bring. MLs contribute rich linguistic, cultural, and community resources to the classroom, including multilingual repertoires, intergenerational knowledge, and transnational experiences, as well as collectivist cultural practices that support collaboration, empathy, and relational learning. Frameworks such as funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) emphasize that MLs draw upon home-based expertise, transnational experiences, and multilingual fluency as resources for learning. Culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2018) build on this foundation, urging educators to integrate students' cultural identities into instruction, while culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017) extends the expectation that teachers sustain and elevate students' cultural and linguistic practices over time.

In the Hawai'i context, the Nā Hopena A'o (HĀ) framework exemplifies a culturally anchored, asset-based practice that operationalizes community-rooted values into an instructional vision and classroom implementation (Hawai'i Department of Education [HIDOE], 2015). Through its focus on belonging, responsibility, excellence, and well-being, HĀ models how schools can ground social-emotional development in local culture, language, and place. Building on this foundation, Taira and Sang's (2019) work illustrates how HĀ can serve as a culturally responsive foundation for assessment and instruction by emphasizing place, relationships, collaborative practice, and decolonizing approaches to understanding learning. Their work illustrates how HĀ expands notions of competence beyond Western norms of emotional expression or individual performance, aligning more closely with communal and relational values central to many MLs' cultural backgrounds.

Other emerging research articulates how culturally responsive SEL supports the emotional well-being and engagement of MLs in a Hawai'i classroom. Briggs and Smith (2025) found that when teachers incorporated home languages, cultural narratives, and identity-affirming routines into SEL lessons, MLs demonstrated increased confidence, emotional regulation, and willingness to participate orally. MLs in their study described the dual-language activities as grounding and empowering, and teachers observed that culturally meaningful SEL strategies strengthened both relationships and classroom belonging. These findings suggest that MLs experience SEL most powerfully when it reflects their cultural norms, linguistic identities, and community values.

Collectively, HĀ and culturally responsive pedagogies offer a powerful foundation for equity-oriented approaches to social-emotional development. These place-based and culture-centered models demonstrate how grounding SEL in local values, relational practices, and linguistic diversity can better support MLs' well-being and academic engagement.

Culturally Responsive Social-Emotional Learning (CR-SEL)

Building on this foundation, *Culturally Responsive Social-Emotional Learning* (CR-SEL) extends these principles by explicitly recognizing that emotional competencies are culturally mediated and must be taught in ways that affirm and reflect students' identities, languages, and community contexts. The CR-SEL framework guiding this study synthesizes national equity-oriented SEL research with Hawai'i-based culturally grounded pedagogies. Rooted in sociocultural theory and asset-based practice, CR-SEL integrates students' cultural and linguistic resources into SEL instruction to create identity-affirming and equitable learning environments for MLs, drawing on five interrelated principles that guided this study:

1. *Reflecting on teacher-student cultural mismatches*: CR-SEL requires educators to reflect on how racial, cultural, and linguistic differences influence SEL expectations, interpretations of behavior, and relational dynamics (Barnes & McCallops, 2019).
2. *Embedding culturally responsive praxis into SEL lessons*: Teachers adapt SEL instruction to incorporate students' cultural norms, community stories, communication styles, and ways of expressing emotion (Gay, 2018; Kim, 2023).
3. *Centering students' linguistic repertoires and lived experiences*: CR-SEL positions multilingualism as a strength rather than a barrier and integrates students' funds of knowledge into SEL activities (Fenner & Teich, 2024; Peercy et al., 2024; Pentón Herrera & Darragh, 2024).
4. *Affirming identity and building critical consciousness*: CR-SEL supports students in understanding how cultural identity informs emotional practices while also recognizing and challenging systemic inequities that shape their daily lives (Jagers et al., 2019).
5. *Promoting engagement and meaningful competency development*: SEL becomes more relevant, memorable, and agentic for MLs when instruction aligns with their cultural and linguistic worldviews (Higheagle Strong & McMain, 2020; Kim, 2023).

Taken together, this CR-SEL framework treats emotional learning as culturally and socially situated; an approach that aligns particularly well with Hawaii's multilingual, multicultural communities. This lens guides the current study's examination of how a third-grade teacher enacted CR-SEL practices to support the holistic development of MLs in a Hawai'i classroom.

Instructional Tools for Supporting MLs with CR-SEL

Supporting MLs' social-emotional development requires instructional tools that center on language, culture, and identity. CR-SEL scholars note that SEL becomes meaningful for MLs when practices are linguistically scaffolded, culturally grounded, and asset-based rather than universalized (Barnes & McCallops, 2019; Jagers et al., 2019; Kim, 2023; Lau & Shea, 2024; Strong & McMMain, 2020). In practice, this means teachers need concrete strategies that reduce language load, honor students' cultural repertoires, and make space for multiple ways of expressing emotions and navigating relationships. Linguistic supports such as multilingual emotion word banks, sentence frames, visual symbols, and modeled role-plays help MLs participate in SEL conversations without being limited by their emerging English proficiency. These tools validate students' home languages, allowing them to engage in SEL learning in ways that feel culturally safe, familiar, and developmentally appropriate.

CR-SEL also depends on relationship-based routines that reflect local cultural norms. Practices such as community circles or *piko* (center), strengths-based check-ins, and collective goal-setting rituals help students link SEL concepts to their lived experiences, families, and local communities (Kana'iaupuni et al., 2010). When teachers use place-based prompts, such as connecting emotional well-being to land, relationships, or community histories, they reinforce the idea that SEL is not a neutral set of skills but a culturally mediated process shaped by values, practices, and worldviews (Hawai'i State Department of Education, 2015). These routines position students as knowledgeable contributors and allow MLs to draw on family, linguistic, and cultural strengths as part of their SEL development.

An essential component of implementing CR-SEL with integrity is teacher self-reflection. Tools like the Likert-type self-assessment developed by Chen et al. (2009) offer teachers a structured way to examine how consistently they enact culturally responsive dispositions in practice. Using a 1–5 response scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree), teachers can reflect on statements related to communication clarity, responsiveness, instructional flexibility, and relationship-building. When adapted for CR-SEL, such items can prompt teachers to consider whether they integrate students' cultural knowledge into SEL lessons, adjust communication to match language strengths, or create equitable opportunities for student voice. Incorporating this reflective tool into teacher inquiry cycles or professional learning community (PLC) discussions helps educators identify growth areas and strengthen their ability to design SEL experiences that align with MLs' needs and cultural contexts.

Together, this body of research demonstrates both the promise and complexity of implementing CR-SEL in multilingual, multicultural classrooms. While prior scholarship identifies key principles and culturally grounded routines, there is limited empirical research documenting the interactional enactment of CR-SEL in day-to-day classroom practice, including how teachers draw on students' cultural and linguistic assets and how these practices shape MLs' engagement and

well-being. To address this gap, the present study examines how one third-grade teacher implemented CR-SEL strategies to support MLs in a Hawai'i public school classroom.

Methods

This study was conducted in an urban public elementary school in Hawai'i and employed an action research self-study design to examine the enactment of CR-SEL in classroom practice. Specifically, the study focused on one third-grade teacher's implementation of CR-SEL strategies to support MLs' social and emotional development in ways that affirmed their cultural and linguistic identities and addressed challenges of cultural and linguistic adjustment. To address this question, we employed an action research self-study of teacher practice, a reflective inquiry method that allows educators to systematically examine and improve their teaching (Feldman et al., 2004).

In this study, the first author served as the classroom teacher and primary practitioner-researcher, while the second author served as a critical friend who supported reflection-on-action, provided feedback, and contributed to the collaborative analysis. This partnership aligns with a self-study's methodological requirement for interaction with others to enhance trustworthiness, challenge assumptions, and deepen reflexive insight (Loughran, 2005; Loughran & Russell, 2002). Data were collected through lesson plans, instructional artifacts, researcher journals, classroom observations, and structured prompts for student feedback.

Self-study requires transparency, systematic documentation, collaboration, and a focus on professional growth (LaBoskey, 2004), and these principles guided the design of this study. This methodological orientation shaped the present study, as the first author sought to strengthen her integration of culturally responsive pedagogy and SEL in a multilingual classroom, while the second author focused on examining how CR-SEL unfolded in this elementary classroom serving diverse MLs. This method provided a structured, reflexive way to investigate teacher decision-making and instructional adaptations, enabling the study to contribute to both practitioner learning and broader conversations on CR-SEL in multilingual contexts.

Reflexivity

This research is shaped by the personal and professional experiences of both authors, who bring unique perspectives on multilingual learning and CR-SEL development. Together, the authors contribute complementary positionalities: One as a classroom practitioner critically examining her implementation of CR-SEL and the other as a multilingual learning scholar supporting reflection, analysis, and methodological rigor.

The first author, a Japanese American and Gold Star child (the daughter of a service member who died during military service), grew up in a bilingual household as the daughter of an American father who died in military service and a Japanese mother. Frequent relocations as a military child brought recurring disruptions to schooling, including being pulled out of class for language support in ways that left her feeling academically behind and linguistically “less than.” These experiences shaped her early internalization of linguistic deficit perspectives and contributed to socio-emotional challenges during elementary school, particularly following her father’s death. Although she received emotional support through military-affiliated mentorship and grief programs, she noticed that similar resources were largely absent in schools. Over time, she recognized how little her multilingual and multicultural identity had been affirmed in K–12 settings. These experiences significantly shaped her commitment to exploring how CR-SEL can affirm MLs’ identities, foster resilience, and counter the deficit narratives she encountered as a child. Her elementary classroom became the ideal setting to critically examine her own instructional decision-making and growth.

The second author, a professor of multilingual learning at a research university, has extensive experience teaching MLs in urban Title I schools, primarily Spanish- and Haitian Creole-speaking students. Coming from a bilingual home, she identifies as Latina, though as a white-appearing woman, she struggled with navigating her cultural identity in her childhood, adult life, and classroom. Her personal history includes family trauma related to untold immigration stories, linguistic oppression, and cultural hegemony, which shaped her commitment to additive bilingualism, sociocultural theory, and CR-SEL. Her research focuses on heteroglossia, content and language-integrated learning, and TESOL teacher education.

Context and Participants

This research was conducted in an urban elementary school in Hawai‘i on the island of O‘ahu. The school serves approximately 1,187 students in grades K-5 and receives Title I funding. Schoolwide demographics reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity typical of many Hawai‘i public schools. Approximately 45% of students identify as Filipino, 25% as Native Hawaiian or Part-Hawaiian, and 15% as Micronesian, with additional representation from Samoan, Japanese, and other Asian and Pacific Islander communities (Hawai‘i Data Exchange Partnership, 2021). The ML population at the school consists of 25% of the total student body and 56% of students receiving free or reduced lunch. Most MLs at the school speak Filipino languages, such as Ilocano and Tagalog, followed by Chuukese, Marshallese, and other Pacific languages.

At the time of this research, the first author was pursuing a graduate degree in Elementary Education with initial teaching licensure. She was hired as a third-

grade emergency hire¹ classroom teacher at the school where she was completing full-time student teaching. The third-grade classroom consisted of 21 students. All students were invited to participate in the research and received assent forms and parent consent forms in English. Seventeen of the 21 students returned signed consent and assent forms. This article focuses on the six participating students who were identified as MLs and received English language support services.

The six MLs in this study included four male and two female third graders. Five of the six student participants spoke Ilocano as a first language, and one student spoke Pohnpeian. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect participants' identities. Additionally, the first author collected categorical data, including each student's gender identity, home language, the school's multilingual designation (beginner, moderate, or fluent), and mean WIDA² scores. Mean WIDA scores were obtained from school records based on a language proficiency assessment administered the previous academic year. WIDA scores range from 1 to 6 and reflect proficiency across four language domains: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. The mean score was used to determine each student's English proficiency level. Students with a mean score below 3 were classified as "newcomers" to the English language. Students with scores between 3 and 4 were at a "developing" level of English proficiency. Students with a score of 5 or higher were considered "fully proficient," exited the school's English language support program, and were monitored for 2 years. Among the six MLs included in this study, four demonstrated intermediate proficiency in English, while two were classified as newcomers to the English language.

Table 1

ML Student Participant Data

Student	Gender	Native Language	English Proficiency Level	WIDA Level
JA	Male	Ilocano	Beginning Proficiency	2.8
KF	Female	Ilocano	Moderate Proficiency	3.8
AJ	Male	Ilocano	Beginning Proficiency	2.8
JS	Male	Pohnpeian	Moderate Proficiency	3.6
RT	Male	Ilocano	Moderate Proficiency	3.7
JV	Female	Ilocano	Moderate Proficiency	4.0

Procedures

At the time of this study, the school had implemented the *Choose Love* (2023) SEL program, a social-emotional curriculum developed by the Jesse Lewis

¹ An emergency hire permit may be issued to an unlicensed individual who wishes to teach in a Hawai'i Department of Education School when no licensed teacher is available.

² World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA). It is an organization that supports multilingual learners by providing resources, assessments, and standards.

Choose Love Movement (2023). The program is organized around four core components: Courage, Gratitude, Forgiveness, and Compassion-in-Action, and provides scripted lessons, read-alouds, and classroom activities designed to strengthen students' emotional regulation and interpersonal skills. During the period of this study, the school-wide focus was on Gratitude, defined as "mindful thankfulness and the ability to be thankful even when life is challenging" (Jesse Lewis Choose Love Movement, 2023).

Over eight weeks, the first author designed and taught four SEL lessons on gratitude, each spanning two weeks as per the school's pacing guide. The first three lessons were intentionally adapted based on culturally responsive, equity-oriented SEL research for MLs, while the fourth lesson followed the original Choose Love format without linguistic or cultural modifications. This final lesson was purposefully included as a contrast case, providing a baseline representation of the school's adopted curriculum and allowing for examination of differences in student engagement, participation, and meaning-making when culturally and linguistically mediated supports were removed. Including a lesson that was not adapted strengthened the analytic design by enabling within-case comparison across adapted and non-adapted instructional conditions, supporting claims about the added value of CR-SEL practices for MLs.

Table 2

Overview of Adapted and Not Adapted SEL Lessons

Lesson	SEL Focus	Cultural Grounding	Linguistic Supports	Key Adaptations	Format
Lesson 1	Self-awareness; Responsible decision-making	Japanese, Filipino, Hawaiian practices	Sentence frames; home language; peer translation	Circle maps; cultural role-play; family interviews	Adapted
Lesson 2	Social awareness; Relationship skills	Multiple home languages	Multilingual "thank you"; partner interviews	Culturally representative text; interviews	Adapted
Lesson 3	Self-awareness; Self-management	Multilingual affirmations	Sentence frames; translanguaging	Affirmations; scaffolded breathing	Adapted
Lesson 4	Gratitude; Mindset shifts	None	English only	Scripted lesson; read-aloud	Not Adapted

Lesson One: Exploring Gratitude Through Cultural Perspectives

This lesson integrated self-awareness and responsible decision-making by helping students recognize their emotions, values, and strengths while learning to make ethical choices. The concept of gratitude was introduced through a circle map activity, where students used their first languages and cultural experiences to define and illustrate gratitude. The specific cultural examples were intentionally selected to reflect the linguistic and cultural backgrounds represented in the classroom and school community. Japanese and Filipino traditions, such as *omiyage* (gift-giving) and *salamat* (expressions of thanks through acts of service), were included because many students in the class identified with these cultures or shared similar collectivist values within their families or local traditions, encouraging students to role-play and discuss their cultural expressions. Hawaiian concepts such as *aloha* (love), *mālama* (care), and *oli* (chanting) were also incorporated to honor the Indigenous values of the place where students live and learn, reinforcing a sense of belonging and place-based identity. After introducing these cultural touchstones, students engaged in role-play and peer discussions using structured sentence frames that made space for multilingual expression. This reinforced relationship skills by allowing students to appreciate similarities and differences in how gratitude is expressed across cultures. The lesson concluded with an applied SEL activity in which students used gratitude strategies (breathing techniques, perspective-taking) to navigate real-life challenges, strengthening their decision-making and resilience. To extend learning beyond the classroom, students interviewed family members about gratitude in their home cultures, reinforcing intergenerational learning and bilingual expression.

Lesson Two: Valuing Linguistic Diversity

Lesson two engaged all five CASEL SEL competencies, encouraging students to recognize, appreciate, and celebrate differences. The teacher facilitated a discussion on diversity and culture, using visual representations and drawings to support MLs. To promote social awareness, students practiced gratitude breaths while learning to say “thank you” in multiple languages spoken in the classroom. This activity fostered pride in home languages and peer appreciation. Instead of the original curriculum’s reading selection, the teacher replaced it with *All People Are Beautiful* (Kelly, 2020), a picture book that highlights the beauty of human diversity through illustrations of people from different racial, cultural, linguistic, and family backgrounds. This culturally representative text helped to validate students’ identities in the classroom. Students then conducted a partner interview, during which they learned about each other’s backgrounds, languages, and strengths, reinforcing relationship skills. Students applied gratitude to real-life scenarios to develop responsible decision-making, using perspective-taking to solve social challenges.

Lesson Three: Building Self-Worth and Confidence

The third lesson focused on self-awareness, helping students develop self-love, confidence, and positive self-perception through affirmations. Students defined affirmations and created visual representations to make the concept accessible to MLs. The teacher introduced affirmations in multiple languages, including Japanese, Pohnpeian, and Ilocano, allowing students to teach their peers and reinforcing cultural pride. To deepen engagement, students watched a video of a young girl reciting affirmations, eliciting emotional responses, and emphasizing the power of positive self-talk. A song about affirmations was introduced to accommodate diverse learning styles. Students practiced gratitude breaths with sentence frames, (e.g., “I breathe in ____, I breathe out ____”) to support language production and ensure MLs could participate verbally with scaffolding. In contrast, later breathing exercises did not use sentence frames because the focus shifted to embodied, nonverbal regulation, allowing students to participate fully through movement and breath without the additional cognitive load of generating language. This distinction ensured that breathing practices remained linguistically accessible while still promoting emotional regulation. The lesson concluded with a real-life application activity in which students used self-talk strategies to navigate challenges, reinforcing emotional resilience and self-compassion. A home-school connection encouraged students to practice affirmations with their families, allowing for cultural and linguistic personalization and strengthening family engagement in SEL.

Lesson Four: Unadapted Choose Love Lesson

As the final lesson, the original Choose Love format was used to provide a standardized approach to teaching gratitude. The lesson opened with a quote about finding beauty in difficult situations, followed by gratitude-breathing exercises in which students took slow, intentional breaths while reflecting on something they felt thankful for. However, the Choose Love curriculum did not include sentence frames or invite students to use their native languages. Students then listened to *The Last Stop on Market Street*, a children’s picture book in which a young boy and his grandmother ride the bus through their neighborhood while the grandmother helps him recognize beauty, gratitude, and community in everyday experiences, despite initial disappointment (de la Peña, 2015). Then, the students participated in a class discussion about how the characters used gratitude to transform negative experiences into positive ones. While this lesson reinforced mindset shifts and optimism, it lacked the cultural adaptations and linguistic supports integrated into the first three lessons. It was included in this study as a baseline for identifying changes in student feedback when lessons were adapted. The template also provided space for lesson notes and post-lesson reflections, allowing for ongoing evaluation and refinement. The following section outlines the

specific adaptations made to the first three lessons and contrasts them with the fourth, unmodified Choose Love lesson used in the school's SEL program.

Data Collection

Teacher and student data were collected for 15 weeks. An SEL Goal-Setting Template (co-created by the authors of this study) served as the primary data and teacher self-reflection tool. This template was adapted from the CR-SEL principles described by Chen et al. (2009) and was designed to help the first author assess her integration of CR-SEL practices across lessons. The template included three components: (a) SEL competency targeted in the lesson (aligned with the CR-SEL conceptual framework), (b) multilingual learner considerations (linguistic and cultural background information used for planning), and (c) educator actions (adapted activities and culturally responsive strategies enacted during instruction). The template was completed three times (once after each adapted SEL lesson). It was housed in Google Docs and shared with the second author before each lesson for feedback and refinement.

The first author also took handwritten notes directly on the template during instruction, rating her observations on a 0-3 scale (0 = not observed, 3 = consistently observed). A detailed reflection accompanied each rating, capturing insights into lesson effectiveness and student engagement. A researcher's journal provided a structured and open-ended space for reflection, documenting teaching experiences, student interactions, and potential biases. Notes included lesson contexts (date, student attendance, pseudonyms, topic), teaching challenges, student scenarios, and direct quotes. Journaling was ongoing, capturing ideas, coding reflections, and study discussions. This iterative process facilitated real-time analysis and refinement of instructional strategies.

Following each SEL lesson, students completed exit tickets to reflect on their understanding and experiences. A total of 24 exit tickets (six MLs × four lessons) were collected and analyzed. Students expressed their thoughts through writing or drawings, responding to prompts such as how the lesson made them feel and what they enjoyed most. These responses provided insight into students' emotional engagement and comprehension.

Four student focus groups were conducted between weeks 9-15 as a member-checking process to validate findings. These small-group discussions allowed students to clarify their exit ticket responses, provide specific examples and elaborate on their emotions. Focus group interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and saved as PDFs for analysis. Transcripts were then separated, and only the six MLs who provided informed consent were included in the final dataset.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a three-phase approach, systematically organizing and examining teacher and student data before triangulating findings to ensure accuracy and depth. Phase One examined teacher data using a deductive qualitative approach. The SEL goal-setting templates were coded using a provisional codebook based on existing research (Azungah, 2018; Saldaña, 2025). The codebook incorporated CASEL's five SEL competencies and four SEL settings (2024), and key attributes of culturally responsive educators (Gay, 2018). Coding was completed in Google Docs using highlight and comment tools, and the authors met to refine codes and resolve discrepancies until 100% agreement was reached. Similar codes were then grouped to identify the most and least frequent patterns.

Phase Two analyzed student data, focusing on exit tickets. PDF copies were reviewed using *in vivo*, descriptive, and affective coding (Saldaña, 2025) to capture students' exact words and emotional responses. Codes were added to or refined within the existing codebook to reflect student perspectives. The authors met to compare patterns emerging from teacher and student data, strengthening triangulation. Phase Three involved reviewing focus group transcripts and the researcher's journal to validate and refine the codebook. Value coding (Saldaña, 2025) was applied to identify students' and teachers' attitudes and beliefs toward CR-SEL practices. Key excerpts were highlighted and linked to existing codes, and new insights were incorporated when needed. Qualitative patterns were then synthesized into broader thematic categories that captured the study's central findings.

Findings

Findings from this study are organized into three themes aligned with the CR-SEL framework: Affirming Linguistic and Cultural Identities (Self-Awareness), Building Cross-Cultural Empathy and Community (Social Awareness), and Strengthening Emotional Regulation and Student Agency (Self-Management). Together, these themes illustrate how culturally responsive SEL practices supported MLs' self-understanding, social connection, and emotional regulation.

Affirming Linguistic and Cultural Identities (Self-Awareness)

Self-awareness emerged as the most prevalent SEL competency across data sources. Whenever the teacher engaged in self-awareness activities that validated students' cultural backgrounds and positioned them as holders of valuable knowledge, culturally responsive attributes were consistently activated. These attributes reflected the teacher's evolving dispositions (her attitudes, beliefs,

values, and behaviors related to self-awareness and CR-SEL). Across all three SEL goal-setting templates, cultural and linguistic integration was prominently featured in the educator action column, illustrating deliberate choices to activate students' cultures and linguistic assets. For example, during the first gratitude lesson, the teacher provided translations in multiple languages and highlighted Filipino practices, such as *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude). Students were invited to search for, share, and teach cultural expressions of gratitude in their home languages, making multilingualism an expected and celebrated part of the learning process. This integration of language and culture strengthened students' self-awareness by helping them explore personal values, emotions, and identities through culturally meaningful entry points.

Students expressed overwhelmingly positive feelings about sharing their culture. One student reflected, "Telling people about my culture was amazing because I could teach them about my country and language" (Focus Group 2). Other adjectives students used to describe their feelings about SEL lessons incorporating their culture included "pride," "happiness," and "calm," which reflected the emotional impact of culturally grounded SEL lessons. As students shared their culture with their peers, self-awareness deepened, fostering inner peace, as one student explained, "I feel like I can breathe" (Focus Group 3). Another shared, "I felt happy and calm because I could speak in my own language, and no one knew I could speak it before. It was exciting to share it with others" (Focus Group 1).

These student reflections prompted the teacher to develop a powerful metaphor in her researcher's journal: "When culturally responsive content is absent from SEL lessons, students experience a form of intellectual and emotional suffocation" (Researcher Journal). By integrating cultural relevance into SEL, the teacher fostered self-management and created an affirming space where students could fully express themselves, reinforcing the importance of identity, belonging, and emotional well-being. To further understand the impact of cultural absence, the teacher asked students how they felt when their culture was not acknowledged in lessons. Students used such adjectives as: "angry," "quiet," "sad," and "ignored." One student expressed, "[It feels] like my teacher can't see me" (Focus Group 4).

The teacher responded to these insights by modifying SEL materials to include oral, cultural storytelling, giving students structured opportunities to connect lessons to their life experiences. As one student shared, "I got to share what we do in Pohnpei... we celebrate at my home to show gratitude" (Exit Ticket, Lesson 1). This student validated her cultural knowledge and strengthened her sense of self. Students frequently translated phrases for one another, demonstrating multilingualism and translanguaging as natural collaborative practices. As one student explained, "My favorite part [of this lesson] was telling other people about what my culture is like, using my language, then telling my friend what it means in English" (Focus Group 4). Language and culture became assets rather than obstacles, directly supporting the formation of students' cultural identities.

The teacher documented this shift, noting, “Students were teaching those around them rather than sitting as passive empty vessels to be filled with [English] knowledge; they were the teachers. I watched and learned with them” (Researcher Journal). A clear role reversal occurred as students demonstrated how to say gratitude statements in their native languages. The teacher intentionally stepped back, positioning herself as the learner, observing students translate, spell, and explain phonetic sounds. She wrote, “Students are teaching one another how to say different phrases in different languages; some are spelling and writing in other languages to explain the phonetic sounds” (Researcher Journal). Translanguaging became emancipatory, enabling the teacher to challenge the hegemonic English-only curriculum. She reflected, “My goal is to have all students talking about this topic regardless of their native language. I want them to feel welcomed” (SEL Goal Setting Template, Lesson 2). Later, she questioned, “Why do schools require English only? Include translanguaging in my rubrics?” (Researcher Journal). This line of questioning expanded into broader critiques of institutional norms, as she asked, “Why push Eurocentric values onto a non-Eurocentric student body?” (Researcher’s Journal). These reflections marked a transformative shift in the teacher’s pedagogy. She began reconsidering the success criteria embedded in her instructional documents, recognizing the need to redefine them to be inclusive of multilingual students. Positioning translanguaging as legitimate and necessary reframed students as knowledge holders rather than learners who lack English proficiency. Ultimately, culturally responsive SEL fostered both student growth and teacher transformation, showing how identity-affirming practices strengthened emotional well-being, self-awareness, and classroom belonging.

Building Cross-Cultural Empathy and Community (Social Awareness)

Social awareness emerged as a significant theme, reflecting how the teacher positioned diversity as an asset and fostered an inclusive learning environment. CR-SEL actively integrates humanistic values (dignity, respect, and relational care) while also cultivating transformative elements (such as student agency, cultural affirmation, and confidence). The Choose Love lessons reinforced this orientation by encouraging students to value their own cultures and those of their peers, shifting mindsets from comparison toward appreciation.

In several activities, students explored gratitude across cultural contexts using sentence frames such as, “I love how you show gratitude with your family by...” which supported reflective dialogue and language access. A subsequent lesson, “Love Our Class Diversity,” invited students to complete partner-based prompts, including “At home, my partner’s family speaks...” and “My partner is different from me because... this makes them special because...”. These routines emphasized empathy and normalized cultural differences. Students frequently responded by sharing specific practices: One explained, “Us Filipinos, we do *pagmamano* (a gesture of respect where they take an elder’s hand and place it on their forehead). And we use *po* and *opo* when we speak to elders” (Focus Group

3). Another student responded, “In Pohnpei, we do that too, but we say *iramwen* to our elders. I say *souwas mwahu, iramwen* [Good morning, how are you?]” (Focus Group 3).

Across exit tickets and focus groups, students consistently described “understanding diversity in the classroom” as a key insight from the lessons. One student shared, “There are many more cultures out there... I am not the only one with a different culture” (Exit Ticket, Lesson 3). These findings suggest that CR-SEL helped students overcome feelings of Eurocentric isolation by recognizing the cultural diversity already present in their classroom community.

However, despite these successes, the teacher noted a gap in fostering critical consciousness. She wrote, “I don’t think I encouraged students to critically examine social issues, power dynamics, and injustices in society” (Researcher Journal). Although lessons cultivated appreciation for difference, opportunities to analyze systemic inequities were missed. This tension underscores the instructional challenge of extending social awareness activities into the more complex CR-SEL work of guiding students to examine power, privilege, and systemic injustice. For example, although students compared cultural traditions and affirmed one another’s identities, the lessons did not yet push them to analyze why certain languages are marginalized in school spaces, why some students feel unseen, or how cultural hierarchies shape classroom interactions.

In contrast, student responses during the fourth, unadapted Choose Love lesson reflected noticeably reduced verbal participation and fewer affective connections. Without sentence frames, home-language invitations, or culturally anchored prompts, MLs participated primarily through brief English responses or nonverbal engagement. Exit tickets from this lesson contained fewer references to identity, language, or cultural pride and focused instead on general feelings of “being thankful” or “listening to the story.” During focus groups, one student shared, “They did not talk about any cultures, and it made me feel empty because it didn’t teach me that I am not alone or that I have friends to relate to.” Students did not reference the unadapted lesson when describing moments of pride, connection, or calm, suggesting that the absence of linguistic and cultural mediation limited opportunities for deeper engagement, belonging, and identity affirmation.

Strengthening Emotional Regulation and Student Agency (Self-Management)

Self-management emerged as the third most frequently identified theme. It referred to students’ ability to regulate their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors across different contexts, enabling them to navigate challenges, build resilience, and engage productively in academic and social settings. CR-SEL practices supported this growth by connecting emotional regulation to students’ cultural and linguistic identities, making self-management both meaningful and accessible. Mindful breathing, affirmations, and reflective dialogue were intentionally adapted

to affirm students' cultural knowledge, enabling them to build confidence while practicing emotional control. As one student explained, "Breathing in and out made me feel calm, and I remembered to think about something good instead of feeling mad" (Focus Group 3).

A central feature of CR-SEL for self-management was language scaffolding. The teacher integrated translanguaging visual supports and sentence frame tools to help students process new SEL concepts. For example, during gratitude breathing exercises, students were encouraged to take deep breaths while reflecting on something they were thankful for. The teacher noted, "Inner speech can be done in their native language" (Researcher Journal), reinforcing that emotional regulation could occur through students' most comfortable linguistic pathways. Students echoed this sentiment, with one sharing, "When I close my eyes and think in my language, I feel safe and happy" (Exit Ticket, Lesson 1). These practices underscored how linguistic familiarity deepened emotional engagement and supported students' self-regulation.

Visual and linguistic tools further strengthened students' self-management. Circle maps paired with sentence frames enabled students to define and conceptualize gratitude, revisiting and refining their ideas over time to deepen understanding and connect SEL concepts to cultural traditions. Students often drew on family practices, celebrations, and heritage knowledge to make reflections personally meaningful, thereby increasing relevance and supporting sustained engagement. One student wrote, "I never got to write about my home before. This made me feel like my family is important" (Focus Group 2). These statements illustrate how cultural relevance elevated students' sense of worth and strengthened their motivation to participate.

Across lessons, students described cultural sharing as the most empowering aspect of CR-SEL. "Speaking my language made me feel empowered," one explained (Focus Group 4). Another shared, "I now see my culture as important. I didn't before" (Focus Group 2). These statements demonstrate a reciprocal relationship between cultural affirmation and emotional regulation; when students' identities were validated, they were more willing and able to use SEL strategies such as breathing, positive self-talk, and reflective decision-making. Structured routines, such as pairing sentence frames with gratitude breaths, provided structured, guided entry points into emotional regulation, allowing students to make thoughtful decisions and respond to challenges with composure. One student reflected, "When I feel nervous, I try to take a deep breath and say something nice to myself" (Exit Ticket, Lesson 3). These emerging skills supported students' resilience within a new school environment marked by cultural and linguistic diversity.

To further understand her role in supporting this development, the teacher used the SEL goal-setting template to track how consistently she implemented empowering CR-SEL strategies across lessons. The template's self-rating feature indicated that "empowering" averaged a 1.5, suggesting early but uneven enactment. This prompted the teacher to reflect on how to create more sustained opportunities for student agency and emotional regulation. These reflections

underscore the developmental nature of CR-SEL implementation, moving from cultural awareness toward practices that actively cultivate confidence, ownership, and resilience among MLs.

Discussion

This study contributes to the growing body of literature advocating for culturally sustaining SEL approaches (Kim, 2023; Paris & Alim, 2017). By embedding students' linguistic and cultural identities within SEL instruction, educators can design learning environments that promote emotional regulation, identity affirmation, and linguistic pride. However, findings indicate that, while SEL activities supported students' social awareness and cultural appreciation, they did not engage with issues of power, privilege, or systemic inequities. These outcomes align with research indicating that educators need explicit training in facilitating conversations about race, privilege, and structural inequality within SEL (Gimbert et al., 2023; Jagers et al., 2018). Without sustained professional development, SEL implementation risks becoming inconsistent, reinforcing inequities in students' access to meaningful SEL (Donahue-Keegan et al., 2019). High-quality professional development remains essential for equipping educators to foster our students' holistic growth and create inclusive classroom environments.

While CR-SEL was found to foster students' self-regulation and emotional resilience, alternative explanations warrant consideration. Improvements in self-management may stem from the teacher's interventions, increasing student familiarity with school routines, or cultural values emphasizing discipline and respect. Additionally, research suggests that MLs are often perceived as needing additional SEL support, which may shape intervention outcomes (Cho et al., 2019). Future studies should explore how SEL can be differentiated to avoid cultural overgeneralization, as students of the same ethnicity or linguistic background may experience school in diverse ways (Lau & Shea, 2014). Longitudinal research is also needed to explore the durability of CR-SEL outcomes across varied learners and contexts.

The study also has practical implications for educators and school administrators. Research supports integrating cultural and linguistic diversity into SEL curricula to enhance student engagement and emotional development (Calderón & Slakk, 2019). In particular, language scaffolds, such as sentence frames, multilingual reflection prompts, and visuals, can make SEL content more accessible and meaningful for MLs (Fenner & Teich, 2024). Prior scholarship also emphasizes the importance of translingual, culturally responsive SEL approaches that move beyond English-only models to embrace students' linguistic identities (Cuocci & Arndt, 2020; Lau & Shea, 2024; Mori, 2023). Findings from this study echo these recommendations, highlighting the need for teacher education programs to integrate translingual pedagogies into SEL preparation to equip educators to enact inclusive and equitable practices.

Limitations of this study include its focus on a single third-grade classroom, which impacts generalizability. While qualitative methods provide rich insights, future research should incorporate quantitative measures to triangulate self-management growth. Additionally, we acknowledge that researcher positionality may have influenced lesson adaptations and interpretations of student responses, a common challenge in qualitative SEL research (Jagers et al., 2019). We say this because the participating teacher was highly committed to CR-SEL; therefore, it is unclear whether educators without targeted professional development would implement CR-SEL similarly. Mixed-methods research across diverse schools and educator backgrounds would strengthen the understanding of CR-SEL's broader applicability.

Another notable limitation of the study's design is the sequencing of lessons, as students received three culturally adapted lessons before the unadapted lesson. It is possible that these earlier experiences shaped students' expectations for linguistic inclusion and cultural affirmation, thereby heightening their awareness of the absence of such supports in the final lesson. Rather than viewing this solely as a confound, we interpret this sequencing as analytically informative: Students' reduced engagement in the unadapted lesson may reflect the pedagogical significance of culturally responsive mediation once it has been established as a classroom norm. Future studies might counterbalance lesson order or include parallel classrooms to further isolate sequencing effects.

Given the evolving educational landscape, this study underscores the need for clearer definitions and models of CR-SEL, particularly within multilingual classrooms. As schools continue to diversify, embedding culturally sustaining SEL practices remains vital for ensuring that all students receive equitable, inclusive, and meaningful social-emotional learning. In the context of US federal restrictions on diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, research must continue to clarify how CR-SEL is enacted in practice and how it shapes students' academic and social-emotional outcomes.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that CR-SEL can play a transformative role in supporting MLs' emotional, linguistic, and identity development. When SEL instruction intentionally integrates students' cultural knowledge, home languages, and lived experiences, it creates conditions for deeper engagement, emotional safety, and authentic self-expression. Findings indicate that CR-SEL extends beyond discrete competencies; it affirms student identities, strengthens agency, and deepens relationships that support community well-being. The first author's reflections also illustrate how teacher self-examination, particularly around language ideologies and English-dominant norms, is central to designing instruction that honors students' cultural assets.

By highlighting how CR-SEL fosters belonging, empathy, and emotional regulation for MLs, this research contributes to broader conversations about transforming SEL to advance equity. In Hawai'i, Indigenous frameworks such as Nā Hopena A'o (HĀ: BREATH) offer culturally grounded pathways for integrating relationality (the value of interconnected relationships among people, place, and community) and well-being into SEL. Work by Taira and Sung (2019), for example, demonstrates how HĀ supports students in understanding belonging, responsibility, and excellence through Indigenous epistemologies, offering a culturally anchored foundation for SEL in Hawai'i schools. Integrating such approaches alongside CR-SEL strengthens students' opportunities to connect social-emotional learning with place, culture, and community, and affirms the value of Indigenous ways of knowing for MLs.

Future research should explore how CR-SEL supports students in analyzing power, naming linguistic and cultural marginalization, and envisioning collective action. Teacher education programs must also prepare educators to design CRSEL practices that are linguistically inclusive, contextually grounded, and responsive to MLs' lived experiences. In sum, this study affirms the promise of CR-SEL as a pathway to inclusive, humanizing, and culturally sustaining learning environments, especially in Hawai'i, where honoring place, culture, and Indigenous knowledge is essential for helping MLs thrive.

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