

Giving Voice, Creating Change: MMEA Perspectives on Culturally Relevant SEL Curriculum Adaptations

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Abstract: This constructivist grounded theory study examines how Islamic school teachers adapt social-emotional learning (SEL) curricula for Muslim Middle Eastern American (MMEA) students. Drawing on intensive interviews, focus groups, and graphic elicitation with 20 educators across two North New Jersey USA Islamic schools, three key adaptation areas emerged: promoting cultural awareness, addressing gender roles, and reframing collectivism as a foundational worldview. Findings reveal a critical disconnect between the CASEL framework's individualistic assumptions and MMEA students' communal values, challenging SEL's foundational premises about selfhood and identity. Practical curriculum recommendations are offered with implications for educators in Islamic school and public school settings.

Keywords: Culturally responsive, Islamic schools, SEL, constructivism, collectivism

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Social-emotional learning (SEL) equips individuals with the skills to navigate their emotional lives, build positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Durlak et al., 2016; Humphrey, 2013). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2023) identifies five core competency domains — self-management, self-awareness, responsible decision-making, social awareness, and relationship skills — that provide educators with a framework for fostering students' personal growth and well-being. Research consistently supports SEL's benefits for students' emotional development, academic achievement, and long-term life outcomes (Cipriano et al., 2023; Durlak et al., 2011; Mahoney et al., 2021; Oberle et al., 2016). However, the effectiveness of

SEL depends critically on its cultural responsiveness. Programs that adopt a race- and culture-neutral stance risk alienating students whose identities, values, and relational frameworks differ from the individualistic assumptions embedded in dominant SEL models (Jagers et al., 2019; McCallops et al., 2019; Simmons, 2019).

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) offers a framework for addressing this gap. CRT recognizes students' cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives as assets that enrich learning rather than obstacles to overcome (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995). When students develop skills grounded in their own lived experiences and cultural frames of reference, engagement, comprehension, and personal meaning deepen (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995). For SEL specifically, integrating CRT principles means moving beyond universal emotional competency checklists toward curricula that honor the cultural and relational contexts in which students develop their identities (Donahue-Keegan et al., 2019; Garner et al., 2014). This integration is particularly urgent for populations whose cultural frameworks, including collectivist values, religious identity, and community-centered conceptions of self, are largely invisible in mainstream SEL design (Attaya & Hilliard, 2023; Jagers et al., 2019).

These concerns are especially salient for Muslim Middle Eastern American (MMEA) students, a population that remains significantly underrepresented in both SEL research and multicultural education scholarship. MMEA students frequently navigate the tension between collectivist cultural values and the individualistic norms prevalent in mainstream American schooling, a tension compounded by post-9/11 Islamophobia, ongoing discrimination, and the challenge of forming coherent identities across multiple cultural contexts (Ajrouch & Jamal, 2007; Muedini, 2009; Reagan, 2020; Sirin et al., 2008). When students' cultural and religious identities are absent from or misrepresented in school curricula, the resulting cultural mismatch can impede belonging, identity formation, and academic achievement (Phillips et al., 2020; Stephens et al., 2012). Islamic schools have emerged as one institutional response to this mismatch as spaces where MMEA students can learn within a secular academic environment deeply rooted in Islamic principles, integrating cultural and religious identity rather than requiring students to compartmentalize them (Brooks et al., 2020; Tiflati, 2016). Understanding how educators in these settings adapt SEL curricula offers insights applicable well beyond Islamic schooling, with implications for educators serving MMEA students across diverse public and private school contexts.

Despite the widespread adoption of SEL programs, research on how these frameworks serve culturally diverse populations remains limited (Wigelsworth et al., 2022), and studies specifically addressing MMEA students are virtually absent from the literature. This study addresses that gap. Drawing on constructivist grounded theory and the perspectives of 20 Islamic school teachers in North New Jersey, USA, we present an empirically grounded theory arguing for SEL models that encompass both individual and communal frameworks, reflecting the collectivist values central to many MMEA students' identities. The findings offer practical curriculum adaptations and carry implications for educators, curriculum

developers, and policymakers seeking to build more culturally responsive and equitable SEL programs.

Conceptual Framework

This study draws on three interconnected bodies of scholarship. The first examines MMEA student well-being and acculturative stress, establishing the psychological and social pressures these students navigate as they move between collectivist cultural values and individualistic schooling norms. The second addresses the cultural limitation of mainstream SEL frameworks, situating CASEL's competency model within critiques of its unstated cultural assumptions. The third considers the distinctive position of Islamic schoolteachers. Together, these frameworks establish the conceptual foundation for understanding how Islamic school educators adapt SEL curricula for MMEA students.

MMEA Student Well-being and Acculturative Stress

MMEA students face distinctive challenges at the intersection of cultural identity, religious practice, and schooling in the United States. Acculturative stress — the psychological, social, and physical strain of adapting to a new cultural context while maintaining one's heritage — is a significant factor shaping their academic and emotional trajectories (Faragallah et al., 1997; Phillips et al., 2020; Stephens et al., 2012). For MMEA youth specifically, this stress is compounded by the tension between collectivist home values that emphasize family obligation and communal interdependence, and the individualistic norms dominant in mainstream American schooling (Awad, 2010; Sabry & Bruna, 2007). Post-9/11 discrimination and sustained Islamophobia have intensified these pressures, creating additional barriers to identity formation and belonging (Muedini, 2009; Reagan, 2020; Sirin et al., 2008).

Although family cohesion and religiosity can buffer acculturative stress in first-generation immigrant families, research indicates that unresolved cultural and identity tensions become more acute over time, with later generations showing elevated vulnerability to anxiety and depression (Awad, 2010; Awaad et al., 2021; Goforth et al., 2015). Gender dynamics add a further layer of complexity. Acculturation unfolds differently across genders within MMEA communities, and the interplay between cultural traditions and Islamic principles, which are frequently conflated in both popular discourse and educational settings, shapes how students, particularly girls, navigate identity and belonging (Al-Krenawi et al., 2020; Glas et al., 2018). Understanding these intersecting pressures is essential for developing SEL approaches that address the actual lived experiences of MMEA students rather than generic conceptions of cultural difference.

SEL, CRT, and the Problem of Cultural Neutrality

SEL programs have demonstrated broad benefits for students' emotional regulation, relationship skills, and academic achievement, including for students in disadvantaged and special-needs populations (Cipriano et al., 2023; Durlak et al., 2011; Mahoney et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2017). The CASEL framework, with its five competency domains, provides the most widely adopted structure for SEL implementation in American schools (CASEL, 2023). However, a growing body of scholarship challenges the assumption that these frameworks are culturally neutral. Most SEL interventions have historically been developed from within Western, individualistic psychological traditions, centering the autonomous self as the primary unit of emotional development (Jagers et al., 2018; Jagers et al., 2019; Simmons, 2019). For students whose cultural frameworks prioritize communal identity, interdependence, and collective responsibility — as is characteristic of many MMEA families — this individualistic framing can render SEL programming culturally misaligned and, at worst, alienating (Attaya & Hilliard, 2023; McCallops et al., 2019).

Culturally responsive teaching offers a corrective framework. CRT positions students' cultural backgrounds not as variables to accommodate but as pedagogical assets that are central to, rather than peripheral to, effective instruction (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Integrating CRT principles into SEL design means moving beyond competency checklists toward programs that reflect the specific relational, communal, and identity contexts in which students actually develop (Donahue-Keegan et al., 2019; Farinde-Wu et al., 2017; Garner et al., 2014; Stevenson & Markowitz, 2019). For MMEA students, this integration is particularly urgent. Unresolved cultural and identity tensions in first-generation immigrant families can compound across generations, leaving young people increasingly vulnerable to mental health challenges as they inherit dual cultural identities without adequate frameworks for navigating them (Awaad et al., 2021). An SEL program that fails to address this reality does not simply fall short, it risks reinforcing the cultural mismatch it should be mitigating (Simmons, 2019).

Islamic Schools as Sites of Culturally Responsive SEL

Islamic schools occupy a distinctive institutional position relevant to this study. As diasporic institutions, they aim to integrate Islamic beliefs, practices, and perspectives throughout the curriculum and school culture, creating environments in which Muslim students can develop academic competencies without being asked to compartmentalize their religious and cultural identities (Brooks et al., 2020; Hussain & Read, 2015; Tiflati, 2016). The number of Islamic schools in North America has grown substantially, particularly following 9/11, as families sought educational spaces insulated from rising Islamophobia (Memon, 2011). While variation exists across these institutions in pedagogy, curriculum design, and SEL

implementation approaches, they share a common commitment to centering the cultural and religious identities of their students, precisely the condition that CRT scholarship identifies as foundational to equitable learning (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

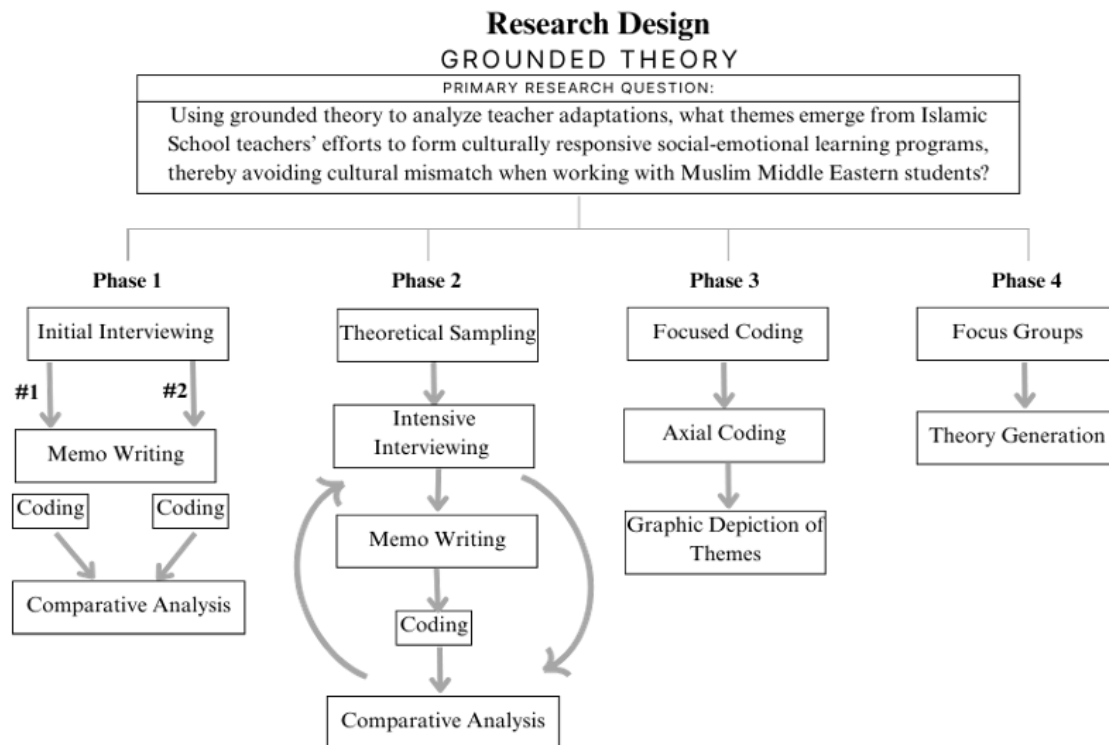
Islamic schoolteachers occupy a unique position at the intersection of faith, culture, and education. They integrate Islamic ethical perspectives across subject areas while simultaneously navigating commercially developed SEL curricula such as Responsive Classroom, Leader in Me, and RULER, which were not designed with MMEA students in mind. Research on how these educators adapt mainstream SEL frameworks is scarce (Memon, 2011; Sirin et al., 2008). This study centers their voices and practices as the primary site of inquiry, treating their adaptations as practitioner-generated knowledge about what culturally responsive SEL requires for MMEA students.

Together, these three bodies of literature — MMEA acculturative stress, the cultural limitations of mainstream SEL, and the distinctive context of Islamic schooling — frame the central inquiry of this study. If SEL programs embed individualistic assumptions that conflict with the collectivist values and religious identities of MMEA students, and if Islamic school teachers are uniquely positioned to recognize and respond to this misalignment, then studying their adaptive practices offers a path toward a more culturally grounded theory of SEL. This study pursued two research questions: (1) What theory emerges from Islamic school teachers' efforts to create a culturally responsive SEL program? (2) What adaptations do Islamic school teachers make when teaching SEL skills within the CASEL framework's five competency areas?

Methods and Materials

This study employed constructivist grounded theory (CGT) to examine how Islamic school teachers adapt SEL curricula for MMEA students. CGT is well-suited to this inquiry because it allows theory to emerge organically from participants' lived experiences rather than from predetermined hypotheses and explicitly positions the researcher's subjectivity as a productive analytical tool rather than a source of bias (Charmaz, 2014). Data collection and analysis proceeded concurrently across three phases, moving iteratively between interviews, focused coding, constant comparative analysis, and focus groups until theoretical saturation was achieved (Birks & Mills, 2023; Charmaz, 2014) as depicted in Figure 1. Details of the study methodology are described below.

Figure 1
Grounded Theory Research Design



Research Setting and Participants

This study was conducted in North New Jersey, USA, a strategic location given its high concentration of MMEA families. New Jersey's Arab American population is estimated at 179,449, with the state's highest concentrations found in North Jersey communities (Arab American Institute, 2024). The region is also home to a well-established network of Islamic Schools serving thousands of students. Two Islamic schools participated, both committed to integrating SEL into their curricula but through distinct approaches. School 1 employs a multifaceted model combining Responsive Classroom, EL Education's English curriculum, and the CASEL framework, emphasizing students' social and emotional development as foundational to learning. School 2, a pre-K through 12th-grade institution, implements a customized SEL framework that draws on the Leader in Me and RULER programs, extending SEL into community engagement and outreach beyond the classroom. The variation in SEL approach across the two schools provided a rich comparative context for understanding teacher adaptations.

Twenty educators were recruited using initial criterion sampling: Participants were required to have at least two years of experience teaching both academic content and SEL curricula in Islamic schools with significant MMEA populations. Reflecting the demographics of Islamic school faculty more broadly,

19 participants identified as women and one as a man. Participants' cultural backgrounds included Middle Eastern, South Asian, East Asian, Persian, Caucasian, and Native American, reflecting the diversity characteristic of Islamic school faculty nationwide. The group had an average of 11 years of teaching experience. Table 1 provides participant details. All names are pseudonyms.

Table 1
Study Participants

Name	Cultural Background	Years of Experience	Gender	Data Collection	Role
<i>Individual Interviews</i>					
Fatima	South Asian	12	Woman	Interview	Educator
Aisha	Middle Eastern	18	Woman	Interview	Educator
Khadija	Persian	8	Woman	Interview	Educator
Mariam	Middle Eastern	3	Woman	Interview	Educator
Zainab	Middle Eastern	6	Woman	Interview	Educator
Sumaya	Middle Eastern	4	Woman	Interview	Educator
Safiya	Caucasian	12	Woman	Interview	Educator
Umar	Middle Eastern	2	Man	Interview	Educator
Amira	Middle Eastern	20+	Woman	Interview	Educator
Nusaybah	Middle Eastern	9	Woman	Interview	Educator
Ruqayyah	Middle Eastern	4	Woman	Interview	Educator
Zahra	Middle Eastern	20+	Woman	Interview	Educator
<i>Focus Group 1</i>					
Salama	Middle Eastern	13	Woman	Focus Group	Educator
Hafsah	Middle Eastern	8	Woman	Focus Group	Educator
UmKalthoum	Middle Eastern	4	Woman	Focus Group	Educator
Sawdaa	Middle Eastern	20+	Woman	Focus Group	Educator
<i>Focus Group 2</i>					
UmAyman	Native American	20+	Woman	Focus Group	Educator
Juwwariyah	East Asian	4	Woman	Focus Group	Educator
Asma	East Asian	12	Woman	Focus Group	Educator
Maimuna	Middle Eastern	5	Woman	Focus Group	Educator

Data Collection

Data were collected across three phases, combining intensive interviews, theoretical sampling, and focus groups with graphic elicitation. In the first phase, 12 teachers participated in individual semi-structured interviews lasting 45–60 minutes. Initial questions were broad and open-ended to allow participants to direct the conversation toward what they found most significant. For example: “Can you describe how you approach SEL in your classroom?” and “Have you ever felt that SEL materials didn’t fit your students and what did you do about it?” As analysis progressed, questions became more focused, probing emerging themes such as collectivism and gender dynamics. Reflexive memos were written after each interview to document emerging insights and analytical hunches (Birks & Mills, 2023).

In the second phase of theoretical sampling, gender roles were identified as a significant category; thus, a male participant was purposefully recruited to allow for comparison and contrast (Charmaz, 2014). Additionally, both veteran and novice teachers were included to examine whether teaching experience influenced culturally responsive SEL adaptations. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached, the point at which no new categories or meaningful variations within existing categories were emerging from the data.

In the third phase of focus groups, two focus groups of four participants each were conducted, each lasting approximately 90 minutes (Morgan, 1998). A concept map developed from Phase 1 and 2 findings served as a graphic elicitation tool (Crilly et al., 2006), making the emerging theoretical framework visible to participants and stimulating focused feedback. This approach verified the credibility of emerging categories with the very practitioners who generated them and facilitated collective meaning-making around the developing theory.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the constant comparative method characteristic of grounded theory, proceeding concurrently with data collection (Charmaz, 2014). Analysis began with focused coding: An immersive, line-by-line examination of transcript data to identify and label the raw emotions, actions, and meanings expressed by participants. Focused codes were then compared within and across transcripts to reveal patterns, which were refined into categories during a second round of coding. Axial coding deepened this analysis by illuminating relationships among categories and connecting them to broader social processes. Reflexive memos throughout this process documented analytical decisions, tracked theoretical development, and supported confirmability (Birks & Mills, 2023). To illustrate the coding progression, Table 2 presents an example drawn from the Cultural Awareness theme:

Table 2*Illustrative Coding Trail: Cultural Awareness Theme*

Data Extract	Initial Code	Focused Code	Axial Code	Core Theme
"So often times, we learn with the understanding that a lot of what we are reading is from the Western perspective. So, I like to constantly bring in the contemporary Muslim perspective" (Fatima)	Supplementing Western Curriculum	Integrating Muslim Perspectives	Curriculum as Culturally Exclusionary	Cultural Awareness
"I want them to read about Elizabeth, but I also want them to read about Mahmoud and Ahmad and the Yaseens who have changed the world" (Nusaybah)	Desire for Diverse Representation	Naming Absent Identities	Curriculum as Culturally Exclusionary	Cultural Awareness

Both researchers independently coded an initial subset of transcripts, then met to compare codes and resolve discrepancies through discussion, a process that strengthened the dependability of the analysis. Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis software, was used to organize and manage codes across transcripts. Theoretical saturation was determined when two consecutive interviews and one focus group session produced no new categories or meaningful variations within existing ones.

Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the authors' university Institutional Review Board and conducted in accordance with established ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. All participants were informed of the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time without consequence, and the measures taken to protect their confidentiality. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

Researcher Positionality

Constructivist grounded theory treats researcher subjectivity as a productive analytical tool rather than a confound to be eliminated (Charmaz, 2014). Consistent with this epistemological stance, we acknowledge our positionality as directly relevant to this inquiry. The first author is a Muslim Middle Eastern American who grew up in the same geographic and cultural context as this study and currently serves as an administrator at an Islamic school. This insider positionality deepened rapport with participants, sharpened sensitivity to the nuances of cultural mismatch and dual-identity navigation, and informed the analytical lens brought to participants' accounts. At the same time, this proximity required ongoing reflexive attention to assumptions, which was addressed through consistent memo writing throughout data collection and analysis. The second author is a faculty member in multicultural education whose scholarship centers on educational equity and culturally responsive pedagogy. Approaching this study as an informed outsider to Islamic schooling, the second author provided a complementary analytical perspective that helped externalize and interrogate assumptions that might otherwise remain implicit. Researchers engaged in collaborative coding and regular debriefing to surface and reconcile the interpretive influences of their respective positionalities.

Ensuring Rigor

Several strategies were employed to establish the trustworthiness of this study's findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was supported through triangulation across three data sources — individual interviews, focus groups, and graphic elicitation — and through two rounds of member checking: Participants received their individual interview transcripts via email and were invited to review, correct, or expand upon their accounts. Subsequently, the concept map representing the emerging theoretical framework was shared with all participants for collective verification and refinement during Phase 3 focus groups. This dual member-checking process ensured that the developing theory remained grounded in and accountable to participants' actual experiences. Transferability is supported

by the rich descriptive detail throughout the findings, enabling readers to assess the applicability of these insights to their own contexts. Dependability was addressed through the maintenance of a detailed audit trail, including reflexive memos, codebooks, and documentation of analytical decisions at each phase. Confirmability was strengthened through independent coding by both researchers, collaborative reconciliation of discrepancies, and the reflexive memo process, which made analytical reasoning transparent and traceable.

Limitations

Several limitations of this study warrant acknowledgment. First, data were collected from two Islamic schools in a single geographic region, North New Jersey, which limits the transferability of findings to Islamic schools in other regions or with different demographic compositions. Second, the participant pool was predominantly female (19 of 20), reflecting the actual gender distribution of Islamic school faculty but constraining the study's ability to capture male teacher perspectives on culturally responsive SEL. Although a male participant was recruited intentionally when gender roles emerged as a significant category, his contributions, with two years of teaching experience, closely mirrored themes already present in the data and yielded no analytically distinct insights. This reflects a broader limitation: Findings are weighted toward the perspectives of experienced educators and the male teacher perspective on gender roles within MMEA SEL contexts remains underexplored. Future research should prioritize recruiting male Islamic school teachers with greater pedagogical experience. Third, this study examined teacher perceptions and practices; it does not provide direct evidence of how these adaptations affect student outcomes. Fourth, findings are specific to Islamic school settings; while we offer implications for public school educators, the extent to which these insights transfer to secular contexts without a religious framework has not been empirically tested. Finally, the theoretical framework developed here represents one plausible interpretation of the data, shaped by the researchers' positionalities and analytical choices.

Findings

The study data revealed a nuanced understanding of social-emotional learning, shaped by participants' experiences and professional development. Islamic schoolteachers identified three key approaches to adapting the CASEL framework within their SEL lessons to make them culturally relevant to MMEA students: promoting cultural awareness, addressing non-stereotypical gender roles, and reframing collectivism as a foundational worldview.

Cultural Awareness

Participants consistently identified a fundamental cultural awareness gap in their CASEL-endorsed SEL curricula, not merely an absence of Middle Eastern content but a deeper epistemological problem: The curricula positioned Western perspectives as universal and unmarked while rendering MMEA students' identities invisible. This invisibility, as Ladson-Billings (1995) argues, is not pedagogically neutral; curricula that reflect only dominant cultural frameworks implicitly communicate to marginalized students that their experiences fall outside the boundaries of what counts as educationally significant. Fatima named this dynamic directly: "So oftentimes, we learn with the understanding that a lot of what we are reading is from the Western perspective. So, I like to constantly bring in the contemporary Muslim perspective."

This supplementation was not incidental enrichment. Rather, participants described it as a necessary corrective to what Simmons (2019) identifies as the "single-story" problem in SEL: When students encounter only one cultural framework for understanding emotions, relationships, and identity, the framework itself becomes the standard against which their own experiences are measured and often found lacking. The consequences for MMEA students were visceral. Khadijah described students who felt their "identity is just like not welcome" when their cultural stories were absent from the curriculum, a sentiment that resonates with research connecting representation in learning materials to students' sense of belonging and academic engagement (Aronson & Laughter, 2016).

Participants responded by actively centering Middle Eastern voices and historical figures in their instruction. Zahra, for example, articulated the representational stakes most sharply, saying,

I wish that there were more Middle Eastern stories.... Even when we talked about Nelson Mandela and Malala, it was not enough. But I would love to see more — at least one or two stories — about a Muslim. I think the only one we have right now is Malala.

Zahra's account reveals the compounding effect of underrepresentation: Even well-intentioned multicultural curricula can inadvertently reinforce the "danger of a single story," such as one Muslim woman's narrative standing in for an entire community's diversity. Participants were unambiguous that effective cultural awareness in SEL required not tokenistic inclusion but substantive curricular transformation incorporating Middle Eastern authors, historical leaders across Islamic traditions, and narratives that captured the internal diversity of MMEA communities.

Equally important, participants cautioned against treating the MMEA community as monolithic. Zainab noted that her classroom represented students from entirely different national and cultural backgrounds, unified by Islamic faith rather than a single ethnicity. Her approach, emphasizing Islamic teachings as a shared framework while remaining attentive to individual cultural variations,

reflects what Gay (2002) describes as culturally responsive pedagogy's essential flexibility, honoring both the common threads and the internal diversity of students' communities. Effective SEL cultural awareness for MMEA students, participants argued, requires precisely this balance of sufficient cultural specificity to be meaningful and sufficient flexibility to avoid substituting one monolithic narrative for another.

Gender Roles

Although a male educator participated in Phase 2 specifically to provide a comparative perspective on gender dynamics, his responses at two years of teaching experience closely mirrored themes already present in the data without yielding analytically distinct contributions; findings in this section therefore draw primarily from the accounts of more experienced female educators.

Participants identified gender roles as the most consistently misrepresented dimension of MMEA students' cultural experience within mainstream SEL curricula. The misrepresentation operated in two directions simultaneously: Western frameworks either ignored gender dynamics within MMEA communities entirely or engaged with them through a deficit lens that portrayed Muslim women as passive and constrained. Both approaches, participants argued, failed their students, one by erasure, the other by stereotype. Nusaybah challenged the foundational assumption underlying the deficit view directly: "A lot of people believe feminism and feminist thought have no place in Islamic culture. And that's not true." This was not simply a corrective statement; it was a pedagogical stance. Participants consistently positioned the recovery of women's agency within Islamic history as both an academic and an SEL intervention, one that gave MMEA girls a framework for understanding their identities that neither required them to reject their faith nor accept its mischaracterization.

Safiya illustrated this approach through concrete curricular choices, incorporating historical figures such as Nusaybah bint Ka'ab, who defended the Prophet Muhammad in battle, and Safiya bint Abdul-Muttalib, who protected women and children during the Battle of the Trench. These were not decorative additions to the curriculum; they functioned as counter-narratives that disrupted the oppressed Muslim woman trope while remaining fully grounded in Islamic tradition. This approach maps directly onto CASEL's Responsible Decision-making competency. MMEA girls navigating dual cultural identities are already practicing sophisticated forms of responsible decision-making; curricula that render this negotiation invisible miss a significant pedagogical opportunity.

Perhaps the most analytically significant finding within this theme was the distinction participants drew between cultural practices and religious doctrine. Khadijah described classrooms where anti-girl dynamics generated by cultural attitudes created genuine harm, yet she was deliberate in her response:

Some classes did have a very boy, anti-girl kind of dynamic. And I think girls, because of that, have a very strong feminist, I mean, rightfully so, because you're hearing derogatory comments. So, addressing those things, I do. Those are one of those things that I feel like culturally, unfortunately, depending on the culture, sometimes there's a bit of a disadvantage. So, I like to separate this as a culture. This is not Islam.

This separation of culture and Islam is pedagogically crucial and theoretically important. It challenges the tendency, present in both popular discourse and some multicultural education frameworks, to treat Islamic identity as a monolithic cultural bloc rather than a religious tradition whose teachings can themselves serve as resources for gender equity and student empowerment. Aisha reinforced why this requires contextual knowledge rather than assumptions: "I think what helps is that I know their context... one of the hardest things for students is when the teacher has no context of who they are at all or assumes they know their opinions because of where they're from." SEL programming that conflates culture with religion or assumes homogeneity within culture and religion replicates rather than remedies the identity mismatch MMEA students already navigate.

Collectivism

The most theoretically significant finding of this study concerns collectivism, specifically, the inadequacy of the CASEL framework's current positioning of it. Within CASEL, collectivist values primarily appear in the relationship skills competency domain, framed as tools for productive social interaction. Participants rejected this framing as a fundamental mischaracterization of what collectivism means within MMEA cultural and Islamic contexts. For their students, collectivism is not a relationship skill; it is a foundational worldview that shapes how the self is understood, how identity is constructed, and how each of CASEL's five competency domains is experienced. Aisha articulated this distinction precisely, explaining that the CASEL framework "focuses a lot on self-awareness only from an internal and external perspective, but not from a communal perspective." This communal perspective, she argued, is not an add-on to self-awareness, it is its precondition.

This tension between collective and individualistic conceptions of self represents a paradigm-level challenge to individualistic SEL frameworks. The self that CASEL asks students to become aware of, manage, and develop is implicitly an autonomous self-bounded, internally coherent, and the primary unit of emotional development. For many MMEA students, this conception of self is culturally foreign. As Amira explained, "Your sense of self is — I don't want to say defined by your community — but a big part of it is what you give back to that community." Identity, in this framework, is constituted through contribution and relational obligation rather than through introspection and individual achievement. Mariam extended this to self-management itself: "You do for the community; you do for the ummah [the entire group]. So, when you're teaching self-management,

it's a regulation in a larger sphere. It's not a regulation within oneself." These accounts suggest that for MMEA students, CASEL's core competencies are not five discrete domains but five expressions of a single underlying relational framework.

The practical implications of this reframing were visible in participants' classroom practices. Nusaybah described community projects in which students organized tutoring programs for elementary school children, understanding service to others not as an extracurricular virtue but as a form of self-development. Ruqayyah extended the reframing to self-respect specifically:

So, when we're talking about self-respect, it's respecting oneself and, in so doing, respecting everybody around you. So, understanding when it's important to speak, understanding when it's important not to talk, right? For one of my classrooms, it would include how to talk to your elders, right? And that's not really a component in the CASEL framework.

Ruqayyah's observation exposes a concrete gap: The CASEL framework does not address intergenerational respect as a dimension of self-respect. Yet, for MMEA students, this connection is culturally foundational. Her further question, "If you're allowing this to happen to someone in front of you, how are you now defining yourself? What is your role in the community? Are you supposed to be a bystander?" reframes bystander intervention not as a social skill but as an expression of self-concept. This collectivist understanding of self, participants argued, has implications far beyond MMEA communities. Centering communal obligation in SEL would benefit every student by building the understanding that individual flourishing is inseparable from collective well-being.

Table 3

Mapping Culturally Responsive SEL Adaptations to CASEL Competency Domains

CASEL Domain	Standard Framework Assumption	MMEA Cultural Adaptation	Participant Example
Self-awareness	Identity understood through individual introspection; emotions as internally generated	Identity formed through cultural, religious, and communal context; self-understood in relation to community and faith	"I like to constantly bring in the contemporary Muslim perspective" (Fatima)
Self-management	Emotional regulation as individual skill;	Regulation understood as communal,	"When you're teaching self-management, it's a regulation in a larger

	managing one's own responses	behavior governed by obligations to family, community, and faith	sphere. It's not a regulation within oneself" (Mariam)
Social Awareness	Perspective-taking toward others as individuals; empathy as discrete competency	Communal awareness as foundational worldview; agency defined through contribution to collective well-being	"Your sense of self—a big part of it is what you give back to that community" (Amira)
Relationship Skills	Interpersonal skills for productive individual interactions	Collectivism reframed as foundational worldview; intergenerational respect, communal responsibility, and service as core relational practices	"How to talk to your elders... that's not really a component in the CASEL framework" (Ruqayyah)
Responsible Decision-making	Individual ethical reasoning; personal choices and consequences	Decision-making situated within cultural and religious identity; women's agency in Islamic tradition as curricular resource for navigating dual identities	"A lot of people believe feminism and feministic thought have no place in Islamic culture. And that's not true" (Nusaybah)

Discussion

This study set out to understand how Islamic school teachers adapt SEL curricula for MMEA students and what their adaptive practices reveal about the limits of existing frameworks. Three findings emerged: Teachers identified a

pervasive cultural awareness gap in CASEL-endorsed materials, navigated the misrepresentation of gender roles within Islamic communities, and confronted a fundamental mismatch between CASEL's individualistic assumptions and the collectivist worldview central to their students' identities. Taken together, these findings do more than document adaptation strategies; they constitute a practitioner-generated critique of the theoretical foundations on which mainstream SEL is built and create a provisional framework for what culturally responsive SEL must look like for MMEA students.

Cultural Awareness as Structural Necessity

The cultural awareness gap participants identified is not simply a content problem to be resolved by adding more Middle Eastern authors to reading lists. It reflects a deeper structural issue: SEL curricula that fail to recognize this not only miss a pedagogical opportunity but also actively undervalue the competencies these students have already developed. The curricula become culturally specific to the dominant group while appearing universal (Jagers et al., 2019; Simmons, 2019). For MMEA students, the practical consequence is a curriculum that positions their identities as supplemental rather than central; this is what Hoon et al. (2019) describe as inclusion without belonging.

What participants did in response to this marginalization was theoretically significant. By integrating Middle Eastern historical figures, Islamic literary voices, and culturally grounded narratives into their SEL instruction, these educators practiced what Ladson-Billings (1995) terms cultural competence, developing in students the ability to function effectively in their own cultural context while also engaging critically with dominant cultural frameworks. Critically, this is distinct from multicultural add-ons: Participants were not decorating an unchanged curriculum but restructuring the epistemological center of their classrooms. Attaya and Hilliard (2023) argue that applying critical race theory to SEL requires moving beyond representation toward transformation, replacing the assumption that one emotional framework fits all students with a design philosophy that begins from students' actual cultural realities. Participants in this study were doing precisely that, without formal theoretical scaffolding to support them. This suggests that Islamic school teachers have developed practitioner knowledge that SEL scholarship has not yet caught up to; centering their voices in research, as this study does, is itself a methodological and ethical imperative.

Gender Roles, Religious Identity, and Responsible Decision-making

The gender roles finding carries implications that extend beyond curriculum design into the theoretical heart of SEL. Participants' insistence on distinguishing cultural practices from Islamic doctrine challenges a conflation that appears not only in popular discourse but in educational frameworks that treat religious and

ethnic identity as interchangeable variables. The practical harm of this conflation for MMEA students is significant: Girls who encounter curricula that frame Muslim womanhood as inherently passive or constrained are being asked to choose between their faith identity and their sense of agency. This is a false choice that SEL programming should be dismantling rather than reinforcing.

Participants' corrective strategy, centering women of agency from early Islamic history, maps directly onto CASEL's Responsible Decision-making competency in ways the framework itself does not anticipate. MMEA girls who navigate dual cultural identities, negotiate between home and school expectations, and maintain their religious commitments within a society that frequently misrepresents them are already engaged in sophisticated, responsible decision-making. Failing to recognize this concept represents a missed pedagogical opportunity: the competencies these students have already developed go unacknowledged and undervalued. Future SEL design for MMEA populations should explicitly incorporate Islamic historical narratives of female agency as resources for developing the Responsible Decision-making and Self-awareness competency domains, rather than treating religious identity as a variable to be accommodated around the edges of a secular framework.

This finding also has implications for how educators are prepared to engage with gender dynamics in diverse classrooms. Aisha's observation that effective teaching requires knowing students' context rather than assuming their perspectives based on cultural or religious background points toward a specific gap in teacher preparation: Educators serving MMEA populations need not cultural scripts but cultural humility, the capacity to approach students' identities with genuine curiosity rather than pre-formed frameworks (Gay, 2002).

Collectivism and the Limits of Individualistic SEL

The collectivism finding represents this study's most significant theoretical contribution. Existing critiques of CASEL's individualistic assumptions, including Jagers et al.'s (2019) call for transformative SEL and Simmons' (2019) critique of culturally neutral emotional frameworks, have largely stopped short of proposing an alternative conceptual architecture. This study's findings suggest what architecture might require, at least for MMEA populations: A reorientation of SEL's foundational unit of analysis from the individual self to the relational self. This change is not merely a cultural accommodation, it is a theoretical intervention. If self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making are understood as competencies of an autonomous individual, they will be taught, assessed, and developed in ways that are structurally misaligned with students for whom the self is constituted through communal relationships and obligations. Participants' accounts suggest that, for MMEA students, the five CASEL competency domains are not experienced as discrete skills but as integrated expressions of a single collectivist orientation toward the world. Mariam's formulation, that self-management is "a regulation in a larger sphere" rather than

“a regulation within oneself,” is not a cultural variation on CASEL’s framework. It challenges its foundational premise.

This finding resonates with scholarship on collectivist cultural frameworks in other educational contexts. Research on East Asian and Latinx student populations has similarly documented tensions between individualistic SEL assumptions and collectivist cultural values (Garner et al., 2014), suggesting that the paradigm shift participants advocate for may have implications well beyond MMEA communities. A collectivist reframing of SEL — one that positions community engagement, intergenerational responsibility, and relational identity as core rather than supplemental competencies — would not diminish the framework’s relevance for individualistic cultural contexts but would expand its capacity to serve the full diversity of American classrooms.

Implications for Public School Educators

While this study was conducted in Islamic school settings, its implications extend to any educator serving MMEA students in public or private secular contexts. The three adaptation areas participants identified — cultural awareness, gender roles, and collectivism — do not require a religious framework to implement. They require cultural knowledge, pedagogical flexibility, and a willingness to interrogate the assumptions embedded in off-the-shelf SEL curricula.

For public school educators, cultural awareness adaptation begins with a curriculum audit that examines which voices, histories, and cultural frameworks are represented in existing SEL materials and which are systematically absent. Supplementing with Middle Eastern authors, historical figures from Islamic traditions, and narratives that reflect the diversity of MMEA experiences does not require religious instruction; it requires the same commitment to representation that culturally responsive pedagogy has long advocated for Black and Latinx students (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Addressing gender roles in public school contexts means resisting the deficit framing of Muslim women that pervades popular media and, frequently, educational materials. Public school educators can draw on the same historical counter-narratives participants described, including women of agency in Islamic history, as part of broader multicultural social studies and ELA instruction, without framing them as religious content. The pedagogical goal of disrupting stereotypes and expanding students’ frameworks for understanding gender and identity is entirely compatible with secular educational contexts.

The collectivism finding carries perhaps the most universally applicable implications. Community-based learning structures such as service projects, peer tutoring programs, and collaborative problem-solving are not culturally specific pedagogical strategies. They are evidence-based practices that naturally align with the collectivist values MMEA students bring to school. Public school educators who

build these structures into their SEL instruction create conditions in which MMEA students' cultural strengths become pedagogical assets rather than sources of mismatch. Equally important, these structures benefit all students as building the understanding that individual flourishing is enmeshed with collective responsibility is an educational goal with value far beyond any single cultural community.

Implications for Teacher Preparation and Policy

This study's findings point toward three specific recommendations for teacher preparation programs and education policy. First, pre-service and in-service teacher education must move beyond generic cultural competency modules toward sustained engagement with the specific cultural, religious, and historical contexts that the communities' educators will serve. For teachers working in areas with significant MMEA populations, this means developing substantive knowledge of Islamic history, the internal diversity of Middle Eastern cultures, and the pressures of dual identity navigation; not as peripheral enrichment but as foundational professional knowledge.

Second, SEL curriculum developers and adoption committees should require cultural responsiveness reviews as a condition of program adoption, examining not only whether materials include diverse representation but whether their foundational assumptions about selfhood, emotion, and identity align with the cultural frameworks of the student populations they will serve. The CASEL framework's considerable strengths should not exempt it from this scrutiny. Indeed, its widespread adoption makes this examination more rather than less urgent.

Third, school leaders and policymakers should create structures that enable MMEA families and community members to participate meaningfully in SEL program design and review. Participants in this study developed their adaptation strategies organically, through deep community knowledge accumulated over years of practice. That knowledge is currently invisible to the curriculum developers whose materials are being supplemented. Formalizing community participation in SEL design would make practitioners' knowledge productive at the program level rather than leaving individual teachers to reinvent it classroom by classroom.

Conclusion

This study makes a case, grounded in the practitioner knowledge of twenty Islamic school educators, that the cultural neutrality assumed by mainstream SEL frameworks is not neutral at all. For MMEA students navigating the intersection of collectivist cultural values, Islamic religious identity, and the individualistic assumptions embedded in American schooling, dominant SEL frameworks do not simply fall short. They actively reproduce the cultural mismatch they should be mitigating. The three adaptation areas participants in this study identified — cultural awareness, gender roles, and collectivism — are not supplementary

modifications to an otherwise functional framework. They indicate where the framework's foundational assumptions require reconceptualization.

The most significant theoretical contribution of this study is the reframing of collectivism. Relocating collectivism from CASEL's relationship skills domain, where it appears as one interpersonal competency among several, to the foundational level of all five competency domains challenges SEL scholarship to ask a more fundamental question: Whose conception of the self does this framework serve? For students whose identity is constituted through communal relationships and obligations rather than individual introspection and achievement, this is not an academic question. It shapes whether SEL instruction feels like empowerment or erasure.

Three Actionable Recommendations

These findings point toward concrete steps that school districts and curriculum developers can take to make SEL programming more responsive to MMEA students and, by extension, other culturally and religiously distinct populations navigating dominant frameworks. Participants' practitioner knowledge suggests three interconnected areas for action: Strengthening the vetting process schools use when adopting SEL curricula, building cultural and religious literacy into how teachers are prepared to deliver that curricula, and developing a collectivist alternative to the individualistic assumptions embedded in current frameworks. Taken together, these recommendations move beyond identifying the problem to providing schools and policymakers with a practical path forward.

One priority is that cultural responsiveness reviews in SEL curriculum adoption should be mandated. School districts and curriculum committees should require structured audits of SEL materials prior to adoption, examining not only representational diversity but also the cultural assumptions embedded in the framework's conception of selfhood, emotion, and identity. These reviews should include educators and community members from the populations the curriculum will serve, not as a courtesy consultation but as a substantive design requirement. For MMEA populations specifically, reviewers should assess whether materials reflect communal as well as individual conceptions of self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making.

Educators also need culturally- and religiously-informed SEL content to be integrated into teacher preparation programs. Pre-service and in-service educators serving MMEA populations need more than generic cultural competency training. They need substantive preparation in the historical, religious, and cultural contexts that shape their students' identities, including the internal diversity of Middle Eastern cultures, the distinction between cultural practices and Islamic doctrine, and the history of women's agency within Islamic tradition. This preparation equips educators to facilitate the kind of contextually grounded SEL

instruction that participants in this study developed through years of community experience, rather than leaving each teacher to construct it independently.

Finally, a collectivist SEL framework as a formal curricular alternative should be developed. This study's findings, combined with parallel scholarship on collectivist cultural frameworks among East Asian and Latinx student populations (Garner et al., 2014), suggest a sufficient empirical basis for developing a collectivist SEL framework as a structured alternative or supplement to individualistic models. Such a framework would position community engagement, intergenerational responsibility, and relational identity as core competency domains rather than relationship skill add-ons. Critically, this framework would benefit not only MMEA students but also any student for whom individual flourishing is understood as inseparable from collective well-being.

Future Research Directions

Several directions warrant further inquiry. First, this study examined teacher perceptions and practices; future research should examine student outcomes directly, assessing whether the adaptations documented here produce measurable improvements in MMEA students' social-emotional development, sense of belonging, and academic engagement. Second, the male teacher perspective on culturally responsive SEL remains underexplored; future studies should recruit male Islamic school teachers with greater pedagogical experience to examine whether and how gender shapes adaptation strategies. Third, the public-school context requires direct empirical attention. Studies examining how secular educators serving MMEA students in diverse public-school settings navigate the same cultural tensions documented in this study would substantially extend this study's implications. Finally, perspectives from majority-Muslim countries and Global South educational contexts would enrich this line of inquiry by broadening the comparative framework beyond the North American diasporic context.

Ultimately, creating culturally responsive SEL for MMEA students is a matter of educational equity, not cultural accommodation. When SEL frameworks position one cultural conception of the self as the universal standard, they do not serve all students equally. Instead, they serve some students at the expense of others. The educators in this study refused that trade-off. Their practitioner knowledge, documented here for the first time in the empirical literature, offers both a critique of what SEL currently is and a roadmap for what it could become: A framework capacious enough to honor the full diversity of identities, relationships, and ways of understanding the self that students bring into American classrooms.

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