



Teaching Against Erasure: Transformative SEL, Language Justice, and Belonging for Multilingual Learners in Hawai‘i

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Abstract: This qualitative case study examined how a third-grade teacher in a Title I school in Hawai‘i implemented Transformative Social-Emotional Learning (tSEL) to support multilingual learners’ social-emotional development. Grounded in a framework centering belonging, agency, identity, and language justice, the study investigated how culturally and linguistically sustaining adaptations to an existing SEL curriculum shaped student engagement and participation. Over 15 weeks, four gratitude lessons were taught, three adapted using tSEL principles. Data sources included classroom observations, student artifacts, exit tickets, lesson plans, and teacher reflections, and were analyzed using iterative qualitative coding. Findings indicate that tSEL-aligned instruction fostered four interrelated outcomes: belonging through cultural and linguistic inclusion, agency through student voice, collaborative problem-solving through peer interaction, and self-awareness through linguistic affirmation. Multilingual learners participated more actively when home languages and cultural knowledge were positioned as classroom resources rather than accommodations. The study provides empirical evidence that classroom-level adaptations of SEL can function as culturally sustaining practice and offers implications for implementing equity-oriented SEL frameworks with linguistically diverse learners.

Keywords: Transformative Social-Emotional Learning (tSEL), language justice, multilingual learners, translanguaging, elementary education, qualitative case study, Hawai‘i

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Historically, educational systems in the United States have imposed English-only instruction that silenced students' home languages and identities, contributing to widespread language oppression and educational inequities (Rodriguez-Arroyo & Pearson, 2020; Scott et al., 2009). Thus, language justice is essential to equitable education, ensuring that multilingual learners' (MLs') rights to use and develop their native languages are affirmed and sustained in schools. Over the past two decades, the number of K-12 MLs in U.S. public schools has grown significantly, now comprising over 10% of all enrolled students (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2024). As one of the fastest-growing student demographics, MLs bring linguistic and cultural diversity that enriches educational settings. However, they also face distinct academic and social-emotional challenges that impact their educational experiences and outcomes. Language barriers, difficulties with cultural adjustment, and struggles with social integration often hinder MLs' academic success and well-being (García & Wei, 2014; Park et al., 2018). In particular, foreign-born MLs may experience acculturative stress, resulting from exposure to a new cultural and linguistic environment, which has been linked to higher levels of depression, anxiety, and lower academic performance (Albeg & Castro-Olivo, 2014). Given the increasing number of MLs in U.S. public schools, addressing their social-emotional needs alongside academic instruction is imperative.

Public schooling in Hawai‘i has long operated as a site of linguistic and cultural regulation. Following the illegal overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom in 1893, English-only schooling was institutionalized through policies such as Act 57 (1896), which banned ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i as a medium of instruction. These policies positioned English as the language of schooling, success, and belonging, while Indigenous and immigrant languages were systematically marginalized. Although Hawaiian language revitalization efforts have since emerged, the legacy of English-only education continues to shape how language, identity, and learning are valued in schools today. Compulsory education in Hawai‘i has therefore not been neutral. Historically, schooling functioned as a mechanism of assimilation, requiring students to participate in educational systems that privileged dominant linguistic and cultural norms. For MLs, this has meant navigating classrooms where home languages and culturally grounded ways of communicating are often silenced or treated as peripheral.

English-only ideologies persist not only in formal policy but also in everyday classroom practices that regulate how students are expected to speak, feel, and behave. These dynamics are inseparable from ongoing struggles for Hawaiian sovereignty and self-determination. Schooling in Hawai‘i has historically been used to erase Indigenous language and knowledge, raising critical questions about whose identities and ways of being are legitimized within compulsory education (Benham & Heck, 2013). Within this context, social-emotional learning (SEL) risks reinforcing assimilationist norms when implemented without attention to language, power, and history, defining emotional expression and “appropriate” behavior through monolingual, Eurocentric lenses.

A Transformative Social-Emotional Learning (tSEL) framework offers a necessary intervention in this context. By centering language justice, identity, belonging, and agency, tSEL provides a way to reimagine SEL as a space where multilingual learners' languages and cultural knowledge are affirmed rather than regulated. This study examines how a third-grade educator adapted SEL instruction through a tSEL framework to support MLs' social-emotional

development within a compulsory schooling context in Hawai‘i. In this study, tSEL is taken up as both a pedagogical and a justice-oriented response to the historical and ongoing conditions shaping MLs' experiences of schooling in Hawai‘i.

Conceptual Framework

tSEL is meant to “promote equity and excellence among children, young people, and adults” (Jagers et al., 2019, p. 162). tSEL aims to address systemic inequities by empowering students and educators to critically analyze power structures and to collaborate to foster fair and inclusive environments.

Table 1

CASEL SEL Competencies Aligned to tSEL Focal Constructs

CASEL SEL Competencies	tSEL Focal Constructs
Self-Awareness	Identity – Understanding and affirming one’s cultural, linguistic, and social identities.
Self-Management	Agency – Exercising voice, choice, and the capacity to take purposeful action.
Social Awareness	Belonging – Feeling accepted, valued, and included within a community.
Relationship Skills	Collaborative Problem-Solving – Working with others to share ideas, negotiate perspectives, and co-construct solutions to complex problems.
Responsible Decision-Making	Curiosity – Actively seeking to understand diverse perspectives, asking critical questions, and exploring new ideas.

Note: CASEL = Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020). tSEL = Transformative Social-Emotional Learning (Jagers et al., 2019, 2021).

As shown in Table 1, tSEL extends the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning’s (CASEL, 2020) five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, by incorporating five focal constructs: identity, agency, belonging, collaborative problem-solving, and curiosity. *Identity*, closely aligned with self-awareness, emphasizes students’ understanding of their linguistic and cultural identities and how these intersect with their social experiences. Identity formation is fluid, evolving as students navigate different cultural spaces (Jagers et al., 2021). A strong sense of identity supports multilingual learners (MLs) in developing confidence in their heritage while adapting to new educational contexts. *Agency*, associated with self-management, refers to students’ perceived capacity to effect change through purposeful action. It includes having a voice in decision-making, setting personal and academic goals, overcoming challenges, and engaging in collaborative processes. Agency is fundamental in enabling MLs to take intentional actions that shape their educational trajectories. *Belonging*, aligned with social awareness, is the experience of being accepted, respected, and included within a group or

community. It extends beyond recognition by engaging students in co-constructing learning spaces where they feel valued. A sense of belonging is critical to MLs' cognitive, social, and emotional well-being and influences their academic motivation and success (Mori, 2023).

Collaborative problem-solving, central to relationship skills, involves students working together to address challenges by sharing knowledge, negotiating perspectives, and developing solutions. This process supports MLs in navigating complex social and academic environments while fostering cooperation across diverse cultural backgrounds (Mercer & Gregersen, 2023).

Curiosity, linked to responsible decision-making, encourages students to seek knowledge, ask critical questions, and engage with diverse perspectives. Through curiosity, MLs develop the ability to challenge assumptions, explore new ideas, and cultivate deeper understandings of themselves and the world around them (Mori, 2023).

A tSEL framework for MLs recognizes the intersectionality of language, culture, and identity. It ensures that SEL practices do not simply assimilate MLs into dominant norms but amplify their voices, sustain their cultural identities, and equip them with the tools to challenge inequities. tSEL reimagines SEL as a vehicle for equity and systemic change in multilingual education by embedding translanguaging, critical consciousness, and culturally relevant pedagogy. The tSEL conceptual framework provides a lens through which educators can critically assess SEL practices, implement culturally sustaining pedagogies, and support MLs in becoming active agents of change in their communities. The above tSEL framework is used in this study to explore how a third-grade educator implements tSEL strategies to support MLs' social-emotional development and which contextual factors influence these strategies.

Review of the Literature

SEL is the process of acquiring and applying the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to understand and regulate emotions, set and accomplish meaningful goals, show empathy, build and sustain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2020). SEL is operationalized in this study to describe classroom activities that support students' development of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship-building, and responsible decision-making. Our extensive literature review revealed that SEL curricula may prioritize individual expression and self-advocacy, which can conflict with collectivist cultural values or language barriers faced by MLs.

SEL is most commonly operationalized in U.S. schools through the CASEL (2020) framework, which identifies five core competencies (see Table 1): self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Research has demonstrated that SEL initiatives aligned with these competencies are associated with positive student outcomes, including improved academic achievement, emotional regulation, and interpersonal skills (Denham & Brown, 2010; Hamilton et al., 2019). As a result, CASEL-aligned SEL frameworks have been widely adopted across K–12 contexts and continue to shape how social-emotional development is conceptualized and implemented in schools.

Students develop SEL competencies through policies, programs, and practices that strengthen emotional regulation, goal-setting, empathy, relationship-building, and decision-making. For example, a national survey of K–12 educators found that 72% of principals ranked SEL as a top priority, particularly in urban and high-poverty schools (Hamilton et al., 2019). While the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA, 2015) does not explicitly reference SEL, it promotes initiatives that improve school environments, enhance peer interactions, and encourage

community engagement. As a result, many states have adopted SEL standards and access federal funding through ESSA's three main streams: (1) Title I, which supports academic achievement for disadvantaged students; (2) Title II, which funds teacher and school leader training, and (3) Title IV, which enhances educational opportunities through 21st-century school programs. These funding sources help states implement SEL standards and ensure schools have the necessary resources to foster students' SEL growth.

Why MLs Need SEL

SEL programs in U.S. schools are primarily shaped by Western norms, yet social-emotional skills are socioculturally situated (Vygotsky, 1986). Children from diverse backgrounds may interpret SEL behaviors differently (Lau & Shea, 2024). For example, silence may signify active listening in some Asian cultures rather than disengagement, yet in U.S. classrooms, it may be misinterpreted as a lack of participation. Many MLs who enter formal schooling in the U.S. are exposed to new behavioral expectations and are expected to assimilate school-valued norms quickly (e.g., raising a hand to speak, standing quietly in line) (Cho et al., 2019). MLs transitioning from non-Eurocentric educational systems may feel confused or alienated when interacting with teachers and peers who uphold fundamentally different cultural values (Pentón Herrera, 2020).

As SEL programs evolve, various curricula have emerged, such as standalone programs, integrated approaches, and online resources. However, implementation varies: elementary schools are more likely to adopt structured SEL curricula, while secondary schools rely more on informal SEL practices (Hamilton et al., 2019). Research highlights the importance of a supportive and inclusive school climate, particularly for MLs, who face additional challenges related to language acquisition, cultural adaptation, and social integration (Özer, 2018). SEL plays a crucial role in supporting MLs by creating inclusive learning environments where they feel valued, respected, and connected to their peers and teachers. Programs emphasizing self-awareness, emotional regulation, and interpersonal skills help MLs navigate the complexities of learning a new language while building confidence in their abilities.

SEL fosters a sense of belonging, key to MLs' academic engagement and overall well-being (Adams & Richie, 2017). Educators can enhance SEL practices for MLs by incorporating culturally responsive approaches, such as using students' home languages in discussions, integrating diverse perspectives into the curriculum, and fostering peer mentorship programs encouraging collaboration across linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Fenner & Teich, 2024). Implementing SEL with cultural sensitivity strengthens MLs' emotional resilience and enhances their academic performance and social interactions, setting them up for lifelong success.

Foreign Language Anxiety and Identity Formation

MLs may experience heightened anxiety as they acquire a new language and adapt to unfamiliar cultural norms, all while striving to maintain family values within educational environments that may position them as outsiders (Calderón & Slakk, 2019; Fenner & Teich, 2024; Subhi, 2024). Despite the prevalence of this foreign language anxiety, standardized SEL programs rarely address it directly. While many teachers care deeply about the social-emotional well-being of their linguistically diverse students, they may overlook the cultural strengths and knowledge these learners bring to the classroom (Jagers et al., 2019; Mahfouz & Anthony-

Stevens, 2020). This disconnect underscores the need for educators to understand students' cultural histories and the systemic factors that shape their school experiences.

Beyond the classroom, MLs face additional stressors, such as immigration-related challenges, family separation, poverty, and tensions between home and school cultures (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2002). These experiences can increase the risk of academic difficulties, as MLs consistently score lower than their English-proficient peers on reading and math assessments (Ballantyne et al., 2008). Even in the early grades, students may internalize academic self-doubt and display higher rates of social-emotional challenges (Niehaus & Adelson, 2014). Since elementary school is a critical period for shaping academic trajectories and emotional development, it is essential to implement targeted tSEL strategies that support MLs' holistic growth (Stipek et al., 2010).

Language Justice

Language justice, as described by Rodriguez-Arroyo and Pearson (2020), involves recognizing and addressing the systemic denial of students' linguistic rights in schools. Historical and contemporary policies have silenced entire communities by privileging English while devaluing other languages. Scott et al. (2009) argue that honoring students' rights to their own language is foundational to humane, culturally sustaining education. These insights help reframe MLs' challenges not as deficits, but as consequences of oppressive language ideologies embedded in educational systems. MLs undergo complex cultural adjustment and identity formation processes, navigating U.S. societal expectations while preserving their heritage culture (Adams & Richie, 2017; Calderón & Slakk, 2019; Cho et al., 2019). Many MLs struggle to adapt to Western teaching styles and assessment methods, particularly when transitioning from non-Eurocentric educational systems that emphasize collaborative learning and oral communication, in contrast to the individualized, standardized-testing approach that is dominant in U.S. schools (Abedi, 2002). These disconnects contribute to feelings of alienation, low self-efficacy, and academic underperformance.

In addition to academic hurdles, MLs contend with discrimination based on race, ethnicity, immigration status, and language proficiency (Calderón & Slakk, 2019; Cho et al., 2019; Lau & Shea, 2024). School policies frequently reflect sociopolitical biases that marginalize MLs, subjecting them to discriminatory practices and lower teacher expectations (Mavrogordato & White, 2020; McMain, 2023). Many teachers misinterpret MLs' behaviors, viewing them as deficient in social-emotional skills rather than recognizing their cultural ways of interacting and learning (Cho et al., 2019; Mahfouz & Anthony-Stevens, 2020). Additionally, MLs are perceived as "damaged" students needing remediation rather than being seen as multifaceted individuals with linguistic and cultural assets (Higheagle Strong & McMain, 2020).

Translanguaging as a Social-Emotional Practice

MLs do not simply acquire an additional language; they communicate, think, and construct relationships through an integrated linguistic repertoire. Translanguaging refers to the process by which bilingual and multilingual individuals draw on their full linguistic resources to make meaning, express identity, and participate socially (García & Wei, 2014). In classroom contexts, translanguaging functions not only as a linguistic scaffold but also as an affective and relational practice that supports students' sense of belonging and participation.

When students are restricted to English-only communication, emotional expression and identity performance may be constrained, limiting their ability to engage authentically in classroom communities (Durán, 2013; Rodriguez-Arroyo & Pearson, 2020). Conversely, opportunities to use home languages allow students to communicate complex emotions, share cultural knowledge, and position themselves as competent contributors (Lau & Shea, 2024). Emerging research demonstrates that translanguaging supports social-emotional development by reducing anxiety, strengthening peer relationships, and validating students' identities (Mori, 2023; Pentón Herrera, 2020). Therefore, translanguaging operates as a mechanism of language justice within everyday instruction. It shifts MLs from recipients of accommodation to agents of meaning-making, enabling them to participate fully in collaborative and reflective classroom practices. Thus, integrating translanguaging within SEL instruction is not merely a linguistic strategy but a necessary condition for equitable social-emotional learning.

The Role of Transformative SEL (tSEL) in Supporting MLs

Research links MLs' academic performance to social-emotional development (Adams & Richie, 2017; Cho et al., 2019). Teachers' early perceptions of MLs' SEL competencies significantly impact their academic self-concept and their belief in their ability to succeed academically (Niehaus & Adelson, 2014). Research shows that fifth-grade MLs score significantly lower in academic self-concept than their monolingual peers, and this gap persists through middle school despite improvements in reading skills (Soland, 2019). This self-efficacy gap (a lack of confidence in their ability to succeed) suggests that schools serving high-ML populations should implement tSEL programs (Calderón & Slakk, 2019). Rather than viewing MLs as passive recipients of remedial instruction, teachers should actively engage them in tSEL programs that honor students' lived experiences and cultural backgrounds (Lau & Shea, 2024).

Gaps in the Literature

Despite the increasing focus on SEL, there is limited research on how tSEL programs impact MLs. Current literature lacks empirical studies on how tSEL intersects with language learning, identity formation, and academic success. Additionally, few studies examine teachers' experiences in implementing tSEL with MLs at the elementary level. Further qualitative research is needed to explore tSEL educators' actions and the resulting ML outcomes. By addressing this causal relationship, scholars and educators can develop more effective tSEL interventions that support MLs' academic success, emotional well-being, and cultural identity.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2018) to examine how a third-grade educator implemented tSEL strategies to support MLs and the contextual factors influencing these practices. A case study approach was well-suited to this research, as it enabled an in-depth, contextually rich examination of a complex instructional phenomenon in a real-world classroom setting. Specifically, a single-case embedded design enabled analysis of the classroom as a holistic unit while attending to multiple subunits, including teacher decision-making, student engagement, and classroom discourse.

The first author occupied a dual role as both classroom teacher and researcher, which provided in-depth access to instructional practices and student interactions while also requiring ongoing reflexivity. The second author, as a university-based researcher and teacher educator, engaged as a critical collaborator in the research process, supporting analytic rigor through iterative dialogue and reflection. Together, we remained attentive to how our positionalities shaped data interpretation, particularly in relation to language, power, and classroom dynamics. Strategies such as collaborative coding, reflective journaling, and ongoing analytic discussion were used to mitigate bias and strengthen trustworthiness.

Context and Participants

The study was conducted in an urban public elementary school on the island of O‘ahu, Hawai‘i. The school serves approximately 1,187 students in grades K–6, with 25% identified as MLs and 56% qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch, indicating a linguistically and economically diverse school community. At the time of the study, the first author was enrolled in a graduate program in Elementary Education with initial licensure and was employed at the research site as a third-grade emergency-hire teacher¹ while simultaneously completing full-time student teaching. The focal classroom consisted of 21 students. All students were invited to participate in the study, and parental consent and student assent were obtained for 17 students. Of the 17 participating students, six were identified as MLs receiving English-language services. These six students served as the focal participants for the study and are the primary focus of the analysis reported here.

Table 2

ML Participants

Student	Gender	Native Language	English Language Proficiency
JA	Male	Ilocano	Beginning
KF	Female	Ilocano	Moderate
AJ	Male	Ilocano	Beginning
JS	Male	Pohnpeian	Moderate
RT	Male	Ilocano	Moderate
JV	Female	Ilocano	Moderate

Note. Table 2 lists participants' pseudonyms, native language, and WIDA multilingual designation (beginner, moderate, or fluent) used by the school.

¹ In Hawai‘i, an emergency hire permit allows individuals to teach in public schools when a fully licensed teacher is unavailable. Emergency hire teachers must meet minimum qualification requirements and are typically enrolled in or completing a state-approved teacher preparation program while teaching full-time (Hawai‘i Teacher Standards Board, 2023).

Procedures

The school where this research was conducted implemented the *Choose Love* SEL program (Choose Love Movement, 2025). At the time, the SEL focus was gratitude; this topic was the foundation for this study's tSEL adaptations. Over 15 weeks, four gratitude lessons were taught in a third-grade classroom, with three lessons being adapted using tSEL principles and one unadapted lesson from the original *Choose Love* curriculum for comparison. The adapted lessons were meant to affirm students' linguistic and cultural identities, develop critical social awareness, and foster agency in SEL development, which are key tenets of tSEL. The lesson adaptation process began with analyzing MLs' data, such as their home languages and cultural backgrounds, to ensure lessons incorporated students' linguistic strengths and lived experiences. A tSEL Goal Setting Template listed tSEL actions, ensuring that gratitude was culturally embedded, community-centered, and taught as a social justice-oriented value.

Lesson one introduced gratitude through students' cultural lenses, using circle maps in home languages and teacher modeling of gratitude traditions from Japanese, Filipino, and Hawaiian cultures. Students shared and role-played gratitude practices in their own cultures, practiced gratitude breaths as a mindfulness tool across traditions, and engaged in a home-school interview on intergenerational gratitude expressions, reinforcing cultural pride and identity affirmation.

The second lesson positioned linguistic diversity as an issue of social justice, challenging monolingual norms by having students teach each other how to say "thank you" in their native languages and engage with a culturally responsive read-aloud, *All People Are Beautiful* (Kelly, 2020). A problem-solving scenario encouraged students to apply gratitude to advocate fairness and inclusion daily.

Lesson three focused on self-worth and affirmations, with students creating affirmations in their home languages, shifting traditional power dynamics by positioning MLs as knowledge holders. The teacher modeled self-affirmations in multiple languages, and students taught phrases in their native tongues, fostering linguistic empowerment. A self-affirmation video and song ensured multisensory engagement, and students applied affirmations and gratitude as resilience tools in a real-life scenario. A home-school extension encouraged families to engage in affirmation practices, further bridging school and community SEL experiences.

The final, unadapted lesson followed the original *Choose Love* curriculum, which defined gratitude as an individual mindset shift rather than a culturally embedded or justice-oriented practice. The lesson included a quote, a breathing exercise, and a read-aloud of *The Last Stop on Market Street* (de la Peña, 2015). However, it did not incorporate multilingual or culturally sustaining elements and therefore functioned as a comparison condition to examine differences in student engagement and identity affirmation between adapted and unadapted instruction.

Data Collection

Data collection spanned 15 weeks and aligned with the lesson adaptation process, capturing how tSEL principles were embedded in gratitude instruction and how MLs engaged with these culturally sustaining, identity-affirming SEL practices. The data consisted of teacher lesson plans ($n = 4$) and instructional artifacts ($n = 24$) that documented the intentional integration of tSEL into lesson design. Lesson plans were developed using a teacher-created tSEL Goal Setting Template that outlined specific tSEL-aligned educator actions, ensuring that

gratitude was framed as a community-centered and justice-oriented value rather than an individual mindset. tSEL Goal Setting Templates and student work samples were collected and shared with the second author for analysis. Student artifacts included tangible work samples collected during the lesson. The second author served as a research collaborator and critical reviewer throughout the analytic process, engaging in iterative discussions to refine coding categories, ensure analytic rigor, and support reflexivity. This collaborative approach contributed to the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings.

The first author also maintained a reflective journal to document teacher decision-making and reflection, including daily observations, instructional adjustments, and student responses to both adapted and unadapted SEL lessons. These open-ended reflections, stored in Google Docs, provided insights into how MLs engaged with SEL practices, expressed cultural identities, and navigated the tSEL framework in real time.

Student engagement and perception of tSEL lessons were gathered through student feedback collected via exit tickets, surveys, and informal discussions at the close of each lesson. Students used text or drawings to reflect on their experiences and perceptions of each lesson. Student feedback data allowed MLs at varied language proficiency levels to participate equitably. Feedback focused on how students connected gratitude to their cultural backgrounds, how comfortable they felt expressing themselves in different languages, and whether they saw their identities reflected in SEL activities.

Finally, classroom observations provided real-time data on student–teacher interactions and the enactment of tSEL practices. Observational field notes were documented directly on the SEL goal-setting template during lessons, capturing student participation, language use, and instructional adaptations as they occurred. Following each lesson, the teacher completed a structured reflection journal describing instructional intentions, perceived student responses, and emerging questions. These observational records and reflections were then reviewed collaboratively with the second author to support analytic meaning-making and to surface potential researcher bias. By incorporating lesson plans, teacher reflections, student feedback, and classroom observation records, the study employed multiple sources of evidence to develop a holistic understanding of tSEL implementation for MLs and to strengthen analytic trustworthiness.

Data Analysis

We employed a qualitative coding approach guided by Saldaña's (2025) recommended phases of data analysis to address the research question: How does a third-grade educator implement tSEL strategies to support MLs' social-emotional development, and what contextual factors influence the effectiveness of these strategies? Initially, we employed first-cycle coding methods using in vivo, structural, open, and process coding techniques (Saldaña, 2025) to analyze teacher practices and effective student responses. First-cycle coding involved several iterations of analysis and took the longest to complete, but it helped us make sense of the data separately and then as a whole. In vivo coding was to honor students' voices by capturing their exact words and highlighting the emotional and cultural resonance of tSEL activities. For instance, the phrase "speaking my language made me feel empowered" was coded as linguistic empowerment, reflecting the role of translanguaging in fostering engagement. Similarly, statements like "I like sharing how we say 'thank you' in my family" were coded under cultural identity affirmation. In vivo codes derived from student data and lesson observations captured

the affective and cultural resonance of the lessons and were used to define relevant codes and summative categorical themes. Student expressions were mapped onto two central themes: (a) Cultural Identity & Belonging, which included statements like "I am not alone" or "It talked about my culture and made me feel proud to be Filipino" to reflect affirmation of identity and belonging, a key tSEL construct; or (b) Linguistic Empowerment, such as when students said, "I could bucket fill in my language, and no one would know," to signal agency and pride in heritage language use, core to translanguaging practices.

Next, structural coding was applied to categorize teacher actions using the tSEL conceptual framework. tSEL Goal Setting Templates and teacher reflections were analyzed. Teacher actions were structurally coded to align with the following CASEL-tSEL competencies: Personally Responsible SEL: Gratitude breaths and individual journaling were aligned here. Participatory SEL: Peer sharing, "Love Our Class Diversity" activities, and gratitude circles fostered relationship skills and social awareness. Transformative SEL: Culturally adapted read-aloud and discussions about identity and family culture (e.g., Filipino, Japanese, Pohnpeian) aligned with critical self-awareness and agency constructs. For example, in Lesson 2, students were invited to express gratitude in their home languages and celebrate classroom diversity—coded as both agency and belonging.

Open coding was then used to triangulate the data. We sought outliers to identify emerging themes beyond the predefined tSEL categories, revealing recurring ideas across all data. The emerging themes included Student Advocacy & Voice – students initiating cultural sharing. Grief & Memory – references to distant or deceased relatives (e.g., "reminded me of my cousin who used to live here") showed that tSEL strategies triggered personal emotional reflection. Translanguaging Challenges – noted in the teacher's reflective journal, highlighted the complexity and value of integrating students' languages (linked to Emancipatory Practices).

Process coding was used to trace student SEL development over time. This method captured shifts from passive observation to active participation, documenting moments when students initiated discussions, engaged in peer learning, and applied SEL strategies to real-life contexts, particularly after integrating culturally relevant materials and translanguaging into SEL activities. Process coding documented shifts such as: "happy to listen" → to "excited to share" → to "brave enough to teach others about my culture." Students also moved from passive participants to active co-constructors of knowledge (tied to Agency and Collaborative Problem-Solving). In one example, a student stated, "I liked learning how to say thank you in Japanese because I am Japanese, and I got to learn about myself." This represented a moment of self-awareness, identity formation, and linguistic pride.

Table 3
Teacher Actions and Student Outcomes

Category	Teacher Strategy	tSEL Construct	Student Outcome
Belonging	Gratitude circles, partner praise, read-alouds featuring diverse families	Social-Awareness	"I'm not alone" / "Others have my culture too."
Agency	Students sharing languages, leading classroom discussions	Self-Management	"I shared how to say 'thank you' in Pohnpeian."

Collaborative Problem-Solving	Small group discussions using gratitude to navigate peer conflict	Relationship Skills	“We solved a problem using CALM.”
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Lastly, we engaged in second-cycle axial coding (Saldaña, 2025). Again, we triangulated the data to refine and synthesize connections between teacher strategies and student outcomes, tracing students’ tSEL developments over time. Results from our second cycle analysis are presented in Table 3, which maps each identified axial code (category) onto teacher strategies corresponding to the tSEL framework, with aligned student outcomes described with student quotes from the data. These categories are further explored in the next section.

Findings

This study explored how a third-grade educator implemented tSEL strategies to support MLs’ social-emotional development and what contextual factors influenced the effectiveness of these strategies. Study findings reveal that intentional adaptations to a traditional SEL curriculum, grounded in the tSEL framework, enhanced students’ sense of belonging, agency, and cultural affirmation. Through qualitative analysis of lesson artifacts, student feedback, reflective journals, and classroom observations, four key findings emerged.

tSEL Strategies Fostered Belonging Through Cultural Inclusion

When SEL instruction was intentionally meant to reflect students’ cultures and home languages, MLs expressed increased feelings of belonging and connection. Activities like gratitude circles, peer-to-peer praise in native languages, and culturally responsive read-alouds created inclusive spaces where students felt seen, respected, and valued.

One student shared, “It made me feel special because I learned there are more people like me who have different cultures.” Another expressed, “Today’s lesson made me feel special because it talked about my culture. After all, I am Filipino, and I was born there.” These reflections demonstrate students’ validation and cultural pride.

The incorporation of students’ home languages further deepened their sense of belonging. One student wrote, “I felt happy and calm because I could bucket fill in my own language and no one would know, so I could share it with others.” Others shared joy in seeing their families represented: “What made me happy is sharing my language with other people because that is what I do at home.”

This inclusion was particularly impactful for students who previously felt isolated. As one student described, “Before, I thought I was the only one with a different culture, but now I know that others are like me too.” These responses highlight the transformative effect of culturally and linguistically affirming practices on students’ emotional security and classroom engagement.

Student Agency Emerged Through Culturally Sustaining Practices

When MLs were invited to share their home languages and traditions, they actively shaped SEL instruction. In contrast to the more passive engagement observed during the unadapted lesson, students in the tSEL-modified sessions demonstrated confidence and

ownership of their learning. This shift reflects the development of agency, a core tSEL tenet, wherein learners see themselves as capable of effecting change. Opportunities to share their languages, traditions, and personal experiences positioned them as knowledge holders and leaders.

One student stated, “I shared how we say thank you in Pohnpeian, and my classmates learned it too!” Another expressed, “I liked learning how to say thank you in Japanese because I am Japanese and I got to learn about myself.” These moments of teaching and sharing allowed students to take pride in their linguistic and cultural assets and encouraged peer respect across differences.

During a gratitude scenario activity, one student offered to lead the group in saying affirmations in Ilocano, prompting others to request that their languages be included in future lessons. As the teacher reflected, “Students began volunteering their own words and phrases. They were not just participating – they were leading.”

Students also applied these experiences beyond the classroom. In follow-up reflections, one student shared, “I went home and taught my little brother how to say kind things in our language.” This example illustrates how agency extended beyond the immediate lesson, empowering students to serve as cultural bridges between school and home.

Collaborative Problem-Solving Encouraged Peer Learning and Relationship Building

Culturally adapted activities that promoted group work and peer exchange, such as gratitude scenarios and partner reflections, provided meaningful opportunities for MLs to engage in collaborative problem-solving, a tSEL construct closely tied to relationship skills. These interactions promoted trust and mutual understanding among students from diverse backgrounds. Classroom observation data showed that MLs were more likely to participate in discussions and take leadership roles when gratitude was framed as a communal value rooted in their lived experiences. In one activity, students worked in pairs to apply the CALM strategy (Calm down, Ask questions, Listen, Make a plan) to resolve a peer conflict.

A student reflected, “We solved the problem together using CALM. I felt proud because we both listened to each other.” Another student shared, “I helped my partner say thank you in his language, and now we say it to each other daily,” reflecting their ability to apply SEL skills collaboratively and contextually.

Small-group discussions and partner activities embedded in the adapted tSEL lessons fostered collaborative problem-solving skills and supported relationship-building across cultural lines. These interactions nurtured empathy and respect while allowing MLs to practice communication and social negotiation in low-risk settings. During the “Love Our Class Diversity” activity, students were prompted to praise something unique about their partner’s culture. One student wrote, “I love how my friend says thank you in Filipino. It sounds nice and I want to learn more words.” These moments of cross-cultural appreciation supported trust and deepened classroom relationships.

In her journal, the teacher observed that “MLs who were typically quiet began initiating conversations and leaning into peer collaboration.” By embedding SEL in culturally relevant, socially interactive tasks, students practiced relationship-building in ways that honored their linguistic identities and personal experiences. This shift in participation revealed how culturally sustaining pedagogy can foster confidence and connectedness, foundational to student agency.

As students took on leadership roles, such as guiding peers through language-based activities or sharing gratitude practices from home, they not only deepened their learning but also shaped the learning environment for others. One student wrote, “I helped my friend write their affirmation because I knew how to say it in their language.” This kind of peer-to-peer support positioned MLs not just as beneficiaries of SEL but as contributors and leaders within the classroom community.

Over time, students began requesting to include more of their languages and family traditions in upcoming lessons, reflecting a growing sense of ownership and investment. As the teacher reflected, “They weren’t just learning the content – they were personalizing it, expanding it, and asking for more.” These developments illustrate how tSEL strategies empowered MLs to move from silent observers to active agents in shaping their social-emotional and academic experiences.

Cultural Affirmation and Linguistic Empowerment Deepened Self-Awareness

Incorporating home languages into affirmations and journaling activities encouraged students to reflect on their identities and recognize the value of their heritage languages. This culturally sustaining practice fostered a more profound sense of self-awareness, helping students connect emotional expression to their cultural context. Statements like “I felt brave teaching my class how we say thank you at home” reflect how linguistic inclusion can enhance emotional security and pride. These moments of linguistic empowerment supported emotional regulation and shifted classroom power dynamics by positioning MLs as cultural experts.

When students were encouraged to express themselves in their home languages, create culturally grounded affirmations, and reflect on their values, they demonstrated increased self-awareness and confidence. These moments cultivated emotional regulation and pride in heritage, identity, and self-worth.

One student wrote, “Saying my affirmation in Japanese made me feel brave.” Another shared, “I like how we say thank you in my family because it reminds me of who I am.” These responses reflect how students used language and reflection to connect to their identities in empowering ways.

Even more profound were moments of emotional reflection tied to cultural memory. One student shared, “It reminded me about how my cousin and I used to take photos in the mirror, and it reminded me that we live far away.” In this instance, the SEL activity became a space for processing grief and cultural displacement, unaddressed in standard SEL models.

Several students described gratitude and affirmation practices as tools for navigating complex emotions: “When I feel angry, I take deep breaths and say thank you in Ilocano. It helps me feel better.” Another wrote, “Today’s lesson made me feel confident in every goal I have in life.” These reflections illustrate how culturally grounded SEL practices can lay a foundation for self-awareness, resilience, and emotional well-being, particularly when students are equipped with tools to express and affirm their identities across languages and contexts.

Discussion

This study examined how transformative social-emotional learning (tSEL) functioned within a third-grade classroom serving multilingual learners and what conditions shaped its effectiveness. Taken together, the findings indicate that students’ social-emotional development

was influenced less by SEL content itself and more by shifts in participation. When students' linguistic and cultural knowledge operated as classroom resources rather than accommodations, interaction moved from compliance toward contribution. Belonging, agency, collaboration, and self-awareness were therefore enacted through participation rather than acquired as discrete competencies (Vygotsky, 1986). Consistent with research on multilingual learners' classroom engagement, students participated more fully when communicative practices were recognized as legitimate forms of interaction rather than deviations from expected behavior (Cho et al., 2019). A sense of belonging emerged when students' ways of speaking and knowing structured classroom activity (Adams & Richie, 2017; Mori, 2023).

These findings complicate conventional implementations of SEL that prioritize individual skill acquisition detached from sociocultural context. Critiques of universalized SEL frameworks note that programs often assume common behavioral norms across learners (Heineke & Vera, 2022; McCall et al., 2023). In this classroom, engagement increased not when emotional vocabulary was intensified, but when participation structures allowed students to contribute meaningfully. For MLs, social-emotional competencies appeared inseparable from opportunities to act within a shared learning community rather than demonstrate isolated behaviors.

Translanguaging functioned as the mechanism that enabled meaningful participation. Drawing on García and Wei (2014), students used their full linguistic repertoires to narrate experiences, express emotions, and guide peer learning. Rather than simply supporting comprehension, translanguaging organized relational dynamics: students initiated discussions, mediated misunderstandings, and taught peers linguistic practices. Therefore, the classroom became a translanguaging space in which emotional expression, identity performance, and collaborative problem-solving co-occurred. These findings extend research showing that translanguaging supports emotional expression and peer connection (Lau & Shea, 2024; Pentón Herrera, 2020; Rodríguez-Arroyo & Pearson, 2020) and can reduce linguistic anxiety while strengthening classroom relationships (Fenner & Teich, 2024; Subhi, 2024).

Through these interactional shifts, tSEL altered the role of MLs within SEL instruction. Students moved from demonstrating expected behaviors toward shaping the learning environment itself. This repositioning aligns with tSEL's emphasis on shared responsibility and collective agency (Jagers et al., 2019). Agency emerged not from encouragement alone but from epistemic authority: students' knowledge became necessary for classroom functioning. When linguistic and cultural knowledge informed peer affirmations and collaborative dialogue, learners experienced competence as relational rather than individual. Such positioning reflects scholarship demonstrating that learners develop agency when recognized as contributors rather than recipients of remediation (Mahfouz & Anthony-Stevens, 2020).

When classroom interaction was structured in multiple languages, students also displayed confidence, initiative, and leadership. These outcomes are consistent with research linking participation and belonging to academic self-concept among multilingual learners (Niehaus & Adelson, 2014; Soland, 2019). The findings suggest that social-emotional competencies develop through participation in classroom roles rather than preexisting prior to such participation. Moreover, the study further suggests that language justice in practice operates through everyday interaction rather than policy statements alone. Schools do not become equitable solely by asserting that they value students' languages. When communication was restricted to the dominant language, participation narrowed, and emotional expression became procedural. When multiple languages were incorporated into classroom activities, students demonstrated collaborative responsibility and ownership of their learning. Equitable SEL implementation,

therefore, requires not only culturally relevant materials but interactional conditions in which students' communicative repertoires shape classroom activity.

For educators, these findings imply that adapting SEL for MLs involves rethinking participation structures rather than adding cultural examples to existing lessons. Instructional routines that required students' linguistic knowledge (peer teaching, multilingual reflection, and collaborative dialogue) more consistently supported social-emotional development than teacher-directed reflection. For schools, the results suggest that SEL frameworks function differently across linguistic contexts; implementation fidelity alone cannot produce equitable outcomes without attention to how students participate.

In presenting the findings of our study, we acknowledge several limitations. First, the study was conducted in a single classroom with six focal MLs, therefore limiting generalizability. Secondly, because the teacher was also the researcher, interpretation may have been shaped by proximity to the instructional setting despite triangulation and member checking. Additionally, the study examined interactional change rather than longitudinal outcomes. Future research could investigate whether sustained exposure to participation-centered tSEL practices influences long-term academic trajectories, belonging, and identity development across grade levels and settings.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that SEL becomes meaningful for MLs when language, identity, and participation are treated as interconnected rather than separate domains of instruction. By integrating translanguaging and culturally grounded practices into SEL, the classroom shifted from regulating behavior to supporting belonging and agency. The findings suggest that SEL frameworks cannot achieve equity through universal competencies alone; they require interactional spaces where students' linguistic and cultural knowledge shape the learning environment. Future research should examine how tSEL can be sustained across classrooms and scaled within school systems while remaining responsive to local communities. Reimagining SEL in this way positions MLs not as recipients of support but as contributors to collective learning.

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