



Association of Mexican American Educators Journal

A peer-reviewed, open access journal

Volume 19 Issue 1

2025

AMAΕ Open Issue

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ISSN: 2377-9187

Using Testimonios to Enhance Social Emotional Learning Skills for High School Latina/o/x Students

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Abstract

This article explored how a testimonio presented during an out-of-school summer program for Latina/o/x high school youth served as a tool for students to enhance their Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) skills. Focusing specifically on a robust communal activity in the program known as an “Encuentro,” I examined how SEL skills were fostered through the individual and collective interactions that occurred during this gathering. I drew on video data to examine how a Chicana student’s testimonio presentation and her reflection on a personal lived experience sparked program staff and students listening to engage in acts of collective sense-making through the sharing of personal stories. I observed students fostering their SEL skills through the personal and collective sense-making that occurred between program staff and students. I make the case for how testimonios can serve as a culturally relevant tool to diversify current SEL practices within U.S. schools.

Key words: social emotional learning; testimonio; culturally relevant approach; SEL skills

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24974/amae.19.1.519>

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has come to represent a significant educational movement within the United States. SEL focuses on attending to students' social and emotional needs to increase students' learning experience in and out of the classroom (Hoffman, 2009; Humphrey, 2013). Since the 1990s, U.S. schools have largely relied on the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), the world's leading organization in advancing the practice of SEL into P-12 schools, for guidance on implementing effective SEL programs and practices in classrooms. The justification and need for SEL has largely been captured in studies showing that developing students' self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making—otherwise known as SEL skills—can lead to “improvements in social and emotional competence, reductions in problem behavior, and improved academic performance” (CASEL, 2015, p. 31). Educators have not only used academic and behavioral reasons to justify the need for SEL in schools but have also proposed SEL as a way to improve the learning experiences for at-risk groups (Elias, 2009). Students of Color (SOC) are often identified as an at-risk group. While studies have revealed the positive impact SEL practices can have on increasing academic performance and SEL skills for SOC, critiques have also surfaced identifying the lack of diversity present in SEL practices. There is, thus, a need to implement culturally relevant practices when attending to how emotions are developed, experienced, and expressed by SOC.

In this article, I explored how students used *testimonios* (or testimonies in Spanish) to reflect on personal lived experiences. I focus on a young Chicana student's testimonio that she shared during a robust activity known as an *Encuentro* (or meeting in Spanish). Encuentros were a daily activity that took place in the Aquetza: Youth Leadership, Education, and Community Empowerment Program (henceforth, Aquetza), a free, intensive one week summer program for

high school students. I focus on one testimonio presentation that occurred during one Encuentro to highlight how the sharing of one student's lived experience sparked other students listening to share their own experiences. It is in the collective sharing and sense-making of experiences where the emergence of SEL skills can be observed. This article aims to demonstrate how testimonios can serve as a culturally relevant practice to diversify SEL approaches within U.S. schools.

Social Emotional Learning and Students of Color

While this article focuses specifically on the Latina/o/x students who participated in the Aquetza program, I purposely discuss studies in this section that highlight the experiences of SOC with SEL. Researchers often lump Latina/o/x students under the umbrella term of SOC. As such, proponents of SEL frequently treat the experiences of SOC as universal, unintentionally overlooking the vast intersections that shape and define cultural and social experiences for SOC in the U.S.

SOC are identified as an at-risk group who are more likely to experience challenging social environments (Polleck, 2010; Reyes & Elias, 2011; Reyes et al., 2013) and less likely to graduate from high school (León et al., 2011) when compared to their White peers. SEL has also been framed as an appropriate behavioral intervention framework to address the high discipline referrals which disproportionally impact SOC (Brown et al., 2018). With SEL being regarded as an essential “missing piece” to providing students with an effective education (Elias, 2009), efforts in SEL research have sought to identify ways to make SEL practices more accessible to SOC.

Researchers have proposed utilizing culturally relevant practices and resources to promote SEL for SOC in the classroom. Castro-Olivo (2014), for example, noted how Spanish-speaking students “have been identified as an at-risk group of students in need of culturally adapted interventions” (p. 8). The “culturally adapted interventions” Castro-Olivo (2014) referred to involved directly translating the Jovenes Fuertes (Strong Teens) SEL curriculum from English to Spanish, which proved to be effective for a sample group of 102 Spanish-dominant Latina/o/x middle and high school English Language Learners (ELLs). Similarly, in a study by León et al. (2011), the fostering of SEL skills for a sample group of 62 Spanish-speaking fourth- and fifth-grade students emerged from directly translating SEL curricula from English to Spanish. Studies by Castro-Olivo (2014) and León et al. (2011) demonstrated the positive effects of translating SEL curricula from English to Spanish, notably on improving standardized test scores and developing SEL skills for Spanish-speaking students.

While culturally relevant practices can be implemented differently in the classroom, one distinguishing factor that unites all culturally relevant practices includes recognizing the rich history, knowledge, and experiences of ethnic groups and utilizing these assets to make school content more accessible to SOC (Paris & Alim, 2017). Translating SEL curricula from English to Spanish, as studies by Castro-Olivo (2014) and León et al. (2011) demonstrated, did center the rich knowledge ELLs have by recognizing and encouraging the use of ELL’s primary language in the classroom. However, direct translation of a curricula still limits the ability for SOC to incorporate their rich history and experiences in classroom activities, especially if the curricula that is being translated initially lacks any cultural competence for how SOC express and make sense of their emotions (Hoffman, 2009; Humphrey, 2013).

An SEL curricula that most closely aligns with the goals of culturally relevant practices of focusing on the history and experiences of ethnic groups is Facing History and Ourselves (FHAO). FHAO is a classroom curriculum for middle and high school students that centers an exploration and reflection of historical events dealing with prejudice, genocide, and injustices against people in society (Brabeck et al., 1994; Elias et al., 2019; Elias et al., 2006; Facing History and Ourselves, 2019). Some of the common topics discussed under the FHAO curricula include race in U.S. History, the Holocaust, and bullying and ostracism. Through self and group reflection activities, students are provided with a classroom environment where they can blend “historical knowledge with social and self-awareness and respect for diversity, along with perspective taking and conflict resolution” (Elias et al., 2019, p. 10–11). Studies have shown that students who participate in FHAO activities not only develop an increased motivation to learn in class but are more likely to recognize and speak out against racism and bigotry when they occur in society (Facing History and Ourselves, 2019; Strom et al., 1992). In addition, FHAO has also shown to influence students’ moral development in a way that increases students’ reasoning without affecting their psychological well-being (Brabeck et al., 1994).

While FHAO was not specifically designed for SOC, it does touch on topics that adversely affect SOC and People of Color. A curriculum such as FHAO where SOC can see themselves reflected in the material being taught, fits with the goal of culturally relevant practices by making the SEL curriculum more accessible to SOC. However, I identify some limitations found in FHAO and their capacity to fully implement culturally relevant practices. FHAO risks:

- promoting a one-size-fits-all approach for all SOC;
- not discussing where ideologies such as racism, classism, and sexism originate;

- only centering the histories and experiences of African Americans and persecuted white groups;
- presenting a general overview of student experiences as opposed to the personal histories and stories of students who have direct experience with forms of oppression; and
- not emphasizing how social and political factors affect and shape one's emotions.

The limitations I identify with FHAO and translating SEL curricula from English to Spanish are not intended to dissuade the overall academic and social-emotional impact certain curricula have had on SOC. My critiques are meant to highlight the need for culturally relevant curricula that recognizes and utilizes the rich history, knowledge, and experiences of ethnic groups, in a way that deviates from a largely White-centered way of defining emotions in schools which SEL curricula have been critiqued in doing.

SEL practices in schools have been criticized for: (a) teaching students to control rather than understand their emotions; (b) justifying individual skill development by focusing on narrow measures of academic achievement (e.g., test scores); and (c) promoting a White middle-class standard definition of how SOC should express and discuss their emotions (Hoffman, 2009; Humphrey, 2013). Given the increasing influence of SEL in U.S. schools and the desire to expand SEL programs to SOC, I argue that SEL practices need to emphasize how students' emotional development, experience, and expression are culturally situated (Mesquita, 2007). This article expands on SEL research by exploring a cultural practice known as *testimonio* among a small subset of high school students participating in the Aquetza summer program. By exploring the impact a student's *testimonio* had on a group of students, I discuss how the sharing of personal lived experiences can contribute to Latina/o/x students exploring

and understanding their emotions in a way that can foster the emergence of SEL skills.

Testimonio

Testimonio is inherently a form of narrative. Although narratives can and have been used in a variety of social settings, the unique history of testimonio and their particular use in Latin America makes them unique to a certain racial and ethnic community. Latin Americans have used testimonios to document and narrate the personal and collective experiences of those who have been oppressed in society (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012). Latin Americans have detailed acts of oppression experienced and have identified how they resisted injustices during times of war (Pérez Huber, 2010). The defining feature of a testimonio not only lies in its intent to spread awareness of oppressive conditions, but also in their intent to seek justice from said oppressive conditions (Collins, 1991; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Elenes, 2000). The history surrounding the use and practice of testimonios can thus make them political by nature (Brabeck, 2003). A testimonio can include a critique of power while also serving as a method to empower those negatively affected by institutions of power. This form of empowerment lies in a testimonio's ability to affirm a person's experiences, especially when their narrative is seldom recognized by systems of oppression.

Usually written or presented in front of a group, a typical testimonio often involves a person first naming a form of oppression, reflecting on the oppression experienced, and coming up with ways to address that oppression. Brabeck (2003) described the reflective process involved in presenting a testimonio as a verbal journey where a person recounts injustices experienced while also reflecting on the effects that have resulted from the mentioned injustices. While the presenter does undergo a process of naming, personally struggling through, and self-reflection, those who bear witness to a testimonio can also realize

commonalities that exist between their and the presenter's experience (Pérez Huber, 2010). Those listening to a testimonio can then engage with the speaker as they work to validate and collectively make sense of the experiences being shared (Lenkersdorf, 2008). Unlike a narrative, a testimonio is "the expression not of a single autonomous account but of a collectively experienced reality" (Brabeck, 2003, p. 253). Those who have faced oppression can come to realize that their own experience is not unique and a connection to a larger group struggle exists. In addressing students' emotions in schools, the reflective and collaborative nature of testimonios offers the opportunity for Latina/o/x students to explore the experiences and emotions that simultaneously surface from the many societal and educational inequalities Latinas/os/xs face. Latinas/os/xs experience struggles concerning their immigration status, language, ethnicity, culture, identity, phenotype, and more (Pérez Huber, 2009). Testimonios thus represent a way—grounded in Latina/o/x cultural practice—for Latina/o/x students to discuss and heal from experiences dealing with oppression.

Testimonios have already been applied in the field of education to empower Latina/o/x students and inform others of the experiences Latina/o/x students face in their educational journeys. For example, a single case study by Lara (2023) highlighted the specific challenges experienced by multiple marginalized undocumented Latinx students. Similarly, a study by González et al. (2003) explored how undocumented students used testimonios to not only highlight experiences dealing with racism but to also inform teachers of the academic obstacles undocumented students face in schools. Both Lara (2023) and González et al. (2003) reveal the transformative power students' testimonios can have in both educating educators on the struggles undocumented students face and highlighting the impact mentorship can have in positively influencing immigrant Latinx students' educational experience. Testimonios have the

power to humanize the immigrant experience which contrasts the overwhelming political narrative that vilifies and dehumanizes undocumented people in the U.S. (Ochoa, 2016).

Methods

Before describing the daily practices of Aquetza and my data collection and analysis, it is important to position myself in relation to the program's organizers, facilitators, and student participants. I was brought into Aquetza by my doctoral advisor, Aquetza's Faculty Co-Director, to serve as a graduate research assistant and collect data during the program's duration. Most of the organizers, facilitators, and student participants self-identified as Latina/o/x¹ or Chicana/o², members of a predominantly Latina/o/x immigrant working class community and were either attending or had graduated from a public school. I identify as a cisgender Latino from a working-class community in the Western United States who also attended public schools. While some personal and professional similarities did exist between Aquetza members and myself, which can provide a unique perspective in interpreting the practices and learning that occurred during Aquetza, I am also aware of the uniqueness that exists in cultural experience. As such, I proceed cautiously in my analysis of the events that occurred in Aquetza to avoid generalizing the experiences of organizers, facilitators, and participants (Boveda & Annamma, 2023).

¹ I use "Latina/o/x" to capture the broad range of self-disclosed identities present in Aquetza. Some of the self-disclosed identities accounted for intersections that exist in cultural and social experience (Latinx) while most identified as Latina/o, emphasizing the ethnic and cultural origins one has to a Spanish-speaking country (García, 2020).

² "Chicana" is a political identity that emerged during the Chicano Movement of the 1960s. The identity is also used to describe the complexity that exists in being both Mexican and American and being accused of not being either (Simmen & Bauerle, 1969; Aguirre, 1971).

Aquetza Context

This article used data gathered during a summer when 41 high school students (four returning and 37 new participants) and 16 undergraduate and graduate students participated in a one-week summer enrichment program known as The Aquetza: Youth Education, Leadership, and Community Empowerment Program (henceforth, Aquetza) which takes place at a university campus located in the Western United States.³ Aquetza is a free, intensive seven-day program that focuses on engaging Latina/o/x high school students in the examination of history, literature, health science, and relevant social and political issues from a Mexican American Studies perspective. All activities that took place during Aquetza were planned by the 16 undergraduate and graduate student volunteers who served as the program's main organizers and facilitators.

A typical day at Aquetza first saw high school students participating in four academic courses taught by undergraduate and graduate student facilitators from the early morning until the early afternoon. In the evenings, all participants participated in a communal gathering known as an *Encuentro* (or “meeting” in Spanish) where students shared narratives, their experiences, and reflections - or testimonios - in a group setting. Given the purpose of these daily gatherings, Encuentros provided a unique space to explore how the presentation of students’ testimonios can reinforce SEL skills.

Encuentros, Data Collection, and Analysis

In Spanish, Encuentros translates to “meeting” or an “encounter.” Although meant to be an informal space for sharing, organizers of Aquetza still utilized some routines to structure the

³ All names in this article are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of each participant.

sharing of stories. An Aquetza director would serve as the facilitator and would often begin an Encuentro by asking if there were any volunteers who would like to share a story or relevant piece of information to the rest of the group. If an Aquetza member chose to volunteer, they would then walk to the front of a large lecture hall and present to the larger group. Those who were not presenting were expected to listen quietly while the presenter shared their story. After the presenter finished sharing, the facilitator would thank the presenter, open the Encuentro space for feedback, would thank the presenter once there was no more feedback, instruct the presenter to sit down, and ask if anyone else would like to present.

Most students would share letters, poems, or stories that had been inspired by prior lived experience. Encuentros became a space where students chose to share intimate parts of their lives and would feel comfortable showing any emotions that surfaced from listening to people's experiences. For example, a common theme that permeated the Encuentro presentations revolved around identifying and reflecting on moments when Aquetza members were victims of racism. It is important to reiterate that Aquetza only took place over a seven-day period. Therefore, students' willingness to share something meaningful about themselves with their peers and staff speaks to the trust cultivated in Aquetza and during the Encuentros.

This article focuses on one student's testimonio presentation, and the immediate feedback received, which was video recorded and later transcribed. Angela, a 17-year-old Chicana high school junior, was one of four alumni that came back to Aquetza to serve as a student leader for the other incoming student participants. I focus on Angela's testimonio presentation because it provides a concrete example of the self-reflective and collective sensemaking that can emerge from a testimonio presentation (Pérez Huber, 2010; Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012). Angela's testimonio presentation centered her own individual

experience and inspired those listening to share their own experiences once they realized the commonalities that existed. Focusing on one person's testimonio is a common analytical approach as it provides the opportunity to explore the way a person recounts an experience, how they position themselves in that experience, and what overall message the presenter aims to transmit by recounting on their lived experience (Baumeister & Newman, 1994; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Riessman, 1993).

I utilized a deductive coding approach (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998) to identify moments in Angela's testimonio presentation where she and other Aquetza student participants exhibited the development of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and/or responsible decision-making. A deductive coding approach is appropriate when looking at already established concepts (Merriam, 2009). With CASEL (2015) already giving a detailed description of each of its five SEL core competencies, I was able to use these descriptions to code the interactions that occurred throughout Angela's testimonio presentation. Angela's testimonio presentation included Angela presenting her testimonio, an Aquetza director immediately asking a question once Angela finished presenting, and three students engaging with Angela and with each other all in the same Encuentro. Below I give a breakdown of the primary people involved throughout Angela's testimonio presentation:

Presenter and Respondent Breakdown

Name	Role in Aquetza	Age	Gender Identity	Ethnicity
Angela (Presenter)	Student Participant	17	Female	Chicana
David	Director	28	Male	Chicano
Maria	Student Participant	16	Female	Mexican
Lupe	Student Participant	17	Female	Chicana
Franco	Student Participant	15	Male	Latino

Findings

Next, I introduce Angela's testimonio presentation. I then discuss how CASEL's (2015) SEL model is present in the conversation that immediately followed Angela's testimonio presentation. The reflective and collective sensemaking that occurred over the course of Angela's testimonio presentation represents one example of how testimonios can serve to accomplish the goals associated with SEL.

Angela's Testimonio Presentation

On the first day of Encuentro presentations, approximately 60 people (including Aquetza organizers, facilitators, and student participants), spanning an age range of 15-40, all of which identified as either Latina/o/x or Chicana/o, met in a large lecture hall to be in community and take part in an Encuentro. David, one of the Aquetza directors, extended an invitation to anyone who wanted to present a story, experience, or thought in front of the entire group. Angela, a returning student participant, decided to present a testimonio she had written after leaving Aquetza the summer before. After being introduced by David, Angela proceeded to the front of the large lecture hall, wearing a black t-shirt with "La Raza" printed on it, and stood behind a waist-high podium. Angela waited patiently for the group to quiet down. After the room went silent, Angela grabbed her phone and proceeded to read her testimonio aloud:

Dear White people. Welcome to the land of the brave and free. I live in a country born on genocide and built on the backs of slaves. Dear White people. *El Fútbol no es* my favorite sport. Y mi cultura is not "exotic" as you call it. Gringo, no soy Hispanic, soy Latina.

Soy Indigenous, Chicana, Mexicana, Brown. Welcome to the stolen land. 1492, when Native Americans discovered Columbus. Columbus, the man who was lost, raped our

women and our culture. No human is illegal. We're not immigrants. We didn't cross the border, the border crossed us. No, we're not lazy and no, we didn't steal your jobs. Coming from another country not knowing the language and having no resources, starting from zero, my friend, is not stealing your jobs. Welcome to the land where your people, backpacking from Europe, messing stuff up, and drinking are called "adventurous," and my people crossing borders, risking their lives to save themselves, are called "criminals." We are strong, we are resilient, we are human.

Audience members applauded after Angela finished presenting her testimonio. Angela then asked for any follow-up questions and comments. After a short moment, David raised his hand to ask what inspired Angela to write her testimonio.

Angela identified an interaction she had with a White classmate back at her high school as her main inspiration for writing her testimonio. Describing the interaction in detail, Angela mentioned how a White classmate began saying racist Mexican jokes one day during art class:

He [White classmate] started saying racist Mexican jokes and he's like, "Oh freaking people jumping the border," this and that. [. . .] I stood up [in class] and I told him, "I'm so sick and tired of White people saying whatever they want and not getting in trouble for it!" [. . .] I got sent to the Dean's. [. . .], and so that same day I wrote a poem. And it all came out.

Aquetza members were shocked at the racism Angela experienced while being in school. A conversation then emerged where students not only gave Angela feedback but also shared their own experiences dealing with racism. It is in the conversation that emerged between Angela and three other Aquetza student participants where CASEL's SEL competencies can be observed.

Using CASEL's SEL Model to Analyze Students' Responses to Angela's Testimonio Presentation

The interactions that occurred immediately after Angela's testimonio presentation can be analyzed using CASEL's (2015) five SEL competencies. The five SEL competencies CASEL identifies include: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. CASEL notes how these five competencies can be taught in many ways and across many settings, all with the goal of enhancing students' skills, attitudes, and behaviors to deal effectively and ethically with daily tasks and challenges. The feedback generated from Angela's testimonio presentation not only captured the purpose behind presenting a testimonio—which is to reflect on one's own experience and engage in individual and collective sense-making (Pérez Huber, 2010)—but her testimonio presentation also appeals to CASEL's five SEL competencies.

Three Aquetza student participants, each sharing one after another, participated in a conversation that followed Angela's testimonio presentation. It is in the collective sense making that occurred between three student participants and Angela where the emergence of one or more of CASEL's (2015) competencies can be observed. Next, I discuss how the five SEL competencies are present in the order they emerged after Angela's testimonio presentation.

Self-management and Responsible Decision-making

The two competencies of *self-management* and *responsible decision-making* are combined since Angela's testimonio included specific moments in which both competencies were simultaneously present. CASEL (2015) defined self-management as the ability to “regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations” (p. 5). Responsible decision-making involves being able to make “constructive and respectful choices about

personal behavior and social interactions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms, the realistic evaluation of consequences” (p. 6). Demonstrating both competencies is thought to be indicative of personal growth because one must process how their actions can lead to immediate and future consequences. Moreover, being able to demonstrate both competencies is also indicative of emotional growth because one must overcome any emotions that arise from being in difficult situations.

The best reflection of self-management and responsible decision-making is demonstrated in Angela’s explanation as to why she wrote her testimonio. Angela mentioned that she wrote her testimonio due to an encounter she had experienced in high school. This experience involved a moment where Angela found herself having to control her actions after becoming angry at another student. One day during art class, Angela described what had happened:

I walked into class, you know, and it was the week of senior pranks. So, I had art and it’s a mixture of freshmen through seniors and so there was a freshman White boy, and he started talking to me, according to him, in a “Mexican” accent. So, he started talking to me, he’s like, “Oh, for your senior prank you should, you know, do something that has to do with *fútbol*. Yeah, *el fútbol!*” And I was like, “whatever.” So, I sat down, and I put in my headphones and it’s sad that I had to put in my headphones to basically get away and not listen to him, and so I decided not to say anything because you have to choose your battles, you can’t fight like every single one of them.

Here, Angela described how she was able to manage her emotional reaction and behavior during a difficult situation, which is reflective of demonstrating self-management. The phrase, “You have to choose your battles,” is a powerful way of assessing Angela’s actions during the stressful situation she described, given that she showed self-restraint despite the offensive and racist comments she heard. Understandably bothered and perturbed over the comments

directed at her, Angela's decision to put her earphones on as opposed to engaging with her classmate exemplifies responsible decision-making—Angela demonstrated how she was able to make constructive and respectful choices about her personal behavior. Angela's decision to put on her headphones not only led to a brief moment of managing the stress she was feeling, it also showed how she chose to disengage instead of getting into a potential verbal—or physical—confrontation with her classmate.

As Angela continued standing in front of the lecture hall, she shared with Aquetza members how her classmate's jokes continued and became increasingly more offensive. Angela described how she was literally shaking with anger, and after tolerating her classmate's racist remarks for too long, Angela decided that she needed to respond:

I was doing like scratch board, so I had an Exacto knife in my hand. I started shaking. So, I dropped it, and I stood up and I told him, "I'm so sick and tired of White people saying whatever they want and not getting in trouble for it!" And like legit, I go to a predominantly White people school and so everyone turned, and I'm the only brown girl there, and everyone turned to me and they were like, "What did you just say?" And it's crazy because they didn't say anything when he was being racist, but they said something once I stood up [. . .]. I got sent to the Dean's.

Angela's decision to drop the Exacto knife is evidence of self-management and responsible decision-making. Angela demonstrated an ability to assess a situation and consider the potential consequences that could have come from a moment of anger. Although Angela's follow-up decision to verbally confront her classmate may not be completely indicative of self-management and responsible decision-making, Angela's decision to drop the Exacto knife demonstrated that she handled the racism she was experiencing as productively as she could. Angela chose to verbalize her frustration and anger as opposed to having taken any physical

action against her classmate that would have resulted in a far more severe punishment than her being sent to the Dean's office.

After listening to Angela's motivation for writing her testimonio, Maria, another Aquetza student, immediately responded to Angela by sharing her own experience with the group. Maria's response to Angela's testimonio is indicative of how presenting a testimonio can inspire a person listening to realize the commonalities that exist between their and the presenter's experience. Both can then engage in collective sense-making to interrogate the events that transpired (Brabeck, 2003; Pérez Huber, 2010). In the same Encuentro, Maria shared with the group an interaction she had with a White soccer player when playing a game for her high school's team:

They [Maria's teammates] passed the ball so I could header it and I jumped up to header it and then she's [opposing soccer player] like, "Ok, it's not the wall. You don't have to jump that high." And then that's when I turned around and actually had to do something about it. But the ref the whole time, they were just listening to it, and I kept telling them, "What are you going to do?" because I was already heated. So, when I pushed her and started getting all on her and doing stuff, they gave me a red card and they just gave her a yellow card [. . .]. I was crying when I got off the field.

Maria shared with Angela and the rest of the group how she lost control of her emotions. Immediate parallels were drawn between what Angela had just shared moments before Maria spoke, and how a White soccer player from an opposing team, began directing racist remarks towards Maria. Maria's inability to control her emotions after being at the receiving end of racism led to actions that resulted in Maria getting expelled from the soccer game. Maria's decision to respond to a soccer player's racist remarks is an example of not reflecting qualities of self-management and responsible decision-making. In particular, Maria could not control her

impulses during a stressful situation, which led to her making decisions that negated the opportunity to continue playing and potentially helping her team win the soccer game. As I explain next, Maria's contribution to Angela's testimonio presentation inspired two more students to add to the conversation, thus demonstrating the social awareness and relationship skills competencies.

Social Awareness and Relationship Skills

Lupe, another Aquetza alumna, listened to Maria share of her experience with racism and decided to immediately provide Maria with feedback during the same Encuentro. The feedback Lupe provided Maria is reflective of the *social awareness* and *relationship skills* competencies. Social awareness is described as the ability to “take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior, and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports” (CASEL, 2015, p. 5). CASEL (2015) defines relationship skills as having the ability to:

Establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups [by] communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking and offering help when needed. (p. 6)

Lupe responded by not only empathizing with Maria, a key feature of social awareness, but Lupe also took the opportunity to present Maria with some advice that could inspire Maria not to react in a confrontational manner next time she deals with a stressful situation.

Lupe's advice has its own origins the summer prior when she had been a participant in Aquetza for the first time. The advice Lupe shared with Maria, and all those present in the Encuentro, is where relationship skills and social awareness are best reflected. During the

Encuentro, Lupe described how David, Aquetza director, had shared a piece of advice with her that influences the way she approaches stressful encounters:

It's hard to maintain control, but like last year David [Aquetza director] told me one thing and it resonated with me. He was like, "You can't get angry because then you're just going to prove them right when they call you violent."

David's advice reflects Aquetza's goal of providing students with the skills for them to become empowered individuals. Analyzing David's advice through CASEL's (2015) model, relationship skills are reflected in the type of connection Lupe tried to establish, not only with Maria, but with all the Aquetza participants. Lupe first sat and listened while Maria presented her dilemma. Lupe then acknowledged Maria's struggles by responding with "it's hard to maintain control" in times of high stress and anger. Although Lupe did acknowledge how difficult it is to maintain control in stressful situations, she emphasized that getting mad is no excuse to act in a confrontational manner. To emphasize the importance of remaining calm during stressful situations, Lupe shared some personal advice she had received from David.

David gave Lupe advice that reflected the social awareness competency—David served as a resource for Lupe. As Lupe shared David's advice, Lupe now served as a resource to Maria and the rest of the Aquetza participants. Although not stated directly, the message, "You can't get angry because then you're just going to prove them right when they call you violent," could be referring to a stereotype of Latinas/os/xs within U.S. society. Rather than validate stereotypes that get attached to Latinas/os/xs, though, Lupe encouraged Maria and the rest of the Aquetza participants to control their impulses and not engage in impulsive behaviors that can be interpreted as deviating from the model citizen behavioral norms present in U.S. schools and society.

Immediately after Lupe finished sharing, Franco, another Aquetza student, contributed to the conversation and continued with giving advice to Maria on handling stressful situations in a constructive and healthy manner; this was during the same Encuentro. CASEL (2015) emphasized teamwork as an aspect of relationship skills. Franco's decision—to share his own experience as an example of how he dealt with a conflict like the one Maria shared—showed how he was reinforcing the efforts that originally commenced with Lupe sharing how one should not get angry during situations involving racism. Like Maria, Franco also dealt with racism when he plays soccer. However, Franco reacts to racist remarks in a manner that does not lead to his suspension from a game. I next explain how Franco's contribution to the conversation, which immediately surfaced after Angela's testimonio presentation, reveals aspects of the self-awareness competency.

Self-awareness

Self-awareness describes “the ability to accurately recognize one's emotions and thoughts and their influence on behavior. This includes accurately assessing one's strengths and limitations and possessing a well-grounded sense of confidence and optimism” (CASEL, 2015, p. 5). Franco described self-awareness in his own personal growth and the way he was aware of his emotions when he reacted to a situation involving racism. Franco shared that the racist remarks he heard were not only spoken by players on the soccer field, but also by people watching the game in the stands. While Franco expressed how angry he felt when he heard those remarks, he knew that he could not let his anger and frustration affect his judgement:

They're just trying to mess with you. But you're still all heated so it's like, you just have to deal with it because if they get in your head, they already got you, so it's better to

either ignore it or just [pause], I would say confront it but not in that situation right there 'cause that's a bad idea.

Franco's reasoning that stemmed from his own experience is an example of how he was able to identify the emotions and thoughts that directly impacted his behavior. As Franco stated, people tried to "mess" with him. This understanding of people's intentions contributed to Franco being able to identify the factors that led him to become frustrated and angry. Once Franco was able to identify these factors, he made a conscious effort to not allow angry emotions to influence his behavior. This recognition contributed to Franco being able to establish a well-grounded sense of confidence and optimism.

Franco found himself "heated" or upset by the negativity that was directed at him, but he decided to rise above it. This decision was sparked by Franco's understanding of what people's intentions were behind their racist remarks. As Franco recalled, instead of letting people "get in [his] head," Franco decided not to give in to other people's attempts to impact his performance on the soccer field. Franco instead used people's racist remarks as a form of motivation to perform better on the field and help his team win the match. Franco displayed his level of confidence by saying that at the end of the day he is the one laughing because the negative comments that were meant to discourage him ultimately ended up fueling his desire to prove those acting against him wrong. Franco hoped that sharing his experience would serve as an example of how one should react and make decisions that will not negatively impact oneself or others.

Conclusion

Using CASEL's model to interpret the conversation that followed Angela's testimonio presentation revealed how sharing a lived experience, and the collective nature involved in

making sense of a lived experience (Pérez Huber, 2010), can contribute to the emergence of CASEL's (2015) five SEL competencies. Identifying CASEL's competencies after Angela's testimonio presentation makes the case for how testimonios can serve as a potential resource to promote SEL in U.S. schools. However, analyzing the act of sense-making that emerged because of Angela's testimonio presentation through CASEL's model can also limit the grander purpose involved when presenting a testimonio.

Testimonio, within the context of Aquetzta, revealed the historical, cultural, racial and ethnic elements that go into understanding emotions that emerged from lived experiences. With SEL being critiqued for largely promoting a White-centred way of defining and approaching emotions, SEL models can benefit from the larger goals of a testimonio. In a time when SEL is heavily critiqued, not only by critical educators but also conservative lawmakers, we must question as to whether schools should continue efforts to address students' emotional well-being.

A curriculum focusing on emotions faced severe resistance prior to 1990 due to the fear that class time would be diverted from teachers teaching and students learning the required academic curriculum. Nonetheless, SEL entered schools and flourished for almost 30 years. Pre-1990 arguments around SEL resurfaced starting 2020, effectively jeopardizing the presence of SEL in U.S. schools (Mitchell, 2024). It was proponents of SEL who initially argued that developing students' SEL skills would effectively improve students' academic scores and reduce moments teachers would have to dedicate time towards addressing behavioral concerns in the classroom (Humphrey, 2013). Studies have shown that SEL does positively influence students' academic skills while also addressing student behavioral concerns. However, SEL's original promise of attending to students' social and emotional well-being has experienced

noticeable shortcomings (Hoffman, 2009). Education is not apolitical nor is it absent of emotions. While U.S. states may be proposing bans on SEL, it is not only important that a curriculum that claims to support the ‘whole student’-nurturing students’ intellectual, social, and emotional development- be continued within schools, but active efforts need to be taken to improve the shortcomings of SEL.

CASEL’s five SEL competencies can be broadened to include a more encompassing and critical perspective as it relates to the experiences of Latina/o/x people in the U.S (Camangian & Cariaga, 2021). Unlike a testimonio, self-awareness does not consider the role that being part of a larger community has in shaping one’s own individual identity. This is especially prevalent when reflecting on one’s place within a certain racial and cultural community and in learning how one’s quality of life is impacted by race-related interactions (Utsey, Chae, Brown, & Kelly, 2002). For example, Franco’s reflection on how he processed the racism he experienced while playing soccer revealed that he understood how he was being treated as a member of a racial group and not only as a high school soccer player. In particular, Franco demonstrated an individual awareness on how he was being addressed as a Latino and was thus subjugated to the stereotypes, images, and hostile verbiage present in racist ideologies. Emphasizing the role racial and ethnic communities have in shaping one’s individual identity and how those communities are treated in the U.S. can enhance CASEL’s approach to self-awareness for SOC.

Social awareness lacks an incorporation of the treatment communities of color have historically experienced in the U.S. Acknowledging the historical and current maltreatment of Latina/o/x communities is central to a testimonio because it identifies an injustice that needs to be addressed. For example, Lupe revealed an awareness of the negative stereotypes that White Americans hold over Latinas/os/xs when she encouraged her peers to avoid getting angry and

losing control in moments involving racism. CASEL's definition of social awareness could benefit from encouraging students to critically analyze U.S. society and centering the role U.S. social and political structures have in influencing peoples experiences and world views.

Developing relationship skills emphasizes the benefits of individuals working through moments of disagreement or conflict (CASEL, 2015). However, relationship skills do not capture a testimonio's ability to form relationships from people realizing a common struggle a group of people has experienced. As evidenced in Angela's testimonio, Angela sharing how she experienced racism led to Maria and Franco realizing that their own individual experiences were not unique and that racism affects others to a similar degree. Finding a relationship through experiences led students to exchange advice on how to respond to situations where tension and frustration emerged from one's personal encounters. Thus, relationship skills can benefit from a testimonio's ability to empower students where, as a collective, they identify an issue present within society and work together to address that issue.

Lastly, responsible decision-making involves being able to reflect and evaluate a situation, identify problems, analyze situations, and make appropriate decisions in response to certain situations (CASEL, 2015). Responsible decision-making does not include an element for helping students understand why a situation is present to begin with. Angela's testimonio presentation is an example of how one's own personal reflection on an event influenced those listening to engage in collective sense-making where they identified the social and political forces present that have shaped racial encounters in the U.S. Making things explicit and spreading awareness on how systems and structures function, while acknowledging that they are problematic, can help students navigate through these institutions where they are placed in the best possible situation to succeed (Delpit, 2018). This was present in Angela's testimonio when Lupe and

Franco shared how one should not get angry when being confronted with racism. Teaching students how to navigate oppressive power structures can broaden the way responsible decision-making is approached.

This article offers implications for how testimonios can provide Latina/o/x students with the chance to examine and understand their lived experiences and associated emotions. In the process, I showed how testimonios can also serve as a way to foster SEL skills. With CASEL developing a Transformative SEL Framework rooted in the notion of promoting justice-oriented citizenship (Jagers, Rivas-Drake & Williams, 2019), CASEL, and other SEL frameworks, should take into consideration the role social and political structures play in shaping one's lived experiences and associated emotions that surface. Testimonios offer one pathway for motivating Latina/o/x students to express and understand their emotions- a skill not emphasized in the self-management competency- by exploring their lived experiences.

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