

# Washington State University

## College of Education

### Emma McMain

Will defend the dissertation on

Date: November 16, 2022

Time: 1:00 P.M.

Pullman Campus - Elson Floyd Cultural Center, Coyote Room

*Faculty, students and the general public are encouraged to attend*

## “BACK TO THE RELATIONSHIP”: EDUCATORS EXPLORE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN A CRITICAL DISCOURSE COMMUNITY

Chair: Zoë Higheagle Strong

Amidst the vast amount of research that measures, evaluates, and suggests best practices for social and emotional learning (SEL), less attention has been given to the underlying cultural values, emotional investments, and relational patterns that shape and uphold SEL at a “root level.” The purpose of this dissertation was to create a practice of teacher engagement with these underpinnings of SEL, including unsettling dominant assumptions about what emotions and behaviors are deemed good, (in)appropriate, or (in)tolerable in school settings. In the spring of 2022, six elementary-school educators and I gathered in a discourse community to read and discuss critical texts about SEL. From these conversations, I considered the following research questions: What questions and tensions around the topics of SEL and social justice emerge? What affective-discursive practices (i.e., patterns of embodied/emotional response alongside meaning-making) are associated with these questions and tensions? How do participants in the discourse community contemplate, disrupt, and/or reproduce these affective-discursive practices?

Through a “scavenger methodology” drawing from Feminist Relational Discourse Analysis and affect theory, I explore two central themes that emerged from our discussions: 1) How can we welcome all emotions without tolerating all behaviors, and 2) Should SEL be more or less standardized? Within these themes, I highlight the affective-discursive practices of hegemonic positivity (emphasizing calmness and emotion regulation at the expense of “negative” emotion), inclusion/exclusion of students from classrooms, accountability to and alignment across curricula, individual choice of curricula, and “communities of difference” in teaching and talking about SEL.

Each of these affective-discursive practices was surrounded by an array of thoughts and emotions (e.g., frustration, desire, ambivalence) from the teachers. Key takeaways from our conversations include the importance of relationships, the importance of questioning, and the need for time to foster both. This work may inspire future discourse communities that honor teachers’ knowledge and the changes that can emerge from collaborative discussion rather than top-down models of professional development. Even if educators are endorsing a practice of deep questioning and relationship-building, the entire institution of education must contribute to a “soil system” that nurtures such practices and those who are engaging with them.