

Fostering Culturally Responsive Social-Emotional Learning Practices in Rural Transitional Kindergarten Classrooms

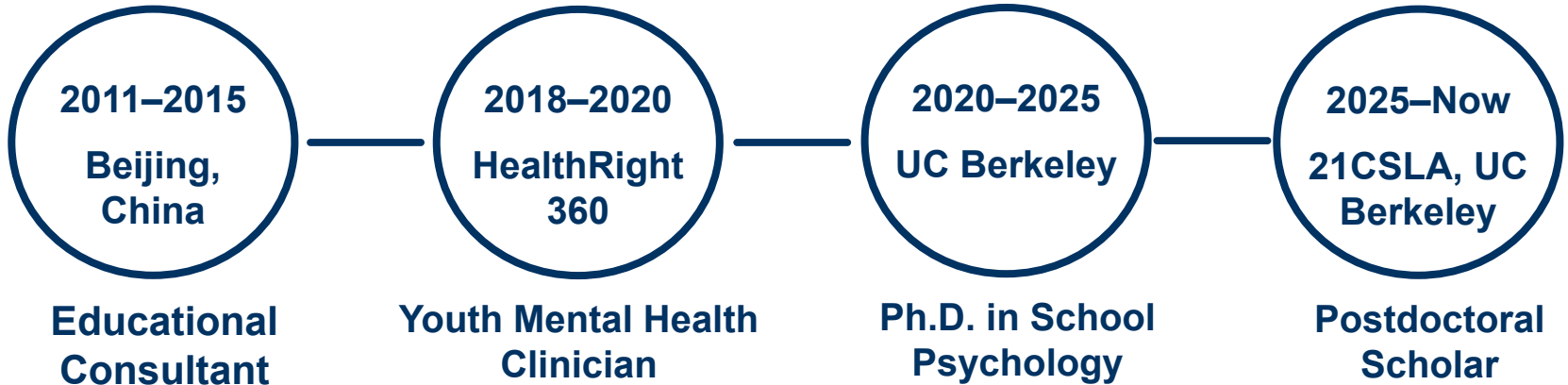
Xueqin Lin & Chunyan Yang

Thursday, February 26, 2026 | NASP 2026 Annual Convention | Chicago, IL

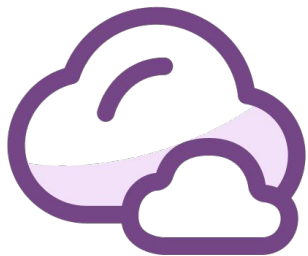
Learning Objectives

- **Learn effective strategies to practice culturally responsive SEL (CR-SEL) in early childhood education**
- **Understand challenges encountered by rural educators in practicing CR-SEL**
- **Learn how CR-SEL is delivered in rural TK classrooms**

Xueqin: Chinese, She/Her, Clinician, Researcher



- First generation Chinese immigrant
- Grew up in a fishing village in Southeast China
- Mother of a 5-year-old



Think about a TK or early childhood classroom you're familiar with. During social-emotional learning time, whose culture tends to be most visible?

California's Rural Context

- **California Rural Demographics:**

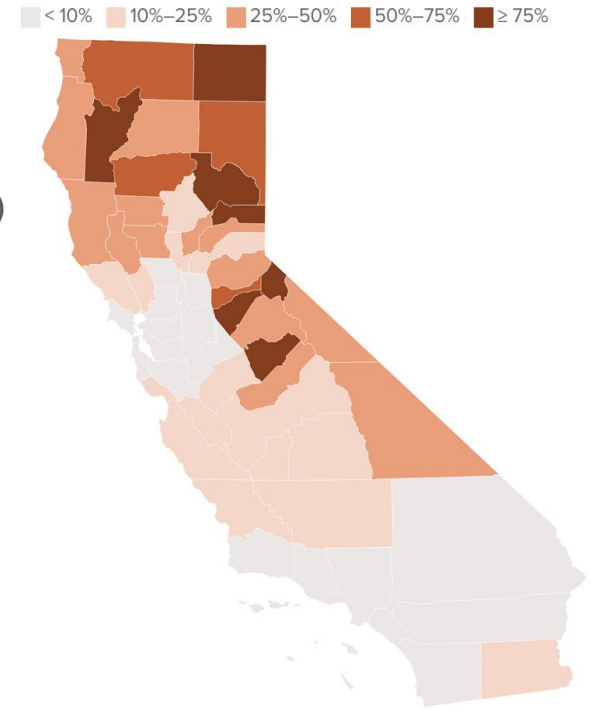
- 1 in 10 children in California reside in rural communities (Association of California School Administrators, 2024).
- One third of its school districts are classified as rural (Jones, 2024)

- **Mental Health Gap:**

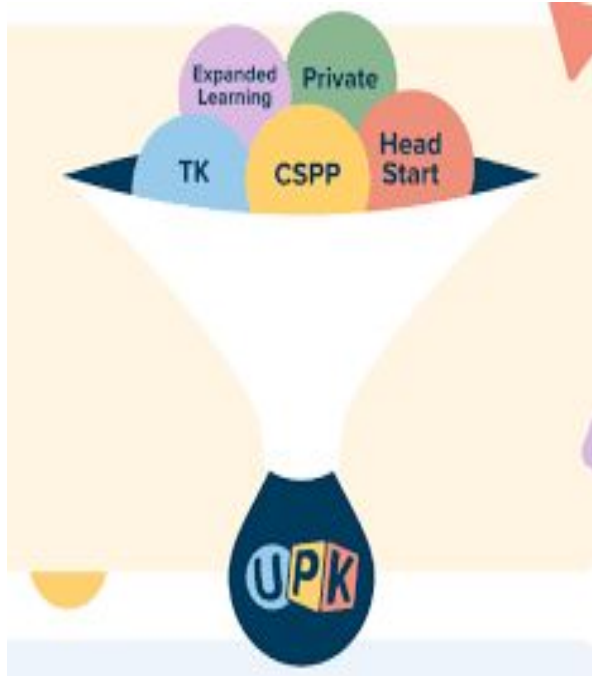
- Rural children face an increased vulnerability to lifetime mental health issues and less access to mental health services (Figas et al., 2023; Morales et al., 2020)

- **Academic Achievement Gap:**

- Less ready for kindergarten (Justice et al., 2017)
- Underperformed in both math and reading between third and eighth grade (Johnson et al., 2021)



California's UTK



- Provide all four-year-old children in the state with access to high-quality early learning opportunities by the 2025–2026 school year
- As of 2023–24, nearly 94% of school districts offered TK, with enrollment doubling to over 151,000 children (Wang et al., 2025).
- Continued Challenges related to facilities, staffing, developmentally appropriate practices and resources, and funding (Wang et al., 2025)

- Research heavily skewed toward urban/suburban settings;
- Primary quantitative measures that prioritize program efficacy over implementation processes
- Most CR-SEL programs lack strong theoretical underpinnings (Lim et al., 2024)

Purpose: explore how teachers deliver and adapt CR-SEL in rural California TK classrooms

Definition and Importance of CR-SEL

- Integrates the culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogy (Mahfouz & Anthony-Stevens, 2020).
- Aligns SEL with cultural values, beliefs, and practices to increase cultural relevance (Lim et al., 2024).
- Existing integration focuses heavily on culturally responsive classroom activities (Ladson-Billings, 2014), overlooking the inter-institutional linkage
- Effective CR-SEL practices: opportunities to explore cultural identities and family engagement (Cressey, 2019)



Bennett et al.'s (2018) Framework



1.
developing a
culturally
responsive
classroom
community

2.
family
engagement



3.
critical
literacy within
a social justice
framework



4.
multicultural
literature



5.
culturally responsive
print rich
environments

How do **teachers** enact **SEL** in a **culturally responsive** way in **rural TK classrooms**?

A faint, light blue network diagram is visible in the background on the right side of the slide. It consists of several nodes connected by thin lines, resembling a web or a social network structure.

Case Study Design

Deepen understanding of rural
CR-SEL practices

Semi-Structured Interview

“What does culturally responsive
SEL look like in practice?”

Purposive Sampling

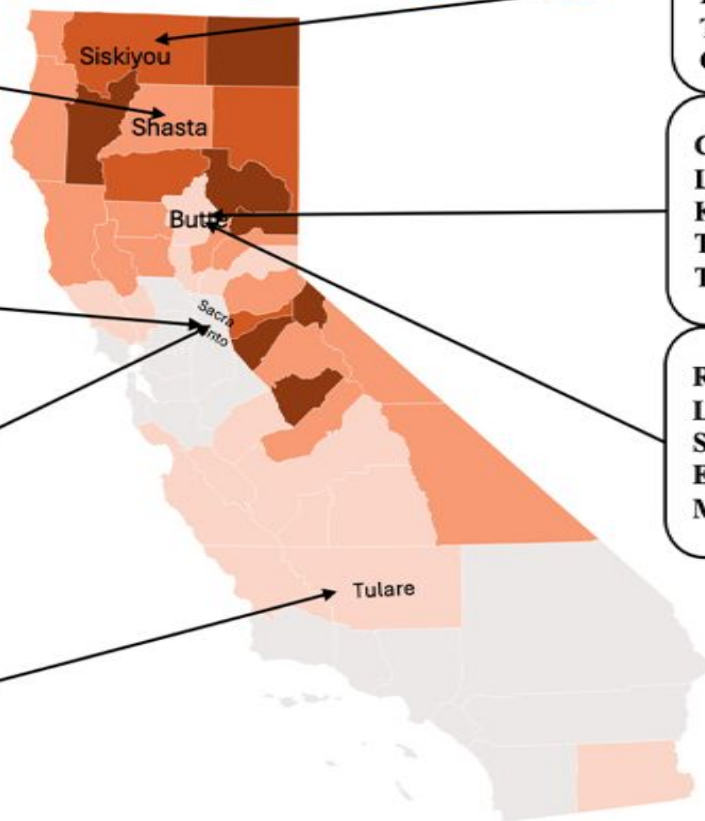
Recruit TK teachers in rural
schools (Jan - June 2024)

Thematic Analysis

Employ thematic analysis and
analyze data on MAXQDA

Percent rural population in the county

< 10% 10%–25% 25%–50% 50%–75% > 75%



Ravenwood Elementary:

Tessa: Vice Principal
Rebecca: TK Teacher
Scarlet: Parent from Rebecca's Class
Denise: Parent from Rebecca's Class
Sophie: Parent from Rebecca's Class

Angelwood Elementary:

Maverick: Principal
Daisy: TK Teacher
Sadie: TK Teacher
Kimberly: Parent of Sadie's Class
Levi: Parent from Sadie's Class
Callie: Parent from Sadie's Class
Andrea: Parent from Sadie's Class

Foothill Elementary:

Logan: Principal
Merida: TK Teacher
Ellie: TK Teacher
Melody: Parent from Ellie's Class
Abigail: Parent from Ellie's Class
Leah: Parent from Merida's Class

Dawson Elementary:

James: Principal
Margaret: TK Teacher
Julia: Parent from Margaret's Class
Brook: Parent from Margaret's Class

Grandview Elementary:

Madison: Student Support Supervisor
Josephine: TK Teacher
Kaia: TK Teacher
Teresa: Parent from Josephine's Class
Claire: Parent from Josephine's Class

Copper Cove Elementary:

Lexi: TK Coach and Mentor
Kamila: TK Teacher
Tamara: Parent from Kamila's Class
Taneshia: Parent from Kamila's Class

Redwood Elementary:

Lexi: TK Coach and Mentor
Samantha: TK Teacher
Evelyn: Parent from Samantha's Class
Mariah: Parent from Samantha's Class

Source: Authors' calculations using 2020 Decennial Census.

Note: Percent of the 2020 Census population in the County within rural blocks.

Participants

- 100% female teachers
- Six White
- Half spoke English only
- 60% had over a decade of teaching
- Nine teachers held at least a bachelor's degree

Participant	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Language Spoken Other than English	Years of Experience as a Teacher	Years of Experience at Current Site	Highest Degree
Merida	50	Female	Latina	Spanish	24	2	Bachelor's
Ellie	53	Female	Asian	Korean	15	2	Bachelor's
Rebecca	36	Female	White	None	6	6	Bachelor's
Daisy	30	Female	White	None	7	3	Bachelor's
Sadie	53	Female	White	None	29	22	Bachelor's
Margaret	49	Female	Latina	Spanish	5	5	Master's
Josephine	43	Female	White	None	10	10	Bachelor's
Kaia	56	Female	White	None	30	1	Teaching Credential + 80 units
Kamila	33	Female	White	Spanish	11	2	Bachelor's
Samantha	29	Female	Latina	Spanish	6	2	Master's

Culturally Responsive SEL in Rural TK Classrooms

Multicultural and Critical Perspective Development

Explicit/Active Teaching

- *Storytelling*
- *Cultural Celebrations*
- *Self-Portrait Activity*
- *Real Life Examples*

Implicit/Passive Teaching

- *Acceptance over Transformation*

Inclusive Environment

Inclusive Print-Rich Environment

- *Diverse skin color for characters*
- *Books with Diverse Topics*
- *Top Selection*

Inclusive Opportunities

- *Peer Interaction*
- *Personal Story Sharing*
- *Diverse Ways of Play*

Empathy and Acknowledgement of Differences

- *Teacher Self-Reflection*
- *Acknowledgement of Diverse Ways of Identity and Emotional Expression*

Family Engagement

Cultural Communication

- *Relationship Establishment*
- *Family's Value and Identity Validation*

Cultural Sharing

- *Teacher and Family's Sharing Culture*

Language Support

- **Explicit and Active Teaching (n = 7)**

Real Life Situations
(n = 4)

Storytelling
(n = 2)

Cultural Celebration
(n = 2)

Self-Portrait
(n = 1)

Josephine's Story

I had a deaf student...We talked about it like sometimes when you're born. Maybe your ears don't work sometimes when you're born. Maybe your arms don't work, but that's just one thing, but she still is just like you and me. And that class was super accepting of her. I mean, she had a ton of friends. They would get in fights, they would make up.

Daisy's Story

I read a story called I like myself, and it's this little girl who she's an African American girl who has like crazy hair, and she gets really embarrassed because she doesn't wanna go to school. Crazy, curly hair. But then, like her mom starts showing her, “like, oh, this is all the fun stuff that you can do with your hair.” And then she starts liking herself because she likes her hair. So I try to like teach at the beginning of the year that “Hey, you might not look like your friends. You might not have the same hair style. You might not have the same skin color, but that's okay, because we all still breathe. We all still need to eat. We all still need water. We all still need to come to school like we're all the same, but we might just look different.” And I think the littles. It's easier...they are just going to accept it because they're like little sponges.

Implicit and Reactive Teaching (n = 5)

- Emphasizing acceptance or not taking the initiative to foster multicultural development
- Sensitive multicultural issues in rural and conservative communities (e.g., sexuality)
 - In Kaia and Josephine's community, over 60% of voters supported President Trump in 2024
 - Need parents' permission to address gender issues in class
- Can be done effectively to model counter-stereotypical preferences

Samantha's Story

I feel like they're so little, we don't make a big deal of anything like that. As I tell them, my favorite color is blue. I'm a girl, 'cause they'll do that a lot, but especially with colors, like you like pink. That's a girl color, and I'm like, well, what I like is blue.

1. **Creating print-rich environment (n = 3)**
 - a. Using different skin colors for characters
 - a. Having books with a variety of topics
 - b. Carefully selecting toys

Kaia's Story

As this year she had several native American students in her class, she carefully picked books representing their Native American culture. She stated, “***The people in the books are Native Americans and some of them are cultural kinds of things...so that they can see themselves in that. I just think, having things that are representative of all the kids***”.

2. Creating Opportunities (n = 5)

- Provide space for students to express who they are and their feelings

Samantha's Story:

One little boy raised his hand and said, "My daddy doesn't cry." And I said, "Oh, and you know what? That's totally okay. Some people don't cry. That's okay. It's okay to cry. But it's also okay not to cry. We all have different feelings and emotions, and we all go through them differently." He kinda just nodded his head like, yeah, I come to think of it, I was thinking about that little boy 'cause that really stuck me. I don't know if I've ever seen him cry.

- Create opportunities for rough play

Kamila's story

Kamila created opportunities for her students to engage in rough play, as she noticed that "rough play [was] extremely common" among her Black students. She said, "And that's one thing I'm working on changing at my school is, I'd like to have more rough and tumble play allowed, but in a controlled manner".

3. Showing Empathy and Acknowledgement of Differences (n = 4)

- Connecting teachers' personal experiences to show understanding
- Acknowledging different emotional expression across ethnic groups

Kamila's Story

When we are doing SEL things, I have them face me. So know they're listening. We have a whole thing about where the eyes go, the brain follows, but I don't care if they're making direct eye contact for both my autistic students and my Hmong students. My Hmong students in general eye contact is seen as something very personal. So they don't do it a lot which is fine...I just make sure they're generally facing that direction...Unfortunately, a lot of times I still just out of habit. Say, "look at me, look at me", and I'm working on the face me, turn towards me, make sure your body is towards my direction, so I can see that you're at least paying attention. But we don't have to make that eye contact.

1. Cultural Communication (n=2)

- a. structured approaches to build relationships with family and acknowledge diverse culture.
- b. Conduct home-interviews with parents

Kamila's Story

For the most part, it's just getting to know the families getting to know the students understanding as much as I can about the cultural backgrounds and how that might affect the way they are and how they interact with others. It's when in doubt, I'll try to look things up and be like, is this a cultural thing? Or is this just this kid? And sometimes it is a cultural thing. And I'm like, Oh, cool, I find something new.

2. Cultural Sharing (n = 3)

- Introduce teacher's own culture & invite families to share their culture
- Create multisensory experience for students and families

Ellie's Story

Then one year I asked her dad came to talk about his country, and he came in and we found out that she's one of the princess in Africa. After that everything changed, not I want to say everything changed...She's like, "Okay. many people now recognized me."...I think just dad came into the classroom and talk about her country and dress up....their traditional clothes. So I think that helps.

2. Language Support (n = 4)

- Teach SEL curriculum in both English and Spanish
- Interact with families in their home language

Merida's Story

At least this Hispanic part I'm aware of, I come from that culture... I'm able to talk to the parents in their primary language, if necessary....But I do my best to try and communicate information to whoever whatever language they're speaking. The hardest one to find contacts for Thai...I had a couple Thai kids before, and I happened to get lucky and have one mom that was Thai and another one mom that was Thai, and the one mom that I needed to communicate with she could speak a little bit of English, so I could talk to her and ask her to talk to the mom. So finding those resources is is tricky.

- TK teachers rely on their personal resources to integrate culturally responsive practices into SEL.
- TK teachers incorporated four of five domains of SEL into their CR-SEL practices, less explicit integration of responsible decision making.
- Complex rural contexts lead to implicit reactive teaching practices, which may limit opportunities, reinforce dominant narratives, and miss empowerment opportunities.
- Teacher self-reflection and professional development are important
- Family engagement integrate family cultures, languages, and practices into schools.

- **Systemic Support:** resource development, preparation, professional learning, professional standards
- **Rural Specific Professional Development**
- **Identity Work:**
 - Implementing CR-SEL requires not only pedagogical expertise but also significant emotional labor and resilience from educators

Questions?

Lin, X., Ingram, J., Yang, C., Cheung, R., & Lim, J.H. (2025). Culturally responsive social-emotional learning practices in transitional kindergarten classrooms. *Behavioral Sciences*, 15(9), 1147.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/bs15091147>