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Better YOU, Better Educator Women's Circles of Hope

Abstract Written By:

Monica Cuevas, Academic Success Coordinator, Team Lead

“The task of educators is immense because human progress and world peace are in their hands”. - Maria Montessori, *Understanding the Human Being*, Page 165.

We have an opportunity to heal the world through education. We all have to be in school from K-12, which makes it a great opportunity for educators to be involved in “human progress”. In addition, it is a golden opportunity for teachers to create classrooms full of wonder, hope, peace, joy, healing, learning, equality, inclusivity, collaboration, and building a life based on purpose not just meeting academic standards. However, to change the world and gain “world peace” change must first start in our hearts.

Schools offer many opportunities for educators to be part of professional development, which allows them to gain new skills through continuing education and career training after entering the field. On the other hand, educators should also be offered opportunities to engage in personal development. The importance of personal growth is significant because it allows individuals to become the best versions of themselves. Personal development opportunities can aid in boosting teacher wellness and allow future and current teachers to reclaim their power to educate, inspire, motivate, and make a difference in the world. When teachers can reclaim their power, they will not leave the school or flee the profession as a whole. Moreover, they will empower their students to also be their most authentic and successful selves.

Learning new skills professionally and unfolding in a personal way never stops - no matter how successful we become. There is always more to experience and absorb. Although educators teach, they should also be reminded that they will always be students of life. Therefore, they should be given opportunities to create space for healing and opportunities to learn how to cope with the ever changing seasons of life. Those opportunities can also allow them to lead their students in a more empathetic and nurturing way, incorporate and embed intentional SEL strategies in their classrooms, and simultaneously enjoy a meaningful career ‘based on purpose, not just meeting academic standards’.



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Assembly Bill 110 was created in 2017, and it offered schools in Nevada the opportunity to participate in a competency-based education network and pilot program. This effort includes the Nevada Portrait of Learner Project and the Nevada Future of Learning Network. The Nevada Future of Learning Network extended a \$5,000 mini-grant to Nevada State University to implement the Better YOU, Better Educator Women's Circles of Hope. The funds were used to purchase learning materials for the circle participants. In addition, the funds were used by the Academic Success Coordinator to attend and complete a 6-week women's circle facilitator training to learn the fundamentals of women's circles, understand the necessary tools for the facilitator and participants, learn how to safely lead a circle that doesn't cause harm and is culturally responsive, learn to set boundaries and communicate with community partners, and do this work with fidelity and INTEGRITY.

The Better YOU, Better Educator Women's Circles of Hope were implemented to allow our pre-service teachers to not only integrate their academic learning but also their life lessons in a space where they could be seen, heard, and validated. We also curated a space for them to feel a sense of healing, comfort, comradery, and belonging. The intention in opening these circles is to allow future educators to be prepared to reroute when they get lost in stressors that may blow out their passionate fire to light the way for their students. We extend our gratitude to our first cohort for being present, vulnerable, and ready to 'reroute'. We also extend an invitation to you to learn more about this initiative by reading our case study below. We hope this motivates you to engage in personal development in order to honor your unrestricted inner and outer blossoming. We hope that this also inspires the education system to reimagine the training that it offers to educators - placing importance on teacher wellness and SEL.



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Monica Cuevas, Academic Success Coordinator, Team Lead
Dr. Vanessa Mari, Associate Professor of TESL
Case Study

What is your Design Challenge?

Context/Background - what emerged in the empathy process that helped you focus your priority?

“Better You, Better Educator” Women’s Circles of Hope

“80% of our School of Education (SOE) students are women. We are focusing on integrating cutting-edge research-based practices to support our future teachers in the SOE with the socioemotional strategies they need to support children in the district- especially those dealing with trauma.” Dr. Shartriya Collier, Interim Dean, Nevada State University.

It is time for change!

When people decide to heal themselves, they heal the world. Education continues to face challenges such as a lack of resources, student behavior problems, infrastructure, and most importantly qualified teachers. Schools find it increasingly difficult to attract and retain high-quality teachers, which tremendously impacts the education of many students. Educators face many stressors like low salaries, long work hours, standardized test expectations, learning loss caused by the pandemic, poor behavior problems, and more. They also focus their energy on their students, families, and administrators, and they do not pour back into themselves like they should. Adult SEL practices can boost teacher wellness and allow future and current teachers to reclaim their power. Their power to educate. Their power to inspire. Their power to motivate. Their power to make a difference in the world by having space and time to heal. When teachers can reclaim their power, they will not leave the school or the profession as a whole. In addition, they will empower their students to be their most authentic and successful selves.



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Share the focused “How Might We” question...?

The Women’s Circle of Nevada State University, School of Education (a.k.a Better You, Better Educator Women’s Circles of Hope) builds connections and support systems for women. This initiative focuses on the “Better You” part of the circle (see infographic below) and it balances academic knowledge with other areas of knowledge, which include social and emotional well-being. The circles are a retention effort from the SOE and a support group for women to connect, share, build skills, and motivate one another to live authentically. This aligns with our social and emotional digital affirmation concept 'Better You, Better Educator', and the holistic advising approach provided by the Academic Success Coordinator. "Holistic advising is described by some as an approach or mindset to supporting students on the path to academic success. This type of advising looks at the whole person because whatever they are going through in their personal lives can influence their academic success" (Kyriacou & Kelly 2023).

A women’s circle is created intentionally for women to gather and feel seen, heard, validated, and own their worth. The terms woman/women/her/she are used throughout this case study and project work, but this extends to all female-identifying and non-binary people. There is no hierarchy within the circles, as all participants hold equal power and importance. It allows all participants to sit in their truths and no one is there to offer advice or persuasion. It is a space for a woman to just be and be reminded who she is and let go of what she is told to be. The trained facilitator is there to ensure that the space is free of judgment, pressure, and competition. The facilitator is trained to use trauma sensitive language and understands the fundamentals of women’s circles, the history of women’s circles, the basics of breathwork and journaling, how to set boundaries, and how to keep the circle safe. Women’s circles are not therapy sessions, but participants are guided to work on nervous system regulation and journal triggers that can be taken to a licensed therapist. Participants are also given mental health resources and the school’s Care Team/Social Worker information. We believe that through collective healing we can heal the education system. We remember humanity through each other!



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This work is truly a circle (see infographic below). When we work on ourselves, we take our healing to our home, to our kids, to our students, and everywhere we go - helping us leave others better than when we found them. We believe that this project work is unique, special, and an important practice to bring to NS. Mental health and healing should be something that we should prioritize for our students. The more we work on ourselves, the “better educators” we become. The more we heal, the more we can "heal" our students and the broken education system. In addition, it could be a way to combat gun violence and bullying, and retain students and teachers in general. Emotional intelligence is so vital in education and when working with others. Our emotions guide our actions. It is time that schools focused on SEL in a better way and placed importance on teacher wellness. Big changes start within us first!

Further evidence of the importance of purposeful SEL time for teachers includes Rawlins (2024) who noted that prioritizing the mental health of teachers goes beyond personal well-being. It also includes building a positive and supportive organizational culture within schools. This positive culture of educators also in turn positively affects student learning. This is why our concept of teacher wellness acknowledges that the work starts with oneself, to then impact the school culture and the students.

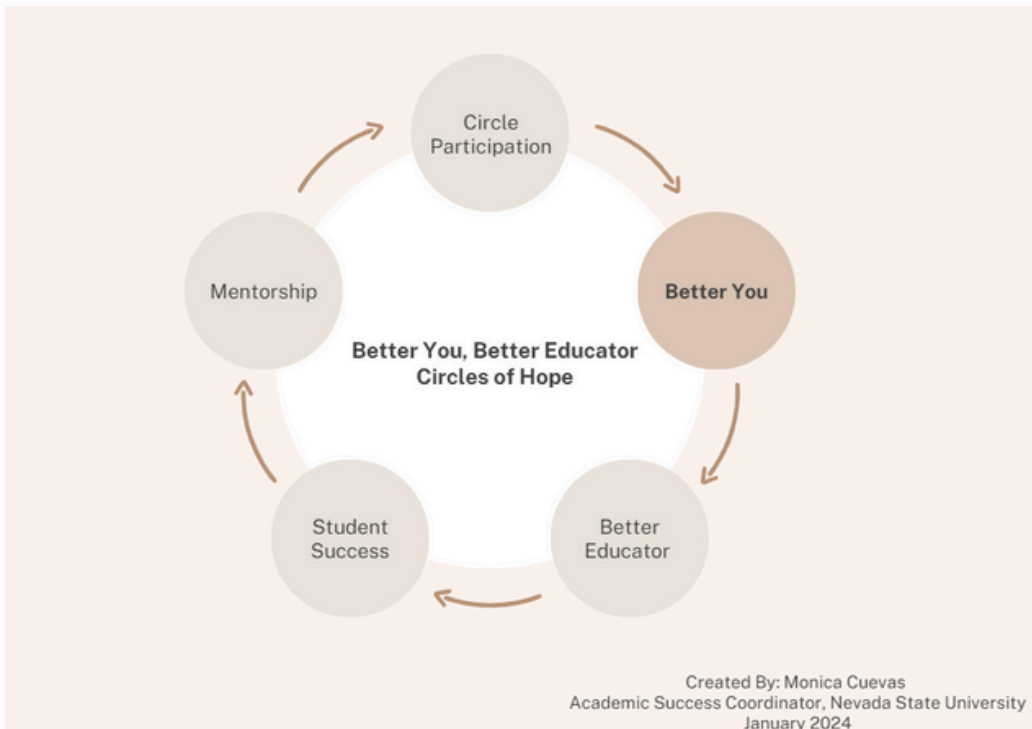
Additional research that supports this includes Bouffard (2023) who reviews important lessons learned from SEL skills and their implications for teacher’s well-being and career longevity. She reviews how one school profiled in a case study of the Tulsa effort found that staff burnout and turnover decreased noticeably after they spent time on SEL. The percentage of staff reporting they felt burned out dropped markedly, from 62% in spring 2018 to 29% in spring 2020, and the turnover rate also dropped from 33% to 23% (Christianson, et.al 2022).



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Infographic Created by Monica Cuevas, Nevada State University





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What did you do?

Describe what happened.

Recipients of the Nevada State Better You, Better Educator Women's Circles of Hope have demonstrated comprehension of social and emotional learning (SEL), which includes a wide array of non-academic skills that individuals need in order to set and accomplish goals, process and remember information, manage behavior, and build relationships. Specifically, recipients have shown an understanding of the effective practices related to teacher wellness, which allowed them to gain a new perspective and recognize that only by taking care of themselves can they ensure quality implementation of SEL strategies and inspire and nurture their students effectively. When asked if they believed this work is needed in Education, a student stated, “Yes, Monica said something along the lines of healing yourself first and then healing your classroom. I learned that my classroom management style can be influenced by my upbringing. I've watched my tone in the classroom more, practiced meditation exercises with first graders. I am so happy for the girls that got this before student teaching! It helped me in my last month of student teaching. Now, I have a better understanding of emotional intelligence and how I can be mindful in professional interactions at work. Our activity about limiting beliefs helped me pin down why I get so anxious during observations. Every single one of us changed for the better, it's our turn to use what we acquired and keep growing.” This further illustrates that teachers’ overall wellness is deeply correlated to student academic success and positive class culture. Through our personal development we can cultivate a healthy environment in our classrooms.

At the end of the project work, participants were given a badge (micro credential).





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What draft competencies may have emerged in your project?

- Participants engaged in a four week teacher wellness group coaching program that allowed students to rediscover who they are and invite them to be their authentic selves. This initiative aspires for students to feel a sense of belonging at Nevada State University, redefine their personal purpose, or redefine their purpose in the field of education - leading to better academic instruction and student success in the classroom.

Week 1: Attacking Our Limiting Beliefs

Week 2: Emotional Intelligence

Week 3: Positive Self-Talk

Week 4: SEL in the Classroom

- Participants viewed and engaged in four self-paced modules.
- Participants engaged in and practiced the five areas of competence represented within the CASEL framework: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.
- Participants engaged in and practiced three of the NV Portrait of a Graduate Competencies: Connecting Attribute: Collaboration, Empowering Attribute: Self-Advocacy, and Thriving Attribute: Resilience.
- Mentorship/Summer Retreat in June.



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BETTER YOU, BETTER EDUCATOR WOMEN'S CIRCLES OF HOPE COHORT 1, SPRING 2024

Thank you



REPEAT AFTER US...
I am loved, because I love myself.
I am valued, because I value myself.
I matter as an individual and as an educator.
I promise to take care of myself!

Thank you for trusting us and choosing to participate in the "Better You, Better Educator" Circles of Hope. The project work solely focuses on building teachers' social and emotional capacities to improve their teaching performance, which ultimately can make a positive impact on their students. As you travel your own path, we want this work to give you strength, comfort, a sense of belonging, and hope for a better future in education.





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Better YOU, Better Educator Women's Circles of Hope Cohort 1, Spring 2024

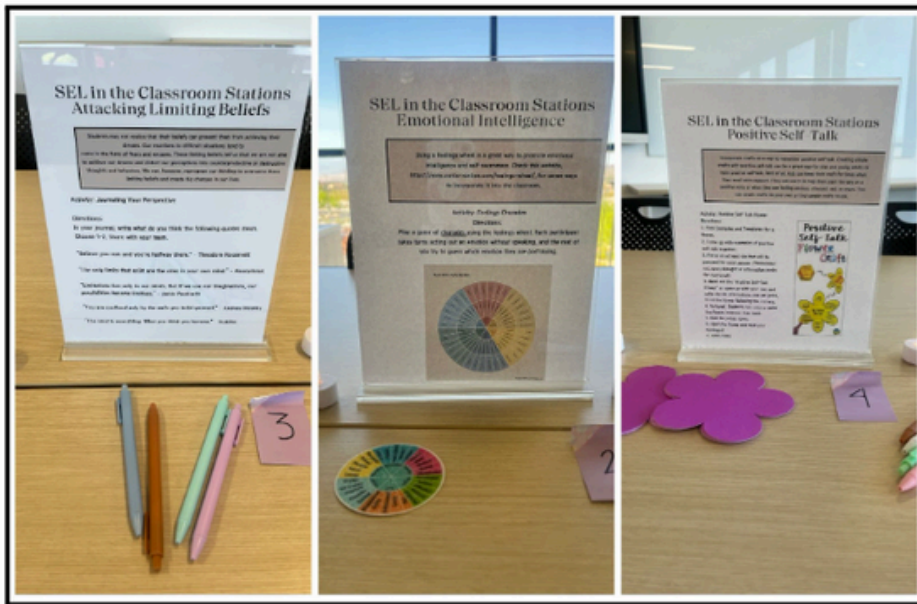




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After students engaged in inner work (personal development) that focused on limiting beliefs, emotional intelligence, and positive self-talk, they were able to practice some SEL activities that they can implement in their classroom. The activities made better sense to the students after working on their own personal development in these areas.



Intended Impact:

Student Retention, especially women of color

Increase Graduation Rate for teachers of color

Communal Growth & Mentorship - Cohort students can become mentors for other students to help navigate college, instill a sense of belonging, and spread knowledge of SEL and teacher wellness.

Deep community connections (collaboration with Mindful Seed)

Empowering women as leaders and changemakers in education

Catalyzing personal growth for participants

A healthier school culture

Future educators can learn restorative justice practices that they can bring into their future classrooms

Individual & Collective Healing - “Better You, Better Educator” means when you can take care of yourself, you can BETTER take care of others.



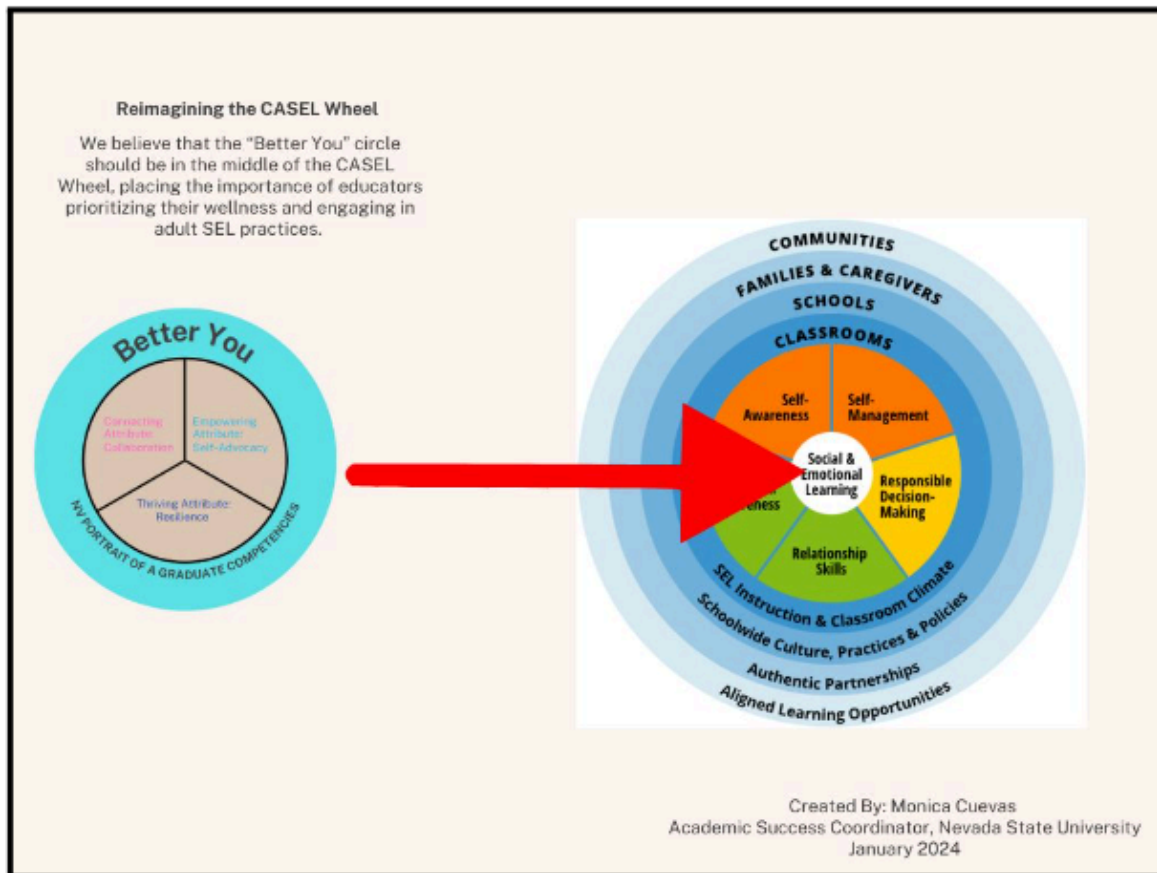
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Infographics by Monica Cuevas, Nevada State University
Reimagining the CASEL Wheel

Figure 1:

We believe that the “Better You” circle should be in the middle of the CASEL Wheel, placing the importance of educators prioritizing their wellness.



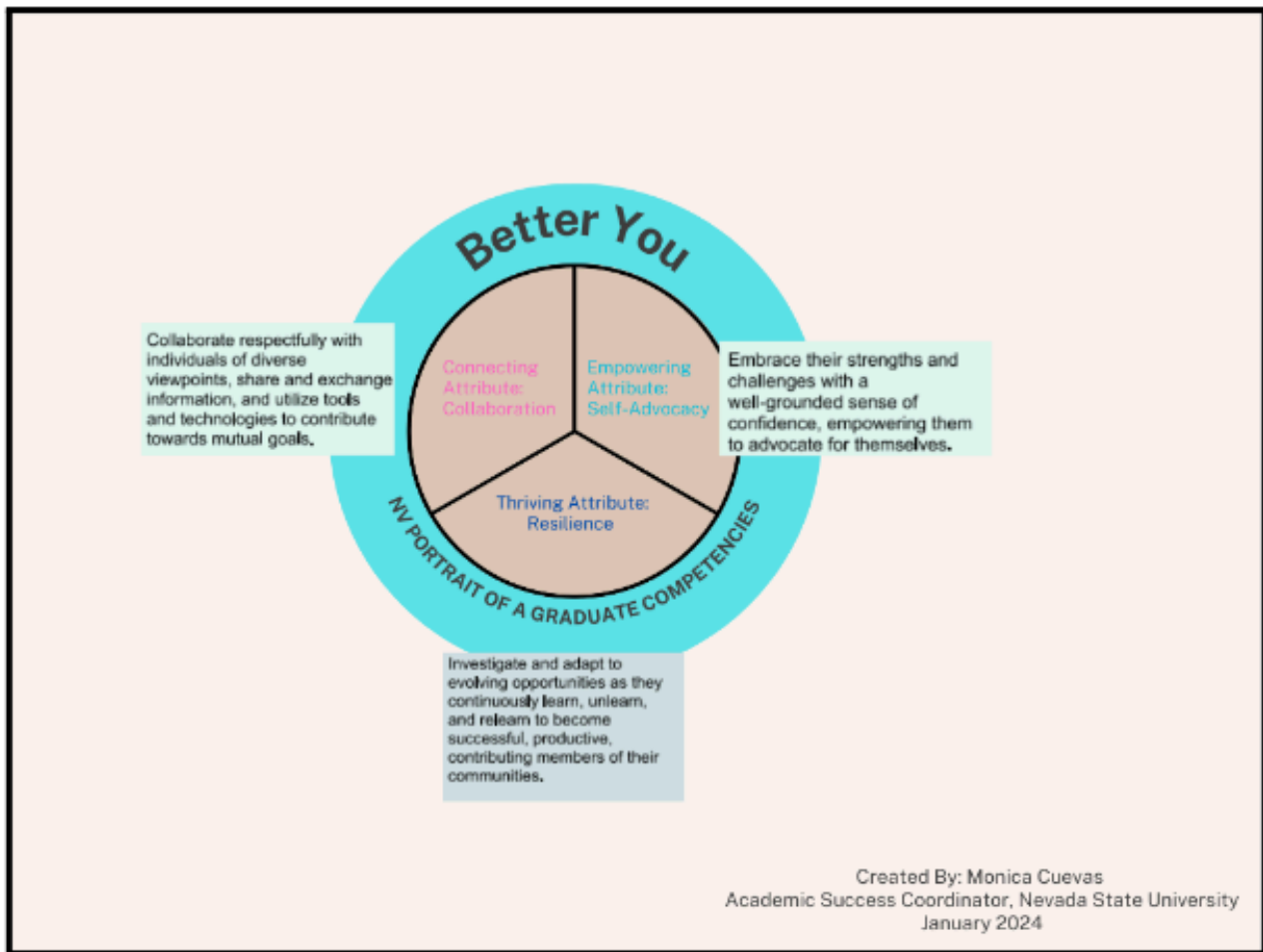


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Figure 2:

The 'Better YOU' circle includes three of the NV Portrait of a Graduate Competencies: Connecting Attribute: Collaboration, Empowering Attribute: Self-Advocacy, and Thriving Attribute: Resilience.



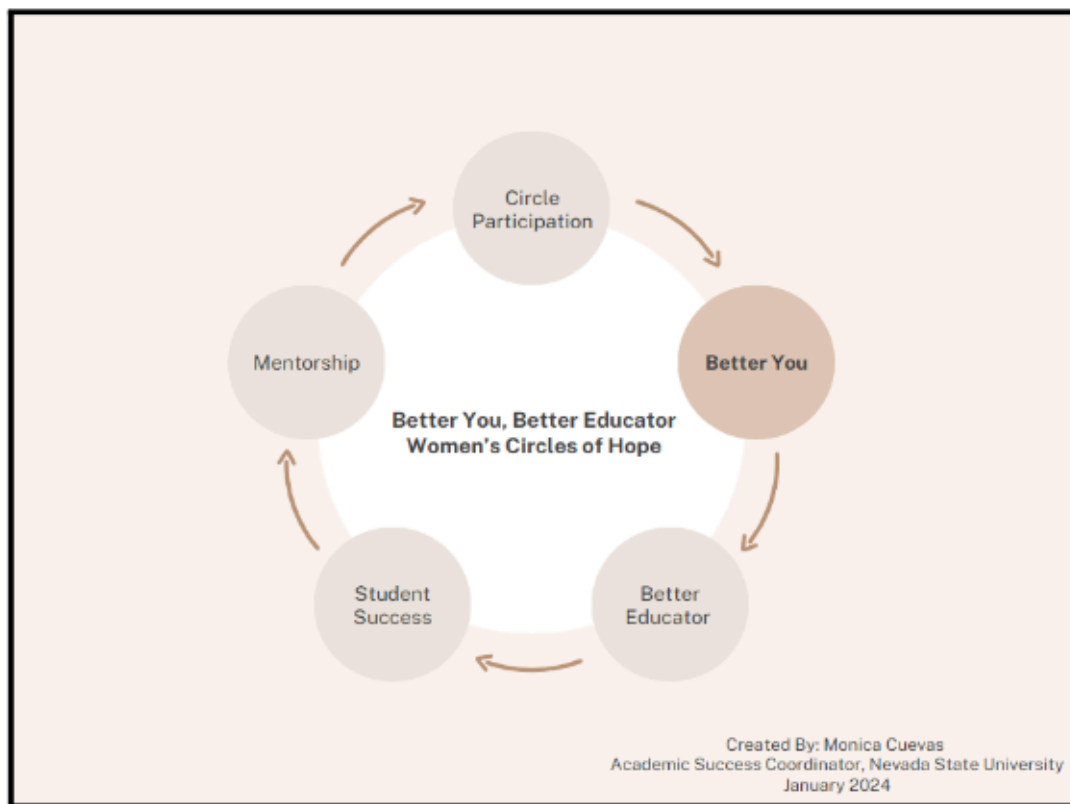


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Figure 3:

After participating in the women's circles (Better You circle), participants recognized that only by "taking care of themselves can they ensure quality implementation of SEL strategies and inspire and nurture their students effectively" (Better Educator circle) hoping to elevate student success in their classrooms.





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What was the biggest surprise/barrier in implementation? What was the impact?

We were surprised at the student response. Students were excited to participate and they also believe that to change the world it starts with us first. They “recognized that only by taking care of themselves can they ensure quality implementation of SEL strategies and inspire and nurture their students effectively.”

Participants of the women’s circles were also invited to the Summer Retreat Nevada State University collaborated with Mindful Sead. The retreat focused on the “Mentorship” part of the circle. Throughout the 7 days, retreat attendees attended workshops hosted by academic faculty “mentors” and they worked with current teacher mentors. The vision for the retreat was the same as the one for the women’s circles. The objective was for participants to be able to demonstrate comprehension of social and emotional learning (SEL), which includes a wide array of non-academic skills that future teachers need to set goals, manage behavior, build relationships, and process and remember information. Specifically, participants were given a chance to show an understanding of the effective practices related to teacher wellness. Additionally, students also had to complete an assignment to deepen their understanding of social-emotional learning (SEL) by creating artifacts that illustrate their comprehension of key topics learned throughout the week. Through the assignment, students demonstrated their ability to translate the knowledge learned into practical applications for fostering SEL in educational settings. Topic selections included; Self-awareness, Self-management, Social awareness, Counseling, Classroom environments, and helping students thrive.

Some of the challenges outside of the logistics of planning such a big event was the ability to recruit male participants. We had three male participants show interest, however, they did not confirm their participation on time and were removed from the retreat. In a profession where males are not represented as widely as women, we would like to survey male pre-service teachers and plan how to educate them on these topics based on their needs.



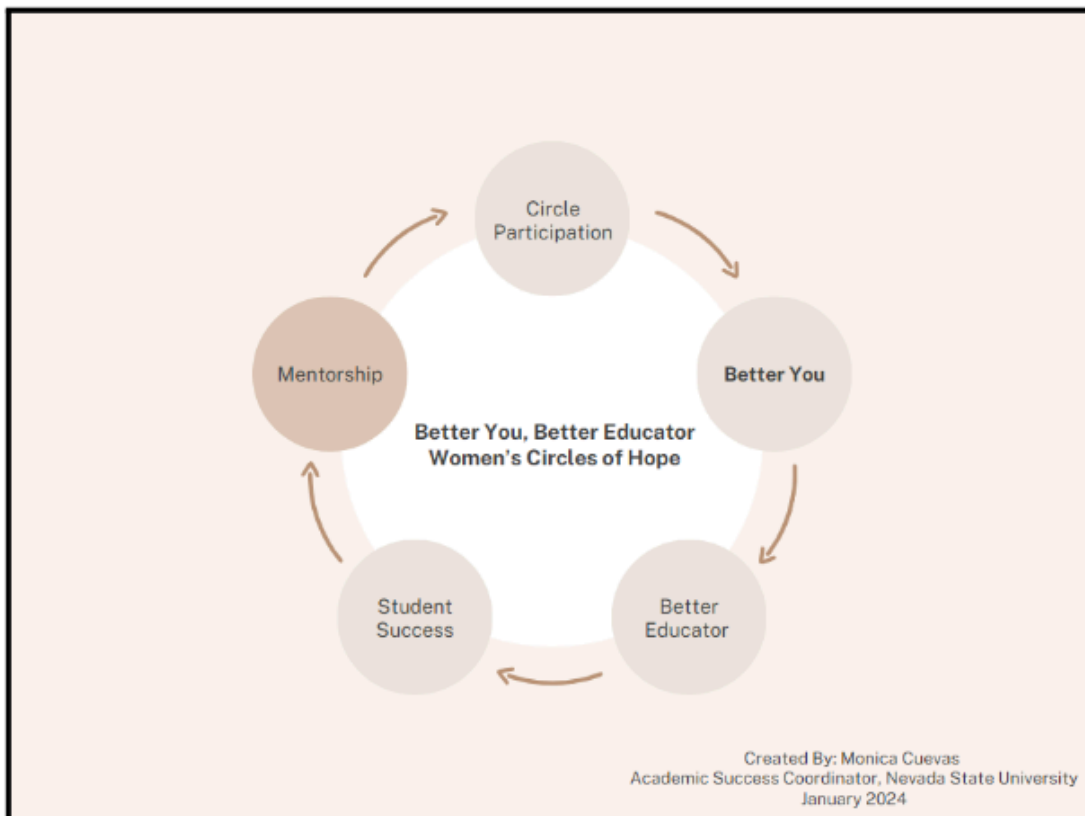
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Infographic by Monica Cuevas, Nevada State University

Figure 4:

Participants of the women's circles were also invited to the Summer Retreat Nevada State University collaborated with Mindful Sead, which focused on the "Mentorship" part of the circle.





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Participant Voices:

Hi I'm
Luisa Cano



Choosing to be a teacher...

I want to become a teacher because school has always felt like a safe space to me, and I have a strong desire to cultivate that same experience to my future students. No matter their background or circumstances, all students deserve an equitable education and I want to create that inclusive environment in my classroom.

Major: Elementary Education w/ Bilingual concentration

Minor: Spanish Heritage

To the education system...

It's time to provide the necessary resources to the students and teachers, especially in the area of mental health.

To students in the SOE...

Communicate with your professors, they want you to succeed so make sure to never be afraid to reach out to them.

"Better You, Better Educator Circles of Hope" seems like a great space to learn new skills, meet with people with similar beliefs as me, and to help me prepare as a future educator.



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Participant Voices:

LESLY M. ARIAS

Secondary Education and
English

I want to become a teacher because I want to guide and help students grow in the same ways that my teachers once did for me. I also believe that education is one of the best ways to create change and make an impact.

I think this project work is an amazing first step towards getting novice teachers to consider social emotional learning as a much more crucial part of their training. We gotta look out for ourselves before we can look out for others!

If you need help, ask for help! SOE staff and faculty are literally here to help you be the best "you" that you can be, and they have so much knowledge to give out.



In my opinion, our education system has become too focused on staying dormant, as opposed to changing alongside our students. Schools need to reflect students today, not what was acceptable 50 years ago.



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What was the greatest success? How did this success impact young people or how might it impact young people on your campus? What are their perceptions?

We would like to just share the participant voices to answer this question. See below.

Feedback collected via Qualtrics.

Q9 - What did you think of this experience? Explain.

I liked the strategies for classrooms and the positive self-talk. Monica Cuevas and Vanessa Mari will be unforgettable for my peers and I. We were able to be vulnerable as current/future educators and speak freely. We found that we are not alone. Seeing two strong Latinas lend a helping hand to us is inspiring. They set some of our building blocks for effective teaching.

This was an amazing experience to be part of. I was able to learn about the importance of learning where those beliefs are coming from. Also the importance of emotional intelligence and how those can lead to our actions.

The only bad thing I have to say is that it's sad that more students could not participate.

At first I wasn't too sure about this experience, but I can now proudly say that I'm leaving here being a new person and with strategies that will not only help me personally but educationally as well.

It was an amazing experience where I learned things I cannot wait to share with my students.

This whole experience was an emotional ride and made me recognize to be present. Take time to reflect, learn to listen, quiet, and how to apply different SEL techniques.

I thought it was really insightful to hear from my peers, and understand that a lot of us have similar experiences. I thought it was helpful to be able to emotionally regulate ourselves, and also to help our future students.

I really enjoyed being able to learn these different concepts. From this I was able to learn more about myself, how to be nicer to myself and have better coping mechanisms for when I feel anxious or down on myself. I realized I was lacking some skills and it really made me have to reflect.

This was such a beautiful experience that taught me so much that will truly stick with me for the rest of my life. I have learned things that I didn't even know I needed & I value it so much.



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Q10 - Your testimony! Would you recommend this experience to other students? Explain.

Yes, it was great to hear from my peers and make connections with what they shared. I learned new strategies for SEL, and I practiced listening to things I didn't agree with and stay quiet. I listened, took notes, and debriefed with my therapist every week. These gave me new avenues to explore in therapy for myself and I'm super grateful for that. My favorite part was working with Dr. Mari outside of a course. I believe that getting to know your mentors this way breaks apart a bit of the power dynamics we feel at school. Monica Cuevas and Vanessa Mari are great role models and shared their own stories to help us find our own way. Thank you!

Yes I would highly recommend this experience to other students to help with individual growth with identifying their emotions where they are coming from. Also being able to be there for others.

Totally! In fact, I feel like it should genuinely be necessary and required for future teachers to go through this type of training before they are entrusted with the learning and growth of others.

I would 100% recommend this because it makes you reflect and realize things that you have never thought about.

I definitely would! Everyone should do this training.

Yes!!!

I would recommend this experience because of the content. I feel like emotional intelligence and positive self talk and things in the same realm aren't always taught to someone-myself included. If I knew anything before coming it was if I had looked into it myself.

I would recommend this experience to other students, overall it was enjoyable and I was able to learn how to be a better person to myself and how to be nicer to others.

Yes!!! It is information and skills everyone should learn and know how to use. It help with communication and the way we interact with others. It also makes you reflect on how we treat ourselves and understand that we are our own worst enemies at times and now we learn ways to stop the actions that makes us think that way.



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Q12 - Do you believe this work is needed in Education?

Yes, Monica said something along the lines of healing yourself first and then healing your classroom. I learned that my classroom management style can be influenced by my upbringing. I've watched my tone in the classroom more, practiced meditation exercises with first graders. I am so happy for the girls that got this before student teaching! It helped me in my last month of student teaching. Now, I have a better understanding of emotional intelligence and how I can be mindful in professional interactions at work. Our activity about limiting beliefs helped me pin down why I get so anxious during observations. Every single one of us changed for the better, it's our turn to use what we acquired and keep growing.

Yes, this work is needed in education.

Yes. If the people in charge of Ed policy had any sense of emotional awareness, our education system might actually thrive instead of whatever is going on right now.

I do.

Yes. It is very necessary for all! Students, teachers, and parents.

Absolutely!

I do think this work is needed in education. It's important to help teachers identify and work through their emotions so that they take it out on students and help students work and process their emotions as well.

100%. We don't learn balance and it is so important!

Absolutely, learning to SEL not only helps educators personally but it helps them to help their students in a more effective way.



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What's next? How does your team plan to evolve this work? What are the most significant pieces of learning you see impacting adult work and young people's experiences? What school level, district level, state level policy may need to be addressed?

We look forward to not only doing this work with pre-service teachers, but also offering these circles to teachers already working in CCSD.

As adult learners, what is shifting about your mindset regarding what it means to empower young people with voice, agency, and influence in your classroom? What insights do you have around assessment? How might it need to evolve locally to include a broader set of outcomes? What implications may exist around accountability?

It is important that educators prioritize their wellness, in order to empower their students. Teachers should be given the opportunity to engage in personal development workshops or courses, not just professional development starting in higher ed or out in the field. Personal development should focus on the 7 dimensions of educator wellness: emotional, environmental, intellectual, physical, social, occupational, and financial. These dimensions interact and influence each other. According to Austen (2024), "A teacher that enjoys occupational wellness within a fulfilling teaching career is likely to experience better emotional wellness. Similarly, good physical health can enhance intellectual wellness, allowing a teacher to be more engaged and energetic in the classroom" (p.39). By participating in these circles, learning about CASEL, the 7 dimensions of educator wellness, and engaging with other educators, teachers begin to cultivate more empathetic and safe learning environments. This work is important to gain academic success. We all learn in spaces where we feel validated, heard, and seen. When teachers are given the opportunity to prioritize their wellness or well-being, they can successfully implement SEL strategies. We strongly believe that when we heal ourselves, we heal the world. When we heal ourselves, we heal our homes. When we heal ourselves, we heal our classrooms. We all have to be in school from K-12, and we definitely believe that we have a great opportunity to heal the world through education with the proper guidance and tools. According to a study conducted by the American Psychological Association in 2014, the average reported stress in children during a school year exceeds that of adults. That indicates that children are having a hard time learning under stress. That is only exacerbated when we also add the stress and burnout teachers feel during the school year. It is time that we took a mindful approach in improving the school year for teachers and students. It should not only be about pumping information to our students, but fostering a love of learning. It should not be about overloading our educators with more work, but rekindling their love of teaching. When educators reclaim their personal power through personal development, they will also reclaim their power to teach in a safe, inclusive, equitable, healing, and organic model of learning - sparking the curiosity and motivation to learn in their students. We need to take care of our educators. They make homes out of their classrooms, and in those 'homes' extraordinary lives are formed. We all depend on those 'extraordinary lives' to change the world in the future. You see the circle? Once a circle opens, it never closes!



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Research + Resources that inspired and informed our thinking

In what ways has participating in the network supported your learning and unlearning this year? What more do you look forward to?

Nevada State University joined the Nevada Future of Learning Network halfway through the year, which contributed to the challenge of connecting more with the network. Our team is also a non-school based team. It would have been amazing to not only have implemented this design here, but simultaneously also tested the design with teachers already working in the field. According to Austen, “we go into teaching because of our love of education and our passion begins to wane as the pressures build up” (79). The hypothesis is that pre-service teachers would have felt more confident to create a nurturing classroom environment in their first year of teaching. On the other hand, we wonder if the design would have helped current teachers rekindle their love and passion for the profession - shedding light on the importance of teacher wellness and helping with teacher retention. We are also curious to witness if the design cultivated more nurturing classrooms. “Teachers who love teaching, teach children to love learning.” - Unknown



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