

Social Emotional Learning in Secondary Classrooms

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Abstract

There is a need for intervention programs that support teenagers' social and emotional development in American public schools. Education stakeholders have observed a disproportionate decline in social-emotional skills among minority and at-risk adolescents in low performing schools, increasing dropout rates and early exposure to the criminal justice system. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the inconsistent application of social-emotional learning (SEL) by high school teachers in a local Southeast regional school district. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 10 English language arts high school teachers to obtain their perspectives on instructional implementation of SEL curriculum using the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework, the consistency with which they employ SEL practices, and the influence of SEL on student outcomes. The CASEL, designed by a foundation with the same name, was the conceptual framework for this study. Data were analyzed using a priori and in vivo codes, revealing six themes: (a) teachers' perceptions, mindsets, and biases drive pedagogy; (b) consistent and continuous training is needed to build teachers social-emotional competence (SEC); (c) SEL instructional planning is key to successful implementation; (d) knowledge and use of SEL strategies are inconsistent and minimal; (e) barriers to SEL impede successful program implementation; and (f) teachers struggle to assess SEC in their students. The study can promote social change by providing policymakers with strategies to increase youths' psychological and physiological well-being and supports using SEL to address the diverse needs of at-risk adolescents and propel students toward academic and life success.

Keywords: *Social-emotional learning, teacher perceptions, student engagement, social-emotional strategies, social-emotional implementation.*

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1. Introduction

The problem addressed in this study was that high school teachers in a local Southeast regional school district lacked consistent social-emotional learning (SEL) instructional implementation. Sustained SEL implementation occurs through systemic, constant training and staff awareness of the beliefs regarding this

intervention program (Eklund et al., 2018). The need for social-emotional development has been a focus of the district's prekindergarten, elementary, and middle schools. However, that focus did not extend to high schools, where adolescents have struggled with social and emotional development (Eklund et al., 2018). A review of national research on SEL teacher preservice preparation demonstrated that preservice teachers in the Southeast had completed fewer than 50% of their SEL coursework (Schonert-Reichl, 2019).

Researchers have indicated that social-emotional skills developed best when a schoolwide mindset-changing approach was used in classrooms (Main, 2018). However, students developed these SEL mindset skills when teachers possessed positive efficacy and believed in their ability to teach SEL competencies (Weissberg, 2019). The Collaborative for Advancement of Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is an organization and framework that includes SEL competencies in school curricula and best practices. The CASEL organization was founded in 1994 to provide context, structure, and support to schools invested in implementing SEL (Jagers et al., 2019). CASEL was also the conceptual framework for my study and is the paradigm that high schools in this research have used to structure SEL as an effective intervention program for underserved and marginalized populations of color. The body of literature supported the premise that effectively implemented SEL and CASEL programs relied on the preparation and training of preservice teachers and principals. In addition, teacher self-efficacy and awareness of explicit and implicit biases can sway how SEL is integrated into content and classroom practice. Durlak et al. (2022) and Domitrovich et al. (2017) emphasized the need for SEL education in all schools and grade levels. Researchers have also provided insight into at-risk populations best served by SEL and the CASEL framework (Elias, 2019; Kwiatkowski, 2019). The school environment can foster or stifle learning. In effective schools, teachers and staff collaborate with leaders to establish, organize, and facilitate appropriate intervention platforms that help students of poverty mitigate learning barriers (Leithwood, 2021). Additionally, others have expanded on the need for research on SEL in high schools (Tan et al., 2018; Taylor, 2020). However, reports for the district selected for this study and published school curriculum from 2017 through 2019 indicated that SEL training and implementation occurred more consistently in the preschool and elementary levels, with character trait lessons serving as the SEL venue in middle and secondary schools.

SEL allows children to make positive choices, proactively problem-solve, collaborate, empathize, and develop confidence (Elliott et al., 2018). Consistent SEL integration into classroom teaching and learning strategies can provide at-risk high school students with (a) strengthened relationship skills, (b) positive learning experiences, and (c) improved academic performance (Mahoney et al., 2021). In contrast, the lack of consistent implementation of social-emotional practices can impede adolescents' academic growth, relationship skills, and self-identity (CASEL, 2018; Domitrovich et al., 2017; Weissberg, 2019). The current study examined the local SEL programs based on the CASEL framework. To better understand the schools' and teachers' use of the CASEL framework, the consistency of SEL implementation in classrooms, teachers' perceptions of SEL, and SEL's influence on student outcomes were explored. Through qualitative research, high school teachers provided their views regarding their instructional implementation of the SEL curriculum using the CASEL framework and its influence on student outcomes.

The CASEL Framework

The CASEL framework serves as the foundation for numerous SEL programs across the nation, and it is used by the schools in my research study. CASEL is a framework that supports the integration of transformative competencies and social and emotional teaching and learning. The high schools in this study integrated multiple tiers of support (MTSS) with SEL to provide additional support to students on both disciplinary and academic levels. Because SEL focuses on the social and emotional development of the whole child, the program also can foster academic success in at-risk students (Constantine et al., 2019). The CASEL framework was appropriate for the research study as it provided constructs for gathering data concerning social-emotional development and teachers' perspectives regarding SEL. The CASEL framework allowed examining teachers' views about SEL in high schools serving at-risk adolescents (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Weissberg, 2019). In addition, the framework provided a lens through which to examine teachers' perceptions of SEL and its influence on student outcomes, which supported my search for answers to the current study's research questions.

1.1 Background of the Study

This research study focused on teachers in local high schools in a Southeast district that included both urban and suburban areas. These high schools serve large populations of marginalized learners and are labeled Title I schools, which are indicators of elevated levels of poverty among student and family populations. According to the school district's report cards, low socioeconomic status (SES) students of color comprised most of each high school's population. The local high schools integrated SEL with preexisting multiple tiers of student support (MTSS) to meet at-risk learners' needs better. Accordingly, in 2017 and 2018, each high school added an SEL program to its goals to achieve schoolwide improvement. Following the first year of SEL implementation, minimal progress was noted in the schools' Indistar status reports, which indicated a need for increased integration of multitiered support systems with social-emotional instructional practices. Further, the

schools' communities-in-schools coordinators and SEL expert staff (personal communication, December 12, 2019) confirmed that gaps exist between the school district's stated goals and teachers' classroom practices, resulting in low academic proficiency scores among specific student groups. Information regarding the school district in the state where this study occurred

revealed that SEL was included in the district's vision and goals in 2017. However, the district's statements from a report on youth justice indicated that disparities remained prevalent on the state and local levels in racial equity, discipline referrals, suspension among at-risk youth of color, and high school dropout rates. The high schools in this study serve student bodies of more than 85% minority at-risk learners. According to Hegedus (2018), schools that serve free and reduced lunches demonstrated an influx of students from impoverished communities. Discipline referrals, gang violence, substance abuse, high suspension rates, and rising dropout rates remained prevalent in these schools.

Along with MTSS, to improve the low-performance status, the district policymakers determined that SEL practices needed to be integrated into the high school's curriculum and classroom practices to support students. Accordingly, the high school's leadership teams added Indistar as an indicator of the SEL program initiative's consistency and the accomplishment level of the school improvement goals for 2017 through 2021. Leadership team minutes indicated that Indistar's rubric of completion reported that SEL goals remained only partially met because of a lack of training. Discussions with school experts revealed that professional training for teachers to learn SEL strategies was virtually nonexistent. In 2019, one of the high school communities-in-schools coordinators (personal communication, December 12, 2019) confirmed that breaches existed between the curriculum put forth by the school district and practice in the teachers' classrooms. These schools' leadership meeting notes and professional development (PD) agendas showed that SEL practices and intervention programs such as SEL should be systemically integrated into instructional lesson plans and daily classroom practices. Furthermore, high school state report cards, which displayed high-needs areas that SEL would address, indicated that deficient and inconsistent SEL employment remained a problem for schools and staff.

Subsequently, the study site attempted implementation of SEL strategies in high schools where state report cards revealed marginalized students continued to have problems with social-emotional competence (SEC). The district and school improvement plans indicated teachers' need for modeled strategies to help them understand how to work with struggling students. As a result, in 2017, the school district created a departmental team to address SEL in elementary and middle schools. In contrast, the district's high school policymakers discussed the need for SEL to increase learners' abilities to matriculate from high school into society. Through SEL platforms, learners can be equipped with the skillsets that every individual requires to become productive community members. The school's leadership team meeting minutes declared SEL a goal to be revisited; however, no initiatives for training staff in SEL and the CASEL framework for SEL ensued.

Significance of the Study

A significant body of research supports school districts' implementation of social-emotional teaching practices using the five-construct CASEL framework to improve at-risk students' academic identity and performance. The CASEL organization was founded to help preschool through high school institutions create high-quality SEL programs (CASEL, 2018). Programs for the early school levels have had a positive effect on children in early childhood programs (CASEL, 2018). However, the consistency with which high school teachers implement SEL practices remains unknown (assistant principal, personal communication, August 28, 2019). Likewise, B. L. Kennedy and Soutullo (2018) noted that secondary teachers' perceptions of SEL programs and practices integral to the program's success remain unclear. This study addressed the problem that high school teachers in a local Southeast regional school district lack consistent SEL instructional implementation.

The goals of SEL are to build students' social and emotional skillsets and to embed the teaching of those skillsets into daily lesson plans and teachers' practices. In the local setting, students of color, particularly Black and Hispanic males, experienced failure academically and socially (Brinkley et al., 2018). According to Brinkley et al. (2018), the local school district where I conducted my study had experienced prominent levels of low academic performance and escalated discipline referrals among marginalized males of color. Brinkley et al. asserted that teachers' relationships, expectations, and biases are vital to addressing the low academic performance and escalating discipline issues noted in this student population.

This study contributes to the educational field by providing information to assist the school and district's stakeholders with policy and curriculum decisions regarding SEL implementation in their high schools. According to Tan et al. (2018), instructors' perceptions about SEL drive how they teach at-risk high school students. Through heightened awareness of SEL competencies and practices, the educational community might benefit from improved teaching and learning practices, enriched student social-emotional skills, and higher academic achievement of at-risk learners. SEL environments can equip students with relationship skills, self-management, and decision-making acumen, resulting in academic confidence and improved self-efficacy

(Domitrovich et al., 2017). Armed with those skills, at-risk high school students may have increased opportunities to evolve into proactive adults with an increased capacity to benefit their community and society.

1.1.1 *Purpose of the Study and Research Questions*

The study's research question (RQ) and sub-RQs were structured to address the problem of high school teachers in a local Southeast regional school district lacking consistent SEL instructional implementation. These high schools have characteristics that mirror the urban and rural qualities of the nation's public schools. The overarching RQ focused on high school teachers' perspectives regarding implementing the SEL curriculum using the CASEL framework. The sub-RQs were structured to solicit information about teachers' beliefs that were influenced by their perceptions of SEL implementation, consistency, and effectiveness in their classrooms and schools. Moreover, the RQ and sub-RQs facilitated an examination of teachers' beliefs about the influences of SEL on their students' outcomes. The RQ and sub-RQs are listed as follows:

RQ: What are high school teachers' perceptions regarding their instructional implementation of the SEL curriculum using the CASEL framework?

Sub-RQ1: What are high school teachers' perceptions about the consistency with which they employ SEL practices in the classroom?

Sub-RQ2: What are high school teachers' perceptions about the influence of SEL on student outcomes?

2. Methodology and Sample

This study used a basic qualitative research method approach to answer the research questions and understand educators' perceptions and SEL perspectives. In addition, teachers' self-reported knowledge of SEL strategies that align with the CASEL conceptual framework and their perspectives on SEL's influence on student outcomes were explored. Purposive sampling was used to purposefully select participants based on the core constructs and the contexts of the RQ and sub-RQs. Participants selected for the study had similar knowledge and experiences of the phenomenon. In selecting a sample for this study, the selection was expansive enough to minimize bias, determined which attributes mirrored features of the broader population and attain transferability; and discerned the sample's ability to address the research problem, purpose, and questions. 10 ELA teachers were recruited from a population of both schools' 180 teachers and explored their perceptions regarding SEL using the CASEL framework. The general population in this research study consisted of secondary education teachers from all interdisciplinary content areas. The criteria for inclusion in the study were that the participants must be actively teaching ELA in one of the district high schools and teaching at a school that served 40% or higher Hispanic and African American populations where at least 50% of the students received free or reduced lunch. At each of the high schools in this study, the teacher population consisted of more than 90 teachers serving a minimum of 1300 students; the teacher-to-student ratio was 16 students per teacher. At each of the two high schools in this study, there were 20 ELA teachers, five for each grade level, including those who co-taught in inclusion and self-contained ELA classrooms. All teachers at both high schools possessed some familiarity with SEL.

3. Data Analysis and Results

In this basic qualitative study, data was collected through semistructured interviews and maintained a researcher journal to identify teachers' perspectives on SEL using the CASEL framework. Saldaña (2016) suggested that the coding process began with deductive a priori coding followed by inductive in vivo coding cycles. Priori codes were created, aligned with empirical data and the conceptual framework of the research study. In vivo coding was used while reviewing the interview transcripts and researcher notes to detect patterns and trends in the participants' responses based on their lived experiences and in their own words. Six main themes emerged regarding high school teachers' perceptions of incorporating SEL into the curriculum: (a) teachers' perceptions, mindsets, and biases drive pedagogy; (b) consistent and continuous training is needed to build teachers' SEC; (c) SEL instructional planning is key to successful implementation; (d) knowledge and use of SEL strategies are inconsistent and minimal; (e) barriers to SEL impede successful program implementation; and (f) teachers struggle to assess SEC in their students. A priori codes, interview questions, and categories connected to the RQ and sub-RQs.

Theme 1: Teachers' Perceptions, Mindsets, and Biases Drive Pedagogy

The primary RQ was: "What are high school teachers' perceptions regarding their instructional implementation of the SEL curriculum using the CASEL framework?" The emerging theme was congruent with the study's primary research query. The effect of teachers' attitudes on their self-identity, efficacy, and openness to SEL programs in their secondary schools was connected to the first theme of this research. The participants provided their perspectives on SEL objectives and their attitudes toward acknowledging and addressing their biases, significantly influencing the implementation of SEL practices. The participants believed that all students can learn; however, only one expressed that all students can learn despite their demographics.

Bardach et al. (2022) asserted that teachers who are aware of their perceptions of students' strengths and weaknesses can address and mitigate their personal biases and adopt a growth mindset. Efficacy influences the effort teachers put into their practice, their level of aspiration, and the objectives they set for themselves and their students (B. L. Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018). Teachers with high self-efficacy and aspirations are more open and willing to try new techniques to address the requirements of their pupils (Moser, 2018). When confronted with obstacles with their students, teachers' tenacity and resilience are influenced by their self-efficacy beliefs (Aldrup et al., 2020).

At the beginning of each semistructured interview, each participant was asked about their teaching philosophy and the extent to which they perceived it as a guiding principle for their educational approaches. The purpose of the question was to gain awareness of high school teachers' sense of identity and efficacy, along with their implicit or explicit biases regarding their students. Teachers' mindsets about their students can enable or impede their ability to form essential relationships with their pupils. Studies on education and development have shown that the quality of interactions between teachers and students in the classroom environment is a crucial factor that affects students' academic performance (Ansari et al., 2020). Social and relational dynamics between teachers and students play a key role in determining the effectiveness of teaching and learning processes. Incorporating interview questions focusing on educators' teaching philosophies, including their teaching methods, approaches to learning, and social-emotional development, provided valuable insight into their cognitive frameworks and perspectives on SEL in their educational institutions. Participants' responses to questions about their teaching philosophies revealed that 80% believed students lacked essential skills for success in academic and real-world settings.

Throughout the interview responses, participants expressed concern for their students' educational experiences from early childhood to secondary school. They worried about the negative effect trauma and prior academic failure could have on students' self-identity and engagement with school. Their responses also revealed how teachers' expectations of students affected their application of SEL strategies and how those were applied in their instructional practice. In contrast, Teachers 2–9 reported that based on their background, pupils lacked social-emotional skillsets, resulting in numerous absences, poor decision-making, and increased drop-out rates. Instructors also responded that their pupils entered high school reading at an extremely low level and that instructors should not be held accountable for their students' lack of academic abilities and inability to read at or above grade level.

Teachers who adopt negative views of their students often exhibit increased stress, frustration, and exhaustion that emerge in ways that students notice and internalize and may impede academic and relational outcomes (Brinkley et al., 2018). According to Jagers et al. (2019), teachers with a growth mindset noted more growth in students' academic and SEC. However, educators and educational stakeholders with a deficit or negative mindsets have impeded school equity (Legette et al., 2022).

During the interviews, questions about teacher-student relationships followed the questions about teaching philosophies. Teachers' capacity to build positive relationships with their students is integral to SEL implementation (B. L. Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018). Further, without teacher-student connections, the capacity to guide and engage learners in other important SEL activities is limited (Bos et al., 2019). Eight of the 10 participants believed that building teacher-student relationships was essential to student success. Participants who did not strongly believe that instructors should have equal rapport with their pupils stated that teachers should form connections with them but not friendships. These participants provided examples of how to create trust with students while maintaining a tough, no-nonsense position regarding pupils' accomplishments.

Theme 2: Consistent and Continuous Training Is Needed to Build Teachers' SEC

The second theme aligned with sub-RQ1: "What are high school teachers' perceptions about the consistency with which they employ SEL practices in the classroom?" Respondents were asked to share their experiences implementing SEL strategies within their pedagogy. Eighty percent of the participants expressed uncertainty regarding the identification of SEL-specific techniques. They also requested comprehensive training to enhance their confidence in designing and implementing SEL activities within the conventional curriculum. Although it was expected for teachers to have knowledge of SEL strategies, given that the school district's SEL initiative had been in place since 2017, eight of the 10 participants' responses revealed they had little knowledge of SEL classroom strategies.

Most participants indicated that their lack of self-efficacy and inconsistent use of SEL strategies was due to a deficiency in continued training. Eighty percent of the participants admitted they received little to no SEL training. Comparably, Teachers 1-10 acknowledged that they required prolonged and explicit training in SEL techniques and strategies to enable their planning and implementation of SEL strategies in their daily practice.

The same participants expressed dissatisfaction with the unfulfilled promise of SEL training and instruction. Teachers 1, 2, and 3 shared that they received no formal SEL training at their schools or the district level.

Teachers 8 and 10 had different experiences with SEL training in their respective schools than the rest of the participants. Both taught at high schools, which were considered SEL charter schools, where training occurred monthly for teachers and their coaches. In those schools, teachers were given scripted lesson exemplars that facilitated integrating SEL activities into each unit. However, Teacher 10 related that since arriving in the current district (the district for this study), “SEL goals had been mentioned in passing, but no formal training took place” in the 2 years they had been employed there. Despite Teacher 8 reporting ongoing training and Teacher 10 not experiencing training, both concurred with the remaining 80% of participants who felt that SEL training should be more in-depth and consistent to achieve sustainability.

Theme 2, which emerged from participants' responses to questions about the consistent use of SEL strategies in daily teaching, indicates a need for consistent SEL training for teachers to encourage them to employ SEL strategies in their daily practice. Researchers studying SEL training and PD concluded that PD that supports teacher autonomy is the most effective and proactive method of teacher training. Imants and Van der Wal (2020) focused on teachers' SEC, autonomy, and agency by conducting a meta-analysis in response to rising interest in teacher agency in PD. Imants and Van der Wal promoted a model to view PD and school reform using a five-prong teacher agency approach. Subsequently, they analyzed and outlined the agency model as a viable instrument for integrating school reform and PD. Further, they outlined key components of teacher agency models to address the need for teacher ownership in the workplace and increased capacity of schools to promote sustainable transformation. In creating an SEL PD as the project deliverable for my study, I incorporated the components for teacher agency outlined by Imants and Van der Wal.

Theme 3: SEL Instructional Planning Is Key to Successful Implementation

Theme 3 aligned with sub-RQ1 concerning consistently implementing SEL strategies in daily practice through intentional lesson planning. The success of SEL in schools largely depends on the teacher's ability to infuse unit lessons with opportunities for students to practice and apply social-emotional skills. However, research supports the participants in this study's recognition of the difficulty they faced when integrating SEL into the traditional curriculum (Ferreira et al., 2020). Significant findings from the data analysis and identification of Theme 3 included the need for educators to receive additional planning and preparation time and SEL training.

All 10 participants expressed the significance of SEL instructional preparation for teachers. This theme highlights the crucial role that planning plays in enabling teachers to incorporate SEL methods into their teaching practices effectively. Additionally, it emphasizes the need to create SEL learning environments that provide students with ample opportunity to cultivate and use social-emotional skillsets. This theme further emphasizes the importance of evaluating students' academic and social-emotional development in relation to SEL education. For teachers to experience a sense of efficacy in implementing SEL strategies, it is imperative they receive comprehensive training that encompasses a deep understanding and proficiency in cognitive, social, and behavioral abilities (Imants & Van der Wal, 2020). These skill sets can enable educators to integrate SEL strategies and activities seamlessly into their curriculum and daily practice.

In response to the interview questions related to instructional planning, all teachers agreed that planning lessons fused with the academic curriculum is integral to their ability to implement SEL strategies into daily instruction effectively. While eight of the 10 participants concurred that no planning time had been dedicated to SEL instruction, two specified that instructional planning occurred weekly and that SEL was emphasized in unit planning.

All participants perceived SEL training as an essential component encompassing a comprehensive understanding of the objectives and strategies associated with teachers' social-emotional development. Further, all participants preferred a proficient instructor to exemplify SEL methodologies in the classroom, especially when engaging with students classified as high-risk. Participants in the study agreed that changing the class schedule to incorporate 70–90-minute intervals would be another way to improve planning efficiency. By implementing this modification, teachers would have additional time to design and execute SEL strategies effectively. Moreover, this approach would allow students to engage in collaborative activities, assume leadership roles, and actively employ SEL skills in each instructional lesson.

Educators commonly recognize training as a crucial component in attaining the SEL objectives of the district and schools (Mischenko et al., 2022). Participants of the current study agreed that adopting authentic SEL strategies would benefit at-risk students. These strategies are anticipated to support students in developing

and enhancing their SEC and academic performance. All participants concurred that emphasis on high-stakes testing should not be the central aspect of SEL program design.

Participants agreed that having the chance to see seasoned educators who have effectively incorporated SEL techniques was advantageous. Considering these findings, it is important to hold introspective conversations about the identified strategies before attempting to implement SEL practices independently.

Theme 4: Knowledge and Use of SEL Strategies Are Inconsistent and Minimal

The fourth theme emphasized that teachers felt compelled to use SEL strategies in their classrooms but believed they were not provided adequate training for applying SEL strategies with fidelity. In addition to lacking the time and training to prepare lessons that adequately blended social-emotional development opportunities into daily academic lessons, high school teachers in the current study shared their concerns that high-stakes testing continued to take precedence over SEL in high school classrooms. Theme 4 aligned with sub-RQ1, which addressed the consistent use of SEL strategies in teachers' daily practice. Conversely, respondents could describe techniques they believed resembled SEL strategies but were hesitant to identify those strategies as methods that had a substantial effect on students' social-emotional skills.

Theme 4 also aligned with the primary RQ and sub-RQ 2, which focused on teachers' perceptions of SEL, their experiences, and consistent implementation of SEL strategies in their classrooms. The data indicates that teachers' knowledge of SEL is limited, and their implementation of SEL strategies is inconsistent. Participants in the study indicated they attempted to incorporate intervention strategies aligned with SEL programs and the CASEL framework. However, they acknowledged that they perceived their efforts would be more impactful if they received guidance and demonstrations from experts on effectively integrating specific SEL techniques into their daily instructional practices. The participants described how they used SEL tactics, such as boosting student participation during academic activities and developing their ability to recognize and sympathize with characters and situations depicted in textual readings. When asked to describe SEL strategies they consistently applied in their instruction, all 10 participants discussed encouraging students to connect to text(s) as the primary approach when employing SEL skills in their daily practice. However, none of the teachers could provide specific examples of intentional planning and use of SEL strategies in their practice.

Respondents also commented about giving students group or project-based assignments at least once in every unit, which required them to collaborate with classmates and present their views and connections to each topic. All 10 participants agreed that teachers have a scarcity of knowledge about SEL, the CASEL framework, the goals and constructs of both, and the strategies involved in SEL implementation. In response to the interview questions, Teachers 2–9 communicated that teachers lack general knowledge of SEL, CASEL, strategies, and assessment methods to measure students' mastery of SEL skillsets. Teacher 1 stated that SEL strategies at her school consisted of ELA teachers attempting to help students connect with characters and situations in the text but posited that the curriculum texts frequently lacked relevance to students' lives and situations.

Theme 5: Barriers to SEL Impede Successful Program Implementation

Theme 5 aligned with the primary RQ as the participants' perceived barriers to the implementation of SEL programs in high school. According to Mischenko et al. (2022), barriers to SEL implementation consist of relational trust between implementors and the curriculum team. Relational trust is considered the element that binds individuals together and promotes students' education and well-being. Relational trust implies a shared vision and values; school efforts may falter when that relationship erodes. Theme 5 emerged as teachers were questioned about their perceptions of obstacles that impede their successful implementation of SEL practices using the CASEL framework. Participants 1, 2, and 4–9 collectively identified several key barriers to effectively implementing SEL practices. These barriers included fragmented training, inadequate support from school and district leaders, insufficient time for the application, an overemphasis on academic testing, and challenges associated with student behavior.

Participants in this study expressed experiencing various barriers impeding their capacity to implement SEL practices successfully.

All participants, including those who taught at SEL schools, shared concerns about teacher turnover and the growing shortage of educators. Out of the 10 participants, eight reported encountering diverse obstacles while implementing SEL strategies. The hurdles included discrepancies in training, disruptions in behavior, frequent crises involving students, significant staff turnover, regular interruptions in administrative tasks, and demands from management. The intrusive character of high-stakes testing was also considered a barrier. Previous training had been conducted on diverse learning styles and establishing secure and inclusive learning environments.

Nevertheless, the prioritization of testing, adherence to a strict schedule, and the emphasis on continuous instruction overshadowed the attention given to nurturing social and emotional growth. The current study's findings indicated that these limitations substantially affected educational emphasis, hindering educators' ability to incorporate SEL into their daily instructional practice effectively.

Additional obstacles to achieving success were inconsistencies in supervision and discrepancies between the social-emotional development objectives and goals and expectations set by the district and the level of assistance provided by school administrators. One participant expressed concern over the limited engagement and lack of support from parents and the community within the prevailing political environment, which was a hurdle to the successful implementation of SEL in schools. Despite the obstacles mentioned here, all teachers expressed a willingness to move forward with engaging their students in SEL in the upcoming school terms and shared an interest in seeing improvements in their student's behavior and academic achievement.

Theme 6: Teachers Struggle to Assess SEC in Their Students

Theme 6 was derived from participants' responses to sub-RQ2: What are high school teachers' perceptions about the influence of SEL on student outcomes? Nine of the 10 participants found it difficult to articulate what social-emotional skillsets they should assess. They also expressed confusion and frustration about assessing students' mastery of SEL competencies. Teacher 1 explained that no formal SEL assessments had occurred at her school at any time.

The need for consistent use of SEL practices, training, and assessments emerged throughout this study. Mischenko et al. (2022) proposed that assessing teachers' integrity in applying SEL was equally important in determining SEL's influence on student outcomes. One way to assess practitioners' SEL implementation is their concern and expectations for their students and teachers' tactics to empower learners. Mischenko et al. identified examples of teachers who consistently used SEL methods throughout their study. For example, teachers may encourage pupils to work collaboratively and lead lessons (CASEL, 2018). However, educators find it difficult to assess student outcomes from strategies they have employed and struggle to ascertain the influences of SEL in their classrooms (Yeager et al., 2018).

When determining SEL influences on students, it is important to consider teachers' SEC (Ruiter et al., 2020). Further, when evaluating SEC in educators or learners, it is imperative to employ a variety of sources for assessment (Xu & Zammit, 2020). In the context of instructional evaluation, assessments may encompass several components, such as lesson plans, observations, and competence ratings. These assessments should be aligned with the indicators commonly seen in formative and summative teacher evaluations. Various assessment instruments have the potential to be productive in evaluating students' proficiency in SEC. Aldrup et al. (2020) developed the Test of Regulation in Understanding of Social Situations in Teaching to assess instructors' understanding of emotion control and relationship management tactics in emotionally and socially stressful circumstances with students. Oberle et al. (2020) recommended quantifying the quality of student-teacher connections as well as student experiences and learning in the classroom. As supported by the research, it is advisable to use multiple assessments to accurately measure the progress and attainment of skillsets related to SEL in both teachers and students (Abrahams et al., 2019).

To ensure equitable opportunities for academic success among students from prekindergarten to Grade 12, it is imperative that SEL programs receive comprehensive backing in the form of state and district policies, resources, and training. Research indicated a rising need to use accurate methods of evaluating teachers' and students' SEC. According to McKown and Taylor (2018), although there has been notable progress in implementing SEL policies and programs aimed at fostering the growth of student capabilities, there is a lack of research on evaluating student SEC. Methods for assessing teachers' effective use of SEL strategies that reach all learners pose obstacles to the effective implementation and sustainability of SEL programs (Ramberg et al., 2019). However, based on participant responses and the body of literature, my research findings demonstrated that educators also find constructing assessments for specific SEL skill sets among students difficult (Abrahams et al., 2019).

Abrahams et al. (2019) introduced novel frameworks and methodological methods, incorporating five essential dimensions of social-emotional development. These frameworks enhance practitioners' ability to assess the impact of SE on student outcomes. Participants reported gaps between setting goals for students' social-emotional development and their ability to assess their mastery of social-emotional skillsets accurately. Schools have various methods of quantifying students' academic progress; however, ascertaining adolescents' SEC has presented significant challenges. Assessing SEL standards across all grade levels is not consistently implemented nationwide. Further, performance descriptors are frequently implemented to illustrate how students might exhibit their achievement of a standard, specifically by showcasing the abilities or knowledge that signify the fulfillment of that requirement (CASEL, 2018). Learning standards play a significant role in delineating the content

educators must instruct and the knowledge and skills students are expected to acquire (CASEL, 2018). When standards are given due importance, they become a comprehensive plan or framework for instructional activities with a significant effect on the dynamics and outcomes of classroom practices (CASEL, 2021).

4. Conclusions

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of high school teachers in a local Southeast regional school district on their instructional implementation of the SEL curriculum, perceptions of their role in SEL, and views on the influence SEL practices have on student outcomes. The results revealed that SEL programming in high schools in this Southeast region is inconsistently applied despite existing goals to improve the social-emotional development of students and teachers. In my study, the data showed that high school teachers and school leaders support systemic SEL programming. The empirical research suggested that heightened self-awareness among teachers increases their self-efficacy and SEC (Mahoney et al., 2021). The study's data showed that the high school teachers in this study were less confident of their ability to integrate SEL into their curriculum effectively.

Findings suggest that SEL would be more consistently applied if adequate training were in place to strengthen teachers' self-identity, self-efficacy, and SEL acuity. The research corpus supports the need for more consistently implemented SEL in schools on local and national levels. The study's findings confirmed that teachers can improve their self-awareness and increase their SEC. The potential effect of this study's findings includes the improvement of teachers' SEC, which can build a school's capacity for systemic SEL (Mahoney et al., 2021). This study can potentially guide high school teachers in integrating high-quality SEL programming into daily classroom and school lessons and activities. This research study showed a need for a systemic approach to adopting SEL in schools, and the findings provide insight into what teachers require to assist them in designing and implementing SEL techniques into their everyday practice. The body of research in this study suggests that teachers' SEC is important to both teachers' occupational well-being and positive student development (Aldrup et al., 2020; Mahoney et al., 2021). The current study illustrates that teachers have the capacity and the desire to build SEC skillsets and, in doing so, meet social and emotional challenges inherent in educational settings.

The research study demonstrated that 80% of the teachers interviewed felt their school's climate was negative and shared the belief that SEL would improve the school climate and students' behavior. However, the research also showed that those teachers who found the workplace climate negative agreed that developing a SEL curriculum can improve the school environment and enhance students' behavior and academic performance. According to Taylor (2020), elementary school students exposed to SEL programs showed higher success rates in middle and high school. However, Bardach et al. (2022) stated that more research is necessary to expand knowledge of the influences of SEL on diverse populations.

Teachers in the research study concurred that SEL is needed in high school to increase the outcomes of economically disadvantaged students who enter ninth grade lacking social and emotional skillsets. Teachers also asserted that there was not enough emphasis on integrating SEL into daily instructional practices and that adequate training and support were integral to their ability to infuse SEL strategies into their lessons. However, the data revealed that the participants believed their high schools lacked consistent SEL knowledge, goals, and training they felt would assist them in creating an SEL environment in the classroom. CASEL (2018) asserted that the importance of SEL lies in its ability to transform students' lives by placing them on a successful life trajectory. Additionally, CASEL reported that teachers using SEL in their classrooms acknowledged positive influences on disadvantaged children.

Findings also indicated that instruments for measuring teachers' SEC are lacking, and theory-based models can be useful in developing those instruments (Abrahams et al., 2019; Aldrup et al., 2020; Ramberg et al., 2019). Further implications of the current research study include the probability that as teachers measure their personal SEC and growth, their improved self-efficacy and self-awareness will manifest in positive student growth and improved student outcomes. The implications for this study include building teachers' capacity to develop positive student-teacher relationships and, in turn, improve student outcomes for at-risk students. This study can also drive educational policy change, focusing on areas where teachers can begin implementing strategies in their daily practice. Further, the findings in this study can help educators improve PD to meet teachers' needs in implementing SEL, such as training in building SEL knowledge, building self-identity, planning ways to integrate SEL into daily lessons, and expanding SEL programming schoolwide.

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