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Educators' Perspectives on the Practices and Implementation of Social Emotional Learning Programs

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Document Type

Dissertation in Practice

Degree Name

Ed.D.

Department

Educational Administration and Policy Studies

First Advisor

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Keywords

CASEL, Implementation, Mindfulness, School engagement, SEL, Social emotional learning

Subject Categories

Education | Educational Methods

Publication Statement

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Educators' Perspectives on the Practices and Implementation
of Social Emotional Learning Programs

A Dissertation in Practice

Presented to

the Faculty of the Morgridge College of Education
University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

by

Monica Parra Ballon

August 2022

Advisor: Erin Anderson, Ph.D.

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Degree Date: August 2022

Abstract

This interview-based qualitative study sought educators' perceptions of best practices for and implementation of mindfulness and social and emotional learning (SEL) programs in the classroom in order to discern how SEL programs foster student socio-emotional wellbeing (e.g., self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision making). To do so, I conducted semi-structured interviews via videoconference with nine educators from public, private, and charter schools in the United States and Canada. Discussions include questions about personal experiences and implementation of SEL interventions. The recorded interviews were transcribed and coded to locate emergent themes. The present research revealed several training and implementation approaches that helped them with student discipline, academic achievement, and overall socio-emotional wellbeing. Furthermore, findings elucidated ways SEL changed educator approaches to classroom management using, tools, structures, and guidance for implementation; and illuminated practices and procedures for use in other school districts.

Key Words: *Social Emotional Learning, Mindfulness, Meditation, Implementation, Practices, Wellness, SEL, CASEL, School Climate, Emotional Engagement, School Culture, Theory of Action.*

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my phenomenal dissertation Chair, Dr. Erin Anderson for your unbelievable patience, brilliance, and wisdom. Dr. Susan Korach and Dr. Daniel Jorgensen, my amazing committee, thank you for your dedicated guidance and insight. I am grateful for my dissertation participants, my cohort, and my professors at the University of Denver who opened my mind and forever altered who I am in the world.

With deep gratitude, I honor all of my family for their endless love, devotion, and support for me to succeed in this humbling doctoral process. Immense gratitude to my dedicated husband Bob. I love you more every day and could not have done this without you loving me in all the ways I never imagined when we started this life journey together. A special thank you to my incredible children and my two sons-in-law, my greatest teachers: Lara, Zachary, Anna, Benjamin, Christopher, and Andy for your constant motivation, words of wisdom, juicy philosophical talks, and the countless ways you help me. To my siblings, nieces, nephews, and my soul sisters—C, J, S, and C— who guide me, and make me feel heard. To my heroes and beacons of light, my sisters Dr. Michelle Parra and Dr. Christina Christie: Thank you for your inspiration and for guiding my way with reassurance that I am worthy of pursuing and earning this degree.

A special dedication and acknowledgment to my parents Dennis and Jeannine for instilling in me a lifelong love and passion for learning. Your source of strength and unyielding “just do it” attitude make me who I am. I cherish memories of my beloved late father who started this incredible journey by my side. You will always be my steadfast spirit and source of inspiration to never give up and bring more love into the world.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all.

—Aristotle

Many who work in education—including teachers, administrators, students, and families—are adversely affected by the uncertainty and stress of today (Reynolds, 2020). Such stress can create unstable social and emotional learning (SEL) environments. Thus, vital social and emotional skills and self-management interventions have become as essential as academic skills (Crooks et al., 2020; Durlak et al., 2011). Indeed, Schonert-Reichl and colleagues (2017) note that “effective education includes practices that bolster students’ social-emotional competencies in tandem with their academic knowledge” (Schonert-Reichl, 2015, p. 52). Essentially, SEL is a framework for evidence-based practices and policies designed to help students attain the necessary skills to become responsible citizens through personal development by managing emotions; appreciating other perspectives; having empathy for others and expressing it; and setting and achieving positive goals (Durlak et al., 2011). As described by the Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), the framework for SEL includes self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. The guiding motto of CASEL (2005) is “educating hearts and inspiring minds using core SEL competencies” (p. 10). This study intends to provide an

understanding of educators' implementation practices for the successful use of SEL programs.

Background on the Problem

Student and teacher social and emotional competencies are a fundamental element in children's education affecting their academics, behavior, and potential for how productive they may become in society (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). SEL influences student and teacher wellbeing, engagement, responsiveness, and stress contagion (Oberle et al., 2016 & Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). SEL skills can be taught in the classroom providing teachers understand implementation and practices (Jones & Doolittle, 2017). Thus, SEL is essential to student academics, engagement, social responsibility, and the mission of schools (Jones & Doolittle, 2017). To address these concerns, researchers suggest looking at school as a holistic experience and building relationships to provide a more supportive classroom environment to improve stress regulation (Hawn Foundation, 2021). Improved classroom environments and student engagement depend on strong student and teacher relationships (Lieselotte Malboeuf-Hurtubise et al., 2016). Integrating mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) practices can also help lessen anxiety and stress, while enhancing overall mental health (Flook et al., 2013; Gouda et al., 2016).

Classroom climate, culture, and learning are influenced negatively by teacher and student stress (Collie et al., 2012). Present day stressors for students and teachers extend beyond the classroom environment, including racism, terrorism, natural disasters, social unrest, and more recently, the effects from the Coronavirus pandemic that began in 2020 (Pedrosa et al., 2020). Subsequently, the pandemic has intensified stress, anxiety, and

fear, further impacting those suffering from mental health issues (Pedrosa et al., 2020). Increasing rates of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and mental health issues create learning challenges (Brunzell et al., 2015). Students frequently find it difficult to adjust to the socio-cultural norms they experience at school (Upadyaya & Salmela-Aro, 2013).

Teacher stress is directly related to constant training and development, workplace expectations, and the reality of the teaching profession compared to expectations (Friedman, 2000). Teachers face a multitude of stressors, in what Kyriacos (2001) refers to as “unpleasant, negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety, tension, frustration or depression, resulting from their work as a teacher” (p. 28). Student discipline problems and overall classroom management contribute to teacher stress (Clunies-Ross et al., 2008; Collie et al., 2012; Klassen, 2010). Finally, as student populations become more culturally and academically diverse, effectively meeting the needs of every student brings new challenges for teachers (Bennett, 2012; Zoch, 2017; Connor et al., 2008).

In turn, teacher stress and lack of self-care can negatively affect the classroom environment, teaching, and student learning. Stress among teachers decreases students’ engagement and inhibits their ability to carry out the goals of the public school system (Flook et al., 2013; Guglelmi et al., 2016). To achieve success throughout the learning process student engagement is essential. The interplay of student stress and teacher stress creates a cycle wherein teachers struggle to support students’ SEL needs, increasing teacher stress and reducing student engagement (Collie et al., 2012). In order to support social and emotional wellness, we must address the cycle of stress among both teachers and students.

Colorado Department of Education Social and Emotional Wellness Standards

The Colorado Department of Education (CDE) recognizes the importance of SEL and stress reduction. SEL policies and practices are guided by the state, using the Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework. The framework for SEL interventions and CASEL was used by CDE to develop a curriculum for social and emotional wellness (SEW) standards. The CDE Colorado Academic Standards now have emotional and social wellness (ESW) standards embedded in the Comprehensive Health and Physical Education Standards. The standards guide educators' integration of SEL in classes and across the curriculum (CDE, 2021).

CDE suggested 31 different SEL program options for teachers and families to use during COVID-19 remote learning. SEL and MBSR teacher training, professional development, and support were provided by a number of organizations in order to implement academic learning with mindfulness. Indeed, certain mindfulness programs provide a framework for including mindfulness as a prosocial intervention in the classroom (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Myriad SEL programs are available online in a video or slide presentation format for educators to access and use for training or classroom curriculum. Some of the programs used by the educators in this study are Class Dojo; Go Noodle; the Kindness Program; the 5 C's; Mindfulness, Mindfulness Mindset; MindUP for Life; Rethink Ed; Second Step; Social Skills Improvement System; and programs created and developed by the schools. Many of these programs offer content that is accessible online. These online programs have changed SEL implementation by providing online access for curriculum planning and lesson videos.

Teachers and students have access to SEL practices while at school, online, and at home due to online resources provided by CASEL. Students and teachers can use these practices virtually if they cannot be together in person. Building leaders can rely on SEL interventions, such as Brain Gym, Go Noodle, the Kindness Program, and Mind-Up, to educate teachers on how to create a stimulating learning environment in the classroom to raise student achievement and SEL. Many students returned to in-person learning in the 2020–2021 school year with new academic and social challenges as a consequence of extended virtual learning. Indeed, students’ lack of personal contact with their teachers and peers and social and emotional difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic led to new social, emotional, and academic problems (Pedrosa et al., 2020).

Problem Statement

A majority of mental illness (80%) begins in childhood and can lead to outcomes such as disability, sickness, and death (Vohra et al., 2019). In 2022, policymakers, practitioners, and families recognize the need for mental health services for students, as they endure global pandemics, school shootings, climate change, and political and racial unrest in our increasingly stressful world. Acute and ongoing stress both negatively affect student learning and wellbeing. In order to support the positive mindsets of both students and teachers, SEL needs to be a regular feature of school programming.

Although there is greater recognition of the need to support student SEL, it can be challenging to select a program, train educators and families, and offer support during school (Durlak, 2015)—especially as worldwide there is an abundance of school culture and improvement programs. Furthermore, numerous school districts invest large sums of

money every few years in school-improvement programs. Teaching and learning are unique to each educator and student, requiring an educators' willingness to provide a learning environment that promotes a mindful classroom climate and culture and ensures social and emotional wellness. When done well, a mindful classroom environment can drastically change students' educational paths and open doors for learning, personal development, and academic and professional success (Crane et al., 2010).

Purpose Statement

This study aims to understand SEL program implementation, which may include improved teacher and student problem solving and coping mechanisms, and improved academic performance. A sustainable SEL program may provide students with skills to become calm, focused, responsible, and self-aware to help them with life, learning, and social-emotional wellbeing (Vohra et al., 2019). Ideally, when using an SEL program, teachers adopt and model these practices for students. A program can provide classroom and online support so that teachers and students are independent and responsible for their mental and physical wellbeing. Daily use of SEL practices by teachers and students strengthens mindfulness's effectiveness and fosters a positive classroom environment (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). Strosahl and Robinson's (2015) recent study on neuroplasticity and the benefits of mindfulness practices, found that these practices help increase the brain's attention, emotional regulation, and problem-solving regions. SEL programs provide tools for teachers to help students calm their minds and have more focus, and SEL tools taught at school are likely to be utilized at home as well. The

consistent use of SEL is intended to improve classroom climate and culture, and ultimately create a more mindful classroom environment.

Research Questions

Two key questions guided the present research:

1. What are the practices for implementing SEL programs at various K–12 schools in the United States and Canada?
2. What are educator’s perceptions of how social-emotional programs foster student SEL and CASEL core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness?

The theory of improvement for this study is that through a better understanding of the practices and implementation of SEL programs, school leaders can support student and teacher wellbeing. Teachers will achieve a deeper connection with students and parents, as they create stronger connections, exert better control in their classroom, and ultimately deliver instruction free from anxiety, behavioral issues, and stress (Shonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). Eventually, SEL programs may foster improved learning techniques and encourage students to be self-motivated and responsible. A student’s connection to the value of their education and personal successes will feel more fulfilling as their interactions, attitudes, and motivation alter their performance (Farrington et al., 2012)

Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

As described earlier, the CASEL motto is “Educating Hearts, Inspiring Minds,” which embodies mindfulness education and SEL. The implementation of SEL programs like mindfulness in schools and districts around the world is supported by CASEL programs which also include coursework, research, and methodology (CASEL, 2017). Dusenbury and colleagues (2019) explain that the CASEL framework is implicitly developmental, as it measures the framework for SEL. Mindfulness practices are an intervention for improving awareness of what one is feeling internally, for self-regulation, and advocating care for others. These mindfulness practices affect SEL and teacher-student relationships by improving communication, focus, engagement, and student behavior, thereby reducing stress and impacting the classroom climate and culture (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Student achievement throughout the learning process depends on their level of participation. The likelihood that pupils will learn well increases as their level of engagement and interest in the subject increases. (Chiesa & Serretti, 2009). The effects of mindfulness practices on the social and emotional health of both students and instructors become more significant as they become more prevalent in classrooms.

The CASEL framework outlines five interrelated competencies related to engagement and academic success: (a) two focused on self (self-awareness, self-management), (b) two focused on interacting with others (social awareness, relationship skills), and (c) one focused on responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020). These five

competencies present a framework to evaluate the implementation and perceived benefits of SEL programs. I explain these competencies in more detail in the literature review.

Significance of the Study

The COVID-19 pandemic “has caused an unprecedented shift to a new type of learning experience” (CASEL, 2020). Shields (2018) argues for transformative leadership in describing the challenges of living in our present-day world of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA): “Especially in the VUCA social milieu of the 21st century, with the constantly rising cost of commodities, housing foreclosures, homelessness, high unemployment rates, and so forth, countless families are struggling to survive” (p. 35). The VUCA system is unpredictable and profoundly impacts SEL and wellness among teachers and students. Shields (2018) argues further:

To be a transformative leader in this VUCA world, we need to convince people of the importance of being inclusive, and of reconstructing the ways in which we think about children, families, cultures, the curriculum, and the wider society (p. 44).

New challenges arise every day, and not knowing what pandemic restrictions will occur makes preparing for an unknown future ever more difficult.

One of the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and our present world is the social and emotional wellbeing of our students, teachers, and communities. To create a school climate conducive to learning, reducing stress, healing, and thriving, school leaders must consider new approaches when it pertains to professional development in order to better equip teachers and promote interventions that support social and emotional competence. (CASEL, 2020). Teachers and students returned to in-person learning during the 2020–2021 and 2021–2022 school years and were challenged because of gaps caused

by virtual learning during the pandemic. The lack of personal contact with teachers and peers and social and emotional difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic lead to new social, emotional, and academic problems (CASEL, 2022).

School leaders count on SEL interventions to instruct teachers in creating a stimulating learning environment in the classroom and enhance social emotional wellness and academic performance. Learning SEL skills at school and home will enhance classroom and school climate by assisting students in discovering long-term solutions for managing stress. Additionally, individuals who receive SEL training also have access to lifelong practices. A positive social change could be induced by identifying the professional development training and practices for SEL implementation at school and home for teachers, students, and families, changing the emotional health and culture of our society.

Limitations

This study's limitations were based on the level of SEL practices used by teachers and students in the classroom. The variability of each school's professional development to support the implementation of SEL influenced how they report practices. Additionally, measuring effectiveness based on participant perceptions may have introduced bias into the data. The present study seeks to understand practices under normal circumstances as well as during remote learning; however, teacher's current experiences with SEL programs have been greatly impacted by COVID-19, which presents another limitation. In short, the pandemic may have influenced the findings.

Delimitations

The aim of this research was to discover practices for implementing the SEL program in a school environment. For that reason, the subjects to be investigated are the administrators and teachers responsible for the SEL implementation in their schools. Therefore, the experiences of these individual participants may look different than other urban, suburban, or rural schools.

Organization of the Study

In this chapter, I discuss the background to the problems at hand and the shift in education toward a more holistic focus. This included the implementation of SEL interventions, with the promise of reducing student anxiety, stress, and depression; and the hope of changing the trajectory of social and emotional wellness in our classrooms. Practicing SEL interventions, students will acquire five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2013). The goal of the present research is to 1) discern the practices for implementing SEL programs into classrooms and 2) understand teachers' perspectives of the SEL program. Understanding the ramifications of stress-induced anxiety, depression, and poor mental health on the brain and body, as well as the available interventions to improve social emotional wellness to positively transform the future of education. This chapter concludes with definition of key terms. In chapter two, I review seminal literature on SEL, and the CASEL core competencies. In chapter three, I discuss the methods for my research. Chapter four is the research findings and chapter five offers a summary and conclusion.

Definitions of Key Terminology

School Climate – Social interdependence theory has an impact on how the environment is generated by the interactions of the school’s professional members (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). In addition, student and staff behaviors are influenced overall by the school environment (Hoy & Sabo, 1998).

Emotional Engagement – Increasing students and teachers abilities to think, feel, and act in ways that will help them learn and process new information and make social transitions.

School Culture – An organization’s identity is established by its values, beliefs, and procedures for conducting business or maintaining order (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The organizational leadership of the school environment contributes to ongoing changes in school culture. It is the method that a group can utilize to address issues (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). It also involves administrators, faculty, and other staff members’ ability to collaborate around their shared beliefs, values, and assumptions.

Learning – Constant growth in human potential or performance as a results from the learner's interactions and experiences with the outside world (Driscoll, 2020).

Perspective – The current condition of one's thoughts and the knowledge of facts are important in developing deep relationships.

Mindfulness – Jon Kabat-Zinn (1994) said:

Paying attention, on purpose in the present moment non-judgmentally” (p.4)...in mindfulness practice we commit fully to be present...inviting ourselves to

interface with this moment in full awareness, with the intention to embody as best we can an orientation of calmness, mindfulness, and equanimity right here and right now... (Kabat Zinn n.d., Schneider (1997).

Practicing this daily in every experience be it sitting still or moving and becoming aware of our body, mind, thoughts, and emotions with no judgement (Kabat Zinn, 1994; *Handbook of Mindfulness in Education*, 2016).

MBSR – A program called mindfulness-based stress reduction uses meditation to “alleviate suffering associated with physical psychosomatic and psychiatric disorders” (Grossman et al., 2004). MBSR is mindfulness with the added benefit of reducing negativity and increasing vitality and coping skills.

MindUP – The Brain & Brain Break, Kindness, Gratitude, Parent and Teacher Training Workshops, and other programs are a few examples of engaging ways to incorporate MindUP courses into online and offline environments with this evidence-based curriculum. (MindUP, n.d.).

Neuroscience – Learning how the brain and neural system are structured and operate including thinking and managing emotions (Watagodakumbura, 2020).

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) – The skills and awareness acquired by individuals to manage themselves in relationships, socially, and in responsible decision making.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The research for this project began with a strong desire to understand how to improve classroom culture and climate through interventions aimed at improving social and emotional wellness. The problem of teacher and student stress is rooted in the stress of everyday living and is compounded by global pandemics, school shootings, climate change, war, and political and racial unrest. Such stressors can be remediated through mindfulness practices embedded in SEL interventions. However, research on available mindfulness and SEL curricula is scant, and research on implementation practices for SEL in schools is even more limited.

As a field, mindfulness and SEL research is in its infancy, and research on mindfulness and SEL for children is a small but growing subfield. Even so, through a process of careful cross-disciplinary research, I attempted to uncover the most relevant discussions of mindfulness-based SEL practices, implementation, and social-emotional wellness. Search tools employed in constructing this literature review include the University of Denver Libraries' primary search function (Compass), disciplinary databases like ERIC, peer-reviewed education and psychology journals, Google Scholar, ProQuest, and various subject-specific books. Searches were conducted using a series of related key words, such as *brain function*, *school culture and climate*, *meditation*, *mindfulness*, *social-emotional learning*, *social emotional wellness*, *teacher stress*, *student*

stress, and anxiety in uncertain times. As well, literature by leaders in mindfulness, CASEL, the five C's, the Kindness Program, SEL, MBSR, MindUP, Second Step, such as Jon Kabat Zinn, Kimberly Schonert-Reichl, Molly Lawlor, and others were consulted and included in searches.

The literature review is organized thematically, with a focus on major themes in published literature (Creswell, 2015). First, I describe the benefits of SEL, Mindfulness, and MBSR. Then, I discuss CASEL and SEL interventions and practices as strategies to improve student and teacher engagement, reduce stress, and improve social-emotional wellness. The discussion includes a review of seminal studies investigating mindfulness, SEL theory of action; practices and implementation in schools; and integrating mindfulness and SEL training, classroom methods, curriculum, and professional development (PD). Due to the presence of remote learning during the years for this study, I also include research on the role of technology as related to SEL and mindfulness.

Social and Emotional Learning

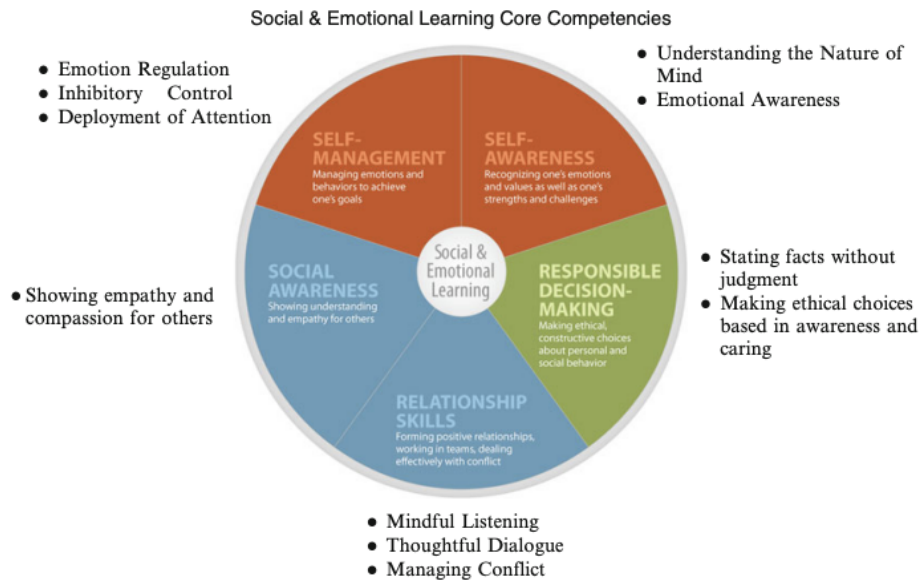
Building on psychology and emotional intelligence research (Salvoy & Mayer, 1990), CASEL (2020) developed SEL in 1994 as “a framework for social improvement.” SEL aims to improve students' overall well-being, including social skills, mental health, and academics (Durlak et al., 2015). Over the last couple of decades, the United States has implemented SEL to varying degrees, closely focused on academics. (Oberle et al., 2016). In 2014, Siegel and colleagues introduced the new three Rs in education: resilience, reflection, and healthy relationships. Durlak et al. (2011) carried out a

significant meta-analysis using 213 papers and 270,034 SEL-trained K–12 pupils.

According to this study, students who received SEL interventions outperformed non-receiving pupils in academic growth by 11%.

Development of the five core competencies identified by CASEL (2020): self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making—is the aim of SEL interventions (see Figure 2.1) (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2020). Figure 2.1 shows the CASEL practices that help “deepen the development of the social-emotional competencies” (CASEL, 2013; Lawlor, 2016, p. 171). Together, mindfulness and SEL “focus on the education of the whole child with emphasis on the development of positive self, moral, social and emotional understanding” (Lawlor, 2016, p. 166,).

Figure 2.1 Social and Emotional Learning Core Competencies



Note. Figure adapted from Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (2013), Schonert-Reichl & Roeser (2016, p. 69).

Social and Emotional Learning Core Competencies

In the following section, I explain the five SEL competencies—(a) self-awareness, (b) self-management, (c) social awareness, (d) relationship skills, and (e) responsible decision-making—and offer examples of research or SEL practices that connect mindfulness to academic or social outcomes for students.

Self-Awareness. This first competency refers to an understanding the way the mind functions in terms of feelings and thoughts, and how individuals value and think of themselves, and their strengths, limitations, and purposes. Self-awareness answers the question, “Who am I” (Lawlor, 2016, p. 69). This competency works with the other five SEL competencies to foster confidence and optimism with a “growth mindset.” Practices that help increase self-awareness are focused breathing, reflective thinking and writing, and quiet time in the classroom. (CASEL, 2013).

Self-Management. Self-management is controlling one’s thoughts to delay gratification, temptation, impulses, and impatience (CASEL, 2013). Essentially, it requires attention to one’s inner thoughts to regulate emotions, manage stress, and take action to achieve goals (CASEL, 2013) as part of cognitive executive functioning (EF). The prefrontal cortex manages EF, and developing it “improves cognitive control and emotional regulation from childhood through early adulthood” (Lawlor, 2016, p. 71; Casey et al., 2008).

Social Awareness. The ability to comprehend the social and ethical norms of others—including empathy, taking different perspectives, showing concern and feeling another’s emotions, and expressing gratitude —characterizes social awareness (CASEL,

2013). Perspective-taking is one of the exercises used in the classroom to foster social awareness. In the perspective-taking exercise, individuals practice reframing stories to understand different perspectives and develop empathy and compassion for self and others. Empathy can be fostered, for instance, by actively portraying characters in a play. (MindUP, 2013). Shonert-Reichl's (2015) research on SEL found improvements in empathy and prosocial behaviors with early adolescents.

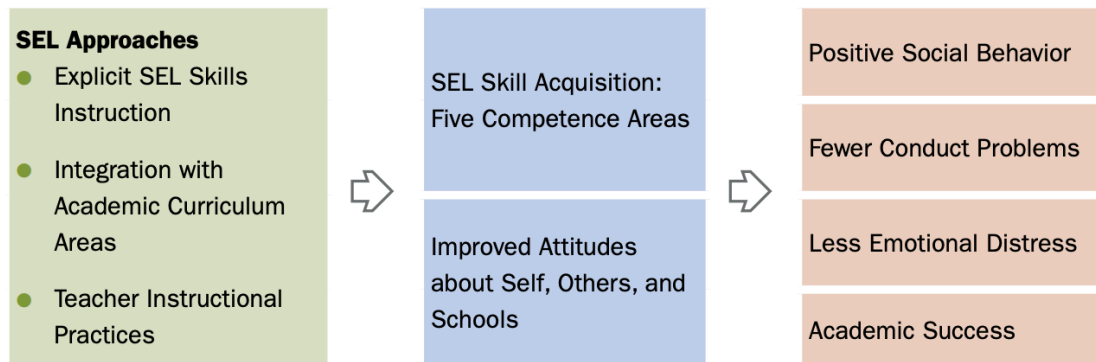
Relationship Skills. Developing positive and healthy relationships with others through communication, team building, and showing leadership comprise relationship skills. Furthermore, communication skills such as listening can help students understand other cultures, collaborate, and resolve conflict among diverse individuals and groups (CASEL, 2013). One skill used in school to develop mindful listening is the practice of the ringing of a bell and asking students to tune into their sense of listening to increase their focus. Other mindful listening exercises includes listening to different sounds in the classroom or going outside and identifying all the sounds. Playing a game of “telephone” with elementary age students can sharpen listening skills by hearing what others are saying and practicing repeating back exactly what they say. Such skills extend beyond the classroom into everyday life (MindUP, 2013).

Responsible Decision-Making. Student success depends on making positive decisions about our behavior, our words, and how we connect with others. In responsible decision-making, individuals observe without judgement, comparison, or manipulation of others; they are present in the moment, and attentive to the wellbeing of self and others.

Responsible decision-making takes into consideration all five of the SEL competencies (CASEL, 2012).

Students, teachers, and families can develop positive relationships by providing the framework they need to master the five competencies created by CASEL. Positive school behavior, mindset, culture, and home life are built on these practices. SEL programs using the CASEL framework prepare students to control their emotional and social wellbeing. In particular, the five competencies are especially important as children begin school and prepare to socialize with classmates and adults. The five competencies provide a foundation for improved social skills and academic achievement (Durlak et al., 2011). Essentially, the five competencies can be taught to children from all cultures and developmental stages from preschool through high school to gain more confidence, maintain a healthy perspective of themselves and others, and succeed in academics as they contribute to their families and community (CASEL, 2020).

Figure 2.2 Outcomes Associated with the Five Competencies



Note. Adapted from CASEL, 2013.

CASEL SElect Programs

In 2003, CASEL began identifying effective SEL programs—so-called, CASEL SElect Programs—and published guides for preschool and elementary programs, and middle and high schools. CASEL evaluates SEL programs using a systematic methodology to determine well-designed empirically supported SEL programs. The guidelines objective is to assist educators in choosing and implementing SEL initiatives. CASEL (2020) devised an evaluation guide for CASEL SElect programs in 2013 for preschool and elementary schools and in 2015 for middle and high schools. In 2020 CASEL revised the criteria for CASEL SElect programs implementation. CASEL developed four main criteria to be designated as a CASEL SElect program:

1. During the school day, PreK–12 students are involved in a general, school-based program that assesses and evaluates implementation (CASEL, 2020).
2. A pre-post quasi-experimental (QE) design or a pre-post randomized control trial (RCT) evaluation is employed with an adequate comparison group (CASEL, 2020).
3. The evaluation, which has already taken into account differences in the outcome variable during the pre-test, shows statistically significant learning outcomes and controls between the comparison group and the intervention group (CASEL, 2020).

4. Reducing conduct issues, mental distress, and enhancing student confidence and school climate positively benefit student behavior (CASEL, 2020).

Additionally, CASEL created a CASEL Promising Program in 2020 that a requirement for one of the following additional criteria:

- Only non-behavioral outcomes, such as attitudes or a specific social or emotional competence, indicate a beneficial impact, favoring the intervention group in the evaluation (e.g., emotion recognition or decision-making) (CASEL, 2020).
- The evaluation does not account for the pre-test and shows favorable results for the intervention group, and the groups were equal at baseline (CASEL, 2020).
- The evaluation demonstrates an outcome for enhanced instructional strategies, rather than only a behavioral student outcome (CASEL, 2020).
- The program has a second qualifying evaluation with an independent sample that shows positive effects by at least a 2:1 ratio; but the evaluation also yields a significant result in favor of the comparison group on a factor that is crucial to the theory behind the program (CASEL, 2020).

CASEL has a structure for school districts and schools to follow the Theory of Action for Systemic SEL. The theory of action holds districts and schools accountable to improve educational outcomes for all students in an effort toward educational reform and making

decisions about educational outcomes, funding, implementation, and support. CASEL (2013) argues:

Based on strong scientific evidence about the impact of social and emotional factors on students' academic learning and school success, CASEL believes that developing the capacity to support high-quality, evidence-based SEL must be an essential part of districts' improvement efforts.

Many of the programs used by the participants are CASEL SElect programs, and thus comply with the School Theory of Action guidelines.

The following activities are included in the district SEL theory of action: (a) collaboration with stakeholders for implementation and planning; (b) identify the resources and needs for SEL implementation; (c) design a long-term strategy for SEL; (d) create SEL learning objectives and evaluations; (e) implement SEL interventions that are supported by evidence; (f) establish and implement efficient professional development strategies; (g) show students how to be socially and emotionally competent; and (h) track SEL implementation procedures and student performance (CASEL, 2013).

The school theory of action for SEL requires schools to: a) develop an SEL vision that all stakeholders share; b) perform a resource and need inventory for SEL; c) formulate a plan for implementation; d) offer continuous training and development; e) implement SEL programs and practices that are supported by evidence; f) Implement school-wide practices to support each student's intellectual, social, and emotional development; and g) utilize data to develop implementation.

Commissioned by the Wallace Foundation, the Ecological Approaches to Social Emotional Learning (EASEL) Laboratory (2018) outlined key components for effective implementation practices for SEL. These key components are aligned with the framework

of CASEL’s theory of Action. CASEL and the EASEL Lab theory of action complete the implementation framework components. The key elements of SEL program implementation are: a) supplementary lessons and activities; b) culture and climate support; c) out-of-school time practices; d) flexibility to individual circumstances; e) training and development; f) execution and support; g) program outcome evaluation tools; h) evaluation of implementation tools; i) family and community engagement. The theory of action framework outlined by CASEL and the EASEL Lab demonstrates the strategies needed for consistent well-implemented SEL (CASEL, 2021).

SEL Programs and Practices

Programs used by participants in this research were Class Dojo, Go Noodle, the Kindness Program, the 5Cs of Positive Youth Development, the Mindfulness Mindset, MindUP, and RethinkEd; all include the CASEL SEL core competencies. They are used as interventions for SEL in the classroom and help teachers implement SEL practices to create a better classroom climate and culture.

Class Dojo (2022) provides teachers with a classroom management tool and an online cartoon video curriculum. The curriculum connects teachers with students to create a positive classroom culture and engagement, and Class Dojo gives students a voice and connects parents by sharing videos and photos of class time while introducing SEL to students and parents. Class Dojo is similar to Go Noodle, as they both offer curriculum and lesson plans in a video format.

Go Noodle's (2020) motto is, “The Good Energy Company” and their claim is to “be a force of joy, health and self-discovery for kids and the adults who love them.”

Using instructional videos their focus is to teach personal and community wellness with song and dance. Go Noodle has an extensive SEL curriculum covering brain function, for all subjects. Go Noodle is unique in the presentation of academics with song and dance, unlike the other SEL programs.

The Kindness Program is one of CASEL’s SElect programs and is a global education program to make the world a kinder place by fostering wellbeing for everyone. Kaplan Kindness program teaches social justice and equity. The experiential education-based curriculum model includes exercises intended to develop the ten qualities of kindness: humility, honesty, mindfulness meditation, positivity, collaboration, empathy, perspective, appreciation, humor, and self-acceptance. The Kindness program has various curricula to teach preschool through twelfth grade. The curriculum is built on the premise that “wherever there is a human being, there is an opportunity for kindness” (The Kindness Program, 2020). The Kindness Program curriculum incorporates many CASEL core competencies, similar to the 5 Cs of Positive Youth Development, Mindfulness Mindset, and MindUP.

Another CASEL SElect developmental science theory, “the 5 Cs” of Positive Youth Development (PYD), identifies five psychological, behavioral, and social traits that foster strong bonds between young people and their families and communities. The five Cs—character, competence, connection, confidence, and compassion—lead to a sixth C—*contribution* to oneself, one's community, and society—when wholly developed. (EASEL, n.d.). The five Cs are similar to many SEL programs focused on character development for SEL interventions.

Mindfulness Mindset is a framework drawn from Buddhism with a focus on dignity with an intersectionality theory and social justice perspective similar to the Kindness Program. Seven interconnected characteristics of the mindfulness mindset include (a) compassion, (b) sympathetic joy, (c) situated intersectional awareness, (d) negative capability, (e) cultural humility, (f) wonder, and (g) generosity (Mahalingam, 2019). A mindfulness mindset fosters the ability to connect with dignity to improve personal well-being. The design of the Mindfulness Mindset program is to foster resilience and self-regulation using a holistic approach to self-awareness, social awareness, and cultural inclusivity to raise consciousness (Mahalingam, 2019).

The MindUP curriculum teaches students to understand the functions of the mind through the study of neuroscience. Students who understand how their mind works may better connect mind and body, and learn self-awareness that supports emotional regulation and control (Hawn, 2020; Schonert-Reichl, 2015). MindUP is a CASEL SElect program that combines mindfulness with SEL practices that provide tools for students and teachers. Using the SEL and CASEL framework to guide the MindUP curriculum, students learn valuable lifelong skills. Research on the effects of MindUP on 584 young children in 42 different classes was conducted by Crooks et al., in 2020. All of the study's test subjects showed positive benefits, including improved behavior and an increase in adaptive skills, according to Crooks et al., (2020). Indeed, “MindUP had the strongest impact on reducing executive functioning deficits” (Crooks et al., 2020; Mindfulness, 2020, p. 2441).

RethinkEd is an SEL program that fosters mental health and wellness using training and instructional tools. This program is designed to empower educators to “literally re-think education,” by improved learning and wellbeing of the whole child through stress management, resilience, and empathy. RethinkEd’s (2022) motto is: “Together we power the potential of all learners” (par. 1). RethinkEd’s community focus on whole child wellbeing is similar to the 5 Cs, Go Noodle, and Second Step.

Second Step is a CASEL SElect program designed for PreK through grade twelve. Similar to Mindfulness mindset, the Second Step program fosters a holistic approach. The curriculum focuses on building supportive communities for every child through a universal classroom-based SEL. Second Step offers lessons incorporating several CASEL core competencies to help kids become more self-assured; create objectives; make better decisions; work and play together with others; and navigate the world more skillfully (Second Step, n.d.).

All of these SEL programs provide curriculum, lesson plans, training, and development to support educators to implement SEL more effectively. Many educator’s use at least two or more of these SEL programs to create a school or classroom curriculum that is specific to the needs of their students. Two stand-alone programs are Second Step and MindUP. These programs have a comprehensive curriculum and training that is exclusive to each program and implemented solely using one single program.

Mindfulness

Ancient Buddhist teachings and meditation are the foundation for mindfulness with a focus on the “awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 145). Mindfulness is an SEL intervention, and there is evidence that it reduces depression, anxiety, and “increases prosocial behaviors and improves school performance” (Durlak et al., 2011; Maloney et al., 2016). The Mind and Life Education Research Network (MLERN) suggested that mindfulness as “contemplative practices could complement and add value to SEL programming in two ways” (Lawlor, 2016, p. 185): as consistent opportunities to practice and to provide professional development for teachers (Lawlor, 2016; Davidson et al., 2012).

A more recent figure, mindfulness leader Jon Kabat-Zinn is known internationally as a scientist, teacher, and scholarly leader pioneered advancing mindfulness into society and medicine mainstream. Kabat-Zinn founded the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, and MBSR Clinic (Mindfulness, 2021). He introduced mindfulness practices and methodologies into education and has been a leading researcher on mindfulness for more than 30 years. Consequently, mindfulness programs are in schools worldwide, and millions of students have benefited from classroom implementation of mindfulness (Brensilver, 2020). Mindfulness is more secular than meditation. More secular than meditation is mindfulness. Focusing on breathing, purposefully focusing on a certain thought, object, or emotion, and becoming more aware, peaceful, and present are some ways to practice mindfulness (Meiklejohn et al., 2012).

Controversy looms regarding the ancient roots of mindfulness (Crane et al., 2016) and the lack of a consistent definition challenges implementation interventions (Meiklejohn et al., 2012). Despite the controversy over the modern practices, a modified MBSR course has been discovered to decrease psychological symptoms, stress, and burnout (Kriakous et al., 2021). Additionally, teachers saw improvements in self-awareness, focus, and self-compassion, which led to an improved learning environment and happier mental states. (Flook et al., 2013). Flook and associates in 2013, conducted a mindfulness pilot on the impact of stress and burnout on learning. The goal of this study was discovering training feasibility and the impact for teachers implementing MBSR training and practices. The study consisted of 18 public school teachers predominantly female (n=16), from four different elementary schools. The intervention group consisted of ten randomly assigned instructors in total, and the control group consisted of eight teachers. The researchers used cortisol sampling to measure stress levels, various different scales and surveys to measure mindfulness, compassion, burnout, attention, mindfulness practice compliance, and classroom behavior was measured by observation.

Similarly, Ching, Koo, Tsai, and Chen (2015) conducted a study on mindfulness meditation using a pre- and post-test quasi-experimental approach. The study's objective was to examine how a mindfulness meditation course affected Taiwanese university students' capacity for learning and cognitive performance. First-year students have mandatory curriculum to take a “mindfulness meditation” course. This gave the investigators an appropriate sample size of 130 first-year students in the control group and 152 first-year students in the intervention group, learning and practicing meditation

in an 18-week session, 50-minute class. The course concentrated on classic Buddhist techniques including eating and walking meditation as well as attentive breathing exercises and body scans. According to Newton et al. (2008), the

Chinese version of the College Learning Effectiveness Inventory (CLEI) and a series of computer cognitive tasks were used by the researchers to assess the impact of the mindfulness meditation intervention. The CLEI measures psychosocial factors such as thoughts, feelings, or behaviors related to academic outcomes. (p. 5)

The results of the study concluded that a one-semester mindfulness meditation course greatly enhanced learning, attention, memory, and cognitive ability. Cognitive performance benefits students' academic outcomes. Although this study was in a higher education setting, these same outcomes have also been found with younger students (Shonert-Reichl et al., 2015).

Mindfulness is a tool that supports social emotional wellbeing; improves peoples' ability to be compassionate, kind, and helpful (Davidson et al., 2003); and improves executive functioning and decision-making (Alfonso et al., 2010). Meiklejohn (2012) and colleagues reviewed the literature on the use of mindfulness training in K–12 education. The study evaluated teachers' social emotional wellness (SEW)—their ability to set and reach goals and skill level for classroom management. This research reviewed fifteen previous studies. The conclusion was that interventions like MindUP lower the risk of teacher burnout, and reduce stress, and builds confidence and mental well-being. Such results point to the benefits for students as teacher's improved mind-set and overall wellness will reflect onto their students.

The program framework for the SEL classroom curriculum includes the CASEL SEL Core Competencies and the mindfulness awareness practices. Table 2.1 includes details about the mindfulness awareness and mindfulness practices that align with each of these five SEL competencies.

Table 2.1 SEL and Mindfulness: SElect Practices

SEL competency	Mindful awareness	Selected mindfulness practices
Self-awareness	• Understanding the nature of mind	• Focused mindful breathing
	• Emotional awareness	• Reflective writing
Self-management	• Emotion regulation	• Focused mindful breathing
	• Inhibitory control	• Movement (e.g., yoga, tai chi)
	• Deployment of attention	
Social awareness	• Showing empathy and compassion for others	• Literature
		• Dramatic arts
		• Compassion/loving-kindness meditation
Relationship skills	• Mindful listening	• Active listening activities
	• Thoughtful dialogue	• Cooperative activities
	• Managing conflict	
Responsible decision-making	• Stating facts without judgment	• Community service learning
	• Making ethical choices based in awareness and caring	• Active witnessing

Source: Schonert-Reichl & Roeser, 2016, p. 69.

Meditation. Meditation is a key mindfulness practice. In-depth research on the effects of meditation on boosting intelligence (The Raven's standard Progressive Matrix), mood (Profile of Mood States exam), and attention (Attention Network Test, or ANT) was done by Tang et al. in 2007. Eighty male participants were divided into two groups: the experiment group and the blind control group. They performed a test-retest to evaluate the effects of meditation on attention after participants practiced 20 minutes of meditation for five days. They analyzed the data to understand the relationship between meditation and attention. They collected cortisol samples from the participants to measure stress, attention, mood, self-control, and conducted a mental arithmetic

challenge. According to the findings, there were considerable variations between the experimental group and the control group. A brief integrative body mind training (IBMT) program can heighten good moods and lessen bad ones. Improving mood, attention and higher levels of thinking have been associated with consistent meditation practices (Tang et al. 2007).

Ramsburg and Youmans (2013) recommend meditation training to build competencies required for success in memory and knowledge retention. Focused and open-monitoring meditation has been shown to improve performance. The increase in cortical thickness and more gray matter (Lazar et al., 2005) are the keys to meditation's ability to improve memory and knowledge from lectures. The gray matter is linked to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Since 2007, meditation routines have been used to help people with ADHD (Ramsburg & Youmans, 2014) examined retention and knowledge using a baseline test over a three-week period. They conducted three experiments with three sample sizes, 35, 55, and 93. Lecture groups were divided in half, with half of the participants meditating before class and the other resting before class. The final results showed that students who meditated outperformed students who rested on the post-lecture assessment. This suggests that mindfulness can help students regulate stress and improve academic outcomes.

Mindfulness Meditation and the Brain. Kozasa and colleagues (2012) report recent studies showing long-term meditation practice may alter the morphology and function of the brain regions responsible for “attention, interception and sensory processing” (Lazar et al., 2005, p. 735). Kozasa and colleagues (2012) used an fMRI

adapted Stroop Word-Colour Task (SWCT) test to find differences in brain activity between meditators and non-meditators with similar ages, years of education, and gender over five days. Comparatively to regular meditation practitioners, non-meditators displayed a higher pattern of brain activation. The fMRI of the meditators displayed a different brain mass, so that is how they could distinguish the difference between the meditator's brains and the non-meditators brains. They used a questionnaire for screening during the fMRI, one with colored pictures and one with words. The conclusion of this study showed that practicing meditation improves efficiency, attention span, and impulse control (Kozasa et al. 2012). These studies indicate meditation can lead to SEL competencies of better self-regulation, relationships, and decision making.

Mindfulness and meditation actually affect the brain. Luders et al. (2008) studied the relationship between levels of gray matters for 22 meditators and 22 non-meditators using a high resolution MRI. The brain analyses showed that meditators' cerebral measures and their right hippocampus sizes were substantially greater than those of controls. The correlation of meditators with the enlarged hippocampus indicated participants ability to have a more positive and stable emotions and practice mindful behavior than participants not practicing meditation. These more stable emotions should lead to better self-regulation, relationships, and decision making.

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). One of the most extensively studied stress management techniques is MBSR, which was created by Kabat Zinn in 1994. It was the first secular application of mindfulness training. MBSR practices include

the mindfulness body scan and hatha yoga. Evidence shows it reduces stress, depression, and anxiety, and improves empathy (Schure et al., 2008). Vohra and colleagues (2019) conducted a two year, mixed-methods, randomized cluster-controlled trial among 85 adolescent residents in a voluntary treatment program, ages 12 to 18. Participants used an intervention of eight MBSR sessions weekly for two hours each. The study found that by providing a structure for regular MBSR sessions for these participants there was evidence of a significant impact on improved behavior, better control of their emotions, and reduced stress (Vohra et al., 2019).

MBSR is a crucial self-care practice to lessen stress and enhance interpersonal interactions (Gouda et al., 2016). Schure and colleagues (2008) created a program and conducted a four-year qualitative study on the effects of Hatha Yoga, meditation, and Qigong on counseling first- and second-year graduate students engaged in a fifteen-week course. Schure et al. (2008) describe the art of self-care as a vital skill to teach. The important factor is realizing the stress overload people endure—especially those taking care of others such as, counselors, teachers, and mothers. A journaling assignment was given to participants during the semester, and they also received instruction in mindfulness techniques. Through the research, students had the chance to investigate the three areas of the human being: mind, body, and spirit. The study's most crucial component was for students to apply the techniques to their everyday lives. Students' took a survey and journaled every day. The result of this study was the participants feeling less stressed, feeling more patient, and having more control over their emotions after using these practices and having a focus on self-care. It was key for students to learn

these techniques not only for the purpose of passing it onto to their students or clients, but to really learn the art of taking care of themselves in order to be better care givers with their students.

A foundation for teaching mindfulness practices is the understanding that the mindfulness practices instigate a “shift from a ‘doing’ to a ‘being mode of mind’” (Crane et al., 2010, p. 75). By using these techniques, counselors will have the ability to reduce stress, anxiety, depression and have more empathy (Shure et al., 2008). As teachers, counselors, mothers and other caregivers learn and practice mindfulness, they will gain empathy and compassion for others through social awareness. Essentially, as they care for themselves, their capacity to care for others grows.

Teaching Mindfulness in the Classroom

Students are learning to manage their mind and regulate their emotions by practicing attention and focused mindful breathing. One method of becoming mindful is through the practice of breathing and paying attention to the breath, which is also employed in MindUP (Hawn, 2020). Through a quasi-experimental study, Schonert-Reichl and Lawlor (2010) investigated the effects of the Mindfulness Education (ME) Program on pre- and early adolescents. Participants were 4th to 7th grade students from 12 classrooms and their teachers. Half of the classes trained in mindfulness three times per day, and half were placed in a control group with no interventions. Results of the study showed an increase in positive emotions and improved classroom behaviors among classes that practiced mindfulness. It was surprising to learn that teachers reported ease when implementing the mindfulness practices following the design of the program

(Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). Students developed self-management and self-awareness and became more competent in self-management. The final result is improved relationship skills and classroom behavior (CASEL, 2013).

Integrating Mindfulness Training into the Classroom

Effective mindfulness techniques among adult populations, training, and meditation knowledge for K–12 educators have all evolved into an intervention for lowering adult stress (Meiklejohn et al., 2012). There are many benefits to teacher training in mindfulness practices. Three important purposes for teachers to practice mindfulness are: 1) self-care, (2) becoming a more introspective, mindful educator, and (3) creating a solid foundation for teaching students mindfulness-based or mindfulness-informed practices to improve academic and emotional learning (Schonert-Reichl & Roesner, 2016). Teachers' mindfulness practices are developed by forming connections with students and engaging in emotional sense inquiry. (Meiklejohn et al., 2012).

Practices for Implementation. There is more to learn about the practices for integrating mindfulness meditation in K–12 teaching, which is part of the need for this study. One thing we do know is that utilizing an indirect approach to mindfulness skills instead of a direct approach is better received by teachers and students (Meiklejohn et al., 2012). Additional research is needed to explain implementation practices. For example, the Wallace Foundation (Jones et al., 2018) reported on implementation challenges as related to SEL programs and activities. They found the following list of potential challenges, which I seek to understand more about in this study:

- Making SEL a priority and incorporating it into routines.

- Practicing SEL outside of the classroom
- Ensuring adequate training and staff support
- Enabling buy-in and program ownership
- Data informed decisions
- Using and conveying abilities
- Assuring adequate intensity and exposure

These challenges have to do with making time, gaining buy-in, and establishing routines, as well as ensuring that new learning becomes a regular part of students and teachers everyday lives.

Technology

As schools struggled to adapt to COVID-19, it created a new norm for education technology, virtual classrooms, and other types of online learning. Increased use of technology in the virtual classroom and at home instigated a major shift in learning, focus, and student discipline. Existing research already revealed that when students are out of school for long periods of time—such as weekends, holidays, and summer break—they report more screen time, irregular sleep hours, and poorer diets (Pedrosa et al., 2020). As well, during stressful times, children and teens may overuse social media, causing a negative impact on their wellbeing (Pedrosa et al., 2020). Even before many schools moved online, research demonstrated that school culture and climate extend far beyond the classroom (Rice et al., 2015), with issues like cyberbullying—psychological warfare against students with low self-worth through the use of electronic devices—becoming a persistent problem (Rice et al., 2015).

Technology and sensory overload have contributed to both educational advancement and issues. Americans' attention spans are getting shorter as they spend more time glued to their phones and computers. (O'Donnell, 2015). The VUCA environment of today and a lack of involvement worsen a loss of focus brought on by sensory overload. Technology's sensory overload has made a variety of mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, learning difficulties, and inability to relate to others, worse. (O'Donnell, 2015). Online SEL activities can teach kids how to use technology in constructive ways so they can access mindfulness exercises. These online SEL activities aid kids in calming their minds, gaining self-assurance, and connecting with others to foster constructive peer-to-peer relationships. (Rice et al., 2015).

Conclusion

This chapter discussed literature related to supporting student SEL and interventions to create a positive school culture. Understanding the need for mindfulness and SEL implementation is instrumental to improving the education and wellbeing of every student and young adult. Following CASEL and EASEL's Theory of Action and the five core competencies framework creates the focus and engagement necessary for improved student academic achievement and mental wellness. SEL tools for self-awareness and emotional regulation might be provided to teachers and students as part of a comprehensive strategy, and educators could take the lead in addressing these urgent problems that currently plague the educational system. Building on promising results from SEL in higher education and K–12 settings, this study contributes new insights to

scant literature on implementation practices that benefit both students and teachers SEL outcomes.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Chapter one provided background on the problem of student and educator stress alongside the emerging promise for a more holistic focus in education within the context of the VUCA milieu. As well, I outlined the mindfulness and SEL practices and the interventions available through CASEL's five core competencies. The competencies are further explored in the framework guiding mindfulness, SEL, and wellness practices. Chapter two synthesized key findings from the scholarly literature, with focus on the history and benefits of SEL interventions. The present chapter outlines the research methodology for this study.

The purpose of this interview-based qualitative study was to investigate the practices and implementation of SEL programs in various K–12 schools in the United States and Canada; and to explore educator perceptions of how the SEL programs foster student wellbeing to determine future practices and procedures for use in other school districts. With scant literature in this area, there is a need for understanding implementation practices and implementation of mindfulness and SEL programs (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). This chapter describes how I chose the participants, and how data and participants were analyzed. Specifically, the analysis of the SEL program training and implementation practices used in the schools of the participants. Understanding the success and failures experienced by teachers, principals, and students

following professional development and training to benefit future educators using SEL programs in other school settings.

The present study examined nine educators' implementation of various SEL programs to determine implementation practices and strategies for mindfulness and SEL interventions in the classroom. This study dissected SEL programs practices, implementation, and impact after participants received training for mindfulness and SEL programs. By understanding aspects of these programs more holistically, I analyzed the theory of action for effective mindfulness and SEL integration.

Research Questions

The present study explored two questions:

1. What are practices for implementation of mindfulness and SEL programs in K–12 schools in the United States and Canada?
2. What are educator perceptions of how the social emotional learning programs foster student SEL and CASEL core competencies of self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness?

Rationale for Research Methodology

I have endeavored to examine SEL practices and implementation, offering insights into “in progress” SEL approaches as experienced by teachers and administrators using an interview-based qualitative study. The analysis reflects a systematic interpretation of themes collected from interview transcripts and presentation of different participant perspectives and experiences. The study is time-bound, as participants are

actively working within the parameters of their respective SEL programs. Through my analysis, I sought to better understand implementation practices for mindfulness and SEL programs offered in various K–12 classrooms and schools throughout the United States and Canada.

Researcher Positionality

The tool for making sense of data in qualitative research is the researcher lens. It is important to understand how my experiences have uniquely qualified me for this research and how they have contributed to latent biases. I have been an educator serving my communities as a teacher, and school leader for three decades, focusing on transformative educational leadership, policy studies, and school culture within SEW.

As a child, I was bullied in school and judged unfairly by teachers. I suffered emotionally from this experience, and it has informed my present positionality as an advocate for solutions that create safe and stress-free learning environments for all students. Through education and my personal experiences, In addition to knowing educational implementation and practice theories, I have incorporated a mindfulness lens into my pedagogical approach. In the present study, I am attempting to see how other educators view and create SEL and wellness interventions in the classroom and school environment. Understanding the intricacies of teaching students SEL fosters a culture of responsible citizens and lifelong skills for success.

Research Design

I designed an interview-based qualitative approach to gather educator perspectives and study classroom mindfulness and SEL implementation practices. I

conducted semi-structured interviews to foster natural conversation around specific open-ended questions and prompts. As Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) note: “An interview is literally an inter-view, an interchange of views between two persons conversing about a theme of common interest” (p. 2). Questions included: (a) Who initiated SEL training and implementation in the classroom or school? and (b) How did you [educators] implement SEL programs into the classroom or school? Qualitative research was appropriate for the present study, as it uses close interactions and conversations as a means to comprehend participant standpoints and practice evaluation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through this approach, my goal was to better understand educator perceptions of the benefits of and practices for implementation of the SEL program.

Participant Demographics

As seen in Table 4.1, participants included five classroom teachers, one assistant principal, and three school principals. Table 4.1 includes participant pseudonyms, highest level of education attained by each participant, current grade level they are teaching or leading, number of years they have been an educator, age, gender, and ethnicity.

Table 3.1 Participant Demographics

Participant Pseudonym	Highest level of education	Position in Education	Years as an Educator	Age	Gender	Ethnicity (Self-identified)
Marissa	MA SPED	Teacher	40 years	64	F	White
Jessie	PhD	Teacher	8 years	48	F	White

Grace	MA + 90	Teacher	25 years	51	F	Italian American
Crystal	MA	Teacher	22 years	59	F	I am a privileged settler of Eastern European ancestry
Reese	MA SPED	Teacher	23 years	43	F	White
Remy	MA	Assistant Principal	17 years	44	F	Dakota Native American
Sam	PhD	Principal	33 years	55	F	Latina
Theresa	MA	Principal	16 years	40	F	White
Jill	MA SPED	Principal	24 years	43	F	Asian Latina

Note. MA = Master of Arts; SPED = special education credential; PreK = Preschool/Kindergarten.

My initial intent was to interview from a sample of 200 educators in a single school district in the Rocky Mountain West. After planning six months ahead of the time to interview with the school district, I was only able to interview two participants. To recruit additional participants, I used a snowball sample approach (Creswell, 2002) by asking for referrals from educators I already interviewed. Participants suggested friends and coworkers known for their experience with SEL. The resulting sample of educators with deep SEL experience is a strength of the present study, as I sought to understand implementation in particular.

The participant group included five teachers. Marissa teaches second grade at a private school. Jessie teaches fourth grade in a public school. Grace teaches middle school ages in a public school. Crystal teaches grades 7–12 in a public school, and Reese teaches in a public high school. There were four administrators interviewed. Remy is an assistant principal in a public high school. Theresa is the principal of a K–5 charter school. Sam is the principal of a K–6 private school, and Jill is the principal of a public high school. A Master’s degree was the minimum level of education among participants; three participants hold a special education credential, and two participants have a Ph.D. Collectively, participants have 208 years of experience in education, with the average participant serving over 23 years. The average age of participants is 49. All participants are female, with four identifying as White; one identifying as a privileged settler of Eastern European ancestry; one identifying as Italian American, another as Asian-Latina, one Latina, and one Dakota Native American.

Participant School and Student Demographics

Table 4.2 shows the participants grade level and type of school, area of school, student demographics, language spoken by the students and percentage of 2020–2021 school year remote or hybrid.

Participant’s School and Student Demographics

Six participants currently work in suburban schools, and three work in rural schools. The nine educators’ schools are located in the United States and Canada. The languages spoken by the educators’ students are Cantonese, Cree, Dene, Hindi, Hebrew, English, French, Mandarin, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, and Vietnamese. This research

was conducted during the 2020–2021 school year. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the educators’ schools worked hybrid and in-person throughout the school year. Four educators’ schools were 66% hybrid and 33% in-person; three schools were 50% hybrid and 50% in-person; and two schools were held 100% in person.

Table 3.2 Participant School Demographics

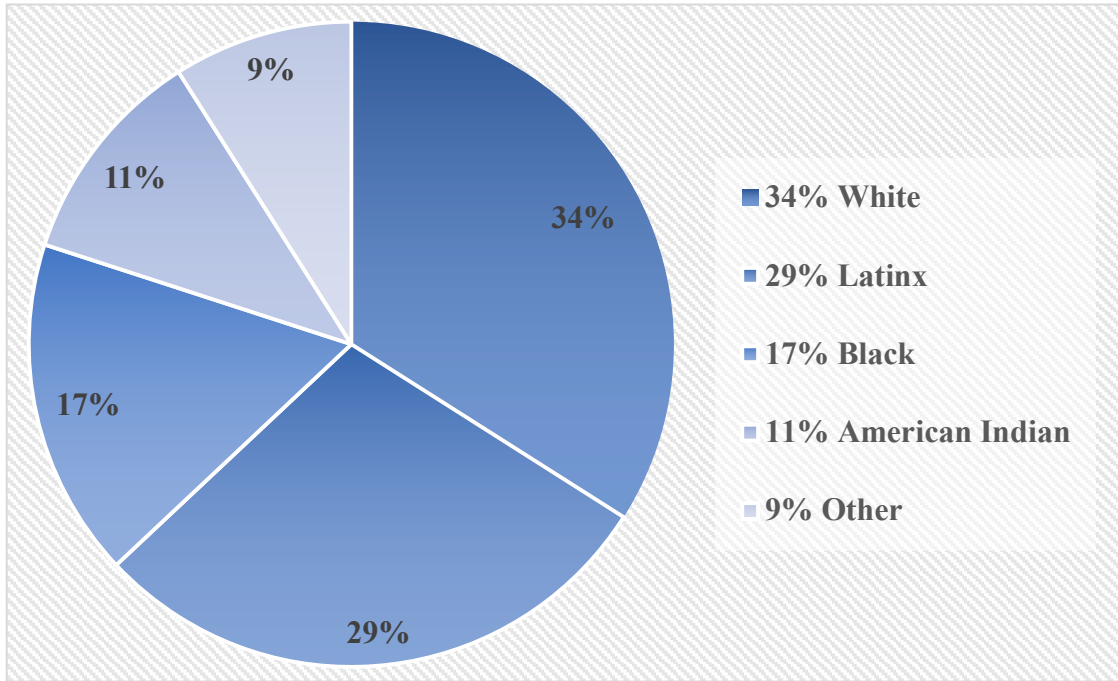
Participant Pseudonym	Current grade level and type of School	Area of school	School demos.	Languages	Percentage of 2020–2021 remote/hybrid
Marissa	Grade 2 Private	Suburban	78% white 10% Latinx 6% Asian 2% Black 4% Two or more	English Portuguese Spanish	100% in person
Jessie	Grade 4 Public	Rural	81% White 14% Latinx 1% Black 1% Asian 3% Two or more	English Spanish Vietnamese	66% hybrid 33% in person
Grace	Grade 6,7,8 Public	Rural	85% White 12% Latinx 1% Black 1% Asian 1% Two or more	English Spanish Vietnamese	66% hybrid 33% in person
Crystal	Grade 7–12 Public	Rural	89% Indigenous 6% White 5% Other	English French nīhithowīwīn (Cree) and Denesuline (Dene)	100% in person; outdoors with students most of pandemic
Reese	High School Public	Suburban	56% Latinx 21% Black 8% White 6% Asian 3% American Indian	English Spanish	50% hybrid 50% in person

			3% Two or more 3% Pacific Islander		
Remy	High School Public	Suburban	67% Latinx 22% Black 3% White 3% Asian 1% American Indian 1% Pacific Islander 3% Two or more	English Spanish	50% hybrid 50% in person
Sam	PreK–6 Private	Suburban	27% White 26% Latinx 14% Black 14% Asian 19% Two or more	English Spanish Cantonese Hindi Hebrew Mandarin Russian French Portuguese	66% hybrid 33% in person
Theresa	PreK–5 Charter	Suburban	66% Black 24% Latinx 3% Asian 2% American Indian 1% White 4% Two or more	English Spanish	50% hybrid 50% in person
Jill	High School Public	Suburban	50% Latinx 27% Black 16% White 2% Asian 5% Two or more	English Spanish	66% hybrid 33% in person

As visible in Table 4.2, the student ethnic populations of the educators interviewed are 34% White, 29% Latinx, 17% Black, 11% American Indian, 4% Asian,

4% Other, and 1% Pacific Islander. Figure 4.1 shows the student population by race/ethnicity.

Figure 4.1 Student Ethnic Populations



Procedures and Data Collection

I interviewed nine participants. Each interviewee received a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix D) and consent form by email. Interviewees filled out the survey and emailed it back to me prior to the interview. Following COVID-19 safety restrictions, each one-on-one meeting occurred over a recorded Zoom call at a mutually agreed upon time for approximately 60 minutes.

Between June 2021 and February 2022, five teachers were interviewed individually for less than 60 minutes each. Interview questions inquired about their perceptions of implementation and practices for the SEL interventions used in their

classroom to foster improved student social emotional wellbeing outlined by CASEL (e.g., self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision making). Questions addressed their personal experiences as educators and how they have applied program practices in their classrooms (see Appendix A). Interviews conducted on a videoconferencing platform were audio recorded and transcribed by Zoom, while I simultaneously collected observational notes. I analyzed transcriptions for emergent themes.

During the same period between June 2021 and February 2022, I interviewed four school principals individually for less than 60 minutes each. Interview questions inquired about principal methods of implementing mindfulness and social and emotional interventions to foster improved student socio-emotional wellbeing (e.g., self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision making) and reduce stress. Participants were asked about their experiences as a school leader, and how they personally supported the implementation of the SEL interventions (see Appendix C). Interviews occurred over Zoom, with the audio-recording feature activated. During the interviews, I made observational notes. Recorded interviews were transcribed via the Zoom automated transcription and transcriptions were analyzed for emergent themes.

Data Analysis

The data analysis evolved and changed as the layers of data began to answer the research question (Creswell, 2015). I conducted my analysis using an inductive approach to establish patterns and themes. Once interviews were conducted and recorded, they were transcribed using Kaltura automated transcription. Data from interview

transcriptions, interview notes, and audio recordings were reviewed for accuracy. First, I verified accuracy by reviewing the video recording and checking the transcription word for word for exactness three times per recorded interview. Next, I sorted and hand coded the data to find emergent themes based on the research questions and CASEL framework with rigor. Creswell (2015) notes that rigor requires “multiple levels of data analysis from the narrow codes or themes to broader interrelated themes to more abstract dimensions...to validate the accuracy” (p. 48). The data were analyzed for evidence of the five SEL outcomes outlined by CASEL and were coded from the data based on the implementation Theory of Action found in the Wallace report (Jones et al., 2018). Interviews were coded using a systematic approach in which I analyzed and summarized participant interview narratives, comparing “what the individuals have experienced and how they have experienced it” (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell 2018, p. 77) and hand coding these experiences into categories according to the implementation theory and theory of action. I scanned and coded interviews five different times.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

The current qualitative study must include the following fundamental characteristics: dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability. (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Credibility and rigor can also be expanded by examining my researcher biases. Dependability can be attained by following procedures outlined in the institutional Review Board (IRB) and the research process outlined. Validation of transferability can be confirmed in the summary of the educators interviewed. To achieve confirmability, I used triangulation to confirm evidence of recurring themes, such as the information

collected from the interviewee's similar perceptions and data obtained on implementation and practices.

Ethical Considerations, IRB, and Confidentiality

Approval was granted by the University of Denver's IRB prior to data collection. Before starting the discussion, participants were informed about the purpose of the research and participants read and verbally agreed to the consent form (See Appendix G) that outlines the research purpose and procedures, as well as the privacy and confidentiality processes. The informed consent document was emailed to participants ahead of the interview, reviewed immediately before the interview, and agreed upon before initiation of the recorded interview. Participants choose pseudonyms before the discussion began. All participant personal information was excluded from the data ensuring participant confidentiality. Participant names were replaced by pseudonyms and location of workplaces. Participants were not required to answer any questions that made them feel uncomfortable.

Limitations

The COVID-19 global pandemic and schools closing and operating online/hybrid altered my ability to work with various school districts to gather data in a timely manner between Spring 2021 and Spring 2022.

The challenge and limitations for researching mindfulness and SEL is the lack of research on the subject, particularly studies on elementary-age students in the United States. Furthermore, clarity about the concepts of mindfulness and understanding people's perceptions and "explicit durations of practices" (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012, p.

24) also presented a challenge. Finally, making a precise determination of what an individual gains as part of mindfulness training as well as measuring emotional health and the quality and length of practices left much to question (Davidson, 2010).

Summary and Conclusion

By collecting and analyzing educators' perspectives of implementation and practices of the SEL program, I sought to discover the successes and failures of SEL to enhance implementation of SEL programs in the future. I discuss the findings of this research in chapter four.

Chapter Four: Findings

The purpose of this interview-based qualitative study was to explore educator perceptions of SEL program implementation practices to foster student wellbeing. Relevant findings could be used to develop plans for how to integrate SEL practices and procedures into classrooms to help teachers and students prosper, reduce stress and overall wellbeing —ultimately improving school climate, culture, and academics. To better understand the practices and protocols used by educators to bring SEL interventions into their classrooms and schools, I conducted semi-structured virtual interviews with nine educators between June 2021 and February 2022. Following COVID-19 safety protocols, all interviews were conducted using Zoom and electronically recorded and transcribed. Two research questions guided interviews:

1. What are the practices for implementing SEL programs in a classroom or school?
2. What are educator’s perceptions of how the social-emotional programs foster student SEL and CASEL core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness?

Specific details of my interview protocol and questions are discussed in chapter three and included in Appendices A and B.

In this chapter, I discuss the results of participant interviews, analyzed through manual thematic analysis and inductive coding (Saldaña, 2009). The thematic analysis follows the framework and Theory of Action outlined by CASEL and the EASEL Lab. Then, I discuss the four themes that emerged in the coding process.

In analyzing research question one—exploring practices for implementing SEL programs in a classroom or school—I discovered three themes. The first theme locates SEL as an approach, not a program—including both grassroots and systemic approaches; autonomy and choice. Theme two identifies SEL as “planning for a process.” This theme includes developing a shared plan and action steps; programs and practices for students, families, and community; administrative support and professional development; language; partners in the classroom; tools; practices, strategies, and skills. Theme three locates SEL as means to create community and foster engagement. This theme engages classroom and community climate and culture; mindful gatherings and communication; buy-in, engagement, and wellbeing; team building and community service projects; challenges; and teacher follow-through and implementation with fidelity.

The second research question explored teacher and administrator perceptions of how the social-emotional programs foster student SEL and CASEL core competencies. One theme emerged: internal and external perspectives of social emotional development.

Research Question #1: What are best practices for implementing SEL programs in a classroom or school?

The present study was predicated on the notion that SEL implementation requires a framework and theory of action followed with precision, and that aspects of

implementation—established in the literature and delineated as part of the study—lead to successful implementation. The analysis and distinction between approach or program compare the differences in curriculum and implementation using the framework theory of action for implementation practices standards designed by CASEL and EASEL and suggested by the state and national department of education.

Theme #1: SEL as “An Approach not a Program”

The theme of SEL as an approach rather than a program emerged in the data. Participants either used a grassroots or a systemic approach to implement SEL in their schools and districts. Within the group, the five more experienced educators maintained a more grassroots philosophy for SEL, characterized by implementation flexibility, adaptability, and freedom to choose curriculum and programs. These five participants chose their classroom/school curriculum and used multiple programs, piecing together a curriculum specific to the student needs. The four less experienced educators worked at schools where there was only one program, and they used a more systemic approach for SEL intervention. One principal, Sam, shared that her longstanding SEL program “is really more of an approach,” noting, “it’s interwoven in all of the content areas and in our school culture. It was teacher-generated.” An approach that is interwoven throughout school culture and content areas is indicative of both the grassroots and systemic approaches. However, the key difference between an approach and a program is that an approach may adapt and value multiple programs to fit the needs of the students. An approach is as a philosophy of teaching and learning, whereas a program is a set

curriculum that may not allow for an individualized set of practices. The systemic approach typically uses one set program of practices within a school or district.

Grassroots Approach. When asked how they implemented mindfulness and SEL practices in their classroom or school, participants highlighted a grassroots approach. The more experienced teachers expressed using multiple programs and following the students' needs for designing their curriculum. Jill—a principal and district SEL director—expressed how her school is “doing a lot of grassroots stuff from theory and from the experiences in training of my clinicians and there was a training on trauma-informed approaches and a lot of that is SEL based” They talked about “letting things happen naturally” and spontaneously throughout the day. Crystal, a 7–12 grade teacher at a public school stated it very simply: “It's inherent in the things that I do.” She reported choosing the program or practice needed at the moment to create a positive classroom environment or individual student intervention. All participants except Remy, a high school principal, and Theresa, a K–5 principal, shared a focus of implementing their SEL curriculum with spontaneity and being guided by the needs of their students.

The five grassroots participants used a variety of programs and practices, creating their own approach for SEL. Table 4.3 shows the number of programs used by each educator. The educators used between one and five programs with 2.3 average programs used. The programs have specific curricula and practices, and almost all of them are part of the CASEL SElect (CASEL select) collection of recommended SEL programs for education. The programs vary in what they offer the educator, including specific language, emotions, games, and exercises to connect the brain or create a calm classroom

environment. Most programs have a particular curriculum to follow, with lesson plans available in a book, digital collection, video or slide presentations.

The grassroots participants highlighted different SEL approaches used in their schools, reflecting a more fluid and responsive set of techniques and an out-of-the-box program. Reese, a high school teacher, stated, “I don't love box curriculums, but I like to take things from every boxed curriculum and make my own curriculum personally.” She also shared about how many schools buy curriculum and never use it. To her, what is most important is to respond to student needs. She noted: “it's about what the kids do; it comes back to letting the kids drive the curriculum.” Reese’s example is one of adaptability and allowing the curriculum or approach meet the needs of the students with individual modifications. Other participants expressed similar views. Marissa, a second-grade teacher at a private school noted that her school did not follow a specific SEL program. She said, “You never know what the kids are going to need.” Continuing, she noted, how important it is to choose practices from various programs based on the need of the moment and what is happening with her students. An outlier, Theresa a principal, followed the designed SEL for her charter school closely and did not discuss various programs or having choice or adaptability in the matter.

The Systemic Approach. A systemic orientation to SEL provides specific parameters that follow school, local, and state SEL policies and practices for all students pre-K to grade twelve. Systemic SEL is designed to create equitable learning and use the CASEL core competencies. Although specific to the programs used, an ideal systemic approach includes flexibility for teachers to manage the policies and practices that meet

the needs of their students. All four participants schools using a systemic approach used one of the CASEL SElect programs that have been proven effective. According to CASEL's research in "Systemic SEL: Promoting Educational Success for All Preschool to High School Students," all participant programs represent systemic SEL, as they used CASEL'S core competencies and a consistent Theory of Action.

Autonomy and Choice. Although none of the SEL programs or approaches at participant schools were mandated for teachers or leaders, all of these participants used the same philosophy guiding SEL interventions and implementation. Participants sought to select best practices and make decisions organically about how to implement the SEL interventions in their classrooms and schools. Jessie, a fourth-grade teacher, echoed this sentiment: "because we're not a school that really likes to say you must do this, you must do that, teachers are used to a fair bit of autonomy." Jessie spoke of autonomy in her school and school district as a choice in how the SEL program was implemented in the classroom and choice to use the SEL program as much or as little as each teacher preferred. Although Jessie refers to autonomy and choice, her school used only one program with a systemic approach. However, teachers were given the option to implement SEL to the extent that they wish after the entire school district was trained to implement their specific SEL program.

Of course, autonomy can also mean a failure to adopt. Jessie and Grace who both teach in the same school district shared that among more than 200 educators trained to use a specific SEL program in their district, only seven educators were implementing the SEL practices after one year of district training and support. The idea of autonomy and

choice in implementing SEL led to a very small percentage of teachers choosing to use the program after one year of training. Although autonomy carries risk of poor implementation or avoidance, especially in the early stages, these five educators expressed the benefits to autonomy and the many options to choose their curriculum.

Summary. Based on data from this research, educators who used a more grassroots philosophy felt more successful in SEL implementation, as compared to half of systemic program participants who shared implementation frustrations. Both Remy and Theresa shared that newer teachers did not implement their systemic programs “with fidelity” because they were overwhelmed. Likewise, when teachers were hired mid-year, they did not get the training needed to successfully implement the SEL program.

According to the EASEL Lab (2020), SEL is a pedagogical philosophy that can be operationalized through program components; however, at its core, SEL implementation requires a commitment to the philosophical paradigm. Theresa, Remy, Grace, and Sam all shared about less-experienced teachers who needed more support to meet the level of commitment necessary to implement SEL. Jessie shared her first year of teaching was chaotic and when students arrived, for example, she employed a computer program to start the day. After six years of teaching, Jessie was trained in a district SEL program. She shared, “starting the day with a circle gathering helped me get the temperature of the day for my kiddos, and my classroom was no longer chaotic.” Employing a philosophy that fits the needs of the students, classroom, or school is the basis for a more successful program according to participants. Practitioners of both grassroots and systemic program philosophies were successful as they applied the

philosophy to fit the needs of their students. Approaches that employed multiple programs allowed for unique variation in SEL processes and curriculum, which fostered positive outcomes for students and teachers.

Theme #2: SEL as “Planning for a Process”

Theme two is an analysis of the implementation practices discovered in the participant interviews using the CASEL Theory of Action key components for effective implementation of systemic SEL. These key components are the framework for the program design that determines the policies, procedures, and strategies for program implementation. A key component of any program is that effectiveness is relative to the degree to which it was implemented as intended. The Theory of Action for SEL program implementation distinguishes the action steps needed for positive outcomes in SEL implementation based on four key imperatives: (a) establish an SEL team to develop a shared plan with action steps for implementation, (b) strengthen adult SEL competencies, and develop trust and engagement with staff (c) develop SEL programs and practices with student focus and competencies and family, community partnerships, and d) provide professional development and guidance toward equity and cultural inclusivity for continued improvement and implementation.

Developing a Shared Plan and Action Steps. School teams working together to create an SEL implementation plan is a vital part of the planning process. Sam shared that her school’s SEL approach is “teacher generated.” Her school convened an SEL committee comprised of a program director, a school psychologist, and an inclusion coordinator. According to Sam, selecting a coordinator and engaging teachers who self-

select onto the committee “honor[s] the work, so that there's always teacher voice and even teacher assistant voice in the implementation. That committee work is time allotted to do that work about two sessions per month.” Similarly, Remy’s school has an SEL Director and they work with administrators to develop the implementation plan.

Programs and Practices for Students, Families, and Community. Effective SEL extends beyond the classroom to impact families and the broader community. The SEL programs implemented by participants included competencies and skills designed to help students with academics, as well as social skills to use at home and in community. To extend this work, schools engaged families and communities directly. For example, Sam discussed the workshops available to families at her school, offered three times per year in six-to-eight weeks cycles: “These workshops have a peer-to-peer and social component, where parents have an opportunity to discuss the phases their children are similarly experiencing.” At Sam’s school, the director also provides individual meetings for families who need or want the extra support.

Administrative Support and Professional Development. Staff support and training is a key component for SEL program implementation. Administrative support and PD varied by participant. All of the educators—except Crystal, a 7–12 grade teacher, who received no training—received support, professional development, and training to implement SEL. Table 4.3 captures the number and types of professional development and training participants reported.

Table 4.1 Training and Development

Pseudonym	No. Programs	No. Years using SEL	PD for SEL	Training Internal/ Training External	SEL Director	SEL Curriculum	Data
Marissa	4	10	yes	no/no	no_	G	X
Jessie	1	2	yes	yes / yes	yes	S	X
Grace	1	2	yes	yes / yes	yes	S	X
Crystal	1	10	no	yes/no	no	G	no
Reese	5	4	yes	yes / yes	yes	G	X
Remy	1	20	yes	yes/no	yes	S	X
Sam	2	20	yes	no/no	yes	G	X
Theresa	2	7	yes	yes / yes	no	S	X
Jill	4	10	yes	yes / yes	yes	G	X

Note. G = grassroots SEL approach; S = systemic SEL approach.

Training and development were similar between grassroots and systemic approaches. Consistency was mentioned by seven out of nine educators as an important piece of PD. Eight out of nine educators received training for SEL the week before school began and throughout the year. Seven out of nine participant schools reported SEL training from an outside source. Five out of nine participants personally provided training for their school or district as a teacher trainer, coach, or administrator. Six out of nine educators had an SEL director on their campus or in their district assisting with the implementation, training, and development of their approach, program, or practices. Training was given by SEL company professional trainers or the professional trainers held train-the-trainer classes for a select group of teachers and administrators, and those educators trained their colleagues.

Schools with more unique programs held their own training within their professional learning community. Jessie, Grace, Remy, and Theresa's schools trained their educators with one program, whereas Remy's program changed mid-year to a different program. Due to high teacher turnover, Theresa's program needed to train teachers throughout the year, which made it difficult to sustain follow-through with new teachers. Educators from all four of these programs reported struggles with teacher buy-in, when programs were not implemented as designed or trained. For example, Theresa was responsible for training teachers and ensuring efficient implementation. To that end, her school provided training at weekly academic strategy meetings throughout the year. She noted: "We would ask a teacher who was using the SEL program in their classroom to share out a lesson that worked really well and how to use the curriculum." According to Theresa, the high turnover among teachers negatively impacted training:

I did train the teachers. We lost one teacher; I train a new teacher. The training was not as good as it was at the beginning of the year, because they were learning so much at that time. And checking in to see if teachers were using the curriculum with fidelity did not happen as I had intended.

Five participants shared the relationship between PD and successful implementation because of PD, administrative support and having teachers and administration buy-in. Continuous administrative support providing training throughout the year did not mean that teachers had buy-in. Two principals with systemic programs, Remy and Theresa, shared the challenges of teacher compliance and follow-through, even though they provided strong administrative support and PD. Remy shared about a

two-day training offered before the start of the school year by experts from their systemic program. She reported that after they were trained in the online platform, they “got a new SEL Director and they rolled out a pretty comprehensive PD for a new program.” Remy shared that starting a new program and needing to train staff after the beginning of the year training caused teachers in her school to implement SEL without fidelity or avoid implementation of SEL entirely.

Language as a Way to Create Consistency. All but two participants spoke in detail about a specific language or vocabulary that helped identify SEL interventions for students. Although various programs were implemented in each class or school, shared language created consistency in implementing SEL practices. Grace and Jessie both teach in the same district. While they teach different grade levels, they both used the same program. The program emphasized neuroscience and brain function; therefore, neuroscience language was embedded into daily SEL practices and interventions. Both Grace and Jessie expressed how essential it was to teach the language of neuroscience in their SEL curriculum as “the first thing” instructed at the beginning of the year. Both teachers shared how important it is for students to understand and use the vocabulary of neuroscience, and to be able to pronounce the words that they use to describe what is occurring during brain function. Similarly, Theresa mentioned how particular language is used with students and clinicians for SEL identification of feelings and walking students through a process to calm and get control of their being. Sam also spoke specifically about the language used for SEL in her school, stating that they “practice using specific language that helps them articulate their feelings and their social interactions.” Every

participant used specific language to create consistency in communicating mindfulness and SEL interventions and implementation. The common language helped to convey and identify feelings and to express them in any social environment. This practice of language helps to be consistent in SEL practices.

Partners in the Classroom Creating Consistency. Seven of nine participants used a student teacher, teacher's aide, or a paraprofessional in their classrooms. They shared how helpful it was to implement SEL with a second adult in the classroom. Several participants reported more time for individual needs of students, and the academic lesson in progress could continue without interruption. Grace said, "the student-teacher was able to teach SEL the identical way that I do, even though we're two different people, so I have learned that consistency definitely helped." Jessie commented about the challenges of one-on-one or group discussions, with students having social-emotional concerns during the school day. She noted the benefit of a second professional: "one of us could continue the lesson and one of us could spend however much time was needed in the hallway with that individual or that group; and, of course, you can implement completely with one teacher." Similarly, Marissa shared about the collaborative help in the classroom and within the administration at her school. She reported: "We have teacher aides in the classroom who are able to pull the child out if they need to and our principal, vice-principal, and three special education teachers that support teachers. Our whole dynamics of the school is that immediate help is available."

Grace, Jessie, and Marissa's examples of help in the classroom are a sample of the comments made by four other educators. Having access to other adults in the classroom

or professionals such as behavior technicians or school counselors gave teachers the support needed for more consistent implementation and to care for the needs of more students. Opportunities to work one-on-one with students and additional supports within the school helped create consistency within the classroom and relieve stress for teachers by expanding the social-emotional availability. Support for implementation is a key component for the Theory of Action and is a resource that contributes to program fidelity.

Tools for Consistency. In addition to partners in the classroom, teachers Grace, Jessie, Marissa, Reese, and Theresa, a principal, shared in detail the use of slides or video lessons to help create consistency and ease in teaching SEL lessons in their classrooms. Videos or slide presentations make for more consistent class lessons and language across the school. All educators who used slides reported that videos made it less stressful for teachers to implement SEL. All of the participants used slides or videos to support SEL implantation.

Grace spoke about creating a YouTube account and creating videos with her students to streamline SEL lessons, while teaching hybrid and online during the pandemic. After students came back for in-person learning, they began making YouTube videos. She would share the links with students not in class and was also able to work with students remotely around the country. She said, “by making the videos, I found that I could teach more content in less time because you can edit and make them crafted. So that is working better.”

Jessie shared similar challenges through the COVID-19 pandemic and how engaged teachers were after being trained by SEL program trainers. But when the school

year started, it was difficult to keep up with all the requirements and standards—especially when they were vacillating between remote, hybrid, and in-person learning.

Even so, Jessie reported the ease of using slides:

We created a slideshow for each grade level. Each lesson has three or four slides, and it outlines the overview of the lesson. We sent that out to each teacher. The videos were really important for us this year. We really wanted to give teachers the idea of this isn't something that's going to take up a whole lot of your time. It's not going to be difficult to implement. So, we just handed them a slideshow where they literally have everything that they need, that I think helped more teachers implement.

Marissa used video programs in her classroom available through YouTube. She noted, “I like the Go Noodle. They have a lot of mindsets, relaxation, and therapy, and when the person talks through yoga, it has video lessons that you can use so you don't have to do a bunch of prep. It's ready to go for you to use.” From a leadership standpoint, Remy, an assistant principal, noted similar benefits:

when we're expecting teachers to teach high-quality lessons and, in their content, and then also prep SEL, something's got to give. And so that's where the idea of the weekly slides came in...[The SEL director prepped it for them, so it wasn't like that prep work it's just mostly execution.]

All participants reported using SEL tools such as prepared lesson plans, slide presentations, videos, and online programs—especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The digital formats were not only assessable and simple to use, they also provided

additional autonomy and flexibility. Grace, Jessie, Marissa, Reese, and Theresa shared that using these tools supported more routine and expedited implementation of SEL in their classrooms and schools.

Applying SEL Practices, Strategies and Skills in and out of the Classroom

The schools used a variety of SEL practices simultaneously. Table 4.4 shows implementation practices reported by participants, including brain breaks, mindful spaces, slides or instructional videos, physical movement, and data use. The practices are explained below.

Table 4.2 Practices and Implementation Used in the School or Classroom

Pseudonym	Brain Breaks	Fidget Tools/ Exercises	Mindful Space	Physical movement in class for SEL	Data
Marissa	X	X	X	X	–
Jessie	X	X	X	X	–
Grace	X	X	X	X	X
Crystal	–	X	X	X	–
Reese	–	X	X	X	–
Remy	–	X	–	–	X
Sam	–	–	–	–	X
Theresa	X	X	X	X	X
Jill	X	–	X	X	X

Seven out of nine participants used most of the SEL tools indicated in Table 4.4 above.

Brain Breaks. Many participants talked about using brain breaks and movement to help their students de-escalate, focus, and stay engaged. They discussed using brain breaks organically and consistently using breaks throughout the day as needed. Seven out of nine participants took brain breaks during class. Eight of nine used fidget tools and did brain connectivity exercises with students. For example, Grace explained how students learned vocabulary and techniques to take a brain break using an instructional video. The

video teaches students details about how to position their body and how to prepare their mind for learning. Grace noted, “it’s a pretty consistent training.” During her interview, Grace demonstrated how to do the hand brain break moving your hands like the Hoberman’s sphere, opening and closing them and breathing in and out as your hands expand open and close. She shared the importance of students being able to take a brain break without using any tools.

Fidget Tools: The Hoberman Sphere. The Hoberman Sphere is considered a fidget toy in some of the classrooms and is used with breathing as a tool to increase calm. This exercise is used by five of nine participants. To use the Hoberman Sphere, one takes a breath in as the sphere expands and exhales as the sphere closes. The Hoberman Sphere is a scientific approach to gain the skills of mindfulness and also teaches students how their lungs work. The exercise of the Hoberman’s sphere can be done using your hands. The purpose of this tool is to teach students and teachers mindful breathing to become focused and calm.

Figure 4.1 The Hoberman Sphere in Expanded Position

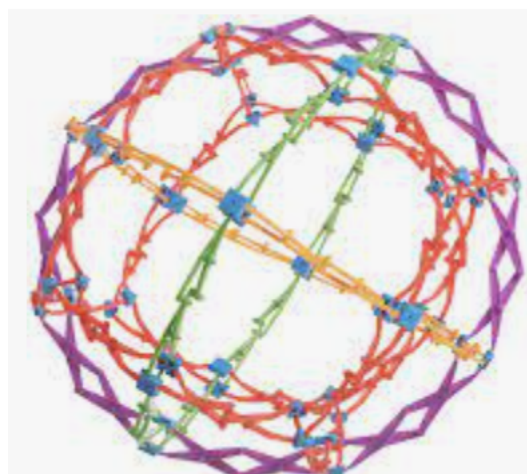


Figure 4.2 The Hoberman Sphere in Closed Position



Jill explained how her school uses coping toolboxes. Each student creates their own toolbox for fidgets, activities, and things to help cope when they are feeling dis-regulated and they keep the toolbox with them to use throughout the day. Jill implemented the coping toolbox during the 2020–2021 school year, when they were in a hybrid modality. According to Jill, tools like fidgets and breathing exercises helped students self-regulate and manage on their own, keeping the classroom environment less stressful and supported learning for everyone.

Mindful Spaces. Another similarity was revealed as eight out of nine participants provided a mindful space in their classroom or school. These mindful spaces have different names—Chill Space, Zen Den, Peace Room, and Refocus Area, to name a few. Educators reported the use of these mindful spaces to help students with stress relief and supported de-escalation and refocus throughout the day. Jill, Grace, and Reese talked about the chill space in their classrooms and shared pertinent information. Jill noted, “We are implementing a peace room at the main campus for our district.” She talked further about the mindful space in her school helping students who cannot sustain themselves in the classroom. She noted, “Our refocus area, the space that our students support specialist

uses is like a triage.” The student-support specialist works with students in her school to identify the issue and come up with solutions to help students cope in the classroom.

Using the mindful space is one solution to help teach students to de-escalate and reduce stress.

Reese echoed these benefits: “Some kids really need space, and there is a lot of training on students needing sensory areas, de-escalation areas, tents, cozy corners, and chill spaces.” Reese and Grace both shared how they use the chill spaces in their classrooms to create an opportunity for students to be involved in a community service project by being responsible for the chill space- keeping it clean, organized, and ready to use. They also gave students an opportunity to contribute to how the space is used in their classroom by creating leadership opportunities for students to make decisions about the use of the chill spaces, making rules for the class to follow and setting time limits for use and designing the space within the classroom. Grace said:

The mindful space is helpful to us because we can take an additional brain break whenever we need it. I noticed an increase in the use of the mindful space before a holiday break, winter break, and around standardized testing. I have even had kids stop by and say I know I’m not in your class right now, but can I just use the space for a minute, I’m really having a stressful day and I need to regroup.

All of the educators discussed the use and benefits of having a mindful space in their classroom and school and how important it has been for their students and personally for them as educators. These mindful spaces, brain breaks, and physical movements have been beneficial during highly stressful times like the COVID-19

pandemic. By using these spaces, exercises, and tools, educators reported feeling less stressed and better able to help students cope during these unprecedented stressful times.

Physical Movement. Marissa talked about using exercises and demonstrated how they use “Brain Gym” in the middle of class when students lose focus and are not listening. She said, “We just stand up and start our breathing exercise doing figure eight, and it's all connecting each side of the brain.” Marissa explained and demonstrated during the interview how to do this brain break exercise: cross your hands extended in front of you and fold them in, then unfold them back out and then cross hands in the opposite direction. Then cross your legs while doing your hand exercises, and then do it the opposite way. Another exercise they do is to put one knee on the opposite side of the body, elbow crossing midline, and repeat ten times. Marissa explained the benefits of such an activity: “there are all these different connecting each side of the brain exercises. You do so many things throughout the day that you don't even think about it as a social-emotional [activity].” She continued, “these exercises help to focus and reconnect the brain.” The “Brain Gym” type exercises were discussed by eight out of nine educators, and all except Remy talked about movement being a part of their SEL interventions.

Jessie said she has an exercise poster that guides her students to perform the exercises in the hallway outside their classroom. Jessie and Marissa discussed using the same activities from “Brain Gym” to help students focus and calm. All participants use some form of breathing exercise as a brain break, and an SEL intervention in their classrooms. Brain breaks and physical movement occur in a variety of classrooms and exercises. The key benefit of using these tools is to reduce teacher and student stress, thus

creating calm and focus. Making these tools available and accessible for students to help themselves not only relieves stress, but it also gives students the ability to be responsible for their social-emotional wellbeing throughout the school day and to contribute to making their school environment and learning more positive.

Tracking SEL Interventions, Tools, and Student Behavior Data

Using data to inform decision-making for programs, curriculum, tools, and implementation is another component of effective SEL implementation. Participants reported various methods of data collection. All educators, except Crystal, discussed using data in their classroom or school. Data systems used by the educators included Swiss, Functional Behavior Assessment (a data system to figure out what is causing challenging behaviors), the Five C's (positive behavior development using competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring) and the five CASEL competencies. Data evaluation was implemented in Remy's school using a survey and checklists. High school educators, Jill, Reese, and Remy, and elementary educator, Theresa, were the only educators using hard data. Others used comparative lists and checklists for students, keeping data on numbers of expulsions or distractions in class. Educators reported keeping data on increase or decrease in interventions, behavior modifications, or time spent in the chill space taking a brain break.

In describing the impact of SEL, Grace said her data showed that “engagement increased, the behavioral challenges decreased, and re-directions decreased significantly with students.” Reese used the Swiss data tracking program and the 5 C's of positive

youth development (Lerner, 2009): competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring. She noted further:

I track what is the hypothesized function of the behavior so that if you ever have to do an FBA (functional behavior assessment) it's ready to go. I use data to prioritize what SEL practices were used, student interests, the dynamics of my classroom and my community, the age of my students, and the function of their behaviors.

Similarly, Theresa shared data from her school, explaining:

Coupling the program with an understanding of our discipline matrix together, we did reduce the number of suspensions in our school and we had more of a restorative practice going on where we invited students into our offices and have conversations with them using the same program practices that the teachers are teaching in real life.

Data tracking at Theresa's school allowed her to determine the efficacy of various SEL implementation practices, ascertain what was working and not, and make decisions around what to change about current practices.

When uptake was poor, Remy used data to track how SEL was being neglected in her high school. She found teachers who were not having class and allowing students not to show up for their SEL period. Even when teachers had students in class, they were not always conducting SEL instruction or following their school program having one-on-one interventions. This caused her to begin regular classroom visits and tracking data using a weekly survey of students. Collecting this aggregate data helped Remy measure

implementation and accountability to mitigate future neglect of their SEL program. The questions used in the student survey, along with demographic information such as student name, SEL teacher name, and race, included more personal questions such as: During the past week, how do you feel? How much of your schoolwork have you completed? Have you understood your expectations? What is something cool that has happened? What else do you need help with? How well do you understand the grades? Do your grades motivate you? How often do you get feedback? What has been most helpful?

Of the research from Remy's school questionnaire, she noted:

It's interesting how kids will actually put stuff in here. Because this is reflective of the teacher, and the teacher has to give the feedback on their grades, this survey process is about moving students from dependent learners to independent learners, and so it's not about the rules and regulations; it's more about knowing that you have to master the material. And then these are like a staff shout out.

These are cute because, you can click a teacher and then you can write something about them. Our administration uses this survey to take care of the teachers. We sort them by shout out and send them to the teacher.

Remy's questionnaire reflects a more robust collection of raw data, when compared to the other participants. Data collection is a key component in the Theory of Action to assess the SEL programs and use the data for informed decision-making. This type of data helps to evaluate social emotional, school climate, and culture and to assess the needs of the students and choose best practices for future SEL implementation.

Theme #3: SEL as “Creating Community and Fostering Engagement”

Establishing community is key to successful SEL implementation. Participants expressed a need for both student and teacher buy-in, alongside family engagement. Engagement fosters community buy-in and connects students and teachers with families. Seven of nine participants used team building as an SEL intervention. Surprisingly, five of nine participants checked the box for all of the classroom, climate, and culture interventions. Eight of nine participants shared evidence of improved school or classroom culture and community engagement, as listed in Table 4.5.

Table 4.3 Classroom Climate and Culture

Pseudonym	Total	Morning circle & or afternoon circle	Increases student engagement and buy-in	School classroom culture community engagement	Restorative practices	Team building	Reduce student stress
Marissa	6	X	X	X	X	X	X
Jessie	6	X	X	X	X	X	X
Grace	6	X	X	X	X	X	X
Crystal	6	X	X	X	X	X	X
Reese	5	X	X	X	X	X	--
Remy	5	X	X	X	X	---	X
Sam	6	X	X	X	X	X	X
Theresa	3	X	X	---	X	---	---
Jill	6	X	X	X	X	X	X

Time for Mindful Gatherings and Communication. Participants reported many key components to improve SEL implementation, including teacher support from administration and allowing time for mindful gatherings and communication. According to participants, a tool for developing community engagement is starting each day with a connection circle. As Jessie shared, “At the start of the year, we spend all those connection circles aimed towards community building and getting to know each other. And then we just kind of build on that throughout the year.” This SEL intervention is a foundation for community building and developing social norms. Jessie disclosed “the mindful gatherings in her classroom helped to end the chaos” that she experienced in her first year of teaching. Even though only two educators teach in the same school district, time allotted for mindfulness and SEL implementation had more similarities than differences between participants. For example, all participant teachers facilitated at least one classroom circle gathering per day. All four elementary schools had circle gatherings every day in the morning and after lunch. Participants shared how circle time was crucial to opening lines of communication, and getting students settled and ready for academics. The middle school and two high school educators organized circle time at the beginning of their class, and two high schools had a specific class period dedicated to SEL, where they began the class with a group circle. Reese’s high school students had one-on-one sessions with their teacher instead of a group circle. Sam explained how circle time is part of her school’s approach and is “woven into the school culture”:

During circle time, children are afforded an opportunity to share how they feel about what is going on in their lives and hear other children. It is a time when they also practice using specific language that helps them articulate their feelings and their social interactions.

Circle time at every grade level gives students and teachers an excellent opportunity to develop empathy and communication skills—an essential element of SEL. Participants shared circle prompts that included gratitude practices and time to connect with each other, allowing every student to share and be heard. Jessie stated, “These are the skills that will make them successful.” Developing communication skills to listen to others and learning to share gratitude and taking time daily to express feelings—whether positive or negative—helps clear the mind and open up to learning more efficiently. Theresa, a principal, shared an exercise her school employs in morning circle time to implement SEL. She noted: “when you have this feeling, you need to stop, name what you're feeling, and then take ten breaths, and count to ten.” When a student has an escalation, they use this exercise to stop and communicate.

Many teachers used rituals to initiate the mindful gathering. A unique practice Crystal used was smudging. According to Schools Division Canada (2019), smudging is a tradition that involves burning one of four sacred medicines (e.g., tobacco, sage, cedar, sweetgrass) used in First Nations ceremonies. Smudging encourages individuals to stop, slow down, and become mindful and centered. Integrating traditional ceremonies such as smudging ensures schools are inclusive and culturally responsive. After smudging, Crystal shared that her students discussed “topics such as addiction,” offered gratitude,

and talked about “how they felt about the day, ending the circle with a handshake, hug, or fist bump.”

Jessie and Grace used a chime sound to begin their circle time, and create the stop, slow down, and become mindful and centered. The chime created an effect similar to Crystal’s class smudging. Reese, Marissa, Jessie, and Grace used aromatherapy diffusers with lavender or other essential oils to create a calm class environments, as aromatherapy helps to reduce stress and anxiety (Redstone, 2015).

Student Engagement, Buy-In and Social Emotional Wellbeing. In this research, I discovered many different ways to create buy-in and student engagement. Indeed, every participant expressed that their SEL approach did this work. The educators discussed different methods for creating student understanding, including using technology, creating instructional videos, outdoor education, and intriguing assignments; or rewarding students for cooperation and good behavior to create student buy-in and engagement. As Reese noted, “SEL increases engagement and buy-in; it teaches academic and social-emotional skills.”

Student engagement is one of the key components for SEL implementation. One notable way Reese increases student engagement is by having students create comic books and layout stories with thought bubbles. Using this process to engage kids in thinking about what others are thinking and feeling is developing social-emotional skills. Reese reflected, “I’ve seen it help a lot of kids.” Through this exercise, students relate and engage in compassion and awareness toward others.

Perhaps the most important aspect of engagement and buy-in is intervention. As

Remy shared:

we have intervened in too many kids' lives that have suicidal ideation or something's going on at home, and we caught a lot of that in SEL. The impact, even just in that, is huge with the kids that we were able to reach, and I still don't know if that's enough to get full teacher buy-in, and I think that's like the conundrum.

Teachers feeling like they are reaching students is critical for social-emotional intervention and gives teachers the assurance they need to feel their time is well spent. As Grace shared, time is a concern for most teachers to add SEL to their academic schedule because they want to know that the time spent is worth it.

Grace continued:

Knowing that SEL might prevent even one death by suicide could be enough to increase teacher buy-in. Even so, the weight of lesson prep time and the perceived benefit does not seem to outweigh the time needed that so many teachers think they don't have.

Jesse, Grace, Sam, Jill, Reese, Crystal, and Marissa all shared that their programs are more tailored to students needs and feel trusted to select daily practices from a broad curriculum. They used both grassroots and systemic SEL approaches, and shared the common practice of creating curriculum that meets the needs of their students to create engagement and buy-in.

Facilitating Teacher Engagement, Ownership, and Buy-in. Student engagement and buy-in is contingent on teacher engagement and buy-in to facilitate program ownership and engagement. Participants all stated in various ways that teacher engagement and buy-in was essential to implementing social emotional skills and interventions. Buy-in is one of the competencies for effective SEL implementation. Developing a sense of ownership and trust between administration and teachers helps facilitate a deeper level of engagement.

Remy expressed the challenge of increasing teacher buy-in when many already feel overextended and overtaxed. She noted, “I think it's mixed; there’s always hope with the teachers. And there's a certain level of frustration that it's the same thing disguised as something else.” At Remy’s school, they have changed their SEL program every year. Constant transition has decreased teacher buy-in, as they are taxed with learning a new program or practice every year. That would make it difficult for any teacher to be excited about SEL. Based on participant reporting, the schools that have used the same program over and/or give teachers the flexibility to create their approach experience better teacher uptake. Remy questioned, noting the reality that SEL requires more of hardworking teachers: “How do we make this meaningful and worthwhile? ...I don't know what else to do to create the buy-in, especially because it does look like one more prep for teachers.” Slide presentations and videos seem to work well, and those who used them reported feeling less stressed and more motivated to implement SEL practices and interventions.

Feelings of ownership and buy-in are key components for effective SEL implementation. The structured programs compared to the grassroots programs seem controlled and lack a sense of ownership and buy in from the teachers. When administration is forming committees to choose their programs, approaches and implementation, it is important to include staff and other key stakeholders to help with decisions and to contribute to the design of the program to align with school and community goals and the school culture .

Jessie shared that her school district has complete buy-in and the director of teaching and learning is supportive of implementing the SEL program. Although Jessie's school district has a structured program, she explained the genuine support from the district, and expressed how she feels as a teacher like she would want her students to feel: supported in learning, comfortable, safe, and engaged in the classroom. She said, "They very much care about us and our daily lives, and how satisfied we are as teachers and not just as producers of test scores." She also discussed the community effort and altogether, feeling like she's "not in this alone." Jessie and Grace's school district has the newest SEL program of all nine participants. Yet, due to strong administrative support, their program is rapidly evolving with training and development offered by the company that sponsors their program, along with ongoing training and support throughout the year. Additionally, Remy shared that "teacher buy-in was lacking, as only 5–10% of teachers in her school was implementing the program as designed." The four educators using a structured program discussed challenges with teacher buy-in and implementation. Even

though they had administrative support, their schools lacked teacher buy-in with programs limited in flexibility.

School and Community Engagement, Culture, and Climate. In the data, participants reported that creating classroom climate and culture increased student engagement and buy-in. For example, all participants used morning and or afternoon circle gatherings and restorative practices. Reese and Marissa both shared about increasing student engagement and buy-in with community-service projects. Reese noted that community projects “engage students beyond the classroom and beyond our country.” Reese expressed further that “the kids should drive the conversation and the instruction that's really what's going to facilitate ownership and buy-in.”

Grace discussed helping students understand the *why*. She noted: “Once they understand the why, they want to know more; they get inquisitive.” She noted further that using neuroscience to help students understand their brain “creates more buy-in 100%.” Another way to introduce students to *the why* is through communicating what they will learn in the future. Crystal said she creates buy-in by getting students excited about the program for the semester—sharing what they’re going to learn and why it matters.

Marissa shared how her classroom has pods and a point system within the pods. This motivates students to work as a team and learn cooperation to be rewarded with candy or pennies. She noted, “I know it sounds silly, but those things make that connection, and their behavior programs help as they’re constantly being rewarded.” Data on student engagement and buy-in reveals the importance of communication—essentially

promoting understanding, motivation, community engagement, and compassion for others.

Grace and Jessie, who are teachers, and Remy, an Assistant Principal, shared that developing lesson plans with slideshows increased teacher buy-in, as they would not have to spend time on prep work. Instead, they could focus time and energy on executing the SEL interventions and classroom culture. Grace explained creating high school teacher buy-in and the importance of sharing video testimonials of students. She said:

if I go into those instructional coaches and show them success stories of kids they are in if I just say, this is what we're doing; they are out. It has to be their decision. Even though it's school-wide, it still has to be voluntary. The videos are like planting a seed in the hope of having every teacher in the school have buy-in.

Jill said all her “teachers have buy-in because they understand the value of SEL as special education teachers.” Similarly, Reese noted, “Teachers should have an outline, a lesson plan, and objectives, but can't have a set, straight-up curriculum because there's a lot of emotion that should be involved, which will slow down or speed up your curriculum.” Remy highlighted the importance of SEL as a chance to connect with students. Her teachers feel it is “necessary to have a checkpoint time with a group of students.”

Building school climate and culture extends beyond the classroom and fosters positive norms and expectations that help students and staff feel safe, connected, and engaged. SEL skills are needed outside of the classroom—especially on the playground at recess, lunchtime, and in the community. Creating safe spaces in the school playground and other out of classroom places gives students the support needed to have continuity in

developing SEL skills. Giving students opportunities to practice SEL skills outside of the classroom supports needed skills for continuity in using these practices. Creating professional development and training for social-emotional competence, including support for teachers, staff, and parents provides opportunities for students to build meaningful connections with their family and community.

Teachable Moments Become Lifetime Skills. SEL skills can be taught to use in daily interactions in the classroom, on the playground, at home, and in the community. These skills include behavior management, conflict resolution, and restorative practices. These skills taught in the moment in real time carry a value that extends long past the hours spent in school.

Restorative practices were mentioned as a part of SEL interventions by every participant. Depending on the age of the students, different restorative interventions were coupled with social-emotional practices to resolve conflict and bring a happier environment to the school culture and community. As Sam commented:

The director actually facilitates individual sessions with children over lunch, so it's not a punitive approach for children who might be experiencing the need to talk or work out conflicts...in addition, the director facilitates group lunch between children who might be having some interpersonal conflicts or might need what we call a friendship break and all of this is done over lunch either outdoors here on our campus in a non-threatening way or in the director's office.

Sam attends some of these lunch “sessions,” and she also schedules lunch sessions with new students, to meet her as Principal as well as the Assistant Principal and the director

of their social approach. The restorative approach at Sam's school builds communication and relationship skills, social awareness and community engagement.

Jessie reflected on the positive impacts on conflict resolution, noting, "We bring in a lot of conflict problem solving and restorative practices into the class." She explained that if something comes up that is affecting the whole class, a small group, or two students, they will have a restorative circle. Jessie reported, "I try to guide them to take more ownership and leadership in those restorative practices."

Jill is a high school principal and SEL Director for her district of 2800 students. Her team employs a restorative approach to discipline. She noted, "we use restorative pieces to implement the social-emotional component and look at behaviors and how they affect others around them."

The restorative practices shared by the educators are atypical, as they use CASEL core competencies as the foundation of their restorative practices. The result of developing communication skills and building relationships beginning in Pre-K effects student behavior and self-responsibility throughout their years in school; more importantly, these are beneficial life skills. As Jill stated:

We collect data on everything. We have seen a decrease in our major referrals.

We've had a huge decrease in both in and out-of-school suspension rates. We

have overall more time spent in class and less time in our refocus area.

This data is evidence that coupling mindful restorative practices with SEL interventions changes the relationships of teachers, students and the communities around them.

Team Building and Community-Service Projects. School and classroom culture and community engagement are essential parts of SEL, and eight out of nine educators mentioned how SEL interventions changed their school culture by fostering meaningful relationships with school, family, and community partnerships. Students and communities are brought together as students learn to communicate, develop empathy, and give their time through team building in community service projects. For example, Marissa’s class raised funds for the U.S. military and Reese’s students raised money for children in Africa. Community service projects teach students about something bigger than themselves and opened their eyes and their hearts to the world around them in addition to generating student engagement. Several of the participants shared how SEL interventions focused on community engagement to create a sense of belonging, inclusive learning environments, and a positive school and classroom culture. Reese, explained the impact of service-learning projects, as:

one of the biggest game-changers in my career. Finding ways for my students to give back to the community and implementing it into the classrooms has to be in everything you do. It’s most beneficial when it ties in with the academics, and it should be a foundational structure of your whole classroom.

Similarly, Marissa shared, “We have a big buddy program where the older kids are buddies to the little kids. I think that kind of a program is really helpful to make everybody feel a part of the community.” According to Marissa, the buddy program creates a sense of belonging for new students in the school at any grade level. Theresa

also uses a buddy program in her school and shared that it “created inclusivity and belonging.” Along similar lines, Sam stated:

When children are happier, it just makes the teaching easier, not easy, but certainly facilitates the academic components and they go hand in hand. From our perspective they're not separate once again all interwoven into everything that we're doing. And so it just makes for deeper richer community building, and that is definitely an incentive for them to have less issues outside of academics to deal with.

The depth of learning that occurs when engaging students in community-service projects extends far beyond the classroom. A holistic approach to community collaborations is embedded in many difference SEL practices. All participants shared experiences of community projects.

Challenges During Unprecedented Times. As mentioned earlier, one of the greatest challenges for education, SEL, and this research was the COVID-19 pandemic. Every educator I interviewed expressed the challenges of navigating online and hybrid learning in uncertain times. According to participants, the top challenges during the pandemic were gaining trust to maintain a positive school culture, having positive student-teacher conversations, data collection, time for training and development, holding teachers accountable, teacher follow-through, consistency, and implementation with fidelity. Support from administration, including professional development having teacher-student buy-in, were essential for effective implementation.

Challenges with Teacher Follow Through and Implementation with Fidelity.

Accountability for implementing SEL as designed is a challenge for educators. Theresa and Remy spoke of challenges in prioritizing SEL implementation practices with fidelity. Random check-ins with teachers at both of their schools revealed that some teachers were not implementing SEL interventions. Both Theresa and Remy reported experiences where teachers said they were implementing SEL, but found they were not doing it at all. Reese expressed concern over a limited focus on data, while not following through on implementation with fidelity. She noted, “It's hard to change your habits. It's hard to implement new things. It takes time and energy...we don't have frankly, so teacher follow-through, and the ability to be consistent and find who will do it well with fidelity.” Similarly, Remy shared, “it is frustrating to be real about it as an administrator and seeing that only 50% of the teachers are truly implementing SEL with fidelity.” Theresa stated, “Holding teachers accountable is where we fell short because they were trained in using it, and I was available for questions, but I did not check-in and enforce that they use the curriculum with fidelity.” Implementing SEL intervention as designed creates fidelity. As Remy and Theresa shared, their teachers were trained but did not implement SEL as designed, which caused frustration and the need for more training, development and instructional monitoring.

Summary

Student, teacher, and family engagement is critical for successful SEL implementation and intervention. Helping teachers make time to create trust and engage students is essential for any implementation strategy. The Theory of Action outlined by

the Wallace Foundation (2021) points to six elements for high-quality SEL implementation; and all six elements were evident in participant interviews. These intersecting elements were instrumental in engagement and buy-in: allotting sufficient time for implementation; extending SEL beyond the classroom; applying and transferring skills; prioritizing staff support and training; facilitating program ownership and buy-in; and using data to inform decision making (EASEL, 2021). One of the most important elements for SEL implementation is allocating time to create engagement and implement a tailored curriculum that improves student wellbeing, and changes school culture and climate.

Research Question 2: CASEL Core Competencies

My second research question explored teacher and administrator perceptions of how SEL programs foster student SEL and CASEL core competencies of self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness? The five core competencies can be “taught and applied at various developmental stages from childhood to adulthood and across diverse cultural contexts” (CASEL, 2020). CASEL’s five SEL core competencies were used by every educator in teaching SEL, and similar implementation strategies were used for positive classroom outcomes at the different grade levels of the participants. The five core competencies implemented into their SEL programs help guide their students and teachers to develop these skills and implement them in their daily lives.

Theme #4: Internal and External Perspectives of Social Emotional Development

Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is CASEL's first core competency and examples of how self-awareness was taught in class was discussed by every participant. The participants indicated that students becoming self-aware helped them identify and cope with their emotions and stress, resulting in a stronger sense of how their actions affected themselves and others. Crystal spoke about how her student's practiced self-awareness by having personal introductions and through sharing about who they are in their families and community:

They are representing their relations and where we're connecting to the land. The students connect physically, emotionally, and spiritually, and recognize each other for who they are. They develop a strong awareness of each other and support each other in finding a sense of purpose.

Crystal's students learn self-awareness, as they listen to each other share. Having students understand their ancestral roots and cultural identities creates a strong sense of belonging, thus building cultural inclusivity within their classroom and school community.

Jessie talked about self-awareness, and how she teaches students to "build one or two strategies they can depend on to bring themselves back to regulation and calm." As a class, "students identify emotions and share what they are feeling." This exercise helps them become present to themselves and build those strategies for regulation and calm throughout the day.

Marissa shared about her students learning a different virtue every month. For example, they use the Go Noodle reflection to walk through feelings and to identify how they would feel if they were someone else and develop the skills of empathy and compassion. For example, she asked students to consider what it would feel like if someone stole from them, after one of her students stole awards from another student. Similarly, Grace expressed:

Self-awareness is part of adjusting not only as a tween or teen but as an adult and being aware, but being able to take a pause and take a break and figure out what you need for self-care. The biggest one is when they feel anxious, stressed, overly excited, or even sad, they immediately go into their brain break without directive. They are empowered; they have the self-awareness, the empowerment, and the care.

Grace's students attain this self-awareness by using the CASEL interventions and practices that they are taught throughout the year. The skill of self-identifying their emotions and feelings is an important part of becoming self-aware. As Reese expressed:

SEL gives kids a voice, and it teaches them how to use their voice which often in schools, we tell kids not to do. I think that's the biggest influence that I see from social-emotional learning. It really helps a kid learn about themselves and who they are and how they fit in the world. It teaches them how to advocate for themselves; it teaches them how to connect with others; it teaches them how to connect with themselves and talk to themselves and talk themselves through the hard times and through the good times.

Reese describes self-awareness through student voice. As students become more self-aware, they speak up for themselves and learn to advocate for themselves. Reese's description of how self-awareness helps students have voice is one way to teach students confidence and connecting their feelings to their thoughts and voice.

According to participants, developing self-awareness is learning about each other's social and cultural identities, learning to identify emotions, and learning to regulate and calm emotions. It's learning to speak up and have a voice and express oneself.

Self-Management. Self-management is CASEL's second core competency. Similar to self-awareness, it is taking a new level of action by managing one's emotions and stress. Part of self-management is learning to take charge. Many of the educators give their students opportunities to exercise leadership in self-management. Grace noted, "I model self-management the first week of our class, and then they would go over to the mindful space and be able to use the tools to calm their amygdala and get a moment to center and ground themselves until they are ready to return." By teaching self-management, Grace gives her students a say in how they implement SEL tools for self-management. Her middle school students learn to self-manage their emotions and to take initiative to use the mindful space when they need it. The eighth graders help her make decisions about the mindful space in her classroom and make decisions about how it should be utilized. This teaches students real-life self-management. In regards to teaching self-management, Jessie noted that it helps students manage their emotions and "stay regulated before issues arise and before your amygdala gets all fired up." Jessie teaches

students to self-manage using these tools and a common language to help everyone communicate.

In more serious cases, Jill noted, "We also use nonviolent crisis intervention to really work on de-escalating behavior identifying patterns of behavior with students and working on replacement behaviors." At Jill's school, they use trauma-informed training, life space crisis intervention, and self-management practices to help students investigate and identify their behaviors. This level of self-management helps students take action and accomplish personal goals set each week.

Similarly, Marissa shared how self-management helps students over time. She stated, "if we have a variety of different ways to solve problems they become better problem solvers. The video program we use talks them through thinking and calming themselves." The exercises Marissa teaches for self-management help her second-grade students stay focused and reconnect their brains for higher learning. Reese teaches her students to self-manage using crazy eight breathing as a strategy to de-escalate.

Theresa shared about the most extensive self-management in the study, using verbal cues and actions to self-manage. The teachers teach these tools to students in morning meetings to show them how to manage when they have certain feelings. The verbal cues include you need to stop, name what you're feeling, and then take ten breaths, count to ten. She expressed using these tools as a principal to guide emotional students in her office to self-manage feelings and maintain a hands-off policy with students. Theresa also shared, "my office was often the place where we moved students who were having an emotional breakdown, and so I got to see a lot of firsthand response and intervention for

those students.” She discussed some of the emotional and physical outbursts that occurred in her office, and how her team of behavior technicians would speak to the students through verbal cues. She noted, the “process would help deescalate students much faster the more this system was in place.” Teaching students to self-manage with these interventions is giving these students life-long skills.

Self-management is taught using different exercises to deescalate student stress and calm emotions. Educators use mindful spaces in their classroom and give permission for voice and self-direction or de-escalating behavior by identifying patterns, teaching students to be problem solvers by using breathing exercises or verbal cues to de-escalate emotions, and calm. The tools used to teach students self-management lead to responsible decision-making and more learning.

Responsible Decision Making. Responsible decision-making ranges from self-care and safety and learning consequences to learning to take on a simple task and applying critical thinking skills to personal behavior and social interactions. Every age group is learning how to make decisions and take steps that will benefit their wellbeing, and choose behaviors that will positively impact their lives. As Crystal shared:

Responsible decision making is not explicitly taught. It is inherent and, of course, there will be mistakes. And there will be ways to be able to look for teachable moments in terms of mistakes for choices and looking at how to build the knowledge.

Continuing, Crystal gave an example of responsible decision-making with her outdoor education program on a cold day when students were not wearing proper boots. The

whole day became about saving their feet from frost bite. She noted, “it was a learning experience; I bet you none of those kids will ever go out again, where it is that they are wearing ankle boots.” This experiential education opportunity is a vivid and grounded example of recognizing critical thinking skills, teaching students to have good judgment, and considering consequences by allowing them to make mistakes and learn from them.

Relationship Skills. Relationship skills mean being able to connect, communicate, and work with others to develop positive relationships and cultural competency. Some relationship skills show up in group collaborations, developing leadership skills, resolving conflict, and learning how to ask for help or give to others when needed, and standing up for others. Every educator discussed some aspect of relationship skills as part of their SEL interventions. Crystal shared how she teaches relationship skills and helping seventh to twelfth-grade students who deal with anxiety. Critically, she noted:

[The] disconnect that teenagers will have thinking that they're suffering on their own...it gives them an opportunity to connect with each other, not only their energies like in a circle, but also how it is that they see themselves and others, so that there's more of a realization that they're not alone that there is a community.

Crystal noted that when students shared about their anxiety and loneliness, it helped them develop positive relationships with each other by seeking or offering support.

Grace also noted the importance of communication to build relationship skills and student-to-student dialogue: “The dialogues that kids have kid-to-kid, kid-to-teacher and other teachers... They are handling situations and understanding how to have those

conversations.” Being an advocate teaches kids the components of communication, standing up for the rights of others, and developing positive relationships.

Marissa shared many ways to accomplish communication within her classroom, student to student, or as a group using SEL tools to build relationships and having students practice reflection and finding gratitude. She also teaches relationship skills using fishbowl discussions or having debates in small groups. She found it valuable to use these tools and interventions to resolve problems and build relationships within her classroom through conversations versus lecturing her students.

Remy shared that “the initial purpose of SEL is like a safety net to catch kids who are slipping through the cracks.” She described SEL as way to check students’ vital signs. Having conversations with high school students and asking how they are doing and about their grades, “you start to form a relationship with them.” Having these conversations with high school kids opens up an opportunity to build healthy and supportive relationships. Students gain trust in their teachers and may ask for and accept help when needed.

Theresa discussed not using tools or lessons for relationship skills and focusing more on decision making and communication as part of her school’s intervention piece. However, her example of the interventions used is relationship building. She said:

when kids came to my office, instead of saying, ‘hey you did this; here is your consequence.’ It was like, ‘hey you did this. Take some time to think about it.

Let's have a discussion, and they would use this kind of graphic organizer that

talked about all the solutions and the people that were affected, what can you do differently, and then we talked about that decision.

She concluded, noting the consistency of the work: “I would have check-ins with those students until I saw improvement.”

Of collaborative problem-solving, Jill noted:

Our kids work on collective problem solving and they work on how to establish and foster collaborative relationships with others and pro social skills. Our negative peer interactions are down so when we're talking about social relationships, that's a huge piece.

On a similar note, Jessie shared about making connections and building relationship skills as she stated:

If you can make connections and make the relationships really strong before you jump into all those academics then they know that you really do have their best interests at heart. It comes back to that relationship piece, they need to trust you, and they need to trust that you've got you their best interests at heart, not your best interests and that's what this program does.

Relationship skills are taught and students are guided in different ways. Yet, the common thread among participants was using communication to build strong relationship skills and using CASEL core competencies to create a foundation for being in touch and connecting through conversations and resolving conflicts to develop positive relationships.

Social Awareness. Social awareness is understanding others, having gratitude, finding compassion, developing empathy for others, and identifying social norms. As the educators express how social awareness skills are developed and students are guided to learn these skills, almost all CASELs social awareness components were found within the SEL programs of these educators.

Marissa discussed tools she used daily in her classroom to bring awareness and resolve social issues—especially after lunchtime, and when “there's a problem or when somebody hurts somebody, you sit, and you talk about how you feel and what would it feel like if you were one of those kids.” Teaching social awareness to young children begins with empathy and compassion for others, and learning to hear and understand other perspectives.

Sam also talked about empathy, noting: “the approach uses specific language with child-friendly imagery to help children develop conflict resolution skills, but there are components of it designed to help children develop empathy for others.” Gratitude is a crucial skill in SEL and was mentioned by participants as a practice to discuss or journal about to deepen social awareness. Jessie stated, “Children need to know how to treat each other; they need to know how to stay calm in different situations and have gratitude.”

Jill reflected in a similar vein:

It's about improved peer interactions, less referrals for negative peer interactions.

It's about students being able to identify goals and discuss their progress towards those goals by using their Swiss data to identify patterns and guide that

conversation. It's then that the restorative piece to it brings in how their decisions impact others.

Teaching social awareness looks different for each age group, but creating a culture of feeling and relating to others, understanding others' viewpoints, and being kindhearted is how we become a responsive community. Crystal suggested having stronger "relationships and connection to land and community supports." This is a powerful example of SEL and social awareness. No matter where we are in education, social awareness is a priority.

Chapter Summary

SEL was an essential antidote to the problems created and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, illuminating systemic issues that already existed pre-pandemic. One of the most significant discoveries in this research was that no matter the grade level of the classroom, if the school was rural or suburban, public, private, or a charter school, or if it was in the United States or Canada, educators' perspectives on SEL were comparable; and the interventions and tools they used were similar for every age and grade in school. It was common practice for educators to foster the Theory of Action and CASEL'S core competencies and have students learn self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision making, thereby building relationships, community, and social awareness within every classroom.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

The present interview-based qualitative study sought to discover educator perceptions of practices and implementation of SEL programs in the classroom, and locate ways SEL programs foster student socio-emotional wellbeing (e.g., self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision making) and reduce stress. Indeed, Schonert-Reichl and colleagues (2015) note that “effective education includes practices that bolster students’ social-emotional competencies in tandem with their academic knowledge” (p. 52).

The research questions were (1) What are practices for implementing SEL programs in a classroom or school? (2) What are educator perceptions of how social-emotional programs foster student SEL and the CASEL core competencies of self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness? I discussed the research questions in detail in chapter four. This final chapter discusses implications of my findings and provides recommendations for future SEL implementation and practices.

The findings are in alignment with current literature on SEL and the framework designed by CASEL. A new definition, as stated by CASEL (n.d.), defines SEL as “the skills associated with social-emotional learning as both ‘fundamental for life effectiveness’ and ‘a framework for school improvement.’” Indeed, SEL significantly

evolved during the two year period (2020–2022) when I collected and analyzed the data. In that period, SEL became a vital topic in education and the broader world during such an unpredictable and unprecedented time. The present research is only a snapshot in this time period; and yet, the speed at which SEL importance changed was challenging to keep current.

Three major themes answered the question, *What are practices for implementing SEL programs in a classroom or school?* The first theme is SEL as “an approach not a program.” A second theme is SEL as “planning for a process.” Theme three is “SEL as “creating community and fostering engagement.”

The theme of “internal and external perspectives” answered question two: *What are educator perceptions of how social-emotional programs foster student SEL and the CASEL core competencies of self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness?*

Summary of Findings

A key finding of this research is an implementation philosophy that SEL is an approach, not a program. In essence, the optimal SEL approach adapts the curriculum to the individual needs of the students; and SEL planning and scheduling works best when it is individualized for each classroom and school. Wigglesworth and colleagues (2016) state that SEL interventions show the largest effect size when the intervention is designed with a specific context or culture in mind. This supports the idea that SEL is not a “one-size-fits-all” intervention. Wigglesworth and colleagues’ (2016) statement aligns with my findings, as a majority of participants used a grassroots philosophy to organically fit the

needs of the school community. Based on data from this research, educators who used a more grassroots philosophy had more success in SEL implementation. Essentially, customization was key to SEL success among participants. Administrators should be open to various resources to customize the SEL program curriculum and design the curriculum to fit the needs of students.

A systemic approach follows specific school, local, and state SEL policies and practices, using CASEL core competencies. Systemic approaches explored in this study had more structure, and some were designed to fit the needs of the students. Overall, however, they were not as flexible as the grassroots approaches that provide individualized SEL practices from multiple resources.

Relative to SEL as “planning for a process,” my findings revealed a shared plan and action steps as key implementation strategies. Utilizing a school SEL Director strengthened adult competencies and developed trust and engagement among staff. Research from CASEL (2020) indicates that “full implementation of schoolwide SEL often takes three to five years but will depend on each school’s individual circumstances and goals” (p. 1). Data from this research showed that more experienced participants had stronger SEL program practices and implementation.

Findings related to fostering engagement and creating community included developing classroom climate and culture, and using practices such as daily classroom circles to create opportunities for engagement, communication, and community. Classroom gathering circles are an essential SEL practice to start the day and to foster focus. The practice of smudging is a new finding and resource for beginning the

classroom circle. Burning one of four sacred medicines used in First nations ceremonies allowed students to become mindful and centered, while fostering an inclusive and culturally responsive classroom (Schools Division Canada, 2019). Other traditions for circle gatherings included chime or bell ringing. These traditions provided cultural inclusivity and, most importantly, helped create community and engagement. Gathering circles provided an opportunity to teach empathy, listening skills, and for students to learn about each other socially and culturally. Using prompts to share gratitude was included during gathering circles for every participant. According to CASEL (2013), teaching gratitude practices fosters social awareness. Gratitude practices were included in every program used by participants, including MindUP, the Kindness Program, and unique approaches designed by individual schools in this study.

The CASEL core competencies of self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness are critical to SEL intervention. All programs used by participants used the CASEL core competencies, and CASEL SElect programs including Class Dojo, Go Noodle, the Kindness Program, the 5Cs of Positive Youth Development, the Mindfulness Mindset, MindUP, and Rethink Ed.

Self-awareness is learning the skill of self-identifying emotions and feelings, learning to calm and regulate emotions and advocating for oneself. Self-awareness answers the question, “Who am I?” (Lawlor et al., 2013, p. 69). Teaching self-awareness was accomplished using SEL practices such as focused breathing, reflective thinking and writing, and quiet time in the classroom. Art is another way to access self-awareness and all five SEL competencies (CASEL,

2013). Teaching students how their mind works was used by two of the participants in this research and they found it valuable to have students connect mind and body, and learn self-awareness that support emotional regulation and control (Hawn, 2020; Schonert-Reichl, 2015).

Similar to self-awareness, self-management is learning to manage emotions and take charge. Learning to make decisions, take action and set and accomplish goals was discussed by all participants as an important part of SEL intervention. Some ways participants taught self-management was to encourage students take responsibility in the classroom and help make decisions about classroom management of SEL implementation. An SEL exercise used by several participants is to teach students to self-manage using crazy eight breathing as a strategy to de-escalate stress and calm emotions. Another practice used by every participant to teach self-management was to have a chill-space or peace corner in their classroom or on the school playground. Giving students space to manage their emotions or take a brain break is crucial for self-management.

Social awareness is understanding others, having gratitude, finding compassion, developing empathy for others, and identifying social norms (CASEL, 2020). As the educators express how social awareness skills are developed and students are guided to learn these skills, almost all CASELs social awareness components were found within the SEL programs of these educators. An important aspect about self-awareness is the significance of learning the perspectives of others to develop cultural inclusivity within the classroom and community. The practice of understanding other's perspective was used in the curriculum for every grade level by the participants in this study.

Responsible decision making ranges from self-care and safety and learning consequences to learning to take on a simple task and applying critical thinking skills to personal behavior and social interactions. Every age group was learning to make decisions to benefit their wellbeing, and choose behaviors that will positively impact their lives. Focusing on responsible decision making in the classroom and on the playground and teaching students to analyze situations, make judgements, and get the facts helps with critical thinking skills and understanding consequences. These learned skills foster personal wellbeing at school, home, and in the community (CASEL, 2020).

Relationship skills are improved by using all of the other CASEL competencies: self-management, self-awareness, social-awareness, and responsible decision making. Learning relationship skills means being able to connect, communicate and work with others developing leadership skills and resolving conflict. Many participants emphasized the importance of fostering relationship skills as a means to SEL intervention and restorative practices.

Recommendations and Implications for Practice

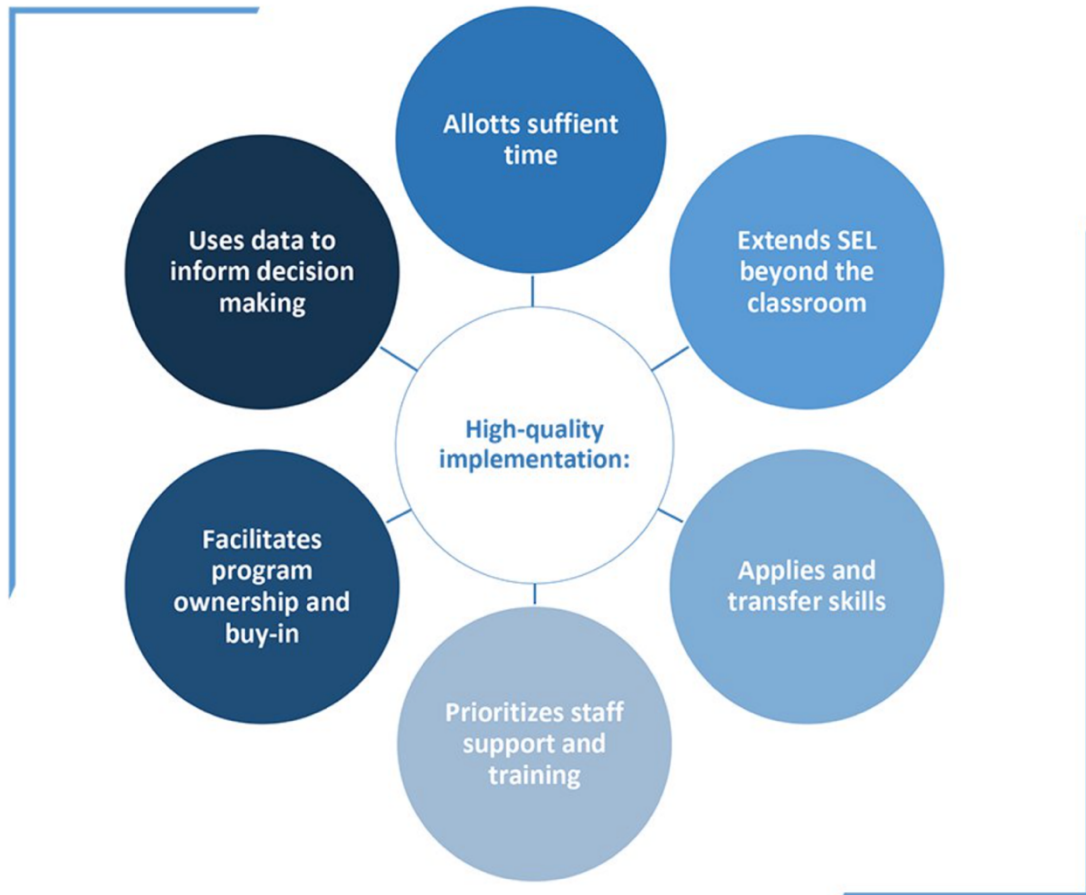
The Wallace Foundation (2021) published recommendations for a high-quality SEL Implementation Theory of Action. The data herein reveals that the six implementation elements were used by participants in this study. All participants reported using most, if not all, of the theory of action components: 1) Allot the time required to implement the program sufficiently and effectively. 2) Extend SEL beyond the classroom. 3) Provide opportunities to apply and transfer SEL skills mad strategies. 4)

Ensure sufficient staff support and training, 5) Facilitate program ownership and buy-in.
6) Use data to inform decision-making.

I recommend this theory of action as a framework for SEL implementation and to follow the philosophy of using a “grassroots approach.” Choosing the practices and programs to “fit the needs of the students” benefits all stakeholders. According to Jones and colleagues (2021), the six components in the Theory of Action affect SEL in that it is integrated into academics by providing support for implementation and autonomy to fit the needs of the individual, classroom, or school. Professional development and training provide the skills and strategies to extend SEL beyond the classroom, and foster improved school climate and culture. And teaching students to use these skills at home and in their life fosters inclusivity and family and community engagement. I recommend guiding teachers in their first few years of teaching with a more systemic approach and to gradually introduce more practices or other programs to eventually use a grassroots approach to fit the needs of their students.

Data informed decision making is critical for effective SEL implementation. Study participants suggested that administrators collect student feedback and use data to assess program growth and success to drive the curriculum with flexibility and autonomy. The school theory of action for SEL requires schools to use data to improve practice (EASEL, 2018).

Figure 5.1 Recommendations for High-Quality SEL Implementation



Source: Wallace Foundation, 2021, p. 32.

Administrative Support and Professional Development for SEL

Recommendations for successful SEL implementation include training staff throughout the year, designing professional development, and offering ongoing support and regular discussions with staff and administration. EASEL lab (2018) research shows that training adults to model SEL skills is essential when working with children. In

addition, participants in this study recommend staff voices should be raised and amplified in group settings to create safe places to check-in and deescalate. The SEL culture of staff is critical for successful SEL implementation.

Participants in this study suggested to ease teacher workload and foster programmatic continuity across classrooms, schools could generate instructional videos. Instructional videos were reported by participants Grace and Marissa to be especially helpful for newer teachers, as they provided a variety of practices to use within the classroom. According to my findings, videos reduce teacher stress and foster ease in implementation. Furthermore, including students in the process of creating videos may help other teachers see the value of SEL, while engaging students in team- and community-building within the school.

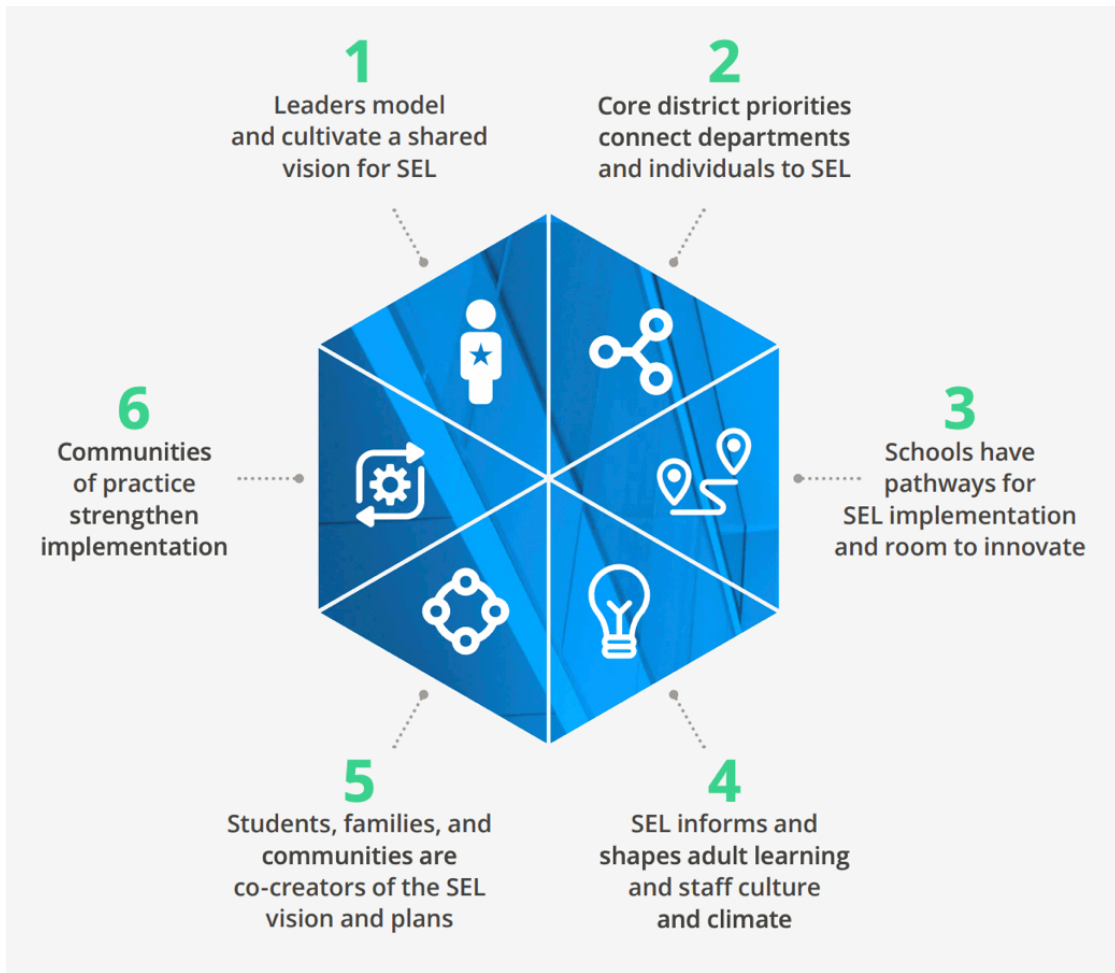
My research showed that support for SEL was needed throughout the academic year—not just at the beginning. Brilliant ideas may come up mid-year, as the SEL program grows and changes with the needs of the students and community. Thus, administrators should make funding SEL a year-round priority.

Finally, engaging the community is critical to the broader goals of SEL. Schools could include training for families and community members, recruiting volunteers to become involved in community-service learning projects, for example. One of the greatest findings for SEL implementation and community engagement was learning about total SEL integration into the school and community. Based on my findings, I recommend schools convene volunteer committees to collaborate and make decisions about SEL curriculum, practices, and the overall approach. Conducting bi-monthly

organizational meetings with staff and offering monthly classes for families brings together an approach that is inclusive and integrative for life long skills for students, families, and the whole community.

CASEL’s Collaborating Districts Initiative (CDI) ten-year study from 2011 to 2021 outlined the “Six Elements for SEL Sustainability”: 1) Leaders model and cultivate a shared vision for SEL. 2) Core district priorities connect departments and individuals to SEL. 3) Schools have pathways for SEL implementation and room to innovate. 4) SEL informs and shapes adult learning and staff culture and climate, 5) Students, families, and communities are co-creators of the SEL vision and plans. 6) Communities of practice strengthen implementation. (CASEL, 2021). These six elements offer a systemic process for SEL sustainability and demonstrate the practices used by both the grassroots and systemic approaches revealed in this research. The importance of these six elements for SEL sustainability is that it “can help bring all stakeholders to the table to contribute to the long-term sustainability of SEL” (CASEL, 2021). These six elements also align with CASEL’s Theory of Action discussed in chapter four that are part of the long term sustainability for SEL implementation. I recommend for any school or district wishing to succeed in SEL implementation to follow CASEL’s Theory of Action and the Six Elements for SEL Sustainability in conjunction with EASEL Lab Theory of Action to develop an SEL plan for their school and community that will have long term viability and foster social-emotional wellbeing for all stakeholders.

Figure 5.2 The Six Elements for SEL Sustainability



Source: CASEL, 2021, p. 9

Classroom Interventions Using SEL

In the classroom, SEL helps teachers create a safe, calm, and more positive culture. Teachers might begin the day with a sharing circle and gather at least once daily. Classroom adjustments like aromatherapy help create a calm environment for better focus. To improve student engagement over long periods, teachers might utilize brain breaks, fidget tools, and a “chill space” or “peace corner” in the classroom. Integrating

SEL throughout the school day with academics, conflict management, and restorative practices will help students become more independent.

Recommendations for Future Studies

Future researchers could explore ways SEL informs classroom time management and student success. Rather than detracting from curricular goals, future studies might explore whether SEL practices help teachers meet daily and yearly curricular goals. Such research could answer teacher and administrator concerns that SEL implementation takes time away from more important learning goals.

Jones and colleagues (2018) reported on implementation challenges as related to SEL programs and activities. They found the following list of potential challenges:

- Prioritizing and integrating SEL in daily practices
- Extending SEL beyond classrooms
- Ensuring sufficient staff support and training
- Facilitating program ownership and buy-in
- Using data to inform decision-making
- Applying and transferring skills
- Ensuring sufficient exposure and intensity (p. 31)

These challenges were key among participants who reported success with SEL implementation. As participants addressed these challenges in their school programs, they established practices that ensured SEL would become part of everyday routines. Further research is needed to gain a deeper understanding on how to overcome these challenges with ease and create a plan for implementation that any educator can effectively use.

The educators interviewed in this study are leaders in the field of SEL—all creating new approaches and practices in their schools. Following their lead, the future of SEL involves implementation in every school by teachers who are free of stress and anxiety, as they adopt SEL practices themselves. With teachers as guides, students engaged in this critical work would build and maintain SEL competencies that reduce suicidal ideation and create lifelong strategies to learn more efficiently and thrive in their lives.

Conclusion

In November 2021, CASEL concluded a ten-year study on the long-term sustainability of SEL in U.S. school districts. The study inquired whether “it was possible to implement SEL systemically in large, urban districts across the United States” (p. 4) They found that systemic implementation of SEL is more prevalent than a single class or one-time program, and systemic implementation is in every aspect of classroom learning. Indeed—similar to the discoveries in the present research—SEL is woven into schools in ways that improve classroom behavior and reduce stress, and have further infiltrated entire school communities to alter school climate and culture, fostering profound change in family and community engagement, and overall wellbeing.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocols

Teacher Interview Questions:

- a. Explain the purpose: Thanks for agreeing to speak with me in greater detail about the SEL program. The purpose of this study is to understand the practices and implementation of the SEL program used in your classroom. I sent you a consent form with more detailed information on the study. Do you have any questions at this point?
- b. Answer questions.
- c. Explain the process: I have a series of questions I want to ask you today. I will be recording your answers so that it can help to transcribe everything you've said; however, I will be deleting the audio recording and giving you an alias. If at any time, you wish to change your status or withdraw from this case study, please let me know. Do you have any questions about that process?
- d. Answer questions.
- e. Okay. Let's get started with the questions. I have emailed you a list of the questions, so you could think about your answers beforehand. Please give as detailed of an answer as you can.

Name of Interviewee:

Time, Date, and Location of Interview:

1. Describe Mindfulness Based Social Emotional Learning (SEL).

2. How does your school or district provide guidance or training on SEL interventions to use in your classroom?

3. How do you implement the SEL program into your classroom?

a. Think of an intervention you use and describe what that looks like to you.

b. Why do you use the SEL program? How do you see it helping students and teachers?

c. How do you prioritize integrating SEL into daily classroom practices? Do you use data to inform decision-making?

d. Do you extend SEL beyond the classroom?

Prompts about (a) deescalating a student, (b) reducing stress, (d) classroom discipline, (d) school climate and/or culture,

4. What has changed in your classroom since you have been using SEL practices in your classroom?

Prompts about (a) deescalating a student, (b) reducing stress, (d) classroom discipline, (d) school climate and/or culture, (e) engagement

3. What is working or not working from using this program?

a. In teaching the SEL program, what difference do you see for students?

Prompt: Give examples. Stories of specific students

b. In what ways do you facilitate ownership or buy-in with your students?

c. Tell me about the ways in which the SEL program influenced student's behaviors?

Prompt: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making?

- d. In what ways has the SEL changed how you approach stress as a teacher?
 - e. How has it changed the culture of the school outside of your classroom?
5. Do you feel supported by your school, leadership, and peers in using SEL interventions?
 6. How can you be better supported in implementing SEL interventions in your classroom?
 7. What changes would you make in the first year of implementing this program?

Prompts: structures to help implement, practices to help implement, training, etc.

Appendix B

School Counselor Interview or Survey Questions:

- a. Explain the purpose: Thanks for agreeing to speak with me in greater detail about the SEL program. The purpose of this study is to understand the practices and implementation of the SEL program in your school. I sent you a consent form with more detailed information on the study. Do you have any questions at this point?
- b. Answer questions.
- c. Answer questions.
- d. Explain the process: I have a series of questions I want to ask you today. I will be recording your answers so that it can help to transcribe everything you've said; however, I will be deleting the audio recording and giving you an alias. If at any time, you wish to change your status or withdraw from this case study, please let me know. Do you have any questions about that process?
- e. Answer questions.
- f. Okay. Let's get started with the questions. I have emailed you a list of the questions, so you could think about your answers beforehand. Please give as detailed of an answer as you can.

Name of Interviewee:

Time, Date, and Location of Interview:

Implementation

1. How did you determine to implement the SEL program in your school/district?

- a. How did you bring it to your faculty?
- b. How do you prioritize implementation practices for your school?
2. How long has the SEL program been in practice at your school?
3. What was your role as a counselor in implementing this program?
4. What Professional Development is offered to train teachers?
 - a. How do you ensure sufficient staff support and training?
 - b. What training structures did you create to implement the SEL program?
 - c. What are the results of the training at your school?
 - d. What is the incentive for teachers to implement this program?
5. How did you track the progress and use of the SEL program? How do you use data to inform decision making?

Benefits to Students

6. In what ways have you seen the SEL program improve student's well-being?

Prompts: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills,
responsible decision making
7. Who is involved and who is being affected by using the SEL program?

Appendix C

School Principal Interview or Survey Questions:

- a. Explain the purpose: Thanks for agreeing to speak with me in greater detail about the SEL program. The purpose of this study is to understand the practices and implementation of the SEL program in your school. I sent you a consent form with more detailed information on the study. Do you have any questions at this point?
- b. Answer questions.
- c. Explain the process: I have a series of questions I want to ask you today. I will be recording your answers so that it can help to transcribe everything you've said; however, I will be deleting the audio recording and giving you an alias. If at any time, you wish to change your status or withdraw from this case study, please let me know. Do you have any questions about that process?
- d. Answer questions.
- e. Okay. Let's get started with the questions. I have emailed you a list of the questions, so you could think about your answers beforehand. Please give as detailed of an answer as you can.

Name of Interviewee:

Time, Date, and Location of Interview:

Implementation

1. How did you determine to implement the SEL program in your school/district?
 - a. How did you bring it to your faculty?

- b. How do you prioritize implementation practices for your school?
2. How long has the SEL program been in practice at your school?
3. What was your role as Principal in implementing this program?
4. What Professional Development is offered to train teachers?
 - a. How do you ensure sufficient staff support and training?
 - b. What training structures did you create to implement the SEL program?
 - c. What are the results of the training at your school?
 - d. What is the incentive for teachers to implement this program?
5. How did you track the progress and use of the SEL program? How do you use data to inform decision making?

Benefits to Students

6. In what ways have you seen the SEL program improve student's well-being?

Prompts: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills,
responsible decision making
7. Who is involved and who is being affected by using the SEL program?

Appendix D

Demographic Questions

Demographic questions will be asked prior to the interview through a Qualtrics online survey to create a reference to the educator's background.

Participant Demographic Questions:

1. What is your position in the School? (What grade level(s) do you teach?)
2. What are the demographics at the school where you teach?
3. What languages are spoken by the students in your school?
4. What is your highest level of education?
5. How long have you been employed at your school?
6. What is your age?
7. What is your gender?
8. What is your ethnicity?
9. What percentage of the year were you in person, remote, hybrid?

Appendix E

Exempt Research Information Sheet

Title of Research Study: Educator's Perspectives of the Practices and Implementation of a Mindfulness Based Social Emotional Learning Program

Principal Investigator: Monica Ballon, Doctor of Education candidate.
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IRBNet Protocol #: 1759455

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Your participation in this research study is voluntary and you do not have to participate. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. This document contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate. Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to participate.

Study Purpose:

The purpose of this interview-based qualitative study is to investigate practices for implementing mindfulness-based social emotional learning (MBSEL) programs and to explore educator perceptions of how the MBSEL program fosters student wellbeing to determine future practices and procedures for use in other school districts.

Risks or Discomforts

Potential risks, stress and/or discomforts of participation may include psycho-social and physical risks. You may experience uncomfortable feelings, emotions or mental stressors brought up about job conditions, relationships or personal performance on the job or perceptions of implementation of the Mindfulness Based Social Emotional Learning program.

Benefits

The possible benefits which may reasonably be expected to result from this study are future uses of tools, training and implementation practices for the Mindfulness Based Social Emotional Learning program.

We cannot and do not guarantee or promise that you will receive any benefits from this study. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your employment.

You may choose not to participate in the interview for any reason without penalty.

Confidentiality of Information

All of the information you provide will be confidential. However, if we learn that you intend to harm yourself or others, including, but not limited to child or elder abuse/neglect, suicide ideation, or threats against others, we must report that to the authorities as required by law.

Possible risk due to breach of confidentiality. A pseudonym will be used in place of your name and the specific grade level or subject you teach will be changed to protect the confidentiality of your name and job position. The researcher will only collect personal information that is essential to the research project. The link between your identifiers and the research data will be destroyed after the records retention period required by state and/or federal law.

Procedures:

If you participate in this research study, you will be invited to have an interview with the researcher.

- The interview with the researcher will occur on zoom with the audio-recording feature activated for no more than 60 minutes.
- Before the interview you will be asked to participate in a demographic questionnaire.
- During the interview, the researcher will make observational notes.

Interview questions

Administrator Implementation

8. How did you determine to implement the MBSEL program in your school/district?
 - a. How did you bring it to your faculty?
 - b. How do you prioritize implementation practices for your school?
9. How long has the MBSEL program been in practice at your school?
10. What was your role as Principal in implementing this program?
11. What Professional Development is offered to train teachers?
 - a. How do you ensure sufficient staff support and training?
 - b. What training structures did you create to implement the MBSEL program?

- c. What are the results of the training at your school?
- d. What is the incentive for teachers to implement this program?

12. How did you track the progress and use of the MBSEL program? How do you use data to inform decision making?

Benefits to Students

13. In what ways have you seen the MBSEL program improve student's well-being?

Prompts: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision making

14. Who is involved and who is being affected by using the MBSEL program?

You may refuse to answer any question or item in the interview or questionnaire.

Audio/video recording will be involved:

You will be audio/video recorded during the interview to improve accuracy of information analysis. If you do not want to be audio/video recorded, please inform the researcher, and only hand-written notes will be taken during the interview/focus group.

Data Sharing

De-identified data from this study may be shared with the research community at large to advance science and health. We will remove or code any personal information that could identify you before files are shared with other researchers to ensure that, by current scientific standards and known methods, no one will be able to identify you from the information we share. Despite these measures, we cannot guarantee anonymity of your personal data.

Questions:

If you have any questions about this project or your participation, please feel free to ask questions now or contact me at any time.

Monica Ballon, doctoral candidate, University of Denver

Monica.Ballon@du.edu or 619-341-4200

If you have any questions or concerns about your research participation or rights as a participant, you may contact the University of Denver's Human Research Protections

Program (HRPP) by emailing IRBAdmin@du.edu or calling (303) 871-2121 to speak to someone other than the researchers.

The University of Denver Institutional Review Board has determined that this study is minimal risk and is exempt from full IRB oversight.

Please take all the time you need to read through this document and decide whether you would like to participate in this research study.

If you decide to participate, your completion of the research procedures indicates your consent. Please keep this form for your records.

Appendix F

Exempt Research Information Sheet

Title of Research Study: Educator's Perspectives of the Practices and Implementation of a Mindfulness Based Social Emotional Learning Program

Principal Investigator: Monica Ballon, Doctor of Education candidate.
University of Denver, Morgridge College of Education
Monica.Ballon@du.edu 619-341-4200

Faculty Sponsor: Erin Anderson PhD Erin.Anderson249@du.edu 303-871-2149
IRBNet Protocol #: 1759455

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Your participation in this research study is voluntary and you do not have to participate. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. This document contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate. Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to participate.

Study Purpose:

The purpose of this interview-based qualitative study is to investigate practices for implementing mindfulness-based social emotional learning (MBSEL) programs and to explore educator perceptions of how the MBSEL program fosters student wellbeing to determine future practices and procedures for use in other school districts.

Risks or Discomforts

Potential risks, stress and/or discomforts of participation may include psycho-social and physical risks. You may experience uncomfortable feelings, emotions or mental stressors brought up about job conditions, relationships or personal performance on the job or perceptions of implementation of the Mindfulness Based Social Emotional Learning program.

Benefits

The possible benefits which may reasonably be expected to result from this study are future uses of tools, training and implementation practices for the Mindfulness Based Social Emotional Learning program.

We cannot and do not guarantee or promise that you will receive any benefits from this study. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your employment.

You may choose not to participate in the interview for any reason without penalty.

Confidentiality of Information

All of the information you provide will be confidential. However, if we learn that you intend to harm yourself or others, including, but not limited to child or elder abuse/neglect, suicide ideation, or threats against others, we must report that to the authorities as required by law.

Possible risk due to breach of confidentiality. A pseudonym will be used in place of your name and the specific grade level or subject you teach will be changed to protect the confidentiality of your name and job position. The researcher will only collect personal information that is essential to the research project. The link between your identifiers and the research data will be destroyed after the records retention period required by state and/or federal law.

Procedures:

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- During the interview, the researcher will make observational notes.

Interview questions

8. Describe Mindfulness Based Social Emotional Learning (MBSEL).
9. How does your school or district provide guidance or training on MBSEL interventions to use in your classroom?
10. How do you implement the MBSEL program into your classroom?
 - a. Think of an intervention you use and describe what that looks like to you.
 - b. Why do you use the MBSEL program? How do you see it helping students and teachers?
 - c. How do you prioritize integrating MBSEL into daily classroom practices? Do you use data to inform decision-making?
 - d. Do you extend MBSEL beyond the classroom?
11. What has changed in your classroom since you have been using MBSEL practices in your classroom?
3. What is working or not working from using this program?
 - f. In teaching the MBSEL program, what difference do you see for students?
 - g. In what ways do you facilitate ownership or buy-in with your students?

- h. Tell me about the ways in which the MBSEL program influenced student's behaviors?
 - i. In what ways has the MBSEL changed how you approach stress as a teacher?
 - j. How has it changed the culture of the school outside of your classroom?
12. Do you feel supported by your school, leadership, and peers in using MBSEL interventions?
13. How can you be better supported in implementing MBSEL interventions in your classroom?
14. What changes would you make in the first year of implementing this program?

You may refuse to answer any question or item in the interview or questionnaire.

Audio/video recording will be involved:

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<p>Please take all the time you need to read through this document and decide whether you would like to participate in this research study.</p>
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If you decide to participate, your completion of the research procedures indicates your consent. Please keep this form for your records.