



Short Research Report

When Teachers have Autonomy to create SEL Initiatives: Conceptualizations and Iterations

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Teachers may be encouraged to follow a prescribed curriculum when teaching social and emotional learning (SEL), and varied research findings attest to the efficacy of this approach in fostering students' social and emotional competencies. An alternative approach might see teachers create SEL initiatives and infuse, embed, or integrate SEL into core teaching content. This case study explored how, when asked to foster social and emotional learning within their schools, 16 SEL teachers created learning opportunities for students to bolster their social and emotional skills. Teachers were asked to first define SEL and then to create portfolios showcasing three of their SEL lessons or initiatives. Content analysis of definitions revealed that teachers largely defined SEL as fostering students' self-awareness and self-management. Content analysis of each of the teachers' lessons indicated that the learning opportunities or initiatives that teachers introduced were predominantly social in nature and oftentimes focused on having students practice emotion regulation strategies. Findings inform our understanding of the perceptions and actualizations of SEL in applied contexts.

Keywords: social emotional learning, elementary schools, teachers, case study, content analysis

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Introduction

Social and emotional learning (SEL), which garnered the interest of both researchers and K-12 educators in part thanks to meta-analytic studies attesting to the immediate and long-term benefits to students (e.g., Durlak

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et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017), has increasingly been implemented in school districts across North America and beyond (Malti & Noam, 2016; Soto et al., 2021). From the perspective of the Collaborative for Academic and Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL, n.d.), a vanguard organization offering a repository of scientific and applied information on SEL, we see SEL defined as “the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions” (CASEL, 2023, parag. 1).

To teach SEL, some educators may follow prescribed curricula comprised of structured lessons sequenced over time. Sometimes referred to as “explicit curriculum” (Wallender et al., 2020), such an approach can be reassuring to teachers for whom SEL is new as each lesson is outlined and the requisite resources provided. This approach can, however, be perceived as restrictive, curtailing creativity and buy-in from educators seeking the freedom to bring SEL to life as they see fit within their classrooms. When explicit curricula are used, concerns have been raised around implementation fidelity and teachers handpicking lessons from larger thematic units, thereby compromising the effectiveness of programs (Collie et al., 2015; de Leeuw et al., 2020; Thierry et al., 2021). An alternative model to explicit curriculum can see educators infuse, embed or integrate SEL into their existing lessons. This “nested approach” (Kutash et al., 2007) affords opportunities for teachers to integrate SEL into other teaching subjects that may otherwise prove challenging with stand-alone lessons (Waajid et al., 2013). As argued by Martinez (2016, p. 21) “Further research is necessary to understand how teachers incorporate these instructional practices in their classrooms and the supports they need in the long term.” The overarching aims of this study were to explore teachers’ definitions of SEL and, how, when asked to create SEL learning opportunities for students, did teachers foster SEL?

Method

University Behavioural Ethics and school district research approval were obtained and all participants provided written informed consent. Participants ($N = 16$, 81% female, $M_{age} = 42$ years, $SD = 8.2$; $M_{teaching\ experience} = 13$ years, $SD = 7.43$), were recruited in the Fall of 2020 via an email sent to a cohort of western Canadian public school teachers identified by the school district as SEL Teachers in 13 schools. The role of these teachers was to facilitate the uptake of SEL across classrooms and within the broader context of their assigned school community and was part of a new initiative by the school district to promote SEL district-wide. All invited teachers chose to participate in the study. Participants first completed a demographic questionnaire and a series of open-ended prompts (e.g., “Define SEL).

Second, to document the SEL initiatives generated, each teacher was asked to produce an e-portfolio showcasing how SEL was implemented over the course of the school year. Teachers were given the freedom to create SEL learning opportunities as they saw fit (i.e., inspired by prior knowledge or from their own researching of SEL). The creation of the teacher’s e-portfolio was guided by the following prompt: “*What 3 initiatives most strongly showcase how SEL was brought to life in your school? Describe each initiative in*

detail.” Conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), a process of first identifying global or general codes and winnowing these codes into meaningful categories (Wolcott, 1990), was used.

Results

Definitions of SEL

When asked to define SEL, the majority of participants provided definitions identifying a specific skill that aligned with one of the five CASEL competencies (see Table I). Common themes to emerge included *self-awareness* (26.7%), *self-management* (23.3%), and *social awareness* (16.7%). Examples of these included SEL defined as “the ability to understand and effectively apply tools to create a foundation for individual growth and success” (Participant 6; *self-awareness*) and “the development, practice, and application of social-emotional skills to understand and manage emotions” (Participant 16; *self-management*). Another notable code to emerged was *Lifelong Development* (i.e., that SEL meant an integral component of lifelong learning and development and/or providing students with skills that would benefit them in life; 13.3%). Examples included “SEL is fundamental to every child's learning journey, it helps kids develop skills that will ensure they are successful in life” (Participant 4), “SEL is an integral part of human development” (Participant 11), and SEL is “a journey and a life-long process” (Participant 15).

Table I. Participants’ definitions of social emotional learning.

Theme	Definition and Examples	N	%
Self-Awareness	Participant identified a specific skill that aligned with CASEL’s definition of the self-awareness competency.	8	26.7
Self-Management	Participant identified a specific skill that aligned with CASEL’s definition of the self-management competency.	7	23.3
Social Awareness	Participant identified a specific skill that aligned with CASEL’s definition of the social awareness competency.	5	16.7
Lifelong development	Participant defined SEL as a process of development over the course of one’s life.	4	13.3
Relationship Skills	Participant identified a specific skill that aligned with CASEL’s definition of the relationship skills competency.	3	10.0
Responsible Decision Making	Participant identified a specific skill that aligned with CASEL’s definition of the responsible decision-making competency.	2	6.7
Other	Participant’s definition could not be categorized into the themes above.	1	3.3
Total		30	100

Salient Themes in SEL e-Portfolios

Participants’ SEL lessons were analyzed both within- and across-portfolios to gain a deep understanding of each participant’s SEL initiatives as well as their shared commonalities.

What initiatives did SEL teachers implement? Participants generated 46 distinct SEL lessons from which a total of 363 codes emerged (see Table II). The majority of these codes (55.1%) described the *activities*

that were conducted as part of the SEL initiative. The majority of these activities (23.0%) were *social* in nature and comprised of activities that involved collaborating with, or leading, a group of peers. Examples of these included board games, group discussions, and leading school committees. Activities that involved *emotion regulation* (i.e., tasks to regain control of emotions or calm one’s emotional state) were the second most commonly reported (16.5%). Examples of these activities included the creation of “calming dens,” breathing exercises, calm-down kits, and a “hide-y-hole” which was described by participant 6 as “a hidden space that [a specific student struggling with emotion regulation] could use when she felt like she needed a moment outside of the classroom.” The third most notable code that emerged from activities was defined as ‘other’ (16.0%) and included a variety of activities such as videos, lessons, and growing vegetables. *Reading and writing activities* such as reading books and activities that involved *making something* such as colouring, friendship bracelets and posters comprised 13% and 12% of the activities, respectively.

Table II. What initiatives did SEL teachers implement?

Theme	Definition and examples	N	%
Activity	Participant described the activity or activities that they implemented.	200	55.10
Emotion Regulation	Activity involved students practicing to regulate their emotions, such as “calm down kit” or “zones of regulation”.	33	9.09
Kindness	Activity involved participating in kind acts such as “kindness tag” or “showing respect”.	17	4.68
Making Something	Activity involved creating or making something such as “posters” or “friendship bracelets”.	24	6.61
Physical	Activity involved physical exercise such as “yoga” or “football”.	5	1.38
Reading/ Writing	Activity involved reading materials or writing such as “reading books” or completing “worksheets”.	26	7.16
Self-Awareness/ Reflection	Activity involved reflection or practicing self-awareness skills such as “completing self-assessments” or “looking deeply in mirrors”.	17	4.68
Social, Community, Leadership	Activity involved being social, showing leadership or being part of a community. Examples include “leadership teams” or “buddy benches”.	46	12.67
Other	Activity could not be categorized into the above themes including “growing veggies” or “watching videos”.	32	8.82
Details	Participant provided details about how their initiative was implemented.	76	20.94
General	General detail could not be categorized into the themes below.	1	0.28
Duration/Time	Participant included information as the time commitment or duration of the initiative, such as “20 minutes” or “sessions over 2 Wednesdays”	9	2.48
Topic	Participant included information as to what the topic of the initiative was, such as “friendship” and “diversity”.	38	10.47
Who	Participant included information as to who was involved in the initiative, such as “grade 3 girls” or “3-5 students”.	28	7.71
Goal/Need	Participant identified the goal or need that inspired the initiative.	57	15.70
Behaviour	The aim was to improve students’ behaviour, such as “we had noticed a huge amount of incidences being referred to administration”	14	3.86

Connection/ Community	The aim was to improve students' connections or sense of community, such as "the goal is to build collaborative relationships"	17	4.68
Teacher	The aim was to provide assistance to the teacher, such as "we recognized that teacher stress was starting to increase"	3	0.83
Wellbeing	The aim was to improve the wellbeing of students, such as "a lack of self-esteem" and to "foster a growth mindset"	14	3.86
Other	Goal could not be categorized into the sub-themes above, e.g., "I wanted to give students an idea as to what social emotional learning means"	9	2.48
Outcome	Participant identified noticing an explicit outcome of the initiative, such as the initiative has "been successful in helping students develop communication skills" and "this has increased students' awareness of themselves and those around them."	23	6.34
Shared Resources	Participant described having shared their SEL resource with other teachers, staff, or parents, including "I presented the initiative at our monthly staff meeting."	7	1.93
Total		363	100

In addition to describing their SEL lessons, participants often reported *details* about the initiative (20.9%) and/or discussed the *goals or needs* that had inspired the creation of the initiative (15.7%). The most notable detail reported by participants was to identify the topic that the initiative was focused around (50.0% of all details), including *resilience*, *kindness*, and *diversity*. Three distinct *goals* emerged in lesson descriptions, the most common of which was *fostering community or connections* (29.8%; e.g., "students were really struggling with understanding what it truly means to be part of a community" (Participant 7); "we have a challenging class who have a difficult time connecting and communicating with each other" (Participant 10); and that there was "a high need for lessons on how to connect with peers and become a good friend" (Participant 11)). *Improving behavior* and *improving students' wellbeing* also emerged as notable goals with each comprising 24.6% of all goals reported. Goals to improve behavior included examples such as noticing "an increase in un-kind behaviours", "a huge amount of incidents being referred to administration regarding behavior" (Participant 6), and "a significant problem with a group of boys engaging in aggressive physical behaviours" (Participant 12). Goals to improve students' wellbeing included wanting "to connect kids to our school community and give them a sense of purpose" (Participant 4), seeing students struggling with "a lack of self-esteem and a desire for belonging" (Participant 6), and working with a student "who is presenting very sad" (Participant 12).

The most prevalent CASEL competency addressed by the SEL initiatives was *self-awareness* with 25 of the 46 initiatives (54.3%) targeting this competency. Examples of self-awareness initiatives included discussing "the concepts of positive self-talk and affirmations" (Participant 6) and the students "learning how to recognize their feelings and how their feelings affect their bodies" (Participant 10). *Self-management* was the second most likely to be addressed as is evidenced by this competency being present in 24 of 46 initiatives (52.2%). In one initiative, the participant described the students as "taking initiative to create cards for each classroom" (Participant 8), and another described the students as learning self-management by "role playing

difficult emotions and practicing using the calm down techniques” (Participant 9). *Social awareness* and *relationship skills* were the third and fourth most prevalent with 47.8% and 39.1% of initiatives focused at improving these skills. Notably, responsible decision making was the least likely to be addressed with only 9 initiatives (19.6%) targeting this competency.

Conclusion

Affording teachers professional autonomy to promote SEL yields rich learning opportunities for students and holds ramifications for teachers’ professional development and the fostering of SEL within school communities more broadly. This flexibility allows for teachers to customize their lessons to address the contextual and cultural needs of learners (Johnson et al., 2023; Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020). Teachers created varied learning opportunities for students that were informed by one or more of the CASEL SEL pillars, especially *self-regulation* and *self-awareness*. Findings inform teachers’ professional development which may combine foundational SEL knowledge with opportunities to create SEL-rich learning opportunities for students.

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Disclosure

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