



Social and Emotional Learning: A survey of English primary school's priorities, perceptions, and practices

Michael Wigelsworth¹, Alice Eccles and Joao Santos

Manchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester, United Kingdom

This article reports the findings of a pre-pandemic national survey of English primary schools (n=621) examining how Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is prioritised and practiced in school. Perceived benefits and prioritisation of SEL, barriers and facilitators in supporting implementation, and the nature and extent to which whole school approaches, classroom interventions and/or individual teaching practices are present, are discussed. Responses showed consistency in respect to some established findings in the field, namely concerns of time in respect to implementation, however some novel findings emerged, including satisfaction with programmes and training approaches, and a higher prevalence of SEL practice than previously reported. Findings are discussed in relation to an increasing nuance in understanding SEL provision within schools. The study contributes to limited research regarding typical practices, especially outside of funded trials, and in doing so provides useful and relevant information for educational professionals responsible for the implementation of SEL post-pandemic.

Keywords: Social and emotional learning, schools, survey, primary, elementary

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Introduction

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process by which skills and strategies are developed to manage emotion, understand the perspectives of others, communicate effectively, and make decisions that are in line with future goals and values (Weissberg et al., 2015). Often implemented as a set of principles and curricula, SEL programmes are typically embedded in the context and wider environment of the school setting, through

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Corresponding author. Email address: michael.wigelsworth@manchester.ac.uk

the use of co-ordinated classroom, school, family, and community strategies (Oberle et al., 2016). The potential benefits for SEL are well established, with a wealth of evidence supporting positive outcomes for children (e.g., Cefai et al., 2018; Corcoran et al., 2018; Wigelsworth et al., 2016). Effective SEL can have a positive impact both in the short-term (e.g., reductions in emotional distress and conduct problems) and long-term (e.g., reductions in adult antisocial and criminal behaviour) (see Clarke et al., 2015; Gutman & Schoon, 2013). The importance of effective school-based provision has become even more critical as a framework in addressing the consequences of Covid-19, as early evidence indicates a need to strategise addressing child and adolescent wellbeing during and after the pandemic (Singh et al., 2020) by which SEL is emerging as one possible pathway in doing so (Clarke, 2020).

A major caveat in the interpretation of effectiveness of SEL is a high reliance on evidence drawn from within Randomised Control Trials (RCTs) and their variants, with a notable proportion of these conducted at 'efficacy stage' by which the internal logic of an intervention is tested. Conducted under ideal circumstances, efficacy studies often receive additional resourcing otherwise unavailable outside of trial settings, and typically ignore the various competing interests and contextual confounds present in 'real world' settings. As such there are limitations to the ecological validity of any process and implementation findings as a result, despite the central importance of these factors (Lendrum & Humphrey, 2012; Singal et al., 2014). In their meta-analysis of 92 SEL programmes, Wigelsworth and colleagues (2016) noted that most trials were classified as efficacy (up to 69%) which corresponded to a drop in effect size of up to 0.2 when compared to studies trialed outside of optimal conditions. Although there has been an increase in the study of the importance of local context in implementing programmes (Connolly et al., 2018), there remains comparative little evidence addressing many of the contextual factors that impact programme implementation within naturalistic settings (Dusenbury et al., 2003; Fixsen et al., 2005), particularly in respect to perspectives from teacher and school staff (Denham et al., 2012). This is important given successful SEL implementation is heavily dependent on the wider context of implementation, including staff understanding and level of comfort with SEL itself, alongside perception of support from the wider school environment (Brackett et al., 2012).

In examining SEL outside of funded trials, understanding and support of SEL appears high with recent international teacher surveys across both the US (Bridgeland et al., 2013; DePaoli et al., 2017) and Europe (Loinaz, 2019) reporting a very high degree of support for the principles of SEL. Over 90% of respondents (across both surveys) agreed that emotions are important for learning and that teachers themselves are responsible for socialising pupil emotions. Earlier evidence (Triliva & Poulou, 2006) indicated that support for SEL is congruent with its intended aims, as teachers recognised links between educational foci such as classroom management and support in academic learning. Interestingly, Triliva and Poulou's study suggested that teachers' approval of SEL did not necessarily extend to the implementation of specific SEL programming. Instead, it supported the idea of an experiential model of socio-emotional development by which 'teachable moments' during daily education are maximised through the lens of SEL (e.g., a teacher introducing social scripts to address issues of conflict in the playground). As the authors themselves note, this finding is far too

tentative to ascribe causality, but it does nominally provide a potential hypothesis for the incongruence between teacher support for SEL and prevalence of implementation. This is because, based on available data, actual uptake of SEL programming appears limited. Survey figures from the USA (Bridgeland et al., 2013) indicate just under than half of schools surveyed were explicitly teaching SEL (n=605). European data (Loianz, 2019) shows comparable or lower prevalence, with similar findings in the UK, with 39% of schools (n=140) reporting no explicit teaching incorporated into the curriculum (notably the lowest prevalence was in Sweden, with as little as 26% of schools (n=27) reporting active SEL implementation). In explaining this discrepancy, literature is limited. Ee and Cheng (2013) provide some insight through their study of teachers perceptions of SEL provision through teaching practices in Singapore. Through a number of interviews, this study identified factors recognised in wider implementation literature such as the need for senior support, time constraints in implementing SEL, and access to resources. Although insightful, Ee and Cheng's study features a very small sample size (n=19) and issues of cultural transferability of findings across country settings have been called into question, limiting the application of these findings (Loianz, 2019).

Knowledge in the field remains limited. Even as a combined response, data from cited papers represent a very small minority of views, and these do not account for concerns around the cultural transferability of findings across countries. Further, an emphasis in teacher and school reports on SEL entails a focus around conceptualisation and understanding, rather than a focus on current practice. Given the recognition of the importance of Social and Emotional Learning, the current study intended to capture data to further understand the status of SEL within English primary schools. Although SEL provision is potentially available across all school years, the focus of this research is in the primary years of education (Years 1 – 6) only. Primary school represents the earliest time at which all school children receive mandatory education in a systematic and universal manner (i.e., within schools and classrooms) (McClelland et al., 2017). Accordingly, the research attempted to explore the status of SEL provision in respect to its priority in school, perceptions of its intended benefits from staff, and the nature of current practice. Specifically, this study sought to address the following objectives research questions:

1. How is SEL viewed in school?
 - RQ1a. How is SEL defined by schools?
 - RQ1b. What do schools report as the perceived benefits of SEL?
 - RQ1c. To what extent is SEL prioritised in school?
2. What influences the implementation of SEL?
 - RQ2. What are the barriers and facilitators to implementing SEL?
3. What evidence is there of SEL implementation in schools?
 - RQ3a. What evidence is there for school level approaches?
 - RQ3b. What evidence is there for the use of individual programmes or curricula?
 - RQ3c. What evidence is there for the use of individual teacher practices?

Method

The study adopted an online exploratory survey design (utilising ‘Key Survey’ software), sent to all state-funded, mainstream primary schools in England. Although survey-based research is often criticised for lacking depth (Robson, 2015), this approach offered an optimal reach across the population of interest, minimising data burden to researchers and participants, and maintaining efficiencies in respect to timescale and budget (Wright, 2005).

Survey design

In designing the survey instrument, we drew upon existing scoping surveys (as per those cited in the preceding literature alongside literature exploring schoolwide implementation of SEL, notably the works of Domitrovich et al. (2008) and Oberle and colleagues (2016)). This aided a distinction between school level factors (such as climate and culture) and individual level factors (such as perceptions, attitudes and practice, which contributed to the authors decision to capture both perceptions of wider school approaches as well as individual practices and perceptions. Requests for social-demographic data (e.g. geographical location of the school, approximate size, percentage of children eligible for free school meals) were included in order to assess representation of the final sample. The survey was a blend of response type, as appropriate to the question (e.g., Likert-scale, mark all that apply, etc), including open-text response, as shown in the results section. This variety allowed a balance between a confirmatory and exploratory approach, allowing summation of responses in respect to know areas for investigation (e.g., barriers and facilitators to implementation already established in the literature) alongside opportunities for exploration, permitting respondents to utilise free text to report any emergent issues that may not have been previously recognised. The surveys took approximately 15-20 minutes to complete.

Procedure

Following ethical approval from the University’s Research Integrity Committee, a third-party provider was commissioned to distribute the invitation to participate by email to all state-funded, mainstream primary schools in England during March 2019. Where possible, emails were addressed to the headteacher directly. As the survey included items about school-based approaches (rather than *individual* teacher practices), responses were limited to one-per-school. Initial recipients of the survey (e.g., headteacher) were instructed to pass the survey to the member of staff most knowledgeable about the school’s approach to SEL (e.g., a member of the senior leadership team). On submission, participants were given the opportunity to enter a prize draw for one of five iPads. A total of 621 schools (approx. 3.7% of the population) provided data. The majority of respondents were head or deputy-head teachers (58%) followed by Special Education Needs Coordinators (25%), with remaining staff making up the rest of the sample.

Analysis

Analysis was conducted per question. For quantitative data, responses were summarised and presented descriptively, reporting % of respondents per item response (e.g., 46% of schools reported SEL as top priority). Open text responses were subject to a similar summary; however, a coding framework was required to summarise related responses. Accordingly, qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis (as outlined by Braun & Clarke, 2008), which involved multiple readings to gain a holistic sense of the responses. Data were collated under coded categories and % values reported for each category. Two of the study authors discussed the wording and semantics relating to the generate codes to identify sources of overlap or ambiguity. It was agreed that as responses fell into identifiable categories (given the specificity of individual questions) and an initial coding activity reached 100% agreement, the coding was then predominately conducted by one researcher.

Results

A total of 621 schools, from all regions of England, responded to the survey. No respondent answered every single item, therefore the number of responses per question varied. We did not detect any pattern of missingness to the data. In respect to sociodemographic representation, responding schools had a higher average of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) which was used as a proxy for socio-economic deprivation, compared to national figures. Responding schools had an average of 23.9% FSM pupils compared to a national average of 17.3% (DfE, 2019).

Terminology & perceived benefits

Nearly all respondents reported that they use explicit terms “social and emotional learning” or “social and emotional skills” in conversation with other school staff, parents, and/or school policy documents (Figure 1).

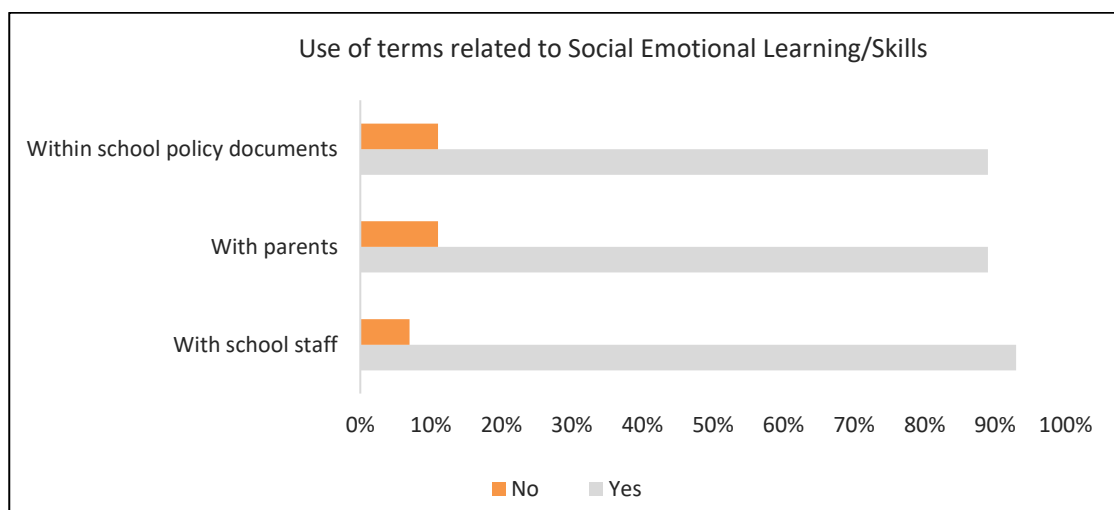


Figure 1. Do you use the explicit terms “social and emotional learning” or “social and emotional skills”? (n= 413)

For those responding “no”, open text responses provided alternative nomenclature, including “life skills” and various permutations of “social, emotional, mental health and wellbeing”. Six schools referred to “social skills”, five schools used the term “emotionally friendly”, and three schools referred to “emotional intelligence”.

Schools were asked to rate the importance of SEL in relation to the following perceived benefits (Figure 2).

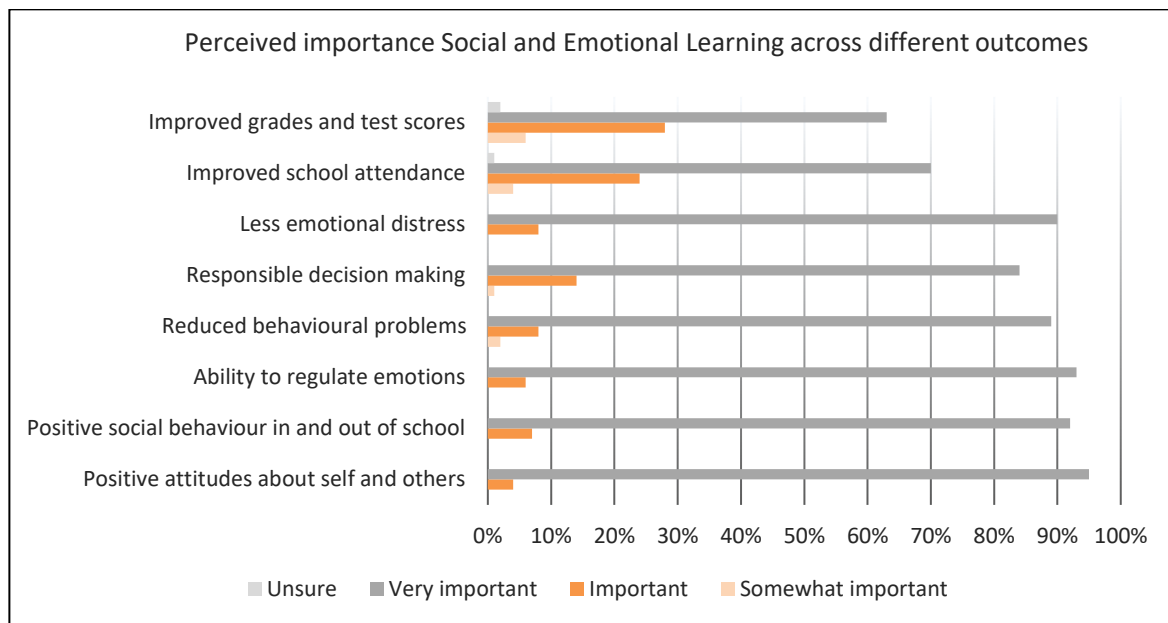


Figure 2. In your opinion, how important do you think social and emotional learning is in terms of contributing to the following benefits for students? (n = 368)

Prioritisation

Schools were asked to rate the importance of SEL in relation to other school priorities. 46% of schools reported that “We believe it is one of our topmost priorities” (n=169) with 49% of schools reporting “We believe it is important alongside a number of other priorities” (n=183). 4% of schools responded, “Other priorities take precedence over SEL” and one school responded that “We don’t think prioritising SEL is an effective approach”.

Schools were asked to compare their current SEL provision to five years ago, in order to assess whether the school was “devoting more, less or about the same amount of time to social and emotional learning”. Almost half (48%) of the 368 respondents reported they were devoting “much more time” (48%) or “somewhat more time” (36%) to SEL compared to five years ago. 14% of the respondents reported they were devoting “about the same amount of time”. Slightly more than 1% of respondents reported either “somewhat” or “much less time” devoted to SEL (Figure 3).

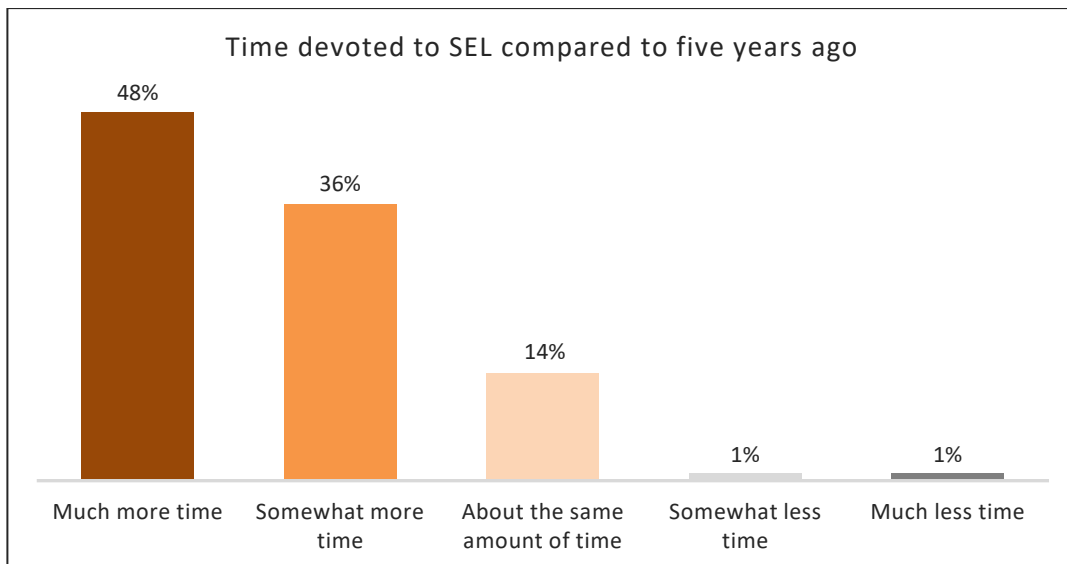


Figure 3. Compared to you SEL provision to five years ago are you devoting more, less or about the same amount of time to social and emotional learning.

Open text commentary was provided for this question and those who answered “much more time” or “somewhat more” had their comments examined for general themes (n=284). For those responses focusing on what changes occurred (n=472) the main three categories of change emerged:

Staff Training / Recruitment (n=143): Comments included examples of whole school training (e.g., “Training of all staff in school has been rolled out”); specialism training (e.g., “In the last 2 years we have trained more staff to be able to support pupils with SEL needs”) and increased responsibilities of staff members, focusing on SEL, e.g. (“We have more staff with responsibility for Social and emotional wellbeing”).

Engagement in external programmes (n=58) including strategies, therapies, and interventions, e.g. (“We have engaged with therapies such as art therapy, drama therapy, music therapy and family therapy to support SEL”; “There are more interventions to develop children's social and emotional learning rather than just English and Maths”).

Internal changes including policy, ethos, focus, and time (n=133) including curriculum and timetabling changes (“Specific time allocated during the week for Personal, Social and Health Education”). Whole school approaches (e.g., “Assemblies linked to Emotional learning SEL”) and school development (e.g., “Wellbeing is a priority on our school development plan”).

Schools also reported upon why change occurred (n=130). Three main categories were identified:

External Motivation for Change (n=38) including pressures from social media (e.g., “Impact of negative social and emotional practices such as social media on children”) perceived failing support from external bodies (e.g. “Society generally a more toxic place, falling standards in parenting, less support from police, health, social services, etc”) and pressures from the home environment (e.g., “Increased parental pressure on schools to meet the child's needs”).

Internal Motivation for Change (n=66) including increased needs of the children and staff (e.g., “Mental health and Social issues are having a significant impact on the ability of some pupils to fulfil their potential”; “A higher percentage of children struggling to cope with the demands and expectations of school”).

Increased Awareness (n=26) from both external (parents, stakeholders) and internal sources (staff) (e.g., “Raised awareness of its importance within school but also parents and pupils more aware to”; “An understanding that by supporting children's social and emotional needs there is a positive impact on their ability to access learning in the classroom”).

Barriers & facilitators

Schools were provided with a list of barriers to implementation as identified in prior literature and asked to select as many as appropriate (Table I).

Table I. % Responses to identified barriers to implementation.

Response	%
Lack of time in class available to teach lessons on SEL	71
The pressure to focus on other priorities unrelated to SEL	68
Lack of time available to prepare for teaching lessons	47
Lack of specialist knowledge amongst staff in teaching SEL	38
Lack of finances available to purchase SEL curriculum	33
Lack of confidence amongst staff in teaching SEL	30
Difficulties in staff recruitment and turnover	14
General scepticism regarding need for teaching of SEL	9
We are not aware of a curriculum that addresses our needs	8
Lack of senior belief or support for SEL	3
Negative experiences with teaching SEL in the past	2
Other	10

Open text response was provided so that schools could indicate other barriers. These were identified as: financial barriers (n=5); increased focus on learning and academic data (n=6); staff knowledge, engagement and/or own SEL needs (n=6); and parental engagement, support and/or understanding (n=7).

In respect to facilitating SEL, schools were provided an open text response asking, “What support, input or resources would help you in relation to supporting children’s social and emotional skill development?”. When examining responses, four main categories were identified:

Staff training (n=80): This included whole school training rather than dissemination style approaches (e.g., “Training that is offered for whole staff teams - not to one to then disseminated - weakens an important

message by which chance is created and sustained”) with an emphasis on external partners (e.g., “Experienced trainers to come into school to deliver training to all staff”).

Curriculum & Planning (n=76): This related to an integration of SEL into current schemes or work, rather than commentary around explicit SEL curricula itself. Several comments noted the desire for SEL to be integrated in this fashion, (e.g., “More links to core curriculum areas to allow teachers to include within English lessons etc”). This theme was seen to be related to the barrier of availability of time and resources with comments calling for “greater weight placed on Social and emotional learning in the curriculum”.

Development of resources (n = 68): Closely related to the theme above was commentary specifically addressing the desire for more easily accessible resources that could be used to augment existing practice, for instance, “Ideas about recommended additional resources/interventions that we could use to supplement what we are already doing’. When explicit SEL programming was mentioned, time and resource limitations were again reflected, as typified by the following quote: “we need a clear and concise, curriculum and resources that is not overly expensive or has a huge time commitment”.

Funding and support for resources (n=58): A large number of comments referenced the need for funding and support explicitly (e.g., “free resources and workshops as budgets are so tight”). There were calls for funding and resources to support a range of activities, for instance, “Funding for extracurricular groups so that identified children and parents could be supported out of class time”.

School-level approach

Schools were asked to rate to what extent their school adopted non-curricula, cross class approaches. Schools were provided a 3-point Likert scale for items identified as “whole school practice behaviours drawn from existing SEL interventions” (Figure 4).

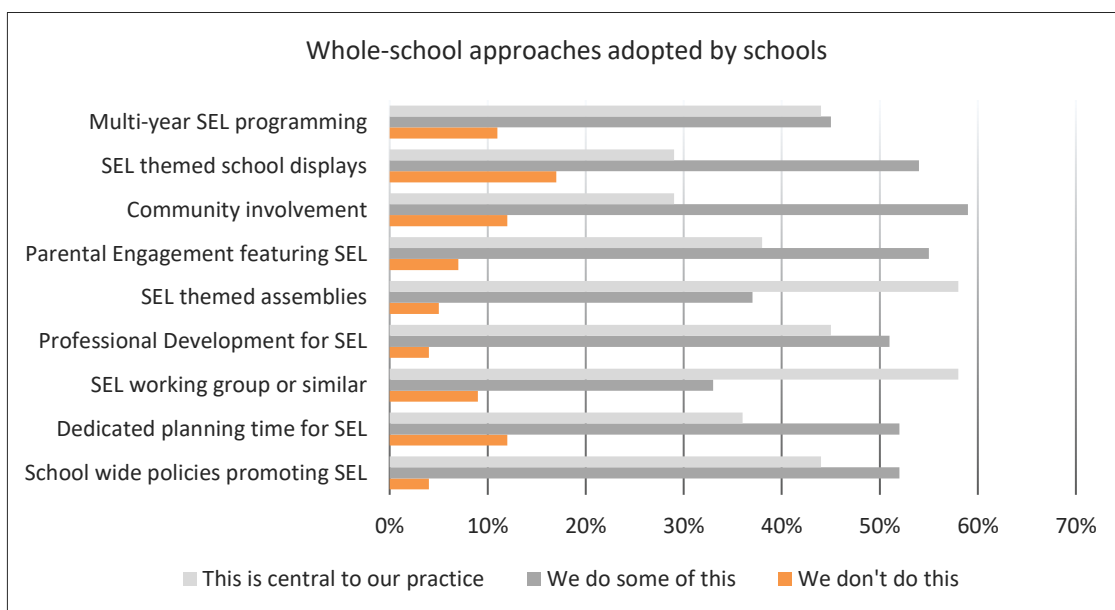


Figure 4. To what extent does your school adopt the following whole-school approaches to SEL? (n=365)

Programmes

Schools were asked whether they had a regular schedule for an explicit SEL curriculum. Of the 183 responses to this question, 13% of schools reported they timetabled “more than an hour”, with 44% of schools reporting scheduling “up to 1 hour”, 33% of schools reporting scheduling “up to 30 minutes” and 10% of the sample reporting “no regular schedule”.

Schools that scheduled regular SEL provision were asked which particular SEL programmes they were currently implementing, and whether they had started but subsequently stopped any SEL implementation in the last five years. An open text box was provided to address the reasons underlying this interruption. Schools were also provided a list of 20 common SEL programmes known to have been recently implemented in the English context, along with an open text box to record any programme not listed. The most frequently implemented programme (104 schools) was “Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL)” (Department for Education and Skills, 2005). The second most frequent programme (27 schools) was “Targeted Mental Health in Schools” (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008), followed by “FRIENDS” (Barrett, 2005) (15 schools), “Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies” (9 schools) (Greenberg & Kusche, 1993) and “b mindfulness” (6 schools) (Huppert & Hohnson, 2010).

Teaching practices

Finally, schools were asked to think about a typical class in school and to reflect to what extent they observed the following teaching practices (Table II). Results showed a range of responses across practices.

Table II. Thinking about a typical class in your school, in the last year, to what extent have you observed the following activities (n=346)?

	Never Observed	Occasionally Observed	Regularly Observed
Deliberate strategies to increase pupil’s emotional vocabulary (e.g., word of the day, spellings, class posters)	18%	45%	37%
Deliberate opportunities for pupils to explain their own feelings and the context behind them (e.g., drawing ‘feelings’, sharing stories in circle time)	3%	39%	58%
Using and teaching calming and regulatory techniques (e.g., count to ten, breath slowly, sit on hands);	1%	41%	58%
Use of perspective taking in understanding social interaction (e.g., discussing empathy in a story, role modelling different ways of behaving)	2%	37%	61%
Deliberate development of communication strategies (e.g., typical scripts for social situations “can I play?”)	6%	52%	42%
Deliberate teaching of rational decision making when solving social problems (e.g., reflecting on choice and consequence either through stories or worksheets).	6%	47%	47%

Discussion

Terminology, perceived benefits, and prioritisation

Surveyed schools showed a consensus in respect to terminology, with approximately 89% of schools explicitly using the terms “social and emotional learning” or “social and emotional skills” both within school and in respect to communication with parents and written policy documentation. However, this finding may in part reflect the sampling technique, by which respondents were invited to respond to a “social/emotional health survey” and given the pre-specified terminology of the question itself. Although the wider field of positive promotion has been criticised for a confusing set of overlapping terms, including non-cognitive development, character education, 21st century skills, emotional literacy ([author redacted], under review), Primary schools in England were subject to nationally mandated initiative for Social & Emotional Learning (Hallam, 2009). This initiative is estimated to have been used in over 80% primary schools in 2008 (Humphrey et al., 2008). Active use of the programme has significantly dropped in respect to survey findings (57% schools surveyed reported still using materials), but familiarity with this programme otherwise supports Loinaz’s (2019) assertion in respect to the cultural specificity of otherwise international terminology.

Almost all schools (95%) ranked SEL as a priority (though this may reflect that this was a volunteer sample). Regarding perceived benefits, most schools (84%) reported a commitment to increased SEL provision, mainly through increased training and recruitment as well updating school method and policy documentation alongside curriculum and timetabling changes in support of SEL. Proximal benefits of SEL were recognised by over 90% of schools (i.e., attitudes towards self and others, behavioural regulation and pro-social behaviour). The identification of some of the more distal benefits (e.g., improve school attendance (70%) and improved grade and test scores (63%)) was considered to be less of a priority. This shows a deviation from wider literature, as SEL has been associated with improved academic outcomes (Corcoran et al., 2018). However, this response may indicate perceived ‘want’ by schools in relation to SEL provision which itself does not directly target attainment as an outcome.

Barriers and facilitators

Lack of time for both the preparation and delivery alongside competing priorities unrelated to SEL were identified as prevalent barriers to implementation, despite indications of increased investment from surveyed schools over the last 5 years. This is congruent with wider findings in the field, which often report on factors such as overcrowding in the curriculum, lack of staff time and a lack of adequate resourcing and support (Cefai & Askill-Williams, 2017; Durlak & Dupre, 2008). Similarly, issues in relation to staff training was the most prevalent response in respect to facilitating SEL, reflecting a general consensus in the wider literature as to the importance of staff training (e.g., see Cefai et al., 2018 for a brief review). However, suggestions from schools did not necessarily reflect recommended training models. For instance, surveyed schools noted a desire for whole staff training delivered by an external agency, in contrast to suggested dissemination models by which more experienced staff guide and support other staff internal to the school (Askill- Williams, 2017). However,

these ideas are not mutually exclusive and indeed, Cefai et al., (2018) warn against a reliance ‘champion-based’ dissemination, given concerns around sustainability. Differences may reflect type of training needs, distinguishing between programmatic or ‘instruction based’ knowledge on how to deliver specific interventions vs. value-based approaches in which awareness and prioritisation of SEL as a focus. There is, therefore, a call for further nuanced understanding about the potential acceptability of different types of staff support and training in respect to SEL.

SEL implementation

School level approaches. Novel and emergent findings arose in respect to responses to school level approaches, not least because of a significant paucity of empirical data in respect to what constitutes typical practice in this area. Less than 40% of responding schools reported engaging with parents in respect to a child’s social and emotional development and less than 30% reported engagement with the wider community. Taking a systemic and integrated approach is seen as an essential element in effective provision and although authors have commented that there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ (Vostanis et al., 2013) in how this may be achieved, a common element is that of parent and community engagement (Meyers et al., 2015). In this respect, there is reduced prevalence of recommended practices from surveyed schools, especially given the almost unequivocal support for the principles for SEL in earlier responses. In consideration of the data, lack of macro-level support may be one interpretation, as authors (Domitrovich et al., 2008) note the importance of a central executive in supporting policy (e.g., governmental policy and guidance). In respect to England, this corresponds to a diminishing emphasis on Social and Emotional Learning, and a renewed emphasis on academic learning (Cullinane & Montacute, 2017).

Programmes & Practice. In comparison to extant literature, reported implementation of SEL programming was higher than that suggested by earlier surveys. i.e., Loinaz, (2019) reported that up to 39% of surveyed schools had no explicit programming whereas the current study shows 90% of schools reported scheduled programming. However, the amount of explicit scheduling of SEL remaining low with only 57% of schools providing explicit teaching of more than 30 minutes a week. Lack of sufficient dosage and duration of explicit programme is a recognised issue in successful SEL implementation (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). In considering the comparatively low uptake of interest are comments around the nature and use of curricula, with reports that programmes were too expensive and not sufficiently similar to the core curriculum. This highlights the aforementioned concern that time pressures make delivery of an explicit programme difficult without due consideration of existing priorities (despite explicit programming being a recommended approach to comprehensive SEL (Durlak et al., 2011). However, authors note that ideally, processes become integrated and embedded in the curriculum (Weare & Nind, 2011). Indeed, the lack of success of the SEAL programme in the UK was in part due to it not being embedded directly into the formal curriculum, with the teaching staff not being involved in its delivery and reinforcement (Humphrey et al., 2010). However, commentary from the survey is suggests a more integrated approach may be evident. Responses showed that deliberate strategies

aligned with social and emotional practices such as developing a specific emotional vocabulary and using techniques for emotional regulation, and that modelling of communication and problem sibling strategies was observed in at least 80% of the sample on an occasionally to regular basis. This is congruent with earlier work from Triliva and Poulou's (2006) study indicating that teachers' approval of SEL did not necessarily extend to the implementation of specific SEL programming. Instead, it supports the idea of an experiential model of socio-emotional development by which 'teachable moments' during daily education are taken advantage of through the lens of SEL (e.g., a teacher introducing social scripts to address issues of conflict in the playground).

Study Limitations

First, despite invitations being sent to all mainstream primary schools in England, the returning sample does not represent a random proportion of the national population. Although responses were geographically diverse, schools with higher-than-average deprivation had greater representation when compared to the national average. Furthermore, in light of voluntary participation, schools with an interest in participating in the research were more likely to respond. Second, responses represented respondents' perceptions of current practices, as compared to a more objective measure (such as direct observation). Variation in the specific role of the respondent (e.g., pastoral lead, deputy head) may contribute to further variability (for instance, some roles may have less opportunities to observe teaching across the school or better insight into opportunities for professional development in comparison to other roles). This is certainly the case whereby the survey was completed by one member of staff who was asked to represent the typical practice of the wider school. However, we would expect a nominated member of staff with recognisable responsibilities in this respect (as denoted by roles of the respondents) to have at least some strategic overview of the current capacities and practices of their school, as befitting their professional responsibilities. A final consideration is that data for the current study was obtained before the Covid-19 pandemic occurred. It is undisputable that education systems, including those in England, have experienced unique and challenging circumstances that may affect perceived priorities and practices. However, SEL has been cited as a promising framework particularly suited for addressing many of emergent issues of such as reported declines in pro-social behaviour, impairment in social interaction and increased worry (Imran et al., 2020; Linnavali, & Kalland, 2021).

Conclusion & Recommendations

This study adds to an understanding of the nature and prevalence of how SEL is prioritised and practiced in a sample of English primary schools. Overall, the exploratory research revealed that despite a high level of agreement for the prioritisation of SEL, there is considerable variability in the practices implemented for its support. There appears to be reduced parental engagement and reduced direct implementation of programmes, two issues generally recognised as barriers to successful outcomes. Established barriers were recognised (e.g., time), though further nuance and understanding arose in respect to acceptability of different training models

and a close examination of teachers perceptions in respect to ‘teaching moments’ in comparison to explicit curricula. As an exploratory and preliminary finding, this paper suggests these are foci for future research. Such opportunities are very valuable given a need to move to strategising and optimising child and adolescent wellbeing post-pandemic (Clarke, 2020).

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