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Blanca N. Ibarra

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Blanca N. Ibarra
University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

Abstract: This inquiry examines the benefits of utilizing social-emotional learning in today's classrooms to address students' academic and social-emotional needs. Now, more than ever, as teachers have transitioned from remote instruction to face-to-face or blended learning, particular emphasis must be placed on addressing students' social and emotional needs (Fagell, 2021) while addressing learning loss. Social-emotional learning (SEL) may have been in place in school systems before the COVID-19 pandemic; however, understanding SEL and the instructional practices that contribute to developing a learning environment that nourishes students' sense of belonging is necessary to inform teacher pedagogical practices post-pandemic. Teachers play a critical role in establishing a learning environment suitable for nurturing students' sense of belonging (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). As teachers attempt to provide a sense of normalcy in the classroom, they must skillfully balance designing instruction, creating an inviting classroom community, and helping students "feel" safe and supported.

Introduction

Today's students face many social and emotional issues. The pandemic has created a need for educators to understand their role in creating an optimal learning environment for students to ensure their overall well-being and academic success. Social-emotional learning (SEL) is an approach that promotes the well-being of students and prepares them for the challenges of the 21st century. SEL program academic benefits are well documented in the research (Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2017; Mahoney et al., 2018-2019; Osher et al., 2016); however, there is a gap in the literature about how teachers can utilize SEL principles to address students' social and emotional well-being in the classroom. There is insufficient research into the impact of a social and emotional learning climate in classrooms on student engagement

and academic achievement. This research specifically positions teachers at the forefront of creating the classroom's social and emotional learning climate where SEL principles have a more direct impact on addressing students' social and emotional well-being. Much research abounds examining the benefits of SEL program implementations. However, the problem is that it focuses on implementing a specific program rather than focusing on SEL principles that teachers can use to create the conditions in the classroom to provide social and emotional support within the learning environment. This research addresses the gap in teachers' role in developing students' sense of belonging in the classroom.

SEL has an essential role in the educational system, especially today, because "social and emotional competencies are not secondary to the mission of education, but concrete factors in the success of teachers, students, and schools" (Jones et al., 2013, p. 65). This year, many students returned to school for the first time since the pandemic started with learning gaps, fear, and a lack of personal connection with peers and teachers (Texas School Safety Center, n.d.). In post-pandemic education, failure to address students' social and emotional needs in the classroom may result in disengagement and poor academic performance (Yorke et al., 2021), which schools cannot afford to occur if they are to address students' learning needs successfully. Teachers can no longer be solely responsible for teaching content knowledge (Ferraira, 2021). Findings from Jennings and Greenberg (2009) suggest that teachers influence students' social and emotional development; unfortunately, there is limited research on this topic (Gimbert et al., 2021). In today's climate, where the term SEL is permeating schools and classrooms across the nation, it is imperative that teachers understand what SEL is but, more importantly, be aware of how the place where students spend most of their time in, the classroom, is the place that needs to be supportive. This article asserts that while social-emotional learning impacts students' well-being and academic success, it is dependent on teachers' active role in developing students' sense of belonging by creating a learning environment that is safe, nurturing, and supportive. Therefore, this paper aims to answer what educators should know about SEL and how they can create a learning environment that supports students' social and emotional well-being.

Method

The literature included in this review relied on the following search terms: *SEL, SEL competencies, benefits of SEL*, and *academic benefits of SEL* on academic databases and Google Scholar. Articles that appeared in educational research or practitioner journals had priority for inclusion. Through the numerous articles obtained, commonalities began to emerge and overlap and are the rationale for including specific literature in this article. For example, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) main SEL theoretical components consistently appeared as a reference in the literature. Several meta-analyses conducted by a combination of the following authors (Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Weissberg) were repeatedly cited in other literature referenced in this article. The authors, as mentioned above, have well-documented research supporting the fact that the use of SEL program implementation has academic benefits. An important finding emerged from this literature: *SEL programs were more effective when implemented by the classroom teacher*. As a result of this finding, an additional search explored the role of teachers in supporting students' social and emotional well-being in the classroom. The search terms used included: *teachers and SEL, teacher social-emotional competence, and developing a sense of belonging*. Jennings and Greenberg's research (2009; 2017) frequently appeared as a reference in research addressing teachers' social-emotional competence and their role in SEL. For this reason, their research

anchors the focus on teachers' role in developing students' social and emotional well-being in the classroom. I will first provide a brief overview of SEL and its theoretical components in the literature review. Understanding the SEL framework helps explain the array of benefits to students (academic, social, and emotional). Second, I will discuss the benefits of SEL as documented in meta-analytic studies. Understanding SEL's benefits are essential for educators since they play a significant role in addressing students' well-being. Third, I will delve into the teachers' social-emotional competence, instructional practices, and the specific role they have in preparing the learning environment for addressing students' social and emotional well-being. The classroom is where students spend most of their time in school with one adult to teach and guide them and, therefore, should be a place where they feel safe, secure, and nurtured. Finally, I will conclude with implications for educator practices in post-pandemic learning environments.

Historical Background of Social Emotional Learning Theory

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is the application of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that allows individuals to manage behavior and emotions and set goals. SEL, as defined by the Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), is "the broad process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships and make responsible decisions" (McKown, 2017, p. 160). SEL research dates back to 1900, but it was not until the 1990s that research began focusing on the role of SEL in the school climate (Osher et al., 2016). The term social-emotional learning (SEL) first appeared in *Promoting Social and Emotional Learning: Guidelines for Educators* (Elias et al., 1997), and it outlined the goals of SEL as being to promote the creation of a nurturing learning environment and to develop five core components: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills (Osher et al., 2016). Social-emotional learning draws from other learning theories, including social learning, behavioral, and multiple intelligences. According to Osher et al. (2016), social learning theory emphasizes self-expectancies which correlate to SEL's emphasis on social awareness and self-awareness. Cognitive behavior theory emphasizes the roles of thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes that influence feelings and affect behaviors, such as making choices that align with SEL's emphasis on self-management and responsible decision-making (Osher et al., 2016). Lastly, Gardner's multiple intelligence theory, specifically interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence, emphasizes empathy and understanding, aligning with the SEL components of self-awareness and self-management (Taylor & Larson, 1999).

Theoretical Components

SEL encompasses three types of skills: thinking, behavioral, and self-control. Thinking skills involve interpreting and reasoning information about other people's behavior; behavior skills refer to the specific actions people take to form and maintain relationships; and self-control skills refer to the ability to control emotions to preserve and achieve goals (McKown, 2017). These skill sets serve as a foundation for the five core SEL competencies, which CASEL identifies as self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills. Self-awareness involves recognizing one's emotions, strengths, and weaknesses to develop a sense of self-worth (Denham & Brown, 2010; Osher et al., 2016), while self-management is the ability to control emotions and behaviors (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013). Social awareness involves recognizing social and cultural norms (Osher et al., 2016),

being empathetic toward others, and understanding support systems and resources available for assistance (Frank, 2020; Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013). Relationship skills refer to sustaining healthy and positive relationships with parents, peers, and teachers (Frank, 2020), as evidenced by practicing effective communication, listening, and collaboration skills. Lastly, responsible decision-making involves making rational choices and understanding the consequences of decisions on others and oneself (Denham & Brown, 2010; Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013). The development of these five components is the short-term goal of SEL, but the long-term benefits are developing socially adjusted students who have less stress and are thriving academically (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013).

Benefits of Using Social-Emotional Learning

Social-emotional factors such as a sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and a sense of caring impact students' academic success (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). The use of SEL programs has many benefits, such as improved social-emotional competence of students, fewer conduct problems, reduced emotional distress (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013), and a positive learning climate (Osher et al., 2016). Short-term benefits of SEL include increased student engagement, positive attitudes, and a sense of belonging, while long-term benefits include academic achievement, social-emotional competence, college readiness, mental health, and 21st-century skills (Greenberg et al., 2017; Mahoney et al., 2018-2019). However, an additional benefit identified in some meta-analyses (Durlak et al., 2011; Payton et al., 2008) reveals positive academic outcomes and increased student engagement. SEL benefits three areas significantly: academic achievement, students' social-emotional competence, and 21st-century skills.

Academic Achievement

A significant benefit of SEL frequently mentioned in the literature (Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2017; Mahoney et al., 2018-2019; Osher et al., 2016) is academic achievement. Specifically, academic achievement in the literature refers to improved performance by students on standardized exams in reading and math, report card grades, and overall GPA (Durlak et al., 2011). Payton et al.'s (2008) review of 317 studies involving 324,303 students revealed that, on average, students enrolled in SEL programs demonstrated an achievement gain on standardized test scores from 11 to 17 percentile points. Additional support for these findings includes Durlak et al.'s (2011) meta-analysis, which revealed an 11-percentile gain in students' academic achievement in reading and math standardized test scores and overall GPA when they participated in classrooms with an SEL program. Mahoney et al.'s (2018-2019) analysis of four meta-analyses of SEL programs found that the effect size on academic achievement (standardized test scores) remained constant across all four meta-analyses ($r = 26$ to $r = 33$), indicating a direct and moderate relationship, thereby supporting the argument that one of the benefits of SEL programming in schools is improved academic achievement. Furthermore, a more recent study also revealed significant effects of SEL on reading ($g = 0.25$) and math ($g = 0.26$) achievement on standardized tests indicating a direct and moderate relationship as well (Hart et al., 2020).

Ragozzino et al. (2003) write that CASEL has identified four ways SEL initiatives can positively impact academic achievement. First, it allows students to apply SEL skills to classroom behaviors that can enhance learning, such as setting educational goals, mastery of content within a particular subject, and identifying strategies to address areas of difficulty to achieve academic goals (Ragozzino et al., 2003). Second, providing students the opportunities to

apply SEL skills such as writing from a certain point of view, providing students with choices, and using cooperative learning results in self-directed and academically engaged students (Moore-McBride et al., 2016). Lastly, forming relationships with students allows teachers to provide feedback on academic progress, contributing to developing students' self-awareness and social-emotional competence (Denham & Brown, 2010).

Social-emotional competence

Social-emotional learning supports students' social and emotional development by helping them develop positive relationships, learning to work cooperatively with peers, managing emotions, and setting and achieving goals (Ragozzino et al., 2003). Students who are socially and emotionally competent are actively engaged, have a good rapport with peers, are motivated to learn, and have grit which is the persistence and desire to achieve goals despite obstacles encountered (McKown, 2017). A competent person has the skills "to generate and coordinate flexible, adaptive responses to demands and to generate and capitalize on opportunities in the environment" (Waters & Sroufe, 1983, as quoted in Durlak et al., 2011, p. 406). Weissberg and Cascarino (2013) add that academically successful students develop persistence and determination, which are positive habits of mind that allow students to be academically successful, and that an SEL program further develops.

21st-century learners

To be prepared for the 21st century, today's students need to be creative, critical, reflective, and conceptual thinkers (Erickson, 2007). Devaney and Moroney (2018) argue that SEL develops 21st-century skills since "it builds upon the practices and strategies inherent in youth development, project-based learning, and college and career readiness activities" (p. 255). Kaufman (2013) explains that 21st-century skills include problem-solving, being flexible, taking personal responsibility for decisions, communicating effectively, working collaboratively, and having initiative. Devaney and Moroney (2018) add that 21st-century skills encompass skills addressing literacy (economic, technological, and information), internal and learning processes, social interactions, and, more recently, the development of social-emotional competence as a 21st-century skill. SEL helps develop flexibility, collaboration, and critical thinking skills, making students college-ready and preparing them to succeed and function in the 21st century (Osher et al., 2016). Another benefit of SEL is improved student-teacher relationships, increased motivation for learning, and academic and life success (Kress et al., 2004), such as earning a high school diploma and attaining gainful employment (Devaney & Moroney, 2018). While SEL develops students' cognitive, social-emotional, and behavioral readiness to succeed academically and citizenship skills to actively participate in a democratic society (Kress et al., 2004), it is contingent on the classroom teacher.

Role of Teacher in Developing Students' Sense of Belonging

Ferraira et al. (2020) write that the teacher is instrumental in implementing SEL. In addition, Allen et al.'s (2018) meta-analysis revealed that teacher support in the classroom was the factor that had the most substantial effect size ($r = 0.46$) on a student's sense of belonging, indicating a moderately strong impact. A student will have a stronger sense of belonging if they perceive that their teachers are genuinely caring and supportive (Allen et al., 2018; Freeman et al., 2007; Ibrahim & Zaatari, 2020; Osterman, 2000). A sense of belonging is "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the

school environment" (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, p. 60-61). Strayhorn (2019) writes that belonging is a necessity to ensure a student's success and is "vital for optimal human functioning" (p. xiv). More specifically, autonomy, support and involvement, caring relationships, fairness, and friendliness significantly impact students' sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2018). Jennings and Greenberg (2009) and Allen et al. (2018) assert that the teacher plays a pivotal role in contributing to students' sense of belonging; hence if students feel they belong in the classroom and have a positive and trusting relationship with teachers, they will be more inclined to participate and be engaged (Texas School Safety Center, n.d.). Teachers can cultivate a sense of belonging by ensuring they know their students socially, culturally, and academically (Thayer-Bacon, 2014) to create an optimal environment for academic engagement, collaboration, relevant learning, and academic success. Educators often conduct activities at the start of the school year to learn about their students' interests; however, early attempts often dissipate (Miller, 2021). Ibrahim and Zaatari (2020) argue that teachers must invest time forming relationships with their students instead of just focusing on meeting accountability standards. They also believe that "the power relationship has to be balanced" (p. 393), and teachers need to self-reflect and determine if their word choice, intonation, and interactions with students convey caring and support or disrespect and lack of appreciation. Students need to perceive that they have a positive relationship with their teachers to feel like they belong (Allen et al., 2018), which teachers can cultivate by making themselves available to assist students with academic and non-academic issues. However, for teachers to develop students' sense of belonging, they must be socially competent to create a prosocial classroom learning climate and use instructional practices conducive to student interaction and the development of social-emotional competence (Greenberg et al., 2017; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Social-Emotional Competence of Teacher

Teachers play an essential role in shaping the hearts and minds of students, and they must be intuitively aware of their strengths and weaknesses as an educator to nourish relationships with students effectively (Jones et al., 2013). Research (Coelho & Sousa, 2018; Durlak et al., 2011) reveals that SEL program implementation is more successful when the classroom teacher implements it, thus supporting the notion that teachers play an integral role in developing the social and emotional competence of students. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) and Greenberg et al. (2017) affirm that teachers play a pivotal role in the development of students' social-emotional development; however, for classrooms to improve, teachers not only have to be motivated to learn and use SEL but must be socially and emotionally competent (Ferraira, 2021; Jones et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2013). Socially and emotionally competent teachers are socially aware, recognize the differences between students and their emotions, and are sensitive to others' perspectives (Gimbert et al., 2021; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Oberle et al., 2020). Teachers with low social-emotional competence tend to have issues with classroom management (Jones et al., 2013), which can create negative classroom experiences for both students and teachers and result in teacher burnout and an adverse climate (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Teachers need to have the capacity to show empathy and compassion (Collie, 2017) to de-escalate conflict and a deep awareness of SEL in order to understand their students better and communicate with them more effectively (Kress et al., 2004). Therefore, teachers must receive pedagogical training on identifying and developing their SEL competence to understand how to create a learning environment conducive to students' social-emotional development (Greenberg et al., 2017).

Schools can address teachers' social-emotional competence by developing their social awareness skills (Gimbert et al., 2021) to develop compassion and empathy. Gimbert (2021) suggests three guiding principles to develop teachers' social-emotional competence. The first principle is to ensure teachers understand the CASEL competencies (self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills) for SEL since understanding allows teachers to be cognizant of how their actions and behaviors demonstrate social-emotional competence. Second, teachers need to develop positive collaborative relationships with colleagues, which can occur through PLCs. Utilizing the PLC, teachers can discuss ways to incorporate CASEL competencies within their classroom and develop an understanding of them. Third, school leaders need to provide teachers with "a safe space to reflect, dialogue, make connection to their past experiences and see immediate relevance" (p. 25). Through critical self-reflection (Schon, 2017), teachers can refine their SEL understanding, reflect on their social-emotional competence, and improve their instructional practice.

Classroom Learning Climate

The development of a safe and supportive learning environment promotes student risk-taking to tackle educational tasks, inquiry, engagement, and a sense of community (Jones et al., 2013). Range et al. (2013) suggest that teachers develop a nurturing learning environment by adopting a student-centered approach to teaching and learning. The learning environment should allow for student input, frequent praise, and classroom choices that contribute to student empowerment (Cooper, 2014), a sense of belonging, and self-efficacy, factors that influence student engagement (Battistich et al., 1997). An optimal social and emotional climate has minimal conflict, effective transitions between activities, positive feedback, and engagement and supports all learner differences (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). The creation of an optimal classroom learning environment begins with the establishment of a community which Battistich et al. (1997) defined as a "place where members care about and support each other, actively participate in and have an influence on the group's activities and decisions, feel a sense of belonging and identification with the group and have common norms, goals and values" (p. 137). The ideal learning community should function on the principle of mutual enhancement in which both students and teachers understand that there is an expectation of "equanimity and universal respect" (Gallagher & Goodman, 2014, p. 309) governing the classroom. Therefore, teachers must be aware of the learning climate because the classroom environment can contribute to or derail student social-emotional growth (Coelho & Sousa, 2018).

Jennings and Greenberg (2009) assert that "teachers must establish relationships that promote each student's discovery of the intrinsic reward for learning and create responsive environments that allow autonomy and cooperative learning" (p. 510). Harnessing students' funds of knowledge can create positive relationships between teachers and students and between and among students (Connery & Curran, 2014). Students who feel welcomed, supported, and appreciated feel comfortable in class (Ibrahim & Zaatari, 2020; Texas School Safety Center, n.d.; Schonert-Reichel, 2017) and participate in academic learning experiences (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Student perceptions of teacher interest and caring (Pendergast et al., 2018) contribute to participation, on-task behavior, engagement, and self-directed learning (Ryan & Patrick, 2001). Emotional security, a feeling of support and safety to make mistakes, and fulfillment of basic needs can contribute to a student's engagement in academic settings (Roorda et al., 2011; Schonert-Reichel, 2017). However, if students feel that their teacher does not like them, it can contribute to disengagement and lack of motivation for learning (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Instructional Practices

        Classroom practices such as student choice, brain breaks, games (Texas School Safety Center, n.d.), cooperative learning (CASEL, 2012), and teacher-student interaction (Ibrahim & Zaatari, 2020) contribute to students' social-emotional development and academic achievement. Teachers establish routines, procedures for cooperation, discussion, and norms for participation; however, the quality of the tasks and activities assigned by the teacher often determines participation (Ferraira, 2021; Ryan & Patrick, 2001). Teacher practices such as cooperative learning, self-assessment, teacher-led activities, and language of instruction can contribute to social-emotional development (Osher et al., 2016). Small group and cooperative learning practices allow for the teacher to serve as a facilitator (Ghorbani et al., 2018) and provide both individual assistance, personalized immediate and corrective feedback, which contribute to the development of students' self-awareness in the mastery of content and their sense of self-efficacy (Ferraira, 2021). Taylor and Larson (1999) indicate that cooperative learning strategies such as jigsaw, think-pair-share, and numbered heads help students develop their communication and relationship skills.

        Teachers can create a social-emotional learning environment through interactions with students and instructional practices, primarily through learner-centered instruction (Greenberg et al., 2017). Teachers can incorporate SEL principles in the classroom by allowing students to express their opinions and interact with others (Ferraira, 2021; Taylor & Larson, 1999; Wang & Holcombe, 2010) by doing debates, structured dialogues, role play, simulations, and reflective journaling. By participating in debates, students can articulate their perspectives, listen to their peers' differing points of view, and develop a sophisticated understanding of issues under discussion, resulting in cognitive engagement (Ferraira, 2021; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Perspective-based writing allows students to express their feelings about a topic, event, or issue discussed in class. However, teachers need to recognize that students' perceptions about their self-efficacy affect their ability to complete assigned academic work and heighten feelings of stress (Zimmerman, 2014). Also, in terms of motivation, some students show engagement in learning while others feel alienated, and for all students to be autonomous learners and develop a sense of belonging, differentiated learning experiences are necessary (Pendergast et al., 2018; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Teacher practices that empower students to express themselves have choices in learning, and opportunities to master learning produce positive teacher-student relationships, educational benefits, and emotional well-being (Greenberg et al., 2017; Wang & Holcombe, 2010).

Implications for Educator Practices

        This inquiry on the benefits of social and emotional learning is significant because it helps educators understand the importance of developing a learning environment conducive to nurturing students' social and emotional needs. As schools across the country strategically plan to adjust instruction and address learning loss, they need to understand that "there is no manual for helping vulnerable children-or-adults-to thrive in the aftermath of the pandemic, but we can start by ensuring that everyone feels seen, nurtured, and valued" (Fagell, 2021, p. 55). Considering that the literature review revealed that SEL helps students academically and contributes to their social-emotional well-being, teachers need to understand how to prepare the learning environment to sustain and nurture students' social-emotional well-being organically.

        Teachers must understand that knowing an SEL program's components or implementing SEL activities is insufficient. Instead, teachers need to teach effectively and model social-

emotional skills, be aware of their social-emotional competence and recognize that "feeling" (Brackett, 2019) is a part of the human condition. Research into the role of teachers in developing a sense of belonging is a timely contribution to educators since there is a priority on addressing students' emotional needs through the use of SEL practices. Students returning to school may be experiencing a mixture of emotions, and "true feelings can be messy, inconvenient, confusing, even addictive [which often] leave us vulnerable, exposed, naked to their world" (Brackett, 2019, p. 7). Therefore, the findings from this inquiry suggest that addressing students' social and emotional needs begins with teachers creating a safe, supportive, and nurturing environment.

The classroom environment is crucial to ensuring students feel safe and welcomed. Teachers need to understand that "SEL is developmental" (Ferraira, 2021, p. 31), and instructional practices in the classroom will need to vary based on students' individual needs. To assist students in readjusting to face-to-face instruction, teachers must emphasize class-building and help students rebuild trust within their learning community—the classroom. Part of developing a classroom community requires students to have the opportunity to know their peers (Elias, 2016) and feel valued. Teachers can design an environment that allows for autonomy, cooperation, collaboration, and support by using Kagan cooperative learning structures (Kagan, 2001) to promote discussion and simultaneous equitable participation by all students in the classroom. They can encourage conversation in the classroom by providing students with non-academic discussion questions (ex. talking about favorite foods, hobbies, TV shows, or sports), thus allowing everyone to talk, share, and learn about their peers. CASEL (2020) also offers question stems (ex. *"What are some things that make you feel mad? Sad? Happy? What are some ways that you let your friends in your class know you care about them?"*) that support the SEL competencies and engages students in self-reflection. To have a more structured discussion that encourages respect and listening but allows students to "feel" and share their emotions, teachers can use the Talking Circle strategy (Alarcon et al., 2017). In this strategy, the teacher poses a question or topic and then passes an object to students to take turns sharing their opinions while everyone else listens. Students can talk when the object gets to them or pass, but everyone has to respect, be quiet and listen. Teachers can utilize this strategy to have students express how they feel about returning to school and discuss feelings of anxiety, stress, and nervousness, which can also help students develop empathy.

Next, teachers need to get to know their students and incorporate opportunities for students to learn about their culture to develop their identity and understand who they are. For example, through a student identity activity such as "Who Am I" (The Linking Network, 2022), students can share personal life stories, experiences, or information about their family background. Identity activities (Facing History & Ourselves, 2009) allow students to get to know their peers in a non-threatening manner resulting in class-building. Often schools select a popular entertainment trend/theme in society to be the theme for the school's bulletin boards (ex., Star Wars, Lego, Marvel Avengers, Harry Potter), and decorations reflect that theme throughout the school. Similarly, teachers can embrace culturally responsive pedagogical practices to promote diversity, inclusivity, trust, and belonging (Mason, 2021; Elias, 2021) as their themes. Creating an inviting classroom space communicates to students that it belongs to them (Smith-Gillman et al., 2014). For example, having a designated area for students to read a book, listen to music, or take a mental break before resuming class work provides them with a safe place to de-stress. Brain breaks function as opportunities for the brain to stop thinking about learning (Desautels, 2016). Also, dedicating some wall space for a picture wall for students to post pictures of their

accomplishments and give shout-outs (InquirED, 2019) to peers contributes to building that sense of community in the classroom.

In addition, teachers can nurture a classroom community by having each student assume a role in the classroom, such as technical expert, motivator, influencer, timekeeper, or materials manager (Herrmann, 2021). Students feel they belong when they know they are essential and have responsibilities in the classroom community. To maintain a safe and nurturing classroom, teachers should use a firm but calm voice instead of yelling and use close kneeling proximity to be on an equal footing with students to address individual misbehavior discreetly instead of in front of the whole class (Brunzell et al., 2020) so students understand and feel that you want them to be better and not that you are punishing them.

This inquiry revealed the importance of teachers understanding that students need to be doing well mentally to do well academically. While many schools' focus this year is learning loss, teachers need to consider adjusting their instructional design to ensure students do not feel overwhelmed but are relatively supportive in a classroom where they feel safe to learn, make mistakes, and be themselves. Brunzell et al. (2020) recommend that when it comes to instructional planning, lessons should: (1) reflect students' readiness for learning, (2) provide clear goals for learning with differentiated paths for completion but the same criteria, and (3) provide students with immediate and corrective feedback aligned to established criteria. Following these recommendations helps students meet their individual learning needs at their own pace.

Furthermore, teachers need to embrace mindfulness practices (Philibert, 2021) to ensure their stress level does not transfer into the learning environment (DiCarlo et al., 2019). Teachers need to plan for non-academic mental breaks such as having students stand up and stretch, playing meditation music, or doing a puzzle or brain teaser to help students de-stress. At the same time, though, teachers also need to address their own social and emotional needs. For example, learning about mindfulness techniques can help teachers regulate their emotions to avoid stress and burnout at school (Zolkoski & Lewis-Chiu, 2019). Mindfulness practices may assist teachers in finding the right balance between planning and teaching, using technology, and addressing learning loss without feeling overwhelmed. Teachers' social-emotional competence is also a necessity that requires an investment in professional development to ensure they can model SEL skills and develop the learning environment that nourishes students and helps them feel valued, supported, and nurtured.

Conclusion

The pandemic resurfaced interest in social-emotional learning to address students' social and emotional needs. While SEL helps develop academic dispositions, social skills, academic grit (McKown, 2017), and improve academic achievement (Durlak et al., 2011; Payton et al., 2018), it also helps to address students' emotional well-being. As teachers readjust to face-to-face instruction and deal with the impact of the pandemic on the educational system, they must be prepared to address not only the academic needs of students but their social and emotional needs. Fagell (2021) stresses that in this post-pandemic educational system, "safe-guarding students' mental health and well-being will be key to ensuring their future success" (p. 51). Thus, teachers must understand their critical role in establishing a safe and secure classroom environment (Allen et al., 2018; Ibrahim & Zaatari, 2020) to positively develop trusting relationships with students and utilize instructional practices conducive to addressing students' social and emotional needs. At the same time, school leaders must invest in professional

development to help teachers develop their social-emotional competence to nurture students' social-emotional well-being. Though this article suggests some practical strategies for educators to create a supportive and nurturing learning environment to develop students' sense of belonging, more research is necessary. While there is much research on SEL pre-pandemic, the pandemic warrants newer research on post-pandemic SEL programs and best practices, including possibly redesigning SEL programs to address students' emotional well-being effectively. In addition, further research on effective ways to help develop and sustain teachers' social-emotional competence through professional development and effective teaching practices that help promote students' sense of belonging in a post-pandemic environment would benefit practitioners. As schools navigate teaching and learning post-pandemic, they must make a concerted effort to prioritize students' social and emotional well-being, assist teachers in nurturing positive relationships with students, and develop their social-emotional competence, which in the end, will result in academic success. Academic success is measurable through performance on academic achievement tests or subject area grades on report cards or observable as in the development of study habits, resiliency, and a growth mindset which facilitate long-term success in Pk-12, university, and post-graduate settings. As educators, our goal is to develop life-long learners, which begins with removing the social and emotional barriers students face and nurturing the love of learning.

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Author Notes

Blanca N. Ibarra
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4893-2902
University of Texas at Rio Grande Valley
blanca.ibarra02@utrgv.edu