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Transformative Social Emotional Learning: Bridging the Gap Between Teacher Preparation and Student Learning

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TRANSFORMATIVE SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING: BRIDGING THE GAP

BETWEEN TEACHER PREPARATION AND STUDENT LEARNING

by

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the practices and perceptions of educators implementing a schoolwide SEL curriculum. This study sought to identify aspects that promote and prevent effective SEL programming in schools by answering the following questions: How do educators implement SEL curriculum in a diverse school setting? How do educators' understandings and beliefs about SEL impact schoolwide program implementation? and What transformative qualities of educators' knowledge and practices emerge in the examination of their beliefs about SEL? The data for this study was collected through a survey and semi-structured interview with three participants. Three key findings emerged: a) the lived experiences and perceptions of competencies impact educators' approach to program implementation, b) limitations within the structure of the curriculum and educators' workarounds also impacted implementation, and c) classroom practices grounded in SEL demonstrated the potential to create transformative experiences and spaces.

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Chapter One: Introduction

The year of 2020 is one that will not soon be forgotten. In March of that year, schools across the world transitioned to fully online systems due to the COVID-19 pandemic, introducing "an unexpected and profound change into our social, educational, health and governance systems" (Dudovitz et al., 2021, p. 1662). The killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd reignited media coverage of the Say Her Name and Black Lives Matter movements, drawing increased attention to violence and discrimination against Black people. Dudovitz and colleagues (2021) noted that this "unexpected and profound change" served as a type of "stress test" for the nation (p. 1662). There is an opportunity for the year of 2020 to be remembered not just for its serious health impacts and civil unrest, but as a catalyst for change and an opportunity to restructure social, educational, health, and governance systems (Dudovitz et al., 2021)). Schools around the world were forced unexpectedly into an online learning environment, and there was an increase in media attention regarding the inequities in access to technology, nutrition, childcare, and health care. An added pressure emerged to meet the needs of students, especially those marginalized by social systems.

In an investigation of the impacts of COVID-19 on children's' mental health, Dudovitz and colleagues (2021) identified the following as potential threats or challenges: challenges in interactions with parents and peers; a decrease in sense of belonging, purpose, and a sense of connectedness; potential for an increase in domestic violence and maltreatment; decreased access to support services; delayed diagnosis; and potential for increased parental stress, anxiety, isolation, and poor mental health. The high levels of stress, trauma, and anxiety have further marginalized youth who have been historically underrepresented and excluded from the dominant narrative of education. According to Irvine (1990), "The practice of labeling children

who are different, those who don't or won't fit into our mold, has a long-standing tradition in American education" (p. 18). The perceived achievement chasm between White students and Students of Color is just one example of a practice used to create dissonance and inequity, resulting in the labeling of children who do not fit within the dominant norms.

Ladson-Billings (2006) describes this gap in achievement as an "education debt" (p. 3) that society owes to the marginalized youth the education system has failed to serve. This "education debt" includes historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral debts. Irvine (2010) also speaks about this debt, referring instead to the gaps in opportunity that have led to perceived gaps in achievement. These gaps are found in teacher quality, teacher training, challenging curriculum, school funding, digital divide, wealth and income, employment opportunities, affordable housing, health care, nutrition, school integration, and quality childcare (p. xii). Milner (2016) expands upon Irvine's opportunity gaps and Ladson-Billings' education debt, arguing that achievement, much like academic and social success, is socially constructed, with certain areas being more privileged and valued than others. Through this lens, researchers and practitioners tend to frame White students as the norm and view Students of Color[1] as deficient, and according to Paris (2012), these deficit perceptions translate into deficit practices. Dudovitz and colleagues (2021) suggest, "The United States represents a paradox in that despite a strong economy we provide poor environments for children, whose health outcomes ranked 36th of 38 countries even prior to COVID-19" (p. 1664). This "poor" environment is evidenced through the analysis of opportunity gaps and education debt.

With increased awareness of the impact of societal and systemic forces on student learning and well-being, there is an urgent need for a shift in how well-being education is addressed within schools. Much like the practice of labeling students, human development also

has a long-standing tradition in American education. Horace Mann, William McGuffey, and Benjamin Franklin, the founding fathers of education, wanted morality taught in schools (Love, 2019). Social emotional learning (SEL) has evolved over the years in response to these debts and gaps, but without a critical examination of the perceptions of those responsible for the facilitation of SEL programming, there is a risk that those perceptions will translate into practices that further contribute to systems of oppression that are harmful to Students of Color.

Statement of the Problem

Our school populations are becoming more diverse and our children are growing up in an increasingly hate-filled and violent world. (Durlak et al., 2015; Simmons, 2019). According to the 2014 report from the U.S. Census Bureau, the United States is on track to be a "minority-majority" nation within the next three decades (Jagers et al., 2018), and the Uniform Crime Reporting Program of the FBI, reported 7,314 hate crimes committed in 2019 targeting 8,552 victims. More than half of these crimes were motivated by race, ethnicity, and/or ancestry. In response to the shift in minority-majority status and an increase in racially motivated hate crimes, educators and advocates for transformative education practices are seeking to spread awareness and abolish oppressive policies and procedures in our schools (Simmons, 2019). This awareness has prompted educators to critically examine the implications of these societal forces on the social emotional development of students. Simmons coined the phrase "White supremacy with a hug" (Madda, 2019, para. 11), to describe the dangers of implementing SEL without an anti-racist, equity lens. She works to spread awareness of the abuse and disenfranchisement that has led to traumatic experiences for marginalized youth at schools across the nation through SEL practices. This current study exists within the intersection of SEL and equity, two areas of concern as reported by educational research (Jagers et al., 2018; Milner & Tenore, 2010;

Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021; Sondel et al., 2019), and seeks to explore the impact of educators' understandings and beliefs on the implementation of schoolwide SEL programs.

Purpose

While much research exists about the effectiveness of SEL programming in schools, many limitations also exist. The effectiveness of SEL programming is dependent on teachers' familiarity, beliefs, training and perceived school culture on SEL (Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021), and the ethnic-racial identities (ERI) of participants (Jager et al., 2019). Interventions for SEL are also rarely designed and implemented with a culturally responsive lens in mind, which can further limit measures of effectiveness (Kaler-Jones, 2020). The purpose of this qualitative research study is to explore the practices and perceptions of educators implementing a schoolwide SEL curriculum. This study seeks to identify aspects that promote and prevent effective SEL programming in schools by investigating educators' understandings and beliefs regarding the five core competencies of SEL and the teachers' perceptions of the purpose of schoolwide SEL program implementation.

Research Questions

Although a wealth of research surrounds SEL and the impact of teachers' understanding and beliefs on student learning, most research thus far has failed to apply a critical lens. Therefore, a gap exists in the literature regarding the impact of these beliefs about SEL and transformative practices, specifically as seen through a critical lens. This present study seeks to explore this gap and is guided by the following questions:

1. How do educators implement SEL curriculum in a diverse school setting?
2. How do educators' understandings and beliefs about SEL impact schoolwide program implementation?

3. What transformative qualities of educators' knowledge and practices emerge in the examination of their beliefs about SEL?

The term "diverse" is used in this study to mean the complex and dynamic make-up of classrooms. Qualities of diversity include differences in culture, ethnicity, race, socio-economic status, gender, ability, learning conditions, and life circumstances. Through an exploration of the understandings and beliefs of educators, the intent of this study is to identify aspects that promote and prevent effective SEL program implementation. In doing so, the objective is to develop a process through which educators can examine their practices and perceptions regarding culturally sustaining aspects of SEL curricula through both a transformative and critical lens.

Significance

This study offers an important contribution to the field of transformative SEL. Too often curriculum is situated in dominant norms that can lead to acculturative stress. This consequence occurs when there is a disconnect between the cultural expectations and norms of a host (i.e., the United States) and the cultural norms and expectations of students' heritage (Jagers et al., 2018). According to Milner and Tenore (2010) with regard to classroom management, teachers often utilize inappropriate techniques in their work with culturally diverse students due to a lack of awareness of teachers "implicit pedagogical, curricular, assessment, and management decisions" (p. 567). This current study demonstrates a process through which educators can examine their practices and perceptions regarding the transformative aspects of various SEL curricula.

Defining Terms

Language is used to construct meaning and realities that are influenced by institutional, societal, and cultural norms. Too often the language we use is centered in dominant norms. It is

therefore imperative to contextualize the use of language, rather than assume familiarity and understanding. The following terms and definitions are provided to build a common understanding necessary to engage in this study.

Achievement Gap

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2021), achievement gaps occur when there is a statistically significant difference between two groups of students on a standardized measure of achievement. Students may be grouped according to race, ethnicity, or gender. Data provided by the NCES utilized scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to identify a gap between Black and White students, and Hispanic and White students.

"At Risk"

While deficit approaches to teaching and learning existed prior to the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk* (Paris, 2012), the term "at risk" became a popular term used to identify students that would likely experience low academic achievement after its publication (Brown, 2008). "At risk" has also been used to identify students that are at risk of not graduating high school. *Risk factors* is another term that is often used to discuss students at risk. The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) defines risk factors as "variables found in individuals, families, communities, schools, and peers that put youth at greater risk of participating in delinquent and risky behaviors or developing mental, emotional, physical or behavioral disorders" (n.d.).

Culture

The term culture is defined here as being "of" a social group, and in reference to the learning context, both school and classroom. Hammond (2014) defines culture as, "the way that every brain makes sense of the world," much like the way that software makes use of hardware

(p. 22), "culture guides how we process information" (p. 48). Culture encompasses the shared beliefs, social behaviors, norms, and institutions.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP)

Ladson-Billings (1995) identifies similarities with this approach to Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed and defines culturally relevant pedagogy as a pedagogy of opposition committed to the empowerment of the collective through the proposition of:

Academic Success. Students must demonstrate competency in literacy, numeracy, technological, social, and political skills necessary. Ladson-Billings (1995) also argues teachers must demand, reinforce, and produce academic excellence, but that students must also "choose" it for themselves.

Cultural Competence. Defined as the ability to help students appreciate and celebrate their cultures of origin while gaining knowledge of and fluency in at least one other culture. Ladson-Billings (1995) recommends using culture as a "vehicle for learning" (p. 161).

Critical Consciousness. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire defines conscientização, or critical consciousness, as "learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (2005, p.34). Ladson-Billings (1995) defines it as a sociopolitical consciousness that allows students to "critique the cultural norms, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities" (p. 162).

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP)

Gay (2002) defines culturally responsive pedagogy as "using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively" (p. 106). Milner & Tenore (2010) expand upon this definition noting how CRP

teaches to and through the strengths of students. CRP is culturally validating and affirming (p. 570).

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP)

Paris (2012) defines culturally sustaining pedagogy as a way to both maintain and sustain "linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as a part of the democratic project of schooling" (p. 95). Culturally sustaining pedagogy challenges the use of the words relevant and responsive, arguing that it is possible to be both without ensuring sustainability and continued practice.

Diverse

For the purpose of this study, the term "diverse" will be used to describe the complex and dynamic make-up of classrooms. Qualities of diversity in this study include differences in culture, ethnicity, race, socio-economic status, gender, ability, learning conditions, and life circumstances.

Dominant Norms and Values

Throughout the present study, dominant norms and values are referenced and discussed. Researchers identify dominant norms and values as White, middle class, Western, Eurocentric, and individualistic (Gillies, 2011; Hoffman, 2009; Simmons, 2017).

Educator

For the purpose of this study, the term educator will be used to refer to individuals that provide instruction, education, or mentorship. The word teacher implies what Freire (2014) refers to as the "banking" concept of education in which knowledge is deposited by the teacher into the student. Freire is critical of the banking concept in which the creative power of students is restricted. In the banking concept, teachers hold the power and knowledge, while students are receiving objects, without power or opinion. The term educator goes beyond the traditional,

standardized, methods of education. An educator is someone who educates. According to Oxford Languages, to educate is to "give intellectual, moral, and social instruction to someone" (n.d.). Within this construct, an educator goes beyond the role of teachers to include social workers, student support staff, and school leaders.

Marginalized

Freire (2014) defines marginal persons as those "who deviate from the general configuration of a "good, organized, and just" society" (p. 74), those who have been oppressed by society, those who are viewed as "incompetent and lazy", and in need of the oppressors. Paris (2012) identifies marginalized students as those experiencing systematic inequalities on the basis of race, ethnicity, and language.

Positive Youth Development (PYD)

The term Positive Youth Development (PYD) is used to describe programs that enhance the strengths of young people by establishing engaging and supportive contexts and providing opportunities for bidirectional, constructive youth-context interactions (Taylor et al., 2017).

Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines SEL 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" (n.d.).

Social Emotional Learning Competencies

CASEL identifies the following five broad and interrelated areas that support learning and development: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, relationship skills, and social awareness. These competencies are described fully in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

Students of Color

The phrase Students of Color is intentionally used throughout this study to represent the different racial and ethnic groups that make-up classrooms. The term is inclusive of students who may identify as Black, African American, Latinx, Indigenous, Asian, South Asian, Middle Eastern, Pacific Islander, and multiracial.

Transformative Social Emotional Learning

Transformative SEL "is a means to better articulate the potential of SEL to mitigate the educational, social, and economic inequities that derive from the interrelated legacies of racialized cultural oppression in the United States and globally" (Jagers et al., 2019, p.163). It is "a process whereby students and teachers build strong, respectful relationships founded on an appreciation of similarities and differences, learn to critically examine root causes of inequity, and develop collaborative solutions to community and societal problems" (Jagers et al., 2018, p. 3).

Organization of Study

This study is organized in five chapters. The introduction gives an overview of the focus and purpose of this study, and its significance to the field. The second chapter provides context for this study with a review of existing literature relating to transformative SEL, providing a synthesis across the themes of SEL, teacher competencies, and transformative education. The third chapter presents a detailed description of all aspects of the study's qualitative,

phenomenological design including positionality of the researcher, research setting, participant

sample, and data collection and analysis methods. The fourth chapter organizes and reports the

data collected and provides a rich discussion of the themes identified through data analysis. The

fifth chapter provides a final reflection of the study as a whole, discussing the study's findings in

relation to the research questions and literature review, and presents the limitations of the study,

implications for instruction, and recommendations for future research and program

implementation.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This study explored the ways educators' understandings and beliefs about social emotional learning (SEL) impact schoolwide program implementation. The theoretical framework guiding this work is rooted in a transformative worldview. This perspective focuses on "issues of power and social justice," by questioning power and privilege and applying a critical lens to analyze the results (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 9). Grounded in transformative SEL, as defined by Jagers and colleagues (2019), this research will focus on what is revealed about transformative practices within schoolwide SEL program implementation.

What is Social Emotional Learning?

The National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE) published *A Nation at Risk* (1983), in a call for nation-wide education reform. This report identified the negative impact of demands often placed on schools to solve personal, social, and political problems that other institutions refuse or fail to solve. According to the NCEE report, these excessive demands resulted in mediocre educational performance across the nation and threatened to disarm the United States as it struggled to compete globally. The report further argued that society lost sight of the purpose, expectations, and efforts of basic schooling. In a play on an analogy made in the original report, Zhao (2015) adds to the ways in which education systems have continued to threaten the success of students around the world,

> If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the misguided policies that threaten democracy, turn American children into robotic test takers, narrow and homogenize our children's education, encourage standardization instead of helping the needy children and stimulating innovation, value testing over teaching, and scapegoat teachers that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we

have allowed this to happen to ourselves. We have squandered the opportunities brought

about by technology, ignored research evidence, and paid no attention to what the future

needs. (p. 129)

While the report focuses primarily on standardized measures of academic achievement to define

the indicators of risk, the commission points to the importance of the nation's moral and spiritual

strengths in addition to the intellectual. According to Wortham and colleagues (2020), "Our

emotions, politics, morals, and relationships connect with and depend on each other. A

comprehensive approach to well-being asks educators to help young people integrate these

aspects of themselves" (p. 410). Researchers often identify these noncognitive factors

(Farrington et al., 2012; Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021; Wortham et al., 2020; Zhao, 2015), as the

"behaviors, skills, attitudes, and strategies that are crucial to academic performance" (Farrington

et al., 2012, p. 3).

Just over ten years after the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, the Collaboration for

Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was born and from it the term "social and

emotional learning" (SEL) was defined. Hoffman (2009) credits the growing popularity of SEL

in the 1990s to the expressed "concerns over the vulnerability of children and youth to various

social and psychological problems and the potential role of schools in ameliorating such risks"

(p. 533). SEL is defined as "the process through which children and adults develop the skills,

attitudes, and values necessary to acquire social and emotional competence" (Elias et al., 1997,

p. 2). Correspondingly, social and emotional competence is defined as "the ability to understand,

manage, and express the social and emotional aspects of one's life in ways that enable the

successful management of life tasks such as learning, forming relationships, solving everyday

problems, and adapting to the complex demands of growth and development" (p.2). CASEL (2020) also identifies the five core competencies as such:

1. Self-awareness: "The abilities to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts" (para. 3).

2. Self-management: "The abilities to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and to achieve goals and aspirations" (para. 6).

3. Social awareness: "The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures and contexts" (para. 4).

4. Relationship skills: "The abilities to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups" (para. 7).

5. Responsible decision making: "The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations" (para. 5).

This section of the literature review will explore the historical context of SEL, the formalized definitions and variations in terminology, and the behavior and academic outcomes.

Historical Context

While the emphasis on human development has existed in educational philosophies and practice for millennia, the work of formalizing the field began in the late 20th century (Wortham et al., 2020). Burkhard and colleagues (2020) argue that the Positive Youth Development (PYD) programs that evolved in the 1990s, did so in response to the deficit model that had been

predominant in the 20th century. SEL falls both within the realm of PYD and the umbrella of "education for well-being," alongside moral education, character education, whole child education, civic education, and 21st century learning (Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021; Wortham et al., 2020). Other programs that fall within this umbrella include AIDS education, career education, civic education, delinquency prevention, dropout prevention, drug education, family life education, health education, law-related education, multicultural education, nutrition education, physical injury prevention, positive peer bonding, sex education, truancy prevention, and violence prevention (Elias et al., 1997). McWhirter and colleagues (1998) identified the core components of programs for prevention and early intervention as training in life skills, interpersonal skills, assertiveness, problem solving, decision making, self-management, self-control, and coping strategies. It is important to note how many of these programs address risk factors through the building of positive assets and the development of protective factors. Wortham et al. (2020) agree, arguing that education should address multiple dimensions of human functioning, while also helping students to integrate across dimensions.

How is Social Emotional Learning Defined?

The language used in research about social and emotional learning is varied. Hoffman (2009) describes "a fair degree of ambiguity and conceptual confusion" (p.535) in their response to the question, "What is SEL?", identifying that SEL serves as an umbrella for a variety of programming. In a meta-analysis of the impact of school-based universal interventions on academic achievement, researchers used the following terms to identify relevant studies: social and emotional learning, competence, assets, health promotion, prevention, positive youth development, social skills, empathy, emotional-intelligence, problem solving, conflict resolution, coping, and stress reduction (Durlak et al., 2011). A meta-analysis of follow-up effects

conducted years later used similar strategies to search for, select, and code studies. Bavarian et al. (2012) utilize the term social emotional and character development (SECD), listing SEL and PYD programs as SECD-like. At the same time, Reeves & Le Mare (2017) argue for the use of the term social emotional education as a way to shift the focus from deficits within individuals to the processes and contexts through which skills are learned and developed. International studies utilize social, emotional, and/or behavioral (SEB) (Sklad et al., 2012) and social emotional aspects of learning (SEAL) (Gillies, 2011) to describe programs and interventions that explicitly address social and emotional development.

Researchers identify competence promotion as the dominant approach to SEL implementation, emphasizing the development of discrete noncognitive competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (Durlak et al., 2011; Reeves & Le Mare, 2017; Wortham et al., 2020). A second approach is relational, shifting the focus again from the individual to the context through which skills are learned and developed. In this approach, explicit attention is paid to teacher-student relationships and classroom and school culture (Durlak et al., 2011; Farrington et al., 2012; Reeves & Le Mare, 2017; Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015).

Outcomes of Schoolwide Social Emotional Learning Implementation

A growing body of research indicates that school-based SEL programs improve academic achievement and prosocial behaviors while reducing conduct problems and emotional distress (Bavarian et al., 2013; Durlak et al., 2011; Elias et al., 1991; Sklad et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2017; Thierry et al., 2021).

Behavior Outcomes. SEL program implementation targets instruction in five core noncognitive skill sets: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making,

relationship skills, and social awareness (Durlak et al., 2011). Researchers have described positive behavior outcomes of program implementation as prosocial behaviors (Elias et al., 1991; Sklad et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2017) including self concept, bonding to school, classroom behavior (Durlak et al., 2011), academic motivation and ability, problem solving, self-control, emotional regulation, and attention (Bavarian et al., 2013). Researchers also reported decreases in antisocial, self-destructive, and socially disordered behav-ior (Elias et al., 1991) such as aggression bullying, and delinquent acts, reduced feelings of depression, stress, and social withdrawal (Durlak et al., 2011). In addition, scholars have identified a positive impact on student academics and behaviors as a protective factor against conduct problems, emotional distress, and drug use (Bavarian et al., 2013; Taylor et al., 2012), which can improve future social relationships and reduce negative outcomes such as arrests and clinical disorders (Sklad et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2017).

Academic Outcomes. While SEL program implementation does not provide explicit instruction in academic skills or mindsets, researchers have identified the ways in which the five core competencies overlap with other noncognitive factors that support the development of academic skills and mindsets (Bavarian et al., 2013; Durlak et al., 2011; Farrington et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2017; Thierry et al., 2021). As a result, Bavarian and colleagues (2013) observed favorable growth on the Illinois State Achievement Test (ISAT) in reading and math after a six year Positive Action (PA) trial in Chicago Public Schools. PA was identified by researchers as a comprehensive SECD program comprising six units of study: self-concept, positive actions for mind and body, positive social-emotional actions focusing on getting along with others, and managing, being honest with, and continually improving oneself (Bavarian et al., 2013).

After a two year case study exploring the impact of a community partnership in improving readiness for program implementation, Thierry et al. (2021) found that in the third year of the partnership, the academic progress index, measuring student growth relative to academically similar students, grew 26.4 points. In addition, the closing gaps index, which measures whether all students and subgroups are improving achievement rates, grew from 37.5 to 97.2. Both indexes were calculated on a scale of 0 to 100. In a meta-analysis of school-based interventions for enhancing social and emotional learning in students from kindergarten to high school, Durlak et al. (2011) found that students that received SEL programming averaged 11 percentile points higher on achievement tests than students that had not received programming.

Further, a literature review conducted by Farrington et al. (2012) introduced two theories to explain these positive effects on academic achievement. The first describes how the prosocial skills developed allow students to participate more productively in their classroom interactions, and the second explains that teachers value prosocial behaviors in grading systems. The second theory applies to classroom grades, but does not, however, account for growth on the standardized measures of achievement found in the studies cited in this paper. In addition to improved academic achievement, Taylor et al. (2017) also found a long term effect of increased graduation rates and college attendance.

Social Emotional Learning and Teacher Competencies

Existing research identifies that teachers have an understanding of the importance of SEL, the challenges faced by students, the interconnectedness with academic learning, and a desire to address these needs within the classroom (Reeves & Le Mare, 2017, Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021, Thierry et al., 2021). Despite this desire, common barriers to effective SEL instruction exist. Researchers agree that a lack of pre- and in-service training opportunities, low levels of

SEL competencies paired with feelings of stress, fatigue, and isolation, and a disconnect between school culture and practices prevent effective implementation of schoolwide SEL programs (Reeves & Le Mare, 2017; Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). The development of teachers' understandings and beliefs through both preservice and in-service SEL training, as well as an alignment to schoolwide policies, procedures, and culture may have beneficial effects for both teachers and students (Schiepe-Tiska at al., 2021). This section of the literature review will explore the inclusion of SEL in teacher preservice and in-service preparation programs, teachers' understandings and beliefs about SEL, and the context in which SEL instruction takes place.

Teacher Preservice and Inservice

Traditional pre-service teacher preparation programs in the United States tend to focus predominantly on academic curriculum (Reeves & Le Mare, 2017). In a review of articles, reports, and government websites, Schonert-Reichl et al. (2015) found that state standards for teacher preparation programs tend to place little to no emphasis on the SEL competencies of teachers and students. The study found that while 71% of state standards addressed one to three of the five facets of SEL, only 20% addressed four of the five, and no states addressed all five facets in regard to teacher competencies. Self-awareness and self-management were the least present among state standards. According to Schonert-Reichl and colleagues (2015), "Very few states required preservice teachers to learn skills such as how to identify their feelings, strengths, and weaknesses, or how to control and appropriately express their feelings, manage stress, and monitor their progress toward achieving goals" (p. 414).

The results of an international study of teachers' familiarity, beliefs, training, and perceived school culture found that while the bachelor's and master's programs attended by their

participants may have offered educational/pedagogical psychology courses, or classroom management courses, none explicitly addressed teaching SEL (Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021). In this study, classroom and behavior management content often focused on intervention rather than prevention. The results of this study (Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021) also found that of the five core competencies, teachers were the least comfortable teaching self-awareness and self-management, which correlates to the findings of Schonert-Reichl et al. (2015) that found self-awareness and self-management were the most commonly absent facets in state standards addressing teacher competencies.

In a case study examining school readiness for SEL program implementation, Thierry et al. (2021) found that both school leaders and teachers agreed that a lack of ongoing SEL training had a negative impact on previous program implementation. High levels of staff turnover and burn-out were reported as further challenges, though participants shared a belief that a schoolwide SEL initiative would equip teachers and leaders to effectively regulate student emotions and build supportive relationships with students and families. Reeves and Le Mare (2017) also found that stress, fatigue and feelings of isolation had a negative impact on implementation. Researchers agree that preservice and in-service teacher training can improve teacher proficiency in providing appropriate support and instruction for students (Reeves & Le Mare, 2017; Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015).

The school readiness study completed by Thierry et al. (2021) was two-fold. The first year focused on measures of school readiness, while the second focused on the impact of specific interventions targeting the general and specific capacities identified as needing improvement in the first year. Interventions included schoolwide professional development sessions at the beginning and middle of year two targeting the needs identified in year one, a two-day visit to a

model SEL school, virtual monthly sessions with school leadership, a review of school discipline policies, identification of SEL standards, and the establishment of a coaching model to support SEL implementation. The researchers noted substantial improvements on annual accountability indicators after completing the three year partnership. In addition, they received state recognition two years later for their family and community engagement in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Teachers' Understandings and Beliefs

Existing research has also explored teachers' understanding and beliefs about SEL. A study conducted by Schiepe-Tiska and colleagues (2021) found that while teachers can explicitly identify the benefits of SEL in relation to students' lifelong learning, satisfaction, and current and future success, they were unable to explicitly define the facets of SEL from a professional lens and used personal experiences instead to define the terms. The authors state, "When defining SEL, teachers mostly explained it as a concept that fosters social skills, such as building friendships and relationships, working in teams, along with emotional learning that promotes exploring your emotions and emotional states" (2021, p. 8). The study only measured teachers' understandings and beliefs on three of the five facets of SEL: self-awareness, self-management, and social awareness. Similar to the findings regarding coverage within state standards for teacher preparation programs, teachers were most uncertain about the facet of self-awareness.

Further, Reeves & Le Mare (2017), highlighted a linguistic shift in their study, choosing to use social emotional education (SEE) over social emotional learning, arguing that this shift changes the focus from the individual learner to the processes and context in which the learning occurs. Of the two approaches to implementation, the researchers chose to focus on the relational aspects, teacher-student and teacher-teacher, arguing that the dominant approach of competence

promotion is often disconnected from the curriculum and lends itself to standardized forms of evaluation. The relational model utilized in this study focused on the strength of and access to supportive relationships within the learning context, both for the students and for the teachers. Through interviews conducted at the beginning of the year, Reeves and Le Mare, found that teachers expressed a deep understanding of and appreciation for creating positive student-teacher relationships to support academic and social growth.

Understanding teacher competencies and beliefs about SEL is important because, as Reeves & Le Mare (2017) found, knowledge doesn't always translate to practice, even though teachers had a strong relational orientation in their knowledge about responding to disruptive behavior. As expressed by participants during their interviews, the teachers sometimes resorted to expressions of anger and punitive responses in their practice. Evidence of this was found in their weekly reflection journals. Punitive responses and management systems are dangerous because they prevent "opportunities for teachers and staff to engage in meaningful connections with students and families that would help them to build positive relationships" (Thierry et al., 2021, p. 11). Positive relationships are imperative to supporting the development of students who are happy, healthy, and productive (Reeves & Le Mare, 2017). Additionally, Schiepe-Tiska et al. (2021) found that teachers included aspects of relationships skills within social awareness and "explicitly pointed out the importance of SEL and personality development for students' lifelong learning, life satisfaction, and success in school and also later in their career and relationship building" (p. 8). In response to *A Nation at Risk*, Zhao (2015) amplifies this importance by arguing the need to equip students with the tools and resources they need to create a peaceful and sustainable future in which over seven billion people with vastly different economic, social, and cultural backgrounds coexist.

The Learning Context

In the relational approach to SEL implementation, the focus is on the context through which self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, relationship skills, and social awareness are developed through school and classroom culture or climate, partnerships with community, and family engagement. Washington and Zandvakili (2019) noted the many formal and informal social settings within the school setting. Formal settings are those in which school professionals are responsible for specifying the rules and structure, like classrooms and offices. Informal settings are those in which students set the rules and structures of social relationships, for example, on a playground or bus. Schonert-Reichl and colleagues (2015) examined the presence of the learning context across state teacher preparation standards. The researchers identified the four domains of learning context as schoolwide coordination, school-community partnerships, school-family partnerships, and classroom context. The study found that knowledge of the learning context was present in 82% of states' standards. Research of schoolwide implementation has found, however, that the learning context is an area in need of improvement (Reeves & Le Mare, 2017; Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021; Thierry et al., 2021).

Focusing on schoolwide coordination and school-community partnerships, Thierry et al. (2021) identified the following areas in need of improvement: school climate, family engagement efforts, disciplinary policy review, resource alignment, and initial work on identifying SEL standards. With regard to disciplinary policy, the researchers found a need to improve emotional supportiveness, positive behavior management, and to develop more trusting relationships between teachers and students. Challenges in engaging in school-family partnerships were also identified. School leaders and teachers discussed challenges in engaging with families due to complex family systems (grandparents serving as primary caregivers,

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homelessness, and mobility issues) and the negative stigma African American families reported as they sought mental health services. The researchers also found an expressed need for a unified vision among school staff regarding SEL.

A study conducted by Gillies (2011), listed a similar challenge, the lack of relevant training regarding the personal challenges of poverty, domestic violence, and homelessness faced by the students. In the second year of the study conducted by Thierry et al. (2021), participants worked in partnership with the community organization to target the specific needs identified in year one to create this unified vision. All staff engaged in two full-day professional learning opportunities. The first outlined the neuroscience of stress, trauma, and learning and offered strategies to help mitigate the effects of stress and trauma to increase learning. The second focused on the difference between punishment and discipline, and how to select effective consequences. All faculty also participated in a two-day visit to a model SEL school. The interventions implemented within year two of the study resulted in improvements across schoolwide coordination, school-family partnerships, and classroom context.

Related to schoolwide coordination, researchers have identified loss of academic instructional time as a concern (Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021; Thierry et al., 2021). In addition to the concerns about instructional time, Schiepe-Tiska et al. (2021) also identified that teachers were unaware that SEL was a part of the curriculum. Participants reported that learning objectives were rarely related to SEL and therefore instruction focused primarily on cognitive outcomes and listed extracurricular activities as the source of SEL skill development within their schools. This finding supports the need for a unified vision regarding SEL among all school staff (Thierry et al., 2021). Reeves and Le Mare (2017) also concluded that a schoolwide approach would best support effective implementation and suggested the following strategies for

facilitating collaboration: collective discussion about aims of education (i.e., creating knowledgeable, caring, responsible citizens), formalized conversations about feelings and beliefs, and opportunities to observe others' classrooms, co-plan, and co-teach. Researchers found that schoolwide coordination is key in creating a unified vision, aligning resources, and building organizational structures that support teacher development of SEL skills and strategies for teaching (Reeves & Le Mare, 2017).

Transformative Social Emotional Learning

Schools across the country are adopting SEL standards in an attempt to create safer spaces for student learning, and research has helped build an understanding of the impact of teachers' perceptions and judgements about the way that they filter information, frame experiences, and guide their intentions (Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021). When standards and practices are based in dominant norms and values, however, they can become weaponized, causing harm rather than healing, as these norms are used as a way to police, punish, and control Black and Brown students (Kaler-Jones, 2020). Hoffman (2009) argues that through the centering of individualistic norms, SEL practices become another way to measure and remediate individual deficits rather than build upon the relational contexts of classrooms and schools. Researchers have identified the dangers of punitive behavior management systems, and the ways that teachers can sometimes resort to these measures (Reeves & Le Mare, 2017; Thierry et al., 2021). This section of the literature review will explore the historical context of transformative education, the inequities present in current SEL research, policies, and practices, and transformative SEL as a culturally sustaining, anti-oppressive, and trauma informed practice.

Transformative Education

With roots in Paulo Freire's (2014) radical humanist pedagogy, transformative education is a political act. Freire believed that schooling serves the interests of some and impedes others, but just as it has been used as a tool of oppression, so too can it be used as a tool for liberation. Through liberatory education, individuals gain understanding of systems of oppression and become active in thinking about how to take action (Freire, 2014). Liberatory education is grounded in dialogue and critical consciousness, democratic relationships between teachers and students, and the cocreation of knowledge (Bartlett, 2008).

Expanding upon Freire's use of democratic relationships, Mira & Morrell (2011) identify collectivism, production, and engagement as "elements of the democratic tradition that provide us with the ideological tools to name and challenge systemic inequality" (p. 411). Highlighting the actions of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Rosa Parks, Banks (2017) defines transformative citizenship as those who "take action to implement and promote policies, actions, and changes that are consistent with values such as human rights, social justice, and equality. The actions that transformative citizens take might—and sometimes do—violate existing local, state, and national laws" (p.367). Also included in Banks' citizenship typologies are failed, recognized, and participatory citizenships. Failed citizenship describes individuals and groups that feel structurally excluded and ambivalent. Recognized citizenship describes those with the right to participate, but highlights that the right to participate is not equivalent to participation. Participatory citizens have the rights to participate and take action and do so.

Transformative education is a part of the civic development process. This process aligns with Zhao's (2015) call to equip students with the tools and resources they need to create a peaceful and sustainable future. Wortham et al. (2020) also call for a comprehensive approach to

education that integrates our emotions, politics, morals, and relationships. Civic education is found within the umbrella of well-being education and co-exists with SEL.

The Intersection of SEL and Equity

It is important to apply a critical lens to the ways in which Black and Brown communities are labeled and discussed throughout literature and to be aware of the deficit connotations (Brown, 2008; Burkhard et al., 2020; Gillies, 2011; New, 1998; Paris, 2012; Reeves & Le Mare, 2017). Hoffman (2009) identified how program literature often places emphasis on the ideals of caring, community, and diversity, but undermines these ideals in the centering of individualist models of self. According to Simmons (2017), "Students of color suffer more adversely than their White peers on nearly every measure of well-being—educational, social, financial, emotional, and physical—which impacts them in the long run" (para. 4). The meta-analysis conducted by Durlak and colleagues (2011) identified this as a heightened problem in culturally diverse schools serving students with varied abilities and levels of motivation. One critique of SEL programming both in the United States and the United Kingdom, is the centering of dominant white, Western, and individualistic norms (Gillies, 2011; Hoffman, 2009; Simmons, 2017). The publication of *A Nation at Risk* increased an emphasis on the need for academic achievement through increased measures of standardization and accountability. Since the NCEE report, research has indicated a positive correlation between SEL and measures of academic achievement has in turn had significant influence on school leaders and policy makers regarding program implementation. Hoffman (2009) argues however that interest has also been fueled by the "youth in crisis metaphor" that blames risk behavior on "improper or inadequate emotional socialization or education" (p. 536). New (1998) states,

The perspective taken by U.S. researchers frequently reflects a deficit model of children

that begins with assumptions of risk for those who fail to demonstrate particular

indicators for social competencies. . . Research summaries repeatedly proclaim that

children who lack minimal competence in their early social relations with peers are at risk

for a variety of subsequent failures, both academic and social. (p. 90)

Hoffman's research (2009; New, 1998) further supports the linguistic shift made by Reeves and

Le Mare (2017), in centering the relationships, contexts, and practices in SEE rather than the

promotion of competencies and individualistic focus of SEL. Hoffman (2009) further argues that

a focus on skill development, measurement, and results is antithetical to the caring and holistic

values of community and democracy. Gillies (2011) supports this argument noting how the

dominant norms present in the curriculum dramatically contrast the cultures and experiences of

the pupils the curriculum is meant to serve and further arguing that "deficit models fail to capture

the considerably more complex and socially connected reality behind acting out in the

classroom" (p. 201). Additionally, Simmons (2017) supports the relational model of program

implementation, identifying the ways in which students, families, and communities are

humanized through building relationships that challenge the biases that teachers may hold, build

deeper understandings of the oppressive systems that marginalize groups of people, and create

partnerships that are transformative in practice.

Transformative Social Emotional Learning

As a liberating pedagogy, transformative SEL must address issues of power, privilege,

prejudice, discrimination, social justice, empowerment, and self-determination in order to

mitigate the educational, social, and economic inequities that are inherent within the United

States (Jagers et al., 2019). According to Love and Muhammad (2020),

The field of education is not lacking in scholarship and literature that scientifically demonstrates the humanity of children of color, but their suffering continues because their humanity is questioned and denied by the very people and policies charged with educating and protecting them. (p. 695)

Through this lens, transformative SEL is a political act. In an examination of the convergence between classroom management and diversity, Milner & Tenore (2010) built on previous research on the principles of culturally responsive classroom management to identify the importance of teachers' understanding of equity and equality, and power structures among students; immersion into students' worlds; an understanding of interconnectedness, or the relation of self to others; ability to connect with students by granting entry into their own worlds; and views of school as a community that includes student families. Ladson-Billings (2014) identified the fluidity of both culture and scholarship, in recognizing the ways in which culturally relevant pedagogy was used and misused, and how it eventually evolved into a new form: culturally sustaining pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (2014) presents us with a very different description of risk than in *A Nation at Risk.* She, like Zhao (2015), discusses the risk of standardized systems of rules and regulations, the very ones that evolved in response to *A Nation at Risk*, to warn of academic death, of teachers that "become mere functionaries of a system that has no intent on preparing students - particularly urban students of color - for meaningful work and dynamic participation in a democracy" (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 77). Ladson-Billings (2014) warns of an endless cycle of disengagement, academic failure, dropout, suspension, and expulsion, and of the increasing numbers of unemployed, underemployed, and unemployable. She argues that "if we hope to disrupt this cycle, our pedagogies must evolve to address the complexities of social inequalities" (p. 77). SEL practices, like culturally relevant practices, need

to evolve as research identifies the ways in which practices have been used and misused. Jagers (2016) summarized the ways in which the existing SEL, risk prevention, and risk reduction programs fail to pay attention to the broader societal challenges that elevate risk factors. He further argues that even the competence and resilience programs that foster assets and address needs promote assimilation and symbolic youth involvement. Transformational resistance takes place when youth are positioned as experts in creating a more just, equitable, and sustainable future. Jagers and colleagues (2019) argue that transformative SEL practices require "explicit critical examination of the root causes of racial and economic inequities to foster the desired critical self- and social awareness and responsible individual and collective actions in young people and adults" (p. 178). Programs should focus on the development of identity, and should also integrate issues of race, class, and culture (Jagers et al., 2019; Simmons, 2019). In this way, SEL can be leveraged to help youth with vastly different economic, social, and cultural backgrounds realize their potential and create a peaceful and sustainable future.

Conclusion

This literature review explored the historical contexts of SEL, standards for SEL in teacher preparation programs and k-12 school settings, and the potential for transformative practices to emerge through program implementation. Considering the inherent ways in which research describes how curriculums and teacher practices center dominant White, Western, and individualistic norms (Gillies, 2011; Hoffman, 2009; Simmons, 2017), there is a great risk of SEL practices causing acculturative stress, which occurs when there is a disconnect between the students' culture and the dominant cultural expectations and norms present in policies and practices.

Simmons (2019) calls on courageous educators to teach students the skills they need to navigate the unjust realities of the world we live in. According to Simmons, "Our young people are growing up in an increasingly complex world—one where our own citizens commit terrorist acts against their fellow countrymen and women" (2019, para.1). The potential for SEL practices to be transformative through the critical, anti-oppressive, trauma-informed beliefs and understandings of educators is the major implication of my present study.

Chapter Three: Methods

This study examined the practices and perceptions of educators implementing a schoolwide social emotional learning (SEL) curriculum. The purpose of this study was to identify aspects that promote and prevent effective SEL programming in schools through the investigation of educators' understandings and beliefs. Specifically, the five core competencies of SEL and the educators' perceptions of the purpose of schoolwide SEL program implementation were the focus of this exploration. The complexity of the issues found at the intersection of SEL and equity led me to choose a qualitative design. Qualitative research supports an understanding of social and human problems, data collection in the participant's setting, and is built on general themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Through a survey and open-ended interview with educators, I sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do educators implement SEL curriculum in a diverse school setting?

2. How do educators' understandings and beliefs about SEL impact schoolwide program implementation?

3. What transformative qualities of educators' knowledge and practices emerge in the examination of their beliefs about SEL?

This chapter describes the research methodology used to understand these questions. All aspects of this study design were approved by the Institutional Review Board (see Appendix A).

Theoretical Framework

A transformative worldview was the foundation of this study. This framework provided a lens from which to focus on issues of power and social justice (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Transformative research seeks to confront social oppression and provide action steps to improve the lives of marginalized groups (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). My study was also supported by

the theoretical concepts of culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012), culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), and humanizing pedagogy (Freire 2014), as I explored the use of transformative SEL as a form of resistance. This research aimed to take action against the oppressive elements embedded within SEL standards and practices, and to "critique the cultural norms, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 162) by identifying the perceptions and practices that promote and prohibit effective program implementation. My collective perspective also aligns with Zhao's (2015) call for educators to equip students with the tools and resources they need to create a peaceful and sustainable future in which vastly different groups of individuals coexist. This call relies on the work of courageous educators to recognize the impact of their understandings and beliefs on their practices and in turn on student learning.

Study Context

To fully engage in this study addressing educator perceptions and practices of social emotional learning, it is essential to reflect on the study context. The early 2020s have demonstrated what Simmons (2019) and Durlak et al. (2011) identified as an increasingly complex and hate-filled world. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, schools and businesses were forced to close their doors to mitigate the spread of infection. Learning was disrupted as schools transitioned to online learning, individuals were forced to separate from friends and family members, those who were able transitioned to remote work, and many lost their jobs. The pandemic highlighted long standing disparities in access to education, technology, health care, nutrition, employment, and quality childcare, as well as gaps in wealth, income, and employment opportunities for People of Color (Dudovitz et al., 2021).

The reckless killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd highlighted further disparities in "systemic, institutionalized, anti-Black, state-sanctioned violence" (Love, 2016) and reignited the Say Her Name and Black Lives Matter Movements. On January 6, 2021, the U.S. Capitol was attacked by an angry mob attempting to prevent President Biden from assuming office. The FBI and other law-enforcement agencies classified this insurrection as a domestic terrorist attack (Britannica, 2022). And while 2020 saw a decrease in school shootings, the shooting at an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas in May 2022, marked the 27th school shooting that year (Diaz, 2022). It took place just ten days after a mass shooting at a supermarket in Buffalo, New York and was followed eight days later by a mass shooting at a hospital in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

In addition to these hateful, violent acts, the political landscape of the early 2020s has also impacted the learning environment and well-being of students and teachers. As schools began to return to in-person learning in 2021, debates ensued over mask and vaccine mandates, and contentious discussions ensued about what should and should not be taught in schools. Topics like critical race theory, social emotional learning, and LGBTQ+ gained increased media attention as local and state legislation was introduced across the nation to prevent the inclusion of such topics in the classroom. Stand for Children, a non-profit organization that advocates for equity in public education, reported that 37% of teachers surveyed said that censorship laws would make them more likely to leave the classroom at the end of the school year. Stand for Children calls this attempt at censorship, "a calculated effort to silence, vilify, and demoralize public school teachers," and "to block certain students from gaining access to knowledge, and thus, upward mobility" (Merod, 2022). According to Simmons (2019), there is a great risk that many educators are being accused of politicization, which is leading to job insecurities.

(Simmons, 2019). The pedagogy and practice of transformative SEL can help to address the complexity of the sociopolitical context in which students and teachers exist.

Setting

This study involved teachers in the Pursue Charter School Network, located in a large urban Midwestern city. The Pursue Charter School Network serves over 4,000 students across eleven campuses in grades PreK-8. Pursue Charter School Network is a college readiness public elementary school that significantly outperforms their neighborhood comparison schools, touts an alumni college graduation rate twice as high as their neighborhood comparison schools, and exceeds city, state, and national averages. This network was selected because social emotional learning is a core component in its mission and values, and SEL is held equivalent to academic rigor. The Pursue Charter School Network serves a diverse student population with 76% of the population identifying as Black, 17% Latinx, 4% White, and 3% Other; 86% of the population identified as low income, 9% special education, and 11% English language learners.

There are eleven elementary schools within the Pursue Charter School Network. The participants of this study represent two of these schools. One of the participants, Lauri, teaches SEL at the Washington campus, where 83.7% are identified as low income, and 8% have IEPs. Of the teachers at the Washington campus, 37.3% hold a Bachelor's degree and 60.7% hold a Master's degree or higher. Participants Christy and Cary teach 6th and 4th grade, respectively, at the Lincoln campus, where 58.3% are identified as low income, 52.8% are identified as English language learners, and 10% have IEPs. Of the teachers at the Lincoln campus, 40.8% hold a Bachelor's degree and 37.3% hold a Master's degree or higher. Table 1 outlines the student and teacher demographics of the Network and the Washington and Lincoln campuses.

Table 1
Teacher Student Demographics of Pursue Charter School Network in 2021-2022

School	% Black	% Latinx	% White	% Asian	% Am Indian	% Two or More
Washington Campus						
Student	98.6%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Teacher	20.5%	21.3%	50.3%	3.9%	0.3%	1.7%
Lincoln Campus						
Student	12.2%	84.8%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Teacher	3.4%	66.1%	27.1%	0%	0%	3.4%

Pursue Charter School Network utilizes a schoolwide curriculum to support educators in meeting the social and emotional needs of their students. The schoolwide curriculum consists of four units with five 15-30 minute teacher-led lessons per unit. The topics of the units are growth mindset and goal setting, emotion management, empathy and kindness, and problem solving. The implementation plan varies by campus. The curriculum can be facilitated by a school social worker, the classroom teacher, or as a weekly enrichment class. A typical lesson begins with a 6-8 minute getting started activity with a scripted introduction of the topic, followed by a short video that allows the students to observe the skill in practice and a discussion about what the students observed in the video. After the "Getting Started" activity, there is a 10-12 minute scripted practice activity that typically utilizes a handout. The lesson closes with a two minute "Knowledge Check". The final lesson of each unit is a performance task that allows students to demonstrate their skills and knowledge. The website for the schoolwide curriculum provides program training, digital resources, and supports for culturally relevant practices. There are additional anti-racist and anti-bias materials available to teachers and school personnel who are interested.

Participants

In this qualitative study, a small sample of educators were purposefully selected to illuminate the research questions. There is an emphasis on in-depth understanding in selecting information-rich cases with purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015). My sample was convenient as I recruited educators from the network in which I teach. As an employee of the network, I am familiar with the curriculum, practices, and policies that guide instruction. Participants were not recruited from the campus within which I work to avoid risk of identification, researcher bias, and discomfort.

Educators were eligible to participate if they were licensed to work in an educational setting in the role of teacher, student support staff, or school leadership. Regardless of their role in the school building, participants were only eligible if they were responsible for facilitating the schoolwide social emotional learning curriculum. Eligible participants were recruited with support of campus principals. I reached out to nine principals via email through the school directory posted on the network's website to identify eligible participants. An initial email was sent to the pool of principals that explained the purpose of the study, eligibility criteria, and the time commitment for participants. Principals were asked to forward a recruitment email to eligible participants (see Appendix B). A follow-up email was sent the following week, with an additional email sent to each individual principal to confirm receipt and answer questions.

Two principals responded to the one-on-one emails. Both agreed to share the recruitment email with eligible educators in their respective buildings. One teacher, Lauri, responded to the recruitment email with a phone call and agreed to participate in the study. A consent form was sent with the survey and a request to schedule the interview, but no reply or response was received. A follow up email was sent to inquire about interest in participating in the study. Lauri

again expressed interest in participating and an interview was scheduled over Zoom. A third

principal confirmed that they would share the recruitment email with staff at grade level team

meetings. With the efforts of the third principal, Christy and Cary reached out via email to

express interest in participating in the study after the recruitment email had been shared with

them. An interview was scheduled over Zoom with both participants. All participants were

emailed a consent form (see appendix C) with a link to the survey (see appendix D). In the

following sections, I provide a profile of each of the participants of this study.

Lauri

Lauri is a Black female educator in her 30s with three years of experience teaching. She

holds a bachelor's degree in child psychology and is currently working towards her master's

degree in teacher leadership. Lauri teaches the schoolwide SEL curriculum at the Washington

campus to students in elementary and middle school. This is Lauri's third year working for

Pursue Charter School Network, and her first in her current role at the Washington campus. She

described herself as a very empathetic person and noted that while she is working towards a

master's in teacher leadership, classroom teaching is her passion. In addition to teaching SEL,

Lauri also serves as the family planning coordinator at her campus and organizes monthly "Pow

Wows" [sic] and family game nights. Throughout the data collection process, Lauri appeared to

be very confident in her personal and professional competencies as well as her classroom

practices.

Christy

Christy is a White female educator in her 40s with over 10 years of experience. She holds

a master's degree and a school administrator's certificate. She started her career in a fourth grade

classroom in a suburban public school, where she attended training for Positive Behavioral

Interventions and Supports (PBIS). She later served on her schools' PBIS committee that worked to create a matrix for classroom and schoolwide implementation, and she also helped to facilitate training. While working within her previous district, she received training for the schoolwide SEL curriculum that she is currently facilitating at the Lincoln campus. Christy has worked at the Lincoln campus for two years and is currently teaching two sections of sixth Grade ELA and social studies. During the school year Christy was trained in restorative practices and plans to work together with her school leadership team to assist in the training and implementation of restorative practices at her campus in the upcoming year. Christy expressed confidence in her personal and professional competencies and classroom practices throughout the data collection process, and also expressed areas through which she hoped to continue to grow.

Cary

Cary is a White female educator in her 40s with over 10 years of experience. She holds a Master's degree and currently teaches fourth grade at the Lincoln campus. She started her career as a center director for a learning center. Cary has experience teaching first, second, and third grade. This is her seventh year working at the Lincoln campus. While teaching at the Lincoln campus, Cary attended a training course for Love and Logic. Cary demonstrated low confidence in her responses about her personal and professional competencies and classroom practices, drawing only from her professional development opportunities. She also expressed interest in learning more about social emotional learning to support her personal and professional growth.

Data Collection

The data collection process for the present study included an online survey and an individual interview. Surveys were administered online and interviews took place subsequently

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over Zoom. Each step of the data collection process and rationale for their use is described
below.

Survey

The online survey allowed me to understand the participants' understandings and beliefs
about social emotional learning before the individual interview, informing the direction of our
conversation together. Google Forms was used to build the survey which included fifty-eight
questions. The survey took the educators about 15 minutes to complete (see appendix D).
Participants received the link to participate in the survey via email.

The survey was divided into eight sections. The first section included five demographic
questions. In the second section, participants responded to six open-ended questions asking for
the definitions of social emotional learning, self-awareness, self-management, social awareness,
relationship skills, and responsible decision making. Utilizing a four-level Likert scale (i.e., 1-
very difficult, 2-somewhat difficult, 3-somewhat easy, and 4-very easy), the next five sections
asked personal self-reflection questions about each of the five facets of SEL. The final section of
the survey asked professional self-reflection questions about teaching the five facets in the
classroom. A Likert scale was used for the final section with response options of 1- not at all
confident, 2-slightly confident, 3-somewhat confident, and 4-quite confident or extremely
confident.

In this study, the purpose of this survey was to provide information about educators'
perceptions about their personal and professional competencies in self-awareness, self-
management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. Survey
responses provided background knowledge about participants' understandings and guided the

individual interviews, allowing me to further examine and question educators' understandings and beliefs about SEL.

Individual Interviews

Individual interviews were scheduled over Zoom and lasted between 45-60 minutes. When I emailed the link to the survey. The timing of the study presented a challenge, as each of the participants were in their final weeks of the school year. After my initial email, I followed up with each of the participants in an attempt to schedule the interview. Only one of the participants, Lauri, was able to schedule a time before the school year closed. Cary reached out on the last day of school that she was available later in the evening, and Christy reached out again after the school year had ended to schedule the interview. Utilizing Zoom to conduct the interviews allowed for more availability in schedules, as the interview could be conducted from the convenience of the participants' workplace or home. Interviews were purposefully selected as a data collection tool because understandings and beliefs are not data points that can be observed. A semi-structured open-ended interview guide allowed me to establish a conversational style, while ensuring that the same basic lines of inquiry were explored with each participant (Patton, 2015). The interview questions expanded upon the survey results to further examine the origins of educators' understandings and beliefs about social emotional learning and their experiences with facilitation. The interview also included questions about the learning context, and reflection questions about identified strengths and opportunities for growth (see Appendix E).

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data collected in this study was informed by a theoretical frame comprised of culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012), culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), and humanizing pedagogy (Freire, 2014). True to the nature of this qualitative

study, data was analyzed inductively (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data was analyzed after data collection was complete. Prior to coding, all data was de-identified. To begin my analysis, I exported all survey answers into Google Sheets and sorted the answers into columns. This approach provided me a method to compare participants' responses side-by-side to see how their open-ended responses aligned and differed. Repeated phrases were color coded or underlined to highlight the commonalities across responses. After transcribing the audio-recordings of the interviews, I engaged in a holistic read of all three transcripts, taking analytic memos in the margins and labeling the topics discussed. I then copied the transcriptions into Google Sheets, chunking the responses by topic, making further notes about the emerging themes. Table 2 outlines the data analysis codes that emerged.

Table 2
Data Analysis Codes

Code	Definition
Background	Includes descriptions of participants' lived experiences, coursework, and professional development.
Curriculum	Involves participants' discussion of the schoolwide curriculum adopted by the network and other curriculums or methodologies that participants used to supplement instruction. Includes discussion of relevance to current events and students' lived experiences.
Practice	Includes descriptions of classroom practices and structures, relational approaches, and culturally sustaining practices

For my second cycle of coding, an inductive coding approach was used to code the data line by line, highlighting data from each participants' responses that fit within the overarching themes. As a final step I sorted all of the participants' responses by theme into columns, which, similar to the survey data, allowed me to compare participant responses side by side (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Data Analysis: Curriculum

CURRICULUM					
SCHOOL-WIDE CURRICULUM			**OTHER CURRICULUM**		
And so now that we have really pulled out a social emotional learning curriculum, **it helps me to dive in and unpack those things with those students.** so do we really have time in 25 minutes. Is 25 minutes enough time for me to talk to 29 students to see how are you really feeling for today and we have an end of molecule assessment. Yay! How? How? How? **25 minutes is not enough especially if the student is late.** So we do use the curriculum.	**I dont think the kids were as engaged as they could be. I think they were like why do we have to do this.** Although those students did a really good job of connecting what they were learning into their everyday lives. We had some pretty traumatic experiences in our classroom where we really had to connect digital SEL into that which SS does not cover really and how to be a bystander/upstander.	30 minutes once a week is not going to do any good. I dont know if the network has really done anything i know last year they did some PDs somewhat related but it wasnt specific to SEL and I cant really remember getting anything out of those PDs I dont even think L9 has done a whole lot either. They haven't been very clear with it and they have the programs just that K2 uses paths . when i taught second grade I had no idea how to use paths. Well so I never cracked	And there definitely is a difference. Social emotional learning is so that they can be aware. Restorative justice is more an intervention or an after effect or awareness conversation so that this doesn't happen again. Yes, we have forgiven and now I know that this boundary is there for you, this boundary is there for me and how do we get along from here. Social emotional learning is are you aware that you just did that or that you have a trigger that causes you to argue	We really had to dig in depth into that and then close to the middle of the year MD wanted me and CH to engage in restorative circles. I guess learn hired a company and we did 2 week on 2 week off training and then eventually we instituted or started restorative practices. I think we did like 4 of those once a week the last month of school. Those were really beneficial for the students. We focused on, even though youve been together for so long you still have stuff to learn about each	P: oh yea and then I know oh Mr Miller, oh no you werent there when Mr Miller had started, we had gotten a behavior interventionist and i know when he first started he sent out a questionnaire asking how comfortable are we with **responsive classroom** and the one where you guide the kids in the problem solving yea restorative justice so i know we havent had any training in that and i dont know if that something that in the fall theyre planning on doing so if theyre

In support of the inductive approach to coding, and researcher reflexivity, I engaged in a reflective process through my analysis that centered the research questions. I looked for inductive codes to emerge in light of their relevance to the intersection of social emotional learning, culturally sustaining practices, and critical consciousness.

Rigor and Trustworthiness

The rigor and trustworthiness of this study were upheld in multiple ways and are evident in the triangulation of data, the detailed descriptions of the data collected, the prolonged time of the researcher in the field, and in the reflexivity and identification of researcher bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data collection included both survey and interview data, which were carefully selected to ensure a deeper understanding of participant perspectives than one form of data collection alone would supply. The rich description of participants' understandings, beliefs, and practices help to identify shared experiences and differing perspectives. Additionally, my connection to the research sites and participants, allowed me to draw on shared experiences and enhanced the comfortability of the participants, as I was able to relate to their feelings about the curriculum, professional development, and interactions with students. This contributed to the openness and vulnerability of participants. Throughout the process, I also constantly reflected on

my position as a researcher and fellow teacher, working to check my bias and ensure that the themes and findings were derived solely from the data collected and not from researcher bias.

Limitations

Limitations to this study include a small sample size and time constraints. Working within the scope and timeline of the parameters of a thesis study, recruitment and data collection needed to happen quickly and also needed to coordinate with the participants' school schedule. This time constraint hindered the availability of participants. The timing of the study also limited the number of participants interested and available in engaging with the study. As an educator myself, I recognize that the time of year during which recruitment and data collection took place is very demanding and free time is limited. Educator burnout, workload, and fatigue may have also impacted the number of educators interested in and available to participate in the study.

The small sample size, and time constraint contributed to another limitation, a lack of representation across participants. As a result, it was not possible to have a full representation of teacher voices and experiences, specifically, teachers who are often underrepresented in educational settings. While the participants each brought different educational backgrounds, and worldviews and taught across elementary and middle school grades, all participants were female and two of the three participants were White. The data collected in this study, therefore, cannot be generalized to the wider population of educators in the U.S.

Position Statement

As an educator, social emotional learning and culturally sustaining practices are of high interest and importance to me. Throughout my teaching experience, I have worked in Title 1 schools, with a predominantly Black and Latinx student population. Raised and educated in a predominantly White middle class suburban town, I acknowledge that my lived experiences,

racial, and gender identities differ from those of the students that I teach, as well as both the participants and the community featured in this study. As an outsider, teaching and researching in a community in which I am not a member, I must also acknowledge my willingness to make mistakes, be uncomfortable, and to decenter dominant norms and values.

Throughout my graduate studies, I have come to understand how whiteness is centered in education policies and how schools work to perpetuate and maintain systems of oppression. My prior understanding had been limited to my life experiences and did not include my racial and cultural heritage; most of my thoughts concerning race were about the race of others and never about myself. Based on my understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy, I was aware of the importance of learning about and understanding the cultures of my students, but I hadn't really given much thought to how my identity impacted my abilities to do so. In reflecting upon my teacher preparation program and professional development experiences, I recognize how ill-prepared I had been to facilitate culturally relevant pedagogy. The theories behind social emotional learning and emotional intelligence have always been at the core of my practices, but were and still are rooted in whiteness. My graduate level coursework has shaped my understanding of how my racial and cultural heritage impacts my beliefs and actions and how that impacts those around me, including my students. While much research exists about the impact of teachers' understandings and beliefs, and teacher-student relationships on student learning, there is a gap with regard to how these findings apply specifically to social emotional learning policies and practices.

In my acknowledgment of my willingness to make mistakes, I also recognize that I am not an expert in this topic. Through this research, I hope to continue to grow my own understandings and practices of humanizing and culturally sustaining pedagogies by applying a

critical and transformative lens to better serve the students and communities with whom I work

with, as well as other communities that have been and continue to be marginalized.

Chapter Four: Findings

The positive effects of social emotional learning (SEL) programs in schools have been well documented (Bavarian et al., 2013; Durlak et al., 2011; Elias et al., 1991; Sklad et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2017; Thierry et al., 2021), but so too have the limitations (Durlak et al., 2011; Jager et al., 2019; Kaler-Jones, 2020; Taylor et al., 2017; Thierry et al., 2021). Since the effectiveness of schoolwide programming is dependent on teachers' familiarity, beliefs, training and perceived school culture (Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021), the goal of this present study was to explore the understandings, beliefs, practices and perceptions of educators implementing a schoolwide SEL curriculum. A deeper understanding of teacher practices can help school and district leaders coordinate programs and processes to improve SEL (Elias et al., 2017). This study identified aspects that both promote and prevent effective SEL programming in schools by investigating educators' understandings and beliefs regarding the five core competencies of SEL, perceptions of the purpose of schoolwide SEL program implementation, and classroom practices. This study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do educators implement SEL curriculum in a diverse school setting?

2. How do educators' understandings and beliefs about SEL impact schoolwide program implementation?

3. What transformative qualities of educators' knowledge and practices emerge in the examination of their beliefs about SEL?

Data was collected through surveys and semi-structured interviews. The survey results revealed how teachers defined social emotional learning and the five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. CASEL (2020) defines them as follows:

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1. Self-awareness: "The abilities to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts" (para. 3).

2. Self-management: "The abilities to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and to achieve goals and aspirations" (para. 6).

3. Social awareness: "The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures and contexts" (para. 4).

4. Relationship skills: "The abilities to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups" (para. 7).

5. Responsible decision making: "The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations" (para. 5).

In their responses, participants used the words *emotions*, *feelings*, *awareness*, and *management* and made reference to self and others frequently across their definitions. Table 3 compares the definitions of SEL shared by each participant. Repeated phrases were color coded, bolded, or underlined to highlight the commonalities across participant responses. Words that describe emotions or feelings were bolded and colored red. Variations of the words *aware* and *manage* were bolded, additionally variations of *manage* were bolded. Participants also frequently used the conjugations of '*be*', implying that in addition to *awareness* and *management*, SEL involves a state of being.

Table 3

Participant Definitions of SEL

Participant	Definition of SEL
Lauri	**Be**coming **aware** of the social skill set that may impact you **emotion**ally and mentally.
Christy	These are lessons you teach people (children - adults) in order to help them **be**come more **aware** of how to **manage** themselves. These can be a range of skills from basic to more complex.
Cary	Social Emotional Learning - learning to identify and recognize your own feelings and the **feelings** of others, as well as how **manage** those **feelings** in a positive way

The survey also revealed the participants' perceptions of their personal and professional social emotional learning competencies. For the survey, I used a Likert scale and asked each participant to first rank their level of comfort with various skills within each core competency, and then to rank the confidence they had in their ability to teach and support the development of student competencies in the classroom.

Table 4

Participant Perceptions of SEL Competencies

Participant	Self-awareness	Self-management	Social awareness	Relationship skills	Responsible decision making
Personal					
Lauri	4	4	4	4	4
Christy	3	2	3	3	3
Cary	2.5	2	2	2	2
Professional					
Lauri	4	4	4	4	4
Christy	3	3	3	3	3
Cary	2	2	2	2	3

Table 4 summarizes the average rating of each participant across both professional and personal competencies, with 1 representing very difficult/not confident at all, 2 representing difficult/slightly confident, 3 representing easy/somewhat confident, and 4 representing very easy to do/very confident.

Data collected in individual interviews provided deeper insight into the participants' understandings, beliefs, and practices. Additionally, the interviews provided a more complete picture of the participants' levels of comfort and confidence with each of the five core competencies through descriptions of their backgrounds, experience with the schoolwide curriculum, and the implementation of their classroom practices. Through the analysis of the data collected, three key findings emerged. These findings include a) lived experiences and perceptions of competencies impact educators' approach to program implementation, b) limitations within the structure of the curriculum and how educators worked around those obstacles, and c) how classroom practices grounded in SEL have the potential to create transformative experiences and spaces.

"I became the person I needed": Lived Experiences and Perceptions of Competencies

The first finding demonstrated the impact of lived experiences and perceptions of competencies on program implementation. First, the participants' narratives will be explored. I will share the stories of the three participants, including their backgrounds and how they perceived their strengths and areas of need in their personal and professional SEL competencies. Then, I will reveal the findings that emerged through an analysis of the lived experiences and perceptions of competencies shared through the survey and interviews.

Narratives are included to provide an understanding of where the participants' understandings and beliefs about social emotional learning developed overtime through their upbringing, collegiate studies, personal interactions with therapy, and their experiences as both students and as educators.

Lauri. When asked about where her understandings and beliefs about SEL originated, Lauri was very open about her lived experiences, sharing stories from her childhood as well as personal experiences with therapy. Lauri often described herself as an empathetic person, stating that it was "in her nature" and that she was "infatuated with the mind." She attributes this to "a compilation of things," including her child psychology coursework and her lived experiences. She describes herself as an adolescent

> I didn't have any emotional outlets because you were designed to just be strong, whatever happened. Whatever happened in the neighborhood. You've seen them, don't talk about them. Things of that nature, it kind of gave you tough skin, where you just internalize everything. By the time you make it to high school, one of two things are going to happen. You're going to be on guard all the time or you're going to be the aggressor. Every little thing got on my nerves in high school. Why am I getting so agitated? And it was because everything that happened in my elementary years was still inside and compressed… I took a look inside of myself and when I was this age in elementary school, what did I need? So, I became the person that I needed.

Lauri also shared that she had personal experiences with psychotherapy and hydrotherapy and that "being exposed to those different strategies and how to cope with things" helped her develop social emotional awareness. She also described how she was able to take all of these

lived experiences and combine them with her child psychology coursework to become the person

that she needed as a child.

> I was able to understand the cognitive function that I had at that age and the different
>
> hormone components in unison with what's going on culturally in my house and
>
> neighborhood and everything that happened and it's like yeah, that was a bad mixture of
>
> things, but here we are.

Lauri's lived experiences, both personal and professional appear to contribute to her perception

of her competencies. Lauri expressed the highest levels of comfort and confidence in both her

personal and professional SEL competencies, rating herself at a level 4 in all areas.

Christy. Christy expressed moderate comfort and confidence in her ratings of her

personal and professional SEL competencies, averaging a 3 in nearly all five facets of SEL. The

area of self-management was the only area in which she averaged a 2 for her personal

competencies, though she did not believe that this impacted her ability to teach self-management

to her students. She did identify self-management as an opportunity for growth in the interview,

making an observation about her reactivity to student behavior. Christy's understandings and

beliefs about SEL originated primarily through in-service training for Positive Behavior

Interventions and Supports (PBIS), though she also briefly mentioned her experience with

therapy and how she is working on her reactivity to better herself "in all areas of [her] life inside

and outside the classroom." At a previous school, Christy was a member of the PBIS committee

and helped to create a matrix for positive schoolwide behavior expectations. She also attended

workshops and helped to train other teachers as a member of the committee. She notes, "We

were not trained as classroom teachers to do any SEL, before PBIS." When her school started the

same schoolwide curriculum used by Pursue Charter School Network, Christy stated that the

school social worker originally facilitated all the lessons, but after about eight years, the social workers were no longer able to lead SEL instruction because "it was taking away from their caseload." She stated that as new laws and policies were created, the social workers would fill them in, but "there was no official training." This likely impacted Christy's reported levels of comfort and confidence both personally and professionally.

Cary. Cary reported the lowest levels of comfort and confidence in her personal and professional abilities, sharing that her understanding and beliefs originated primarily from teaching the curriculum. She shared, "I didn't grow up with social emotional learning at all. Most of my education was in the 80s. We didn't have that back then." In addition to this impacting how she perceived her own competencies, it also appeared to impact her levels of comfort and confidence in having conversations about the topics. She often struggled to find the words to express herself and noted that she was not a very introspective person. For example, the last question of the interview asked participants if there was anything that surprised them in their responses on the survey or the interview, and Cary responded, "How little I know about it. Like I said, this isn't something personally that I've really invested in." She also noted that she doesn't engage in mindful practices, like so many others do. In addition to not having lived experiences to support her understandings and beliefs, Cary also expressed that there wasn't much training, beyond the "nuts and bolts of how the program was organized," but that she felt there needed to be more trauma-based professional development and also professional development that addresses "tier 1 instruction that's going to benefit everybody." Cary's response is evidence of her interest in learning more about SEL as a way to better reach all of her students, but she wants it to be offered as professional development and not a personal pursuit.

Evidence of Competencies

The levels of comfort and confidence with the five facets of SEL were evident throughout the participants' responses. Each participant demonstrated self-awareness as they discussed their strengths and opportunities for growth. Lauri, who rated herself at the highest level of comfort and confidence described herself three times in the interview as an empathetic person and was able to express how her thoughts and values influenced her behavior. She stated,

> I'm a very empathetic person in general. That's just my nature. Even when I was still teaching academics, I always wanted to know the person of the child, like: How are you? What are you doing? What's going on? Not just what are you doing activity-wise, what's going on in your house? On your walk here? And so now that we have really pulled out a social emotional learning curriculum, it helps me to dive in and unpack those things with those students.

Lauri demonstrated self-management in her discussion of her personal experiences with therapy, but also in her interaction with students. During the interview, she shared an anecdote about a student that expressed difficulty waking up in the morning before school. She described her conversation with the student, asking them about their bedtime habits, and discussing some strategies to help, like using the bedtime feature on an iPhone to let you know when you should turn off your screen. Lauri stated, "I do it with them. I set the timer too. Let them see how you do it and then we're going to check our progress. I never ask them to do something I'm not willing to do." Her social awareness and relationship skills were evident in the way that she described the challenges faced by the community, noting the ways that she connected the curriculum to the lives of the students, partnering with them and their families to affect change in her community.

Christy's responses regarding her competencies also aligned with her ratings in the survey. She expressed that her understandings and beliefs developed mostly from professional development and resources related to other approaches to social emotional learning, Positive Behavior Intervention Systems (PBIS), and restorative practices. She also mentioned her experience with therapy when asked about her opportunities for growth, or areas that may be more difficult for her. She stated,

> What I've struggled with is my reactivity. When a scholar or student is doing something that is not in my scope or my expectations, my reactivity to the situation, where I should apply my skills of breathing and disengaging in that behavior… It's something I've been trying to work on both in the classroom and at home… not reacting right away, or not being as sarcastic as I should, or as I am. I think that's one area that I continue to reflect on through therapy myself, or through self-guided "what do I need to do to become better in all areas of my life inside and outside the classroom?"

Christy expressed some uncertainty throughout her interview responses as well, but would often talk through her uncertainty. When asked to elaborate on how she felt PBIS and SEL were different or the same, she began by stating that they were "woven", and then almost immediately retracted it and said, "They're not woven. I think they're two different things." She later stated, "I don't know. I'm not getting my thoughts out on this one. They're interwoven, but they're different." She continued to contemplate throughout our conversation, ultimately observing that PBIS teaches the functions or the behaviors of school (i.e., how do I walk in the hallway, how do I use the bathroom, etc.) while SEL teaches students why those functions or behaviors are necessary, focusing more on how to solve problems.

The third participant, Cary, reported much lower levels of comfort and confidence. When asked about where her understandings and beliefs originated, she stated,

> I didn't grow up with social emotional learning at all. Most of my education was in the 80s, we didn't have that back then, so I have to admit that I'm not the most, what would you call it my intrapersonal, wait no not intrapersonal, I don't even know the word for it. When you talk about the different intelligences, that was not one of my intelligences. I'm not very good at being really introspective.

Throughout the interview, she often seemed hesitant or unsure in her answers. There was a different level of confidence in her voice and her responses, when compared to the other two participants. When asked about her strengths, she stated, "Honestly I was never even aware until I took your survey about those five areas of social emotional learning." When asked about areas in which she experienced some difficulty, she was able to share examples, but noted that she wasn't sure "exactly where they fit in." She also observed that my passion and knowledge about the topic was a result of time that I personally invested for professional reasons. Having worked within the same network, Cary and I had prior conversations about SEL when we had attended professional development sessions together. This knowledge combined with the information provided about the study through the recruitment email, consent form, and through our conversation during the interview, informed her observation that my passion for social emotional learning had led me to pursue additional training opportunities and engage in research about the topic.

The participants' lived experiences and perceptions of their competencies illuminated how their understandings and beliefs about SEL originated, as well as how their understandings and beliefs informed their practices.

"They need more than 25 minutes!": Limitations and Workarounds

In the second finding, each of the participants described similar challenges related to their facilitation of the schoolwide curriculum. The participants also described workarounds that they used to bypass the limitations of the 25-minute structured lessons, the "scripted" nature of the curriculum, and a lack of professional development and support from the network and school leadership. I align my observations with the following definition of a workaround: a method for overcoming a problem or limitation in a program or system (Oxford Languages, n.d.). In this section, I will expand upon each limitation and identify the workarounds described by each of the participants.

The 25-Minute Lesson

All three participants noted that a 25-30 minute lesson once a week was not enough time for students to engage with the content. Each lesson typically begins with an introduction to the skill, followed by a short video, an opportunity to discuss, and a worksheet for the students to practice the skill. The lesson closes with a knowledge check. Early on in her interview, Lauri asked, "Is 25 minutes enough time for me to talk to 29 students to see how [they] are really feeling for today?" Within the same response, she answered her question stating that "25 minutes in not enough." She repeated this three more times, finally observing that "25 minutes is just the intro. [Students] really need more than 25 minutes to understand fully what they are capable of doing by themselves." Cary asked and answered a similar question, "What's the point? Just 30 minutes once a week is not going to do any good." Lauri, Christy, and Cary all described ways in which they worked to go back and reference the skills within other content areas throughout the year. Cary brought up how she incorporated growth mindset, the topic of Unit 2, into other content areas.

We were learning about the human body. So, it was kind of connected to the science side as well… When you're learning something new, it might be hard at first, but you're making those pathways in your brain and each time you practice they're going to get stronger. It's okay if it's hard at first… I had one student during a math lesson we were doing, and he didn't get the try it question correct. He was all upset with himself because he was used to getting them correct… I had to remind him about the pathways, and I was reinforcing that your pathways might even be stronger because you're so upset you made this mistake. It's probably really going to stick with you now.

Cary worked around the limitation of the 25-minute lesson, by incorporating the SEL skill into her science and math lessons.

Lauri also described several interactions with students and their families that occurred beyond the 25-minute lesson that provided additional opportunities for students to practice the skills taught in the classroom. She shared an anecdote about a student that was having trouble working together with others at school, so she decided to start in a safer environment and encouraged him to start working with mom at home because he expressed an interest in cooking.

I told him to ask mom if he could help her cook. Just to get him to start doing partner work. "Ask mom, when you go home, if she doesn't like it that you cook. Ask mom if you can set the table or, you know, get out the things that you can do." So, he started doing that, and mom immediately [messaged] me, "Ms. Lauri, did you tell Bob to?" and I said, "Yes, because I'm really trying to work with him on team building so that he can work with his peers," and she was like, "well he set the table tonight and he cut up onions."

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Lauri shared how excited the student's mom was and how she followed up with the student the next day to help reinforce how the team building skills that had been practicing in class made both him and his mom feel. This demonstrates how Lauri worked around the limitation of the 25-minute lesson to build a partnership with her students and their families.

Christy talked about the importance of social awareness, being exposed to differing perspectives, and empathizing with others from diverse backgrounds, cultures and contexts. She described the need to address it beyond SEL lessons, "where we're spending a half hour just talking about this one thing." She argued that it's important for students to be exposed to different "gender, ethnicities, race, color, religions" and how those topics are not in the SEL curriculum. Christy also believes SEL can be woven into the curriculum when discussing these topics, even if just in brief conversations because it's not about changing the way someone thinks, rather it's exposing the students to differing perspectives. She elaborated, making a reference to lessons about Martin Luther King Jr. "That's not SEL. It's curriculum. It's important to teach, but it goes back to why there were slaves and why we don't have that now? That is an SEL conversation." Christy demonstrates how she works around the timed lessons by bringing the skills taught during the timed lessons into other content areas, weaving them in where appropriate, like Cary did by bringing the growth mindset lessons into her math classroom. The participants were able to make the content more relevant and meaningful to their students by working around the 25-minute timed lesson structure to build relationships with their students and generalize the skills across other content areas.

Scripted Lessons

Another limitation of the schoolwide curriculum discussed by the participants was the scripted nature of the lessons. Cary described the following structure of her lessons,

[The students and I] would start with the warmup, we would go over the scenario, and

then we would have a discussion. Sometimes it was turn to your partner and talk.

Sometimes it was whole class discussions… then it was usually followed up with how

they could apply it in their own lives if there was a similar type of situation.

Lauri and Christy described similar structures to their lessons, but also shared ways that

they supplemented the curriculum. Lauri noted that her building used the curriculum. She

detailed the implementation, "However we have different components that are coming down the

pipe that add to the curriculum because some of the lessons are short." She described adding that

YouTube videos from CASEL's channel, and pre- and post-assessments are also a part of the

curriculum. For instance, she described how she was able to use the pre- and post-assessments.

[The assessments] let you know where they have insufficiencies. From there you're really

able to pinpoint versus just going through the [lessons] and then if decision making is the

last one, then it's finally like, Ah ha! You're not going in there blind, but you have

specifics. Then when I'm doing independent or group work, I can group the group of kids

that need division making and I can work on decision making.

Lauri's point about the scripted nature of the lessons came up again later in the interview.

When talking about opportunities for improvement, Lauri expressed that the curriculum did not

seem challenging enough for the middle schoolers, and that it was sometimes "redundant,

because [the curriculum] piggybacks on what they learned last year and it's not really challenging

them. So, then I have to come up and find something." Lauri expressed frustration in having to

"plan on the fly" and said that she wished that there were a network-wide solution to supplement

the curriculum, rather than the workaround that she is implementing in her own building. She

compared it to the network's approach to academic curriculum, implying that the network's approach to supplementing the SEL curriculum was lacking.

Christy observed that her students weren't "as engaged as they could be. I think they were like, 'why do we have to do this?'" She noted that her class had experienced "some pretty traumatic experiences" in the middle of the year that the curriculum didn't cover well enough. She and I had connected prior to the start of the study, to discuss a situation that had evolved in her classroom with some of the students that I had previously taught. One of my prior students was being bullied by another student in his class. His mom had found messages he had sent to other students in the class that expressed thoughts about suicide and self-harm. Because I was familiar with the situation, I did not ask her to elaborate on the traumatic experience that she had referenced. Christy added that school leadership brought in a third party to train her and a grade level peer in restorative circles to supplement the schoolwide curriculum and better address the needs of the students. Christy stated, "adding the layer of restorative circles" to the schoolwide curriculum was really important because,

> 6th grade is a really challenging year where it's hormones and development and friendship and sometimes, especially in the other classroom, because they were out of control, that's where the circles came in. I think having the different layers of social emotional, of different ways, is important.

Christy also noted that she had also tied in conversations with her students about how the amygdala functions and how strong emotions impact your thinking. She added that while the students understood it, it wasn't enough to address the challenges the students were facing.

School Culture

The final limitation described by the participants was a lack of professional development and support from the network and school leadership. When Lauri described the ways that she was supplementing the curriculum, she noted that her principal had informed her of "additional supports" that were "coming down the pipe." Though she did not elaborate on what these supports might look like or when they might be "coming down", she did talk about the pre- and post- assessments used at her school. When asked about assessments, Christy and Cary did not list any pre- or post-assessments like the ones that Lauri had described. Cary made note in her interview, that while school leadership was conducting walkthroughs to "check and make sure" the teachers were doing SEL, she didn't feel like there was any other support with that, and also noted that she hadn't even known the curriculum had moved to a digital platform, nor had she been given access to the digital resources. The principal at Lauri's campus was also on the Student Support Services lead team and was a part of the decision making process regarding the additional supports that Lauri referenced. This likely impacted the support that Lauri and the other educators at her campus had access to.

The restorative circles training that Christy engaged in was not extended to all teachers in her building, or to other teachers across the network. With regard to professional development specific to the curriculum offered by the network, Cary stated, "I'm assuming we probably had some training years ago when we just started it, but I don't really recall anything that I got much out of it besides the nuts and bolts of how the program was organized." She later recalled that the social worker had come in to model some lessons at her request, but also expressed frustration because the program had transitioned to a digital platform and she said she hadn't known that it had been updated or if she had access to it. Cary also noted that her understandings and beliefs

came solely from teaching the curriculum, while the other two participants had either coursework, trainings for relevant programs from a previous school, or other relevant life experiences like their upbringing, experiences with therapy, or mindful practices.

When Lauri was describing her personal experiences with her classwork that she took for her degree in child psychology and her exposure to various types of therapy (i.e., psychotherapy and hydrotherapy), she noted that she was "exposed to those different strategies and how to cope with things." She contrasted her lived experiences with "the little hour-long professional development" opportunities offered by schools, noting how much SEL is to unpack in one session. She observed,

> When you're learning about social emotional learning, you really don't know that there's five components. We don't know that there's five actual things that go in there, but those five actual things are just an umbrella of ten things under those. And so, in doing those, it was self-development because it's not something that's offered network-wide yet.

The participants expressed a need for more professional development opportunities in the ways in which they depended upon outside sources to supplement their understandings and practices in the classroom.

"SEL…it's Everything": Creating Transformative Spaces

The third finding demonstrates the potential for creating transformative spaces through practices that are grounded in SEL, specifically those related to relationship skills and social awareness. Handling trauma was a prevalent theme throughout Lauri's interview, starting with her question, "Who really targets the trauma or teaches [students] how to get through what they have gone through physically, emotionally, and mentally while they are still expected to perform at a high academic level?" She asked this after noting that we are going through a pandemic,

which no one has ever faced before. She described how she used a relational approach and often describes how she works to partner with the students and their families to address the challenges they are facing. Later in the interview, she expanded upon this by comparing the world now to the world she grew up in. "The world when I was growing up and the world now are totally different. Children are more exposed to traumatic situations… Trauma is at the top of everybody's list." She goes on to provide the following two examples: "I saw one of my family members get shot on the porch or someone passed away from Covid" and notes that "there are just so many different things." Later in the interview she provided a third example in the form of a hypothetical anecdote about students that arrive late to school,

> What do you do? Peter's having a problem right now. Peter just got cussed out on his way to school by his mom. He comes in and doesn't want to take his coat off and slams his stuff down on his desk. The rest of the kids that came in on time are solid, but here he comes. What do you do? …Do I adhere to academics? Or do I take the time out to see what's going on with Peter because I know that if I don't, Peter isn't going to do any work for me anyway… If you don't have a rapport with your students, they're not going to let you know anything that's going on with them.

Lauri discussed building relationships and rapport with her students at other points within the interview as well, stating, "It all boils down to getting to know the child or the student that you're catering to on a personal level." She discusses the importance of partnering with the parents as well to understand what's going on in the student's home. "Is it full of chaos and trauma that's causing your decision making, your relationships, your social awareness, self-management, and self-awareness to reflect what's going on at home? We have to look at that." She identifies that students are spending far more time at their homes than they are at school with

her. "If I partner with what you already know and just put a positive spin on it then that can help you really grasp it." Lauri was able to identify how a relational approach to teaching SEL helped students and their families develop strategies to address the trauma they've experienced.

Cary also described a relational approach, though she didn't explicitly describe how the approach addressed trauma. She reflected,

> We talked about kindness and how different people prefer different ways of showing kindness. Some people prefer to be asked if you want help. Some people just want you to help them. Some people, if they're having a hard time, don't want you to help them, they're just venting and they want you to be empathetic… Different people have different ways that they want help. It's a good idea to check with them first and ask them how they want help.

Cary expressed interest in developing relational skills by learning more about "how to be able to see from their perspective a little more and better understand their needs." She also expressed interest in learning how to support her students' relationship skills. She shared an anecdote about one of her student's that "never really fit in," noting that, "The child's behavior is inappropriate and puts other kids off, but I think the kid is actually doing those behaviors to get attention and doesn't know positive ways to make those friendships." Recall that Cary reported lower levels of comfort and confidence in her personal and professional competencies than Lauri and Christy. In the facet of relationship skills, Cary rated two of the survey items as "very difficult": Question 8 - When I am upset with someone, I talk to them about how I feel and listen to their perspective; and Question 10 - I can work through my discomfort when dealing with conflict, listen to feelings from all parties, and help them understand different perspectives. Cary's comfort and

confidence in her own relationship skills presented a challenge in how she supported students experiencing conflict.

Christy also described a relational approach to her SEL practices. When discussing the traumatic experiences impacting the students in her class, she noted that the schoolwide curriculum wasn't relevant to the experience and did not really cover the challenges the students were facing with bullying, so they had to "dig really deep into" it to define what it means to be a bystander and an upstander. Christy identified that the limitation in the curriculum was the contributing factor that led to school leaders pursuing restorative practices training for the sixth grade team at the Lincoln campus. She expressed that the relational approach of restorative circles was more relevant to the students and was a more effective approach to teaching SEL than the scripted schoolwide curriculum. She explained, "Even though [they've] been together for so long, [they] still have stuff to learn about each other in different ways."

Christy also described how the restorative circles challenged the students to "think about themselves and others in deeper ways." She provided evidence of this practice in an anecdote about a class conversation about safe spaces. One of her students had commented that there was no such thing as a safe space because of God and that anything can happen to you anywhere. She noted that his was a completely different take on the idea of safe. She had shared that most of the other students identified their rooms as safe spaces. She observed,

> I knew he was godly. I knew he was practicing, but it just connected with me in a different way where I was like, "Oh you're right. I guess that does make sense to you, whereas it didn't make sense to me before." That's the part for me where that circle really comes into understanding each other in a different way.

Christy's reflection demonstrates a strength in her relational approach, as she identified how she navigated a space with individuals who shared different ideas, thoughts, and values that differed from her own. It is also an example of her own competence in social awareness and how that supports her approach to teaching it in the classroom.

In addition to her relational approach, Christy provided further evidence of her ability to create transformative spaces through practices grounded in SEL through a discussion about developing social awareness. As we neared the end of the interview, I asked if there was anything else that she'd like to share that might be relevant. She observed that SEL was a "hot topic" and demonstrated an understanding of this when she stated, "SEL is not just thinking about how the brain functions and how we solve problems, but it's everything. It's Erin's Law[1]. It's suicide prevention. It's transgender learning. Its race, ethnicity, and gender." She recognized that "some people don't want that in the classroom" because it should be taught at home.

Christy also noted that her belief about social awareness was a part of her political stance, another aspect that is not welcome in the classroom. She supported her belief arguing that these topics are often not taught at home, which can lead to misconceptions, and that she also feels "It's important for [the students] to know my stance and that their stance is still correct. I can't change how they feel, but I can open their eyes to a different viewpoint" in the same way that her students open her eyes to a different viewpoint about safe spaces. She further recognized, "It's important that companies and teachers are not scared to put [different viewpoints] into lessons because it is so important that we're exposed to everything."

Finding Three revealed that transformative spaces can be created through practices grounded in relationship skills and social awareness.

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[1] Erin's Law requires that all public schools implement a prevention-oriented child sexual abuse program. As of July 2019, it had been passed in 37 states. (Erin's Law, 2022)

Chapter Five: Discussion

The goal of this present study was to explore the practices and perceptions of educators implementing a schoolwide social emotional learning curriculum, identify aspects that promote and prevent effective SEL programming in schools, and develop a process through which educators can examine their practices and perceptions regarding the culturally sustaining aspects of SEL curricula through a transformative and critical lens. This qualitative study enabled me to capture the understandings and beliefs of educators implementing a schoolwide SEL curriculum in a K-8 school setting. The study focused on the following research questions:

1. How do educators implement SEL curriculum in a diverse school setting?

2. How do educators' understandings and beliefs about SEL impact schoolwide program implementation?

3. What transformative qualities of educators' knowledge and practices emerge in the examination of their beliefs about SEL?

In this chapter I discuss the findings of this study: a) lived experiences and perceptions of competencies impact educators' approach to program implementation; b) limitations within the structure of the curriculum and how educators worked around those obstacles; and c) how classroom practices grounded in SEL have the potential to create transformative experiences and spaces. Findings are discussed in relation to the research questions and existing literature, elaborating on the significance of the data. The findings of this study indicate compelling implications for teacher preparation programs, school leadership, and policy makers. I conclude with recommendations for future studies and a reflection on the meaning of this investigation.

"It's a partnership": Relationships Over Competencies

In the relational approach to SEL implementation, the focus is on the context through which self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, relationship skills, and social awareness are developed through school and classroom culture, partnerships with community, and family engagement. Lauri, Christy, and Cary discussed significant limitations of the schoolwide SEL curriculum, but leaned on relationship skills and social awareness to work around the limitations and facilitate relevant and meaningful experiences for their students. Their relational approach is evident in the way that each approached assessing student learning. Lauri was the only participant to discuss the use of formalized assessments to measure student competencies, though she emphasized the way in which the pre-assessments helped her identify student needs and individualize her approach to instruction, suggesting that she used student competencies to support her relational approach. Cary noted that she didn't feel "that the little assessments that they have in the program [were] that beneficial." Throughout their discussion of how they knew their students were learning, each of the participants shared anecdotal evidence rather than referencing standardized assessments of student competencies. In doing so, they demonstrated that a deep understanding of their students' strengths and areas of need guided their practices. I did not see evidence that the standardized curriculum or assessments were at the root of skill development. Instead, I observed that the relationships that each participant built with their students allowed them to create transformative experiences and spaces for their students to develop their skills. The perceived success of their students, as a result of their relational approach, supports the research that positive relationships are imperative to supporting the development of students who are happy, healthy, and productive (Reeves & Le Mare, 2017; Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021; Thierry et al., 2021).

The language used by the participants to describe their communities of learners suggested that participants were viewing their students and the communities in which they taught through a culturally responsive lens, rather than a deficit perspective, which has been repeatedly identified as a challenge impacting effective SEL program implementation in Black and Brown communities (Gillies, 2011; Hoffman, 2009; Kaler-Jones, 2020; Simmons, 2017). For example, Lauri often described her relationships with her students and their families as partnerships and demonstrated an understanding of the community. Simmons (2017) identified the ways in which students, families, and communities are humanized through building relationships that challenge the biases that teachers may hold, build deeper understandings of the oppressive systems that marginalize groups of people, and create partnerships that are transformative in practice.

I argue that transformative SEL practices are rooted in relationships, not in competencies. Grounded in Freire's (2014) radical humanist pedagogy and Paris's (2012) culturally sustaining pedagogy, transformative SEL is used as a tool for liberation, to both maintain and sustain "linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism" (Paris, 2012, p. 95). It is grounded in dialogue and critical consciousness, the democratic relationships between teachers and students, and the co-creation of knowledge (Bartlett, 2008). Christy's anecdote about SEL creating a space for students and teachers to develop social awareness was echoed in Cary's discussion of how students define and express kindness in different ways; both of which are evidence of a co-creation of knowledge. Further evidence of the transformative nature of the participants' practices came through in Christy's point about what some people want and don't want in the classroom. Her thoughts align with Merod's (2022) and Simmons' (2019) points about how teachers are being vilified and demoralized; accused of politicization and at risk of losing their jobs for discussing topics, such as the ones Christy listed: suicide prevention, LGBTQ+ rights,

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race, ethnicity, and gender. While Christy is not currently out of compliance with any local, state, or national laws, there are states within our nation with legislation that prohibit these very topics (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality) being discussed in the classroom. Merod (2022) notes that "educational gag orders" have impacted over 894 school districts, representing 35% of all K-12 students. Christy demonstrates courage in having these conversations with her students, but her purpose is to help students understand their own viewpoints as well as the viewpoints of others, not to change their minds. Lauri demonstrates courage in the way she approaches trauma and healing through partnerships with her students and their families. Each of the participants reported that it was "easy" or "very easy" for them to recognize the need to continually grow, to challenge the status quo, and to encourage new thinking in their school communities on the survey. Cary reported, however, discomfort and a lack of confidence in her abilities to have conversations about race/racism and connecting with people of different races, cultures, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Cary also expressed a need for more training and trained professionals to address the trauma of students. She recognizes and understands the need, but is limited by her access to training and resources. The trauma-informed practices and acts of courageous educators like the participants of this study Lauri and Christy are evidence of the potential for SEL practices to be transformative, providing students with the tools and resources they need to create a peaceful and sustainable future (Zhao, 2015).

"The nuts and bolts": Teacher Pre-Service and In-Service

This study expands upon the finding of Schiepe-Tiska et al., (2021) demonstrating the effectiveness of SEL programming is dependent on teachers' familiarity, beliefs, training and perceived school culture on SEL. The participants defined the facets of SEL and rated their levels of comfort and confidence in their personal and professional SEL competencies in the

survey and in domain one of the interview, and they explored the origins of their understandings and beliefs. Schiepe-Tiska and colleagues (2021) found that while teachers can explicitly identify the benefits of SEL in relation to students' lifelong learning, satisfaction, and current and future success, they were unable to explicitly define the facets of SEL from a professional lens and used personal experiences instead to define the terms. This was true for the participants in this study as well. Lauri was the only participant to have any pre-service training explicitly in social emotional learning, with an undergraduate degree in child psychology. Christy and Cary had not received any explicit pre-service training through their teacher preparation programs, or otherwise, to support their understanding of social emotional learning. The participants briefly touched on training provided by the network, but most often referenced other sources of information, such as personal experiences with therapy, in-service training for behavior management programs, and upbringing. Schiepe-Tiska and colleagues (2021) found that while the bachelor's and master's programs attended by their participants may have offered educational/pedagogical psychology courses, or classroom management courses, none explicitly addressed teaching SEL. My study found that the more background and familiarity the participants had with SEL practices, even if through a personal lens rather than a professional one, the more effective and confident the participants were in describing their classroom practices.

It is important to note the context in which this study of teachers' experience with SEL occurred. The international health crisis and growing civil unrest of the early 2020s have brought about an increased awareness of the impact of societal and systemic forces on student learning and well-being. Students are growing up in an increasingly complex and hate-filled world (Durlak et al., 2011; Simmons, 2019), in a society that had already racked up a large "education

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debt" (Ladson-Billings, 2006) owed to the marginalized youth the education system has failed to serve. Dudovitz and colleagues (2021) identified the following potential threats or challenges to children's' mental health in an investigation of the impacts of COVID-19: challenges in interactions with parents and peers; a decrease in sense of belonging, purpose, and a sense of connectedness; potential for an increase in domestic violence and maltreatment; decreased access to support services; delayed diagnosis; and potential for increased parental stress, anxiety, isolation, and poor mental health. My study addresses the urgent need for a shift in how social emotional learning is addressed within schools and the importance of continued study. This includes addressing the need for quality pre-service and in-service training, curriculum that is relevant to student needs, and a unified vision within school buildings and districts regarding social emotional learning.

Implications

Researchers agree that a lack of pre- and in-service training opportunities, low levels of SEL competencies paired with feelings of stress, fatigue, and isolation, and a disconnect between school culture and practices prevent effective implementation of schoolwide SEL programs (Reeves & Le Mare, 2017; Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). Many teachers, like Lauri, Christy, and Cary, understand the importance of SEL, but lack the resources to implement SEL programming effectively. "Very few states require[d] preservice teachers to learn skills such as how to identify their feelings, strengths, and weaknesses, or how to control and appropriately express their feelings, manage stress, and monitor their progress toward achieving goals" (Schonert-Reichl, 2015, p. 414). Furthermore, standards and practices are often based in dominant norms and values and can become weaponized, causing harm rather than healing (Kaler-Jones, 2020). Through the lens of Freire's (2014) radical humanist pedagogy and

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Paris's (2012) culturally sustaining pedagogy, educators must work *with* students rather than *for* students, and therefore commit to training that not only addresses social emotional competencies at the professional level, but at the personal level as well. Implicit bias is inherent in humans and is ever-present in educators' work, impacting their behavioral and academic expectations (Simmons, 2019). While unintentional, these biases directly impact the relationships that teachers and students have. The participants did not make any comments indicating any impacts on how they viewed their diverse groups of students, however, research (Gillies, 2011; Hoffman, 2009; Kaler-Jones, 2020; Simmons, 2017), tells us that understanding and beliefs Students of Color impact practices. I conclude that pre-service and in-service teacher training opportunities have the capacity to 1) address educators' social and emotional learning capacities and 2) challenge the dominant norms and values that enter the classroom in the form of implicit biases.

As evidenced by this study, effective pre-service and in-service training programs should address SEL competencies and the potential for practices rooted in SEL to address feelings of stress, fatigue, and isolation. Moreover, programs should provide educators with the opportunity to develop cultural competence and critical consciousness as a way to challenge dominant norms and values. Accomplishing this requires pre-service and in-service training opportunities that build social emotional competencies at the personal level. Lauri and Christy reported higher levels of comfort and confidence in their personal competencies, which translated into their practice. Cary demonstrated self-awareness in identifying her levels of personal competencies as a weakness in her practices and expressed an interest in learning more. Educators have the potential to create transformative spaces without these prerequisites, but are more comfortable and confident in their abilities to do so when they have an understanding of social emotional learning and culturally sustaining practices.

School leadership should also commit to this mission by engaging in similar pre-service and in-service training opportunities. Research supports the need for a unified vision regarding SEL among all school staff (Thierry et al., 2021). Researchers found that schoolwide coordination is key in creating a unified vision, aligning resources, and building organizational structures that support teacher development of SEL skills and strategies for teaching (Reeves & Le Mare, 2017). Educators, like Lauri, Christy, and Cary, need the support of school leadership to effectively develop SEL skills both for themselves and for their students. Each participant was critical of the lack of training and support provided in developing their understandings, beliefs, and practices. Cary was critical of the fact that deeper understandings were often a result of a personal investment in skill development, whether for personal or professional reasons. School leaders also need to engage in quality pre-service and in-service training to develop the personal competencies necessary to build a school culture that supports the social emotional learning of all stakeholders. It is a mutual endeavor. Knowing that their school leaders believe in and value SEL will give teachers the comfort and confidence they need to engage in developing their SEL skills and strategies for teaching.

This study presents implications for policy makers and curriculum writers as well, as schools across the country are adopting SEL standards in an attempt to create safer spaces for student learning. Research has helped build an understanding of the impact of teachers' perceptions and judgements about the way that they filter information, frame experiences, and guide their intentions (Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021). The responsibility of implementing transformative SEL practices, cannot fall in the lap of teachers and administrators alone. Society needs courageous policy makers and curriculum writers to write and fight for the safety and rights of teachers and students to create and exist in transformative spaces.

Transformative spaces are created through a relational approach and are grounded in partnerships that work *with* communities rather than *for* communities. The present study also presents a compelling implication for students, families, and communities. The COVID-19 pandemic and growing civil unrest of the early 2020s have presented an opportunity to restructure social, educational, health, and governance systems. Systems that are grounded in SEL practices have the potential to create revolutionary change. In education systems, we cannot afford to standardize SEL instruction, centering competency and compliance, rather we should ground all instruction in SEL. Transformative SEL is a mutual endeavor and requires the engagement of all stakeholders.

Recommendations for Further Study

An intriguing area for further exploration would be the examination of efficacy within a schoolwide intervention addressing the areas of need identified by the participants in my study. These areas include the following: formalized training in SEL program implementation and trauma informed practices; a unified approach to SEL and meeting the needs of the diverse student population; and equitable access to resources. Future studies might also address the limitations of the present study. Two of the participants were White middle-aged women with similar levels of education and years experience and all participants acknowledged the importance of teaching SEL. This study suggests the need for research that examines a larger, more diverse population of educators with varied beliefs about the importance of SEL practices. In addition, my study took place within a state that has adopted SEL standards for students and focused on a large urban city serving a diverse population of students. Future research should include suburban and rural school districts.

In Zhao's (2015) analogy of the "act of war" being imposed upon American schools, he is critical of standardization and efforts to narrow and homogenize education. When SEL is standardized, it is weaponized. Standardized approaches to practice and policy lack relevance to the communities they are intended to serve. Research guides practice and needs to be representative of the communities impacted by the practice, if not, practices will continue to cause harm in the centering of dominant norms.

Final Reflection

In the process of examining their understandings and beliefs about social emotional learning, the participants of this study revealed the ways in which their lived experiences shaped their perceptions and practices. Despite not having any formal training in social emotional learning, Lauri, Christy, and Cary shared the belief that SEL was an important component of their daily instruction, one that is necessary to support the learning of all students. This daily commitment is not a belief that is shared by all educators.

Our understandings and beliefs are rooted in our lived experiences. Teacher preparation programs, school leadership, policy makers, and curriculum writers all have a professional and ethical obligation to teachers and students to address their social emotional learning needs. Teachers and students also share this human obligation. I believe that education is a political act, but that belief must be grounded in a deep understanding of transformative pedagogy, in order for it to be truly effective. Social emotional learning practices that are grounded in Freire's (2014) transformative pedagogy address issues of power, privilege, prejudice, discrimination, social justice, empowerment, and self-determination as a way to dismantle the educational, social, and economic inequities that are inherent within our education systems. Through a Freirean lens, self and social awareness occur within the investigation of generative themes as a

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practice of freedom. Through dialogic action, relationships are built and maintained via collaboration. Decisions are made responsibly through constant reflection and re-examination. In situating social and emotional learning within a pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire, 2014), compliance is no longer the goal and funds of knowledge are honored. The power of the collective is valued and the voices of the students are amplified, as the contradiction of the relationship between teacher and student is dismantled. Where, instead teachers and students move fluidly between each role.

As co-conspirators working alongside one another both teachers and students can work to restore love, liberating both the oppressed and the oppressors (Freire, 2014). In this I re-envision Zhao's (2015) call to equip students with the tools and resources they need to create a peaceful and sustainable future and instead challenge educators to engage in the liberatory act of co-creating a peaceful and sustainable future. SEL programs that are implemented *for* students, focus on developing competencies. They are standardized, transactional, and grounded in dominant norms. SEL programs that are implemented *with* students are relational. There is still a focus on building competencies, but they are built through the relationships and dialogue between teachers and students. SEL programs implemented *with* students are not transactional, they are transformative.

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Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

UNIVERSITY of WISCONSIN
UWMILWAUKEE

Institutional Review Board

Date: May 18, 2022

To: Leanne Evans
Dept: Curriculum and Instruction
CC: Jennifer Slaughter - Co-Investigator

IRB #: 22.284
Title: Transformative Social Emotional Learning: Bridging the Gap Between Teacher Perception and Student Learning

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Institutional Review Board has granted your protocol Exempt Status under Category 2 as governed by 45 CFR 46.104(d).

This exemption determination is valid for three years and will expire on **May 17, 2025**. Before the expiration date, you will receive an email explaining how to either keep the study open or close it. If the study is completed before the expiration date, you may notify the IRB by sending an email to irbinfo@uwm.edu.

Any proposed changes to the protocol must be reviewed by the IRB before implementation, unless the change is specifically necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects.

It is your responsibility to:
- promptly report unanticipated problems to the IRB
- maintain proper documentation of study records
- ensure that all study staff receive appropriate training as outlined in the protocol
- adhere to the policies and guidelines set forth by the IRB, UWM, and the UW System, and to all applicable state and federal laws

Contact the IRB office if you have any further questions. Thank you for your cooperation and best wishes for a successful project.

Appendix B: Recruitment Email

Dear _____

Thank you for your work this year educating students. Your work is invaluable to the students that enter your school each and every day. I am conducting a research study on transformative social emotional learning. We want to understand the experiences of educators' that are responsible for facilitating schoolwide social emotional learning curriculum in their classrooms. Our research will specifically focus on the experiences, understandings, and beliefs educators have as they facilitate social emotional learning curriculum.

This study involves participants engaging in a 10-minute survey via Google Form, as well as a 1 hour interview. Participants would be asked questions about their experiences, understandings and beliefs regarding the facilitation of social emotional learning in the classroom, as well as questions about their perceptions regarding student learning. I have estimated the time commitment to not exceed an hour and a half total. Please know that your participation is in no way a condition of your employment.

I am happy to provide you with more information about this project. Please let me know if you are interested by responding to me at slaught9@uwm.edu or feel free to call me at (815) 508-5115. At your convenience, I am available to have further conversation either by phone or in person. I look forward to talking with you about this work that I believe will broaden the conversation about social emotional learning.

Thanks so much for your consideration of this project.

Jennifer Slaughter
Master Student
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
slaught9@uwm.edu

Appendix C: Consent Form

STUDY TITLE
Transformative Social Emotional Learning: Bridging the Gap Between Teacher Perception and
Student Learning

RESEARCHERS
Jennifer Slaughter (Master's Student)
Dr. Leanne Evans, (PIs; Early Childhood Education Faculty)

We're inviting you to participate in a research study. Participation is completely voluntary. If
you agree to participate now, you can always change your mind later. There are no negative
consequences, whatever you decide.

STUDY PURPOSE
We want to understand the experiences of educators' that are responsible for facilitating
schoolwide social emotional learning curriculum in their classrooms. We're interested in
identifying the understandings and beliefs that guide instruction.

WHAT WILL I DO?
This study involves participants engaging in a 15-minute survey via Google Form, as well as a
45-60 minute interview. Interviews will be audio recorded. You will be asked questions about
your experiences, understandings and beliefs regarding your facilitation of social emotional
learning in the classroom, as well as questions about your perceptions regarding student learning.
You will also be asked to consent to being audio recorded.

POSSIBLE RISKS
Some questions may be personal or cause discomfort.
You can skip any questions you don't want to answer or quit the study at any time.
Breach of confidentiality (your data being seen by someone who shouldn't have access to it).
Anytime you share information online there are risks.
There may be risks we don't know about yet. Throughout the study, we'll tell you if we learn
anything that might affect your decision to participate.

All identifying information is removed and replaced with a study ID.
We'll store all electronic data on a password-protected, encrypted computer and paper data in a
locked filing cabinet in a locked office.

POSSIBLE BENEFITS
While we cannot guarantee benefits, we are seeking to improve social emotional learning
implementation based on responses that we receive from participants in this study. You will be
contributing to the development of social emotional learning program implementation.

1. The identification of aspects that promote and prevent effective SEL programming in schools

2. The development of a process through which educators can examine their practices and perceptions regarding the culturally sustaining aspects of social emotional learning curricula through both a transformative and critical lens.

WHAT IS MY TIME COMMITMENT?
You will be asked to complete a 10-minute survey. You will be asked to participate in one interview. Each interview will occur via Zoom and will last no more than 1 hour.
There is no cost to participating in this study and participants will not be compensated.

FUTURE RESEARCH
De-identified data (all identifying information removed) may be shared with other researchers. You won't be told specific details about these future research studies.

CONFIDENTIALITY AND SECURITY
We'll collect the following identifying information for the research: your name and email address. This information is necessary so that we can contact you to complete the survey and set up a Zoom meeting for the interview. All data will be stored on researchers' password-protected computers for up to 5 years. In any findings reported in publications or presentations, all participant information will be coded.

CONTACT INFORMATION
For questions about the research:
Jennifer Slaughter
slaught9@uwm.edu
Dr. Leanne Evans
levans@uwm.edu

For questions about your rights as a research participant:
IRB (Institutional Review Board; provides ethics oversight)
414-662-3544 / irbinfo@uwm.edu

For complaints or problems:
Jennifer Slaughter
slaught9@uwm.edu
Dr. Leanne Evans
levans@uwm.edu
IRB
414-662-3544 / irbinfo@uwm.edu

SIGNATURES
If you have had all your questions answered and would like to participate in this study, sign your Name, Email Address, and Date on the line below.
Your electronic signature represents your consent to participate in all activities of this study. Remember, your participation is completely voluntary, and you're free to withdraw from the study at any time

Appendix D: Survey

Section 1: Demographics

1. Study ID

2. Please indicate your ethnicity/ race
   - American Indian/ Alaskan Native Asian
   - Black/ African American Hispanic/ Spanish Origin
   - Latino/ Latina/ Latinx
   - Middle Eastern
   - Multiracial
   - Native Hawaiian/ Other Pacific Islander
   - White
   - Prefer not to self-describe
   - Prefer not to disclose

3. Please indicate your gender
   - Female
   - Male
   - Another gender not listed here

4. Age
   - 20-30
   - 31-40
   - 41-50
   - Over 50

5. Years of Experience
   - 1-2 years
   - 3-5 years
   - 5-10 years
   - Over 10 years

6. Level of Education
   - Bachelor's
   - Master's
   - Certification

Section 2: Definition of Terms

In your own words, please define the following terms. Please do not look up terms if you are unsure of the definition, you can skip the question or write I don't know.

- Social emotional learning (SEL)
- Self-awareness
- Self-management
- Responsible decision making
- Relationship skills

- Social awareness

Section 3: Self-Awareness

Read each statement and think of related specific situations, then rate yourself on the statement by marking the appropriate box (very difficult, difficult, easy, or very easy for you to do). Please answer the questions to the best of your ability. If you are uncomfortable answering or are unsure of how to answer, you may skip the question.

1. I can identify and name my emotions in the moment.
2. I use self-reflection to understand the factors that contribute to my emotions and how my emotions impact me.
3. I recognize when my emotions, thoughts, and biases influence my behavior and my reactions to people and situations, both negatively and positively.
4. I know and am realistic about my strengths and limitations.
5. I recognize and reflect on ways in which my identity is shaped by other people and my race, culture, experiences, and environments.
6. I recognize and reflect on ways in which my identity shapes my views, biases, and prejudices.
7. I believe I will continue to learn and develop skills to better support all young people to succeed.
8. I believe I can influence my own future and achieve my ambitions.
9. I can see how I have a valuable role in my work, my family, and my community.

Section 4: Self-Management

Read each statement and think of related specific situations, then rate yourself on the statement by marking the appropriate box (very difficult, difficult, easy, or very easy for you to do). Please answer the questions to the best of your ability. If you are uncomfortable answering or are unsure of how to answer, you may skip the question.

1. I find ways to manage strong emotions in ways that don't negatively impact others.
2. I can get through something even when I feel frustrated.
3. I can calm myself when I feel stressed or nervous.
4. I hold high expectations that motivate me to seek self-improvement and encourage growth in those I lead.
5. I take action and impact change on issues that are important to me and the larger community.
6. I set measurable, challenging, and attainable goals and have clear steps in place to reach them.
7. I modify my plans in the face of new information and realities.
8. When juggling multiple demands, I use strategies to regain focus and energy.
9. I balance my work life with personal renewal time.

Section 5: Social Awareness

Read each statement and think of related specific situations, then rate yourself on the statement by marking the appropriate box (very difficult, difficult, easy, or very easy for you to do). Please

answer the questions to the best of your ability. If you are uncomfortable answering or are unsure of how to answer, you may skip the question.

1. I can grasp a person's perspective and feelings from verbal and nonverbal cues.
2. I pay attention to the feelings of others and recognize how my words and behavior impact them.
3. I show care for others when I see that they have been harmed in some way.
4. I work to learn about the experiences of people of different races, ethnicities, or cultures.
5. I learn from those who have different opinions than me.
6. I ask others about their experience & perspective before offering my version of events.
7. I understand the systemic, historical, and organizational forces that operate among people.
8. I appreciate and honor the cultural differences within my school community/workplace.
9. I recognize the strengths of young people and their families and view them as partners.

Section 6: Relationship Skills

Read each statement and think of related specific situations, then rate yourself on the statement by marking the appropriate box (very difficult, difficult, easy, or very easy for you to do). Please answer the questions to the best of your ability. If you are uncomfortable answering or are unsure of how to answer, you may skip the question.

1. I stay focused when listening to others and carefully consider their meaning.
2. I can articulate ideas that are important to me in ways that engage others.
3. I can have honest conversations about race and racism with young people, their families, and other community members.
4. I connect meaningfully with young people, their families, colleagues, and community members who are from a different race, culture, or socioeconomic background than I am.
5. I get to know the people around me.
6. I work well with others and generate a collegial atmosphere.
7. I make sure everyone has had an opportunity to share their ideas.
8. When I am upset with someone, I talk to them about how I feel and listen to their perspective.
9. I openly admit my mistakes to myself and others and work to make things right.
10. I can work through my discomfort when dealing with conflict, listen to feelings from all parties, and help them understand different perspectives.

Section 7: Responsible Decision Making

Read each statement and think of related specific situations, then rate yourself on the statement by marking the appropriate box (very difficult, difficult, easy, or very easy for you to do). Please answer the questions to the best of your ability. If you are uncomfortable answering or are unsure of how to answer, you may skip the question.

1. I gather relevant information to explore the root causes of problems I see.
2. I recognize the need to continually grow, to examine the status quo, and to encourage new thinking in my school community.

3. I find practical and respectful ways to overcome difficulty, even when it comes to making decisions that may not be popular.
4. I consider how my choices will be viewed through the lens of the young people I serve and the community around them.
5. I consider how my personal and professional decisions impact the lives of others.
6. I help to make my personal and professional community a better place.

For the last two questions in this section, "others who are impacted" refers to staff and colleagues, young people, their families, and other community members -- especially those who are historically underrepresented in decision-making

7.   I involve others who are impacted to explore a problem collaboratively before choosing a solution or launching a new project.
8. I involve others who are impacted to generate multiple solutions and predict the outcome of each solution to key problems.

Section 8: Practices

Read each statement, then rate yourself on the statement by marking the appropriate box (not at all confident, slightly confident, somewhat confident, quite confident or extremely confident). Please answer the questions to the best of your ability. If you are uncomfortable answering or are unsure of how to answer, you may skip the question.

1. How confident are you that you can help your school's most challenging students to learn?
2. Thinking about self-awareness, how confident are you that you can support your students' growth and development?
3. Thinking about self-management, how confident are you that you can support your students' growth and development?
4. Thinking about responsible decision making, how confident are you that you can support your students' growth and development?
5. Thinking about relationship skills, how confident are you that you can support your students' growth and development?
6. Thinking about social awareness, how confident are you that you can support your students' growth and development?

Appendix E: Interview Protocol

<u>Introduction:</u> Hello. My name is Jennifer Slaughter, and I will be interviewing you today. Before we begin, I'd like to share a little information about myself. I am a graduate student at UWM working towards a masters in Curriculum and Instruction. The focus of my research is transformative social emotional learning, looking specifically at how educators' understandings and beliefs impact the ways in which social emotional learning curriculums are implemented in the classroom. You've already responded to the questions in the survey about your understanding and beliefs and reflected upon your competency. Today I am interested in learning more about those understandings and beliefs, but also about how you facilitate social emotional learning within your classroom. Remember that your participation in this study is voluntary. If you are uncomfortable answering a question, please let me know that you would prefer not to answer.

<u>Domain Topic 1: Understandings and Beliefs about Social Emotional Learning</u>
I'd like to start by diving in deeper regarding your understanding and beliefs about social emotional learning and where they originated.

- Can you tell me about how your understanding of social emotional learning developed?
- How have your experiences shaped your understanding?

Possible follow up questions:
- Would you say that your understandings were developed more in your teacher preparation program, through professional development, or independently?
- Can you tell me more about that experience?
- Was there a specific person/course/professional development/resource that you found particularly helpful in developing this understanding?

<u>Domain Topic 2: Social Emotional Learning Practices</u>
I'd like to take some time now to look at what social emotional learning looks like in your classroom.

- Can you start by telling me about the way you implement social emotional learning in your classroom?
- What is the most effective thing you do to model social emotional learning?
Possible follow up questions:
- Can you tell me a story about a successful social emotional learning lesson that you implemented in your classroom? How do you know it was successful?
- Can you tell me more about that experience?
- How do you know that your students are learning?

<u>Domain Topic 3: The Learning Context (optional)</u>
Let's spend some time exploring how your understandings, beliefs, and practices are supported within the school community.

- Can you tell me about the ways in which your school supports your understanding of social emotional learning?
- Can you tell me about the ways in which your school supports your social emotional learning practices?

Possible follow up questions:
- Can you tell me about the professional development opportunities offered to support the adoption of the curriculum that your school is currently using?
- How often does the school/network offer professional development opportunities for continued support?
- Are there any other resources within your school community (parents, community organizations, coworkers, etc.…) that have supported you or your colleagues in implementing the curriculum?

Domain Topic 4: Reflection

Thank you so much for answering. I'd like to close out our interview with some reflection. In the survey you were asked to define social emotional learning and the five core competencies. You were also asked to reflect upon your own competencies within that framework.

- Can you tell me about the areas that you felt were strengths?
- What about the areas in which you feel like you experience more difficulty?

Possible follow up questions:
- Was there anything that surprised you, in the questions or your responses?
- As you reflect on your experience as a participant in this study, is there anything else that you'd like to share, that I might not have asked?