

Teachers' Voices on Social Emotional Learning: Identifying the Conditions that Make Implementation Possible

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There is increasing evidence that addressing children's social and emotional needs has a positive impact on students' performance, their attitudes about school and the relationships that take place in educational settings. This study is focused on identifying the conditions that support teachers' development and implementation of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programs and practices. Using a practitioner-driven methodology, action research, the staff of a high performing charter school in a disadvantaged urban community in California (United States) engaged in an inductive process of reflection and action to address students' social and emotional needs. The findings in this research highlight the positive impact that implementation of a school-designed SEL intervention had on students, and on teachers' practices. Teachers' commitment was necessary to ensure initial engagement, while curricular and organizational resources were needed to maintain implementation in the long term.

Keywords: action research, social-emotional learning, teacher voice, implementation, teaching practices

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Introduction

Recent research has found that social and emotional learning (SEL) interventions have a positive impact on student performance (Bisquerra, 2009; Durlak, Domitrovich, Weissberg & Gullotta, 2015; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Zins, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004). These programs also reduce aggression and emotional distress among students, increase prosocial behaviors in school, and improve positive attitudes toward self and others (Elias & Arnold, 2006; Greenberg et al., 2003). These studies establish that addressing the social and emotional functioning of students not only improves students'

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achievement, but also improves the learning environment and students' experiences in school. The rise in violence in schools (Robers, Kemp, & Truman, 2013) and the prevalence of bullying and harassment (Elias & Zins, 2013) in the United States has made it clear that educators need to focus on more than simply teaching content such as language arts, math and sciences; educators must also prioritize teaching children how to navigate their emotions or solve conflicts. Therefore, optimizing learning conditions for students requires that teachers focus on developing students' social and emotional skills, as well as meet academic standards, in a safe, caring and supportive environment that promotes healthy student development and motivation (Osher, Bear, Sprague, & Doyle, 2010).

In spite of the evidence supporting the value of SEL, teachers are still faced with accountability demands that emphasize students' performance on standardized assessments (Loveless & Griffith, 2014) especially in charter schools, where more autonomy comes in exchange for greater accountability (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2015). This emphasis on students' performance puts charter school teachers in a difficult position; while many teachers realize the importance of SEL (Civic Enterprises, 2013), raising achievement, even if it means narrowing the curriculum to ensure mastery of the tested subjects, becomes the priority (Levin, 2013). Accountability measures favor teaching practices that prioritize students' cognitive development.

Even when schools do implement SEL programs, their success depends heavily upon teachers' commitment to SEL and their level of comfort with this content, as well as their perceived support from the school (Brackett, Reyes, Rivers, Elbertson & Salovey, 2012). Unfortunately, even when SEL is implemented in schools, teachers often receive limited training and support (Jones & Bouffard, 2012), which are essential for achieving quality implementation (Durlak, 2015). Despite the recognized importance of teachers' beliefs about SEL and their preparation to teach these programs, few studies have examined teachers' experiences with adopting SEL programs and implementing them in classrooms (Durlak et al., 2011).

This study is based on the premise that it is possible and necessary to help teachers build practices that address the whole child, integrating both the cognitive and social and emotional development of children. This study contributes to the field by identifying the conditions that support teachers' development and implementation of SEL programs and practices. Using a practitioner-driven methodology, action research, the staff of a high performing charter school in a disadvantaged urban community in California (United States) engaged in an inductive process of reflection and action to address students' social and emotional needs. A detailed analysis of this process has value for uncovering elements of implementation that may be relevant to SEL implementation in charter schools and other settings coping with demands to boost academic performance, particular those in challenging socioeconomic contexts.

Conceptual Framework

SEL is the process through which students improve their capacity to integrate thinking, emotions and behavior to accomplish important tasks in daily life (Zins et al., 2004). SEL is a broad concept that incorporates the development of the individual's social and emotional competencies (self and social awareness, self-management, relationship skills and responsible decision-making), as well as the social and

emotional context factors that influence the learning process in the classroom (leadership style, classroom management or school rules might enhance or hinder students' ability to learn).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has identified three strategies to develop students' social and emotional skills in the classroom: direct instruction, integration with academic content, and infusion with teaching practices (CASEL, 2013). Recent analysis of SEL interventions found that students benefited at higher rates when these programs were intensive and integrated in teacher's instructional practices (Durlak et al., 2011), as well as in the daily interactions and culture of the school, where students learned and practiced social and emotional skills not only in the classroom, but also in other spaces around the school such as the hallways, the cafeteria or the playground (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). These studies highlight the importance of going beyond teaching a set SEL curriculum, to integrating SEL in the daily fabric of the school through interactions, relations and daily teachings in the classroom and the school. While there have been publications on the instructional practices that support SEL (Elias & Arnold, 2006; Yoder, 2013, 2014), there is still little evidence on how teachers incorporate these practices, the type of supports they might need, or the conditions that make this possible.

Teachers and SEL

Since the late 1980s, research has recognized the importance of teacher participation in addressing issues of reform and successful school-based innovative processes (Lieberman, 1986; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). New initiatives depend on what teachers think and do about it, since they are the ones who generally apply and implement them. This is especially relevant when it comes to the implementation of SEL programs: teachers teach, model and make possible that students practice their social and emotional competencies in the classroom (Jones, Bouffard & Weissbourd, 2013). At the same time, teachers influence the learning environment by creating the conditions that allow students to feel safe and supported (Wentzel, 2016).

In order to identify what supports the integration of SEL in teachers' practices, first we need to understand how teachers develop and change their pedagogical practical thinking (Pérez Gómez, 2007); that is to say, we need to understand how teachers' complex system of personal constructs can be reformulated and developed. According to Pérez Gómez (2007), teachers develop their teaching when engaged in a process of (de)construction of their mental constructs and the actions that have been empirically accumulating. From this perspective, engaging teachers in innovative and training processes that involve critical reflection (Schön, 1983) will be key tools to develop teachers' pedagogical thinking (Ebadi & Gheisari, 2016). When discussing implementation of SEL programs and practices, it is also necessary to consider what teachers teach through their behaviors; Jennings and Frank (2015) discuss that within the domain of SEL, teachers' implicit ideas, values and beliefs may influence teaching in more powerful ways than is the case with traditional content-based instruction. Therefore, it can be argued that engaging teachers in iterative cycles of reflection and action can foster teachers' development of their pedagogical thinking, by helping them examine their implicit ideas, values and beliefs through a critical lens. Based on this framework, teachers in this study actively participated in iterative and reflective practices, so they could critically examine their teaching and (re)construct their pedagogical thinking.

Methods

Context

The study identified the conditions that enhance teachers' development of practices that incorporate and address the whole child. Using a practitioner-driven methodology, action research (AR), the staff of a high performing charter school in a disadvantaged community in a large urban area in California (United States) engaged in an inductive and iterative process of reflection and action in which teachers identified students' needs and designed a plan to address them. During implementation, teachers continually reflected on the roadblocks they encountered, as well as the changes they observed in their teaching practices.

The charter school where this study took place served 400 students in Kindergarten through 6th grade. Almost 90% of the students were Latino/a, and 60% were English as a second language Learners. Located in a disadvantaged urban community, 91% of the students participated in the National School Lunch Program, which is provided to families that are below the poverty line established by the US Federal Government. The charter school is located in a high-crime community, where only one out of every three students graduates from high school (Counseling and Support Services for Youth, 2016).

The entire school staff participated in the research (n=20); the school had 16 classroom teachers and 4 specialists. The majority of the staff was female (90%), with half of teachers having less than 3 years of teaching experience. In addition, the staff was relatively new to the school; 45% of teachers were newly hired at the start of the research and 35% had been teaching at the school for 1-2 school years. Although administrators were not part of the research project, it is important to note that both the principal and the dean of students at the school were new to their administrative roles during the start of the research.

Action Research (AR)

Most of the literature on teacher change and implementation of new initiatives in schools indicates that teachers embrace and implement change when they are involved and participate in the design and development of such change (Campbell, Lieberman, & Yashkina, 2015). Action research (AR) is not a new approach to explore and improve teaching practices. Coined in 1946 by Kurt Lewin, AR has been widely utilized in teacher preparation programs and ongoing professional development (Koutselini, 2008; Ravitch & Wirth, 2007). AR is focused on the praxis –critically informed and committed action– and places teachers in the center of the research process (Herr & Anderson, 2015); it creates a space where practitioners can engage in reflective processes about their practice (Kemmis, 2007) and allows for an ongoing dialog between theory and practice (McNiff, 2013).

Adapting Lewin's model (1946) to this study, the researcher led teachers through the different stages of the action research process. Focus group interviews (Morgan, 2012) were used throughout the action research, and meeting artifacts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) were collected and analyzed. Teachers and the researcher kept a reflective journal (Ortlipp, 2008) about the implementation of the action plan and the changes they observed in students and their teaching practices. In addition, a representative sample of the staff was selected for individual semi-structured interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Table I summarizes the data collection techniques used for each stage of the AR.

Table I. Summary of AR stages and research techniques

AR stage	Description	Data Collection Technique
<i>Stage 1: Problem identification</i>	Teachers identified the school's practices that addressed students' cognitive and social and emotional needs. They reflected on the shortcomings and challenges during working sessions led by the researcher.	Focus group interviews
<i>Stage 2: Design action plan</i>	With support from the researcher, teachers designed an action plan to address the identified challenges and improve the school's existing practices.	Focus group interviews
<i>Stage 3: Implementation</i>	Teachers implemented the action plan and participated in follow-up meetings led by the researcher.	Teacher diary Focus group interviews
<i>Stage 4: Reflection and evaluation</i>	Teachers reflected on things that worked well, the roadblocks they encountered and the impact this work had on their students and their teaching practices through individual journaling. They participated in focus group and semi-structured interviews.	Teacher diary Focus group interviews Semi-structured interviews
<i>All stages</i>		Researcher diary Meeting artifacts

Teachers as Researchers

AR is a practitioner-driven methodology, where those affected by the research problem actively participate in the design and development of an action plan. This study sought to facilitate a reflective process where teachers could identify the barriers they face when educating the whole child, in order to make decisions addressed to overcome them. In this study, teachers were active participants in the research, while the researcher observed and facilitated the process. During the AR, the researcher's positioning fluctuated from being an insider in collaboration with the teachers to being an outsider in a reciprocal collaborative team with the teachers (Herr & Anderson, 2015) depending on the research project needs. Following a participatory AR model (McIntyre, 2007), teachers' reflections, comments, frustrations and actions constituted the foundation of the research process.

Analysis

In line with qualitative data analysis standards, the data in this study were continually analyzed while additional information was collected and interpreted (Creswell, 2013). Given the interactive nature of the AR and the importance of teachers' active participation, qualitative content analysis (Patton, 2015) was done throughout the research process and shared with teachers during working sessions. In turn, these meetings generated new data that also were analyzed following an action-reflection cycle. Transcriptions of focus

group interviews and meeting artifacts were analyzed using Open Coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) to establish codes that captured how teachers' conceptualization of SEL, their experience when implementing the action plan, their teaching practice and the encountered challenges changed over time. In addition, data analysis documented the diversity of teachers' experiences: the individuality of teachers' opinions was identified, as well as shared beliefs and common practices. Initial codes were then refined into larger categories and analyzed for references to teacher development, bi-dimensional teaching (academic, and social and emotional) and supporting factors. Individual semi-structured interviews were also analyzed for references to those categories.

For purposes of triangulation, data generated by the focus groups and the individual semi-structured interviews were compared to see if differences existed between teachers' individual discourse and the discourse generated by the group. In addition, data were triangulated based on time to see how teachers' pedagogical thinking had evolved before, during and after implementation of their action plans. This triangulation made it possible to analyze the new categories that appeared over time and those that remained constant.

Implementation and Results

The first stage of the AR consisted of several working sessions, where teachers reflected on the skills that students need in order to be college ready and how the school was preparing them to be successful in college. During the first working session, teachers identified being able to work in groups (100%), and being assertive (100%), resourceful (75%), problem solver (75%) and independent (75%), as the main skills and qualities students need to be ready for college, and quickly realized that these skills identified by the group were social and emotional competencies. During these initial conversations, teachers emphasized the importance of developing students' social and emotional competencies for academic achievement, but expressed the existence of barriers. At the organizational level, teachers identified lack of time and lack of shared behavior expectations across classrooms and between school and home as the main barriers to develop students' social and emotional skills. At the curricular level, teachers identified the lack of explicit instruction and lack of professional development as the main obstacles.

Analysis of early documents (meeting artifacts and focus group interviews) confirmed the theoretical framework: as other scholars have found (Lambert & McCarthy, 2006; Valli & Buese, 2007), teachers felt pressure and stress to focus on the state standards and increase students' scores on the standardized assessments. Although all teachers at this school expressed the desire to help students be successful in the future and the need to address the whole child, the priority in practice was on students' mastery of the academic standards. Most teachers expressed feeling tension between attending academics and developing students' social and emotional skills across data sources. The following quotes illustrate this tension:

Things become very one-sided, very academically oriented, and it is a reminder that this is a major part of teaching to the whole child. (SEL) gives that perspective. [...] We feel pressure and tension with giving up academics. Like the reality of doing it (SEL)... it's more difficult than what we would want. (Focus group)

We do have so many things, so many pressures and the need to push our kids and have them grow and there are a lot of extrinsic forces I guess at play. And it's just a great reminder that first and for most we need to be nurturing our kids and making sure that they are growing emotionally. (Individual interview)

As part of stage 1 in the AR, problem identification, teachers decided to administer a school climate survey to better understand students' needs before designing their action plans. The Assessment of School Climate (ASC) from Six Seconds (Jensen & Freedman, 2008) was administered to students in grades 2-6 and the entire staff. The ASC is a statistically reliable research tool designed to examine school climate, and identify areas both supporting and interfering with academic and emotional growth. Using a five-point Likert scale, this survey measures three climate factors (Accountability, Respect and Empathy), plus an overlay dimension of Trust. These factors predict 62.37% of the school's success on Loyalty, Learning and Safety combined.

On average, students and staff perceived Learning (4.15) and Empathy (4.01) as positive areas of the school's climate, while Safety (3.26) and Respect (3.34) received the lowest scores (see Figure 1). The area of Respect was about 10% lower than the other two climate factors, Empathy and Accountability, suggesting this was an important area for improvement. During debrief sessions, teachers attributed the lower results in the areas of Respect and Safety to organizational and curricular barriers they had identified in earlier conversations: lack of time, lack of shared behavior expectations, and absence of explicit SEL instruction. At this point in the research, and based on the school's needs, teachers decided to focus their action planning on incorporating students' social and emotional needs in their teaching.

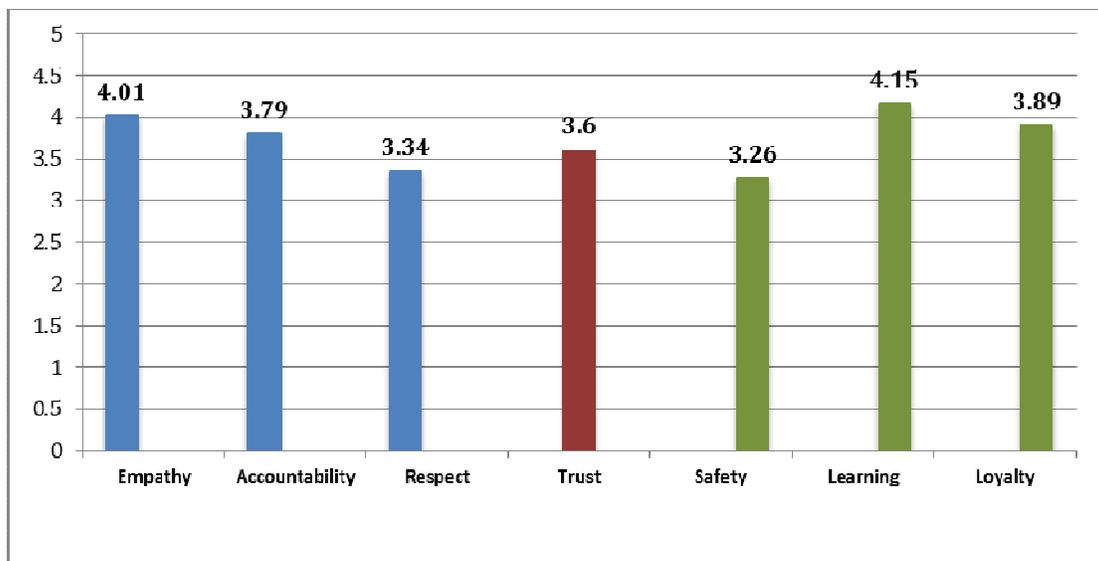


Figure 1: Assessment of School Climate Results

The second stage of the AR, action planning, is the heart of the research process. With support from the researcher, teachers designed a plan to address the identified challenges and improve the school's existing practices. Based on the Anchorage (Alaska, USA) School District's track record implementing SEL practices,

the school decided to adopt a selection of their SEL standards (ASD SEL Steering Committee, 2004). In addition, they followed Six Seconds Emotional Intelligence (EQ) framework--Know Yourself, Choose Yourself, Give Yourself-- (Freedman, 2007), because this organization created the ASC and their framework aligned well with the school climate tool and the identified needs. The school selected 9 out of 36 Anchorage SEL standards based on a) the challenging areas identified in the school climate survey and b) the amount of weeks left in the school year. These standards were organized under the 3 pursuits in the Six Seconds EQ model; the standards related to self-awareness were grouped under Know Yourself, those related to self-management were grouped under Choose Yourself and finally, those related to relationship building and social skills were grouped under Give Yourself (see Table II).

A 2-week cycle (see Figure 2 and Table III) was designed for the purpose of teaching the selected SEL standards. This cycle mimicked the way teachers taught the academic standards and utilized existing structures at the school, such as the buddy class where older students engage in different activities with younger students. Lesson plans were created for each step in the 2-week cycle (see Table IV). The combination of the SEL standards and Six Seconds' EQ model, along with the lesson plans provided the school with the necessary structure to address students' social and emotional needs in a systematic and concrete way.

In this study, implementation of the action plan (stage 3) and reflection and evaluation of the plan (stage 4) occurred concurrently.

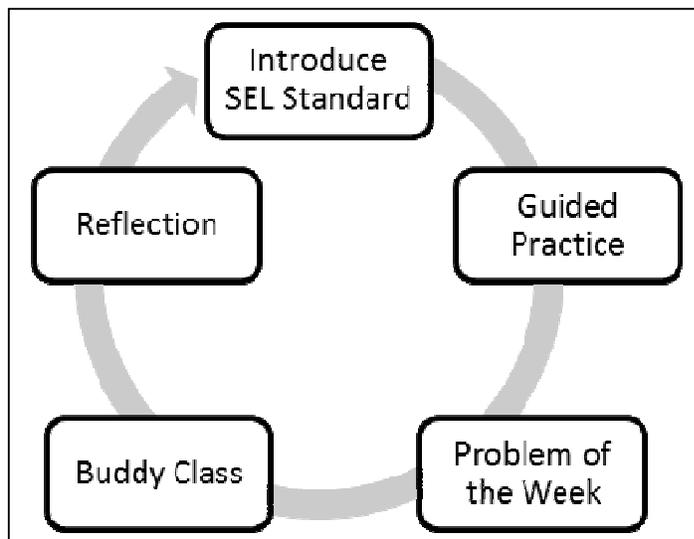


Figure 2: School-Based 2-Week Cycle to Teach SEL Standards

Table II: Selected SEL Standards

Dimension	Standard
Know Yourself	1.a. Students demonstrate an awareness of their emotions. <i>“I am aware of what I am feeling.”</i>
	1.b. Students demonstrate awareness of their strengths and challenges. <i>“I am aware of my strengths and know what I do well. I am also aware of my challenges and the areas I need to work on.”</i>
	1.c. Students have a sense of personal responsibility. <i>“I am aware of my responsibilities.”</i>
Choose Yourself	2.a. Students demonstrate ability to navigate their emotions constructively. <i>“I can navigate my emotions.”</i>
	2.b. Students demonstrate honesty and integrity. <i>“I can act in an honest manner.”</i>
	2.c. Students use effective decision-making skills. <i>“I can make good decisions.”</i>
Give Yourself	3.a. Students demonstrate the ability to prevent, manage, and resolve interpersonal conflicts in constructive ways. <i>“I deal with interpersonal conflicts constructively.”</i>
	3.b. Students demonstrate ability to set and achieve goals. <i>“I care about the feelings and viewpoints of others and do my part to make my community better.”</i>
	3.c. Students demonstrate awareness of other people’s emotions and perspectives and a desire to positively contribute to their community. <i>“I care about the feelings and viewpoints of others and do my part to make my community better.”</i>

Table III. Description of each step in the 2-week cycle

	Description
Introduce SEL Standard	Teachers gather baseline data about the standard (What do students know about the topic?), introduce the standard and explore its application to real life situations with students.
Guided Practice	Students practice the skills outlined in the standard (i.e. identifying emotions). The guided practice sessions always conclude with reflection questions for the students about the self (i.e. how does it make you feel?) and about others (i.e. how do you think others might feel?).
Problem of the Week	Teachers use problems/issues (observed during class or reported by the students) to engage them in reflective class discussions anchored on the standard being taught during that cycle.
Buddy Class	Students in the upper grades mix with students in the lower grades to work together on SEL activities that reinforce the standard being taught.
Reflection	Students reflect on what they have learned and provide examples (through drawing or writing) of how they are applying the standard in their lives. Teachers also reflect on what they have learned and the changes they observed in their practice as they implement the SEL curriculum.

Table IV. Example of guided practice activities for one SEL standard

Choose Yourself		
<i>Standard</i>	<p>2.a. Students demonstrate an ability to navigate their emotions constructively.</p> <p><i>“I can positively navigate my emotions.”</i></p>	
	General Description	Activities
<i>Guided Practice</i>	<p>*Have students do a few activities around the standard (hypothetical and real situations).</p> <p>*Complete guided practice with reflection questions for the student about the self (how does it make them feel) and about others (how do they think others might feel)</p>	<p>Activity 1: Read <u>Simon’s Hook</u> and discuss the ways the character was taught to deal with triggers.</p> <p>Activity 2: Using a balloon, show how we inflate in response to triggers, like not having time for breakfast, can’t find a missing shoe, friend hurts our feelings, etc. The balloon gets bigger and bigger and if we don’t do anything to navigate our emotions it will pop. Start brainstorming ways to navigate emotions, like deep breaths, talk to someone, take a walk, etc. and let some air out of the balloon with each idea.</p> <p>Say, “One of the first steps to “navigating emotions” is being aware that we can choose our feelings. Sometimes a pattern is very strong and we automatically react without thinking and follow the usual pattern, but we could pause and make a decision about how we will feel next. For example a pattern could be that you automatically hit a brother or sister who takes your toy, but you could choose to be only annoyed instead of enraged.”</p>

Implementing the Action Plan

During implementation of the AR, teachers continuously reflected on the impact this work had on students, themselves, and the school as a whole, through journaling and participating in meetings, focus groups and individual interviews. In this section, the common themes identified across data sources are presented and illustrated with representative quotes.

At the student level, all of the teachers reported that implementation of the SEL standards impacted students in positive ways. Specifically, there were three common themes most frequently identified by teachers: student-led solutions, self-management strategies and improvement in students’ emotional literacy. Given length constraints, the results presented here refer to the first theme, student-led solutions. During implementation, many teachers observed students solving conflicts on their own, without adult intervention. In these quotes, teachers Pam and Alicia described how SEL skills help students self-monitor more.

It’s helped independent time go smoothly, because if they do have a conflict with their partner they can solve it quickly and move on. (...) They are starting to self-monitor more and deal with their little tiffs more quickly and so that they can continue learning. (Individual interview)

In the classroom, I have seen that students are able to self-monitor more, which is part of The College Ready Promise rubric. They are asking each other: Are you being honest? Are you making a good decision? Vocab that students use with each other, without an adult being there. (Meeting artifact)

During focus groups and individual interviews, most teachers reported that this work impacted them personally. In particular, teachers verbalized that it had helped them to learn about their own social and emotional competencies, which is consistent with other authors' findings (Larsen & Samdal, 2011). In this representative quote, Lucy described how the SEL curriculum deepened her self-awareness:

I think I've learned a lot about myself. It actually has been hard for me to teach some of the lessons because I've learned that I'm not the most expressive person about my emotions [...] I've become better at some of the things that I'm trying to teach my kids to do. (Individual interview)

During the AR, teachers also reflected on how implementing the SEL standards impacted their teaching. The majority of teachers reported having a deeper understanding of what it meant to teach SEL standards. Being the first time the school was implementing an SEL curriculum, teachers specifically emphasized the importance of learning by doing (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006), which puts the praxis in the center of the learning process. The following quotes illustrate how teaching the SEL standards helped teachers learn how to teach them.

In theory, I understood the need to teach social skills/values and to be emotionally receptive to students, but this curriculum/school focus has forced me to adopt better conflict resolution practices. (Meeting artifact)

I've really enjoyed it a lot. I think that it has actually been professional development without necessarily having a formal sit down training. (Individual interview)

Many teachers reported the importance of the shared language provided by the SEL standards. As seen in the following representative quotes, this common language specifically helped teachers better understand and communicate with their students.

It is a lot easier to understand what our students are feeling because we have a common language. We talked about feeling like we, as teachers, are being more empathetic towards our students and also it has strengthened the relationships we have with our students. (Meeting artifact)

The SEL curriculum has really changed the way I handle social/emotional issues in/out of the classroom. My students and I have a common language to discuss emotions, problems, etc. I love it! It has made me a better teacher in my opinion! (Focus group)

When reflecting about their practice, many teachers also described feeling empowered to make decisions they had not made before. For example, teachers felt entitled to "stop instructional time" and address issues that had arisen in the classroom and were stopping students from being focused on academic content. Teachers' reflections suggest that, before implementing the SEL standards, teachers may have ignored the issues or avoided addressing them directly.

It's also helped me to feel better about stopping a lesson or just stopping the class whenever to address an issue that needs to be addressed right away instead of just saying "oh we don't have time for that. (Individual interview)

I have learned a lot about the importance of addressing issues as they come up instead of ignoring some things in order to keep going with the academics. This has made me more proactive about responding to students' needs even when it makes me uncomfortable. (Teacher diary)

Several teachers expressed that they were more open to interrupt a lesson, because they had tools to anchor the discussion and have a conversation with students in a clear way. Anne, a classroom teacher, described feeling more prepared to address students' needs through impromptu SEL lessons:

I have noticed that I have taken more opportunities to address class-wide issues with impromptu lessons, because I feel more prepared to do so. We have small class discussions to address teasing and bullying. (Meeting artifact)

As discussed earlier, at the beginning of the AR, all teachers expressed the desire to develop students' social and emotional skills, but identified several barriers that made implementation difficult. After several months of continuous implementation of the SEL standards, many teachers described realizing that SEL is not an add-on to the school's educational program, but it is the foundation that makes meaningful learning possible. In the following quotes, Mary and Nick described how SEL is foundational to academic learning saying:

It's a foundation you need to have before you can get to the academic learning. When students know their strengths and weaknesses, they can use those in order to learn better. (Focus group)

Sometimes kids aren't able to access what's happening in the classroom until they get their emotions under control (...) For me, like that kind of goes with those SEL skills that we want them to have as they grow up and get ready for colleges...getting through those things or, you know, figuring those things out so they can focus on their academics too. (Focus group)

During the last focus group of the AR, many teachers described how SEL had become part of the school's instructional program, and a shared expectation for teachers and students. The following quotes illustrate how SEL can become part of the school's routines with continuous implementation.

I don't know if the school wide we were necessarily fighting like SEL last year, but this year it just feels like it's more one of our Instructional Guidelines and it is something that we do need to do some planning around and it's not an add on as much as it is in terms to what we are doing. (Focus group)

For us as teachers it's become a part of a schedule and it's just normal for us and also we've been able to create that expectation for the students (...) it's just more routine I think that's what our strength is this year." (Focus group)

Finally, teachers also reflected on how this work impacted the school as a whole. The main common theme that emerged across data sources was the importance of approaching SEL as a school-wide project. Teachers described feeling empowered to see that all colleagues were involved and committed to do this work, and were energized by the prospects of continuous improvement as they kept on addressing SEL school-wide. In the following quotes, teachers Laura and Maria described the benefits of a school-wide implementation of SEL saying:

It's been helpful to be part of a bigger school wide project where I feel like every teacher is on the same page about those expectations and is equipped to carry them out on the playground, in the office, wherever it may be (...) It's always helpful for our school to be all on board with something. (Individual interview)

I think it's good to have adopted this into the school culture so that when you say to someone "keep going, or try hard at this" it's not... it's because they see their peers doing it or because they see it being celebrated. (Focus group)

What Limits Teachers' SEL Practice?

Although teachers reported positive outcomes from the project, implementation did not come without difficulties. The staff identified challenges both at the organizational level and with the teaching of the SEL standards. Time constraints to teach the SEL standards were cited in every meeting, focus group and in all individual interviews as one of the main roadblocks teachers faced. Teachers had to find time to incorporate the explicit instruction of SEL standards, which required changes to their schedule and time to review and adapt the existing lesson plans. This challenge, paired with the fact that the school had not allocated teachers additional time for planning the SEL lessons' content, made it difficult for teachers to follow the scope and sequence designed in the school's action plan. In the following quotes, teachers described how the lack of time impacted implementation:

I felt like I got behind, I always felt behind the process because sometimes you don't get to that part of morning meeting or you just don't have the time because of what you're teaching, so just time. (Individual interview)

With everything else we have to fit in it sometimes (SEL) gets pushed to the side. (Focus group)

During the AR, many teachers also encountered difficulties with the teaching of the SEL standards themselves. The main theme that emerged across data sources was the need to differentiate based on students' age and their current needs, as many teachers found that some of the vocabulary in the standards was difficult for students to grasp (e.g., honesty).

It was helpful to use ready-made lesson plans, but it took a trial of implementation to figure out ways that this was feasible in 1st grade, & ways that the lessons needed to be amended. (Meeting artifact)

For varying grade levels it's been a little bit difficult for them to figure out how to teach it to their particular age group. (Individual interview)

At the curricular level, a second theme that emerged was the need for additional professional development. Several teachers in this research requested opportunity to collaborate more with other teachers to brainstorm ideas, and share best practices, as well as observe colleagues teaching some of the SEL standards.

In this study, teachers' frustrations and discomfort with these challenges are considered the first step to understand what limits teachers' practice. This shared consciousness establishes the foundation to find sustainable solutions, a key objective of the AR (Kemmis, 2007), in the long term. As seen in Table V, the findings of this study had an impact at four different levels: the student, the teacher, the organizational and the curricular levels. In summary, the data suggest that implementation of the action plan had a positive influence on students' social and emotional skills and teachers' professional and personal development. At the organizational level, school-wide implementation was perceived as a positive factor, while time constraints and need for schedule changes were two of the main barriers. At the curricular level, teachers valued the use of SEL standards and emphasized the importance of learning by doing. The need for differentiation and additional professional development were the main roadblocks identified by the staff.

Table V. Summary of research themes

Classroom			
+Shared language			
+□ Teaching moments			
Teacher	SEL Implementation		Student
	<i>Curricular Factors</i>	<i>Organizational Factors</i>	
Tension to address students' academic and SE needs	+□ SEL Standards +□ Learning by doing	+□ School-wide project +□ Continuous improvement	+□ Conflict resolution skills +□ Self-management skills +□ Emotional literacy
Professionally +□ Develops teaching of SEL standards	☒ Need for differentiation ☒ Need for professional development	☒ Time constraints ☒ Planning and scheduling conflicts	
Personally +□ Personal growth			

Legend

+□ Indicates positive/enhancing elements

☒ Indicates negative/hindering elements

Discussion

There is increasing evidence that addressing children's social and emotional needs has a positive impact on students' performance, their attitudes about school and the relationships that take place in educational settings (Durlak et al. 2011; Zins et al., 2004). With this in mind, it is key to understand the supports that teachers need in order to educate the whole child and better prepare students for the future.

From a conceptual perspective, this research suggests that the experience of teaching SEL has a positive influence on teachers' pedagogical thinking about SEL. Teachers had initially reported feeling tension between addressing academic content and developing students' social and emotional skills; with continuous implementation of the SEL program, this tension went from being antagonistic (you teach one or the other) to being complementary, as teachers developed their understanding of how social and emotional skills support meaningful learning and can be integrated in teaching practices. In addition, teachers' commitment to SEL is necessary to initiate implementation, but it is not the only element. The learning by doing reported by teachers helped build their confidence and comfort level with this content. As teachers continued implementing the SEL standards, they observed positive changes in their students and their classroom, which deepened their commitment to the whole child. As suggested in the literature, teachers' commitment to SEL was also enhanced by the fact that the AR was a school-wide project supported by the administration (Brackett et al., 2012; Hargreaves, 2003) where teachers participated in reflective processes (Pérez Gomez, 2007; McNiff, 2013; Schön, 1983).

At the same time, this study suggests that the implementation of SEL programs is a complex process that requires time and a continuous focus (Durlak et al., 2015). Implementing a school-wide program that focuses on students' social and emotional competencies is a learning process for administrators, teachers and students alike. From a practical perspective, this research highlights the importance of the praxis in developing a pedagogy for SEL; when SEL is continually implemented, teachers develop their skills to teach social and emotional competencies more effectively. Additionally, teachers need ongoing support to develop and refine their teaching of SEL programs and practices. These findings suggest the need to use training models, such as coaching, where teachers can improve by reflecting, observing and receiving feedback on their own practice (Jones, Bouffard, & Weissbourd, 2013).

While most teachers described the positive impact of this work on their students and observed changes to their own teaching practices, the challenges that they encountered had the potential to limit the school's and teachers' future investment in SEL. The existence of a school-wide approach to SEL implementation enhances teacher commitment to SEL and facilitates the introduction of changes in teachers' practices. As such, the difficulties and roadblocks that come with SEL implementation should be addressed both from the school's general planning, as well as from individual efforts. As others have suggested (CASEL, 2008), creating support structures is necessary to sustain SEL implementation in the long term. The findings in this study suggest the need to create spaces for teachers to collaborate around SEL and share best practices, as well as providing time for teachers to incorporate SEL planning along with their academic preparation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings from this study provide some evidence that the experience of teaching SEL has a positive influence in teachers' pedagogical thinking about SEL. While the data were derived from only one school in a particular context, the process findings are congruent with many reported in the literature across a wide range of contexts, and countries. Continuous implementation of SEL develops teachers' pedagogy of

SEL and deepens their commitment to the whole child. Based on these findings, teachers would benefit from training models, such as coaching, that involve reflecting, observing, and receiving feedback on their own practice. Yet it cannot be ruled out that the intense involvement of an external AR project might have fostered a degree of cooperation and commitment different from the typical school undertaking SEL, even with a motivated staff and supportive administration.

This study also indicates that a school-wide SEL project, the use of SEL standards and a culture of learning by doing enhance teachers' integration of SEL in their classrooms, while time constraints, need for differentiation and lack of planning space hinder teachers' implementation of SEL. In order to address these roadblocks and sustain implementation in the long term, schools should create spaces for teachers to actively participate in the design of the school's SEL implementation plans, collaborate around SEL and share best practices, as well as providing time for teachers to incorporate SEL planning along with their academic preparation.

While this study solely focus on teacher voice, further research that explores SEL implementation from administrators' and students' perspectives and from diverse populations is also needed in order to better understand the factors that make effective and sustainable SEL programming possible. Finally, this study provides preliminary guidance regarding the primary elements that enhance and hinder teachers' implementation of a school-designed SEL program. Further research is necessary to understand how teachers incorporate these instructional practices in their classrooms and the supports they need in the long term.

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