Teachers' experiences implementing social emotional learning programs across PK–12

by

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B.S., Indiana University, 2010
M.S., Hunter College, 2018
M.S., Hunter College, 2021

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Abstract

This phenomenological multiple case study investigated PK–12 teachers' experiences with the implementation of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs across New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. Despite widespread adoption of SEL—reported in over 80% of U.S. schools—teachers' perspectives on program alignment, challenges, and effectiveness remain underexplored. This study was conducted in two qualitative stages. Stage One employed individual interviews with participants selected from a screener survey administered through Qualtrics, establishing eligibility and capturing demographic data. Stage Two utilized semi-structured focus groups to provide nuanced insights into teachers' lived experiences across grade bands (PK–2, 3–5, 6–8, and 9–12). Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied to identify recurring categories. This research extends the existing literature by examining teachers' lived experiences of SEL implementation across PK–12 grade bands, providing insight into the commonalities and differences in how educators understand, implement, and navigate SEL within varied developmental and educational contexts. Findings offer implications for policy and practice and identify directions for future research.

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Abstract

This phenomenological multiple case study will investigate PK–12 teachers' experiences with the implementation of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs across New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. Despite widespread adoption of SEL—reported in over 80% of U.S. schools—teachers' perspectives on program alignment, challenges, and effectiveness remain underexplored. This study will be conducted in two qualitative stages. Stage One will employ individual interviews with participants selected from a screener survey administered through Qualtrics, establishing eligibility and capturing demographic data. Stage Two will utilize semi-structured focus groups to provide nuanced insights into teachers' lived experiences across grade bands (PK–2, 3–5, 6–8, and 9–12). Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) will be applied to identify recurring categories. This research will contribute to established literature by capturing qualitative insights, highlighting how teachers experience SEL implementation across grade bands. Implications for policy, practice, and future research will be discussed.

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This dissertation has been a true labor of love. Social-emotional learning is a topic that I have been passionate about for many years, and I know that passion will continue long after this dissertation is complete. This process has given me the opportunity to explore a topic that is deeply connected to who I am as an educator and to the work I believe is so important for students and teachers alike.

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Thank you to all of my professors along the way. Each of you contributed to this journey in different ways. You pushed me to think outside the box, question my assumptions, consider new perspectives, and become a more reflective educator and scholar.

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Dedication

This paper is dedicated to my parents, who have unconditionally supported me throughout every endeavor I have pursued, both educational and otherwise. Your steadfast belief in me has given me the confidence to chase every goal, no matter how big or small, and to believe that I could accomplish anything I set my mind to.

You have celebrated every success, encouraged me through every challenge, and always reminded me that I am capable of achieving anything I set my mind to. Your encouragement, love, and unwavering support are why I have continued learning, growing, and pursuing my dreams.

Without you, I would not be the person or educator that I am today. This accomplishment is as much yours as it is mine.

"Turns out not where, but who you're with that really matters."

— Dave Matthews Band, "The Best of What's Around"

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Introduction

> I have no doubt that the survival of the human race depends at least as much on the cultivation of social and emotional intelligence, as it does on the development of technical knowledge and skills. Most educators believe that the development of the whole child is an essential responsibility of schools, and this belief is what has motivated them to enter the profession (Darling-Hammond, 2015, p. 3).

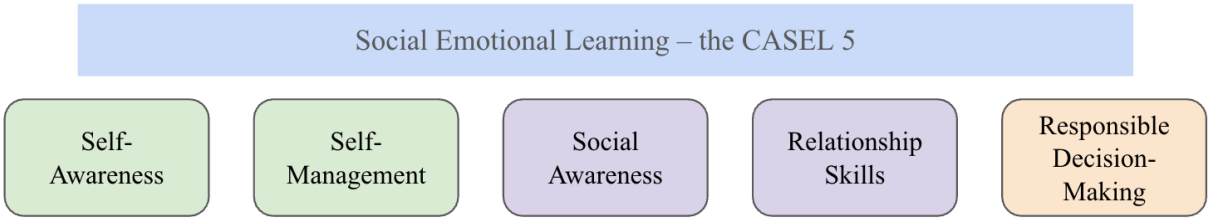
Darling-Hammond (2015) highlights the critical importance of social-emotional learning (SEL) in education. Furthermore, Darling-Hammond (2015) underscores the idea that schools should nurture not just academic achievement but also emotional well-being, empathy, resilience, and interpersonal skills. While SEL has become a prominent feature in education policy and programming over the last decade, its success often hinges on how teachers experience SEL within their own unique classroom environments. These perceptions and practices can vary widely across grade bands, shaped by differences in student developmental needs, curricular demands, teacher training, and institutional support.

Research Context

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which individuals develop and apply the skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve goals, show empathy for others, establish positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2020). SEL encompasses a range of competencies vital for success in both personal and academic settings (Durlak et al., 2011). CASEL identifies five core competencies: (1) self-awareness, (2) self-

management, (3) social awareness, (4) relationship skills, and (5) responsible decision-making that support effective SEL instruction, as shown in figure 1.1 (CASEL, 2003).

Figure 1.1. CASEL Five Core Competencies



Decades of research steadily supports the effectiveness of SEL programs, indicating that they often lead to improved academic performance, better mental health, and decreased problematic behaviors (Cipriano et al., 2023; Payton et al., 2008). Social-emotional learning has been shown to enhance students' academic performance by improving focus, self-regulation, and motivation (Durlak et al., 2011) and foster positive behaviors, such as reduced aggression and improved conflict resolution skills, leading to a more positive school climate (Payton et al., 2008). Over time attention to SEL contributes to improved mental health and well-being, equipping students with essential life skills for future success (Zins et al., 2007).

In PK–12 settings, teachers serve as the primary agents of SEL implementation, translating program frameworks, curricula, and district or school-level expectations into daily instructional practice (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Although many SEL initiatives are designed with structured curricula and evidence-based frameworks, programs vary widely in their scope, instructional design, fidelity expectations, professional development requirements, and levels of administrative and systemic support (CASEL, 2020; Humphrey et al., 2018). This variation contributes to inconsistent implementation across schools and grade levels, as teachers must interpret and adapt SEL programming within the constraints of their classroom

contexts, time demands, and competing instructional priorities (Greenberg et al., 2003; McClelland et al., 2017).

Despite teachers' central role in enacting SEL, much of the existing research has prioritized student outcomes and program efficacy, often treating teachers' perspectives as secondary or assuming fidelity of implementation without examining how educators experience and make sense of SEL in practice (Durlak et al., 2011; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Limited attention has been given to how teachers navigate competing academic pressures, respond to varying levels of institutional support, and reconcile personal beliefs with prescribed SEL curricula. As a result, there remains an incomplete understanding of teachers' lived experiences implementing SEL across diverse PK–12 contexts, highlighting a critical gap in the literature that this study sought to address.

SEL Implementation Policies

SEL emerged as an educational movement in the 1990s to support students' emotional development and academic success. By the 2023–2024 school year, 83% of school principals reported implementing an SEL curriculum (Skoog-Hoffman et al., 2024). However, barriers such as limited funding, resource constraints, and insufficient teacher training and preparation continue to challenge effective implementation (Buchanan et al., 2009; Jones et al., 2017). In response, districts are increasing teacher training and professional development, aligning SEL programs with existing curricula, fostering a supportive school culture, and pursuing community partnerships and external funding (Meland & Brion-Meisels, 2024; Weissberg et al., 2015; Zins et al., 2007). Efforts also include fostering supportive leadership and using implementation data to drive continuous improvement (Durlak et al., 2011). Still, success largely depends on classroom teachers, who are central to delivering SEL instruction with fidelity and meaning.

However, we do not really understand how teachers in different grade bands experience implementation of SEL.

Teachers' Experiences and Perceptions with SEL

Research indicates that teachers' perceptions - shaped by their experiences with training, implementation, and classroom outcomes - play a pivotal role in determining the effectiveness of SEL efforts. Sandilos and colleagues (2023), argue that teachers' experiences of SEL programs play a critical role in both the implementation and outcomes of these programs. Despite SEL's prominence in education policy and programming, research largely overlooks teachers' perspectives on what it means to implement SEL within the classroom context (Dyson et al., 2023). Studies argue that teachers' perceptions of SEL play a crucial role in its successful implementation and in achieving broader student outcomes (Brackett et al., 2012; Jones & Bouffard, 2012). The quality of implementation frequently differs across schools, influenced by the availability of appropriate strategies, adequate resources, and supportive policies (Domitrovich et al., 2008). Therefore, it is critical to examine how teachers' experiences with SEL programs across grade levels influence their implementation practices.

In particular, teachers' attitudes toward facilitating SEL—including their sense of preparedness, confidence, and beliefs about its relevance to student learning—are central to shaping implementation. These attitudes often determine not only whether SEL instruction is prioritized, but also how it is integrated into academic content and classroom culture.

Experience Across Grade Bands

Limited research has examined how SEL implementation varies across grade bands. The preponderance of research has focused on early childhood and elementary settings, where SEL is often integrated into daily routines and behavior management strategies (Durlak et al., 2011;

Jones & Bouffard, 2012). There is a dearth of research related to how SEL is implemented in middle and high school contexts, where academic demands increase and social-emotional needs become more complex (Rosen et al., 2022; Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). Taken together, literature suggests an urgent need to explore how teachers experience the implementation of SEL, including how their approaches, challenges, and perceptions vary across grade levels and developmental stages (Jones et al., 2013; Brackett et al., 2012). By centering the teacher's voice, this study aimed to contribute a more nuanced understanding of the contextual factors that influence SEL implementation and to inform developmentally appropriate supports for educators across the PK–12 spectrum.

Statement of the Problem

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has become a central feature of education in the United States, with most schools reporting that they have implemented some form of SEL programming or practice in recent years (CASEL, 2020; Jones et al., 2021). In fact, by the 2023–24 school year, 83% of principals reported using a formal SEL curriculum, up from just 46% in 2017–18, and nearly all states now maintain policies supportive of SEL (RAND, 2024). Additionally, during 2022–23, 81% of teachers indicated their school would place moderate or major emphasis on SEL (AIR, 2024). Despite this widespread adoption and a growing body of research highlighting SEL's positive impact on academic performance, mental health, and overall student well-being, schools continue to face significant barriers to consistent and effective implementation. Although many districts have embraced SEL initiatives, uneven delivery across classrooms and grade levels—often shaped by factors such as teacher preparedness, available resources and supports, and school leadership—leads to varied outcomes (Oberle et al., 2016; Thierry et al., 2022). In particular, insufficient training undermines teachers'

confidence in teaching social-emotional skills and ultimately affects the quality and impact of SEL programs being carried out (Smolkowski et al., 2022). Research also suggests that time constraints and the allocation of limited resources further exacerbate these implementation barriers, often leading to programs that are not sustained over time (Greenberg et al., 2001; Raich et al., 2024). Ultimately, these challenges prevent the effective implementation of SEL curricula in schools (Buchanan et al., 2009; Humphries et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2017; Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

The existing literature primarily addresses the effectiveness of SEL programs from a student-centered perspective, emphasizing both academic and behavioral outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011; Zins et al., 2007). However, less attention has been given to understanding the perspectives and experiences of teachers responsible for implementing SEL programs, especially across the PK–12 spectrum (Hunter et al., 2022). Understanding teachers' experiences, including the challenges they face and the strategies they employ to overcome them, are crucial for informing effective training, resource allocation, and policy development (Sandilos et al., 2023).

The current study explored how teachers across various grade bands (i.e., PK–2, 3–5, 6–8, 9–12) experience the implementation and integration of SEL programs within their instructional practices and curriculum. By examining these experiences, the research sought to identify the factors contributing to successful SEL integration and provide insights into the barriers that must be addressed to support more consistent and effective implementation across diverse educational settings.

This study foregrounds two primary challenges in the implementation of SEL across PK–12 settings: the variance in SEL programs themselves and the variance in how teachers implement these programs in their classrooms. The first challenge reflects the wide range of

curricula, frameworks, and models available to schools, each with different emphases and levels of evidence. The second challenge underscores how teacher implementation is shaped by factors such as preparedness, training, access to resources, and the realities of classroom contexts. Instruction varies considerably depending on the SEL program adopted and on how teachers themselves facilitate this instruction, highlighting both the variance of available programs and the variance of implementation that this study seeks to explore. Taken together, these two sources of variation create uneven experiences of SEL for both educators and students, making it critical to examine how teachers across grade bands navigate these complexities in their daily practice.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how teachers across different grade bands experience the implementation of SEL programs, with particular attention to the similarities and differences in their perceptions, practices, attitudes toward facilitation, and the challenges they encounter. While research demonstrates the benefits of SEL for students, such as improved academic achievement, social-emotional skills, and attitudes, less is known about how teachers themselves navigate SEL implementation in diverse classroom contexts (Cipriano et al., 2023). Brackett and colleagues (2012), using a survey of 935 teachers, found that teachers' familiarity with and commitment to SEL, along with adequate training, are essential for effective facilitation. Furthermore, research by Rimm-Kaufman et al. (2014) highlights that teachers' beliefs about the importance of SEL and their instructional practices significantly impact the quality of SEL implementation in classrooms. Moreover, previous research has also highlighted that teachers' beliefs, instructional practices, and developmental understanding influence the adoption and integration of SEL programs (Durlak et al., 2011; Yoder et al., 2021; Zins et al.,

2007). These studies collectively emphasize the critical role of teachers' experiences, their perceptions, their attitudes, and their practices in successfully adopting and integrating SEL programs within educational settings. Gaining insight into the contextual, instructional, and developmental factors at play will highlight how improvements in support and implementation strategies can positively impact teachers' views, leading to more effective adoption of SEL programs. Ultimately, the study's findings offer invaluable teacher perspectives on enhancing SEL implementation and support, fostering better and sustained outcomes for both students and educators.

Research Questions

Given the study context, purpose, and guiding literature, the following research questions will guide this study and examine how the experiences of PK–12 teachers shape how they view and implement social-emotional learning programs.

Primary Research Question: How do PK–12 teachers experience the implementation of social-emotional learning programs, and what similarities and differences emerge across these contexts?

Sub-questions:

1. What challenges and supports do teachers identify as influencing their implementation of SEL effectively?
2. How do PK–12 teachers compare their experiences implementing SEL programs by grade band?

Study Overview

This study was guided by the Interactive Systems Framework (ISF) (Wandersman et al., 2008; Lakshmi, 2019), which informed both the research design and the analytic approach. The

ISF identifies three interrelated systems: (1) Synthesis and Translation System, (2) Support System, and (3) Delivery System. Together, these systems work to bridge the gap between research and practice by shaping the development, translation, support, and implementation of innovations in various contexts. When applied to the context of SEL, the ISF highlights the importance of capacity-building and systemic support for translating SEL research into sustainable educational practices. In exploring the similarities and differences in how PK–12 teachers perceive and implement SEL programs, the ISF offers a valuable lens for understanding the multi-level teacher experiences that influence variations across grade bands (Ulla & Poom-Valickis, 2023).

Applied to this study, the ISF centers teachers as primary implementers of SEL by examining how they interpret SEL frameworks and program expectations (Synthesis and Translation), experience professional development and administrative support (Support), and implement SEL instruction within daily classroom practice (Delivery). Using this framework allowed for an examination of how multi-level influences contribute to similarities and differences in teachers' experiences implementing SEL across grade levels. This alignment supported the purpose of the study, which sought to explore how teachers experience SEL implementation and how those experiences vary across PK–12 contexts (Ulla & Poom-Valickis, 2023).

This qualitative phenomenological multiple case study (Moustaka, 1994) was employed to gather data from PK–12 teachers through individual and focus group interviews. This approach enabled the integration of multiple data sources and perspectives to better understand the complexity of SEL implementation in diverse educational settings (Lakshmi, 2019).

A screener survey included collecting and analyzing numerical data to establish teachers' demographic information (Craft, 2022). This helped identify qualified teachers for individual interviews and inform the groupings for the semi-structured focus group interviews, which will consist of open-ended questions grounded in Bloomberg's (2022) assertion that qualitative research fosters a profound understanding of participants' lived experiences. Overall, this study aimed to portray a deep comprehensive understanding of the diverse perspectives on implementing SEL programs and how they are perceived and implemented by PK–12 teachers to better inform school and district policies on SEL training and implementation.

Definition of terms

Given the study's purpose, guiding literature, and research questions, the following terms also informed the remainder of this dissertation:

1. **Curriculum:** intentionally sequenced set of lessons and learning experiences that explicitly target SEL competencies and integrate them into academic instruction, often following the SAFE framework (sequenced, active, focused, explicit) to ensure effectiveness (Durlak et al., 2011).
2. **Empathy:** understanding the perspectives of and showing concern for others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures, as part of developing social awareness (CASEL, 2020).
3. **Emotional intelligence (EI):** the ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and use emotions effectively in oneself and others, guiding thinking and behavior in adaptive ways (Salovey & Mayer, 1990).
4. **Emotional literacy:** the ability to identify, understand, and express one's emotions while empathizing with others, enabling individuals to regulate their feelings and foster supportive relationships within learning communities (Weare, 2004; Ciarrochi, Forgas, & Mayer, 2006).
5. **Explicit Instruction:** refers to the direct and intentional teaching of social and emotional competencies through evidence-based programs and structured lessons, ensuring that

students have dedicated opportunities to learn, practice, and reflect on these skills (CASEL, 2020).

6. **Interpersonal relationships:** the ongoing social connections between individuals that involve mutual interaction, communication, and influence, and are built on skills such as empathy, cooperation, and conflict resolution (Denham, 2006).
7. **Pedagogy**: Pedagogy refers to the theory and practice of teaching—the intentional selection and use of instructional approaches designed to improve student learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).
8. **Responsible decision-making:** the ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior and social interactions, based on ethical standards, safety, social norms, and anticipated consequences for oneself and others (Weissberg et al., 2015).
9. **Self-awareness:** refers to the ability to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values, recognize personal strengths and limitations, and connect this understanding to behavior across contexts (CASEL, 2020).
10. **Social Awareness**: taking the perspective of and empathizing with others from diverse backgrounds, recognizing social and ethical norms, and identifying available resources and supports in one's environment (Lawson et al., 2019; Blewitt et al., 2018).
11. **Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)**: the process through which children and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, build and sustain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Weissberg et al., 2015).

Summary

This chapter introduced a research study on how teachers view and experience SEL implementation in their daily practice, presents an overview of the study's context and problem, and identifies the research questions and rationale. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on current SEL curriculum, SEL outcomes, teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards SEL, teachers' experiences with SEL, and SEL implementation across grade levels. Throughout Chapter 2, the reviewed literature examines the similarities and differences in how PK–12 teachers perceive and implement SEL programs within their instructional practices and curricula. Chapter 3 details the

research design and qualitative phenomenological multiple case study methodology guiding this study. This chapter outlines the participant selection and recruitment strategies, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures for the survey and focus groups. Chapter 4 includes participant profiles within grade bands and details the findings that emerged from the survey and focus group analysis. The study's conclusions highlight teachers' experiences with SEL implementation and how the similarities and differences in their experiences impact the implementation of these programs in PK–12 classroom settings. Moreover, this chapter also highlights how teacher participants react to barriers to SEL implementation and their ability to overcome them. Finally, Chapter 5 analyzes the findings from Chapter 4 through discourse and literature. This chapter also includes proposed conclusions and potential recommendations.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Introduction

This literature review explores how teachers perceive and experience the implementation and integration of SEL programs into their daily practice, with attention to how these experiences vary across different grade levels. This literature review aims to provide a robust background of information that shows the reader the similarities and differences in how PK to 12 teachers perceive and implement SEL programs, and how these differing perspectives shape the quality and consistency of SEL implementation. By examining topics related to Current Curriculum, SEL Outcomes, Teachers' Beliefs and Attitudes, Teachers' Experiences with SEL, and SEL Implementation Across Grade Levels and the similarities and differences in teacher perspectives and practices, this review seeks to identify specific factors that facilitate or hinder the effective implementation of SEL across grade levels. This literature review notes gaps in literature examining how teachers' experiences vary across different grade levels, which this dissertation research aims to address.

Historical Background

The roots of SEL can be traced to early 20th century educational and psychological theories that emphasized the development of the whole child. Influential figures such as John Dewey, a prominent American philosopher and educator, advocated for an educational system that nurtured not only cognitive growth but also emotional and social development. Dewey argued that education should prepare individuals for democratic participation fostering cooperation, communication and moral reasoning (Dewey, 1938; Elias et al., 1997; Quay, 2019). Although early efforts to address students' emotional and behavioral needs existed, throughout the mid-20th century, SEL did not gain formal recognition until the late 20th century. In the

1960s and 1970s, initiatives such as character education and life skills training began to lay the groundwork for structured SEL programs. During this period, the "humanistic education" movement gained traction, influenced by Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers (Feigenbaum, 2023). Their approach emphasized emotional intelligence, self-actualization, and personal growth. Thus, laying a foundation for what would encompass SEL, such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which emphasized that psychological safety and belonging were prerequisites for effective learning (Clay, 2002; Maslow, 1943).

SEL emerged in response to growing awareness that cognitive development alone was insufficient for students' success in school and life (Zins & Elias, 2007). During the late 1990s and early 2000s, research increasingly supported the connection between SEL and positive student outcomes, including improved academic performance, behavior, and emotional regulation (Durlak et al., 2011). This evidence helped to establish SEL as a critical component of education reform, particularly in response to concerns about school climate, youth mental health, and equity. SEL gained formal recognition in the 1990s with the establishment of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), at the University of Illinois at Chicago by Daniel Goleman, who provided a clear definition and framework for SEL that has since guided research, policy, and practice (Osher et al., 2016). Today, SEL is recognized as an essential component of education, shaping not just academic outcomes but also the holistic development of students as empathetic, resilient, and socially responsible individuals (Mahoney et al., 2021; Panayiotou et al., 2019).

In recent scholarship, SEL has materialized as a cornerstone of providing a holistic education, gaining traction across PK–12 educational settings (Lawson et al., 2019; Mahoney et al., 2021). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 encouraged states to include non-

academic indicators of school quality, further legitimizing SEL as a priority in educational policy (Dusenbury et al., 2015). Today, SEL is widely adopted at the district and state level, although implementation varies based on factors such as school leadership and teacher readiness. Dermody & Dusenbury (2022) reported that all 50 states had free-standing early childhood and PK standards and 27 states had free-standing K to 12 SEL standards as of 2022. Recognized for its role in supporting students' emotional well-being, academic engagement, and long-term success, SEL programs are increasingly being embedded into school curricula.

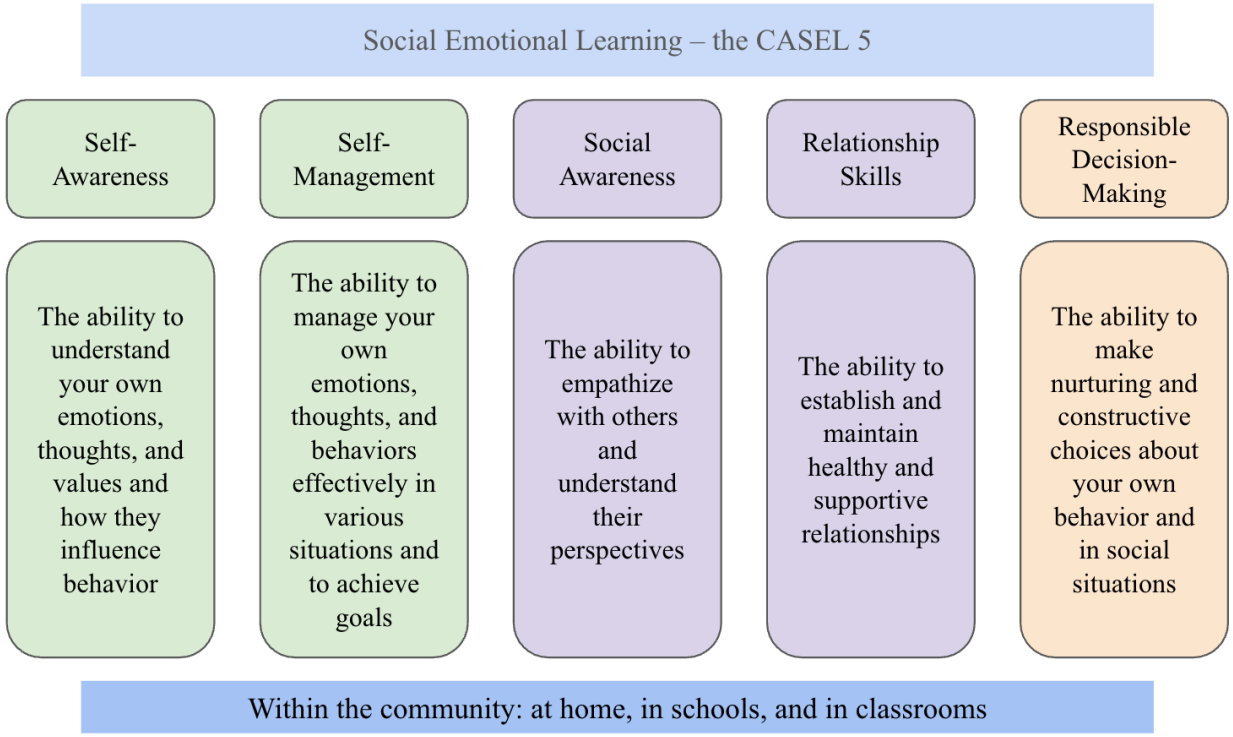
More recently, SEL is a term that encompasses a range of concepts such as character education, 21st-century skills, soft skills, employability skills, social skills, and trauma-informed practices (Jones et al., 2021). Despite growing support and policy mandates for SEL, its implementation remains inconsistent (Durlak et al., 2011). One contributing factor is the variation in how teachers across different grade levels understand, value, and implement SEL in their classrooms (Humphries et al., 2018; Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021). This variation in teacher understanding and practice suggests that formal standards and policies alone are insufficient to ensure consistent SEL implementation across classrooms.

Defining Social-Emotional Learning

The definition of SEL has evolved over the past century as a framework that supports individuals in developing essential interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. These include managing emotions, setting positive goals, feeling and showing empathy for others, maintaining positive relationships, and making responsible decisions (Jones-Schenk, 2019). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), one of the most prominent organizations in this field, identifies five core competencies for SEL: (1) self-awareness, (2) self-management, (3) social awareness, (4) relationship skills, and (5) responsible

decision-making that support effective SEL instruction (CASEL, 2003). Together, these competencies provide a framework for understanding the social and emotional skills that support students' personal development, interpersonal relationships, and decision-making. Rather than functioning as isolated skills, the five competencies are interconnected and collectively contribute to students' ability to understand and regulate their emotions, navigate social situations, develop and maintain positive relationships, and make constructive choices (CASEL, 2020). As such, the CASEL framework provides a foundation for organizing and implementing effective SEL instruction across educational settings. Figure 2.1 illustrates the five core competencies and their interconnected role within CASEL's broader conceptualization of social and emotional learning (CASEL, 2020).

Figure 2.1. CASEL 5 Core Competencies Explained



In the past decade, the definition of SEL has expanded to include culturally responsive and equity-focused practices. Jagers and colleagues (2018) proposed an "equity lens" for SEL

that considers systemic inequalities and promotes inclusivity and social justice, urging that SEL should support all students' identities and lived experiences. In 2020, CASEL amended their definition to include educational equity in their definition of SEL (CASEL, 2020). The revised definition states, "SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions" (CASEL, 2020, What is the CASEL Framework section). In schools, SEL programs vary widely as do their associated curricula.

Social Emotional Learning Programs and Curricula

SEL has become an essential component of holistic education, and leading organizations have identified key elements of effective SEL implementation. The growing emphasis on SEL in educational settings reflects a broader understanding of student development that extends beyond academic achievement to encompass character education, social skills, and ethical decision-making (Devaney et al., 2005; Jones et al., 2021). SEL curricula and programs have become ubiquitous with whole-student educational programming in many K-12 schools (Mahoney et al., 2021). Two leading organizations, The Wallace Foundation and CASEL, have played a significant role in defining the characteristics of high-quality SEL programming.

The Wallace Foundation (2021, 2022) provides comprehensive guidance for educators and policymakers through its analysis of SEL curricula. Central to its approach is the "SAFE" framework, which outlines four foundational characteristics of high-quality SEL programs:

- Sequenced: Skills are built in a logical, connected order.
- Active: Learning is experiential and participatory.
- Focused: Instruction targets specific social-emotional competencies.

- Explicit: Skills are clearly articulated and taught directly.

These principles serve as a benchmark for designing and evaluating programs and are essential in ensuring that SEL instruction leads to meaningful and sustained student outcomes.

Similarly, CASEL, identified as one of the largest SEL organizations, identifies three key curricula components of effective SEL implementation:

(1) explicit SEL instruction,
(2) integration into academic instruction, and
(3) a supportive classroom climate (CASEL, 2020; Dussault & Thompson, 2024).

Explicit instruction delivers targeted teaching of social-emotional competencies, while integration into academic instruction and a supportive classroom climate reinforce these skills throughout the students' daily experiences. Together, these components form a comprehensive framework that supports both academic success and the holistic development of all students (CASEL, 2020; Dussault & Thompson, 2024). Each component will be deconstructed individually in the sections that follow.

Explicit Instruction

The first of the CASEL's recommended components, explicit instruction, is characterized by focused teaching of SEL competencies. This approach has gained traction for its structured, reproducible methods that ensure that students not only understand SEL concepts but also have regular opportunities to develop and practice these skills. By dedicating time specifically for SEL, educators can address developmental needs systematically and ensure that all students receive equitable access to these critical life skills (Mahoney et. at., 2021). Rooted in cognitive-behavioral and social learning theories, this approach operates under the idea that behaviors and skills can be explicitly taught, modeled, and reinforced (Bandura, 1977; Jones & Bouffard,

2012). This distinguishes it from more implicit or embedded strategies, where SEL skills are learned incidentally through academic or social experiences.

Numerous studies underscore the effectiveness of explicit instruction for SEL in PK–12 settings. A landmark meta-analysis by Durlak et al. (2011) examined 213 school-based SEL programs and found that those utilizing explicit, sequenced, and active teaching strategies, core principles of explicit instruction, produced significantly better outcomes in student behavior, emotional regulation, and academic performance. Similarly, Taylor et al. (2017) reported that programs employing structured SEL curricula, such as PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies) and Second Step led to measurable improvements in students' social competence and academic achievement. These programs are grounded in structured lessons, scaffolding, and skills practice, reinforcing SEL through a predictable and deliberate format.

Explicit instruction has been successfully adapted across all developmental stages, from preschool to high school. In early childhood settings, programs like the Incredible Years and Al's Pals use scripted lessons, stories, puppets, and role play to introduce foundational SEL concepts (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2021). In elementary and middle schools, programs such as Second Step and Positive Action deliver SEL through weekly lessons that build progressively on students' developmental capacities (Cook et al., 2015). At the high school level, explicit instruction is often adapted to adolescents' cognitive and social maturity through peer discussions, case studies, and reflective writing (Brackett et al., 2011). This demonstrates that explicit SEL instruction needs to be developmentally responsive and adaptable so educators can tailor strategies to meet the needs of students at every grade level.

While explicit instruction in SEL offers clarity and fidelity, its success hinges on professional development and consistent, high-quality implementation. Jones et al. (2014)

emphasizes the importance of preparing educators to deliver SEL content effectively. However, time constraints and the pressure to prioritize academic content may limit opportunities for regular SEL instruction, highlighting the need for administrative support and integration with academic standards. Although explicit instruction has a robust evidence base, some scholars caution that scripted programs may lack the cultural responsiveness and situational flexibility needed to fully engage diverse student populations or address real-time interpersonal dynamics (Jagers et al., 2018). This points to the importance of understanding teachers' experiences implementing SEL programs. Without proper training, administrative support, flexibility, and the ability to be responsive, even well-designed programs may not be effective.

Integrated Instruction

The second recommended CASEL component, effective implementation of SEL in academic instruction, often involves a blended approach where SEL is infused into core subjects rather than taught as a stand-alone program. Integrating SEL into academic lessons enables teachers to incorporate SEL into core subjects, thereby making the skills more meaningful and contextually relevant (Ingram et al., 2021). According to Jones et al. (2014), integrating SEL into daily instructional practices creates consistent opportunities for students to practice social-emotional skills within authentic academic contexts. CASEL (2020) advocates for three signature practices: welcoming routines, engaging strategies, and optimistic closures as foundational structures for embedding SEL into any lesson.

Curriculum models such as the Responsive Classroom and RULER provide frameworks for SEL integration across disciplines (Brackett et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2021). These models emphasize teacher training, classroom climate, and structured interactions as key components. Responsive Classroom (RC) integrates SEL with academics in order to build a positive school

community (Responsive Classroom, n.d.). Abry and colleagues (2013) found that teachers trained in RC, which incorporates activities such as morning meeting, quiet time, and closing circles into the school day, experienced more positive interactions with their students. Furthermore, their findings provide support between SEL initiatives and the development of positive and supportive classroom environments. Yale's RULER program, following the Understanding by Design framework, ensures that emotional learning is integrated into daily instruction at all grade levels. The program provides tools, such as a Class Charter, that support teachers in creating a positive classroom climate (Brackett et al., 2019).

SEL integration into instructional practices is met with challenges, which leads to less effective implementation. Teachers frequently report a lack of time, training, and resources to effectively implement SEL alongside academic content (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Resistance may also stem from misconceptions that SEL is peripheral to academic success or that it imposes on instructional time (Greenberg et al., 2017). While research shows that SEL-integrated instruction positively impacts both student behavior and academic performance, the focus here is on how SEL can be woven into content-area instruction rather than as a standalone curriculum.

Research indicates that cross-disciplinary approaches, such as combining SEL with literacy or science instruction, enhance both academic and social-emotional outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011; Zins et al., 2007). For example, SEL can be effectively integrated into science instruction by promoting collaborative inquiry and reflective practices, which foster skills such as empathy, communication, and responsible decision-making (Zins et al., 2004). Ingram et al. (2021) demonstrate that a science-based curriculum, specifically, the "SEL Arthropod" module, can simultaneously cultivate students' social-emotional competencies and scientific understanding, as evidenced by students' reflections on both arthropods and human interactions.

Integrating SEL competencies into literature instruction, such as through thoughtful picture-book read-alouds, enhances early literacy while fostering students' self-awareness, social awareness, and interpersonal skills (Deliman, 2024). Martinie et al. (2025) assert that by leveraging the Standards for Mathematical Practice–such as reasoning, precision, and perseverance–social emotional competencies can be taught and reinforced alongside mathematical concepts, effectively integrating SEL into everyday math lessons.

Therefore, teacher buy-in and professional development are critical to overcoming these barriers. Professional development and ongoing coaching are essential to helping teachers learn how to embed SEL into instructional routines in ways that feel manageable (Durlak et al, 2011). The integration of SEL into academic instruction is a promising yet complex endeavor. While research supports its efficacy, successful implementation depends on structural support, teacher readiness, and thoughtful curriculum design. Teachers need support to recognize and appreciate SEL as more than an "add-on" but rather as a thread that runs through instruction.

Supportive Classroom Climate

A result of the turn toward the environmental factors that influence CASEL's success, the final recommended CASEL core component is a supportive classroom climate. Classroom climate encompasses the emotional, social, and academic tone of the classroom environment and involves students feeling emotionally safe, respected, and valued (CASEL, 2020). This strategy enhances students' readiness to learn and provides a foundation for SEL to be successful. A supportive classroom climate is characterized additionally by emotional warmth and inclusive practices and is foundational to effective SEL implementation in PK–12 settings (Mahoney et al., 2021). Research consistently shows that when students feel emotionally and physically safe, engaged, and connected to teachers and peers, they are more likely to benefit from SEL

programs (Osher et al., 2014; Zins et al., 2007). Pianta et al. (2012) identifies three core dimensions of classroom climate relevant to SEL: (1) emotional support, (2) classroom organization, and (3) instructional support. SEL programs, particularly those embedded in daily classroom routines, often emphasize teacher-student relationships, peer interactions, and emotional regulation, key components of a nurturing classroom climate (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Therefore, a supportive classroom climate is not only a factor but also a contributor to SEL growth.

Several studies have shown that supportive classroom climates amplify the effects of SEL programs. For example, Rimm-Kaufman et al. (2014) found that programs, such as the Responsive Classroom approach, improved teacher-student relationships and student prosocial behavior, especially when implemented in emotionally supportive environments. Similarly, Havik et al. (2020) noted that perceived teacher emotional support predicted students' social competence and reduced behavior problems. These findings align with broader research linking positive classroom climates to increased academic achievement, improved emotional regulation, and reduced disciplinary incidents (Bear et al., 2017; Thapa et al., 2013). Classroom climate also affects the fidelity and sustainability of SEL programs; teachers are more likely to implement SEL with consistency when they perceive the classroom culture as cooperative and manageable (Collie et al., 2012; Malloy et al., 2015). Because teachers' experiences and perceptions of their classroom environment significantly influence both their instructional practices and their willingness to implement programs like SEL; when teachers feel supported by a positive classroom climate, they are more consistent and effective in their teaching.

Despite its importance, building and maintaining a supportive classroom climate in PK–12 settings is complex. Factors such as teacher burnout, large class sizes, punitive discipline

policies, and implicit bias can undermine efforts to create inclusive and emotionally supportive spaces (Gregory et al., 2016). Moreover, equitable SEL implementation requires cultural responsiveness and attention to the diverse social, racial, and linguistic backgrounds of students (Jagers et al., 2019). Studies emphasize that climate-building must go hand-in-hand with adult SEL and professional development. Teachers need support to reflect on their own emotional competencies and biases in order to model SEL and foster supportive environments effectively (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). To nurture more equitable SEL implementation practices, recent frameworks advocate for systemic SEL that integrates climate-building at the school and district levels, rather than limiting SEL to classroom-level interventions (Mahoney et al., 2021). Programs such as the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model and CASEL's District Resource Center provide tools for aligning policies, leadership, and school culture with SEL goals. Understanding PK–12 teachers' experiences with strategically and intentionally attending to a supportive classroom climate benefits SEL implementation.

SEL Outcomes

Research consistently shows that high-quality SEL programs positively influence student outcomes across developmental stages, enhancing academic performance, emotional regulation, social behavior, and long-term success (Blewitt et al., 2018; Cipriano et al., 2023; Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). These programs foster five core competencies outlined by CASEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

Academic Performance is significantly impacted by SEL, which supports cognitive and academic development by promoting focus, motivation, and classroom engagement. Studies show that students with strong SEL skills perform better in reading, writing, and critical thinking

(Alzahrani et al., 2019; Galbraith, 2005; MacCann et al., 2019). Research conducted by Durlak et al. (2011) supports that SEL programming increases K-12 students' academic performance. Their review, which synthesized data from 213 school-based, universal SEL programs involving 270,034 students from kindergarten through high school, found an 11-percentile gain in academic achievement among students participating in SEL programs (Durlak et al., 2011). Thus, program fidelity is critical, higher engagement and consistent implementation yield better academic outcomes, particularly in early childhood and middle school (Brackett et al., 2012; Cook et al., 2018; Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2021; White et al., 2023). These findings underscore that when SEL is implemented with fidelity, it not only promotes prosocial behavior and emotional regulation but also improves academic success, making it essential in educational practices.

Emotional regulation is central to SEL's impact on learning and behavior. Among the core competencies of SEL, emotional regulation is central to fostering both academic success and psychological well-being, a concept supported by Jones et al. (2014), who discusses the relatedness of SEL and classroom management. Typically, students who have strong SEL skills, such as managing emotions, listening attentively, and working cooperatively with others, are likely to be less disruptive and better equipped to take advantage of classroom instruction. Programs improve students' ability to manage emotions, reduce stress, and navigate social challenges (Durlak et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2014). SEL fosters a positive classroom climate, especially when programs are culturally responsive and implemented with fidelity (Jones et al., 2017; Pollak et al., 2024; Rivers et al., 2013). Because emotional regulation is not only a desired outcome of SEL but also a way through which SEL influences other educational and behavioral outcomes, it is foundational to both academic and behavioral success.

Social Behavior is positively shaped by SEL programs, which cultivate positive behaviors necessary for positive relationships. SEL significantly enhances students' empathy, cooperation, and conflict resolution skills. Programs like Second Step and PATHS improve school climate and reduce bullying (Cipriano et al., 2021; Greenberg et al., 2003; Zins et al., 2007). Long-term studies show SEL predicts better social functioning and fewer behavioral problems into adulthood (Jones et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2017; You et al., 2023). However, success depends on program consistency and cultural relevance (Domitrovich et al., 2008; Jagers et al., 2019). By fostering positive relationships and reducing behavioral problems, SEL programs create the foundation for healthier peer relationships and school climate, both essential components of classroom success and long-term social development.

Beyond academics, SEL prepares students for **life success**. Implementing SEL in schools is increasingly recognized as a critical factor in promoting students' long-term success, both academically and personally. Competencies such as emotional regulation and responsible decision-making are linked to improved health, financial stability, and lower rates of substance abuse (Moffitt et al., 2011). Early SEL skills predict high school graduation, college completion, and job stability (Jones et al., 2015). As employers increasingly value SEL-related skills, integrating SEL into education helps students succeed in both school and adulthood (OECD, 2015). These outcomes highlight that SEL is an essential component in preparing students for life beyond the classroom.

The degree to which these benefits are realized depends not only on the program but also how it is implemented. Understanding the implementation gap across grade bands is a key part to leverage SEL to achieve these outcomes. The following section will show that without these structures SEL programs will fall short of their impact.

SEL Implementation

Implementation Supports

The effective implementation of SEL within schools requires a complex approach, including **structural, instructional, and leadership supports** (Jones et al., 2021). Establishing school wide norms and policies is fundamental to creating an environment conducive to successful SEL implementation. Collaboratively developed norms contribute to a positive school climate and make SEL standards actionable (Wang & Degol, 2016). Additionally, embedding SEL into strategic plans, budgetary decisions, and instructional practices ensures its integration across all school systems (Mahoney, 2024).

Structural Supports

Structural supports at the school level lay the groundwork for effective implementation of SEL practices. The foundation begins with school norms, policies, and procedures that emphasize emotional and physical safety (Mahoney, 2024). These include key elements such as:

- school norms - shared values within the community
- policies - behavior policy, dedicated time, and curriculum
- leadership practices
- institutional readiness - a school's ability to effectively support its students
- opportunities for collaboration

These elements create the conditions under which SEL can be successfully adopted and sustained (CASEL, n.d.; Jones et al., 2018).

Teachers' experiences within the organizational system are crucial to translating structural SEL supports into effective practice. When well supported, teachers integrate SEL practices into their daily instruction and create emotionally supportive classroom climates that reflect and reinforce structural supports (Brackett et al., 2019; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Thus,

structured supports either empower or constrain teachers' ability to consistently implement SEL practices (Brackett et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2018). Research shows teachers report more positive experiences and feel more confident with SEL when school culture promotes safety, inclusion, and supportive relationships (Fu et al., 2022; Osher et al., 2016). These practices not only help students feel secure but also empower teachers to address emotional and interpersonal issues more effectively. When structural supports are absent or loosely enforced, teachers often encounter challenges in aligning SEL with classroom management and instructional goals (Durlak et al., 2011).

Instructional Supports

Instructional support that honors teacher autonomy plays a vital role in the fidelity and effectiveness of SEL implementation. Teacher autonomy - the ability to make professional decisions regarding instructional practices and classroom management - has been shown to positively impact both engagement and sustainability of SEL implementation (Vangrieken et al., 2017; Jones & Bouffard, 2012). When educators feel a sense of ownership and agency in delivering SEL content, they are more likely to engage meaningfully with the material and integrate it authentically into their teaching (Collie et al., 2012). Conversely, mandating strict fidelity in implementation without affording teachers autonomy can lead to negative effects on both student development and teacher motivation (Dusenbury et al., 2003).

Teachers' experiences related to training and ongoing professional development are crucial to translating structural SEL supports into effective practice. Opportunities for teacher collaboration and support significantly enhance how teachers experience SEL implementation. Teachers benefit from collaborative spaces such as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), where they can share strategies, reflect on challenges, and co-develop SEL practices (Collie et

al., 2015). Teacher collaboration and mentorship are especially important in fostering collective efficacy, which contributes to more consistent and confident use of SEL in classrooms (Cipriano et al., 2023; Greg et al., 2024). Without structured opportunities for collaboration, teachers may feel isolated in their efforts, limiting the effectiveness and sustainability of SEL programs (Jennings & Frank, 2015).

Implementing SEL effectively requires both teacher commitment and comprehensive instructional support to manage the demands of the role/work. SEL implementation in schools is widely recognized as a multifaceted process that depends heavily on the involvement and commitment of teachers. Research has consistently shown that teachers are expected to not only successfully implement SEL programs but also facilitate the learning climate, act as role models of SEL competencies, and remain key contributors to sustaining SEL culture (Brackett et al., 2019; Jones & Kahn, 2017). Brackett and colleagues (2019) emphasize the importance of teachers demonstrating emotional regulation to create supportive classroom environments, while Jones and Kahn (2017) highlight teachers' roles in embedding SEL principles into daily instructional practices to foster students' social awareness and responsible decision-making.

Leadership Supports

Leadership plays a critical role in shaping teachers' experiences with SEL implementation. When school leaders actively promote SEL as a core component of the educational mission—through clear communication, policy alignment, and strategic integration—teachers are more likely to view SEL as a shared priority rather than an isolated classroom task (Brackett et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2018). Leadership support often includes administrative backing, professional development, time allocation, and modeling of emotional competence, all of which strengthen organizational commitment and teacher motivation

(Cipriano et al., 2020). In contrast, a lack of leadership engagement can result in fragmented efforts and hinder the sustainability of SEL practices (Thierry et al., 2023). Schools that embed SEL into strategic plans and schoolwide goals are more likely to sustain implementation over time (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

School readiness is another significant factor shaping how teachers perceive and experience SEL initiatives. Readiness includes the alignment of staff beliefs, available resources, time allocation, and administrative support necessary for meaningful implementation (Domitrovich et al., 2008). Teachers in schools with high readiness tend to experience greater coherence in SEL messaging and practices, which contributes to increased buy-in and fidelity to program goals (Oberle et al., 2016). In contrast, in schools where readiness is low, due to a lack of training, limited materials, or competing priorities, teachers often feel overwhelmed and unprepared, leading to inconsistent SEL delivery (Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

Implementation Across Grade Bands

While SEL is widely recognized as beneficial across all grade levels, the majority of research and program development has focused primarily on early childhood and elementary education (Durlak et al., 2011; Jones & Bouffard, 2012). In these settings, SEL strategies often emphasize classroom routines, behavior management, and foundational skills such as emotion recognition and regulation (Jones et al., 2021; Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). Teachers in early grades typically integrate SEL within daily activities and use concrete, developmentally appropriate methods to build social skills. Conversely, middle and high school SEL implementation is less studied and more varied, with teachers reporting challenges related to academic pressures and adolescent developmental complexities—information processing, reasoning, executive functioning, identity development, self-efficacy, and self-esteem (Rosen et

al., 2022). The relative scarcity of research in secondary settings points to a need for understanding how teachers experience and adapt SEL in these contexts (Ulla & Poom-Valickis, 2023).

Developmental differences among students from preschool through high school necessitate differentiated SEL approaches (Mahoney et al., 2021). Younger students benefit from explicit instruction in basic social-emotional skills embedded in daily classroom routines, while older students require SEL programming that addresses identity formation, peer relationships, and higher-order emotional competencies (Jones et al., 2013; Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). Adolescents face unique social-emotional challenges, including increased self-awareness and social development and interactions, which impact their engagement with SEL curricula (Farley & Kim-Spoon, 2014). Research highlights that SEL curricula must be tailored to meet the developmental needs of students to promote meaningful engagement and effective social-emotional learning (Mahoney et al., 2021).

Tailoring SEL for different grade bands involves adapting both the content and delivery methods to align with students' cognitive and emotional maturity (Durlak et al., 2011; Jones & Bouffard, 2012). In early childhood and elementary grades, SEL is often embedded into play-based learning and teacher-led activities that scaffold skill development (Durlak et al., 2011). Middle and high school programs may incorporate peer collaboration, reflective practices, and opportunities for autonomy to resonate with adolescent learners (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Rosen et al., 2022). Teachers' perceptions and experiences play a critical role in how SEL is delivered at each level, with their comfort and confidence influencing program fidelity and student outcomes (Brackett et al., 2012). Moreover, developmental appropriateness includes recognizing

the increasing importance of social identity and cultural factors as students' progress through grade levels, requiring SEL frameworks to be flexible and inclusive (Dyson et al., 2023).

Barriers to SEL Implementation

Social and Emotional Learning has been widely recognized for its positive impact on students' academic, social, and emotional development across all grade levels (Mahoney et al., 2021). However, despite increasing support for SEL, implementation challenges persist across PK–12 education (Buchanan et al., 2009; Jones et al., 2017). These barriers vary in nature and intensity depending on the developmental stage and educational context.

In preschool and elementary settings, one consistent barrier is the lack of teacher training and confidence with implementing SEL instruction (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Many early childhood educators report feeling underprepared to integrate SEL into their curriculum, especially when balancing academic demands with social-emotional goals (Humphries et al., 2018). Additionally, early childhood programs often face resource limitations, including insufficient materials and time allotted for SEL activities (Humphries et al., 2018). The developmental diversity of young children also challenges educators to differentiate SEL strategies to meet varied readiness levels (Bierman et al., 2017).

The transition to middle school brings new social-emotional challenges that affect SEL implementation. Research indicates that middle school educators struggle with engaging adolescents who face increasing self-awareness and complex social situations with peers, which can impact their responsiveness to SEL curricula (Dusenbury & Weissberg, 2017). Structural factors such as departmentalized scheduling and increased academic pressures reduce opportunities for consistent SEL instruction (Jones et al., 2017).

High schools encounter distinct barriers, including competing academic priorities and less flexibility in school schedules to incorporate SEL (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Research shows that SEL curricula often lack developmental tailoring for older adolescents, which decreases student engagement and perceived relevance (Mahoney et al., 2021). Additionally, high school educators frequently report insufficient professional development focused on SEL implementation for this age group (Jones et al., 2017).

Across all grade bands, systemic challenges such as limited funding, inconsistent leadership support, and unclear SEL implementation policies hinder sustainable integration (Cipriano et al., 2023; Thierry et al., 2022). The variability in school climates and teacher beliefs about SEL's role in education further complicate implementation efforts (Taylor et al., 2017). Research underscores that SEL implementation success requires addressing these contextual barriers with comprehensive, multi-level strategies that account for developmental differences (Mahoney et al., 2021).

Teachers' Experiences with SEL

Teachers' Beliefs and Attitudes toward facilitating SEL

Teachers' beliefs and attitudes significantly shape the implementation of SEL in schools (Ferreira et al., 2020). Research consistently indicates that when educators believe in the value of SEL, they are more likely to integrate it meaningfully into their daily teaching practices (Brackett et al., 2012; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Teachers who perceive SEL as aligned with their professional values and educational goals often become critical advocates for school-wide SEL initiatives (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Conversely, skepticism about the academic relevance or appropriateness of SEL can lead to minimal or superficial implementation (Wigelsworth et al., 2022).

Some educators express concerns about the growing expectations placed on addressing students' emotional and social development, particularly in the absence of clear guidance or sufficient support (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Perceptions of the value and relevance of SEL are deeply tied to educators' broader understanding of student success (Brackett et al., 2012).

Teachers who view SEL as essential to academic achievement, student behavior, and classroom climate are more likely to integrate SEL practices with fidelity (Jones et al., 2013). Multiple studies have shown that educators who recognize the long-term benefits of SEL, such as improved emotional regulation, peer relationships, and school engagement, are more enthusiastic participants in SEL initiatives (Durlak et al., 2011; Domitrovich et al., 2008). However, perceptions of SEL's relevance may vary depending on grade level, subject area, and the sociocultural context of the school. For example, secondary educators often report lower perceived relevance of SEL, particularly when faced with pressures to cover standardized content (Brackett et al., 2012). Moreover, teachers in under-resourced or high-stress environments may struggle to prioritize SEL amidst competing demands, despite recognizing its potential value (Dyson et al., 2023).

Teachers' self-efficacy, their belief in their own ability to teach SEL effectively, is a critical predictor of implementation quality (Collie et al., 2012). Confidence in facilitating SEL often develops through experience, observation of successful practice, and supportive training environments (Oliveira et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2024). Teachers with high self-efficacy are more likely to adopt student-centered approaches, persist in the face of challenges, and adjust their strategies to meet diverse student needs (Jennings et al., 2011). Conversely, low self-efficacy can serve as a barrier to effective implementation (Dowling & Barry, 2020, Schonert-Reichl; 2017). Educators may feel unprepared to address complex emotional issues, particularly when working

with students experiencing trauma or behavioral challenges. These insecurities can result in avoidance of SEL practices or reliance on scripted curricula without authentic engagement (Reyes et al., 2012).

One of the most consistently reported outcomes of school interventions, such as SEL implementation, is the strengthening of teacher-student relationships (Allen et al., 2018; Boat et al., 2025; Coelho & Sousa, 2018). SEL programs that emphasize empathy, communication, and emotional awareness contribute to more positive interactions and increased trust (Zins et al., 2007; Oberle et al., 2016). Teachers often describe how SEL has enhanced their understanding of students' needs and perspectives, leading to a more positive classroom climate through better classroom management (Abry et al., 2013; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Such relationships are not only beneficial for students' social-emotional development but also reinforce teachers' sense of purpose and connection to their work. Educators frequently cite improved relationships with students as a primary source of professional fulfillment when engaging in SEL (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Quality training and ongoing professional development (PD) are central to teachers' ability to implement SEL effectively (Greenberg et al., 2017; Ibarra, 2022). Research underscores the importance of PD that is sustained, practice-based, and embedded within the school context (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Educators who receive structured SEL training report greater clarity, confidence, and commitment to SEL integration (Yoder, 2014). Professional development that incorporates modeling, reflection, and opportunities for collaboration appears particularly impactful (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). When teachers are equipped with theoretical knowledge, practical tools, and strategies, they are more likely to engage in intentional and consistent SEL practices. Moreover, teachers value PD that addresses

their own emotional competencies and well-being, not just instructional practices (Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

Implementation of SEL is highly variable and often contingent upon various factors. Teachers with prior SEL training or experience tend to exhibit a more nuanced understanding and greater fidelity in delivering SEL instruction (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Additionally, school-level supports, such as administrative buy-in, clear policies, and collaboration, can significantly influence how and to what extent SEL is integrated (CASEL, 2020; Lane et al., 2020). In contrast, newer teachers, or those in schools without a strong SEL culture, may struggle to implement SEL in a consistent or meaningful way (Oliveira, 2021). In such environments, SEL is often deprioritized or implemented without fidelity. Despite its potential, implementing SEL presents multiple challenges. Time constraints, competing curricular demands, and inadequate support are among the most cited barriers (Reyes et al., 2012). These challenges underscore the importance of systemic support and culturally responsive approaches to SEL.

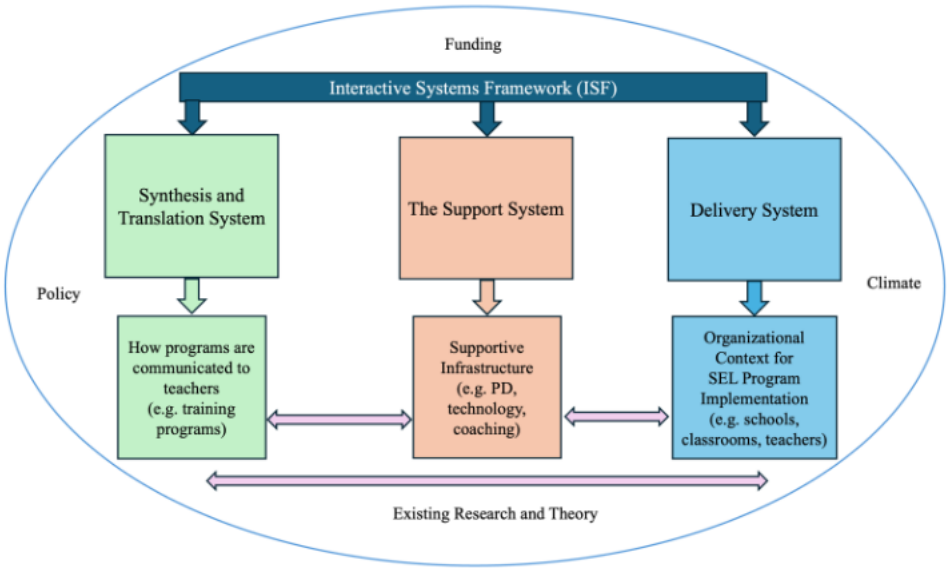
While SEL programs are designed primarily for student benefit, their impact on teachers' well-being is increasingly recognized. The well-being of educators is foundational to cultivating a positive and effective learning environment; however, this requires that educators themselves feel adequately supported. Despite this critical connection, the wellness and self-care of educators remain significantly underemphasized (Lane et al., 2020). Teachers involved in SEL often report increased job satisfaction, greater emotional awareness, and improved classroom climate, which contribute to reduced burnout and emotional exhaustion (Jennings et al., 2011; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). However, SEL also requires significant emotional labor. Teachers are often expected to model calmness, empathy, and self-regulation, even in the face of challenging

behaviors or personal stressors, which can be emotionally taxing, especially when support is lacking (Chang, 2009). The emotional demands of SEL emphasize the need for programs that also prioritize teacher well-being and promote sustainable practices.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the Interactive Systems Framework for Dissemination and Implementation (ISF) developed by Wandersman et al. (2008). The ISF offers a comprehensive model for understanding how evidence-based programs, such as SEL initiatives, move from research to real-world practice, particularly in educational contexts. The ISF emphasizes the connection between three core systems: (1) the Synthesis and Translation System, (2) the Support System, and (3) the Delivery System. Each component provides a lens for examining the translation of SEL research into practical, school-based implementations across diverse grade levels. This framework is particularly valuable for understanding how teachers, within different grade levels, interact with SEL programs and the challenges they face in implementing them. For instance, elementary school teachers may view SEL primarily as foundational for early emotional development, whereas high school teachers may focus more on SEL's role in preparing students for future social interactions and career readiness (Zins et al., 2007). These differences can be attributed to varying expectations and roles within the broader educational environment, which the ISF emphasizes as critical to SEL's success. An overview of the framework is presented in Figure 2.2 below.

Figure 2.2. Interactive Systems Framework



The Synthesis and Translation System involves processes that convert complex research findings into user-friendly resources, strategies, and tools tailored to the needs of practitioners, who in the context of this research are the teachers (Wandersman et al., 2008). Within this study, this system provides a framework for exploring how SEL programs are communicated to teachers, including the clarity, accessibility, and perceived relevance of those resources. Taylor, Weist, and DeLoach (2012) explored the ISF following large-scale crises that disrupted schools and mental-health systems, demonstrating that implementation success depended on whether information about programs was clear, coherent, and contextually relevant for educators. Their work highlights that, in stressful educational environments, teachers' ability to interpret and apply SEL frameworks relies on how effectively research is translated into practice tools aligned with their students' developmental and cultural needs. Similarly, Garbacz et al. (2017) employed Conjoint Behavioral Consultation (CBC) within the ISF to improve school-home collaboration for students in low-income urban settings. Their study illustrated how translation requires co-construction among educators, families, and consultants to ensure SEL-aligned behavioral

supports are feasible and culturally responsive. For teachers in this study, the Synthesis and Translation system relates to how they understand SEL—how they interpret district or school SEL mandates, the degree to which guidance fits their local context, and how they adapt it to the developmental levels of their students. Using the ISF to understand how PK–12 teachers perceive and interpret SEL guidance is critical for evaluating their experiences, including their initial perceptions and preparedness for implementation.

The Support System focuses on the infrastructure that builds the capacity of educators to implement programs with fidelity and sustainability. This includes professional development, technical assistance, and coaching (Wandersman et al., 2008). Differences in the availability and quality of support across grade bands may shape teacher attitudes and practices regarding SEL. Turner et al. (2022) applied the ISF and Quality Implementation Framework (QIF) within a Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) context, identifying the mechanisms through which support structures enhance fidelity of implementation. Their "Ready, Set, Step, Sustain" (RS3) protocol demonstrated that ongoing technical assistance, implementation teams, and data-driven feedback loops improved teachers' sense of psychological safety, organizational readiness, and team functioning—factors mediating high-quality implementation.

Garbacz et al. (2017) further reinforced the significance of sustained consultation and collaborative problem-solving as elements of the Support system, showing that when teachers received regular coaching and family engagement support, their confidence and consistency increased. Conversely, Taylor et al. (2012) emphasized how the absence of coordinated support following crises left teachers feeling fragmented and overwhelmed. In the present study, teachers' narratives about professional development, collaboration, and administrative backing reflect their lived engagement with the Support system—whether they felt empowered,

constrained, or isolated in their SEL work. Within this study, the ISF enables the examination of how support is distributed across elementary, middle, and high school settings, and how such variation affects the adoption and implementation of SEL.

Finally, the Delivery System refers to the organizational contexts, such as schools and classrooms, where the program is implemented and involves the teachers who actually deliver the SEL content (Wandersman et al., 2008). Turner et al. (2022) positioned fidelity of implementation and ongoing performance feedback as key outcomes within this system, revealing that structured team meetings, coaching, and leadership engagement predicted stronger delivery of PBIS and SEL-related practices. Garbacz et al. (2017) offered a complementary perspective, demonstrating that aligning classroom practices with family-based strategies through CBC enhanced generalization and sustainability—critical outcomes for the transfer of SEL skills. Taylor et al. (2012) cautioned that without systemic support, teachers' delivery may regress under competing academic demands or crisis recovery pressures. In this study, teachers' perceptions of SEL programs are analyzed to understand how SEL is experienced across different grade bands. The Delivery system captures teachers' strategies for integrating SEL into academics, adapting lessons for developmental appropriateness, and balancing fidelity with contextual flexibility. It can also help clarify contextual factors (e.g., collaboration, self-efficacy, administrative support) that may contribute to implementation differences across PK–12 settings. The ISF is particularly applicable to this research because it recognizes implementation as a multi-level process that involves not only individual teacher behavior but also systemic and organizational influences. It provides an analysis of both the commonalities and differences in teachers' SEL experiences, including perception and implementation, across various educational contexts. By using this framework, this study will not only uncover how teachers across PK–12

grade bands experience the implementation of SEL programs but also why. Furthermore, the ISF ensures that analysis remains multi-layered and acknowledges not just what teachers do in their classrooms, but how institutional support, policy, and contextual realities shape their capacity to deliver SEL effectively.

Summary of Literature Review

Over the past century, the concept of SEL has evolved into a framework designed to help individuals develop vital interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. In recent years, the definition of SEL has expanded to include culturally responsive and equity-centered approaches. This shift has led to increased focus on SEL in education, reflecting a broader view of student growth that goes beyond academics to encompass character development, social skills, and ethical decision-making (Devaney et al., 2005; Jones et al., 2021). SEL is understood as a developmental process through which people acquire and apply cognitive, emotional, and social competencies that enable them to regulate emotions, build positive relationships, and make responsible choices (Brush et al., 2022).

CASEL identifies three essential components for SEL focused classrooms: (1) explicit SEL instruction, (2) integration of SEL into academic teaching, and (3) fostering a supportive classroom environment (CASEL, 2020; Dussault & Thompson, 2024). The first component involves direct teaching of SEL skills through structured, replicable methods. The second encourages blending SEL within core academic subjects rather than treating it as a separate subject. The third emphasizes cultivating a classroom climate that is safe, respectful, emotionally supportive, and inclusive, which is critical for successful SEL in PK–12 settings (Mahoney et al., 2021). Extensive research shows that well-designed SEL programs can significantly impact student outcomes across various stages of development.

SEL has been linked to gains in academic achievement, emotional regulation, positive social behavior, and long-term success (Blewitt et al., 2018; Cipriano et al., 2023; Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). Among SEL's core competencies, emotional regulation plays an important role in supporting both academic performance and mental health. Jones et al. (2014) highlights the connection between SEL and effective classroom management, underscoring the foundational role of emotional regulation. Studies further indicate that SEL implementation in schools fosters key social behaviors such as empathy, conflict resolution, and prosocial interactions. As a result, SEL is increasingly seen as essential to promoting both academic and personal success over the long term. However, effectively integrating SEL into school environments requires a multidimensional approach involving universal support, teacher engagement, and intentional classroom practices (Jones et al., 2021).

While SEL benefits are recognized across all grade levels, much of the research and program development has concentrated on early childhood and elementary education (Durlak et al., 2011; Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Despite growing support of SEL, challenges related to its implementation continue to exist within PK–12 education (Buchanan et al., 2009; Jones et al., 2017). Teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs play a key role in determining the success of SEL initiatives (Ferreira et al., 2020). Additionally, a teacher's sense of self-efficacy has been identified as a critical factor influencing the quality of SEL implementation (Collie et al., 2012). Notably, educators' views on the relevance of SEL may differ depending on grade level, subject area, and self-efficacy. Nevertheless, a gap remains in understanding teachers' experiences when implementing SEL programs, particularly in PK–12 grades. This study addresses this gap by using the ISF to reveal how teachers across PK–12 grade bands experience the implementation of SEL programs, and what factors may affect their success.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to examine how PK–12 teachers experience SEL implementation in their daily practice. To explore how teachers integrate SEL, this study used a phenomenological multiple case study design (Moustakas, 1994). This chapter outlines the qualitative methods used in the phenomenological case study. Within this framework, the researcher first collected and analyzed survey data on teachers' demographics as a screener for the qualitative data collection (Richter & Richter, 2024). Next, to illuminate nuances within teachers' SEL implementation practices, the researcher held a series of focus group interviews to collect and analyze qualitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). This approach enabled the researcher to obtain a comprehensive and multifaceted understanding of the SEL integration phenomena being studied (Creswell, 2009). The structure of a multiple case study, allowed the research to situate teachers' individual experiences within different grade-level contexts, allowing for both within-case and cross-case analysis to identify similarities and differences among groups (Yin, 2018).

The primary data source for this study consisted of semi-structured individual and focus group interviews with in-service PK–12 teachers who actively implement SEL in their classrooms. This design allowed for consistency in exploring key research questions while also providing the flexibility to pursue participants' emerging insights, ensuring rich, nuanced accounts of their experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Data analysis identified patterns in teachers' perceptions of SEL implementation within and across cases using qualitative data that captures their lived experiences and beliefs. These findings address the following research questions:

Primary Research Question: How do PK–12 teachers experience the implementation of social-emotional learning programs, and what similarities and differences emerge across these grade-level contexts?

Sub-questions:

1. What challenges and supports do teachers identify as influencing their implementation of SEL effectively?
2. How do PK–12 teachers compare their experiences implementing SEL programs by grade band?

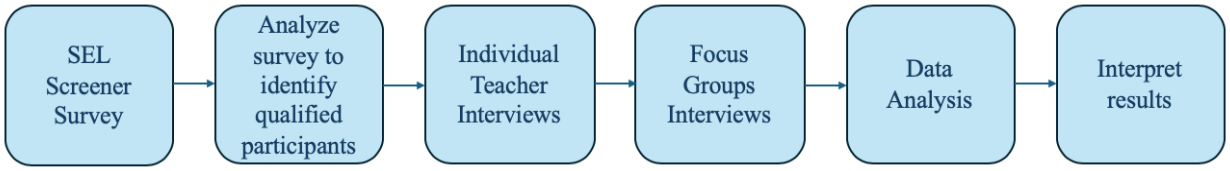
This research explored in greater depth how teachers navigate the successes and challenges of implementing SEL, including issues related to the current curriculum, SEL outcomes, teachers' beliefs and attitudes, teachers' experiences with SEL, and the variations in implementation of SEL across grade levels. This qualitative approach provided rich, contextualized data that helps illuminate patterns in teachers' experiences implementing SEL (Creswell, 2009).

This chapter is subdivided into 5 sections: (1) research design and methodological approach, including a description of population and demographics (2) data tools and collection, explaining the screener survey, individual interviews, and semi-structured focus groups that comprise the qualitative phenomenological multiple case study design; (3) data analysis and procedures; (4) methodological limitations; and (5) ethical considerations. The chapter concludes with a summary of all five sections related to methodology.

Research Design and Methodological Approach

This study of teachers' SEL experiences employed a qualitative phenomenological multiple case study design, as defined by Moustakas (1994). This design, featured in Figure 3.1, illustrates the iterative and interpretive nature of phenomenological inquiry, emphasizing the exploration of participants' lived experiences to uncover the essence of meaning across cases.

Figure 3.1. Phenomenological multiple case study design



The rationale for using this methodology lies in its capacity to enhance understanding of how teachers make meaning of SEL implementation—how they experience, interpret, and reflect on their work with students and the programs they use. As described by Bloomberg (2022), qualitative research is grounded in exploration and discovery, aiming to give voice to participants and capture the nuances of their lived experiences. In this study, the iterative and ongoing nature of qualitative analysis provided a deeper, more contextualized understanding of how teachers in different grade levels navigate the opportunities and challenges associated with implementing SEL. This approach not only reveals variations in experiences across grade bands but also uncovers the underlying beliefs, practices, and contextual factors that shape teachers' perceptions of SEL's effectiveness in their classrooms.

Other studies examining teacher experiences have employed a similar approach. For example, Jennings and Greenberg (2009) explored teachers' lived experiences of emotional labor and self-regulation, illuminating how educators' personal competencies interact with classroom demands. Brackett et al. (2019) examined teachers' perceptions of implementing the RULER SEL program, underscoring how beliefs, school climate, and leadership support influence fidelity and sustainability. Similarly, Schonert-Reichl (2017) investigated teachers' experiences with SEL as both pedagogical and personal transformation, emphasizing emotional awareness and reflective capacity as essential components of effective implementation.

Beyond SEL, other phenomenological multiple case studies have been used to examine educators' experiences across different disciplines and contexts. Seebach (2023) conducted a

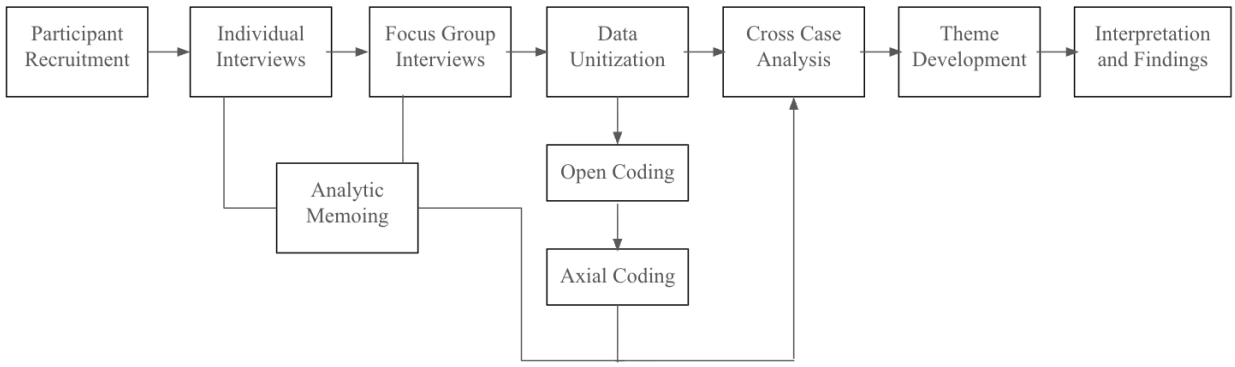
phenomenological multiple case study exploring how school district leaders on Long Island supervised English Language Learner and Multilingual programs, finding that leadership beliefs and contextual constraints shaped program supervision and support. Likewise, Dare et al. (2018) used a phenomenological multiple case study design to investigate science teachers' implementation of integrated STEM curricula, identifying how teachers' perceptions of integration, collaboration, and professional identity influenced their practice. These studies demonstrate the flexibility and depth of the phenomenological multiple case study design for uncovering how educators experience, interpret, and enact complex initiatives within authentic school environments.

By drawing from these methodological designs, the present study adopted a phenomenological multiple case study approach to explore bounded cases—teachers across elementary, middle, and high school grade bands—who have implemented SEL programs in their respective contexts. Each case represents a distinct educational environment with its own demographic and cultural influences, yet collectively they illuminate both shared and divergent experiences of SEL implementation. As Creswell and Poth (2018) explain, phenomenology allows researchers to describe the "essence" of shared experiences, while case study situates those experiences within real-world contexts. This framework ensures that findings capture both the lived meaning and contextual complexity of how teachers understand and implement SEL in their classrooms.

Overall, this methodological approach enabled the study to investigate the phenomenon of SEL implementation through a rich, descriptive lens—one that values teachers' voices, contextualizes their insights within specific contexts, and contributes to a more holistic understanding of how SEL is experienced, interpreted, and sustained across diverse educational

settings. An overview of the comprehensive phenomenological multiple case study design process is presented in Figure 3.2 below.

Figure 3.2. Logic Model for Research Methods



Study Context

The context for this study was PK–12 educators in tri-state (New York, New Jersey and Connecticut) schools implementing SEL instruction. Focusing on this region was particularly meaningful because it encompassed diverse educational settings—urban, suburban, and rural—and met unique policy pressures and demographic dynamics. Specifically, schools across New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut operate within distinct state-level accountability systems, funding structures, and SEL guidance frameworks while serving increasingly diverse student populations. This context was essential, as by the 2023–24 school year, 83% of schools had adopted an SEL curriculum (CASEL, 2024). While 49 states plus Washington, D.C., report supportive SEL policies, many teachers continue to face significant implementation barriers (CASEL, 2024; The Wallace Foundation, 2023; AASA, 2023). Additional work was needed to explore how SEL programs are implemented and perceived by educators within the U.S. educational context (Bond et al., 2023). By situating the inquiry in the tri-state area, this study revealed region-specific challenges and successes that may inform more contextually responsive strategies.

The study's scope aligned with its phenomenological multiple case study design and the goal of comparing data across grade bands. As such, the screener survey for this study utilized an online survey administered via Qualtrics to gather demographics from in-service PK–12 teachers who are implementing SEL across the tri-state area. To maximize participation, the survey was distributed via email and social media, strategies proven to engage diverse educator populations (Haidar et al., 2024). Input was collected from teachers in rural, suburban, and urban contexts. Additionally, focus group interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom to accommodate participants from multiple states within the tri-state region. This inclusive approach aimed to generate a rich and varied dataset that reflects the complex realities of SEL implementation across various grades and educational settings (Greenspan et al., 2021).

Research Design

This study employed a phenomenological multiple case study approach to examine how PK–12 teachers experience the implementation of SEL in their daily practice. Semi-structured individual and focus group interviews provided rich qualitative data that illustrates teachers' perceived successes and challenges. This approach goes beyond merely collecting and analyzing data; it purposefully blends teachers' experiences across grade bands to produce deeper, more robust insights. See Table 3.1 for data collection and analysis schedule.

Table 3.1. Stages of Data Collection and Analysis

Stages of Data Collection and Analysis	Completion
SEL Teacher Experience survey emailed to teachers	December 2025
First reminder to participants	December 2025
Second reminder to participants	December 2025
Third reminder to participants	December 2025
Last valid survey response collected	January 2026
Survey closed	January 2026
Use data from survey to identify qualified interview participants	January 2026
Conduct semi-structured interviews of selected participants	February - April 2026
Complete qualitative data analysis	April - July 2026

Participants

Eligible participants included in-service teachers who have implemented SEL in their classrooms. To be included in the study, participants were required to be currently employed as in-service PK–12 teachers of record, within the tri-state area, who incorporate SEL into their classroom instruction. Teachers from any school setting (e.g., public, private, charter, Montessori) and subject area (e.g., core, arts, sciences) were eligible, as well as those with varying years of experience. There were no restrictions on levels of educational attainment, or any other teaching criteria. Recruitment letters for each phase of the study are included in Appendix A.

The researcher employed a sequential participant sampling strategy, in which the sampling from the screener survey, informed the individual and focus group interviews (Creswell, 2009). For the screener survey, a convenience and purposeful sample of participants was recruited through an online Qualtrics survey distributed via email and shared on social media platforms. The online survey could be completed on a computer or mobile device and remained anonymous to encourage candid participation. Following the completion of the survey, participants had the opportunity to opt into the interview process by responding to the final survey question, indicating their interest in participating in an individual interview and follow-up

focus group. Contact information for interested individuals was collected confidentially and stored on a password-protected computer.

Interview participants were purposefully selected from the pool of survey respondents to ensure representation across grade bands, subject areas, and school types, thereby providing a diverse range of experiences in SEL implementation. In particular, 13 participants across grade level bands were strategically invited to individual interviews and a follow-up focus group. Each group consisted of approximately two to four participants to ensure representation from each grade band (e.g., PK–2, 3–5, 6–8 and 9–12). Thirteen individual interviews were conducted, pending data saturation and narrative redundancy, followed by four focus groups (Trotter, 2012). As described by Creswell (2009), a stratified sampling approach was employed to ensure that focus groups reflected a distribution of perspectives across key demographics identified in the screener survey and individual interview results. Additionally, elements of cluster and purposeful sampling were applied to determine which participants would best represent the range of contexts and experiences relevant to the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data Sources and Collection Procedures

Recruitment began with a screener survey created through Qualtrics and was distributed through professional networks, district contacts, and social media. The screener, consisting of multiple-choice questions, confirmed eligibility criteria: participants must be (a) currently employed as PK–12 teachers of record in the tri-state area, (b) actively implementing an SEL program or framework, and (c) willing to reflect on their SEL implementation experiences. From the eligible pool, participants were purposefully selected to ensure variation across grade bands (elementary, middle, and high school).

The screener survey was distributed electronically and remained open for eight weeks. The target was 30 completed survey responses, with a minimum of 20 responses required to create diverse focus groups from a variety of grade bands and school settings (Memon et al., 2020). The survey elicited a total number of 31 responses collected, with approximately 25 participants consenting to participate in the study. Since the survey link was distributed on social media, an exact response rate cannot be determined. Analysis of the survey data ensured the inclusion of diverse cases within each focus group and informed subsequent interview scheduling and groupings (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Following analysis of the survey data, 13 strategically selected participants to represent the desired range of grade levels were invited to participate in individual and focus group interviews. The interviews were semi-structured and organized around a predetermined set of open-ended questions designed to explore participants' experiences and perceptions of SEL implementation while allowing the researcher flexibility to ask follow-up questions and probe emerging ideas (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Prior consent was obtained for each individual interview and focus group to be recorded and transcribed for analysis. The interpretive qualitative phase aims to explore participants' lived experiences with SEL implementation (Tisdell & Mirriam, 2025). As suggested by Bloomberg (2022), focus groups allowed for rich, detailed exploration and prioritized participant voices in uncovering insights not captured through surveys alone.

Elicitation individual interviews were conducted to prompt rich, experience-based reflection (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004). Participants were contacted via email to schedule individual interviews at a time convenient for them, and all interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom.

Interviews were conducted between January and March and each interview lasted between 25 to 45 minutes. The recruitment and scheduling email template is included in Appendix A.

Semi-structured focus group interviews, lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes, were conducted via Zoom, audio-recorded with participants' informed consent, and professionally transcribed for analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). To facilitate scheduling, participants completed a Doodle Poll indicating their availability. Based on these responses, the researcher organized focus groups to maximize representation across elementary, middle, and high school grade bands. The intended composition for each focus group was a minimum of three participants, with at least one participant representing each grade band.

Four focus groups were conducted, each consisting of three or four participants. Although the goal was to include representation from each grade band within every group, scheduling constraints and participant availability resulted in some variation in group composition. Focus Groups 1, 2, and 4 included participants representing all grade bands; however, one participant from Focus Group 1 and one participant from Focus Group 4 were unable to attend the scheduled sessions. Consequently, Focus Group 1 included participants representing the PK–2 and Grades 2–5 bands, while Focus Group 4 retained representation from all grade bands despite one absence. Focus Group 3 consisted of one participant representing the PK–2 grade band and two participants representing Grades 9–12. Across all four focus groups, perspectives from multiple grade bands were represented, supporting cross-case comparisons of educators' experiences implementing social-emotional learning.

The focus group interviews were semi-structured, asking “grand tour” and “descriptive” questions with the intention of uncovering a deeper understanding of how selected participants experience SEL implementation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The semi-structured nature of the

focus groups allowed for both consistency in addressing key topics and flexibility to follow emerging areas of discussion, enabling participants to share authentic, nuanced accounts of their experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Participants were asked to bring an artifact that represents their SEL implementation, such as a lesson plan, class charter, student reflection, or classroom photo, and to describe what it represents and how it reflects their approach to SEL (Yin, 2018). The artifact served as a tangible anchor for recalling specific experiences and emotions associated with implementation. Participants reflected on recent SEL lessons, students' engagement, perceived successes and challenges, and the personal impact of teaching SEL. Any cases of attrition, including incomplete surveys or withdrawal from focus groups, were documented along with reasons for dropout where provided.

Throughout the focus group interviews, the researcher directly observed participants and took detailed field notes to record any nonverbal behaviors, group interactions, and contextual elements that may not be captured in transcripts or audio recordings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The interviews were recorded and transcribed using Zoom software. Personal identifying information was redacted from stored documents to maintain and protect confidentiality. All data transcripts were stored in a secure, password-protected location. See Appendix Table F.1 for field notes and analytic memos.

Data Analysis

In line with Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological reduction process and Yin's (2018) cross-case synthesis, data management and analysis in this phenomenological multiple case study was conducted through a cyclical, iterative process. Analysis occurred alongside the study's three phases of data collection: the screener survey, individual interviews, and semi-structured focus group interviews so that emerging understandings of participants' lived

experiences with social-emotional learning implementation can inform subsequent phases of inquiry. Following each individual and focus group interview, the researcher engaged in analytic memoing to document initial reflections, note significant statements, and capture emerging patterns related to how participants make meaning of SEL implementation within their school contexts (Birks et al., 2008; Saldaña, 2021). These memos served as an intermediary analytic step between data collection and formal coding, supporting ongoing phenomenological reflection and informing refinements to the focus group interview protocol (Saldaña, 2009). The researcher then analyzed the data through coding, a process commonly employed in qualitative research, as described by Elliott (2018), in order to identify shared meanings within each case and across cases.

The semi-structured interviews were transcribed using Zoom software, which was reviewed against recorded videos to correct any errors or mistakes. The researcher organized and labeled the data in a purposeful way that was directly guided by the study's research questions. Analysis began with open coding, or thematic analysis; the researcher first summarized sections of the data that connect and later serve as a basis for higher-order coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Next, the researcher completed a first cycle of coding to develop preliminary codes grounded in participants' descriptions of their experiences (Saldaña, 2021). The coding process was managed using Google Sheets. Throughout each stage of coding, the researcher maintained theoretical memos to document analytic insights, coding decisions, and the development of emerging concepts (Birks et al., 2008; Saldaña, 2021). Theoretical memos allowed the researcher to reflect on their own role within the research process, create notes about codes and relationships between codes, note ideas for future codes, and note any questions that arise (Bergin, 2018).

Following Moustakas's (1994) process of horizonalization, each significant statement was treated with equal value before being synthesized into textural and structural descriptions. Categories were refined using Braun and Clarke's (2006) iterative thematic analysis approach, emphasizing depth, coherence, and the interplay between individual and collective meaning-making. Cross-case synthesis (Yin, 2018) was then applied to identify commonalities and divergences across grade levels and program contexts, generating a composite essence of teachers' experiences with SEL implementation. Throughout this process, analytic memoing and reflective journaling served as tools for reflexivity and methodological rigor, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in participants' narratives and supported the study's trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Open Coding

According to Braun and Clarke (2022), thematic analysis is a systematic approach to identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns within a qualitative data set, in which the coding of data serves as the foundation for developing categories that represent the central outcomes of the analysis. In this study, structural coding was employed to organize data into categories aligned with teachers' experiences implementing SEL programs, by tagging and indexing participant responses according to the ISF. This approach enabled the researcher to "both code and initially categorize the data corpus" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 67). Moreover, structural coding was deemed suitable for the first cycle of coding the interview transcripts (Saldaña, 2009). First, the coding process began with data unitization, where individual interview transcripts were read and broken down into distinct, self-contained units of meaning (e.g., individual sentences or brief paragraphs) to capture isolated ideas. For the individual interviews, this yielded a dataset of 302 unitized pieces of raw data managed within Google Sheets.

The same unitization process was conducted for the focus group interviews, yielding 262 discrete units of raw data. Across both datasets, raw data units averaged approximately 131 words in length. Within the analysis matrix, each unit of raw data was cataloged alongside an abbreviated descriptive summary to establish a clear conceptual anchor. This process reflects Moustakas's (1994) concept of horizonalization by treating each significant statement as having equal value during the initial stages of analysis before patterns and categories were synthesized. The descriptive summaries also functioned as a form of data condensation that supported iterative coding and constant comparison across cases (Miles et al., 2019; Saldaña, 2021). Next, the researcher determined initial codes using the raw data and abbreviated summaries.

Initial Codes

First Cycle coding refers to the initial stage of data coding and is typically straightforward and direct (Saldaña, 2009). During the First Cycle of coding, true descriptive open coding was performed manually to document the fundamental topics of each unitized statement (Saldaña, 2021). Initial codes were used to break the qualitative data into discrete segments for close examination while remaining open to the theoretical directions that emerged through the researcher's interpretation of the data (Charmaz, 2014). This process served as the foundation for deeper exploration, allowing the researcher to identify emerging patterns and refine the direction of the study (Glaser, 1978).

Each transcript was read multiple times to promote familiarity with the data and to ensure that each unitized statement was considered within its broader context. During the coding process, the researcher examined each unitized statement individually and assigned a descriptive code that summarized the primary topic or central idea expressed by the participant. These descriptive codes remained close to the participants' language and were intended to capture the

explicit meaning of each statement rather than infer underlying interpretations (Saldaña, 2021). As coding progressed, previously assigned codes were continuously compared with new segments of data to promote consistency and to refine code definitions when similar concepts emerged across participants. This iterative process resulted in a comprehensive set of descriptive codes that accurately represented the breadth of participants' experiences and served as the basis for subsequent rounds of pattern coding and category development. Then, Second Cycle coding was utilized to "reorganize and reanalyze data coded through the First Cycle" (Saldana, 2009, p. 149).

Axial Codes

Finally, the researcher engaged in Second Cycle coding using axial coding procedures to identify relationships among the descriptive codes generated during the First Cycle. Axial coding focuses on examining the conditions, context, actions, interactions, and consequences associated with categories to explain how and why concepts are related (Saldaña, 2009). During this stage, the researcher systematically compared descriptive codes to identify conceptual similarities, recurring patterns, and shared meanings across participants' experiences. Related codes were grouped, nested, and collapsed into broader categorical clusters that more accurately represented the underlying concepts reflected in the data (Miles et al., 2019; Saldaña, 2021).

To increase analytical efficiency and support systematic categorization, Gemini, a large language model (LLM) developed by Google, was used to generate preliminary suggestions for grouping similar codes (Prescott et al., 2024). These AI-generated recommendations served only as an analytic aid and were not accepted automatically. Each recommendation was independently reviewed against the original transcripts, coded excerpts, and analytic memos to determine whether the proposed relationships accurately reflected participants' intended meanings. Some

recommendations were accepted as presented, others were refined or reorganized, and several were rejected when they did not align with the data. Throughout this process, the researcher continually compared categories with the original data, eliminated overlapping or redundant codes, and refined category definitions to ensure that each category remained conceptually distinct while preserving the richness of participants' experiences. Gemini was not used to generate or interpret the initial descriptive codes; rather, it was introduced only after the manual completion of First Cycle coding to assist with organizing and identifying potential relationships among the researcher-generated codes.

The refined categories were then examined across all cases to identify broader patterns of meaning that extended beyond individual codes. Categories that consistently reflected a shared underlying concept were synthesized into overarching categories that captured the essence of participants' experiences with social-emotional learning implementation. These categories represented the final level of analysis and provided the organizational framework for presenting the study's findings.

Final Categories

The coding of the individual interviews concluded in the identification of nine distinct parent categories: Teaching Role, Instructional Strategies, Challenges and Barriers, Professional Development, Supports, School Culture, Student Outcomes, Teacher Perceptions and Experiences, and Advice. These categories emerged through the iterative coding process as recurring patterns of meaning were identified across participants' lived experiences (Miles et al., 2019; Saldaña, 2021). Each category captured a shared aspect of participants' perceptions and experiences while allowing for variation in individual perspectives, thereby providing a coherent framework for the cross-case analysis. The categories that emerged inductively from the

individual interviews were subsequently applied deductively as an analytic framework for coding the focus group data (Miles et al., 2019; Saldaña, 2021). However, during the focus group analysis, two categories (Teaching Role and Advice) were excluded. The category of Teaching Role was determined to be redundant, as participants' roles and responsibilities were already addressed during the individual interviews. Additionally, the focus group questions did not specifically elicit recommendations or reflections related to advice; therefore, the Advice category did not emerge as an appropriate category for focus group analysis (Yin, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

The remaining seven categories: Instructional Strategies, Challenges and Barriers, Professional Development, Supports, School Culture, Student Outcomes, and Teacher Perceptions and Experiences, proved applicable across the focus group data. Although the same primary categories were used, the focus group analysis was implemented through the specific analytical lens of grade bands (e.g., comparing PK–2, 3–5, 6–8, and 9–12 contexts) rather than the universal approach utilized for individual interviews. This dual-lens approach preserved the integrity of individual narratives while contextualizing participants' experiences within the distinct structural and developmental realities of specific grade-band environments (Yin, 2018). The transformation table from raw data to categories is included in Appendix Table G.1. Following the assignment of axial codes and parent categories, subcodes were applied as second-order tags to capture specific dimensions within each category (Saldaña, 2021). These subcodes supported the iterative analysis process and guided the organization and refinement of the final categories. Following Gibbs's (2018) approach to hierarchical coding, subcodes were organized as "children" nested within broader "parent" codes, allowing the researcher to examine

relationships between overarching categories and the more specific concepts represented within the data. The Code Book is included in Appendix H.

Trustworthiness/Credibility

To ensure trustworthiness and credibility, it is important to acknowledge potential limitations in the data collection process. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility in qualitative research is established through the accuracy and authenticity of participants' accounts. In this study, the accuracy of findings depends on participants providing honest and thoughtful responses to both the survey and interview questions. Although anonymity and confidentiality were emphasized to promote openness, the possibility of bias or selective disclosure may influence the depth of responses. In addition, issues of transferability were relevant, as demographic factors such as location, school type, and grade level taught may limit the representativeness of the sample and the extent to which findings can be generalized to broader contexts. By remaining transparent about these limitations and clearly situating the findings within their specific context, the study sought to uphold credibility, support transferability, and strengthen the overall trustworthiness of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility was further enhanced through the researcher's role as a cultural insider, possessing firsthand knowledge and professional experience implementing SEL. This perspective facilitated rapport with participants and supported a nuanced understanding of the language, practices, and contextual factors that shaped their experiences. Consistent with qualitative inquiry, the researcher engaged in ongoing reflection throughout data collection and analysis to critically examine how this insider perspective influenced interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, the focus group format allowed participants

to respond to, affirm, and expand upon one another's experiences, contributing to a richer understanding of shared and divergent perspectives and strengthening the credibility of the findings through participant interaction (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Together, these strategies supported the trustworthiness of the study while ensuring that the findings remained grounded in participants' lived experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the Kansas State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). All participants within this study provided consent to participate and understood the purpose and methods of the study. Participants were assured confidentiality and anonymity. Their identities would remain anonymous, and all data would be stored securely on password protected devices. The data for this study was collected accurately and honestly through the survey and focus-groups interviews, without any manipulation past ensuring anonymity. Furthermore, participants were able to withdraw at any time.

Positionality Statement

As the researcher conducting this study, I acknowledge that my professional identity as a teacher who actively implements SEL programs shapes my perspective, interpretations, and interactions throughout this research process. My direct experience with SEL instruction provides me with valuable knowledge of the opportunities, challenges, and complexities involved when integrating SEL into classrooms. This background allows me to understand teacher perspectives more deeply, recognize nuances in their language, and engage with participants in ways that may foster trust and openness.

At the same time, I recognize that this positionality introduces potential bias. My commitment to SEL, as both a practitioner and advocate, may influence how I interpret

participants' accounts or highlight certain aspects of the data over others. I also acknowledge that my enthusiasm for SEL may unintentionally affect the ways I frame interview questions, respond to participant comments, or code emerging categories. My passion for SEL stems from a history of working closely with students in need of support across diverse contexts: supporting children undergoing oncology treatment in a hospital setting, serving students in crisis for four years in a low-income urban school, and working in a private school environment where constant academic and athletic pressures weigh heavily on students. These varied experiences have shaped my belief in the importance of SEL for all students, regardless of context, while also deepening my awareness of the many forms of support students require to thrive both emotionally and academically.

To address this, I adopted strategies of reflexivity throughout the research process. I maintained field notes to record reflections on how my positionality shaped data collection and analysis, and I engaged in memo-writing during coding to surface assumptions, biases, and evolving interpretations. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasize, such reflexive practices are essential for establishing trustworthiness by making the researcher's influence on the inquiry visible and open to critical consideration.

By remaining transparent about my positionality and actively engaging with reflexive practices, I aim to balance my perspective with a rigorous, scholarly approach to ensure that this study contributes meaningfully to the broader understanding of SEL implementation across PK–12 contexts.

Summary

The screener survey captured the demographics of PK–12 teachers in the tri-state area in order to determine individual interviews and diverse focus-groups, representing teachers'

experiences implementing SEL programs across various grade bands. The data, gathered through individual and focus group interviews, was used to capture a deep understanding of teachers' narratives, contextual insights, and nuanced perspectives about how SEL programs are experienced in practice across diverse grade levels and school contexts.

The next chapter will discuss the study findings, beginning with the screener survey, followed by the findings from the individual and focus group interviews.

Chapter 4 - Findings

Introduction

For this study, I conducted two rounds of interviews of PK–12 teachers across the tri-state area. First, I conducted individual interviews of thirteen participants. Then, I conducted focus group interviews. Both interviews sought to explore teachers' experiences implementing SEL programs across various grade bands (PK–2, 3–5, 6–8, and 9–12). Finally, I analyzed the data in two parts according to the following research questions:

> **Primary Research Question**: How do PK–12 teachers experience the implementation of social-emotional learning programs, and what similarities and differences emerge across these contexts?
>
> **Sub-questions:**
>
> 1. What challenges and supports do teachers identify as influencing their implementation of SEL effectively?
> 2. How do PK–12 teachers compare their experiences implementing SEL programs by grade band?

These are the findings from the data analysis using thematic and cross case analysis, used to capture a deep understanding of teachers' narratives, contextual insights, and nuanced perspectives about how SEL programs are experienced in practice across diverse grade levels and school contexts.

Analysis of the individual interview data yielded 282 units of raw data, which were organized into nine overarching categories representing teachers' experiences implementing social-emotional learning (SEL): Teaching Role, Instructional Strategies, Challenges and Barriers, Professional Development, Supports, School Culture, Student Outcomes, Teacher Perceptions and Experiences, and Advice. These nine categories represent the recurring patterns across participants' descriptions of implementing SEL and provide the organizational framework

for presenting the findings. Although Teaching Role initially emerged during analysis, further review indicated that it primarily described participants' professional roles and responsibilities rather than their experiences implementing SEL. Therefore, Teaching Role was used to provide contextual information about the participant sample and is presented in the participant overview section rather than as a separate category.

The focus group data yielded an additional 298 units of raw data, which upon coding, collapsed in the same categorical framework as the individual interview data. However, one additional category, Advice, was not represented in the focus group findings. Focus group protocol did not include questions designed to elicit recommendations for educators; therefore, advice did not emerge as a distinct category during this phase of the analysis. The remaining seven categories–Instructional Strategies, Challenges and Barriers, Professional Development, Supports, School Culture, Student Outcomes, and Teacher Perceptions and Experiences–were evident across both individual interviews and focus groups. While both individual and focus group interviews explored teachers' experiences broadly, the focus groups also examined these same categories through the lens of grade-band differences (PK–2, 3–5, 6–8, and 9–12). This organization allowed the findings to present both the shared experiences of teachers implementing SEL and the ways those experiences varied across developmental and educational contexts.

The findings are presented across both individual and focus group interview data, collectively by category and in frequency order, as each category appeared across the dataset. As summarized in Appendix Table H.1, each category includes a description of the subcategory, an exemplar, and the frequency of coded references for each category and subcategory. The complete codebook, including the corresponding category, subcategories, descriptions,

representative exemplars, and frequencies, is provided in Appendix Table H.1. The categories are presented from most to least frequent and include Instructional Strategies, Teacher Perceptions and Experiences, Challenges and Barriers, School Culture, Supports, Professional Development, Student Outcomes, and Advice. Because the Advice category was elicited only during the individual interviews and was not a target of the focus group discussions, it is presented separately as the final category.

In this chapter, I first provide an overview of the participants who engaged in individual interviews and focus groups. Then, I offer insights within 8 categories and 21 subcategories about teachers' SEL experiences and perspectives. Finally, I compare these findings across grade bands and cases, showing how various grade level groups have unique perspectives and insights.

Participant Overview

Thirteen educators participated in the study, representing four grade bands: PK–2, Grades 3–5, Grades 6–8, and Grades 9–12. Participants brought between 5 and 21 years of educational experience and represented public and private schools across Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey. There were nine female and four male participants. Most participants taught in suburban settings, although school environment varied between public and private, student population, and schoolwide approaches to SEL. Participants implemented a range of established SEL programs, school-developed initiatives, and embedded classroom practices. A complete Participant Table is included in Appendix I.

Grades PK–2

The PK–2 grade band included three educators with nine to 21 years of teaching experience. Three participants served as classroom teachers in preschool, kindergarten, or first grade. Participants taught in Connecticut, one in New York, and one in New Jersey. Participants

represented both public and private schools and described implementing several established SEL frameworks, including Responsive Classroom, RULER, Second Step, PBIS, Kelso's Choice, and Everyday Speech, while one participant reported using an embedded character education approach rather than a stand-alone curriculum.

Grades 3–5

Three educators represented the Grades 3–5 band. One participant taught third grade, but has experience teaching first grade as well, one participant was a K-5 mathematics interventionist, and the other taught fifth grade. Two participants had 20 years of teaching experience and worked in Connecticut, one in a public school and one in a private school, and the third participant has 12 years of teaching experience and worked in New Jersey in a private school. Their schools implemented SEL through Responsive Classroom, Second Step, Community & Growth and Belonging initiatives, Pathways, and other embedded practices integrated throughout the school day rather than as separate instructional programs.

Grades 6–8

Three participants represented the middle school grade band and had 18 to 19 years of teaching experience. All taught in Connecticut private schools. Their professional roles extended beyond traditional classroom instruction and included responsibilities such as athletic director, coach, and community and belonging leadership. Participants taught physical education, mathematics, science, and English while supporting SEL through school-developed character education programs, Pathways mindfulness practices, and initiatives centered on the school's core values.

Grades 9–12

The high school group included three educators with 5 to 20 years of educational experience, including one participant who previously served in the U.S. Marine Corps and another who transitioned into teaching after a corporate career. Participants represented schools in Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey and taught English, Advanced Placement English, history, and counseling/wellness. Their schools varied in their SEL implementation, ranging from a dedicated Readiness curriculum and school-developed character education programs to integrated SEL lessons and periodic schoolwide SEL days.

One educator's role encompasses working with students in grades N–12. For the purposes of the focus groups, this participant was assigned to the 9–12 grade band for focus group interviews.

Thematic Findings

Instructional Strategies

Participants most frequently discussed instructional strategies (*n*=235, 41%), highlighting the central role of instructional practices in teachers' experiences implementing SEL. Within this category, participants described the relevance of embedded instruction, explicit instruction, student-centered and relationship-based practices, differentiated instruction, and routines and structures.

Embedded Instruction

Participants often noted that SEL is "all day, every day" (Michelle) and identified that SEL is most effective when it is embedded throughout everyday teaching rather than taught explicitly (*n*=66, 11%). Natalie, a middle school teacher, explained that SEL is often embedded into daily instruction rather than explicitly taught, "in fifth grade it's mostly embedded in the lessons, uh, not necessarily explicitly taught." Furthermore, Sarah emphasized the value of

learning through shared experiences rather than direct instruction. Sarah, who teaches PK, explained that students were more likely to connect with and internalize social-emotional concepts when they observed others navigating similar experiences than when they were simply told what those experiences meant:

> I think that it's much more compelling for them to witness someone else experiencing something that they have experienced, versus talking at them, versus telling them, you know, what this means having them sort of be able to see things reflected back at them that they have also encountered.

Similarly, Michelle discussed the prevalence of SEL in kindergarten, stating, "I think everything falls around SEL. I think it's something we talk about all day, no matter what subject we're using."

Several participants identified literature and book discussions as effective strategies for embedding SEL authentically into daily instruction across all grade bands. Sarah explained how, at her school, they embed a considerable amount of social-emotional work using literature and discussing characters' feelings, "we do talk a lot about putting words to feelings that I feel like boys start to lose as they get older because it's not, like, acceptable to have feelings. So, we talk about that, but we usually do it, especially in reading through characters." Rachel, an eighth-grade English teacher described how literature promotes empathy, emotional expression, and perspective-taking, stating:

> I think, again, um empathizing with characters, and then putting things into their own lives. Being able to articulate feelings, um in using the literature to do so, um it kind of just, like, helps them get out of their egocentric worlds. And I think that that helps overall.

Finally, Carlos, a high school teacher, illuminated the benefits of teaching SEL through his English courses:

> I feel that the subject matter naturally lends itself to students being prodded towards thinking empathetically and making themselves vulnerable by way of taking positions with writing. So, in my particular discipline, I feel a little bit, like, uniquely, I don't know, gifted to probably see students, uh, kind of in an emotional context likely sooner than perhaps in other classes.

Together, these examples demonstrate how literature can serve as a natural vehicle for integrating SEL into academic instruction by providing students with opportunities to identify emotions, develop empathy, and consider perspectives beyond their own experiences.

Explicit Instruction

Although participants generally viewed SEL as most effective when integrated into daily classroom experiences, they also characterized the importance of explicit SEL instruction as a complementary approach (*n*=67, 12%). Many participants' schools used structured SEL curricula and programs to intentionally teach social-emotional competencies through dedicated lessons and activities, particularly in the early elementary grades. Michelle noted, "I think in kindergarten, it's very easy to do that, only because it happens all day long. We have two different programs." Sarah described using the Mood Meter, a component of the RULER program, to help elementary students identify and communicate their emotions. Sarah explained that visual tools provide young children with a concrete framework for understanding abstract social-emotional concepts:

> We use something called the Mood Meter. Um, and even before I came to my current school, I used to use the Mood Meter too just because with young kids, I think SEL can

be very vague...unless you get, like, a big demonstration, um, or something really outwardly representing how they're feeling or what they're thinking.

Similarly, focus group participants discussed intentionally incorporating explicit SEL instruction into their classrooms, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. Carlos explained, "For SEL, we explicitly teach it and acknowledge it, um particularly in the last few years, I would say, as we return back after COVID." These examples illustrate that although the ways explicit SEL instruction was implemented varied across grade bands and school contexts, participants viewed intentional instruction as an important complement to the social-emotional learning embedded throughout students' daily classroom experiences.

Student-Centered and Relationship-Based Practices

Participants also shared that student-centered instructional approaches prioritize active student engagement, meaningful teacher-student and peer relationships, and opportunities for students to reflect on their emotions, behaviors, and growth. These student-centered approaches and relationship-based practices serve as effective strategies when implementing SEL (*n*=43, 7%). Ashley, a high school counselor, explained how their Readiness class views SEL holistically, to help students handle interrelational dynamics and stress, explaining:

> We see it as really holistic, like we're working on, you know, learning and teaching empathy and communication and conflict resolution and, um, what it means to just create balance in your life and have self-awareness and make responsible decisions. We talk about executive functioning tools that help with emotional regulation and just help with managing the day-to-day tasks.

Participants also described using student-centered reflection tools to promote self-reflection, document behavioral patterns, and facilitate collaboration with families and support

staff. Danielle, an elementary teacher, highlighted that these tools encouraged students to reflect on their behaviors while providing educators with documentation to monitor recurring concerns and guide interventions:

> I find that [our reflection tool] works really well. We actually are able to, you know keep records of these, and if a child is repeatedly doing something, like, you know, kicking someone, and it's, you know, this is your third reflection now. Then it leads to a deeper conversation with the family, um, our guidance counselor, and it's a great way for us to kind of document and, um also, keep track of behaviors to help students.

Student-centered approaches provide opportunities for students to develop and apply social-emotional competencies that support their interpersonal relationships, emotional regulation, decision-making, and ability to navigate daily academic and personal demands.

Differentiated Practices

Subsequently, participants discussed the importance of knowing their students well and adapting SEL instruction based on students' developmental, emotional, or individual needs (*n*=32, 6%). Laura, a first-grade teacher, explained that she adapts SEL instruction through observation, identifying areas in which students may need additional support:

> I feel like it's adapted through, um, observation, seeing what students need in the classroom, like if they need help, um…with executive functioning, then we have, like, a lesson on that. If they need help with, um, kindness or showing respect to others then I'll, like, teach a lesson on that.

Additionally, Danielle, a third-grade teacher, described differentiation as "meeting the kids where they are" and responding to students' emotions as they arise throughout the school day. Danielle, who also has experience teaching first grade, stated that if students return to the

classroom upset following an issue in gym class, effective SEL practice involves, “reading the room as a teacher and understanding, like, we need to talk about this before we dive into the lesson.” Together, participants recounted differentiated SEL instruction as flexible and responsive, with teachers adjusting the focus and timing of instruction based on observed student needs and experiences.

Routines and Structures

Finally, participants portrayed effective SEL implementation as establishing predictable routines while consistently modeling, reinforcing, and reflecting on social-emotional competencies through everyday classroom interactions (*n*=27, 5%). Michelle, a kindergarten teacher, explained the importance of modeling because of how perceptive children are, explaining, “It's every day, like, you're always on, trying to make sure to, as a teacher, you're modeling how you talk to the kids also, because they pick up on how you treat the kids, too.” Sofia described the importance of reinforcing skills through consistency in the classroom:

> I think, number one, consistency. I think that when my kids you know, I want them to be able to take a risk, but I think that one thing that I've try to do is be as consistent as can be. My kids, when they walk in my door, they know what my expectations are. I try to set expectations every day. I try to be consistent; I try to keep my language consistent.

Furthermore, Michelle added that predictable classroom routines promote positive social and emotional behavior and rule following, stating:

> Um, but I think in terms of classroom routines, it's an all day, you know, thing, you know, constantly positive praising. Oh, I love who's using safe walking feet, or you know, just little things like that to try and get them to recognize that we have to make good choices, but there's also rules to follow.

James also emphasized the importance of establishing intentional classroom structures and routines at the high school level to foster relationships and support SEL implementation. James explained that organizing the classroom in ways that consistently demonstrated care and support helped students recognize that teachers were invested in their success, noting:

> if you build, I think if like it's just building systems in the class structure that helps kids understand that like I'm on their side like that sort of like relational pedagogy piece. And so that that's the part that I would say is, like, just the organization of the class.

Across grade levels, consistent routines, teacher modeling, and intentional classroom structures created predictable and supportive environments in which social-emotional competencies could be reinforced through everyday interactions.

Teacher Perceptions and Experiences

In the second category, participants discussed their perceptions and experiences with SEL implementation (n = 112, 19%), describing how they define and understand SEL, how their beliefs have evolved over time, and how these perspectives influence relationship-building, instructional practices, and their views of SEL's role in education.

Defining SEL

Participants described SEL as a foundational aspect of teaching that extends beyond academic instruction to recognizing and responding to students' emotional, social, and developmental needs (*n*=17, 3%). Their definitions of SEL reflected an understanding that students have diverse experiences, emotions, and levels of social-emotional competence, requiring teachers to remain flexible and responsive in their instructional practices.

For example, Michelle explained that SEL represented acknowledging that students cannot always be expected to be ready to learn when personal challenges interfere with their

ability to be present, “when you have things going on in your life, sometimes it's hard to be present and be on, and you know, the kids are human, too. And so, if something else is going on, they're not going to be ready to learn”. Similarly, Sarah defined SEL through a developmental lens, describing it as helping young children evolve socially and emotionally:

> Teaching 4- and 5-year-olds, SEL is predominantly teaching them to be people. Um, sort of moving them developmentally out of that sort of egocentric stage of development into sort of understanding the world around them a little bit, and understanding their role in that world.

Rachel, an eighth-grade English teacher, emphasized that responsiveness is central to effective SEL implementation, explaining that recognizing each student’s emotional state and lived experiences allowed her to be responsive. When defining SEL, Rachel added:

> I would define it as just recognizing that every kid is coming in with a different emotional register, or having experienced something in his home life, or his extracurriculars, or with whatever just happened in his other classes. That makes me be sort of responsive, rather than um, rigid.

Moreover, Michelle shared, “I could just say for myself, the teacher I was, you know, when I first started out to now is completely different”, illustrating how experience and reflection shaped participants’ beliefs about the importance of addressing students’ social and emotional needs alongside their academic development.

Authentic Relationships

Participants also discussed how effective SEL begins with authentic teacher-student relationships and intentional modeling of behaviors (*n*=36, 6%). Authentic teacher-student relationships humanize teachers, making students feel safe enough to be honest and vulnerable,

“I think that it's really important for the students to see you as just human and willing to be vulnerable in front of them, so that they know that it's okay to be vulnerable, too” (Sarah). Danielle emphasized that making students feel valued enables them to evolve throughout the school year and become more comfortable sharing about themselves, explaining:

> I think making kids feel like seen and valued. You know, we will do, like, even, like, shares in the classroom, where the kids will, you know, share something about them, or they'll share pictures of something that they did with their family, and I think when kids, I've seen kids who, in the beginning of the year, they don't share anything, they never raise their hand, and then, you know, you see them come out of their shell, and they gain that comfortability, and um seeing kids grow to be more comfortable or share about themselves, I think is such a huge, like growth factor.

Sarah and Danielle’s perspectives emphasize that authentic teacher-student relationships create the trust and emotional safety necessary for students to engage openly, take interpersonal risks, and develop social-emotional competencies within the classroom.

Carlos described effective strategies for SEL implementation at the high school level, like being consistent and authentic because students are observant and discerning. Carlos explained students can,

> kind of discern between um, when something a teacher is doing, and it feels forced, or, you know, a representative at school. Versus when it's a little bit more organic and authentic and emanates from that person. So, um the more authentic you can be, which sometimes is imperfect, and sometimes it's good for students to see, you know, a school worker's imperfections, or shortcomings, or for them to make mistakes that can really go a long way, um, in building those kinds of relationships with students that, make them

feel more comfortable sharing.

Carlos illuminated how organic and consistent engagement, including an educator's openness regarding their own shortcomings, cultivates an environment of trust where learners feel secure enough to demonstrate vulnerability and articulate their personal narratives.

Adapting SEL

Consequently, participants identified that teachers must constantly adapt SEL to students' developmental and individual needs for effective implementation (*n*=32, 6%). Participants highlighted SEL as a flexible practice that requires continual adjustment based on developmental stage and individual learners' needs. Michael, a middle school teacher and coach, explains the uniqueness of sixth through eighth grades, when students are still understanding what it means to be a person. Michael suggested that it might be easier to reach elementary and high school students emotionally but explained:

> 6th through 8th grade areas, like, they're just understanding what it means to be a person. Like, their bodies are changing, their likes are changing, their status amongst their peers are changing. So, me as an adult is just another layer that they need to kind of figure out for their journey.

Michelle described the need to adapt SEL at the elementary level because students' needs vary based on environmental factors and, as you get to know your students, you learn how to respond to their needs. Michelle highlighted that SEL,

> is not a one size fits all. And what one kid needs is not necessarily what another kid needs some kids do really have things going on in their lives that really impact them when they come to school, so really checking in on those kids, but also, I think by mid-year, you know your kids, so if something seems off, you know when you kind of

maybe need to intervene or check in and see what's going on.

Furthermore, Sofia, who works with students K-5, emphasized that effective SEL implementation requires teachers to recognize not only the differences among individual students but also the changing needs of the same student over time. Reflecting on the individuality of her students, Sofia explained, “I have never had one student that's the same, and I can't approach any child the same, ever.” These differences required her to draw from a range of strategies and remain responsive in the moment. As Sofia indicated, the “little collections” of approaches she had developed throughout her experience allowed her to “pivot in the moment” because she had “realized that one approach doesn't fit all.” Sofia further explained that this flexibility extends to working with the same student across different situations or days. A strategy that is effective at one point may no longer meet that student’s needs later. She noted, “I might be able to use one approach for a little bit, and then I might have to shift and pivot, to another, like, with the same child the next day” (Sofia). Sofia’s experience illustrates the importance of responsive SEL implementation in which teachers continually adjust their approaches based on students’ individual and evolving social-emotional needs.

With his Juniors and Seniors, Carlos outlined how SEL shaped his ability to respond flexibly to students’ needs while maintaining academic rigor. He reflected that SEL made him more aware of practices that had already been “a regular part of [his] pedagogy and sensibility” even before he explicitly identified them as SEL. At the same time, greater awareness of SEL empowered Carlos to,

> trust [his] judgment to both slow things down when needed for whatever reason with an individual student, a group of students, and to do so in a way that that doesn't sacrifice rigor because that's like, that's a big thing for me. And that's kind of the thing where I'm

trying to lead them into more complicated, nuanced subjects and ideas.

Carlos illuminates how SEL can support adapting teaching styles by allowing educators to adjust the pace or approach of instruction while continuing to maintain academic expectations.

Significance of SEL

In the final subcategory that emerged within Teacher Perception and Experiences, participants reflected on the significance and impact of SEL on education and instructional practices (*n*=27, 5%). Danielle described how her understanding of SEL changed throughout her teaching career. Looking back on her early experiences as an educator, she explained, “I think when I first started teaching, I had no idea how much SEL is such a big part of teaching.” She contrasted this realization with her formal teacher preparation, noting that education courses did not cover SEL, clarifying:

> Um even, like when you're taking education courses, you learn so much about content and classroom management, but you don't really learn about SEL. Like, there's no, I never took an SEL course, you know? I've done, like, the RULER PD and stuff, but I never was taught about SEL.

Michael similarly described how implementing SEL influenced his own growth, extending beyond his teaching practices to how he viewed himself as a person. He explained, “I think implementing SEL as an educator has made me a more understanding human.” His increased awareness shaped his everyday interactions and inspired him to consider how his words and actions might affect others. Michael reflected:

> But because my focus and everything that I do in my job is developed with care of when I do this drill, when I make this comment, when I write this email, when I make this joke. How will it land? right? And I think it's made me a better person.

This illuminates how participants perceive SEL as contributing to their own social-emotional growth and self-awareness. Extending the impact of SEL beyond classroom implementation to shaping their professional practices, personal growth, self-awareness, and understanding of their roles as educators.

Challenges & Barriers

Throughout the following, and third most frequent category, all participants discussed challenges and barriers (*n*=92, 16%) that affected their ability to successfully implement SEL formally and informally. Common challenges included limited time and scheduling constraints, home-school communication, varying school structures and available supports, students' developmental readiness and engagement, and inconsistencies of implementation amongst colleagues and grade levels.

Time and Schedule Constraints

Participants identified that they often face insufficient instructional time, competing curricular demands, scheduling limitations, or competing priorities that hinder SEL implementation (*n*=17, 3%). Natalie, a fifth-grade teacher, described the challenge of not having enough time to stop and have meaningful SEL discussions in the classroom:

> There's just never enough time. Sometimes it's 30 seconds of, like, [the students] just can't do that, and this is why, instead of, like, being able to really sit down and have a big discussion about it. Time is just the issue.

Moreover, Erica, a middle school math and science teacher, reported limited time as a challenge to meaningfully integrating SEL into daily instructional practices. Although she explained being open to embedding SEL within her existing curriculum, Erica clarified that competing responsibilities and limited planning time made intentional integration difficult. Erica suggested

that dedicated time within the school schedule could support teachers in making SEL a more consistent part of their instruction:

> If we had one block a week, so we still got to keep free prep periods, but if there was a way to give us, like, one block a week that we met with either other teachers, or the whole point of that block was, take your regular lesson, weave in some SEL, right? So, for me, for 7th grade, make just an SEL lesson, but it was part of our day-to-day, because we just have no time, and then trying to plan that, just there's only so many balls you can, you know, hold up in there.

With older students, time is also a barrier to SEL implementation because of scheduling constraints. James, a 9–12 history teacher, shared, "And then in the high school, I think what's been hard is our scheduling, and like we haven't really figured that out." Participants' comments reflected the challenge of balancing SEL integration with existing instructional responsibilities and limited planning time.

Home-to-School Communication

Inconsistencies between school-based SEL practices and support provided at home (*n*=19, 3%), including parent expectations, communication of challenges or changes in routines, and conflicting beliefs about SEL was another common barrier to SEL implementation participants reported. For example, Sarah, a PK teacher, reluctantly explained that teachers, "don't always know how much the families are doing at home." Similarly, Sarah expressed the importance of open communication between home and school to support students social-emotional health in the classroom:

> And I also wish that families, as much as I say over and over, please, if you notice anything weird at home, if they've said something unusual at home, it's always really

> helpful for me to know. I wish that there was more open communication from families with me in that way.

Beyond communication, Sarah also explained the challenge of not knowing how families communicate with one another and the messaging that our students are getting outside of school, "one challenge I've noticed is I don't always know how families are talking to their kids at home."

School Structures and Supports

Participants also highlighted insufficient training, resources, leadership support, and organizational structures as common barriers to SEL implementation (n=16, 3%). Danielle expressed a desire for more support when dealing with challenging behaviors, such as support staff in the classroom or more professional development to grow resources she could use to address those behaviors. Danielle shared:

> And I think sometimes I wish I had more support in dealing with really, really, like challenging behaviors. Um, and I think that whether it's, like, another teacher in the room, or just having more like, PD to get more, like, tools in my toolbox.

Furthermore, Rachel discussed not having any formal training in conflict resolution, which results in responding to problems after they emerge rather than proactively identifying and addressing them before they escalate. Rachel, a middle school teacher and coach, stated, "Like, to a certain extent, but, like, I wouldn't say, like, we're trained in, like, how to do that. And so, we're kind of more putting out the fires rather than preventing the fires, I would say."

Michael described the challenge of having to get any changes to curriculum passed through many different channels before being able to implement it with students, explaining that "ideas or hopes that I have, obviously always must be passed up the chain, right? So, we would

never teach or coach anything that's not approved by our administration staff." Additionally, Michael identified that the process required to modify curriculum, instructional practices, and teaching plans was a challenge to SEL implementation with middle school students. He noted that although these processes were viewed as necessary safeguards for protecting educators and ensuring that content was appropriate, the variability in review and support created a potential barrier to ensuring that SEL-related practices and resources were implemented consistently and appropriately across contexts. At times, as the athletic director and coach, teachers can seek his approval to implement changes but that is not always the case. Michael also clarified:

> the processes of changing a curriculum or changing a practice plan or changing a teaching plan, and that's just to protect us as educators, um, but sometimes something comes up that you really want to share, but you just got to make sure it's all right. A lot of times, I am the final checklist for coaches and teachers, but sometimes I'm not.

Other participants identified school structures that affect the implementation of SEL, like inconsistent understanding and beliefs about SEL due to lack of training. Michelle explained:

> not all the adults who are in the school need to share the same beliefs in SEL, or understand it, based on their background in teaching, and I think also the support staff, because they're aides or bus drivers who do punch duty, they don't get the SEL side of things, nor do they have any training.

Additionally, the tension between prioritizing academic instruction and making time for SEL requires schoolwide buy-in and a shared commitment to valuing social-emotional skills alongside academic learning. Therefore, Rachel described teachers' reluctance to start implementing SEL because it competes with academic goals:

> I think what you describe as, like, the friction to start is, like, it's necessarily a pause

> from the academic pursuit, right? So, you have to say, taking you out of your classes, that might be your [school's] classes. So, like, what is, like, is who's on board with this, and you're doing it in the service of something that's definitely more of a soft skill, right? And that we're gonna value that and stick with it.

Rachel's perspective emphasizes that prioritizing SEL requires a shared commitment to recognizing social-emotional development as an integral part of students' learning rather than as a competing instructional priority.

Developmental Readiness and Student Perceptions

When discussing challenges and barriers, participants noted that there are developmental differences among students, challenges associated with grade-level transitions, and hurdles to overcome with how students perceive SEL (*n*=14, 2%). Ashley, a high school teacher, explained the challenge of imparting the value of SEL to students who might prefer to spend their time doing something else. Ashley expressed:

> It's really, um, tricky sometimes, I think, to convey the value of the class and the value of that time for the students. So sometimes the kids are coming in rolling their eyes, or wishing they could go somewhere else and study, or they'd rather be on their computers or hang out.

Additionally, Natalie reported the impact of political climate as a barrier to SEL, noting that teachers may feel the need to carefully navigate what they say and discuss with students because of how it will be translated and perceived. Natalie stated, "it feels like we just need to be really careful with what we say. And that is hard, like, it's hard sometimes to have a conversation when you're worried about if a kid's gonna go home and say something". Natalie's experience reflects how concerns about the interpretation of classroom conversations can create an

additional barrier to SEL implementation by making teachers more cautious when facilitating social-emotional discussions.

Teacher Isolation and Inconsistencies

Finally, participants identified limited opportunities for collaboration, feelings of isolation, and inconsistencies in SEL implementation among colleagues as common challenges (*n*=26, 4%). David, a high school English teacher, explained how limited collaboration contributed to feelings of working independently, stating:

> There have definitely been years where I felt like I was in a silo. And everybody else was, and I'm sure with the advent of, like, so much email and online work, it sort of encourages us to, when we're free, to sort to be in our own little world finishing tasks.

In addition to limited collaboration, participants described inconsistencies in how SEL was implemented among individual teachers. Natalie explained, “I think that it sometimes feels more like we're checking a box saying that we do it, but we don't really, I don't know that it's consistently done. Or consistently done well. I think it really varies teacher by teacher.”

These inconsistencies were also highlighted across grade levels. Erica shared that, “when you're collaborating with others, and across grade levels, the inconsistencies, which happens anywhere with administration, makes a big impact, because you could have a grade that does a really good job of trying to develop or follow the SEL practices and develop the proper behaviors, and then the next year, it seems to fall apart, and then the next grade resets it again.” Erica further described changes in schoolwide priorities over time, stating, “I think it's trendy. So, if it's an important topic in the world, they're on it. And as soon as it drops, there's another important topic. Um, then they're on that as well.” Moreover, Rachel explained the challenge of inconsistencies between grade level teams when implementing SEL instruction. For example,

while on one team, shared expectations were more feasible than on another, “when I was a 6th grade teacher, it was like, we could do legit programming there. It's like, we're gonna all do this, we would do it, and you'd expect that it happened, like, it does not happen in 8th grade” (Rachel). Participants illuminated that challenges with collaboration and consistency occurred at multiple contexts, including among individual teachers, across grade levels, and within broader schoolwide practices.

Supports

The fourth category, Supports (n = 41, 7%), captured factors that participants identified as facilitating successful SEL implementation across grade bands. These supports extended beyond individual classroom practices and reflected schoolwide systems that reinforced teachers’ efforts. Participants consistently emphasized that effective SEL implementation depended on supportive leadership, collaborative staff, and organizational structures that prioritized students’ social and emotional development. Additionally, administrative commitment was described as creating conditions necessary for teachers to integrate SEL into their daily practice through resources, consistent messaging, dedicated personnel, and schoolwide initiatives.

Administrative and Staff Support

Participants expressed that district and school leadership facilitated environments where SEL was consistently implemented through encouragement, resources, scheduling, and advocacy (*n*=15, 3%). Rather than viewing SEL as an isolated classroom responsibility, teachers emphasized that successful implementation occurred when administrators communicated a shared vision and reinforced SEL through schoolwide practices. Laura, an elementary school teacher, described how regular assemblies, schoolwide themes, and student-led announcements reinforced common SEL messaging and created a sense of community, stating:

> They do a really good job here, we have a lot of assemblies, talking about words to live by kind of thing. Um, and so we have an assembly every few months about a different word that we're, like, embracing as a community. Um, we have a morning television show that the kids record that will address, like, different, um, SEL components. Um, which really helps foster community.

Another elementary school teacher, Michelle, added that, at her school, administrative leadership supports the belief in the "whole child" by reevaluating and rebuilding the school's Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) system following disruptions caused by the pandemic, COVID-19. She viewed the restructuring as evidence that school leaders recognized the importance of consistent behavioral expectations and social-emotional supports. Michelle explained:

> They strongly believe in the whole child and everything we do is always based on the whole child, and we're actually restructuring our PBIS systems right now because we've noticed since COVID that nothing really had been enforced, and then there's been a lot of turnover with teachers retiring, so we are starting over with the whole process.

In addition to administrative beliefs, participants also highlighted the importance of support staff. Danielle, when referring to supports in place at her school, shared:

> The whole department is called CAST, which is Counseling Academic Support Team. So, in the lower school, we don't have a preschooler, daycare, pre-care, anything, but we're K-12, so the lower school is K-5. We have one counselor and five learning specialists. the middle school and upper school have, like, a whole CAST suite, and they have, like, many counselors. And specialists. But they're much bigger than we are.

Overall, teachers perceived that administrative and staff support foster SEL implementation by embedding SEL into school culture, making school staff and resources readily available, and establishing structures that enable consistently addressing students' social, emotional, and behavioral needs.

Schoolwide Structures and Resources

In addition to administrative and staff support, participants indicated that schoolwide systems, instructional resources, and collaborative partnerships support the effective implementation of SEL (*n*=26, 4%). Sofia emphasized how schoolwide norms and the adoption of an SEL curriculum supported consistency in language across her elementary school:

> They went into norms for the schools, so then everybody had the same norms across um, K-12 in the district. And then from there, they adopted the Second Step Curriculum, and the Second Step Curriculum is taught explicitly throughout the classrooms. Because I'm not in a classroom, I'm not teaching the lessons explicitly, but we still use the same language.

Sofia also outlined the benefits of district support through initiatives, such as flexible seating, that enable teachers to differentiate instruction based on students' emotional and behavioral needs.

The findings also revealed the impact that collaborating with colleagues has on SEL implementation. Natalie, a middle school teacher, emphasized how her grade level collaborates well with each other to share ideas, which works well for them. Natalie further explained the advantage of collaboration, stating:

> Just being able to talk to somebody else about my ideas, because sometimes it's hard to do it alone, or at least to do it without having somebody else to bounce your ideas off of.

> So, I think just the collaboration to find resources, since we don't really have them, like, given to us, there's, you know, finding the resources or finding a way to bring the character continuum into an everyday conversation. I think we've done a good job of doing that over the years.

Although many participants identified collaboration as a key support for SEL implementation, others described the challenges that emerged when collaborative opportunities were unavailable. Teachers working independently expressed a desire for ongoing feedback from colleagues with SEL expertise to strengthen their instructional practices. Ashley shared:

> I'd like someone who does like Health and Wellness K through 12 to work with me to look over what we've created, and to see if we should be adding something, if there's something that's not as necessary anymore, if we should change the language. So, I'm, I do this, I'm only on my own. That's the part that sometimes feels like a little risky.

Rather than questioning her ability to implement SEL, Ashley emphasized the need for collaborative review and shared decision-making when refining curriculum. Across participants' experiences, consistent schoolwide structures, access to resources, and opportunities for collaboration provided important supports for implementing and refining SEL practices.

School Culture

Beyond specific supports, participants emphasized the broader role of school culture (*n*=39, 7%) in shaping successful SEL implementation. Participants described that school culture, including a collective commitment to SEL among faculty, staff, and administration, supported successful SEL implementation. Participants frequently referenced consistent schoolwide practices, collaborative alignment, and positive relationships as features of their school culture that foster effective SEL implementation.

Shared Values

Several participants described shared values and a collective commitment to SEL among faculty, staff, and administration as an important aspect of their school's culture (*n*=14, 2%). Laura explained the shared mindset amongst teachers at her school that SEL, "is, you know, really important, especially in elementary school. Um, and we just have so many resources and um, people to go to to talk about it." Similarly, Danielle emphasized how student and faculty well-being was prioritized at her school:

> I think we're very focused on SEL. I do think that's, like, a huge strength of my school, um, in our new strategic plan. Because, like, every couple of years, they come out with, like, the strategic plan that's, like, guiding the next, you know 10, 15 years of the school. like, well-being of students and faculty was, like at the forefront. Um, so that is, I would say it's, like, I think it's really important at our school.

Additionally, participants highlighted the impact of shared values district-wide that reflected this collective commitment. Sofia shared:

> Something I didn't mention was that [the district] also adopted an SEL Day. We have a half-day dedicated to, um, SEL and, um, the whole school does a celebration um, with different activities throughout the day. That's run by our mental health team, which is kind of neat.

Across interviews and focus groups, participants described schoolwide priorities, strategic planning, and dedicated SEL initiatives as examples of how SEL was embedded within their school culture.

Participants also reported schoolwide consistency, collaborative alignment, and positive relationships as characteristics of their school communities. Several participants contrasted

schools in which SEL was embedded throughout the culture with schools where implementation was less cohesive. Laura reflected on the differences she observed across schools, explaining, "The relationship is at the heart of implementing SEL. And the implementation of it at our school, I feel like they're doing an awesome job. There have been schools where they haven't done such a good job."

Best Practices

In the remaining subcategory for Supports, participants described how a shared focus across the school community contributed to consistent SEL practices (*n*=25, 4%). James, a high school teacher, explained that his school's shift toward emphasizing community and belonging created new opportunities for collaboration, stating, "I think we, you know, so in doing, in saying, talking, working more this year in particular with our dean's office you know, I think switching the name to community and belonging actually has allowed us to get in places we weren't in before." Likewise, Sofia emphasized the importance of communication and administrative support, noting, "I just feel like that administration, administrative piece, regardless of what system you're doing, I think if there's that communication piece and the support with them, it just helps align everybody in the building."

Finally, participants described school environments that encouraged collaboration among colleagues. Michael, a middle school PE teacher and coach, contrasted his previous and current schools, explaining:

> Once your class was done at my last school, you would close your door and that was it. But here, our doors are always open and people, our head of school, created an atmosphere that everyone feels comfortable coming into your office and asking for help, or coming into your office and sharing.

Similarly, Sofia shared how her district prioritized SEL throughout the school year:

> They put it at the forefront. Um I think Millbrook Public Schools as a whole, puts SEL in, you know, ahead of anything else. Um…yes, people want academic growth, but I think that they really put the students social-emotional learning first, um, I feel like a lot of our training in the beginning of the year is that social-emotional.

These experiences reflect how participants perceived supportive school environments as those that encouraged collaboration among colleagues and demonstrated a shared commitment to prioritizing students' social-emotional development.

Professional Development

Throughout individual and focus group interviews, participants shared mixed experiences with the sixth category, Professional Development (*n*=30, 5%). Although participants reported differing levels of formal SEL training, they consistently noted both formal and informal professional learning experiences that shaped SEL implementation. At the same time, many participants emphasized the need for ongoing training, collaboration, and implementation support.

Professional Learning

Participants who participated in formal professional development described how the training influenced their understanding and implementation of SEL (*n*=30, 5%). Danielle, an elementary school teacher in New Jersey, highlighted the value of external and school-based trainings, explaining:

> RULER's been great, uh, responsive classroom has been really great. Um, our school counselor will do at some of our faculty meetings, just, like, in-house PD and kind of go through, like, at the last faculty meeting she gave a PD on how teachers are the first ones

> to notice things in students. And, like kind of guidelines around, like if you're noticing this, like, this is the person you should contact. If you're seeing that, like, this is. Which is helpful, because there's a lot, like, we have a counselor, we have learning specialists, we have all different people we can reach out to, and um I think having a really strong support team is really helpful.

Danielle's experience reflects how professional development can provide teachers with practical guidance, clarify available support systems, and strengthen their understanding of how to respond to students' social-emotional needs.

Subsequently, Natalie reflected that although she did not find the RULER training particularly impactful, it prompted her to intentionally incorporate more social-emotional conversations into her fifth-grade teaching practice. Natalie asserted, "A few years ago, I did the RULER training at Yale, which was meh, but I feel like that made me just think about [SEL] more, and I feel like I do more talking about feelings than I did when I first started." Finally, at Sofia's Connecticut public school, they recently began professional development on Restorative Practices. Sofia shared, "we just had training, um, this past month in Restorative Practices…um and that is something that we are going to continue to be trained in."

Beyond formal professional development, participants frequently emphasized the importance of collaboration with colleagues and support staff. Danielle acknowledged the benefit of consulting counselors and learning specialists to discuss individual students and learn from colleagues' previous experiences teaching them, sharing:

> We have a counselor, we have learning specialists, we have all different people we can reach out to, and um I think having a really strong support team is really helpful. Like, our counselor is amazing, and our learning specialist in the lower school is amazing. Um

> and so, being able to even just, like, talk through with them, like, I'm noticing this in this kid, or you know, they also can carry, like, oh, this worked for this kid last year, like, why don't you try that, you know? That can be really helpful, too.

Danielle's experience reflects how collaboration with colleagues and support staff can extend professional learning by providing teachers with opportunities to share knowledge, discuss individual student needs, and identify strategies that have been effective in supporting students. Additionally, Erica explained that most of her professional learning occurred through informal conversations as opposed to structured training:

> I don't think we've gotten a lot of training. I think there are people, like, I know that there's certain, like, I could call a colleague and be like, hey, can you point me in direction? Um but more colleague-to-colleague conversations, um, casual conversations or if you're having trouble with the student, or you're like, hey, I'm worried about this class, what can you do? So, it's not training, it's just collegiate discussions.

Erica's experience further reflects how, in the absence of formal training, informal collaboration with colleagues can serve as an important source of professional learning and support for SEL implementation.

Although participants valued both formal and informal learning opportunities, many shared a desire for additional professional development. Sarah, a PK teacher, reflected, "I wish I could do more PD. Um, I wish I could attend more workshops and more trainings. Time is definitely a factor in that regard." Furthermore, David, a high school English teacher, emphasized the value of observing colleagues as a form of professional learning. When reflecting on his experience as a teaching fellow, he explained that shadowing experienced teachers provided meaningful opportunities to strengthen his own practice, "That was a

phenomenal experience to get to shadow all the teachers in the English department for a period of time." David also shared a desire for schools to build in time for classroom observations and collaborative time amongst colleagues:

> I left that year thinking, I wish this was part of our schedule every year, you know, like a time set aside just to shadow. Because you learn so much so quickly. And it puts your own work in perspective.

Furthermore, David highlighted the belief that teaching practices would improve with opportunities to shadow other colleagues, stating, "the thing is, the teaching would get better, if there were, shadowing and visiting, and time for discussing techniques was really afforded to teachers."

Overall, participants viewed professional learning as an ongoing process rather than a one-time event. While formal training introduced new SEL frameworks and strategies, participants consistently identified collaboration with colleagues, mentorship, coaching, and opportunities for observation and reflection as equally important sources of support for effective SEL implementation.

Student Outcomes

Participants reported that, beyond academic achievement, SEL promotes student outcomes (*n*=12, 2%) such as social-emotional and behavioral growth that has lasting benefits across developmental stages. Teachers described improvements in students' emotional awareness, self-expression, self-regulation, executive functioning, interpersonal relationships, and willingness to engage in difficult conversations. Many participants emphasized that these skills became increasingly internalized over time, allowing students to apply them independently.

Social, Behavioral, and Academic Outcomes

When reflecting on the impact of SEL implementation, participants identified outcomes across three primary areas: social, behavioral, and academic (*n*=12, 2%). Laura, a first-grade teacher, described observing significant growth in students' social-emotional development over the course of the school year, stating:

> Students make so much progress throughout the year, um, I have, like, they come in and they have a hard time expressing themselves, or they're working on different things, and then, um, it's amazing at the end of the year how much more mature they are, and um, how they can really, like, speak up for themselves, and um I feel like the biggest thing that I've noticed from teaching is students being able to be more mindful.

Moreover, Sarah, a PK teacher of 21 years, explained that students became more willing to express their thoughts because they felt safe within the classroom. Emphasizing the growth that PK students make over the course of the year, Sarah expressed:

> They're just vocal. You know, they're vocal more, they feel safe to be vocal, let me say that. They feel safe to say, and even if it's not, you know, a big, dramatic explanation, they're just like, 'I'm just, I feel this, or I don't want to do this, or so-and-so is chasing me,' right?

These experiences reflect participants' perceptions that SEL supported students' social-emotional growth by increasing their ability to express their feelings and needs, advocate for themselves, and communicate more confidently within the classroom.

Participants also highlighted students independently applying SEL skills without needing

prompting, suggesting that behaviors become internalized over time. Sofia reflected on the beauty of watching elementary students internalize social-emotional growth over time, explaining:

> When you can take a step back, and students are doing it innately and organically themselves because of strategies you've put into the classroom. And they're taking care of it themselves, that's when you're like, oh my god, that's beautiful. You know, I think that is a win.

Likewise, Ashley, a high school counselor who facilitates a Readiness class, emphasized that SEL fostered a classroom culture where students felt comfortable engaging in open and vulnerable conversations, stating, "I think we're creating a space that really encourages, you know, vulnerability and just courageous conversations overall."

During focus group interviews, participants discussed how students were actively engaged with SEL instruction and transferred those skills beyond dedicated lessons. Laura described how her first-grade students enjoyed the SEL role-playing activities and instruction, expressing:

> They enjoy the different games that we play. They love adding different, um, mindful techniques to their mindful toolbox. And, um, it's really great to see like how much they get out of each lesson, too, and seeing them refer to the lessons throughout the day, which is really cool to see as well.

These observations reflect how students applied social-emotional skills beyond explicit SEL instruction, using learned strategies independently and engaging more openly in their everyday classroom interactions.

Finally, participants suggested that the long-term impact of SEL became particularly evident when students had not received the same instruction. Ashley explained that students entering her school in tenth or eleventh grade, without prior participation in their Readiness course, often demonstrated less comfort discussing emotions and weaker executive functioning skills compared with those who had been a part of the course. Ashley, reinforcing the perceived benefits of ongoing SEL implementation, stated:

> I see a difference in terms of their comfort to talk about certain things, like if they have weak executive functioning skills, like the shock of that, you know, and I think it's okay, we'll work on it. And that is something we talk about in our ninth-grade curriculum. They didn't get it with us, so we see the difference.

Ashley's reflection highlights the perceived value of sustained SEL instruction, particularly in developing students' comfort with emotional expression and their ability to apply executive functioning skills over time.

Advice

In the final category, participants described advice (*n*=19, 3%) that they would give to other educators who were beginning to implement SEL in their teaching practices. Advice centered around fostering authentic relationships, leadership support that aligned with their own SEL beliefs, collaborating with colleagues, and embracing continuous growth and reflection. Although participants discussed advice less often than other aspects of SEL implementation, their recommendations reflected the lessons they had learned through experience. Teachers encouraged educators beginning to implement SEL to prioritize authentic relationships with students, seek supportive leadership and collaborative partnerships, embed SEL naturally into

everyday instruction, and approach implementation with openness, reflection, and continuous growth.

Effective SEL Implementation

Many participants emphasized that successful SEL implementation begins with building authentic relationships and creating a classroom community before introducing formal SEL activities or programs (*n*=19, 3%). Teachers described establishing trust, fostering a sense of belonging, and ensuring student voice as foundational practices that increased student engagement and willingness to participate. Laura explained the importance of beginning the school year with her first-grade class by intentionally building community and "starting the year off with fostering a sense of community about how your kids want to, like, feel in the classroom is really beneficial, like, looking at the RULER approach, um, and then just, like, having a lot of student buy-in." Similarly, Ashley advised teachers to focus first on relationships, offering:

> Just start at tier one. Like, just get to know your student and help them feel comfortable turning to you and talking to you. If you teach something that's out of place, it won't resonate the same as if you teach it after you've built a relationship with your students.

These perspectives emphasize participants' views that establishing trust, relationships, and a sense of belonging provides a foundation for students to meaningfully engage with SEL instruction.

Participants also stressed the importance of implementing SEL in ways that were authentic to the individual teacher rather than following scripted practices or trying to emulate other teachers. Teachers believed students quickly recognized when implementation felt forced and responded more positively when SEL reflected the educator's genuine personality and teaching style. Natalie, who has taught fifth grade for many years, explained, "you have to find a

way to do it that works for you. It can't feel forced because the boys sense that, and then they don't respond to it." High school teachers had consistent recommendations as James reflected on the most meaningful advice he received from a cooperating teacher: "The best advice I got was…can you just, like, do you and, like, be you?" This advice came during his first years of teaching, when he was attempting to emulate his colleague's mannerisms and instructional techniques rather than developing an authentic teaching style of his own. Similarly, Carlos offered guidance to new teachers, advising, "I would tell them that they're probably already doing it. And you're not learning something new that you're putting on top. You're just articulating a part of your regular classroom practice."

Several participants encouraged teachers to integrate SEL seamlessly into existing classroom instruction rather than being tied to its implementation as a separate curriculum. With over ten years of kindergarten teaching experience, Michelle recommended taking advantage of naturally occurring teachable moments, stating:

> If you don't have a program, look for those moments that happen in the room that you can use as a teaching example, find your read aloud talk about it, have them connect it to their own lives. I think right there is way more meaningful than having a specific program necessarily.

Other participants also encouraged teachers to intentionally view every lesson through an SEL lens, suggesting to, "work with other people and ask a lot of questions, and purposefully plan SEL within every single lesson that you do" (Sofia). Sofia, a K–5 math interventionist, further explained that teachers should consider, how are the kids interacting with each other, or interacting with the teacher. And making sure that all the learners are feeling safe within that

environment. Your lessons are going to go so much better than they would have if you didn't approach it in that way.

Collaboration and supportive school leadership were also viewed as essential for successful implementation. Participants encouraged educators to seek guidance from experienced colleagues and school support personnel. Additionally, participants stressed the importance of ensuring that school leadership genuinely values SEL, especially if that is something important to your teaching practice. Sofia recommended:

> Do a lot of reading, do a lot of observing, partner with people that you feel have a great approach, partner with your psychologist, partner with your social workers. Um, do a lot of team teaching, like, get as many opportunities and practices of understanding how to implement SEL in the classroom.

Erica emphasized that administrative support should align with teachers' commitment to SEL, advising educators that, "If they're looking for a job or anything, they should make sure the administration is really behind it, because that can completely change what you can do in what is seen as respected or not, for any lessons."

Finally, participants encouraged educators to remain open-minded and view SEL implementation as an ongoing process of learning, rather than mastery. David highlighted the importance of developing an understanding of SEL by "defining what it is and having language around social-emotional learning activities. It's sort of like having the right language, just having a term would help you classify it, and even being able to define it." Furthermore, Rachel discussed the importance of the journey and leading with an open mind,

> because I think the sooner that you get into your programming, like, the way you do things, like even just your schedule, and this is how much I get done, there doesn't…It

doesn't feel like there's much room for anything else.

Relatedly, Michael advised teachers to focus on long-term student growth, suggesting to, "Put your weight into the journey and not the win, the end, you know? Understanding that the kid will win in the end."

Collectively, participants portrayed effective SEL implementation as a relational, collaborative, and reflective process that develops over time through authentic practice rather than strictly following a prescribed program.

Cross-Case Findings Across Grade Bands

Across grade bands, participants described similarities in the foundational goals of SEL while emphasizing that implementation changed in response to students' developmental maturity, social needs, and increasing independence. Rather than identifying entirely different SEL competencies for students at different levels, participants discussed a progression in which similar skills were introduced, reinforced, and applied with increasing complexity.

Early Childhood and Elementary Education

Natalie shared that a character framework at her school provided continuity across divisions while allowing the language to change developmentally:

> I mean, I think the Character Connections is the most useful one I think that we have for across grade levels, because we're all using the same document and idea. I mean, obviously, like, the words are a little bit different from, like, the preschool to the middle school, but the idea is there about…you know, the things that [our school] takes seriously for your character growth. So, I think that, for me, is the most useful one, just knowing that they have this language, and then it's just tailored to their age level but the general idea is the same across all of the divisions and all the subjects, and sports, and

acting, and, you know, all that stuff. It's always there.

Natalie's reflection emphasizes how a shared schoolwide framework can provide continuity in SEL while allowing language and expectations to be adapted to students' developmental levels. Sarah similarly described the benefit of seeing how common SEL approaches appeared differently as students progressed through grade levels. Reflecting on professional development completed collaboratively across preschool and lower school, she explained:

> But we were also able to see what Natalie spoke to a moment ago, how this shows up in first grade is a little bit different from how it shows up in my classroom. But it can also help me think as a teacher, how I'm setting my kids up from when they're encountering it down the road in first grade. Um, so doing all of that and having access to the sort of RULER database, where I can see the lessons, see the examples, look at the videos. There's songs, and all kinds of things that are just applicable to our kids.

Taken together, these reflections highlight the value participants placed on maintaining consistency in SEL approaches across grade levels while adapting practices to meet students' changing developmental needs. Laura emphasized that the same competencies were taught across the early elementary grades but increased in complexity as students matured. Laura revealed:

> I'm actually at a school that's pre-K through 2nd grade. And so, kindergarten, first, and second, we all have the same competencies, and we all have the same, um, like, units of instruction order. It's just, um, the level of maturity goes up for each grade.

She further identified relationship skills as especially important for first-grade students, describing SEL as "learning how to be part of a community, learning how your actions can affect

other people, and understanding that and understanding how, um everyone is different, but also everyone has similarities."

Later Elementary and Middle School

As students moved into later elementary and middle school grades, participants described greater expectations for reflection and independence. Sofia shared how a reflection practice was adapted to students' developmental needs, explaining that:

> For, like, the older kids, it's a little bit, you know, wordier, they are expecting more out of it, where the younger kids, it's more of, like, a face, or a, you know, they can color on the face and how they're feeling and that kind of stuff.

She also described maintaining consistent language and expectations while adjusting support according to students' individual skill development:

> And I would say that, like, a lot of repetition. Like, making sure the language is the same, making sure I'm consistent is probably my most effective strategy, like, making sure, that my language doesn't change, that I'm not teetering and changing my expectation based on a situation, regardless of the situation, my expectations are my expectations. Um, so the kids just know what, you know, the role is, but I do agree, Danielle, like, depending on the kids in front of you, like, you're going to adjust, because they may not have that skill set yet, and they're still exercising some of those ways to be able to interact socially with peers. And, or are socially not available yet. So just being very mindful of how they might be interacting with the student and pairing them up strategically within the classroom to make sure they're successful, I think is important.

This emphasizes the importance of maintaining consistent language and expectations while remaining responsive to differences in students' social-emotional skill development and individual needs.

Middle school participants also described SEL as becoming less recognizable as a discrete lesson and more embedded within academic instruction and everyday interactions. Erica explained that her seventh-grade students engage in SEL through opportunities to develop persistence, respond to mistakes, reflect on effort, and navigate peer interactions rather than through an explicit SEL lesson. When identifying a particular developmental challenge specific to middle school students, Erica shared, "they're so young, but want to be so old and they enter 7th grade, 6th graders still, and then they leave 7th grade trying to be 11th graders," adding that "being a middle schooler makes the challenges difficult to implement anything, because anything sounds hokey to them." Erica's comments illustrate the need to present SEL competencies in ways that are developmentally appropriate for middle schoolers.

High School

At the high school level, participants identified SEL as building upon skills established in earlier grades, while shifting towards increasingly complex social and emotional demands. Ashley connected high school SEL to students' previous developmental experiences, stating:

> Um, yeah, I mean, I think the, the hope is that by the time they're in high school, um, and they're working in like, you know, a classroom, like I'm setting up, which is sort of this health and wellness curriculum, that we're building on the skills that they've learned in primary school and in middle school. You know, we're really looking at SEL as a way for students to learn how to handle, like, stress and interrelationship dynamics, and just making difficult decisions, right? Just what it means for them to manage their anxiety and

> build coping strategies. I don't know. We see it as really holistic, like we're working on, you know, learning and teaching empathy and communication and conflict resolution and, um, what it means to just create balance in your life and have self-awareness, and make responsible decisions. We talk about executive functioning tools that help with emotional regulation and just help with managing the day-to-day tasks.

Ashley's description emphasizes how SEL at the high school level builds upon foundational skills developed in earlier grades while addressing increasingly complex demands related to relationships, decision-making, emotional regulation, and independence.

High school participants also highlighted structural differences that influenced how relationships and SEL were developed. Carlos noted that teachers at the middle and high school levels often have less sustained time with individual students than elementary teachers. Carlos explained:

> Um, I think it takes longer, um…In that regard, you know, at middle, maybe high school level. Because of the fact that you don't spend that, you know, sort of sustained amount of time with students. However, I mean, because I teach English, I feel that the subject matter naturally lends itself to students being prodded towards, thinking empathetically, and making themselves vulnerable by way of taking positions with writing. So, in my particular discipline, I feel a little bit, like, uniquely, I don't know, gifted to probably see…students, uh, kind of in an emotional context likely sooner than perhaps in other classes.

Carlos's experience highlights how structural differences at the secondary level may shape opportunities for relationship-building, while academic content can provide meaningful opportunities for students to engage in empathy, vulnerability, and emotional expression.

Overall, participants illustrated both continuity and developmental variation across grade bands. Foundational competencies, including emotional awareness, relationship skills, empathy, self-regulation, reflection, and responsible decision making remained across PK–12 settings. However, participants described differences in how the competencies were taught and applied.

Summary of Findings

The findings of this study examined PK–12 teachers' experiences with the implementation of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs across New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. Thirteen educators participated in the study, representing four grade bands: PK–2, Grades 3–5, Grades 6–8, and Grades 9–12. Participants brought between five and 21 years of educational experience and represented public and private school settings. Across all grades and settings, participants described their experiences with SEL implementation in seven categories: Instructional Strategies, Teacher Perceptions and Experiences, Challenges and Barriers, School Culture, Supports, Professional Development, Student Outcomes, and Advice.

Overall, participants highlighted SEL as an integral part of teaching that was most often embedded in daily instruction, classroom routines, relationships, and interactions rather than implemented through a stand-alone program. Teachers emphasized authentic relationships, consistency, and flexibility as important components of effective implementation. Although participants used a variety of formal programs, including Second Step and Responsive Classroom, and school-developed approaches, like restorative practices, their experiences reflected the importance of adapting SEL to the individual and developmental needs of students. Participants also described how their understanding of SEL evolved over time, through teaching experience, reflection, professional learning, and collaboration with colleagues.

Across grade bands, participants both compared and contrasted experiences with SEL implementation. Participants illustrated that younger students benefit more from explicit, concrete instruction focused on identifying emotions, self-regulation, behavioral expectations, and interpersonal skills. However, SEL with older students became progressively embedded within daily instruction and interactions. Middle school teachers particularly emphasized the changing social, emotional, and developmental needs associated with that age group, while highs schoolteachers described balancing responsiveness to students' needs with increased academic expectations. Despite these differences, participants across grade bands consistently highlighted that SEL was not one size fits all and required constant adjusting of practices based on individual students' needs, developmental readiness, and the classroom environment.

Participants also identified several factors that influenced their ability to implement SEL effectively. Common challenges included limited time, scheduling and academic demands, inconsistencies with implementation, lack of collaboration between colleagues, insufficient training or resources, home-school communication, and varying levels of student readiness or engagement. Conversely, administrative commitment, collaboration amongst colleagues, support staff, shared schoolwide expectations, consistent languaging and practices, and ongoing professional learning facilitated effective implementation. Participants reported observing student growth in self-expression, self-awareness, interpersonal relationships, self-regulation, and emotional awareness, which also lead to the independent application of SEL skills over time. Ultimately, these findings highlight both commonalities across PK–12 teachers' experiences and differences in how SEL was implemented in response to the developmental needs and educational contexts of each grade band.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine how teachers across grade bands experienced the implementation of social-emotional learning programs, with particular attention to similarities and differences in their perceptions, practices, attitudes towards implementation, and reported challenges. Although research has demonstrated that SEL can improve students' academic achievement, social-emotional competencies, and attitudes, less is known about how teachers navigate implementation across diverse classroom and developmental contexts (Cipriano et al., 2023). Prior research indicates that teachers play a central role in determining the quality and sustainability of SEL implementation. Teachers' familiarity with and commitment to SEL, access to adequate training, beliefs about its importance, instructional practices, and understanding of students' developmental needs can influence how SEL programs are adopted and integrated into classroom practice (Brackett et al., 2012; Durlak et al., 2011; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2014; Yoder et al., 2021; Zins et al., 2007). Building on this literature, the present study foregrounded teachers' perspectives to clarify how contextual, instructional, and developmental factors shaped their experiences with SEL implementation. The findings provide insight into how implementation strategies and systems of support may be strengthened to promote more effective and sustainable SEL practices and improved outcomes for both students and educators.

Participants' experiences and perceptions of SEL implementation provided the foundation for understanding what insights cross-case comparisons reveal about the broader phenomenon of SEL implementation in PK–12 education. Discussions in this chapter highlight how teachers perceive SEL implementation within the context of the tri-state area through their

lived experiences in the classroom. This chapter unfurls their perceptions and experiences as it pertains to instructional strategies, adapting instruction, school culture and supports, and challenges and barriers to effective implementation. Throughout this chapter, the discussions showcase how participants' experiences throughout various schools in the tri-state area compare, including embedded SEL instruction, building authentic relationships, school-wide commitment, and insufficient time. Additionally, this chapter emphasizes similarities and differences that emerged across grade bands based on developmental needs of the students, their instructional context, and school culture.

In answering the primary research question, PK–12 teachers experience the implementation of social-emotional learning programs in various ways, with similarities and differences emerge across these contexts. The findings indicate that PK–12 teachers experienced SEL implementation as a relational, responsive, and developmentally situated component of teaching rather than solely as the delivery of a formal curriculum. Across grade bands, teachers consistently viewed positive relationships as the foundation of effective SEL and described adapting their practices in response to students' observed social-emotional needs. However, the form of implementation varied according to students' developmental characteristics and school contexts. Teachers of younger students relied more heavily on explicit instruction, modeling, repetition, and immediate guidance, whereas teachers of older students emphasized reflection, coaching, authentic discussion, integration with academic content, and independent application. Thus, the findings illustrate that SEL implementation is unified by common goals but differentiated through developmentally responsive practices.

The following discussion examines these experiences through two related dimensions: the challenges and supports that influenced implementation and the similarities and differences that

emerged across grade bands. These findings are interpreted in relation to existing SEL research and the synthesis and translation, support, and delivery systems of the Framework (ISF) (Wandersman et al., 2008).

Particularized, when answering sub question one, teachers identified numerous challenges and supports that influence their implementation of SEL effectively. For example, teachers discussed implementation as being shaped by the interaction between individual classroom practices and broader organizational conditions. Although participants generally valued SEL, limited instructional time, competing academic priorities, inconsistent schoolwide practices, and uneven access to professional development constrained their ability to implement it consistently. Conversely, collaboration, administrative commitment, shared language, responsive curricula, and opportunities for coaching supported implementation. These findings reinforce prior research demonstrating that successful SEL implementation depends not only on teachers' willingness or competence but also on the organizational structures surrounding their work. Viewed through the ISF, teachers operated within the delivery system, while professional development, collaboration, and administrative support represented features of the support system that strengthened, or, when absent, limited, their implementation.

Furthermore, when answering sub question 2, teachers revealed both continuity and developmental progression in their experiences implementing SEL programs by grade band. Relationships, responsiveness, and common social-emotional competencies remained important throughout PK–12 education. However, teachers modified how they cultivated relationships, taught SEL skills, and supported students' application of those skills. PK–2 teachers emphasized emotional safety, concrete language, modeling, and repetition; grades 3–5 teachers placed greater emphasis on reflection, empathy, and perspective-taking; grades 6–8 teachers adopted a coaching

stance in response to increasing peer influence and identity development; and grades 9–12 teachers emphasized mutual respect, autonomy, authentic discussion, and real-world decision-making. These differences suggest that effective SEL implementation does not require uniform practice across grade bands. Instead, it requires consistency in purpose combined with developmental flexibility in delivery.

Challenges and Supports Influencing Effective SEL Implementation

The findings illustrated that implementation of SEL effectively was shaped by the interaction between individual commitment and the organizational conditions surrounding their practices. Participants identified limited time, insufficient opportunities for collaboration, inconsistent implementation among colleagues and grade levels, inadequate preparation, and competing priorities as significant challenges. Conversely, administrative commitment, collaborative planning, professional learning, and schoolwide structures supported implementation. This discussion suggests that effective SEL implementation depends not only on teachers' willingness or skill but on whether schools create the conditions necessary to integrate SEL into instructional practice.

Challenges to SEL Implementation

Across grade bands, teachers described several challenges that influenced the implementation of SEL in their classrooms. Time constraints emerged as a recurring challenge, as teachers described competing academic demands and limited opportunities within the school schedule to intentionally address SEL. Limited collaboration also affected implementation, particularly when teachers lacked consistent opportunities to share strategies, resources, and experiences with colleagues. Moreover, differences in teacher preparation further shaped SEL implementation, as teachers described varying levels of knowledge, training, and experience with

SEL practices. Together, these challenges reflected the varied conditions under which teachers implemented SEL across grade levels.

A frequent challenge across participants' experiences was time. Teachers described difficulty balancing SEL planning and instruction with academic demands and other professional responsibilities. Erica's experience illustrates that teachers' willingness to integrate SEL may not be sufficient without structural supports that provide dedicated time for planning and collaboration. Her comments further suggest that incorporating SEL into existing instruction, rather than treating it as an additional responsibility, may make implementation more manageable within the competing demands of teachers' daily practice. This finding is consistent with previous research indicating that SEL integration into instructional practices is met with challenges, which leads to less effective implementation. Teachers frequently report a lack of time, training, and resources to effectively implement SEL alongside academic content (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Resistance may also stem from misconceptions that SEL is peripheral to academic success or that it imposes on instructional time (Greenberg et al., 2017). It also reinforces the importance of integrating SEL into ongoing classroom practices instead of positioning it as a separate initiative that teachers must add to an already demanding workload.

Participants across grade levels also reported limited collaboration, professional isolation, and inconsistent implementation among teachers and across grade levels. Ashley's experience suggests that collaboration functions as an important form of professional support by providing opportunities to evaluate instructional materials, update practices, and reduce the isolation associated with implementing SEL independently. Without these opportunities, teachers may be left to determine whether lessons, language, and strategies are developmentally appropriate without sufficient guidance. Inconsistency across classrooms and grade levels further

complicated implementation when students did not always experience shared language, expectations, or practices as they progressed through school. This is consistent with prior research indicating that the variability in school climates and teacher beliefs about SEL's role in education further complicate implementation efforts (Taylor et al., 2017). Research underscores that SEL implementation success requires addressing these contextual barriers with comprehensive, multi-level strategies that account for developmental differences (Mahoney et al., 2021).

Another cross-grade band challenge involved teachers' preparation, specifically professional learning, to facilitate SEL. Some participants recounted learning to recognize students' social-emotional needs through experience rather than through preservice education or formal training. Their reflections position SEL as an integral component of teaching that often develops through classroom experience, observation, and relationships with students. Although this helped teachers become more responsive, relying primarily on experience may result in inconsistent preparation, particularly when teachers lack opportunities for collaboration or coaching. This finding supports Collie et al.'s (2012) conclusion that teachers' self-efficacy, their belief in their own ability to teach SEL effectively, is a critical predictor of implementation quality. Additionally, confidence in facilitating SEL often develops through experience, observation of successful practice, and supportive training environments (Oliveira et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2024).

Participants' accounts further illuminate that SEL facilitation involves emotional and relational demands. Teachers must be able to create emotionally safe environments, respond to students' needs, and adapt planned instruction when students are not prepared to engage academically. These responsibilities require teachers to exercise professional judgment rather

than simply deliver predetermined lessons. The findings therefore support a view of implementation fidelity that includes responsiveness to classroom context and students' developmental needs. Coaching and professional learning may be particularly important because they can provide safe spaces for teachers to explore difficult interactions, consider how their practices affect students, and develop strategies appropriate for the age group they teach.

Quality training and ongoing professional development (PD) are central to teachers' ability to implement SEL effectively (Greenberg et al., 2017; Ibarra, 2022). Research underscores the importance of PD that is sustained, practice-based, and embedded within the school context (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Educators who receive structured SEL training report greater clarity, confidence, and commitment to SEL integration (Yoder, 2014). Professional development that incorporates modeling, reflection, and opportunities for collaboration appears particularly impactful (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). When teachers are equipped with theoretical knowledge, practical tools, and strategies, they are more likely to engage in intentional and consistent SEL practices. Moreover, teachers value PD that addresses their own emotional competencies and well-being, not just instructional practices (Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

Theoretically, the Interactive Systems Framework (ISF) helps explain why teacher commitment alone does not consistently produce effective implementation. Within the ISF, the Prevention Delivery System includes the educators who carry out programs in practice, while the Prevention Support System builds their capacity through training, coaching, and organizational support (Wandersman et al., 2008). Participants' experiences suggest that teachers were frequently expected to function within the Delivery System without adequate assistance from the Support System. When dedicated planning time, coaching, collaboration, or clear guidance was

unavailable, responsibility shifted to individual teachers. This contributed to a varied understanding of SEL and its implementation.

Supports for SEL Implementation

Participants identified administrative and staff support, collaboration, schoolwide structures, and professional learning, coaching, and opportunities for reflection as important conditions for effective implementation. Supportive relationships were central to both the process and purpose of SEL implementation.

Administrative support was most meaningful when leaders demonstrated that SEL was an institutional priority through scheduling, professional learning, providing resources, and consistent communication. This is supported by Cirpriano et al. (2020), who purported that leadership support often includes administrative backing, professional development, time allocation, and modeling of emotional competence, all of which strengthen organizational commitment and teacher motivation. Furthermore, when school leaders actively promote SEL as a core component of the educational mission—through clear communication, policy alignment, and strategic integration—teachers are more likely to view SEL as a shared priority rather than an isolated classroom task (Brackett et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2018). In contrast, a lack of leadership engagement can result in fragmented efforts and hinder the sustainability of SEL practices (Thierry et al., 2023). Schools that embed SEL into strategic plans and schoolwide goals are more likely to sustain implementation over time (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Collaboration amongst colleagues was another source of support that participants discussed.

Teachers valued opportunities to plan with colleagues, discuss student needs, review instructional materials, and establish shared expectations. Collaboration connects the Support and Delivery Systems within the ISF. Teachers remain responsible for facilitating SEL, but

collaborative structures give them access to collective expertise and reduce the burden of making instructional decisions in isolation. Collaboration may be especially important across grade bands because developmental expectations, instructional practices, and students' needs change as students advance through school. Cross-grade communication can help educators maintain continuity in schoolwide goals while adapting language and practices at each grade level. When explaining the character work that her school uses for PK–12 Natalie shared the benefit of, "just knowing that they have this language, and then it's just tailored to their age level but the general idea is the same across all of the divisions and all the subjects."

Professional learning, coaching, and opportunities for reflection also supported implementation by helping teachers connect SEL principles to classroom practice. The findings suggest that one-time training may be insufficient because teachers must continually interpret students' needs and adjust their instruction. David, a high school English teacher, described using discussions to continually interpret how students engage intellectually, socially, and emotionally. By attending to students' varied needs and responses, David adjusted discussion prompts and opportunities for participation to foster curiosity, connection, risk-taking, and critical thinking. Ongoing coaching and professional development can support this process by providing feedback, modeling strategies, and creating opportunities for teachers to reflect on their own responses and instructional practices. Within the ISF, these supports represent more than disseminating program information; they strengthen the practices that teachers need to implement SEL effectively (Wandersman et al., 2008). This is consistent with Brackett et al. (2012), who emphasized the importance of teacher training and commitment, while also suggesting that professional support must be sustained and responsive to teachers' contexts.

One of the most consistently reported outcomes of school interventions, such as SEL implementation, is the strengthening of teacher-student relationships (Allen et al., 2018; Boat et al., 2025; Coelho & Sousa, 2018). Participants identified that relationships with students helped them recognize when lessons needed to be adapted, when emotional concerns required attention, and when students were ready to engage with particular SEL concepts. James reported that strong teacher-student relationships are built through vulnerability, authenticity, and developmentally appropriate conversations. By modeling openness and showing genuine curiosity, teachers can "connect with any kid" (James). Relationships with colleagues and administrators similarly created conditions in which teachers could seek assistance, share responsibility, and reflect on barriers to implementation. Michael highlighted the complexity of building trust and adapting instruction, stating:

> So, as I'm working my way backwards, that's also allowing me to know each and every student in my class. So, once I get to know that kid and I develop that trust, I can kind of fracture off or pivot from, or change different things that will then help, um kind of craft that specific journey for that kid, but it's really, really tough.

Studies show that SEL programs that emphasize empathy, communication, and emotional awareness contribute to more positive interactions and increased trust (Zins et al., 2007; Oberle et al., 2016). Teachers often describe how SEL has enhanced their understanding of students' needs and perspectives, leading to a more positive classroom climate through better classroom management (Abry et al., 2013; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Such relationships are not only beneficial for students' social-emotional development but also reinforce teachers' sense of purpose and connection to their work. Educators frequently cite improved relationships with students as a primary source of professional fulfillment when

engaging in SEL (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Therefore, trust and emotional safety were not simply outcomes of SEL, they were also conditions that enabled teachers to implement it effectively.

Comparison of SEL Implementation Across Grade Bands

The findings revealed both similarities and differences in how PK–12 teachers compared their experiences implementing SEL programs across grade bands. Across all grade bands, teachers viewed relationships as the foundation of effective SEL, integrated SEL into academic and classroom experiences, and sought to develop common competencies such as self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. However, the ways teachers developed these competencies changed according to students' developmental needs. Participants described a progression from explicit, teacher-directed instruction in early grades toward more reflective, student-centered, and contextually embedded practices in middle and high school. Differences in implementation across PK-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12 are described below.

Relationships Across Grade Bands

Regardless of grade level, teachers consistently described relationships as the prerequisite and being necessary for effective SEL. Participants indicated that students were more willing to discuss emotions, reflect on their behavior, take risks, and apply SEL skills when they experienced a safe and supportive classroom environment. This suggests that relationships were not simply one outcome of SEL implementation; they were also the foundation that made implementation possible. Mahoney et al. (2017) emphasized that SEL curricula must be developmentally responsive to meaningfully engage students and effectively foster their social-

emotional growth. Nevertheless, the nature of these relationships evolved across grade bands as students developed greater emotional awareness, independence, and autonomy.

In PK–2 classrooms, relationships were primarily centered on emotional safety, predictability, and teacher modeling. Young students relied heavily on teachers to name emotions, model appropriate behavior, guide interactions, and demonstrate strategies for managing strong feelings. This is supported by studies that show SEL strategies often emphasize classroom routines, behavior management, and foundational skills such as emotion recognition and regulation (Jones et al., 2021; Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). For example, Sarah described using RULER's Mood Meter at the beginning of the school year to help students name and communicate their emotions while developing awareness of and empathy for their classmates' feelings. Teachers therefore assumed a highly visible and directive role in helping students understand themselves and interact positively with others. Relationships provided the security students needed to practice unfamiliar social and emotional skills and seek help from trusted adults when they were unable to regulate their emotions or resolve conflicts independently.

In grades 3–5, relationships continued to provide emotional safety but became more of a context for developing empathy, perspective-taking, and reflection. Participants described using literature, character analysis, classroom discussions, and interpersonal experiences to help students consider perspectives aside from their own. Natalie, a fifth-grade teacher, described using literature and history to help students reflect on their own traits while analyzing the strengths, weaknesses, and perspectives of fictional characters and historical figures. Although teachers continued to guide students through conflicts, they also expected students to assume greater responsibility for reflecting on their behavior and identifying possible solutions. In this

grade band, relationships often supported a gradual movement from teacher-assisted regulation toward greater interpersonal independence. These findings are supported by studies that found younger students benefit from explicit instruction in basic social-emotional skills embedded in daily classroom routines, while older students require SEL programming that addresses identity formation, peer relationships, and higher-order emotional competencies (Jones et al., 2013; Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010).

Teachers' roles shifted further in grades 6–8, moving from directing students towards coaching them. This aligns with previous studies asserting adolescents face unique social-emotional challenges, including increased self-awareness and social development and interactions, which impact their engagement with SEL curricula (Farley & Kim-Spoon, 2014). Participants reported that, at this age, students were increasingly influenced by peers, more aware of social dynamics, and more self-conscious about discussing emotions publicly. Michael, a PE teacher and coach, described the middle school years as particularly challenging because students' changing bodies, interests, identities, and peer relationships shape how they understand themselves and relate to adults. Furthermore, Erica, a seventh-grade teacher, explained the unique dynamics of teaching students at this stage, sharing, "I think that for this time in their life, coupled with social media, coupled with all the pressures, coupled with just being a middle schooler." Teachers consequently needed to establish trust without requiring students to participate in ways that could make them feel vulnerable. Relationships provided a foundation for restorative conversations, reflection on peer interactions, and exploration of emerging identity. Rather than immediately resolving problems for students, teachers described helping them interpret social situations, consider consequences, and make their own decisions.

At the high school level, relationships were characterized by mutual respect, authenticity, and student autonomy. This is supported by previous research that high school programs may incorporate peer collaboration, reflective practices, and opportunities for autonomy to resonate with adolescent learners (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Rosen et al., 2022). Teachers described conversations involving identity, academic and personal stress, future goals, ethical questions, and decision making. High school students were expected to display greater independence, yet participants emphasized that adolescents continued to need adults who demonstrated consistency, care, and genuine interest in their experiences. Therefore, the teacher's role was not lessened but redefined. Teachers created conditions in which students could engage in more complex reflection and make independent decisions while knowing that support remained available.

Developmental Progression of Instructional Practices

Social and Emotional Learning has been widely recognized for its positive impact on students' academic, social, and emotional development across all grade levels (Mahoney et al., 2021). Participants across grade bands described SEL as occurring through academic instruction, literature, classroom discussions, routines, reflection, collaborative experiences, and teachable moments. These common practices demonstrate that teachers did not necessarily view SEL as a stand-alone curriculum. Instead, they integrated social-emotional competencies into everyday classroom experiences. However, the degree of explicitness and teacher direction differed across grade bands.

PK–2 teachers described SEL instruction as highly explicit and concrete. This is consistent with research that supports younger students benefit from explicit instruction in basic social-emotional skills embedded in daily classroom routines (Jones et al., 2013; Schonert-Reichl

& Lawlor, 2010). They used visuals, repeated routines, direct modeling, vocabulary building, stories, and role playing based on students' interactions. For example, Sarah reported intentionally using everyday interactions, accessible stories, guided reflection, and tangible activities to help young students gradually understand abstract character concepts such as trustworthiness. One example Sarah explained was using literature to teach core values of character, stating, "This particular book is for trustworthiness. It's the first pillar that we investigate. And it's a real accessible way for 4- and 5-year-olds to start to understand bigger concepts." Since students at this age are still developing the language needed to describe their experiences, teachers frequently demonstrated specific strategies for calming down, sharing, taking turns, expressing feelings, and problem solving. Repetition was essential because students needed multiple opportunities to practice these skills in familiar contexts.

Teachers in grades 3–5 noted a balance between explicit instruction and integration into academic instruction and interpersonal experiences. Teachers continued to introduce and reinforce SEL concepts directly, but they also used novels, character analysis, classroom discussions, collaborative work, and reflection to deepen students' understanding. For example, Natalie described using literature and character analysis to help students identify emotions, understand their causes, and examine how characters manage their feelings. Students were increasingly able to connect and apply those ideas to their own relationships. Therefore, implementation at this level served as a bridge between concrete instruction and independent application. This is supported by Dyson et al.'s (2023) study asserting that developmental appropriateness includes recognizing the increasing importance of social identity and cultural factors as students' progress through grade levels, requiring SEL frameworks to be flexible and inclusive (Dyson et al., 2023).

In grades 6–8, SEL implementation became less dependent on explicit instruction and more connected to advisory periods, peer interactions, restorative conversations, and discussions of authentic concerns. At this age, it also becomes more difficult to encourage student buy-in because, "being a middle schooler makes it difficult to implement anything, because anything sounds hokey to them" (Erica). This is consistent with research indicating that middle school educators struggle with engaging adolescents who face increasing self-awareness and complex social situations with peers, which can impact their responsiveness to SEL curricula (Dusenbury & Weissberg, 2017). Nevertheless, participants reported creating opportunities for students to examine social dynamics, regulate emotions, and take greater ownership of interpersonal relationships. Middle school students possessed a greater capacity for abstract thinking than younger students, yet their heightened awareness of peers sometimes made direct SEL activities feel uncomfortable or inauthentic. Consequently, effective implementation required teachers to be responsive to students' social sensitivity and provide meaningful opportunities for discussion.

High schools encounter distinct barriers to SEL implementation, including competing academic priorities and limited flexibility within school schedules (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Research further indicates that SEL curricula often lack developmental tailoring for older adolescents, potentially reducing student engagement and perceived relevance (Mahoney et al., 2021), while high school educators frequently receive insufficient professional development focused on implementing SEL with this age group (Jones et al., 2017). The present findings suggest that these structural and developmental barriers do not necessarily prevent high school teachers from implementing SEL; instead, they shape the form that implementation takes. Teachers' reliance on academic content, authentic conversations, reflection, and real-world decision-making may represent a developmentally responsive adaptation to students' increasing

autonomy, as well as a practical response to competing academic demands and scheduling constraints. Thus, the less explicit nature of SEL at the high school level should not necessarily be interpreted as limited implementation. Rather, it may reflect teachers' efforts to make SEL relevant to older adolescents while embedding it within existing instructional priorities.

Moreover, rather than focusing predominantly on naming emotions or practicing isolated skills, teachers encouraged students to analyze complex situations, examine identity, advocate for themselves, manage academic and personal stress, and consider the consequences of their choices. Academic content offered a context for including SEL without requiring extra time or taking away from the academic schedule of the classroom. At this level, students were expected to apply familiar competencies with greater independence and sophistication. Teachers often anticipate that students enter high school having learned social-emotional competencies in earlier grades. Ashley expressed hope that high school health and wellness instruction would build upon the social-emotional skills students developed in primary and middle school.

Common Competencies and Developmental Needs

Focus group participants identified similar social-emotional goals across grade bands. Teachers hoped for students to become more self-aware, manage their emotions and behavior, establish healthy relationships, understand others' perspectives, and make responsible decisions. These goals align with the competencies described within established SEL frameworks (CASEL, 2020). However, participants' accounts demonstrate that common competencies were expressed differently at various developmental levels.

Despite growing support and policy mandates for SEL, its implementation remains inconsistent (Durlak et al., 2011). One contributing factor is the variation in how teachers across different grade levels understand, value, and implement SEL in their classrooms (Humphries et

al., 2018; Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021). This study uncovered that, for PK–2 students, self-awareness and self-management involved identifying feelings, sharing, taking turns, and practicing concrete calming strategies. In grades 3–5, these competencies expanded to include empathy, perspective taking, collaboration, reflection, and greater independence in conflict resolution. For students in grades 6–8, participants emphasized peer relationships, identity development, emotional regulation, social comparison, and managing increased awareness of others' perceptions. At the high school level, teachers focused more heavily on independence, self-advocacy, leadership, stress management, college readiness, and responsible decision making.

Based on the findings, developmental alignment across grade bands does not require changing the overarching purposes of SEL implementation from one grade level to another. Instead, it requires adjusting the language, instructional methods, application within contexts, and expectations. For example, responsible decision making may involve choosing how to respond during a playground disagreement in early grades, navigating peer pressure in middle school, and considering academic or forward-thinking choices in high school. Similarly, relationship skills progress from sharing and taking turns to communicating across differences, maintaining complex relationships, and advocating for oneself and others. Regardless of the delivery, a supportive classroom climate is characterized by emotional warmth and inclusive practices, and is foundational to effective SEL implementation in PK–12 settings (Mahoney et al., 2021)

School Structures and Grade-Band Differences

Holistically, findings indicate that schoolwide systems influenced SEL implementation across all grade bands. Teachers consistently valued shared language, administrative support,

collaboration, access to support staff, and continued professional learning. However, participants experienced these supports differently depending on school organization and instructional context. Therefore, differences across grade bands were related to student development as well as how schools structured teachers' time, responsibilities, and contact with students.

In early childhood and elementary settings, SEL strategies often emphasize classroom routines, behavior management, and foundational skills such as emotion recognition and regulation (Jones et al., 2021; Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). PK and Elementary teachers (PK–2 and 3–5) generally described greater continuity with students because they spent substantial time during the school day with the same class. This structure allowed teachers to reinforce SEL through common routines, respond immediately to interpersonal concerns, and integrate social-emotional skills across multiple subject areas. Teachers also reported greater opportunities to observe changes in students' emotions and behavior throughout the day. When grade-level teams used common routines and language, students encountered relatively consistent expectations across settings. Danielle emphasized the importance of explicitly teaching and consistently reinforcing classroom routines, particularly after breaks or when students begin to forget expectations. Using a familiar story and concrete visuals helps younger students understand and practice whole-body listening behaviors that support readiness to learn.

Middle school teachers (6–8) described challenges associated with departmentalization, multiple teachers, shifting peer groups, and reduced continuity across the school day. Natalie described advisory time as a structured space for students to reflect on their effort, academic feedback, and personal growth. It also allowed her to extend schoolwide conversations about character development, reinforcing SEL through ongoing check-ins and reflection. Advisory structures sometimes created a designated context for SEL, but implementation required

coordination among teachers who might differ in their training, beliefs, or approaches. Dyson et al. (2023) asserted that developmental appropriateness includes recognizing the increasing importance of social identity and cultural factors as students' progress through grade levels, requiring SEL frameworks to be flexible and inclusive. As students moved between classrooms, inconsistencies in expectations or language became more visible. These organizational structures made collaboration across departments and grade levels especially important.

High schools encounter distinct barriers, including competing academic priorities and less flexibility in school schedules to incorporate SEL (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Consistent with research, findings from the current study indicated that at the high school level (9–12), content-area priorities and limited instructional time could hinder opportunities for formal SEL lessons. Teachers were often responsible for integrating SEL within subject-specific curricula while maintaining academic expectations. High school students were also granted greater independence, which sometimes resulted in SEL being treated as less necessary or as the responsibility of counselors and advisory programs. Nevertheless, participants' experiences suggested that students continued to require relational support and opportunities to address stress, identity, decision-making, and planning for the future. Carlos explained that SEL in high school is an integral part of everyday interactions, with positive relationships developing through authentic, repeated exchanges before, during, and after class. He viewed SEL as implicitly embedded in successful teaching rather than as a separate instructional practice. Therefore, the challenge is not whether SEL remains relevant, but how it can be integrated authentically within secondary instructional structures.

These findings can be interpreted through the ISF. The Synthesis and Translation System. is responsible for making research and program knowledge accessible and usable. The Support

System builds the capacity needed for implementation, and the Delivery System carries out SEL within instructional practice settings (Wandersman et al., 2008). Participants' experiences demonstrate that knowledge about SEL must be translated differently for teachers working with different grade levels and within different school structures. Guidance designed for an early elementary classroom may not transfer directly to a departmentalized middle school or a content-focused high school classroom.

Similarly, within the ISF, the Support System must provide grade-band specific professional learning, coaching, planning time, and implementation resources. Elementary educators may need support for explicit instruction, routines, and behavioral modeling, while secondary educators may benefit from coaching on facilitating authentic discussions, integrating SEL into academic content, and responding to student concerns without reducing their autonomy. The Delivery System then reflects how teachers apply those supports within their classrooms. From an ISF perspective, variation across grade bands should not be attributed solely to differences in teachers' commitment. It may also reflect how effectively SEL guidance and implementation support have been adapted to each instructional context.

Summary of Discussion

This chapter interpreted the study's findings in relation to existing literature and the Interactive Systems Framework, illustrating that teachers' experiences implementing SEL were shaped by the interaction of individual practices, students' developmental needs, and schoolwide conditions. Across grade bands, teachers identified supportive relationships, administrative commitment, collaboration, professional learning, shared language, and adequate resources as essential to effective implementation, while limited time, insufficient preparation, inconsistent practices, and competing priorities created persistent barriers. Although teachers pursued

common social-emotional competencies across PK–12 settings, their approaches evolved from explicit instruction, modeling, and concrete routines in the early grades to reflection, coaching, authentic discussion, and integration into academic content in middle and high school. These differences reflected not only students' increasing independence and developmental complexity but also variations in school schedules, instructional responsibilities, and organizational structures.

Viewed through the ISF, the discussion demonstrates that sustainable SEL implementation requires developmentally appropriate guidance from the Synthesis and Translation System, ongoing and context-specific capacity building from the Support System, and flexible implementation within the Delivery System. Collectively, the discussion suggests that SEL is most effective when it is treated as a shared, schoolwide responsibility and embedded authentically within everyday teaching rather than positioned as an additional or isolated program.

Chapter 6 - Implications and Conclusion

Introduction

This study contributes to the existing literature by offering a nuanced, cross-grade-band examination of teachers' experiences implementing SEL in PK–12 educational settings. Although prior research has established the benefits of SEL and identified factors that influence implementation, less attention has been given to how teachers' experiences, instructional practices, and implementation needs compare across developmental grade bands. This study extends current knowledge by demonstrating that relationships remain foundational to SEL across all grade levels, while the ways teachers cultivate relationships, adapt SEL practices, and respond to implementation challenges evolve according to students' developmental needs and school contexts.

By interpreting the findings through the Interactive Systems Framework, this chapter also highlights the interconnected roles of instructional delivery, professional support, and the translation of SEL programs into developmentally responsive classroom practices. The sections that follow discuss the significance of these contributions for educational practice, professional learning, school leadership, and future research, while acknowledging the study's limitations and delimitations before drawing broader conclusions.

Implications

Differing Challenges and Supports Across Grade Bands

The present study extends previous research by showing how challenges and supports were experienced across grade bands rather than treating teachers as a single, uniform group. The relative scarcity of research in secondary settings highlights the need to understand how teachers experience and adapt SEL within these contexts (Ulla & Poom-Valickis, 2023). Although

participants across grade levels identified similar structural needs, including time, collaboration, training, and administrative support, the ways these conditions influenced practice depended on students' developmental needs and the organization of instruction. Teachers of younger students often embedded SEL in routines, modeling, and immediate responses to classroom interactions. Teachers of older students tended to embed SEL within existing academic and relational structures rather than teach it as a separate lesson. For example, 6–12th teachers integrated SEL into literary analysis and character development, used advisory periods to cultivate supportive relationships, and adjusted instructional schedules in response to students' observed social-emotional needs. Therefore, shared implementation supports may need to be differentiated rather than standardized across grade bands, with guidance offering grade-band-specific examples rather than expecting uniform delivery.

Additionally, unique to this study, the results describe this progression through the perspectives of practicing teachers across the full PK–12 continuum. Prior research has demonstrated the overall benefits of SEL and the importance of developmentally appropriate programming but has not addressed a breadth of research in secondary settings (Cipriano et al., 2023; Durlak et al., 2011; Ulla & Poom-Valickis, 2023). The present study extends previous work by uniquely including secondary perspectives and showing how teachers translate broad competencies into grade-band-specific practices. Participants did not describe development as a simple linear movement from limited to advanced SEL ability. Instead, they identified changing needs, new social pressures, and increasingly complex contexts that required continued teacher support. Older students' greater independence did not eliminate their need for SEL; rather, it changed how SEL needed to be facilitated.

Challenges and Supports are Interdependent

These patterns also demonstrate that teachers do not experience challenges and supports as separate conditions. Limited time, restricted collaboration, and reflection; insufficient collaboration increased isolation and inconsistency; and inadequate training placed greater responsibility on teachers' individual experience and judgment. In contrast, leadership commitment could create time for collaboration, provide access to coaching, and promote greater continuity across classrooms. This interdependence extends the ISF by illustrating how strengths or approximations of the Support System directly shapes educators' capacity within the Delivery System (Wandersman et al., 2008).

Ultimately, this study's results suggest that a coherent PK–12 approach to SEL should preserve shared competencies and language while avoiding a uniform model of instruction. Younger students benefit from concrete, explicit, and repeated instruction, whereas older students require authentic, reflective, and autonomy-supportive opportunities to apply the same broad competencies in more complex contexts. Through the ISF, this developmental continuity depends on the coordination of usable guidance, differentiated professional support, and classroom-level implementation. Schools may therefore strengthen SEL by establishing a common framework across grade bands while providing teachers with the flexibility and support needed to translate that framework into developmentally appropriate practice.

Systems of Support are Needed

Moreover, this study extends the existing literature by contributing teachers' perspectives on the emotional and reflective aspects of SEL implementation (Humphries et al., 2018). Participants' accounts suggest that effective facilitation requires more than program knowledge or adherence to prescribed lessons. Teachers need opportunities to feel supported, reflect on their practice, develop trusting relationships, and adapt SEL in developmentally responsive ways. The

study therefore highlights the need for sustained systems of support that combine structural resources with relational, reflective, and grade-band-specific professional learning. Effective SEL implementation is most likely to occur when schools treat it as a shared and integrated responsibility rather than an additional task carried out by individual teachers.

Additionally, teachers' approaches changed partly because students' social, emotional, and cognitive capacities evolved, but they were also shaped by classroom continuity, departmentalization, advisory structures, content-area expectations, and available instructional time. This distinction extends prior literature by demonstrating that grade-band differences cannot be understood through child and adolescent development alone. Effective implementation also depends on whether school systems provide collaboration and professional learning structures that engender self-efficacy to allow teachers to adapt SEL meaningfully within their contexts.

Secondary is Unique

Middle and high school SEL implementation remains less studied and appears more varied than implementation in elementary settings. Secondary teachers encounter challenges related to academic pressures and adolescent developmental complexities, including changes in information processing, reasoning, executive functioning, identity development, self-efficacy, and self-esteem (Rosen et al., 2022).

Although evidence supports the understanding that SEL practices should be sequenced, developmentally appropriate, and integrated into students' learning environments (CASEL, 2020; Durlak et al., 2011), the present study also extends this literature by illustrating how these principles are enacted in secondary classrooms. Durlak et al. (2011) found that effective SEL programs commonly incorporate sequenced, active, focused, and explicit practices. The

secondary teachers in this study did not reject these principles; rather, their experiences suggest that the meaning of explicit may shift developmentally. Explicit instruction through direct modeling, structured lessons, concrete language, and repetition was particularly visible in the early grade bands. In middle school, teachers increasingly assumed a coaching role, helping students navigate peer relationships, regulate emotions, reflect on their behavior, and develop greater independence. At the high school level, SEL was more often embedded within academic content, advisory periods, authentic conversations, personal reflection, and real-world decision-making. Therefore, secondary implementation supports could address subject-specific opportunities and scheduling constraints while providing guidance for integrating SEL into existing instructional and advisory contexts.

These less teacher-directed approaches should not be interpreted as an absence of SEL instruction. Instead, they may represent a developmentally responsive form of implementation that recognizes adolescents' growing need for autonomy, relevance, and authentic application. Teachers' reliance on integration also reflected the organizational realities of secondary schools, including rigid schedules, competing academic priorities, and limited time for stand-alone SEL lessons. Consequently, embedded SEL practices may serve both a developmental and practical function: they allow teachers to address adolescents' social-emotional needs while preserving academic instructional time.

The results further indicate that relationships remained central in secondary settings, even as their form evolved. Rather than relying primarily on immediate guidance and behavioral modeling at the elementary level, secondary teachers described building relationships through mutual respect, vulnerability, responsive conversation, and attention to students' changing emotional and interpersonal needs. This suggests that effective secondary SEL depends on

teachers' relational capacity to connect with learners during teachable moments, fuse SEL competencies to authentic experiences, and respond flexibly to students rather than the adherence to a formal program. By documenting these practices from middle and high school teachers' perspectives, this study adds a more differentiated account of what SEL implementation can look like across content areas and secondary grade bands. This explains why implementation looks different across contexts, even when teachers are working toward similar SEL goals, which points to a need for understanding how teachers experience and adapt SEL in these contexts (Ulla & Poom-Valickis, 2023).

Recommendations & Future Research

The study's results suggest that schools should approach SEL as a developmentally responsive, schoolwide practice rather than as a uniform program or isolated curriculum. Although relationships, responsiveness, and shared social-emotional competencies remained important across PK–12 settings, teachers adapted implementation according to students' developmental needs and contextual demands. The following sections present specific recommendations for teacher preparation and professional learning, school leadership and policy, engagement with students and families, and artificial intelligence, technology, and student social-emotional well-being.

Teacher Preparation and Professional Learning

Teacher-preparation programs should provide explicit instruction in SEL development, relationship-building, and the integration of SEL into academic teaching. Although existing preparation programs commonly address elements of the learning environment, such as classroom management and instructional practice, they devote considerably less attention to preparing candidates to intentionally develop students' social-emotional competencies (Schonert-

Reichl et al., 2017). Some promising programs have begun embedding SEL into coursework, clinical experiences, and faculty modeling; however, documented examples have largely focused on elementary teacher preparation (Melnick & Martinez, 2019). Consequently, less is known about how secondary teacher candidates are prepared to integrate SEL into content-specific instruction while responding to the academic demands, schedules, and developmental characteristics of adolescent learners.

The present study extends this literature by identifying what such preparation could entail across grade bands. The findings revealed that secondary teachers often implemented SEL through relationships, authentic conversations, academic content, reflection, and real-world decision making rather than through separate, explicit lessons. Teacher preparation programs should therefore model how secondary educators can make these embedded practices intentional. For example, by demonstrating how teachers can model resilience when responding to mistakes or academic challenges, use literature and disciplinary problems to explore perspective-taking and decision-making, facilitate emotionally complex discussions, and help students reflect on their responses to setbacks. This does not mean replicating elementary SEL lessons in secondary classrooms. Instead, it means preparing secondary teachers to pursue the same competencies through developmentally appropriate practices that respect adolescents' autonomy and connect SEL to meaningful academic and interpersonal experiences.

Research on effective professional development indicates that sustained learning opportunities are most effective when they are context-specific and incorporate active learning, collaboration, models of effective practice, coaching, feedback, and reflection (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Similarly, in-service professional development should extend beyond initial program training to include grade-band-specific modeling, collaborative planning,

coaching, and opportunities for reflection. Consistent with the Interactive Systems Framework (Wandersman et al., 2008), effective implementation requires coordination among the Synthesis and Translation, Support, and Delivery systems so that research-based materials are translated into usable practices, teachers receive sustained support, and implementation remains responsive to classroom conditions.

School Leadership

School leaders and policymakers should protect time for teacher collaboration, provide differentiated SEL resources, and establish shared expectations that allow flexibility across grade bands. Research on systemic SEL similarly emphasizes that successful implementation requires aligned policies, resources, adult capacity-building, and coordinated practices across classrooms, schools, families, and communities (Mahoney et al., 2021). Early childhood and elementary teachers may require materials supporting explicit modeling, emotional vocabulary, and guided practice, whereas secondary teachers may benefit from strategies for embedding SEL into academic content, advisory periods, authentic conversations, and student decision-making. School leaders, districts, and curriculum directors should therefore consider these different forms of SEL enactment when developing professional development, implementation guides, and evaluation practices, recognizing that SEL may look different across grade bands and that variation in its delivery does not necessarily indicate an absence of implementation.

Administrators should also include students and families in the development and evaluation of SEL initiatives to strengthen cultural relevance, transparency, and community support. Culturally responsive SEL requires schools to elevate students' and families' perspectives and use their lived experiences to ensure that practices reflect the identities, values, and needs of the communities being served (Jagers et al., 2019). These actions are especially

important because, taken together, results indicate that implementation depends not only on teachers' commitment but also on school culture, scheduling, access to professional learning, and the degree of consistency across classrooms and grade levels.

Engagement with Students and Families

Schools should actively engage students and families in SEL implementation by strengthening communication between home and school and establishing a shared social-emotional language across settings. CASEL (2020) identifies authentic family partnerships and alignment across classrooms, schools, homes, and communities as central components of systemic SEL implementation. Newsletters, informational mailings, family workshops, and family nights could introduce caregivers to the terminology, competencies, and strategies students encounter at school while providing practical examples for reinforcing these skills at home. In this sense, schools should offer families learning opportunities that parallel educators' professional learning but are accessible, relevant, and responsive to family needs. The use of shared tools and language can provide students and adults with a consistent framework for recognizing, discussing, and regulating emotions across everyday interactions (Brackett et al., 2012). Creating a common understanding of SEL among educators, students, and caregivers may strengthen consistency, reduce misunderstandings about its purpose, and support students in applying social-emotional skills across school, home, and community contexts.

Boundaries of the study: Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations

One limitation of this study was the potential for selection bias within the participant sample. Because participation was voluntary, educators who chose to participate may have been more likely to already value SEL, prioritize authentic student relationships, and be invested in

reflecting on and improving their teaching practices. Voluntary and purposeful sampling can result in participants whose experiences or interests are particularly aligned with the phenomenon under exploration, limiting the range of perspectives represented within a qualitative sample (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As a result, the sample may not fully represent educators who place less emphasis on SEL, experience greater difficulty building authentic relationships with students, or hold less favorable perceptions of SEL implementation. The perspectives of these educators may differ from those represented in the study, particularly regarding the perceived importance and effectiveness of SEL practices.

Additionally, the study examined the experiences of a specific group of PK–12 teachers within a particular geographic context and during a specific point in time. Qualitative findings are situated within the contexts in which participants experience and interpret a phenomenon and are not intended to be generalized to a broader population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Participants' experiences reflect SEL implementation at a specific point in time and may have been influenced by the programs, policies, school priorities, and educational contexts present during the period in which data were collected. The applicability of these findings to other settings depends on the similarities between the study context and other educational contexts, consistent with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) concept of transferability. Therefore, the findings should be understood as representing the experiences of this particular group of educators rather than those of all PK–12 teachers.

Delimitations

A few specific steps were taken to offer delimitations to the study's design. To begin, thirteen educators were selected for this study to ensure representation across all four grade bands (PK–2, 3–5, 6–8, 9–12). In particular, the tri-state area was selected to include economic

diversity, distinct state policy environments, and contrasting urban, suburban, and rural district contexts within a geographically concentrated region. Additionally, each participant was a part of an individual interview, and, with the exception of two educators, a follow-up focus group interview to share anything that may have later come to mind and to explore similarities and differences across grade bands.

These limitations shaped the scope of the study and should be considered when interpreting its findings. At the same time, the delimitations controlled for these as much as possible. Together, they identify opportunities for future research to build upon the present study and further examine teachers' experiences with SEL implementation across diverse contexts, populations, and settings.

Conclusions

This study ultimately reveals that teachers' experiences implementing SEL across PK–12 settings are characterized by a consistent commitment to authentic relationships, responsiveness, and students' social-emotional development. However, the ways these competencies are implemented vary across grade bands. Furthermore, teachers not only experienced SEL as a uniform curriculum or isolated instructional period, but as a flexible, relational practice embedded within classroom interactions, academic instruction, and responses to students' immediate needs. Across grade levels, effective implementation depended on teachers' ability to observe students, adapt their approaches, and establish environments in which students felt safe, understood, and supported. The results in this study also demonstrate that implementation is strengthened by sustained professional learning, collaboration, shared language, supportive leadership, and a schoolwide commitment to SEL. Conversely, limited time, inconsistent

expectations, insufficient training, and competing academic priorities were frequent barriers of consistent implementation of SEL.

The results of the study indicate that SEL implementation follows a developmental progression rather than a single PK–12 approach. Teachers of younger students relied more heavily on explicit instruction, modeling, repetition, concrete language, and immediate guidance. As students matured, teachers increasingly emphasized reflection, perspective taking, coaching, authentic discussion, and independent problem solving. At the secondary level, SEL was often integrated into academic content and everyday relationships rather than presented as a stand-alone lesson, partly because of scheduling limitations and competing instructional demands. Thus, the findings suggest that effective SEL maintains common goals across grade levels while allowing instructional practices, teacher roles, and expectations for student independence to evolve in response to developmental and contextual needs.

This study illustrates that teachers' frequent adaptation of SEL reflects more than a practical response to student needs. It may also reveal a gap between standardized programs and the realities of PK–12 classrooms. Teachers appeared to function as the primary facilitators of SEL, determining when, how, and in what form program principles would be meaningful for their students. From this perspective, implementation fidelity may be better understood as fidelity to the underlying purposes and competencies of SEL rather than strict adherence to programmed lessons or procedures. Although additional research is needed to examine this interpretation, the study suggests that sustainable SEL implementation requires both coherence and flexibility. Schools need shared values, language, and systems of support while also trusting teachers to adapt practices appropriately for their students, grade levels, and instructional contexts.

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Appendix A - Recruitment Letter

Dear **[Participant(s)]**,

I am conducting a survey as part of a research project, "Teachers' Experiences Implementing Social Emotional Learning Programs", and I would greatly appreciate your participation. The purpose of this survey is to gather feedback from teachers like yourself to assess the effectiveness of social-emotional learning (SEL) programs across various grade levels. Your insights will help us understand what aspects of program implementation are working well and where improvements may be needed, ultimately guiding future decisions and improvements.

You were selected to be part of this project because you are a PK–12, in-service teacher who might have experience implementing SEL programs. I can imagine this is a busy time of year for you, but I hope you will take some time to participate in my survey. The survey will be administered electronically, should take no longer than 10 minutes, and I kindly ask that you complete it no later than February 22, 2025. If you prefer that a hard copy of the survey be mailed, that can be arranged.

Please be assured that there is no risk involved, and your responses will be kept completely confidential. Moreover, the results of the survey will be reported in a summary format, so that no one will be able to associate you with your responses on this survey. All survey data will be stored on a password-protected laptop and within secure, official databases. Your participation is voluntary, and you may refuse to participate or discontinue participation at any time.

Completion and return of the questionnaire will indicate your willingness to participate in this study. If you have any questions about the administration of the survey, please contact me at aturkel@ksu.edu. Thank you in advance for your participation in this important research and helping us improve the program.

Sincerely,
Amanda Turkel
Doctoral Student, Kansas State University
aturkel@ksu.edu

Link to survey: https://kstate.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6zecbXZxieFEP8W

Dear [Participant Name],

Thank you so much for completing my survey and for indicating your willingness to participate in the next phase of my study. I am incredibly grateful for your time and your interest—your voice and experiences as an educator are truly invaluable to this research.

I am writing to invite you to participate in the follow-up interviews. Participation will involve **two parts**:

- **An individual, one-on-one interview**, lasting no longer than **45 minutes**
- **A small focus group discussion** with approximately **three other participants**, also lasting no longer than **45 minutes**

Both the individual interview and the focus group will be conducted via **Zoom**. You are welcome to keep your **camera turned off** if you prefer and all sessions will be scheduled at times that are as convenient as possible for you.

Please know that **all identifying information will be removed** from transcripts and reports. Your participation is entirely confidential, and pseudonyms will be used to protect your identity in all study materials and publications.

I deeply appreciate your willingness to share your experiences. Your insights will help contribute to a richer understanding of teachers' experiences with Social and Emotional Learning and will meaningfully inform both research and practice.

In this interview, I'll ask you to talk about your teaching background and your experiences using social-emotional learning (SEL) in your classroom. We'll discuss how SEL shows up in your daily practice, what has worked well for your students, and any challenges or supports you've encountered along the way. I'll also invite you to reflect on how SEL has shaped your teaching and share any advice or insights you think would be helpful for other educators. There will be time at the end for you to add anything else you'd like to share.

Below, I have outlined various days and times throughout the week that I am available, please reply to this email with your availability and I will follow up to coordinate scheduling and provide additional details. Of course, participation is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time.

Thank you again for your time, generosity, and commitment to this work. I truly cannot express enough appreciation for your willingness to contribute.

Warm regards,
Amanda Turkel
Doctoral Candidate
Kansas State University
aturkel@ksu.edu

Appendix B - Qualtrics Screener Survey

Purpose

The purpose of this screener survey is to determine eligibility and recruit participants for a qualitative phenomenological multiple case study examining PK–12 teachers' experiences implementing Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs in Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey. The survey collects preliminary demographic and contextual information (e.g., grade band, subject area, school type, and SEL training) to confirm that respondents are current in-service teachers who integrate SEL into their classroom or school-wide practices. Responses will be used to identify potential participants for the interview phase of the study.

Q1 Do you consent to participate in this study?

Q2 Are you currently an in-service PK–12 teacher of record in Connecticut, New York, or New Jersey?

Q3 Do you implement SEL (lessons, integration, or school-wide SEL practices) with your students?

Q4 What grade band do you teach?

Q5 Select the primary subject area that you teach

Q6 Select your school type

Q7 Select your school locale

Q8 Does your school have Title I Status?

Q9 Select your years of teaching experience

Q10 Select any SEL training that you have received

Q11 What is your main approach to SEL implementation?
Explicit instruction, integrated into academics, school-wide practices, program-based, other

Q12 If you are willing to participate in a follow-up interview, please provide your email address

Appendix C - Individual Interview Questions

Purpose

The purpose of the individual interviews is to gain an in-depth understanding of how teachers experience and interpret SEL implementation in their classrooms, as well as the supports and challenges that influence their practice. Each interview lasted approximately 25-30 minutes and followed a semi-structured format to ensure alignment with the study's central research questions.

1. Can you tell me about your current teaching role—such as your grade level, subject area, and years of experience?
2. How would you describe your school's overall approach to SEL?
3. How do you personally define SEL in the context of your classroom?
4. What does effective SEL instruction look like in your daily teaching practice?
5. How have your beliefs about SEL evolved over time?
6. Can you describe a recent SEL activity or lesson you implemented?
7. What aspects of SEL implementation have been most meaningful or effective for your students?
8. What challenges or barriers have you encountered while implementing SEL?
9. How do you adapt SEL instruction for the developmental needs of your students?
10. What types of training, resources, or administrative support have been most helpful?
11. What additional supports or resources would strengthen your ability to implement SEL effectively?
12. How do you perceive the role of your school's culture and leadership in supporting SEL?
13. What outcomes have you observed in your students as a result of SEL?
14. How has implementing SEL influenced you as an educator?
15. When you reflect on your experience with SEL, what stands out as most significant?
16. What advice would you give to other teachers beginning to implement SEL?
17. Is there anything else about your experience with SEL that you would like to share?

These questions were adapted from and informed by prior research on teachers' perceptions and implementation of SEL (Brackett et al., 2012; Buchanan et al., 2009; Durlak et al., 2011; Humphries et al., 2018; Mahoney et al., 2021).

Appendix D - Follow-Up Focus Group Interview Questions

Purpose

The purpose of the focus groups is to extend and deepen insights from the individual interviews through collective reflection. Participants discussed SEL implementation practices, shared curricular materials, and examined common and divergent experiences across grade bands. Each focus group included three to five teachers and lasted approximately 45–60 minutes.

1. Please (re-)introduce yourself and describe your grade level and subject area. Where you went to school - level of education/undergrad and graduate school
2. Since our individual interview, have you noticed any new insights or changes in how you approach SEL?
3. What aspects of your SEL curriculum or classroom routines have been most effective?
4. Can you share an example of an SEL activity that worked particularly well? What factors

contributed to its success?

5. Do you decide which SEL competencies (e.g., self-awareness, empathy, responsible decision-making) to emphasize? If so, how do you decide which to

emphasize?

6. What barriers or challenges have you faced in implementing SEL?
7. How do time, academic demands, or school structures affect your ability to teach SEL?
8. What role do training, resources, and administrative support play in your success with SEL implementation?
9. How do SEL practices differ across grade levels or among your colleagues?
10. What adaptations do you make to meet the developmental needs of your students?
11. Are some SEL competencies (e.g., self-awareness, empathy, responsible decision-making) easier or more challenging to teach at your grade level?
12. How has SEL influenced student relationships, engagement, or behavior?
13. How has implementing SEL shaped your own professional growth or teaching

philosophy?

14. What themes or patterns do you notice across your collective experiences with SEL?
15. Based on our discussion, what recommendations would you make for improving SEL implementation or support within your school or district?
16. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences with SEL?

These focus group prompts were adapted from previous qualitative studies examining SEL implementation and teacher perspectives (Ransford et al., 2009; Collie et al., 2012; Jones et al., 2021; Mahoney et al., 2021).

Appendix E - IRB Approval & Consent Form

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY | Office of Research Integrity, Compliance and Security

TO: Ambyr Rios
Curriculum and Instruction

Proposal Number IRB-13324

FROM: Lisa Rubin, Chair
Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 11/17/2025

RE: Approval of Proposal Entitled, "Teachers' Experiences Implementing Social Emotional Learning Programs Across Grade Bands."

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects has reviewed your proposal and has granted full approval. This proposal is **approved for three years from the date of this correspondence.**

APPROVAL DATE: 11/17/2025

EXPIRATION DATE: 11/16/2028

In giving its approval, the Committee has determined that:

No more than minimal risk to subjects

This approval applies only to the proposal currently on file as written. Any change or modification affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation. All approved proposals are subject to continuing review, which may include the examination of records connected with the project. Announced post-approval monitoring may be performed during the course of this approval period by URCO staff. Injuries, unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the IRB and / or the URCO.

Electronically signed by Lisa Rubin on 11/17/2025 2:31 PM ET

203 Fairchild Hall, 1601 Vattier St., Manhattan, KS 66506 | 785-532-3224 | fax: 785-532-3278 | comply@k-state.edu

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
University Research Compliance Office

Institutional Review Board (IRB)
Informed Consent Template Form

comply@k-state.edu | 785-532-3224

PROJECT TITLE:	Teachers' Experiences Implementing Social Emotional Learning Programs Across Grade Bands

PROJECT APPROVAL DATE:		**PROJECT EXPIRATION DATE:**		**LENGTH OF STUDY:**	6 months

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:	Ambyr Rios
CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):	Amanda Turkel
CONTACT DETAILS FOR PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS:	ambyrrios@ksu.edu
IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION:	Lisa Rubin, (785) 532-3224, rubin@ksu.edu

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:

The purpose of this research study is to examine how PK-12 teachers experience SEL implementation in their daily practice. To explore how teachers integrate SEL, this study uses a phenomenological multiple case study design.

PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED:

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop anytime. If you choose to participate in this study, you will take a screener survey that will take approximately five minutes of your time. If you agree to participate further, and agree to be interviewed, you will indicate this on the screener survey. Those agreeing to be interviewed will be contacted to be interviewed in an elicitation interview, where you will be asked to bring an artifact that represents their SEL implementation—such as a lesson plan, class charter, student reflection, or classroom photo—and to describe what it represents and how it reflects their approach to SEL. Then, you will be asked to participate in one of four focus-group interviews on Zoom, lasting from 60-90 minutes. All interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed and, to the furthest extent possible, data will be de-identified during the transcription process. You can keep your camera off during the interviews and pseudonyms will be used after the transcription process.

RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED:

We have taken steps to minimize the risks of this study. Even so, you may still experience some risks related to your participation, even when we carefully avoid them. A possible risk is a breach of confidentiality, though we will take steps to make all data anonymous and confidential. This study poses minimal risk or discomforts for participants. Participation is voluntary and participants can withdraw at any time without any consequence.

BENEFITS ANTICPATED:

We cannot promise any benefits to you or others from your taking part in this research. However, possible benefits include additional opportunities to engage with your peers and give and receive feedback on your experiences implementing SEL curricula in your classrooms.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:

Interviews will be recorded and transcribed and, to the furthest extent possible, data will be de-identified during the transcription process. Pseudonyms will be used after the transcription process. Identifiers will be removed from the identifiable private information, and, after such removal, the information could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent.

Appendix F - Field Notes & Analytic Memos

Appendix Table F.1. Field Notes & Analytic Memos

Analytic Memos	**Location**: Zoom
Date: 1/16 & 1/18	Participants: Michelle & Natalie
Descriptive: Across multiple interviews, participants struggled when asked to define social-emotional learning, yet they readily described numerous classroom practices that clearly reflected SEL implementation. Teachers discussed modeling emotional regulation, building relationships, facilitating classroom discussions, incorporating movement breaks, using read-alouds, and supporting conflict resolution. This suggests that teachers may understand SEL more as a set of daily teaching practices than as a formal educational framework. Rather than relying on theoretical definitions, participants appear to conceptualize SEL through lived classroom experiences. This finding may indicate that implementation is driven more by practice than by terminology and could explain why many teachers feel successful implementing SEL despite limited formal training. **Reflection:** • Individual Interviews are shorter than expected - could questions be ordered better to flow better • Not able to define SEL in context of classroom with a definition vs what they do to implement SEL • "Can't educate anybody without trust and respect" - found this quote important in the moment because it captured how most participants felt about SEL implementation • SEL is done all the time, discussed benefit of using intentional read alouds • Meeting kids where they are - reminds me of working in the Bronx, reading the room, recess always bleeds into classroom time because of conflicts	
Date: 1/21 & 1/24	Participants: Danielle, Laura, & Sarah
Descriptive: Several participants described receiving little formal preparation for implementing SEL. Many reported that neither their teacher preparation programs nor district professional development adequately prepared them for SEL instruction. Even when schools required training, participants often described these experiences as checking a box rather than improving instructional practice. Instead, teachers relied heavily on colleagues, personal experience, observation, or trial and error to develop their SEL practices. This suggests that professional development may be perceived as fulfilling organizational requirements rather than building teachers' confidence or instructional capacity.	

This finding aligns closely with the **Interactive Systems Framework, particularly the Support System**, because training intended to strengthen implementation may not be functioning as intended.

Reflection:

- RULER - emotions linked to colors - moves from abstract to concrete
-

Date: 2/2 & 2/7	Participants: Sofia & Rachel

Descriptive:
Rather than describing formal professional development as most influential, participants frequently discussed learning through observation, collaboration, coteaching, and conversations with colleagues. Teachers appeared to value practical examples and shared experiences more than formal workshops. This suggests that professional learning communities and collaborative opportunities may play a larger role in supporting SEL implementation than traditional training models.

Reflection:

- Training - so far no one trained formally or doesn't use program trained in, feels like it's checking a box vs helpful
- No education courses about SEL - multiple participants mentioned not being taught about SEL
- Opportunities and practices → the benefit of partnering with people, observe/coteach - I have thought about the benefit of observing other teachers to better teaching practices overall but never through the lens of improving SEL implementation
- **Transitions** - thinking about how you interact with students during unstructured and transition time = natural and organic SEL moments
- SEL is woven all throughout the day - similar to K, unlike 5th
- Large counseling department at school - seems like a great support for SEL

Date: 2/19	Participants: Michael & David

Descriptive:
Participants frequently emphasized that SEL extends beyond instructional activities to include how teachers communicate with students. Tone of voice, body language, word choice, and responses during transitions were described as opportunities to model emotional regulation and respectful interactions. Teachers appeared to view themselves as constant models of social-emotional competence, suggesting implementation occurs continuously throughout the school day rather than only during planned lessons.

Reflection:

- I was surprised by the prevalence of negative self-talk among different grades
- US starts with academics, credibility, and deliberate instruction then get deep vs SEL occurring first and foremost in lower grades = cross grade differences

- Maybe it's important to build credibility and show US students that you respect the academics before getting into unstructured SEL work

Date: 2/27 & 3/5	Participants: Ashley & Carlos

Descriptive:
Teachers across multiple grade bands discussed using literature as a vehicle for SEL instruction. Participants described asking students to analyze characters' emotions, motivations, conflicts, and perspectives. This appeared consistently across elementary, middle, and upper grades, suggesting literature may provide a developmentally flexible context for social-emotional learning – literature is an authentic way to facilitate SEL discussions.

Reflection:

- Are the use of read alouds - common throughout? Just elementary?
- Connecting to characters in a book - happens at all ages

Date: 3/27 & 3/29	Participants: James & Erica

Descriptive:
You can't educate without trust and respect - similar ideas appeared throughout multiple interviews, even when participants used different language. Teachers repeatedly emphasized relationship-building before discussing specific SEL activities. Participants described greeting students, monitoring emotional states, maintaining respectful communication, and intentionally creating psychologically safe classrooms before expecting meaningful learning.

This suggests that participants view relationships not simply as an outcome of SEL but as a prerequisite for successful implementation.

Reflection:

- Question 15 trips people up - "most significant" maybe unclear because it is so broad (participants wonder whether I want to know about a moment or activity vs overall, but I was trying to leave it open on purpose)

Date: 3/30	Participants: Focus Group 1

Descriptive:
Numerous interviews highlighted developmental differences in SEL implementation across grade levels. Elementary teachers frequently described explicitly teaching emotional vocabulary, helping students identify feelings through concrete supports such as colors, and intentionally teaching foundational social skills. In contrast, upper elementary and middle school teachers discussed students entering their classrooms with established strengths and deficits that required reinforcement or intervention rather than initial instruction.

Teachers also noted that family influence appears particularly strong in kindergarten, while older students increasingly reflect peer influence, social media, and political discourse. These

developmental differences appear to shape both the content of SEL instruction and teachers' implementation strategies.

Reflection:
I was surprised by how changing classes emerged as a barrier. Coming from an elementary background, I may underestimate how structural factors influence SEL implementation in upper grades. I should continue examining whether this barrier emerges consistently among departmentalized teachers before treating it as a broader finding.

- 5th affected by political world/family perception and K very much family dependent

Date: 4/3	Participants: Focus Group 2

Descriptive:
Several participants described families as essential partners in reinforcing SEL skills outside school. Teachers acknowledged that classroom instruction alone has limited impact if students return to environments that do not reinforce emotional regulation, empathy, or communication. Some participants suggested schools should provide more parent education or family workshops to establish consistent expectations between home and school.

This finding suggests teachers perceive SEL implementation as extending beyond classroom boundaries and requiring collaboration between educators and families.

Interactive Systems Framework - Implementation extends beyond the **Delivery System** into broader community supports.

Reflection:
- I was not surprised that lack of training on SEL was a common challenge or barrier - I was surprised about the variety of challenges and barriers discussed
- Time outside of school for families to engage in SEL and support it vs time in classroom - should schools offer more SEL support to families to bridge the gap between home and school?
    - Mandatory parent talks about SEL - more training for families and in conjunction with families and teachers

Date: 4/15	Participants: Focus Group 3

Descriptive:
One of the most notable observations across interviews is the variability in implementation. Participants consistently described different barriers, different supports, and different instructional approaches. Rather than identifying a single pathway for successful SEL implementation, the data suggest teachers adapt implementation based on student needs, classroom context, school expectations, and personal teaching philosophy.

Interactive Systems Framework by illustrating how implementation changes depending on local supports, teacher capacity, and contextual factors.

Reflection:

- I am surprised I have never come across Social Thinking - makes me wonder how we introduce SEL programs/curriculum/supports to teachers and schools
- "One thing I'm thinking about now is, like, everyone that's agreed to be a part of my research, like, deeply cares about their teaching practice and students, and so, like, no one's going to be a part of this research and be like, yeah, like, I don't care about SEL, like, I don't really think it's important, and, like, but those are the teachers that don't really connect with their students well. Um, and so that'll be an interesting piece that, like, I will have to mention, but I don't really have data on, because those teachers aren't… being part of… they're not the data of this research."
    - potential selection bias in the study - participants are likely educators who are already invested in their teaching practice, student relationships, and SEL, while teachers who may place less value on SEL or struggle to connect with students are not represented in the sample = limitations in capturing a full range of perspectives on SEL implementation and importance

Date: 4/18	Participants: Focus Group 4

Descriptive:
Participants consistently described SEL as something woven throughout the school day rather than delivered as a stand-alone lesson. Teachers referenced movement breaks, transitions, body language, tone of voice, read-aloud discussions, classroom conversations, opportunities for praise, and even simple moments such as allowing students to take a sip of water. These examples suggest that participants perceive SEL as embedded within everyday teaching routines rather than confined to designated curriculum time.

Interestingly, teachers often emphasized that the most meaningful SEL occurs organically rather than following scripted lessons "by the book." This may indicate that authentic implementation depends upon teacher judgment and responsiveness rather than strict fidelity to a program.

Theme
Instructional Strategies - SEL is integrated into everyday teaching rather than delivered as a separate curriculum.

Reflection:
The absence of explicit SEL programs in interviews reminds me not to assume that commonly known SEL frameworks are universally adopted. I need to remain open to participants defining SEL through practices rather than named programs.

I had never considered naming allowing students to take a sip of water as an SEL strategy. Initially, I viewed it simply as classroom management, but the participant framed it as an opportunity for emotional regulation and self-awareness. This interview expanded my own understanding of how broadly teachers conceptualize SEL. I should be careful not to impose my previous assumptions about what "counts" as SEL during coding.

- Not surprised that SEL works well when done organically
- SEL can be as simple as brain breaks and movement breaks
- Language you use - body language, tone of voice → modeling behaviors
- Was surprised by the number of participants who believed in the success of planning SEL within lessons - happening organically vs. intentionally or strategically tucking it in, which takes time and planning
- There really is so much to say - jumped around slides to get in priority questions because of time and participants having to leave after an hour
- Many more connections across grade levels than I was expecting

Appendix G - Transformation Table

Individual Interviews

Appendix Table G.1. Individual Interviews

Raw Data	Abbreviated Description	Code 1: Open Coding	Code 2: Axial Coding
be open-minded. Because I think the sooner that you get… into your programming, like, the way you do things, like. Even just your schedule, and this is how much I get done, there doesn't… It doesn't feel like there's much room for anything else. And so, at least that's what I find. biggest challenges, just as an educator. Um, like, that rigidity. makes it hard to… other stuff, and I think if we can just kind of scramble what's more important, like, what needs to be foundational. We could actually make the rest of this stuff go versus weekly, if we gave it the attention.	advice to teachers beginning to implement SEL is to be open-minded. Doesn't feel like there's much room for anything else after scheduling, which makes it hard to do other stuff.	Advice. Collaboration and Planning	advice
And I also wish that families, as much as I say over and over, please, if you notice anything weird at home, if they've said something unusual at home, it's always really helpful for me to know. I wish that there was more open communication from families with me in that way.	challenges or barriers = lack of communication. communicate if things seem unusual at home, need more open communication	Family Engagement	challenges and barriers
I think, um… The thing that I feel lucky to be an English teacher for is that fiction is a vehicle for empathy development. And especially now with AI functioning like it does. I'm doing so much more this year that is, like the whole thing is… of, hey, I can't think, I	Recent SEL activity - using reading and fiction as a way to develop empathy. Lessons focus on skills like feeling, thinking, and communicating with intention and literature as the vehicle. Also have a	Holistic Approach	instructional strategies

can't… We can generate syntax, but it can't feel, and it can't think, and it can't communicate with intention, so I'm trying to kind of, like, focus on those 3 skills And recognize that the literature is the vehicle for feeling alongside, and I think of. While empathy is kind of more like if you were to look at our program here, like, more like part of the character agenda than the SEL one, I do think that it's one of those traits that… that bridges, kind of, everything, and… I think it is, like, that's our goal for these kids, and it's gonna help their emotional status	character agenda to help support emotional status		
Ruler was through Horizons, so that was through where I was, and Responsive Classroom was, like, my school brought it in. Um… But if I wanted to do SC Ultra, like, if I needed more… my school would…would let me do that and cover it, for sure.	specific program training - RULER through summer program and Responsive Classroom through school. school would encourage and cover costs of trainings	Support and Training	professional development
Light. I think that it sometimes feels more like we're checking a box saying that we do it, but we don't really… I don't know that it's consistently done. Or consistently done well. I think it really varies teacher by teacher.	School's approach to SEL is light, more like checking a box to say that it's done but not done consistently or consistently done well. Varies by teacher	School Culture	school culture
I think students are. Opening themselves up, and they're willing to take more risks and engage in more activities that they would be much less likely to do otherwise, both specifically in the classroom	as a result of SEL students are opening themselves up more and willing to take more risks, engage in more activities that they would be less likely to do otherwise	student outcomes	student outcomes
The whole department is called CAST, which is Counseling Academic Support Team. So, in the lower school, the lower school, we don't have a	school has a counseling department - Counseling Academic Support Team. 1 counselor and 5 learning	School-wide Frameworks and Acronyms	supports

preschooler. Daycare, pre-care, anything, but we're… we're K-12, so the lower school is K-5. We have one counselor and five learning specialists. The middle school and upper school have, like, a whole CAST suite, and they have, like, many counselors. And specialists. But they're much bigger than we are.	specialists in the lower school		
Hmm, most significant it's really, like, language. the language you use. Um and that's, like, all about, like, conscious discipline is, like, what language you're using. Noticing people's queues, like, see people's, um, like uh, body language, tone of voice.	Most significant when reflecting on SEL = language importance, communication, body language, tone of voice	SEL Influence on Communication	teacher perceptions and experiences
I'm a high school English teacher in New Jersey. I teach at Riverview High School. I primarily teach advanced placement language and composition. which is predominantly 11th grade, but it's an 11th or 12th grade elective.	high school English teacher at public school in NJ. Teaches AP language composition, mostly 11th grade but some seniors	High School English Teacher	teaching role

Focus Group Interviews

Appendix Table G.2. Focus Group Interviews

Raw Data	Abbreviated Description	Code 1: Open Coding	Code 2: Axial Coding
I am, I guess I just put out there like sometimes I'm looking for something a little more standardized, like what are the concepts and components that we should be covering at these developmental stages, and, like, where is that information?	HS curriculum-looking for something more standardized with concepts and components that should be covered at specific developmental stages	Cross-Grade Language Continuity	challenges and barriers
with that being said doing math intervention, and then also I teach the math lab at the school we are, as you guys said, you embed the language into everything that you're doing	teaching math intervention you embed SEL language into everything that you do	Teacher Modeling and Observation	instructional strategies
For me the responsive classroom training has been so great. I also when I was in Horizons, we did the Yale's ruler training, and that was so helpful to me. Just in terms of the color zones and using some of that language with kids you know, even applying the language to, like, read alouds and things like how, what color was the car? What color is the character feeling right now?	Responsive Classroom and Yale RULER training have been very helpful for SEL languaging	Valuable Professional Development	professional development
It's on our report card, too, I didn't think about that, but yes, our…It is on the report card, and it's on our report card for…the classroom, and it's on our report card for each of the specialists' areas. So, depending on what environment they're in, they have to fill out a type of SEL. I think there's, like, one or two components, um,	School also has an SEL component on the report card for the classroom and for specialists	Collaborative Strategy Sharing	school culture

within the report card for every setting.			
My students also really enjoy the SEL activities and the instruction time. They, um, think it's really fun to do the role playing. They enjoy the different games that we play. They love adding different, um, mindful techniques to their mindful toolbox. Um… And, um, it's really great to see like how much they get out of each lesson, too, and seeing them refer to the lessons throughout the day, which is really cool to see as well.	students really enjoy SEL activities in first grade- enjoy role playing, mindful techniques, and different games involved- refer to lessons throughout the day and get a lot out of each lesson	Relational Foundation for SEL Implementation	student outcomes
So, we're revamping all the PBIS, like all the kind of stuff that I think had gone to the wayside when I started, because it was COVID there. Um, and all the teachers were veterans anyway. Now we need to bring it back because we're seeing stronger behaviors, I think, in cafeteria recess, bigger areas outside of the classroom, that now is a good time to revamp.	revamping PBIS program because it was put aside during/because of COVID and now seeing stronger behaviors outside of the classroom which begs a need for program revamp	Informal SEL and Character Development	supports
We're really looking at SEL as a way for students to learn how to handle, like, stress and interrelationship dynamics, and just making difficult decisions, right? Just what it means for them to manage their anxiety and build coping strategies.	SEL is a way for students to learn how to handle stress, interrelationship dynamics, and making difficult decisions, how to manage their anxiety and build coping strategies	Consistent Language and Behavioral Expectations	Teacher perceptions and experiences

Appendix H - Code Book

Appendix Table H.1. Categories and Subcategories of Teacher SEL Implementation

Categories and Subcategories of Teacher SEL Implementation

Category	Description	Exemplars	Frequency
Advice			19/580
Advice - Effective SEL Implementation	Teachers described effective SEL implementation as fostering authentic relationships, aligned leadership support, collaborating with colleagues, and embracing continuous growth and reflection.	"Um, and then just, like, starting off small as well. Like, there's a lot of small things you can do, um, to start off, and just the power of what you're saying, like, the children notice everything that you say, and they're going to say it back. And so, um, making sure you're really attending to what you're saying, and your tone of voice, as well"	19/580
Challenges and Barriers			92/580
Challenges and Barriers - Time & Schedule Constraints	Teachers face insufficient instructional time, competing curricular demands, scheduling limitations, or competing priorities that hinder SEL implementation.	"But in the past, I've been at schools that do not have a time dedicated in the day, and it's just kind of, like, address this during morning meeting. Um, and so that makes it very difficult to teach specific things when you don't have the time for it."	17/580
Challenges and Barriers - Home-School Communication	There are inconsistencies between school-based SEL practices and support provided at home, including parent expectations, communication of challenges, and	"Family lifestyles and backgrounds. Definitely, you know, I think kids are products of their environment, so they come to school, they learn behaviors based on what goes on in their homes, and it's hard to change their minds sometimes, depending on	19/600

	conflicting beliefs about SEL.	what families think, so I think that is one."	
Challenges and Barriers - School Structures and Supports	Teachers described insufficient training, resources, leadership support, and organizational structures as barriers to SEL implementation.	"I might not have the tools or the skill set to help these kids in a way that they need to be helped more than I can. Do you know what I'm saying? I have; I'm limited. So, I think my barrier is myself. You know, I don't know what I don't know, and I don't feel like you can always add to your SEL toolkit. And I'm still building mine."	16/580
Challenges and Barriers - Developmental Readiness and Student perceptions	There are developmental differences among students, challenges associated with grade-level transitions, and the impact of students' perceptions of SEL that influence its implementation.	"The middle school does, I mean, like a fantastic job with their advisory program. And how they're able to support kids, even to the point where I think when some of our kids transition from 8th to 9th grade, they're like. Wait, what was, where was my hand holding?"	14/580
Challenges and Barriers - Teacher Isolation and Inconsistencies	Teachers face isolation resulting from limited collaboration and lack of colleagues and inconsistencies with implementation.	"But there's definitely going to be inconsistencies, because more teachers, certain teachers are going to do it more, and there's going to be other teachers that aren't going to address it very much at all, and some of it just might be subject based, you know."	26/580
Instructional Strategies			235/580
Instructional Strategies - Embedded SEL Instruction	SEL is most effective when it is embedded throughout everyday teaching rather than taught explicitly. Additionally,	"Um, so there's a lot of, like, just life lessons that are embedded into the curriculum at large."	66/580

	teachers find that literature and book discussions are impactful tools to organically implement SEL.		
Instructional Strategies - Explicit SEL Instruction	Teachers directly teach social-emotional competencies through structured lessons, activities, or curricula - especially at younger grade levels/bands.	"We had direct instruction today. We were talking about kind words to say and phrases and unkind words and phrases, and it was a sort that the children did and then we talked about, um, why is it important to be kind? And how does it feel when you're kind? And then they do a writing response"	67/580
Instructional Strategies - Student-Centered and Relationship-Based Practices	Student-centered instructional approaches prioritize active student engagement, meaningful teacher-student and peer relationships, and opportunities for students to reflect on their emotions, behaviors, and growth.	"I take a lot of time to just get to know the kids in the beginning of the year. I take a lot of time to do a lot of checklists, observations, and just, like, understand where they're coming from. And then, based on that spot my visual learners, spot my really tapped and adept kids who have, like, older siblings and have been talking about, like a lot of big concepts right away. Just really spending the time to get to know who this child individually is, and sort of making decisions based on that."	43/580
Instructional Strategies - Differentiated Practices	Teachers often adapt SEL instruction based on students' developmental, emotional, or individual needs.	"So, some kids are super articulate already, and you're like, here's what's happening. But then there are some kids who are not there yet. There are also some kids who. You know, if they're tired, you see a different child, and they don't know what's happening,	32/580

		they can't tell you. There could be a dip in blood sugar. No one is eating in pre-K. No one is ever eating their lunch. Um and so because that level of transparency can't always be there. I definitely have to differentiate, right? So, giving instructions has to be different."	
Instructional Strategies - Routines and Structures	Teachers described effective SEL implementation as embedding predictable routines while consistently modeling and reinforcing SEL competencies through daily interactions and reflection.	"At morning meeting, I pose a question every day during morning meeting, and it could be as simple as, you know, which do you prefer, chocolate or vanilla? And each boy gets to vote, right? It's sort of a way for us to start doing some mathematical thinking and decomposing the number of kids in our class, but it's also a way for the kids to take notice of each other. Right? And it's…funny to always see the lone, brave boy who's willing to go against the green. Um, so that's really revealing."	27/580
Professional Development			30/580
Professional Development - Professional Learning	Teachers described formal and informal professional learning as shaping SEL implementation while emphasizing the need for ongoing training, collaboration, and implementation support.	"When I was at my school, we had the ruler training, which I thought was extremely helpful"	30/580
Supports			41/580
Supports - Administrative and Staff Support	District and school leadership facilitate SEL implementation through	"Um, but what is really neat is our assistant principal has done a lot of mindfulness	15/580

	encouragement, resources, scheduling, and advocacy.	training. And every month, she gives us a mindfulness activity that we can do, and typically it's a mindfulness thing that can go outside the classroom, so you can have, like, a toolkit of mindfulness things that the kids could do to calm their body, or if they need to rev up, like, different things that are then posted outside. Um, which has been really nice for the teachers to be able to start to build their own toolkit, so that when we have language with parents, and they're having a tricky time with their kids at home, we can bring up these toolkits, and we can send them to the parents, and again, try to keep that similar language between home and school, and we can practice the strategies at school."	
Supports - Schoolwide Structures and Resources	Teachers identified school systems, instructional resources, and collaborative partnerships that support effective SEL implementation.	"One of our school psychologists is like literally one of the 1st people you see when you walk into the lower el building, and she's in and out of classrooms. There are people that are contracted in also, depending on what kind of supports kids need in the classroom, too. So that's another, I guess, like, piece to it, too."	26/580
School Culture			39/580
School Culture - Shared Values	Teachers described that a collective commitment to SEL among faculty, staff, and administration supports successful SEL implementation.	"I think having supportive administrators who strongly believe that SEL comes first, and then the academics come, because without it we would fall apart."	14/580

School Culture - Best Practices	Consistent schoolwide practices, collaborative alignment, and positive relationships foster effective SEL implementation.	“I think our boys want, the buy-in is there. They want to be a part of this community. They want to do all that they need to, to, like, really be a part of this big school team, and so they're willing to have these conversations, and alter their behaviors, and like take some perspective, because they want to be a part of the school so badly.”	25/580
Student Outcomes			12/580
Student Outcomes - Social, Behavioral, and Academic Outcomes	Teachers reported that SEL promotes students' social-emotional, behavioral, and academic growth, with lasting benefits across developmental stages.	“I think students are opening themselves up, and they're willing to take more risks and engage in more activities that they would be much less likely to do otherwise, both specifically in the classroom”	12/580
Teacher Perceptions and Experiences			112/580
Teacher Perceptions and Experiences - Defining SEL	Teachers’ definitions of SEL and how their beliefs have evolved over time.	“I define SEL as, um, a way for my students to learn about themselves, about their community, and about each other. When I was first teaching, I didn’t realize SEL was something to be taught. I've learned a lot about how there are a variety of different curriculums, there's a variety of different approaches um, and I think that all teachers, whether they directly teach it or not, do address it. Um, and it's really important to, um, explicitly teach it to children.”	17/580
Teacher Perceptions and Experiences -	Effective SEL begins with authentic teacher-student relationships and	“I just sort of talk about me and sort of, like make myself really relatable to them. And I	36/580

Authentic Relationships	intentional modeling - teacher/student relationships and modeling are the foundation of SEL, but the nature of relationships evolves based on grade level.	hope, or at least my intention is, that it sort of muddles the barriers a little bit, and humanizes me for them, so that they know, you know, there's nothing so high stakes in pre-K ever, but especially there's nothing so high stakes in life. That you shouldn't feel safe enough just being honest and vulnerable.”	
Teacher Perceptions and Experiences - Adapting SEL	Teachers must constantly adapt SEL to students’ developmental and individual needs - teachers experienced SEL as a flexible practice requiring continual adjustment based on developmental stage and individual learners.	“And I just think it's part about developmental needs also. Some kids are a little bit more needier at this age than they are, and some kids are mature enough to kind of recognize. And I can have the tougher conversations with some kids to say like, well, if you're going to continue treating people this way, right, they're not going to want to be your friend, where other kids are still kind of learning how just to ask someone else for a pencil.”	32/580
Teacher Experiences and Perceptions - Significance of SEL	Teachers reflect on the significance and impact of SEL on education and teaching practices.	“I think now, more than ever, SEL is part of what we do. I always kind of felt that way as a teacher, is that a teacher is a little bit of a therapist, or you know, an observer. And you know they make some determinations about students’ character and mental and emotional health and well-being.”	27/580

Appendix I - Participant Table

Appendix Table I.1. Complete Participant Table

Name	Years of Experience	School	SEL Curriculum	Grade Level	Subject(s)
Sarah Collins	21	CT private school, suburb, all boys	embedded into daily curriculum, not stand alone, character work	PK	Foundational learning
Michelle Carter	11	NY public school, coed, suburb	PBIS system, Kelso's Choice, Second Step	K	All core
Laura Bennett	9	CT public school, suburb, K-2	Everyday Speech, RULER	1	All core
Danielle Morgan	12	NJ private school, coed, suburb	Responsive Classroom K-5	1 & 3	All core
Sofia Alvarez	20	CT public schools, suburb	District: Second Step School: Responsive Classroom	K-5	Math intervention
Natalie Kim	20	CT private school, all boys, suburb	Embedded into daily practice, Community & Growth, belonging work, Pathways	5	All core

Michael Reynolds	18	CT private school, coed, suburb	School developed character program	6-8	PE, Community and Belonging, Athletic Director, & Coach
Erica Lawson	19	CT private, all boys, suburb	Pathways (mindfulness), Community & Growth	7 & 8	Math and science, coaches
Rachel Thompson	19	CT private school, all boys, suburb	Community & Growth	8	English, coaches
Ashley Parker	5	NY private, co-ed, suburb	Readiness	9-12	Counseling/ Wellness
David Miller	10	CT private, all boys, suburb	No schoolwide curriculum for SEL	9-12, currently 11 & 12	English, coaches
Carlos Mendoza	20	NJ public school, coed, suburb	school has “SEL Days”, otherwise integrated into lessons	11 & 12	English/AP English
James Marsh	17	CT private, co-ed, suburb	School developed character program	N-12	History 9-12, Associate Director of Community and Belonging