

Elementary Teachers’ Perceptions and Experiences Regarding Social–Emotional Learning in Ontario



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Abstract

Social–emotional learning (SEL) is an essential part of students’ learning journey. Teachers’ perceptions of SEL have been associated with teaching outcomes and the effectiveness of its implementation in classrooms. In Ontario, SEL is a mandated component in certain areas of the curriculum. It is therefore important to consider teachers’ perceptions and experiences regarding SEL because a teacher who is confident in implementing SEL strategies as part of the curriculum may contribute to positive social, emotional, and academic outcomes for their students. This study explored teachers’ perceptions and experiences regarding SEL before and during the COVID–19 pandemic. Three elementary teachers in Ontario implementing SEL practices took part in a semi–structured interview that was informed by the CASEL (n.d.b) framework, and it followed a modified version of Seidman’s (2019) three–interview protocol. Research findings revealed the participants’ perceptions of SEL and the various informal strategies they used to teach it during the COVID–19 pandemic in Ontario. This paper discusses the benefits and barriers of teaching students the SEL competencies and describes potential implications for practice informed by the collected data

Keywords: social–emotional learning, social–emotional competencies, CASEL, elementary teachers, COVID–19

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Introduction

Teachers are known to invest hard emotional labour in their work (Hargreaves, 2001), principally by providing social and emotional support for their students throughout the school day (Forrester, 2020). Increasingly, social-emotional learning (SEL) is viewed as an important component of the school curriculum (Frye et al., 2022). It is defined as the process through which children and adults acquire and use knowledge to achieve goals, be compassionate towards others (i.e., diverse groups of people), build and maintain strong relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, n.d.c). SEL consists of teachable competencies (e.g., relationship skills, social awareness, and responsible decision-making) and not personality traits, which are inherited and remain stable over a lifetime (Whitehurst, 2019).

SEL emerged as a result of the deliberations of a group of educators in 1994 who convened to discuss unmet needs in the school curriculum. It was agreed by the participants that emotional intelligence was an essential component of student development that required attention (Bridgeland et al., 2013). The group decided that students needed to know and understand their own emotions and those of others, manage their emotions, develop empathy for others, and make responsible decisions (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Following this meeting, the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was established to disseminate and conduct research on the importance of SEL and the implementation of SEL programs in schools (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Since then, SEL has also been viewed as a proactive intervention used by schools to meet the challenges of an increasing number of students with mental health issues (Buchanan et al., 2009; Greenberg et al., 2001).

Much of the research on SEL programs involves school-based programs for children that are implemented school-wide. Durlak et al. (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of 213 school-based universal SEL programs and found that compared to controls, participants in SEL programs showed significant improvements in social and emotional skills, attitudes, behaviour, and academic performance. They also found that following SAFE practices (sequenced, active, focused, and with explicit learning goals) moderated positive student outcomes. Programs using SAFE practices are systematically implemented and students are taught skills that have been broken down into small components to be mastered with sufficient time and practice. These practices to teach social and emotional competencies are based on learning theory, such as following a step-by-step approach (Gresham, 1995) and using active learning (Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2001). Durlak et al. (2011) argued that all four components of the SAFE approach need to be in place to produce positive outcomes of SEL instruction. It was also found that environments that supported SEL learning were safe and orderly, where teachers established caring relationships with their students and conveyed high expectations for academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011). In a similar study, Taylor et al. (2017) conducted a

meta-analysis to review 82 SEL interventions involving a total of 97,406 K-12 students. This study showed that SEL also had a positive long-term effect on students across different age groups and geographic contexts.

While schools have taken on the task of teaching SEL competencies to students, children's first teachers are usually their parents and caregivers (Zinsser et al., 2014). Parents instruct through modelling, informal teaching, and contingent reaction to emotions all within the global emotional environment of the home (Denham, 1998; Eisenberg et al., 1998; Kochanska et al., 2000). More specifically, parents model giving labels to emotions, regulating them, and reacting to emotional displays of other, as well as coaching their children through emotional situations (Denham et al., 2007). Essentially, parents weave SEL competency instruction into day-to-day activities (Zinsser et al., 2014). CASEL (n.d.c) also recommends collaboration between parents and teachers. Given the importance ascribed to the teaching of SEL competencies, particularly at school, the purpose of this research is to investigate teachers' perceptions of SEL and the strategies they use to teach it.

SEL and CASEL

The CASEL framework is ubiquitous and influences practices across much of SEL-centred education (Frye et al., 2022). The CASEL (n.d.b) framework includes five core competencies (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making) which are known to be frequently used by school districts and states in developing standards for SEL (Kress & Elias, 2006). The CASEL (n.d.b) framework also emphasizes implementing SEL schoolwide through the use of formal programs (Oberle et al., 2016).

CASEL's five competencies are integral to formal SEL programs (Frye et al., 2022) and are often found in health and physical education curricula across K-12 education (Eklund et al., 2018). However, to be implemented effectively, teachers require knowledge of SEL. The results of Glenn's (2022) study of high school teachers indicated that they had a poor understanding of SEL and felt that it was not feasible to implement in their classes. Training in the five CASEL competencies may, however, improve knowledge and contribute to more effective implementation (Cooney, 2021).

Importance of Teachers' Beliefs and Perceptions of SEL

SEL's presence in classrooms has been affected by teachers' perceptions of SEL and their self-efficacy in instructing it (Forrester, 2020). Teachers' beliefs have been known to guide their actions and intentions, thus affecting teaching practices and experiences (Collie et al., 2015). Teachers who believed that SEL is important to be taught in classrooms strive to teach it to their students, especially through a formal curriculum (Zinsser et al., 2014). Teachers' positive

beliefs about SEL have been associated with teachers' greater confidence in teaching it (Brackett et al., 2012). Moreover, a teacher who is confident in using SEL strategies may contribute to positive social, emotional, and academic outcomes for their students (Buchanan et al., 2009). On the contrary, studies have shown that the higher the teachers' perceived stress and dissatisfaction in their teaching practices, the less likely SEL is taught effectively in classrooms (Collie et al., 2012; Collie et al., 2015).

Exploring SEL in the Context of COVID-19

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers were presented with a set of challenges whether educating students online, or in socially distanced classrooms (Daniel, 2020). While the main focus of this study was not on SEL during the pandemic, the timing of data collection necessitated and benefited from the experiences and beliefs of teachers as they navigated COVID-19 restrictions. Although various SEL strategies that could be implemented during the pandemic were suggested by Kamei and Harriot (2021), the effect the pandemic had on teachers' perceptions and practice of SEL has yet not been studied. Glenn (2022) cautions that the lack of in-person instruction could have a negative effect on the instruction and development of SEL competencies. This research explored teachers' perceptions of SEL and the strategies they used to teach it before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Importance of SEL

The majority of the extant literature has found that teachers acknowledge the importance of SEL (Borner, 2018; Forrester, 2020). Results of quantitative research conducted in the U.S. showed that teacher beliefs about the importance of SEL were influenced by a student's grade level, and that it was seen as somewhat less important for older cohorts (Bridgeland et al., 2013). SEL has also been shown to be particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic in helping students navigate challenging times (Murphy et al., 2021). During the pandemic, many children and youth reported symptoms of inattention, irritability, and fearfulness (Singh et al., 2020). Organizations such as CASEL (n.d.a), have recognized the negative effects of the pandemic and provided resources to help teachers, parents, and caregivers support children's SEL.

SEL Strategies

SEL competencies may be taught using either formal or informal programs (Denham, 1998). While researchers have examined the implementation of formal SEL programs such as PATHS, RC, the 4Rs program, and the RULER approach (Cooney, 2021), other studies have highlighted informal SEL strategies (e.g., modelling and check-ins) used by teachers. They found that teaching SEL strategies was most effective when they were taught consistently (Finkley & Hayes, 2020), using culturally relevant content (Cvar, 2019), and with clear expectations (McCoy,

2017). Modelling of SEL competencies by teachers or adult role models was also shown to be effective in improving students' SEL knowledge and behaviour (Bear, 2020; Cooney, 2021).

Teachers have found success teaching students competencies related to awareness of others' feelings through methods such as (a) role-playing (Finkley & Hayes, 2020); (b) classroom discussions (Kamei & Harriot, 2021); (c) games that enhance students' sense of community (Chin Ng & Bull, 2018). The literature describes many different methods teachers use to instruct their students on self-awareness and self-management competencies. For example, using statements that express students' feelings rather than confronting perceived misbehaviour (Cooney, 2021). The literature also notes that some students have been taught self-monitoring skills, especially during virtual lessons during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kamei & Harriot, 2021).

A common informal SEL implementation strategy described in the literature relates to teachers setting a positive, warm, respectful, and caring learning environment for students (Cvar, 2019). This environment can be fostered when teachers (a) regularly check in with their students regarding their academic progress and psychological mental well-being; (b) use daily affirmations to build students' self-confidence (Cooney, 2021); and (c) build a positive teacher-student relationship (Finkley & Hayes, 2020). Moreover, teachers reported using stress-reduction strategies such as mindfulness practices (Cooney, 2021), yoga, relaxation exercises with music, and breathing techniques, especially in virtual classrooms during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kamei & Harriot, 2021). Students were also taught about different SEL competencies, such as persevering through hard times, through read alouds (McCoy, 2017). Although the efficacy of informal SEL strategies is difficult to evaluate, teaching these SEL strategies informally and formally appears to provide many benefits for both students and teachers.

Benefits of SEL

One benefit of SEL programs noted in the literature is improved academic achievement for students (Douglass, 2011; Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017; Zinsser et al., 2014). As well, teachers who incorporated SEL practices in their classrooms perceived increased emotional regulation, emotional knowledge, and empathy among students, which in turn helped them academically later in elementary school (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Raver & Knitzer, 2002). Other benefits for students include improved social skills, such as emotional regulation and interpersonal skills (Borner, 2018; Bridgeland et al., 2013; Durlak et al., 2011). Moreover, SEL has been perceived as important in students' various life endeavours (e.g., school and work) (Buchanan et al., 2009; Durlak et al., 2011), helping students be more aware of their feelings (Cvar, 2019), and teaching them social skills (e.g., social awareness) (Borner, 2018).

Research has emphasized that teachers perceive SEL as a way to build strong relationships with their students (Philippe, 2017; Poulou et al., 2018). Positive student-teacher relationships have

been found to lead to improved student behaviour (Cvar, 2019; Poulou, 2017), increased student motivation, decreased student stress about school life (Collie et al., 2012), and high academic achievement (Douglass, 2011).

In addition to the positive impact of SEL on students, it also has benefits for teachers. For example, a teacher in Gainforth's (2020) mixed methods research conducted in Canada narrated a personal incident in which she was able to avoid a stressful situation by applying an SEL strategy she previously taught her students (i.e., managing and recognizing her emotions). In a quantitative study also conducted in Canada by Collie et al. (2012), teachers implementing SEL strategies felt less stress, were more satisfied with their job, had greater teaching efficacy, and were more motivated to improve and teach SEL. Moreover, teachers' well-being, classroom management, communication skills, and SEL skills generally improved when they had experience teaching SEL (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2003). However, while myriad benefits of SEL have been noted for students and their teachers, a number of barriers have also been identified.

Barriers to Implementing SEL

A considerable body of research has shown that teachers feel they lack SEL training and have limited knowledge of SEL (Buchanan et al., 2009; Douglass, 2011; Esen-Aygun & Shahin-Taskin, 2017). Research results reveal that when teachers are knowledgeable about SEL, they understand its importance (Douglass, 2011) and are more confident in implementing SEL practices in their classrooms (Collie et al., 2012; Philippe, 2017). To improve their SEL instructional skills, teachers need appropriate support and professional development (PD) (Collie et al., 2015; Cooney, 2021). Encouragement and support from the administration have been shown to be equally important for improving confidence and job satisfaction when implementing SEL (Collie et al., 2015).

In several studies, teachers described not having sufficient time throughout the school day to prepare and teach SEL lessons (Borner, 2018; Buchanan et al., 2009; Cvar, 2019). Other research has shown that teachers may not be provided with sufficient resources to deliver high-quality SEL lessons (Collie et al., 2015). For instance, several teachers in Buchanan et al.'s (2009) quantitative study conducted in the United States indicated that they lacked funds to purchase materials for SEL lessons.

In summary, the literature shows that educators recognize the importance of SEL in enhancing students' learning outcomes (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014), and many implement informal and/or formal SEL practices in their classrooms. SEL has been associated with better student-teacher relationships (Philippe, 2017), decreased student stress (Collie et al., 2012), as well as improved student academic achievement (Borner, 2018), social skills (Buchanan et al., 2009), behaviour (Poulou, 2017), and motivation (Collie et al., 2012). Research results also

show that in-service training can increase teachers' SEL knowledge (Esen-Aygun & Shahin-Taskin, 2017). However, there are barriers to implementing SEL, such as a lack of up-to-date teacher-training opportunities, time to implement SEL practices during the school day, planning time, and resources (Collie et al., 2015). Several large meta-analyses have been conducted to date which synthesize the effects of structured SEL programs and interventions (e.g., Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). However, to capture teachers' perceptions, beliefs, and use of SEL in the classroom, most studies have adopted a qualitative approach.

Current Study

Numerous studies have demonstrated the importance of incorporating SEL in elementary and secondary classrooms and have highlighted teachers' perceptions and experiences of SEL (e.g., Buchanan et al., 2009). Most of these studies have been conducted in the United States (e.g., Zinsser et al., 2014) while only a few have been conducted in Canada (e.g., Collie et al., 2012; Collie et al., 2015; Gainforth, 2020), with no studies conducted specifically in Ontario. In this province, SEL is mandated to be taught in schools in elementary grades (Government of Ontario, 2019). Other Canadian provinces have also focused on implementing SEL in their curriculum, especially British Columbia and Nova Scotia (Guyn Cooper Research Associates, 2013). For instance, the K-12 curriculum in British Columbia includes the importance of teaching students the three Core Competencies (Government of British Columbia, n.d.). Similarly, the Nova Scotia curriculum teaches the six Essential Graduation Competencies (Government of Nova Scotia, n.d.). However, it remains unclear how teachers in Ontario perceive and experience teaching SEL competencies. The research questions guiding this study are: (1) What are elementary teachers' perceptions of SEL in Ontario? And (2) What are elementary teachers' experiences implementing SEL in Ontario before and during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Primary Researcher's Statement

My teaching experience began with teaching adults both English and Arabic online. I continued doing so even after being hired to teach English for Grades 5 and 6 at an international school in Saudi Arabia. Although not aware of the term "SEL," I was determined to teach it in my classrooms to build a strong relationship with my students, as well as help them build essential competencies they would need to navigate in society. I focused on implementing informal SEL practices which centred around checking in on my students before and after class, organizing events and activities to help them build self-awareness (i.e., awareness of their interests, goals, talents, etc.), guiding and helping them problem-solve, training students to be critical thinkers, and supporting students in making informed decisions.

I wanted to study teachers' perceptions of SEL and experiences teaching it to understand them better. As a parent and a teacher, I believe that children's SEL competencies should be developed both at home and at school.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding this study were the five core competencies within the SEL framework developed by CASEL (n.d.b):

1. *Self-awareness* is the capacity to understand one's strengths, weaknesses, emotions, thoughts, and values and how they affect behaviour. It includes recognizing emotions and identifying one's strengths, self-confidence, and self-efficacy.
2. *Self-management* is the ability to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviours to achieve personal goals and aspirations. It is the ability to manage stress, self-discipline, motivate oneself, and set and strive to achieve personal goals.
3. *Social awareness* is the demonstration of empathy and compassion towards others, including those of different backgrounds, cultures, and contexts. It encompasses an understanding of social, ethical, and cultural norms for behaviour; respecting others; and celebrating diversity.
4. *Relationship skills* is the ability to build a positive and healthy relationship with others, communicate effectively, and navigate various situations with different individuals. It includes the ability to communicate clearly, listen attentively, build teamwork skills, resist inappropriate peer pressure, and ask and offer help when needed.
5. *Responsible decision-making* is the ability to make rational and productive choices about personal behaviour and social interaction across various contexts. It is to look realistically at situations, problem solve and analyze the awards and consequences involved while keeping in mind the well-being of oneself and others.

The CASEL (n.d.b) framework also highlights the importance of implementing SEL in key settings such as classrooms, schools, homes of families/caregivers, and communities. In these environments, SEL practices and programs should be used within the school's academic curricula and cultural settings in a school-wide context (CASEL, n.d.b). According to CASEL (n.d.b), it is beneficial to implement SEL across the school's policies and practices while collaborating with families and community organizations in supportive and nurturing classrooms. SEL should align with learning opportunities, develop adult competencies, and should be grounded in authentic family and community partnerships. The CASEL (n.d.b) framework was chosen for this study as it is known for leading scientific investigation of child development in SEL (Frye et al., 2022). It is also crucial to paint a clear picture of how SEL practices can be taught according to the five core competencies and four key settings defined by CASEL (Frye et al., 2022).

Figure 1

CASEL's SEL Framework



Note. From CASEL (n.d.b)

Context of the Study

The study was conducted in the winter of 2021 when the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic was very high in Ontario. During the pandemic, some provinces maintained in-person classes throughout most of the 2020-2021 academic year, and others combined in-class and online instruction, depending on the rates of infection (Cooper et al., 2021). In Ontario, in-person instruction occurred in the fall of 2020 and COVID-19 protocols were followed (e.g., masks, cohort instruction, and physical distancing). In the winter and spring of 2021, teachers, including participants in this study, taught in-person (i.e., in February and March) and online (i.e., most of January and April through June), resulting in more weeks of in-school closures than any other province (Miller, 2021).

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design, “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that makes the world visible”

(Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). A thematic analysis of our semi-structured interviews allowed for the interpretation of teachers' perceptions and experiences.

Participants

Elementary teachers of Grades 1 to 6 in Ontario were recruited using purposeful sampling, with the goal of seeking those able to supply the most information possible regarding a specific topic (Perry & Nichols, 2015). The selection criteria were that participants teach at the elementary level (Grades 1 to 6) in Ontario and have experience implementing SEL within the last 5 years, either formally or informally. Although elementary education in Ontario includes Grades 1 through 8, participation was limited to Grades 1 through 6 in order to increase the homogeneity of the school context. In Ontario, Grades 7 and 8 may be taught in an elementary school, junior/middle school, or high school.

Participants were recruited during January and February of 2021 when many schools across Ontario were closed and teachers were instructing online. Notices were posted on social media, specifically Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram, by posting a recruitment poster, which was uploaded to the first author's personal accounts. Participants who met the selection criteria were accepted on a first-come, first-served basis. Three female teachers who met the criteria were identified by pseudonyms to protect their anonymity: Sam, Alex, and Emma. Table 1 provides demographic information for the three participants.

Data Collection and Analysis

A semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant which consisted of questions related to CASEL's (n.d.b) five core competencies and key settings for implementing SEL. Each participant was interviewed following a modified version of Seidman's (2019) three-interview protocol, in which the three parts were condensed into an approximately 2-hour single session. It was felt that due to teacher workload and stress during the pandemic, it might not be possible to conduct more than one interview per participant. The first part of the interview focused on participants' life history, specifically their childhood, experiences at school implementing SEL as educators before the COVID-19 pandemic, and educational background. Then participants discussed their current experiences as educators who implement SEL practices in their classrooms during COVID-19 in the second set of questions. The final part of the interview allowed teachers to reflect on their lived experiences teaching SEL. It was here that the participants explained what it means to be a teacher who implements SEL and the associated benefits and barriers.

Table 1*Study Participants*

Name	Initial degree	Teacher education program	Years of teaching experience	Qualification to teach	Now teaching	Additional responsibilities
Sam	Foreign language and literature	1-year B.Ed.	15+	Junior/intermediate/senior core French teacher	K-8 French at a rural school	Teacher union representative
Alex	Health and physical education; minor in psychology	1-year B.Ed.	26	Primary/intermediate/senior teacher Teaches all subjects Specialization in Computer and guidance Principal qualifications	Gr. 2 at a rural school	Math lead
Emma	English	1-year B.Ed.	15	Primary/junior/intermediate	Gr. 2 at a suburban school	-

The interviews were conducted at a time convenient to the participants using the video-conferencing platform Zoom, and they were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were sent via email attachment to the participants to provide them with the opportunity to make revisions to ensure that the data accurately reflected what they wanted to say. The data were analyzed inductively, and a thematic analysis was conducted. The approved transcripts were first read repeatedly to ensure understanding of the ideas expressed by the participants. Then they were coded manually to promote engagement with the data (Charmaz, 2000). Categories were developed and themes emerged, and the CASEL (n.d.b) framework was mapped onto the SEL strategies implemented by the participants.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness captures the believability of the data (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Credibility was the criterion used in this research to ensure trustworthiness (Merriam, 1998). To enhance credibility and ensure the accuracy of the data, member checks were conducted with the participants (Guest et al., 2012). None of the participants made changes to

their transcripts. As well, the first author, who conducted the interviews, managed her expectations by appreciating participants' alternative realities and suspending initial judgements (O'Leary, 2017). Additionally, the first and second authors analyzed the data independently and their findings were congruent (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Findings

Seven themes emerged from the interviews with Sam, Alex, and Emma: (a) SEL and its importance; (b) strategies to teach SEL competencies; (c) benefits of SEL; (d) barriers to implementing SEL; (e) professional development and support for SEL; (f) involvement of parents and the community in SEL; (g) SEL during the COVID-19 pandemic.

SEL and Its Importance

The educators agreed that SEL is the foundation of student academic success. They believed that if students trusted the teacher and felt psychologically safe to make mistakes in the classroom, then they would do well academically. Alex emphasized, "Children aren't going to learn if they don't feel safe." While Sam felt that learning SEL competencies should be more of a focus of the elementary grades than the secondary ones, Alex and Emma contended that students of all ages could benefit from SEL through instruction and teacher modelling. However, the three educators consistently stated that it was important to begin teaching SEL competencies in the elementary grades so that students could use the competencies at different stages in their life. Sam and Alex both indicated that a positive teacher-student relationship was required to create a safe and nurturing environment in which SEL competencies could best be taught. Sam wondered, "What can I do to facilitate that collaborative and inclusive atmosphere?"

Strategies to Teach SEL Competencies

Although both Sam and Alex reported implementing formal SEL programs, it was clear from the findings that all three participants' main focus was on implementing informal SEL practices (see Tables 2 and 3). Sam and Alex had implemented a schoolwide SEL program, and all three participants believed that a schoolwide approach is the best way to implement SEL. Sam stated what it meant to teach SEL schoolwide:

It was just not at the teacher level but it was topped by the administrators and all the way down and it was implemented with consistency so then the students just adopted it, thought that it was the norm, and didn't question it.

Sam described implementing four SEL schoolwide programs: Character Education (Briggs, 2019), Choice-based teaching (Potter, 2019), Tribes program (Tillotson, 2021), and the Four Zones of Regulation (The Zones of Regulation, 2021).

Table 2

Strategies to Teach SEL Competencies Pre-COVID-19

Competencies	Sam	Alex	Emma
Self-awareness	Applying the four zones of regulation program (formal), Practising yoga (formal SEL practice in P.E.), Implementing mindfulness in education (formal and informal), Checking in with students and speaking in a language they understand (informal).	Implementing mindfulness in education (formal and informal), Applying the four zones of regulation program (formal), Motivating students to do anything they put their mind to (informal).	Changing students' negative reaction to mistakes with a positive one (informal), Helping students realize mistakes and admitting them (informal), Helping students realize and regulate their emotions (informal), Celebrating students' mistakes (informal).
Social awareness	-	-	Organizing an activity where students share and discuss the effect their actions have on others (informal), Modelling how to react in different situations (informal).
Relationship skills	Teaching students how to respect others (informal), Telling students to be mindful of what people say and the things they say in front of them (informal).	Teaching students about accountable talk (informal).	Reading stories about relationship-building (informal), Encouraging students to help others (informal), Teaching how to make and keep friends (informal), Modelling relationship skills (informal).
Responsible decision-making	Teaching how to analyze a situation before taking an action (informal), Guiding students in solving problems (informal)	Telling students to do the best they can (informal)	Teaching students how to apologize (informal), Admitting wrongful actions (informal), Guiding students in solving problems (informal).
Self-management	Telling students to set goals and checking in with students' progress (informal), Implementing choice-based teaching and the Ontario Character Education program (formal).	Helping students that feel dysregulated manage themselves and their emotions by giving them fidget toys (informal), Putting calm music after P.E class to calm the students (informal).	Teaching students perseverance (informal), Teaching students how to manage their emotions (informal).

Table 3*Strategies to Teach SEL Competencies During COVID-19*

Competencies	Sam	Alex	Emma
Self-awareness	<p>Applying the four zones of regulation program (formal),</p> <p>Checking in with students and speaking in a language they understand (informal)</p> <p>Reading stories about mindfulness (informal).</p>	<p>Students have to identify how they are feeling choosing an emoji or meme online (informal),</p> <p>Regulating students' emotions through teacher-student communication (informal),</p> <p>Parents are encouraged to take a break with their family when needed (informal).</p>	<p>Changing students' negative reaction to mistakes with a positive one and celebrating them (informal),</p> <p>Helping students realize mistakes and admitting them (informal),</p> <p>Helping students realize and regulate their emotions (informal).</p>
Social awareness	<p>Implementing the "Star Routine" where students ask one another how they are doing (informal).</p>	<p>Helping students understand their classmates' situation and perspective by having a discussion and explaining key points (informal).</p>	<p>Organizing an activity where students share and discuss the effect their actions have on others (informal),</p> <p>Modelling how to react in different situations (informal).</p>
Relationship skills	<p>Telling students to ask for help when needed or guiding them to other sources to seek support (informal)</p>	<p>Playing games that stimulate students to express their ideas in front of their peers (informal)</p>	<p>Reading stories about relationship-building (informal),</p> <p>Encouraging students to help others (informal),</p> <p>Teaching how to make and keep friends (informal),</p> <p>Modelling relationship skills and how to react to situations (informal).</p>
Responsible decision-making	<p>Encouraging communication (via email) in case an extension on assignments is needed (informal),</p> <p>Reminding students to be mindful of their actions (informal).</p>	-	<p>Teaching students how to apologize: saying sorry and changing undesirable behaviour (informal),</p> <p>Admitting wrongful actions (informal),</p> <p>Guiding students in solving problems (informal).</p>

Table 3 (Cont'd)

Strategies to Teach SEL Competencies During COVID-19

Competencies	Sam	Alex	Emma
Self-management	Teaching students how to manage stress related to submitting work by communicating with the teacher (informal).	Implementing mindfulness program (formal), Motivating students to solve problems and not to be afraid to make mistakes (formal SEL expectation in math), Allowing students to decide when to take breaks during a lesson (e.g., in online classes students walk around to feel calmer) (informal), Giving students fidget toys to help them pay attention during class (informal).	Teaching students perseverance (informal), Teaching students how to manage their emotions (informal).

Similarly, Alex stated that she had implemented the four zones of regulation and a 21-day mindfulness program. She indicated that once her school started implementing SEL to all students rather than to a particular group of students (i.e., students who feel dysregulated), she saw a difference in those groups of students who had once felt different from their peers. While Emma saw value in using a formal SEL program, she clearly stated that she did not use them. Instead, she taught SEL competencies through informal practices that were based on her personal beliefs about teaching (e.g., encouraging students to persevere).

Table 2 shows the strategies used by the participants to teach SEL competencies before COVID-19. While Sam and Alex used the four zones of regulation, all three teachers overwhelmingly implemented informal strategies with their students. It is possible that their schools had not adopted a school-wide program, leaving each teacher to instruct SEL competencies informally as required by the students. Sam and Alex did not report any using strategies to address the social awareness competency. It may be the case that their students already demonstrated competence in this area and no instruction was required.

During the pandemic, Sam and Alex were still using elements of the four zones of regulation program. They were also now implementing strategies to teach social awareness to their students. Emma's SEL pre-COVID-19 practices did not differ from those implemented during

COVID-19. However, Sam and Alex's experience with teaching SEL before and during the pandemic differed from Emma's in that they prioritized students' mental and emotional well-being before academics during the pandemic.

Benefits of SEL

All participants believed that SEL supports students in solving problems by persevering, especially in math (Alex and Emma), which is related to the self-awareness competency. Sam also mentioned that asking for help when solving any problem is important for perseverance. She clarified, "I feel like it's the problem-solving piece. [SEL] gives the individual more confidence all around. [Students] are able to self-manage and to work through it on their own and to ask for help when needed." These skills are components of the self-management and relationship competencies and support academic achievement. As well, when students had SEL competencies and a positive relationship with their teachers, they were not afraid of making mistakes in front of peers or the teacher (Alex and Emma). The three participants believed that a basic condition for the successful teaching of SEL in the classroom involved establishing a strong student-teacher relationship, which improves when trust is built and support is provided by the teacher.

There was consistency among participants regarding SEL's positive effect on students' mental health. Alex believed that when students had SEL competencies they were happier, and Sam felt that they were able to self-regulate better. Alex said, "I think it takes that stigma and pressure off that they can have a bad day, they can have big feelings, and that they don't have to be afraid of it." However, Emma commented that some students with diagnosed mental health issues still need extra interventions and support.

There was a common understanding among participants that the presence of SEL not only benefits students but teachers as well. Sam shared that with SEL implementation, she can cover the curriculum within the allotted timeframe. She also saw that teaching SEL competencies was rewarding because she would witness her students using them. Alex revealed that she used the strategies she taught her students in her own life (e.g., mindfulness), and was inspired by students who returned each day to school with a positive attitude despite having struggled the previous day. Alex seemed passionate about implementing SEL and said, "I think I'm a better educator because of it." Emma also acknowledged being a better educator because she had a solid relationship with her students and was more aware of their academic level.

Barriers to Implementing SEL

All participants described a few barriers to implementing SEL. Sam found the most challenging aspect of implementing SEL was convincing some students to adopt a particular SEL strategy or

method. Resistance from parents (i.e., parents not being open to something new) with regard to implementing SEL was noted by Sam as a barrier.

Alex was confident in implementing SEL and did not experience many barriers. While she did not encounter resistance from parents, she felt that the pressure students experienced at home was a barrier. She believed there should be common norms of behaviour at school and home (e.g., “it’s okay to make a mistake” and how to regulate emotions). Alex strongly believed that SEL could be implemented effectively when parents were provided information on how to support their children in ways that are consistent with what is taught at school, thereby avoiding conflicting messages.

Emma’s main challenge was not parents, but the lack of resources to teach SEL competencies to the entire class. She specified, “I need resources to feel more confident.” She indicated that in the fall of 2021 when in-class instruction was resuming, she would be interested in teaching SEL formally but wanted her board of education to provide lesson plans and resources.

Professional Development and Support for SEL

Sam and Alex had a positive attitude towards the PD they received on SEL whether from the school board or their school. However, Emma reported not receiving enough PD on SEL. Additionally, based on participants’ responses, it was clear that they were highly supported by the school staff and administration to implement SEL and were thereby confident in doing so.

Sam indicated learning about SEL during her B.Ed. program and explained, “In terms of the seminar, it was just explaining the different socio-economic status groups, what their needs are, and what you can do within your own teaching practice to have them feel safe, included, and respected.” Sam also learned more about SEL through personal research, and Alex enrolled in courses on SEL. As well, Sam and Alex appeared to have attended workshops on SEL sponsored by their respective boards of education pre-COVID-19.

While Emma did not mention any PD sessions specifically on SEL, she and Alex attended workshops on the new math curriculum during the initial rollout. Alex indicated that the presenters discussed SEL strategies that could be used in class when implementing the new math curriculum; however, Emma’s workshop did not appear to address this topic. Since COVID-19, workshops have been held after school. Alex and Emma were not eager to attend them, as they were too tired after a day of teaching. They all preferred attending PD sessions held during the school day, as had been the practice before the outbreak of the pandemic. Alex explained,

A lot of the workshops that were being offered this year have been on people's own time, and I think a lot fewer people are taking it or taking advantage of those workshops and those experiences because they're just at the end of the day—they're done.

Emma expressed her disappointment in not having sufficient PD, especially during the pandemic, in order to implement SEL formally to the entire class.

All three participants felt supported by the administration, board personnel, and/or colleagues. Sam indicated that when implementing SEL competencies, she was supported by the administration, her mentor, and a special assignment teacher who acted as a coach and who sent SEL resources to her. Like Sam, Emma expressed that she could request resources from a special assignment teacher in her board, but her key support group was her colleagues.

Involvement of Parents and the Community in SEL

The belief that SEL should be taught by the school and at home was expressed by the three educators. Sam argued, “Students might think they have to act and think in a certain way when they’re at school but, in reality, SEL has a benefit in a wider community and for the person as a whole in their different areas of life.” Moreover, the participants felt that parents should learn about SEL and support the school in teaching competencies at home. Sam contended that parents should learn about SEL competencies whether through personal research or SEL resources provided by schools to reinforce them at home.

Sam and Alex both reported working with community groups in implementing SEL competencies. Sam explained that her school partnered with a community centre that provided individual and small group support for teachers and students during the school day. Alex’s school had worked with a community organization that provided a mindfulness program, which was implemented by teachers at her school.

SEL During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Participants had different perceptions of SEL implementation during COVID-19 whether online or in-person. Sam saw that students were not used to learning online, and she had to teach them to navigate the online platform. She believed that SEL implementation was enhanced during the COVID-19 pandemic because students understood SEL competencies better with the circumstances surrounding learning online or in socially distanced classrooms (i.e., mask-wearing and everyone going through common challenges). She explained, “What usually happens is that a conversation ensues about how one another is feeling. There’s a kind of unity aspect I think.”

Alex articulated that SEL had been emphasized during COVID-19, partly to support students’ mental health and because of the SEL expectations in the new mathematics curriculum. Similar to Sam, Alex thought that SEL implementation was enhanced during COVID-19 because students could acknowledge others’ feelings better, especially those with autism. However, she did express that some activities, such as those held on the carpet and hands-on tasks, were

difficult to do in physically distanced classrooms. Instead, she used more class discussions and the “I notice, I think, and I wonder” game, where “there are no wrong answers.”

Emma firmly believed that COVID-19 deterred the teaching of SEL because it was difficult to engage students in the material online. She felt that students learn more about SEL in groups than individually. She argued, “I think you learn about social-emotional learning more as a group. Learning empathy for each other, working with each other, working in that group, and helping that other kid because he’s struggling.” During the pandemic, group work activities that may require physical contact proved to be difficult due to the nature of a socially distanced classroom. Nevertheless, she noted that some students were flourishing in online learning where their problem-solving skills improved because they were placed in situations where they had to solve their own issues.

One teacher recognized the need for support for teachers during the pandemic. Alex was grateful for her principal who, during the pandemic, conducted daily check-ins with the teachers and encouraged them to take a mental health day when needed. She stated, “Not everyone I know has that much support.”

Discussion

This study examined the SEL perceptions and experiences of three elementary teachers in Ontario drawing on the CASEL (n.d.b) set of competencies as a theoretical framework. A thematic analysis revealed several findings related to teachers’ perceptions and experiences teaching SEL competencies. The data are discussed in terms of the two research questions.

Participants’ Perceptions of SEL

The three teachers in this research perceived that SEL competencies were the foundation of students’ academic success and social and emotional well-being. This belief is consistent with other research results showing that teachers believed SEL was an important component of students’ learning (e.g., Borner, 2018; Cvar, 2019), and long-term academic success (Durlak et al., 2011; Zinsser et al., 2014). These teachers also felt that creating a warm and nurturing classroom and developing strong student-teacher relationships were essential to teaching SEL competencies, a finding also noted in other research (e.g., Durlak et al., 2011; Poulou et al., 2018).

Similar to Philippe’s (2017) results, the teachers in this study believed that SEL instruction was important in both elementary and secondary schools. However, more importance was ascribed to teaching SEL competencies at the elementary level, which supports the results of Bridgeland et al. (2013). These participants also valued family and community partnerships as outlined in

the CASEL (n.d.b) framework and emphasized the importance of teacher–parent collaboration in implementing SEL strategies (CASEL, n.d.b; Zinsser et al., 2014).

As well, the participants felt they had a duty to implement SEL, whether it was provincially mandated in a curriculum document or not. Likewise, teachers in previous studies have indicated that teaching SEL was part of the job (Zinsser et al., 2014) and that they had a professional responsibility to include SEL competencies in their classroom practices (Lasky, 2005; McCoy, 2017). Moreover, these participants believed that they were better educators due to implementing SEL, a finding that supports previous research results (Collie et al., 2015).

Participants' Experiences With SEL

This study provided evidence that the three teachers' SEL strategies, whether formal or informal, encompassed all of CASEL's (n.d.b) five core competencies, which is consistent with Durlak et al.'s (2011) results. As well, by creating a positive and safe classroom environment, teachers in the study stated that their students were able to view making mistakes positively and voice their opinions confidently and without fear of judgement (Borner, 2018). Moreover, educators in this study modelled social awareness and relationship skills to their students, which also supports previous research (e.g., Cooney, 2021; Finkley & Hayes, 2020). These informal strategies also align with those used by parents to teach SEL at home (Denham et al., 2007). They also taught self–management through mindfulness practices (Alex), read alouds and discussions (Emma), and regular check–ins. These strategies used to teach SEL competencies were previously reported in the literature (Kamei & Harriot, 2021; Kim & Hong, 2019; McCoy, 2017; Philippe, 2017). Similar to comments made by Kamei and Harriot (2021), the strategies took on a new importance during the COVID–19 pandemic.

Teachers in this study observed that teaching strategies to improve SEL competencies were associated with happier, calmer, and more motivated students, which in turn improved student–teacher relationships and academic achievement. These benefits are consistent with those identified in previous research (Collie et al., 2015; Forrester, 2020; Zinsser et al., 2014). One participant (Sam) added that being able to cover more of the curriculum could be due to students' SEL competencies. Another participant (Alex) stated that she benefited from teaching SEL competencies by using them in her own life, which is consistent with a finding reported by Gainforth (2020).

Unlike some teachers in previous studies (e.g., Esen–Aygün & Şahin–Taskin, 2017), two participants indicated that they had received training on SEL and were generally satisfied with the content and overall quality of the professional development on SEL that had been provided by their respective boards of education. Two of the Ontario teachers also stated that they had sufficient resources to teach SEL competencies, which differs from other studies where teachers

indicated a lack of high-quality resources (Buchanan et al., 2009; Collie et al., 2015). Moreover, they felt encouraged by board personnel, their colleagues, and the principal, which has been shown to support the teaching of SEL competencies (Collie et al., 2015).

Participants in other studies indicated that time to prepare SEL lessons and incorporate them into the weekly schedule were challenges (e.g., Borner, 2018; Buchanan et al., 2009). Results of this research showed that Alex and Sam implemented structured programs related to SEL competencies (e.g., mindfulness) and planned formal lessons on SEL before and during the pandemic. For these teachers, time was not a barrier to implementing SEL. As well, all three teachers wove informal instruction on SEL competencies into lessons and events that occurred throughout the school day. Previous research also cited barriers to implementing SEL competencies as the lack of training and resources (e.g., Buchanan et al., 2009; Douglass, 2011), which was not the case with the Ontario teachers in this study. However, the participants indicated that they were challenged by the attitudes of some students and parents. Sam noted that some of her students did not use the SEL strategies they had been taught, and she and Alex described some parents as not being open to the importance of teaching SEL and being overly critical about their children making mistakes. This shows that parents and teachers held different attitudes towards SEL, which contrasts with Zinsler et al.'s (2014) findings that show that teachers and parents should collaborate.

An important difference in the experiences of the Ontario teachers with that of educators involved in most other research is the focus on problem-solving skills and perseverance, especially in math. All three participants supported the instruction of problem-solving skills; however, Alex and Emma felt that perseverance was particularly important to motivation and success in math and academics in general. This finding may be attributed to the expectation in the new math curriculum (maintain positive motivation and perseverance), whereby teachers are expected to normalize making mistakes, help students see them as a source of learning, and encourage students to keep trying by using a variety of strategies. Both Emma and Alex told of experiences whereby they had supported their students in persevering in problem-solving. Alex also stated that she was inspired by students who maintained positive attitudes toward math, despite having difficulties the day before.

With the COVID-19 cases decreasing in the summer of 2020, schools in Ontario opened in September 2020 with COVID-19 protocols, and efforts to develop SEL competencies and monitor students' mental health were emphasized by participants. Unlike previous years, SEL took precedence over academics and some boards provided resources for their teachers to instruct SEL competencies (Sam). Alex's principal was also concerned about the mental health of the teachers and conducted regular check-ins with them. While the importance of administrative support in implementing SEL has been reported by Berman et al. (2018), it was

also found to be of emotional support for teachers during the pandemic and provided clear direction for the focus of their work early in the school year.

In response, participants emphasized the acknowledgement of their students' feelings and strove to develop a sense of community, despite the inconvenience of physical distancing. They also did check-ins with their students, taught mindfulness practices, and used read-alouds and discussions to teach SEL strategies. These strategies have been reported previously as ways to improve students' SEL skills such as self-management and social awareness (Cooney, 2021; Kamei & Harriot, 2021; McCoy, 2017). It is possible that the three participants felt that these strategies coupled with strong student-teacher relationships would help them identify students who were struggling, especially during the pandemic, thereby mitigating mental health problems.

It is clear that mandating the instruction of SEL expectations in the Ontario mathematics curriculum and eventually the assessment of them among students contributed to the teachers' sense that implementing SEL strategies to develop competencies is important and to ensure that SEL competencies are taught at some point during the day. This study is the first to report teachers' perceptions and experiences using SEL under these conditions. While the teachers in this study implemented SEL strategies in previous years, they appeared more convinced of their importance now that the new math curriculum had been rolled out, which coincidentally was at the same time that disruptions in schooling occurred due to COVID-19. Despite pandemic protocols and online teaching, these teachers used a variety of formal and informal strategies to teach and reinforce SEL competencies among their students.

Contributions

This study adds to the growing literature on SEL. It is the first qualitative study conducted on elementary teachers' perceptions and experiences of SEL in Canada and specifically in Ontario. It allowed teachers the opportunity to speak openly about their perceptions of SEL and their experiences implementing competencies in their classrooms. The research findings highlight the various strategies elementary teachers used to teach SEL competencies before and during COVID-19. As well, the findings gave new insights into the benefits of teaching SEL for teachers (i.e., observing students demonstrating SEL competencies) and the barriers (i.e., parental support). Additional benefits (i.e., improved problem-solving) and barriers (i.e., difficulty using small groups) to implementing SEL online and in a classroom with COVID-19 protocols were also brought to light. The findings also added to our understanding of the CASEL (n.d.b) framework. In this study, the partnership between home and school in the teaching and reinforcing of SEL competencies that are emphasized in the CASEL (n.d.b) framework did not always exist. While it is not clear if perceived resistance from parents diminished the effects of SEL, it was viewed as a barrier by two of the participants.

Limitations of the Study

There were several limitations of this study. All of the participants interviewed had 15 years or more of teaching experience and a solid knowledge of SEL. Therefore, the findings may not be transferable to teachers with less teaching experience and SEL knowledge or those who are less invested in exploring and discussing SEL. Second, the participants were all Caucasian women, and the research results may not be reflective of teachers of other genders and ethnicities. Finally, unlike other jurisdictions, SEL instruction is mandated in three curriculum documents in Ontario and at least one (i.e., mathematics curriculum) is followed by two of the teachers in the study. Teachers in other parts of the country might not be as committed to developing SEL competencies as were the participants in this study.

Implications and Future Research

An implication for practice is the need for schools to collaborate with parents in sharing the purpose and content of their SEL instruction and in exploring strategies that support specific competencies at home and school. As well, boards and schools should consider the timing of professional learning in order to increase accessibility to teachers, with consideration of opportunities during the work day. Finally, as noted by teachers in this study and other research results (e.g., Durlak et al., 2011; CASEL, 2019), SEL should be implemented on a schoolwide basis to achieve optimum benefits. Therefore, boards and schools should develop or adopt programs, that include informal and formal SEL instruction, so that students receive consistent messaging and age-appropriate skills to support competency development. The literature on SEL in Canada is scant, and future research should study elementary and secondary teachers' perceptions and experiences regarding SEL in different Canadian provinces. It is important to formulate a better understanding of SEL in Canada to improve educators' teaching practices and enhance students' learning journeys.

Conclusion

With the number of children and adolescents with mental health issues increasing in Canada and inadequate services (Vaillancourt et al., 2021) schools have a responsibility to address unmet needs. SEL instruction is one way of providing Tier 1 support to all students who may be struggling to manage emotionally, socially, and academically. Introducing SEL instruction in curriculum documents, such as Ontario has done, ensures that at least informal instruction on various competencies occurs. However, even with informal instruction, the expectations for students must be made clear, strategies and skills must be taught consistently (e.g., directly, by modelling), and students should be actively involved in learning (e.g., through role play and discussions). This instruction of SEL competencies should also occur within caring and safe classroom and school environments and with the knowledge and support of parents.

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