

Development of an Instrument to Assess Teacher Perceptions of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in PK–12 Schools

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Abstract

Research from numerous studies worldwide consistently shows that integrating social emotional learning (SEL) development into the structures and practices of schools is a path to creating safe, supportive, and inclusive environments. Researchers developed and validated an instrument to examine teachers' perceptions of SEL needs in their schools; their knowledge, skills, training, and experiences with SEL in their classrooms; and barriers to implementing practices or receiving professional development. A pilot study was conducted to assess the feasibility of the survey questionnaire, participant recruitment, and data collection and analysis processes. This paper describes the pilot testing process to ensure methodological rigor and content and face validity of the instrument before commencing the main research project surveying PK–12 teachers in Florida. This tool can be used in multiple sites and contexts to assess readiness and barriers to SEL program implementation, providing formative feedback for school leaders, curriculum developers, and teacher educators.

Introduction

Substantial empirical data document that students can develop the social and emotional skills and attitudes they need to effectively navigate their multicultural world and contribute actively and meaningfully to their schools, families, careers, and communities. A plethora of studies of social and emotional learning (SEL) programs worldwide confirms that social and emotional competencies are malleable and can be taught effectively to students by school personnel in partnership with families and communities (Mahoney et al., 2021). Currently, public schools across the United States are considered a high-stakes testing environment; therefore, it is worth noting that SEL can positively affect assessment results by increasing test scores between 11 and 17 points out of 100 (Durlak et al., 2011). Additionally, SEL is a cost-effective investment. According to research at Columbia University on six evidence-based programs, the long-term social and economic benefits return \$11 for every \$1 invested in SEL programs (Belfield et al., 2015).

Beginning in 2011, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) conducted state scans approximately every two years as a monitoring tool to report the foundational policy efforts of SEL (Dermody & Dusenbury, 2022). The latest scan report shows that 27 states offer SEL competencies, and 44 states provide SEL implementation guidance. The number of states with free-standing K–12 SEL competencies has increased by 50% since 2020.

Furthermore, all 44 states have developed state-specific guidance, such as context resources explicit to that state. These state-specific guidelines have increased by almost 70% since 2020 (Dermody & Dusenbury, 2022). The state guidelines for 39 states are located on dedicated SEL websites, an increase of 30% in the last two years (Yoder et al., 2020). In addition, over 200 pieces of legislation that discussed SEL or used closely related language were introduced in 2019 (Shriver & Weissberg, 2020). The expeditious support of SEL in legislation and by states from 2020 to 2022 also shows a seemingly major push to increase SEL implementation, but SEL does not come without criticism.

SEL has been the focus of recent political debate and rhetoric in numerous regions of the country (Sherman & McVeagh-Lally, 2022). Some politicians have posited misleading ideas about SEL, including misconstruing SEL in discussions on critical race theory (Garby, 2022). This confusion about SEL being part of critical race theory has produced fear and misunderstanding in the political and public world. Before this debate, SEL has been questioned in many areas, such as the definition's ambiguity, the hype surrounding SEL as a remedy for various educational issues, and the rapid SEL movement (Shriver & Weissberg, 2020). This prompted advocates to ask reflective questions such as, "Do parents, teachers, and local citizens have a good idea of what SEL is, [and] why it is important?" "What do we know about SEL pedagogy?" "Have teacher preparation programs started preparing teachers?" and "Is there professional development in the pipeline to get existing teachers up to speed?" (McShane, 2019, p. 4).

As an integrated approach to learning, SEL can promote social and emotional competence and foster cognitive, emotional, and behavioral skills while preventing or reducing problem behaviors (Durlak et al., 2011; Payton et al., 2008). This includes the long-term development of academic achievement, problem-solving skills, ethical decision-making, health-promoting behaviors, pro-social attitudes about self, others, and work, and positive contributions to the community and society (Taylor et al., 2017). Program evaluation researchers have analyzed the impacts of SEL programs directly after implementation, but there is a lack of empirical data examining SEL skills for long-term retention (Payton et al., 2008). Thus, there is a dearth of information on the impact teachers can have on a successful SEL program implementation (Haymovitz et al., 2017).

While research data include positive impacts on student academic and behavior outcomes from SEL interventions, certain school-wide conditions are crucial to supporting the development and implementation of these practices (Martinez, 2016; Payton et al., 2008). Teachers require proper training, support, and resources to implement SEL practices and interventions with fidelity. Teachers with a less-developed understanding of SEL may view it as an additional program that will remove items they value from the curriculum or school calendar (McShane, 2019). Despite the recognized importance of teachers' beliefs about SEL and their preparation to teach these programs, few studies have examined teachers' experiences with adopting SEL programs and implementing them in classrooms (Durlak et al., 2011).

This pilot study aimed to produce a valid and effective instrument to measure teacher perceptions of the importance of SEL in school settings, their knowledge of SEL, their implementation of SEL with students and their training on how to do this, and any potential barriers to implementation. This study also aimed to determine training needs to fill gaps in teacher preparation programs or district in-service professional development. Based on the lack of literature on teacher perceptions, the recent surge in SEL legislation and state standards, and the criticism of SEL, our research questions were: 1) What are K–12 teachers' perceptions of SEL? 2) To what extent are teachers implementing SEL? 3) In what areas do teacher participants feel they

should have received more training in teacher preparation programs? and 4) What are the common barriers identified by teachers to implementing SEL in the classroom?

Literature Review

In recent years, SEL has moved to the forefront of research and legislative measures to reduce common behavioral problems in schools that interfere with student learning and positive social outcomes (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2023; Weissberg et al., 2015). Mental and emotional health researchers have argued that including SEL in the curriculum is indispensable for improved student behavior and academic success (Durlak et al., 2011; Payton et al., 2008). In this study, we adopted the CASEL (2023) definition of SEL:

The process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (p. 1).

SEL is not just a program or lessons in a curriculum; it is also how educators and students interact with one another in a supportive and equitable learning environment. Incorporating SEL interventions and embedding them into the school curriculum provides opportunities for students to strengthen these skills and behaviors when faced with tasks and challenges (CASEL, 2023).

Logically, SEL principles and strategies should be implemented in classrooms where the students and teachers spend the most time together building relationships (Garby, 2022). The empirical literature is replete with interventions and strategies that educators should implement. Still, insufficient empirical data are available on teacher perceptions of the impact of SEL on student behavior or achievement. Evaluating the impact of SEL interventions to determine whether they produce the desired results is valuable to the educational field, legislation, and the existing empirical literature.

Teacher Role in SEL

PK–12 school leaders must balance many issues, including diverse populations, school discipline, and academic achievement (Grant et al., 2017; Haymovitz et al., 2017; Payton et al., 2008). These issues extend student academic achievements into personal emotions, relationships, and problem-solving skills (Grant et al., 2017). Educators and policymakers are tasked with finding solutions to these challenges. The importance of SEL has been espoused for years by scholars, educators, and researchers (Dominguez & LaGue, 2013). Schools are responsible for child development, and researchers argue that including SEL in the curriculum is indispensable for positive student behavior and academic success. A complex and stressful learning environment can result from negative student behaviors if a student lacks social and emotional development.

A plethora of research on SEL curricula and programs provides empirical data substantiating claims that implementing SEL programs, interventions, or practices results in decreased emotional and behavioral problems and increased academic achievement (Durlak et al., 2011; Payton et al., 2008). Following their meta-analysis of approximately 700 evaluations of SEL programs implemented with students from preschool to high school, Payton et al. (2008) concluded that these programs assisted students in improving behaviorally and academically. In addition, Durlak et al. (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of 213 studies in which outcome data from universal SEL interventions across all grade levels were analyzed. Durlak et al. (2011) determined that implementing SEL improved behavior and academic success while decreasing emotional distress.

Included in this meta-analysis were data on the personnel responsible for executing the programs, strategies, or interventions (Durlak et al., 2011). Teachers were responsible in 53% of the publications analyzed, while 21% utilized non-school personnel, and 26% of the publications noted programs with multiple personnel components. The mean effects supported the hypothesis that school staff can successfully implement SEL programs. Teachers had effective results in all six outcome categories (SEL skills, attitudes, positive social behavior, conduct problems, emotional distress, and academic performance). Programs with non-school personnel had effective results in SEL skills, conduct problems, and attitudes. Multi-component programs reported effective results in conduct problems, attitudes, emotional distress, and academic performance.

General Teacher Perceptions of SEL

A smaller-scale study in two states aimed to examine teachers' knowledge, perceptions, and practices related to SEL (Buchanan et al., 2009). A sample of teachers from kindergarten through eighth-grade levels was drawn from schools where the researchers already had relationships with the principals and teachers. A total of 263 teachers with a range of less than one year to more than 15 years of teaching experience completed the survey; 44.3% of teachers had less than one year to 10 years of teaching experience, with the remaining 53.8% of teachers reporting 10 to more than 15 years of experience.

The survey administered was developed as a pilot study by the authors; we incorporated several items from this survey into our instrument. Data were collected for analysis in four primary areas: SEL implementation, teacher training, consultation support, and implementation feasibility. Of the teachers surveyed, 45.5% implemented the SEL programs in their schools; a small percentage of participants stated that other educational staff implemented them (Buchanan et al., 2009). Most participants (98.9%) believed that SEL was important in life, and 96.2% agreed that SEL improves academic outcomes. In addition, 40% of teachers believed they should be responsible for the implementation, but a small percentage (14%) stated that another academic staff person should be responsible (Buchanan et al., 2009).

Researchers in Texas administered the Panorama Teacher and Staff Survey (2015) to 76 rural public school teachers to determine their perceptions of skills, knowledge, and resources relevant to implementing the Jesse Lewis Choose Love SEL curriculum for the 2020–2021 academic school year (Zolkoski et al., 2021). The researchers wanted to examine if the teachers' perceptions would predict whether the teachers would be early adopters of the curriculum. Demographic questions included gender, race/ethnicity, teaching experience, and grade level taught. Most teachers reported more than twenty years of experience (28.9%).

Four scales were implemented in the instrument to measure 1) the teachers' perceptions of their professional strengths, 2) the teachers' perceptions of school climate, 3) school resources for student support, and 4) educating all students or diversity (Zolkoski et al., 2021). In addition, one of the authors created a teacher reflection scale to assess the five SEL CASEL competencies (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and responsible decision-making). Cronbach alpha reliability scales for the SEL competency subscales ranged from .87–.95. As for the Panorama survey sections, professional strengths resulted in $\alpha=.88$, school climate in $\alpha=.83$, school resources in $\alpha=.60$, and diversity in $\alpha=.83$.

Teachers who reported confidence in their capabilities to teach diverse student groups and to teach self-management skills while working in a positive school climate were more likely to report the intention to be early adopters of the SEL curriculum (Zolkoski et al., 2021). These findings are consistent with recent research. Our instrument included similar items related to the positive

impacts of SEL on student academic and behavior development, with participants asked to rate their level of agreement with statements on a Likert scale. However, the limitations of Zolkoski et al.'s (2021) study included small sample size and a specific geographic context in rural East Texas. The researchers also relied on self-reporting of intention to adopt SEL using the district-provided curriculum without any behavioral measures of actual adoption. Our instrument explored implementation with open-ended questions at the end for participants to provide extended explanations.

Recent SEL research has indicated positive impacts on student academic and behavioral outcomes with the implementation of SEL interventions, with the consensus being that ongoing success requires ongoing development and implementation (Martinez, 2016; Payton et al., 2008). This premise is supported by data collected on teacher perspectives regarding SEL programming. Teachers believe curriculum change and school-wide initiatives are needed to create positive relationships, prepare students for life after school, and improve student academic achievements. To accomplish this, teachers require proper training, support, and resources to implement SEL practices and interventions with fidelity (Buchanan et al., 2009). With a lack of teacher confidence, knowledge, or negative attitudes toward SEL, the programs' intended outcomes may not be achieved, resulting in teacher dissatisfaction or student disengagement. Hence, more research is needed to gather and analyze educator perceptions regarding their SEL knowledge, attitudes toward SEL, the support they are receiving, the implementation of SEL, and any perceived barriers.

Educator Training

Educators knowledgeable about supportive SEL practices and attuned to their own social and emotional competencies will be better equipped to implement practices that support SEL (Assessment Work Group, 2019). In addition, students are more likely to benefit from SEL when staff receives training and the practices are embedded in everyday teaching and learning (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). However, classroom teachers typically receive little training on promoting these skills or dealing with peer conflict or social and emotional development (Reinke et al., 2011; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). As a result, teachers report limited confidence in their ability to respond to student behavioral needs and, in turn, to support students' social and emotional development.

When teachers receive training in specific evidence-based programs or strategies that affect teaching and learning in the classroom, they feel better equipped to propose and implement positive, active classroom management strategies that deter students' aggressive behaviors and promote a positive classroom learning climate (Jones & Khan, 2017). SEL programs, practices, and interventions are designed to equip students with strategies and self-awareness to navigate their changing social, emotional, and physical growth and manage their behavior accordingly. SEL programs involve how students and adults interact in society, whether in the classroom or the community. Ultimately, training should be embedded in educators' pre-service and in-service experiences, and administrative and supervisory support should be integrated in ongoing ways. Professional learning should address educators' understanding of SEL, the science of its consequences, the relationship of SEL to education, SEL standards and competencies, evidence-based practices, and the role of SEL in supporting high-quality teaching and learning while advancing equity (Assessment Work Group, 2019).

There has always been broad agreement that school curricula should include workforce and life skills as well as academic support and instruction (Durlak et al., 2011). These skills not only

serve the students' success but also serve the community, the state, and the nation. This belief, combined with the history of societal divisions, multiple forms of discrimination, and the effects of poverty, supports the argument that there is a critical need to address the social and emotional challenges that interfere with students' academic and social success. The premise that SEL positively impacts student academic and behavior development and implementation is supported by data collected on teacher perspectives regarding SEL programming (Martinez, 2016; Payton et al., 2008). Teachers believe curriculum change and school-wide initiatives that create positive relationships, prepare students for life after school, and improve student academic achievements are needed.

Common Barriers

Bridgeland et al. (2013) conducted a nationally represented survey of 605 teachers in Philadelphia, PA, from pre-kindergarten to twelfth grade. The sample of teachers included 77% women and 23% men, between 19 and 60 years old, with the most significant percentage falling in the 40–49 age category. Additionally, 86% of the teachers were White, 49% were prekindergarten to elementary school teachers, 24% were middle school teachers, and 26% were high school teachers. These educators participated in focus groups, surveys, and interviews that focused on the role and value of SEL in schools during November 2012 (Bridgeland et al., 2013). Prekindergarten and elementary teachers comprised one focus group, middle and high school teachers comprised the second group, and a mixture of all grade levels participated in a third focus group. All of the teachers had reported prior experience with teaching SEL. Overall, teachers believed a disconnect exists between school-wide SEL programming and consistent implementation across the grade levels. According to the survey responses, only 28% of the high school teachers reported having school-wide SEL programming, as opposed to 49% of elementary and middle school teachers.

Eight-one percent of all the teachers believed time was a problem, and they suggested a school-wide initiative to share resources and receive assistance in reinforcing lessons. As part of a solution, 62% of all the teachers posited that the state education standards should embed social and emotional learning skills (Bridgeland et al., 2013). Research-based findings on SEL has supported these teachers' beliefs. We collected similar demographic data from our participants to run statistical analyses on item responses according to grade level taught, ethnicity, and prior experience. We added items from more current research and theoretical models regarding the potential of SEL to support students from traditionally underserved backgrounds and those who have undergone trauma.

In terms of improving and increasing professional development for SEL, 82% of teachers reported an interest in further training, while 61% were somewhat or very interested in additional training (Bridgeland et al., 2013). Of the 55% of the teachers who reported being trained, 60% were elementary teachers, and only 47% were high school teachers. These numbers highlight the need for professional development, particularly at the upper-grade levels. As with any initiative, the better trained the teachers are, the more confident they will feel; therefore, they will be more likely to engage in recommended practices to implement the program with fidelity.

The researchers identified vital SEL accelerators to be: a) school-wide programs, b) SEL embedded in state educational standards, c) improvement of professional development, and d) engagement with parents and families (Bridgeland et al., 2013). Researchers concluded that SEL programs could lead to better instruction, relationships between educational staff and students could improve, and students could become better learners. Embedding SEL into educational

standards would also assist in addressing the need for more consistency in school-wide SEL implementations.

Elementary school teachers in North Carolina participated in a case study that explored their experiences in establishing SEL pedagogies with at-risk students. A total of 14 educators participated in qualitative interviews and a focus group. They were “asked to reflect on their understandings and ongoing experiences of SEL continued professional development and implementation of restorative practices” (Dyson et al., 2021, p. 625). The SEL training levels of teachers in this study varied; one was a trained counselor, two teachers received a certificate to train others in restorative practice techniques, and seven of the teachers attended a one-day training session, while the remaining four teachers had no training at all.

After analyzing the data, themes emerged regarding barriers to the implementation process: a) teachers having different understandings of the SEL process, b) receiving whole-school buy-in, and c) facilitating time and care (Dyson et al., 2021). Educators had no clear, unified understanding of SEL or its implementation process. This lack of unity resulted in aspects of the SEL process being identified and prioritized differently by each participant. In turn, this became a barrier to the effectiveness of the SEL program, leading to possible inappropriate implementation.

During the interviews, the principal and assistant principal expressed concern regarding the fidelity and extent of the implementation of the SEL strategies (Dyson et al., 2021). Despite the training received, teachers reported struggling with the implementation; some were feeling defeated, others were implementing the program with fidelity, and others were implementing it with no fidelity. Consistency and fidelity are essential when implementing any strategy or curriculum school-wide for maximum effectiveness. In this case, the leaders needed to evaluate the entire staff further to determine where the lack of understanding was coming from or if other underlying reasons were the cause.

Teaching SEL requires time, energy, knowledge, skills, and confidence. Educators in this study genuinely cared about the students and knew what it takes to create and witness change (Dyson et al., 2021). However, the participants in this study emphasized the need for time to receive mentoring and emotional support as a team and in small groups. The time and care they were currently receiving was happening were just at the classroom level rather than school-wide. Communication, teamwork, support, and additional training are imperative in creating successful learning environments, as evidenced in this study. When creating items in our instrument related to barriers, we included possible responses similar to those elicited in this survey: time to prepare and teach lessons, available resources, personal skepticism about SEL, prior training or negative experiences, and level of school and district support.

Central themes that have emerged from research data on educator perspectives regarding SEL interventions include: a) SEL is important in life, b) SEL improves academic outcomes, c) teachers should be responsible for implementation, and d) staff training for successful implementation is necessary for the success of SEL interventions. The studies discussed in this literature review have provided data to support the principle that SEL could benefit students academically, socially, and emotionally through the implementation of its various tenets. Not only is SEL included as a possible intervention for school and student improvement, but many of the skills, characteristics, and abilities employers and higher education institutions seek can be acquired with SEL interventions. Developing a valid and effective instrument to measure teacher perceptions of the importance of SEL in school settings, their knowledge of SEL, their implementation of SEL with students and their training on how to do this, and any potential barriers to implementation is valuable to ongoing research on the effectiveness of SEL implementation.

Design of an Instrument to Measure Teacher Perceptions

In 2010, Schultz and his colleagues realized a need to assess factors that may influence SEL program implementation. In their literature review, Schultz et al. (2010) posited that past research had identified significant differences in the quality of SEL program implementation between contexts in which implementation was done by a large community versus ones where the program developers or researchers controlled the implementation (Greenberg et al., 2005). This review resulted in a compilation of research documenting variations of SEL program implementations in individual schools and across the country. They also focused on developing a questionnaire to identify factors that impact successful SEL program implementation and to assess their design instrument's psychometric properties.

Schultz et al. (2010) developed their questionnaire around two of the five areas in Greenberg et al.'s (2005) comprehensive model on the quality of implementation of school-based programs.

The two elements they focused on were the quality of technical support and implementer readiness. They developed a design instrument that assessed teachers' perceptions of administrative support, teacher training, and teacher attitudes about the necessity for a program, program effectiveness, and which individuals are responsible for children's SEL development. The exploratory factor analysis was re-run, forcing a seven-factor solution and then again forcing a six-factor solution, to conclude with a six-factor solution. These factors were administrative support, training, competence, program effectiveness, time constraints, and academic priority.

Examining the process used to develop this questionnaire, the methods of analysis, and the reported limitations was a valuable step in our research team's process of developing a survey on teacher perceptions. Due to the predictive validity of the factors in Schultz et al.'s (2010) study, modifying questions, adapting certain aspects of a tested questionnaire, and examining the stability of teacher perceptions and attitudes could strengthen our assessment tool for teacher perceptions, training needs, barriers, and positive impacts of SEL programs.

Theoretical Framework

This study used the SEL conceptual framework developed by CASEL (2023), a model gaining increasing empirical support while becoming highly influential in SEL policy. The CASEL model has influenced SEL policies in all 50 U.S. states and internationally (Dusenbury et al., 2019; Eklund et al., 2018). In this framework, SEL comprises five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and decision-making. Self-awareness is the ability to understand one's emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts. Self-management of one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors includes managing stress and being motivated to accomplish personal and collective goals effectively. Social awareness is the ability to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts. This includes the demonstration of social norms for behavior across family, school, and community contexts. Relationship skills help establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and effectively communicate and collaborate with diverse individuals and groups. Responsible decision-making entails making caring, constructive, and safe choices about personal behavior and social interactions.

This framework uses a systemic approach that emphasizes the importance of establishing equitable learning environments and coordinating these five key practices across classrooms, schools, families, and communities to enhance all students' social, emotional, and academic learning. Jagers et al. (2019) extended this model by applying an equity lens. They recommended a "transformative SEL" to articulate the potential of SEL better to mitigate the educational, social,

and economic inequities derived from racialized cultural oppression in the United States and globally.

Transformative SEL includes examining biases and developing culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies that promote inclusive learning environments for children, youth, and adults from diverse backgrounds (Hamedani & Darling-Hammond, 2015; Jagers et al., 2019).

Toward this end, transformative SEL is aimed at educational equity—fostering more equitable learning environments and producing equitable outcomes for children and young people furthest from opportunity. This educational equity implies that every student has what they need when they need it, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, family background, or family income (Jagers et al., 2019, p. 163).

Immordino-Yang et al. (2019) further highlighted the importance of cultural well-being and delineated the research demonstrating how cultural learning and social emotional experiences resulting from human interactions and cognitions influence health, brain development, and learning.

We systematically applied concept mapping to review relevant studies (Huck & Zhang, 2021), and survey design and item construction were guided by the conceptual map shown in Figure 1. The first section of the questionnaire, after demographic data items, was developed to elicit teacher perceptions of the benefits of SEL in promoting the five CASEL (2023) core competencies, their opinions about the ability of culturally responsive SEL to serve young people exposed to trauma, and their beliefs in SEL as an essential part of their state standards. We also constructed items regarding school personnel responsible for implementation. In the following section, we addressed SEL implementation to determine whether programming and curricula were provided on a school-wide basis, if teachers were using SEL practices in their classrooms and with what level of frequency, and where they had received preparation (pre-service, in-service, or both). We asked about the types of SEL assessments their school used and if they would be interested in further training to enhance their practice. We also asked teachers if they believed their school was placing too little emphasis on goals related to the CASEL core competencies. Finally, we addressed potential barriers, including factors cited in numerous previous studies, such as lack of time, resources, or school-wide level of support. We included two open-ended questions for respondents to elaborate on challenges they had faced and whether they were able to overcome them, and then their recommendations for training future teachers.

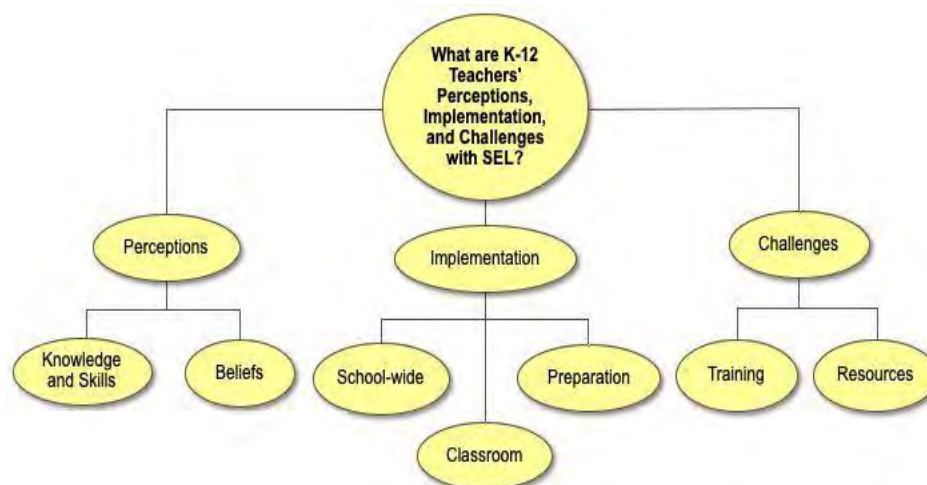


Figure 1. Concept Map for Questionnaire Design

Research Methods

Survey research designs quantitative research procedures in which investigators administer a survey or questionnaire to a sample to describe the population's attitudes, opinions, behaviors, or characteristics (Colton & Colvert, 2007). An instrument with straightforward, unambiguous questions and response options is essential to reduce measurement error. In addition, survey authors need to construct items sensitive to participants' gender, class, and cultural needs (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). For our study, the research design included attention to item writing, questionnaire delivery methods, response data collection and analysis, and improvement of survey items and the questionnaire. This pilot study was implemented with a convenience sample of 34 participants who were representative of the target population for the more extensive study. They were contacted with an email link from the study authors, and feedback was received on clarity, impartiality, formatting, and length of time to complete the instrument. Pilot study participants were directed to take notes as they completed the survey and to provide their feedback via email. We specifically contacted a target population of educators across three counties in southwest Florida with a range of teaching experience, subject area expertise, and educational background.

Fink (2013) recommended that all surveys be pilot tested before launching a research project to ensure methodological rigor, content, and face validity. A pilot study does not guarantee success in the main study but increases its likelihood. It can provide valuable insights to researchers by identifying potential practical problems in the research procedure (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001), and this was the case for this pilot study. For online administration, we used Qualtrics, a web-based survey platform with subscription accounts provided by our institution. We collaborated on the instrument and exported data into IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis. The qualitative data collected through open-ended questions were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Instrument Design

The instrument was constructed by a team including two K–12 education experts, each with over twenty years of experience working with students from traditionally marginalized populations; a content expert whose dissertation focused on SEL and who had expertise in K–12 school counseling; and a professor of research design, assessment, and evaluation. The items included in the instrument were all aligned with previous research, prior surveys on SEL, and new developments in the field, such as the relationship between SEL and reducing the impact of childhood trauma. The survey questionnaire consisted of four sections to collect specific data on variables about teacher demographics, perceptions of SEL, and implementation practices (Table 1).

Participant demographics in Section I included items about the respondents' age, gender, educational background, years of professional teaching experience, and subject area certification. Section II comprised Likert-scale items measuring perceptions of SEL, attitudes toward the need to teach SEL in school, and the benefits of SEL programs for students. This section also included two ranking scales to indicate responsibility for teaching SEL by grade level and job title. In Section III, multiple-choice items were used to measure teacher preparation, level of implementation, interest in future training, and any barriers. Finally, in Section IV, respondents were invited to share their experiences with SEL and provide recommendations for preparing future teachers.

Table 1

The Structure of the Questionnaire Design

Section	Topic	Goals	Number of Items	Format	Sample Item
I	Demographics	Background and contextual information	10	Multiple choice	Which grade level are you currently teaching?
II	Perceptions about SEL	School need	2	4 pt. Likert-scale	SEL should be included in state education standards.
		Benefits	6	4 pt. Likert-scale	Culturally responsive SEL programs create opportunities for teachers to recognize and serve young people exposed to trauma.
		Responsibility	2	Ranking scale	Teaching social and emotional learning skills should be the primary responsibility of which staff members?
III	Implementation of SEL	Preparation	5	Multiple choice	Have you received training on how to teach SEL skills to students?
		Level of implementation	2	Multiple choice	How often do you intentionally incorporate SEL?
		Interest in training	1	Multiple choice	How interested are you in receiving further training on the best practices for teaching SEL to students?
		Potential barriers	1	Ranking scale	Which issues are a barrier to implementing SEL?
IV		Elicit additional information	2	Open-ended	What are your suggestions to enhance SEL knowledge and skills for future teachers?

The questionnaire was distributed online via an anonymous link to 56 individuals employed in three school districts in southwest Florida between November 22 and December 2, 2021; 39 surveys were started, and 34 completed surveys were submitted for a response rate of 60.7%.

Pilot Study Results

Demographics

The respondents were 25 females, eight males, and one non-binary person. Respondents' ages were reported as: 20–29 (4); 30–39 (9); 40–49 (8); and 50 or older (13). Years of teaching experience ranged from less than one year (7) to 16 or more years (9). Teacher certification included elementary education (8), ESOL/world language (6), English (4), and other areas, including science, mathematics, social studies, reading, music education, and journalism. The majority of respondents had obtained their professional credentialing at a state university (41%),

with 26% attending private college or university, 21% following an alternative route to certification, and 12% educated at a university outside of the United States. Respondents represented PK/elementary, middle school, and high school levels. Fourteen respondents worked in a Title I school, 15 did not, three were uncertain of their school status, and two skipped this question. When asked to self-rate their knowledge and understanding of SEL on a scale of 1–5, the mean rating was 3.18. Respondent ratings reported were: 1: none (3); 2: low (5); 3: moderate (13); 4: high (9); and 5: very high: (4).

Teacher Perceptions of SEL

In response to our first research question, “What are K12 teachers’ perceptions of SEL?,” respondents overwhelmingly indicated their belief in the efficacy of SEL and its potential to improve academic, social, and emotional outcomes for students. When asked to select areas in which a larger focus on SEL would have a major benefit, the mean response was highest for two options, “improving relationships between teachers and students” (mean 3.56, SD .50) and “students becoming good citizens as adults” (mean 3.55, SD .56). These were the only options that received all *agree* or *strongly agree* responses from teachers of all grade levels. They also indicated that schools should be promoting SEL skills. Thirty-three participants (97%) agreed or strongly agreed that it is important for schools to promote the development of SEL skills as part of students’ in-school experience, with an average rating of 3.73 and a standard deviation of .45.

Additionally, thirty-two participants (94%) agreed or strongly agreed that culturally responsive SEL programs can create opportunities for teachers to recognize and serve young people exposed to trauma, with an average rating of 3.55 and a standard deviation of .56. Thirty participants (88%) agreed or strongly agreed that the development of SEL skills should be explicitly stated in their state’s educational standards, with an average rating of 3.41 and standard deviation of .69.

In ranking the options for school personnel who should be responsible for teaching SEL, teachers received the highest ranking from 29 respondents, followed by school counselors, school social workers, and then, finally, physical education/health teachers. In terms of grade level, the highest percentage of responses indicated elementary school (mean 3.76, SD .42), followed by middle school (mean 3.74, SD .50), preschool (mean 3.65, SD .54), and high school (mean 3.65, SD .59).

Teacher Implementation

When we asked respondents to report to what extent they were implementing SEL, teachers with sixteen or more years of experience reported more frequent implementation (*daily* or *frequently* for eight out of nine respondents). From the 32 responses received, eleven (34%) selected *occasionally* (once a week); ten (31%) selected *frequently* (2–3 times a week); nine (28%) selected *daily*, and two (6%) selected *never* for their implementation frequency. The next question probed school-wide implementation: “To what extent is teaching students social and emotional skills happening in your school?” Thirteen (38%) respondents answered that it was taught in some teachers’ curricula but not in others; twelve (35%) reported they were not sure; six (18%) indicated that it was not really taught in their school; and only three (9%) stated that it was happening on a programmatic basis school-wide.

When asked how confident they felt about their ability to provide instruction on SEL on a scale of 0 to 100, the mean response was 63.76. Respondents rated their comfort with providing instruction on SEL to their students with a mean response of 68.00. Responses varied widely on the item about the types of SEL assessments used by their schools, with the highest number of

responses for “not sure” (24%) and “my school does not use SEL assessments” (20%), followed by formative assessments (16%) and report cards (12%). Thirty out of 33 participants (91%) agreed or strongly agreed that they would be interested in receiving more training on SEL. The two participants who were “not at all interested” did not work in Title 1 schools.

Educator Training

Our third research question explored the areas in which participants felt they should have received more training in teacher preparation programs. Eleven respondents reported they had received their SEL training through in-service professional development rather than in a pre-service degree program; eight had received training both pre-service and in-service, seven had not received any training, five had received training pre-service, and three were not sure if they had received training. In terms of satisfaction with the amount of coverage SEL had received in teachers’ pre-service and in-service training, *somewhat satisfied* was the most frequently reported level for both training types (12 respondents for each, 40%).

When asked to recall their preparation for SEL in a pre-service teacher education program and provide suggestions to enhance SEL knowledge and skills for future teachers, 10 out of 19 respondents (53%) to this open-ended question could not recall any preparation, and one mentioned that this “was not a hot topic” when they were in school. Recommendations were made for in-service activities, such as additional time spent on the importance of SEL and working with diverse students. Others mentioned that professional development should be more hands-on with continued training throughout the year, small group discussions, and coaching “*to make sure we are doing it right.*”

Common Barriers

When asked to rank barriers to SEL implementation, the primary options selected were time available to prep for teaching lessons (32%); the current level of training regarding SEL (26%); time available to teach lessons (16%); and lack of school or district support (16%). The qualitative data collected through open-ended questions were analyzed using thematic analysis, with 16 of 34 participants (47%) providing relevant feedback related to their training for SEL, any obstacles they had faced, and recommendations for teacher preparation programs or district professional development offerings. When asked to think of a challenge they had experienced implementing SEL practices, participants responded that they lacked time and preparation. One respondent described how she had overcome the challenge of time: “*Time available to teach the particular subject matter was an issue; however, due to the importance, breaking it up over two class periods was a better option than omitting it all together.*” Another cited lack of teacher preparation: “*The in-service was not thorough enough, and teachers feel uncomfortable with much of the material and presenting it to students.*” The barriers participants reported in the open-ended questions repeated and elaborated on the same factors they had ranked in previous survey items.

Feedback on Instrument

Participants were also asked to provide constructive feedback on the structure and content of the instrument. Based on our analysis of participant feedback, data collected in Qualtrics, and an expert focus group, we added more options to a few items in the demographic section, we changed the format of two ranking scale items to Likert-scale or multi-select, and we revised the wording on both open-ended questions to reduce bias. For example, several teachers were unfamiliar with

the term “pre-service,” and many had not completed teacher preparation programs. Therefore, we reworded items accordingly.

We also combined three items related to the benefits of SEL into one matrix. Several respondents indicated technical difficulty with the ranking scale items. Adjusting these items minimized the time spent on the questionnaire and any user frustration from technical difficulty with clicking and dragging items into order. One item related to barriers to SEL implementation was modified from a long-ranking scale to a multi-select option to be more inclusive, allowing respondents to select alternatives without judging their importance in relation to each other. We added one additional line of directions to Section II as suggested by respondents.

Cronbach’s Alpha was calculated for the Likert-scale items in Section II at .80, thus satisfying the instrument’s reliability in terms of internal consistency (Table 2). According to experts, alpha scores in the .8–<.9 range are good (Colton & Covert, 2007). The average time to completion was 11 minutes, with a minimum time of four minutes and a maximum of 25 minutes. Pilot study participants were also asked to take notes; several reported taking longer to complete this task. We were satisfied with the completion time, a figure shown in previous studies of web-based surveys to correlate to a higher completion rate (Liu & Wronski, 2018). We have summarized some of our critical revisions to the instrument in Table 2.

Table 2

Preliminary Findings, Original Questions, and Revised Questions

Section	Topic	Goals	Original Item	Revised Item
I	Demographics	Background and contextual information	Gender, identify as:	Added “prefer not to disclose” option after male, female, non-binary.
II	Perceptions about SEL	Benefits	It is more important to focus on academic learning than SEL.	These three items were combined into one 4-pt. Likert scale matrix.
			It is important for schools to promote development of SEL skills as part of students’ in-school experience.	
			Teachers should model and incorporate SEL throughout the day.	
III	Implementation of SEL	Preparation	Please check the level of SEL skills training you have received.	Clarification was added for the term “pre-service” to include “college teacher preparation programs.”
		Level of implementation	How satisfied are you with the amount of coverage SEL received?	An additional scale option “N/A” was added for those who did not receive preparation in either of the two choices offered.
		Potential barriers	Which issues are a barrier to implementing SEL?	Format changed from ranking to multi-select option

IV		Elicit additional information	Recall your preparation for SEL in your pre-service teacher education program.	The question was reworded to avoid bias. We added, “or other training/professional development.”
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Discussion

It is essential to measure teacher perceptions about SEL and receive feedback for the development of both in-service teachers and our future teachers in pre-service programs. Our study aimed to investigate teachers’ perceptions of SEL, their experience with implementation, and their preparation. We also sought information about common barriers that could prevent teachers from using SEL with their students. The pilot study helped us to improve our survey instrument design before collecting data from a large sample.

We used multiple approaches to help validate the survey instrument, including sampling educators at different grade levels with varying levels of preparation, teaching experience, and certification in various content areas. They provided feedback to address potential issues with logic and flow, comprehension, length, and the technical quality of the instrument. After collecting and analyzing data, our focus group discussions addressed discrepancies in responses, participant feedback, and the relationship between our items and instruments in our literature review studies. They also helped us align each item to one of our research questions concisely and precisely. We ran basic statistical analyses in SPSS and conducted descriptive analyses reviewing frequencies, means, and standard deviations to help improve item construction.

Our findings supported results from previous researchers who asserted that teachers require proper training and support to implement SEL practices (Martinez, 2016; Payton et al., 2008). While the teachers in our study had high agreement with statements that SEL positively impacts two of the five CASEL key competencies, relationship skills and responsible decision-making, only 28% were implementing SEL daily, and 91% indicated they would like more training. Time constraint was the most commonly highlighted barrier, a finding consistent with results from studies by Bridgeland et al. (2013) and Dyson et al. (2021). Any successful SEL initiative will require a shared understanding of SEL, evidence-based resources, school-wide support, and ongoing training. Twenty-two study participants (64.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that students’ lack of interest in learning is a problem in their school, a finding we found concerning yet perhaps related to the post-pandemic situation with social and emotional, financial, and well-being repercussions for many students and families. This finding reinforces Immordino-Yang et al.’s (2019) call for SEL-based interactions and cognitions to influence health, brain development, and learning.

Limitations and Further Research

The study had several limitations that may affect its generalizability. First, the sample was relatively small. Second, this pilot study was conducted using a convenience sample of educators in one geographic region of Florida. More research is needed with a larger sample to validate the instrument. Another limitation inherent to survey studies is the self-selected and self-reported nature of surveys, in which respondents can be influenced by social desirability to over report responses that make them look good (Colton & Covert, 2007) rather than what they do or believe. To thoroughly verify teachers’ reported practices with SEL, a mixed-methods approach may be needed to collect more data from classroom observations, interviews, or artifacts. Future research

is needed to develop innovative programs, interventions, and training and to investigate their effects on PK–12 teachers’ beliefs, implementation, and challenges with SEL.

Conclusions and Implications

The significance of SEL continues to grow in the context of policy debates concerning school improvement and individual student achievement. As a result of recent efforts to employ distance education and hybrid learning modalities during the COVID-19 pandemic, limited interactions with students and families have highlighted the importance of integrating SEL concepts into daily instruction. While incorporating an SEL perspective is necessary to provide all students with an equitable, high-quality education, it is particularly critical to closing the opportunity gap and addressing the needs of traditionally underserved populations of students of color and low-income students (Hamedani & Darling-Hammond, 2015).

As van Teijlingen and Hundley (2001) noted, well-designed and well-conducted pilot studies can inform others about the best research process and likely outcomes. Therefore, investigators should be encouraged to report their pilot studies in detail to establish more substantial validity and reliability of the research study. More research is needed to assess how to best support teachers in refining their practices with SEL, given the respondents’ beliefs that SEL improves school and classroom environments and helps students develop the core competencies of the CASEL model. Respondents also agreed that SEL should be embedded in their state standards. However, when asked how confident and comfortable they felt about their ability to provide instruction on SEL on a scale of 0 to 100, the mean responses were 63.76 and 68.00. These findings indicate that school districts and teacher education programs must provide ongoing professional development if educators desire or are expected to infuse SEL into their classroom teaching and school environments. We have already collected data from over 370 teachers using our revised survey instrument and plan to share our results on a state and national scale. Given the current political climate in Florida, which has legislators conflating SEL with “woke ideology” and banning books with any evidence of SEL, the voices and experiences of teachers in the field are most urgently needed to inform research and policy.

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