Middle School Teachers' Perceptions of Social Emotional Learning and Its Impact on Student

Behavior

Doctoral Capstone Project

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education (EdD)

Stefan Muller

Penn West University of Pennsylvania

July 2024

PennWest University
School of Graduate Studies and Research
Department of Education

We hereby approve the capstone of

Stefan Muller

Candidate for the Degree of Doctor of Education

7/16/24	*[signature]*
	Dr. Todd Keruskin
	Professor Department of
	Educational Administration and Leadership
	Doctoral Capstone Faculty Committee Chair
7/16/2024	*[signature]*
	Dr. Marjorie Diègue
	Assistant Principal – Penndale Middle School
	North Penn School District
	Doctoral Capstone External Committee Member

Acknowledgement

This journey did not come without its share of trials and tribulations, but I certainly would not have been able to complete this endeavor without the encouragement, support and love from so many others. I am deeply grateful to the following individuals whose inspiration have been invaluable throughout this journey:

First and foremost, I extend my deepest appreciation to my wife, Haylee, for her endless patience, steadfast support, and unwavering belief in me. Her love has been my rock, and her understanding has sustained me through the challenges of this venture.

To my children, Chase, Viva, Saige, and Marigot, your presence and love have constantly reminded me of what truly matters in life. Your joy and laughter have brought light to even the darkest moments of my doctoral pursuit. Thank you for inspiring me to persevere and for being my greatest motivation.

I am indebted to my committee chair, Dr. Keruskin, for his guidance, continuous feedback, and constant encouragement throughout this research project. His insights and expertise have been instrumental in shaping this dissertation.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my external committee member, Dr. Diègue, for her friendship, support, and valuable contributions to my academic and personal growth. Her dedication to my success has been truly inspiring.

I want to acknowledge TMB for the persistent push towards growth and excellence. Your mentorship and belief in my abilities have been instrumental in shaping my academic path.

I would be remiss if I didn't thank my Penndale Team for supporting this journey by completing surveys and facilitating SEL lessons throughout the school year. There are certainly more useful ways to utilize the fleeting moments that we have, but you selflessly made time to help a colleague.

To all of you – including those who have been a part of my professional journey at Upper Moreland, Downingtown, North Penn, and Knapp – I offer my deepest thanks. Your support has been the cornerstone of my growth as an educator, and I am profoundly grateful for each of you.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Abstract

With an ever-increasing mental health concerns and social-emotional needs of adolescents, it is more important than ever for schools to go beyond academics, and therefore, it is imperative to provide a universal social-emotional curriculum for students. Despite limited resources and the logistical challenges of scheduling additional content during the academic day, school districts must prioritize social-emotional learning in the same manner as core content as ELA and mathematics. Using a mixed-methods approach, this research study honed in on middle school teachers' perception of SEL and its impact on student behavior. Qualitative data was collected from self-reflection pre- and post-surveys so that the researcher could better comprehend the depth of teacher's understanding of SEL and its purpose. Quantitative data was gathered from the surveys to show to identify how effective staff felt an SEL curriculum is for students and to what degree they would be willing to implement an SEL curriculum during the instructional day. Additionally, student behavioral data, in the form of state reportable offenses, was collected before and after the implementation of the *School-Connect* SEL curriculum and then analyzed and compared to see if there was a causal relationship. Although there was no clear correlation between the SEL curriculum and a decrease in student behavior, there was, however, a positive change in teacher perception of SEL. At the inception of the SEL, general optimism existed as staff expressed a willingness to facilitate SEL lessons and saw value in the curriculum. The post-survey results saw that optimism evolve into enthusiasm to continue with the *School-Connect* SEL platform, as staff perceived SEL to be effective and were far more willing to facilitate the social-emotional learning lessons with their students. However, the research did not come without limitations, and therefore, further studies are recommended to better understand the impact of SEL on student behavior, and ultimately, student achievement.

CHAPTER I

Introduction

This study examines the purpose and potential impact that social emotional learning

(SEL) has on student behavior and identifies the perceptions that teachers have of an SEL

framework within the middle school level. Middle school students face many inherent challenges

beyond transitioning from elementary school which include physical changes due to varying

hormonal levels, finding a sense of belonging, navigating the social pressures from peers, and

preparing for a transition to high school, to name a few.

Due to the waning mental health of our students and the increased need for therapeutic

services both in and out of our schools, it is more critical than ever to provide proactive,

intentional opportunities for students to develop their social and emotional skills during the

instructional day. No longer can we simply encourage students to seek outside services and

support; rather, we need to be intentional about embedding SEL curriculum as a proactive, Tier 1

support into the school day for students. It is important to understand the perception of

teachers before and after SEL implementation to discover what factors are conducive to a

successful, systemic framework for social emotional learning for our students.

Schools no longer are tasked with educating students of reading, writing and arithmetic

skills. Rather, educational communities have been charged with shaping the whole child by

teaching social and emotional skills such as self-awareness, positive decision-making, and

appropriately handling social interactions with peers and adults. Instead of expecting students

already possess the necessary skills to be successful learners and productive members of society,

schools have a unique opportunity to proactively model dialogue concerning one's feelings and

emotions that might otherwise be suppressed by students.

The incorporation of a social emotional curriculum in schools is vital for the well-rounded development of students, leading to improved academic outcomes, better mental health, and the cultivation of skills that will serve them well throughout school-based experiences. The skills learned through SEL are not just valuable in school but are also applicable throughout life. These skills can improve relationships, job performance, and overall well-being.

Background

The North Penn School District, located in Lansdale, Pennsylvania, is one of the largest school districts in the state, serving over 12,700 students and covering about 42 square miles. Situated 25 miles north of Philadelphia, the suburban district employs over 1,300 employees. The North Penn School District is a diverse school district with more than 80 languages spoken by its families, a non-white population eclipsing 50%, and just over 30% of its students enrolled in the free and reduced lunch program. The district has 13 elementary schools, three middle schools, and one high school that graduates about 1,000 students each school year.

The grade level structure of North Penn is unique and noteworthy given the focus of the Capstone being at the middle school level. The elementary schools in the district span grades kindergarten through 6th grade, whereas the middle schools house students in 7th through 9th grades. The North Penn School District stands out as the last remaining school district in Montgomery and Bucks counties to retain their 9th grade students within its middle school walls.

Currently the researcher is the principal of Penndale Middle School, the largest of the three middle schools within the North Penn School District with a student enrollment of 1,250 students. As an administrator for ten years, the researcher's experiences have spanned across all three levels, having served as a high school assistant principal, an elementary school principal, and now in their current role as the principal of a middle school. The researcher has seen SEL work well at the elementary level and believes that, now more than ever, students

need to continue having open dialogue about self-management, responsible decision-making, and social awareness.

Capstone Focus

The purpose of the action research is to understand the perceptions that middle school teachers have, as well as their understanding, of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) prior to fully implementing an SEL curriculum in the classroom setting, implement SEL, and then see if it changed perception and/or had an impact on student behavior. During the research study, a mixed-methods approach will be used to extrapolate quantitative and qualitative data to see if there is a correlation between SEL and state reportable discipline data.

Perceptual data will be obtained from teachers using a survey prior to SEL implementation and then following SEL implementation. This qualitative feedback will provide the researcher with information related to teachers' perceptions of SEL and their belief, or not, in its impact on student behavior and decision-making. Additionally, student behavioral data will provide a before and after snapshot of the SEL curriculum in the classroom and whether student discipline data increased, decreased, or remained stagnant after implementation. The disciplinary data will be that which are 'state reportable' offenses, most notably behaviors that lead to suspension, and thus, must be reported to the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE). More specifically, the discipline data from the 2022-23 school year and the first semester of the 2023-24 school year will be compared with data from the second semester of the 2023-24 school year after implementation of the SEL curriculum.

The districtwide SEL Core Team spent countless hours sifting through several different SEL programs. After researching various SEL curricula and site visits to other schools implementing an SEL program, the selected SEL platform was *School-Connect*. This program is rooted in the CASEL framework and offers lessons designed for students at the secondary level.

Although teachers will utilize a scope and sequence curated by the Core Team, the plethora of resources within the *School-Connect* program will allow for some teacher autonomy beyond the primary lesson.

Research Questions

The following research questions will be used in this study:

1. How do teachers perceive the effectiveness of SEL and its impact on student behavior?

2. Does the implementation of a specific, research-based SEL curriculum have a positive impact on student behavior?

3. How does the implementation of a research-based SEL curriculum influence staff perceptions on student behavior in their classroom?

Expected Outcomes

The expected outcome of this research study is to understand the perception of middle school teachers regarding the efficacy of SEL, and how that perception changed after seeing an SEL curriculum being implemented. Also, student behavior data will let the researcher determine if SEL impacted student behaviors. If the data shows a decline in state reportable behavioral referrals and/or increased teacher belief in SEL, the North Penn School District is far more likely to endorse the *School-Connect* program and the SEL efforts of the middle schools within the district.

Fiscal Implications

There is a financial commitment associated with the *School-Connect* platform; however, the price is significantly lower than some other comparable products that were researched. The total cost for the annual school license is $3000 which included all lessons, ancillary resources, and staff training. All costs were covered through the respective site-based building budget, and

if the program is successful, there would be no additional costs beyond the annual license and

time spent on creating internal professional development.

Summary

Chapter I introduces the importance of social emotional learning for the betterment of

students and their mental health and lays out a potential path for a positive correlation between

the implementation of an SEL program and decreased negative student behaviors. In Chapter II,

peer reviewed journals will set the stage for the Capstone research study by providing the

history of character education in the public school system. The literature review also includes

numerous studies that show the need for continued research in social emotional learning.

CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

The Purpose of Social Emotional Learning and Character Education

Social emotional learning is of paramount importance for students in schools because it equips them with essential life skills beyond academic knowledge. SEL lessons, especially when facilitated by educators, foster emotional intelligence, empathy, self-awareness, and effective communication, enabling students to navigate complex social interactions and build meaningful relationships. It enhances their ability to manage stress, make responsible decisions, and set and achieve goals, contributing to their overall well-being and mental health. Moreover, SEL can help in promoting a positive and inclusive school environment, potentially reducing student disciplinary infractions, incidences of bullying, and fostering a sense of belonging. By cultivating these skills, students are better prepared for success in both their academic pursuits and future endeavors, supporting their growth as emotionally resilient and empathetic individuals capable of thriving in an interconnected world.

There is a heightened demand for preventative programs and protective elements in schools, especially for schools in low-income communities, where students often face stressors linked to socioeconomic challenges and potential childhood trauma. These include the presence of caring adult role models to ensure success in academic and social aspects of life. Many schools recognize the need to help students deal with trauma by prioritizing their social, emotional growth and character development (MacDonnell et al., 2021, p. 2). In fact, according to the CDC, one in six children under the age of eight years old have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder, and schools are in a unique position to address student needs because of their accessibility to adolescents (Perryman et al., 2020, p. 113). These proactive initiatives

come in various forms, with the most widely researched and supported approach being an explicitly taught social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum within the classroom.

Most social-emotional learning curricula are founded on the *Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning's* (CASEL) five basic competencies of self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, social awareness, and relationship skills. According to the CASEL website:

> Social and emotional learning (SEL) is an integral part of education and human development. SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. (CASEL, 2023, para. 1)

The Interactive CASEL Wheel shows the five basic competencies - self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, social awareness, and relationship skills – and their interconnectivity to the classroom, schools, families, and the community. An SEL curriculum alone does not guarantee student success. Rather, an ideal scenario exists when home, school, and community partnerships exist, working together to promote healthy educational communities. Below, Figure 1 shows the interconnectivity of the five SEL core competencies and the classroom, the school, the family, and the community.

Figure 1

Interactive CASEL Wheel
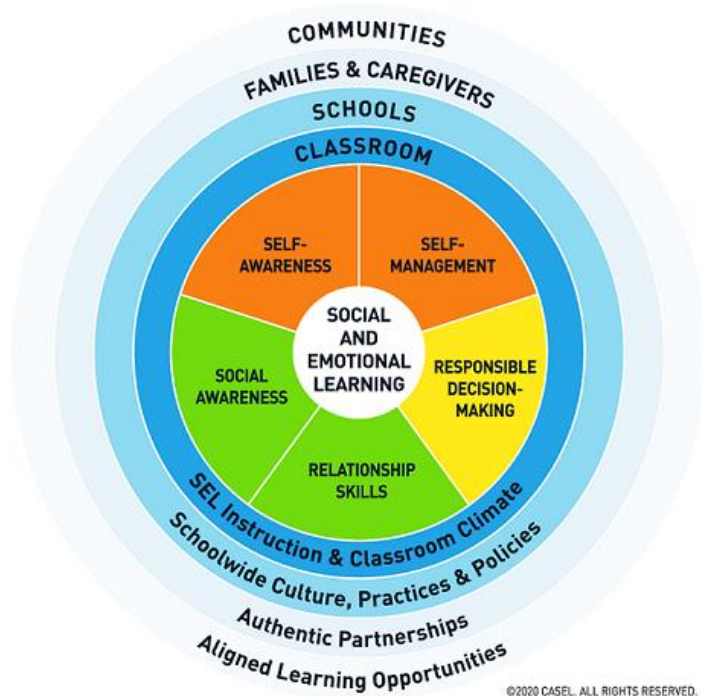
 Note. This figure shows the five SEL competencies and the nexus between classrooms, schools,

families, and the community (CASEL, 2023, https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/).

        An essential component to a positive school environment revolves around the

interactions between students and their teachers. Research shows the profound influence of

positive student-teacher relationships on various aspects of students' lives, including their

behavior, attitudes, and attendance. When students experience a sense of connection to their

school and develop positive relationships with both their peers and staff, it enhances their

motivation and engagement in academic pursuits. Furthermore, students who perceive

themselves as having strong, close relationships with their teachers tend to exhibit a heightened

sense of intentional goal setting and emphasizes the far-reaching impact of these connections in

the educational environment (MacDonnell et al., 2021, pp. 3-4).

The CASEL wheel, as shown in Figure 1, outlines the competencies as a continuum. The continuum is represented by orange, yellow, and green coloring. The entry point for social emotional lessons begins with the basics of self-awareness and self-management, and CASEL argues that it is necessary for students to first be aware of themselves and who they are before developing higher-level social emotional skills such as responsible decision-making (yellow), relationship skills, and social awareness (green). Over time, through consistent reinforcement and feedback, adolescents begin to identify how their choices impact outcomes for the peers and adults in which they interact (CASEL, 2023).

When SEL curricula are explicitly taught in educational environments, student gains are typically reported in academic achievement due to improved behaviors. Conversely, what is more glaring, is that the absence of SEL programs in schools contributes to a negative trend in outcomes for students, including more behavioral referrals, lower academic achievement, and even higher dropout rates. The research points to SEL as not only a proactive student measure, but also a protective safety net for students, especially those from lower socioeconomic settings (Eklund et al., 2018, p. 317).

Although SEL and character education programs have existed in schools for decades, the pandemic has fast tracked the conversation regarding students' mental health needs which is now front and center in education circles. Adolescents found themselves engaging far less with their peers due to social restrictions. The COVID-19 pandemic's inherent effects led to feelings of isolation, limiting the necessary social interactions among children as they develop their social and emotional competence.

> *Emotional competence* refers to two broad skills: the ability to understand, express, and
> regulate one's own emotions, and the ability to understand others' emotions. *Social*
> *competence* refers to the ability to interact pro-socially and effectively with others.

Prosocial behaviors benefit others and promote harmonious relationships, in contrast to

antisocial behaviors that harm others and disrupt social groups. (Bergin et al., 2023, p.

48)

Beyond academic achievement and reduction in behaviors, explicitly teaching the five

core CASEL competencies has benefits for students beyond the classroom. Developing

interpersonal skills has a benefit as young students become teenagers and then later adults in

such realms as college, and most importantly in their career endeavors. Employers in nearly all

career fields are consistently seeking out individuals who demonstrate the ability to resolve

conflict, manage their emotions appropriately, and display empathy for others. When these

skills are modeled by adults and explicitly taught to students in the academic setting during

adolescence, more productive citizens enter the work force. More socially and emotionally

competent adults leads to a stronger work force, and thus, leads to positive economic outcomes

for society (Bergin et al., 2023).

Beyond the student gains that an SEL framework might bring, there are benefits for the

adults in the educational environment who are delivering the SEL lessons as well. As educators

engage in SEL lessons, and more importantly, conversations with students that build deeper

relationships among teacher and student, research shows that more positive outcomes occur

for the adults, indirectly. These emboldened relationships typically lead to more prosocial

interactions amongst the students as they make better choices, manage their emotions more

effectively, and further engage academically in the classroom. In turn, this circle of positivity

increases teachers' feelings of value and self-worth and can lead to less teacher burnout

(Schonert-Reichl, 2019, p. 225).

Many advocates of social-emotional learning argue that SEL programs in schools are a

matter of public health more than augmenting an individual community's values. This notion is

supported by several arguments, most notably being that schools house a captive audience of

impressionable adolescents systemically for much of their formative years. In many cases, these

adolescents spend more awake hours in the school system than they do in their own homes,

providing plenty of time to introduce students to positive decision making and emotional

regulation. Most importantly, schools have the unique opportunity to present SEL interventions

at the universal level, providing all students with the same core concepts to support positive

decisions that promote and sustain the welfare and public health of all individuals (Greenberg et

al., 2017, p. 14).

In many cases, societal interventions that address measures of public health are often

extremely expensive and are inherently reactive in nature. SEL programs in schools, when

universally applied, proactively benefit all and are relatively inexpensive. Consider issues with

addiction and the war on drugs in America. For decades this has been a losing battle with a high

price tag. Most interventions that target drug addiction and alcoholism are reactive to the needs

of the addict, and rarely proactive as a preventative measure. When SEL programs are applied to

school curricula, a substantial portion of society's most impressionable members are inundated

with coping strategies and healthy outlets for their stressors (Greenberg et al., 2017, p. 18).

In the medical world, this is known as the 'prevention paradox,' which argues that it is

more important to focus on the larger population to prevent issues, rather than simply focusing

on a smaller, at-risk population. Using this example, a better public health strategy to mitigate

lung cancer is an advertisement campaign that targets all members of society to quit smoking or

to never start, rather than focusing efforts simply on smokers who are admitted as patients with

adverse health concerns due to smoking. This same paradigm should be applied to our schools

within our American education system to prevent young people from exploring risky behaviors

(Greenberg et al., 2017, pp. 20-21).

In tandem with the promotion of mental well-being, the acquisition of emotional

wellness skills empowers students to not only acknowledge but also comprehend and regulate

their emotions. The cultivation of emotional intelligence assumes a pivotal position in fostering

positive connections with others, as it aids in conflict resolution and developing empathy.

Through the development of these essential skills, students can enhance their ability to

communicate, establish resilient support systems, and foster a positive social environment.

Moreover, these competencies provide students with invaluable tools for effectively managing

stress, anxiety, and various mental health challenges, thereby helping students navigate the

intricate landscape of academic and personal life with greater resilience and efficacy (Whalen &

Moore, 2023).

History of Social Emotional Learning in Schools

Character education is not new to education circles, and in fact, the term was coined in

the early part of the 20th century and debated by many on how character education should, or

should not be, introduced in American schools. In the 1920's, some believed that students

should recite mantras in various forms – pledges, school codes, and slogans – while others felt

that schools should focus on building character throughout daily, relevant occurrences during

the school day. In its infancy, however, there was little discussion surrounding character

education as a standalone curriculum weaved into the instructional aspect of schooling (Milson,

2000, p. 89).

American philosopher and educator, John Dewey, strongly argued that character

education and the teaching of 'morals' should be indirectly taught through various social

situations and group tasks while learning in school. His push for teaching morals in schools

caught on in society, however, the definition of morality varied among many different groups in

society. Although more than two-hundred character education programs existed in American

schools, these programs were nothing more than theories on how to improve one's morals,

character, and/or values. With a common belief in teaching these value systems in schools,

Columbia University spent five years researching and studying the many character education

programs in schools nationwide in what became known as the "Character Education Inquiry".

The report from Columbia University concluded that character education programs were

ineffective, and as a result American society began to distance itself from specifically addressing

character education in schools.

Decades later, in the 1960's and 1970's, after little to no movement in the character

education realm, there was a societal push for other approaches in education. As the United

States was experiencing much political turmoil, society was questioning its preconceived

definition of morality and began shifting its focus towards individualism. In turn, the American

educational system was experiencing a shift of its own to other values-based programs, most

notably the following three: values clarification method, the cognitive-development theory, and

the ethical reasoning approach.

The values clarification approach focused on helping students identify and understand

their own values. Through reflective activities and discussions, students learned to articulate

their beliefs and make informed decisions aligned with their moral viewpoints. This approach

emphasized self-discovery and personal responsibility. Cognitive-development theory held that

moral reasoning evolves with cognitive development through adolescence, suggesting that as

students mature intellectually, their ability to engage in more sophisticated moral reasoning

would increase. Educators using this approach wanted to foster cognitive growth by presenting

ethical dilemmas that challenged students to think critically and develop higher-order moral

reasoning skills. Conversely, the ethical reasoning approach emphasized teaching students a

systematic and principled method of ethical decision-making. Drawing from ethical theories,

students learned to analyze situations, consider alternative perspectives, and make ethically

sound choices. This approach sought to give students a framework for evaluating moral issues

consistently and thoughtfully (Balch, 1993).

Although the tenets of social-emotional learning have been around forever, the term

itself was not officially coined until 1994 by the *Collaborative to Advance Social and Emotional*

Learning (CASEL). To promote healthy choices and positive decision-making, CASEL instituted its

five core competencies of self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making,

relationship skills, and social awareness. Rather than focus on defining morals, ethics, or values

for students, the organization sought to highlight understanding of self, regulating one's

emotions in a positive manner, and acting in ways that were universally regarded as positive

towards others. This shift in character education gained notoriety in the American public school

system and the United States Congress began urging for federal funding to support its expansion

to state boards of education (Edutopia, 2011).

The Evolution of Social Emotional Learning within Educational Frameworks

There has been an increasing urgency for the creation and implementation of

comprehensive character education and social emotional learning programs in recent years due

to the mental health needs of students. Oftentimes, negative behaviors – such as substance

abuse and sexual activity – work in tandem and are associated with lower academic

achievement and externalizing behaviors in the educational environment. Proactive programs

that highlight positive decision-making and appropriate social interactions can demonstrate

significant improvements in student behavior and attendance, and thus, academic achievement

as well as students' mental health (Snyder et al., 2009, p. 28).

According to the *Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional* Learning (CASEL), it

is important that, when adopting an SEL program, schools strategize their plan before just

jumping into any curriculum. Certainly, mode of delivery, staffing and funding are all important, but schools must also consider the strengths and needs of the school. Teacher and staff buy-in are critical components of successful implementation, and thus, their involvement in selecting the SEL program is a necessary first step. CASEL also emphasizes universal implementation of any SEL curriculum, ensuring that all students are equitably introduced to the core competencies. Additionally, it is suggested that any selected programs target the needs within the school and can reinforce the competencies beyond school, including in the home and the community (CASEL, 2023).

One such initiative, the *Positive Action* program, is comprised of approximately 140 lessons that are facilitated by a teacher in a general education classroom, in 15-20 minute increments. Like the five CASEL competencies referenced earlier, the *Positive Action* program targeted the topics of "self-concept, physical and intellectual actions, social-emotional actions for managing oneself responsibly, getting along with others, being honest with yourself and others, and continuous self-improvement" (Snyder et al., 2009, p. 31).

Incorporated within the lessons are discussions and activities that engage students and teachers in identifying core values for the classroom based on universal principles surrounding kindness and respect. The focused topics interact more like themes throughout the school as all participants – students, teachers, counselors, and administrators – use common language throughout the building. Additionally, through parent manuals, newsletters, and parent engagement nights, families are made aware of the tenets of the social-emotional framework so that they, too, can reinforce these universal principles from home. This level of engagement embodies the spirit of home and school partnering together to support healthy decision-making among students. As seen in Figure 2, over a five-year span (2002-2007), schools that

implemented the *Positive Action* program saw significant decreases in suspensions, absenteeism, and retention.

Figure 2

Positive Action Effects on School-Level Indicators
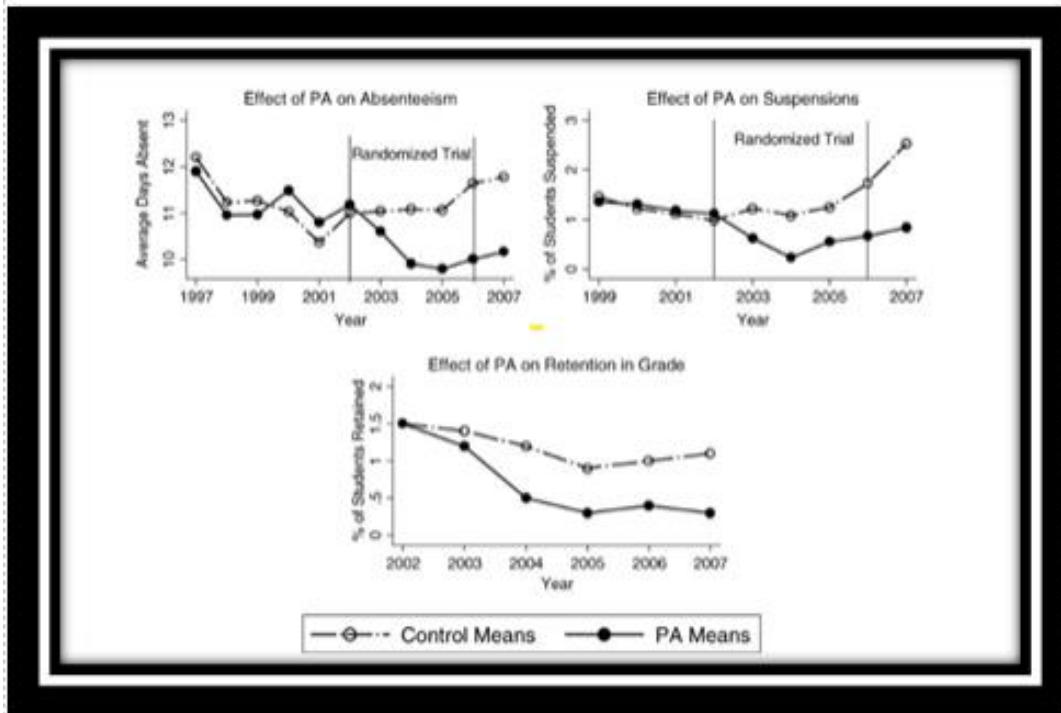
Note. The figure shows the correlation between the Positive Action SEL program and student attendance, suspensions, and grade retention (Snyder et al., 2009, https://doi.org/10.1080/19345740903353436).

Beyond an improvement in student attendance, behavioral data and grade retention, there was also a correlation between the *Positive Action* SEL curriculum and student academic achievement. Due to improved attendance and students displaying more appropriate behaviors, state standardized test scores improved for schools that implemented the *Positive Action* SEL program when compared to the control group of schools (Snyder et al., 2009). Figure 3 shows

the positive correlation between this SEL program and student achievement on state

assessments.

Figure 3

Positive Action Effects on Standardized Test Scores
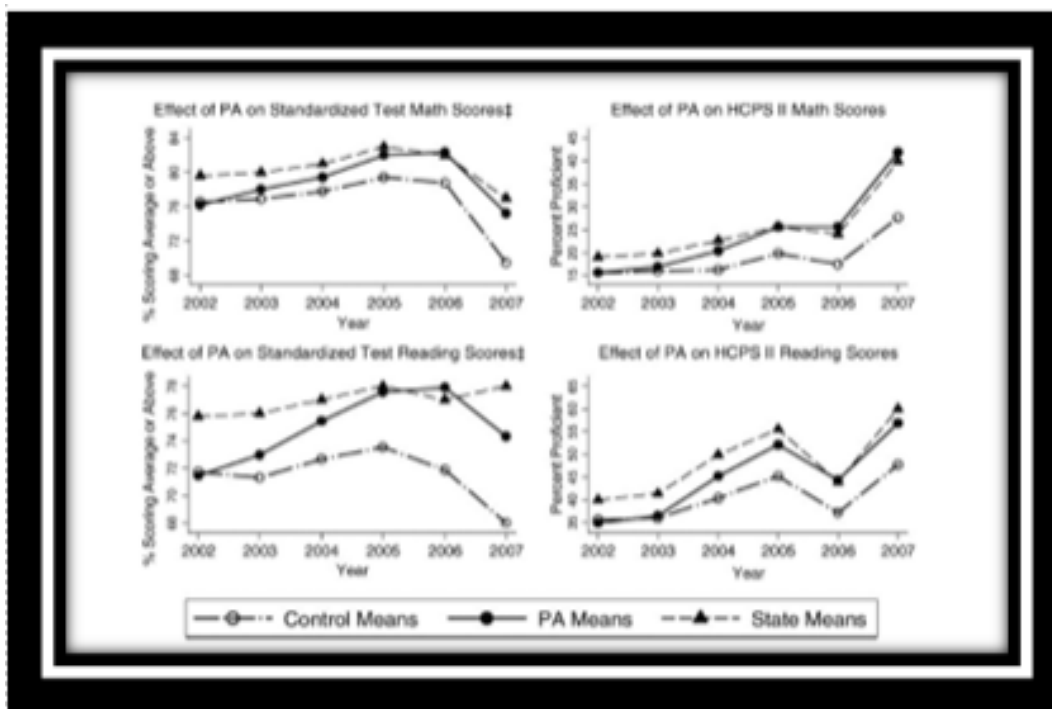
Note. The figure displays the correlation between the Positive Action SEL program and increased

state test scores (Snyder et al., 2009, https://doi.org/10.1080/19345740903353436).

Another SEL program that was extensively reviewed was *Open Circle*, which is a

universal program with Tier 2 supplemental lessons at the elementary level. Although the study

surrounding *Open Circle* initially targeted students' development of SEL skills, most notably the

CASEL competencies, its impact on student achievement was compelling. Specifically, *Open*

Circle was credited with improvements in such student outcomes as improved attendance,

decreased behavioral infractions, and academic achievement. What was most interesting was

that teacher perceptions of school climate and culture saw a significant surge from before and after implementation.

After analyzing the impact of *Open Circle* and narrowing down the factors that lead to this improvement, the researchers noted the importance of the extensive staff training, the on-going administrative support, and the complimentary nature of the *Open Circle* SEL program with the pre-existing PBIS framework embedded in the selected schools. Staff received intense training on the SEL curriculum, which also included job embedded coaching sessions with all teachers. Also, the building level leaders ensured continued coaching and support as they monitored fidelity checks during observations throughout the year. Lastly, rather than asking buildings to choose PBIS or SEL, *Open Circle* emphasized the importance of both initiatives coinciding together, reinforcing both frameworks with common language and expectations (McDaniel et al., 2022).

Another SEL program, *Speaking to the Potential, Ability, and Resilience Inside Every Kid (SPARK) Pre-Teen Mentoring Curriculum*, specifically targeted middle school students and their ability to communicate effectively with peers, regulate their emotions, and make appropriate decisions. Different than many other researched SEL programs, SPARK includes highly trained facilitators to deliver the content to selected classrooms rather than teachers and/or counselors inherently within the school. In SPARK, time intensive lessons were utilized in the classroom setting and focused on a pre-determined curriculum. The curriculum, delivered by outside contracted facilitators, consisted of 12 lessons in one-hour increments, once a week over a three-month period.

When compared with the control group, students who participated in SPARK saw moderate to significant improvement in their communication, decision-making, problem-solving skills, and emotional regulation. As a limitation, however, the researchers noted that it is

important to explore whether training school staff to deliver the SPARK curriculum is a viable

and effective alternative, as relying on external facilitators might pose challenges to its

implementation in certain schools. Like the Open Circle SEL program, the SPARK researchers

acknowledged that it would benefit schools to consider integrating SEL programs with existing

positive behavioral support systems to maximize SEL program efficacy (Green et al., 2021).

Case Studies on SEL

Although there are numerous case studies on SEL and its impact on student

achievement, much of the research is strictly from a universal perspective. When examining an

SEL program's impact on students, it is important to gauge its impact on marginalized groups.

Students with disabilities, for example, are far more likely to be victims of bullying and less likely

to have a keen sense of belonging in school (Rose et al., 2011). Because there is a correlation

between school belongingness and positive peer interactions, one such three-year case study

specifically targeted the impact that SEL lessons had on middle school students with disabilities.

The study included 123 middle school students with various disabilities across 36 different

schools who received explicit SEL lessons via *Second Step*, as well as a control group of students

with disabilities who did not receive any specific SEL lessons. The *Second Step* curriculum utilizes

lessons that span the basic CASEL competencies of self-awareness, self-management,

responsible decision-making, social awareness, and relationship skills.

The study concluded that not only did the participating students see a dramatic rise in

their classroom academic grades, but it also found that students with disabilities reported a

greater willingness to intervene in occurrences of bullying, when compared with participants

who did not participate in an SEL program. The researchers argued that the consistent lessons

helped to create a sense of agency among the participating students, who typically would not

have the social influence to stand up for those being victimized. However, the study did not see

a significant increase in prosocial behaviors among the group that received SEL lessons versus

the control group that did not receive SEL lessons but concluded that further research regarding

SEL and students with disabilities is necessary since little research exists (Espelage et al., 2016).

Along a similar vein, a research study that examined the *RethinkEd* SEL curriculum

strictly within the special education classroom environment, both students and staff expressed

positive gains regarding the CASEL core competencies. Staff at the New Horizon School – a

school that specifically supports students with Autism, ADHD, and dyslexia - noted an increase in

their own capacity to nurture social and emotional well-being in students and to establish

stronger connections with both students and families. They acknowledged considerable

progress in their students' ability to comprehend and manage their emotions, resolve conflicts,

forge peer relationships, and articulate their needs more effectively. Similarly, students

completed a self-awareness assessment at the conclusion of the study and rated themselves

higher in four of the five CASEL competencies, when compared with the pre-assessment prior to

the study. These positive developments have provided strong encouragement for the

implementation of a wellness program tailored to special education students (Whalen & Moore,

2023).

In a separate study, researchers studied the impact that an SEL program has on

elementary students who were at risk for emotional and behavioral disorders. Specifically, the

study targeted well over 1000 at-risk students, not yet identified as needing special education

services, across 52 schools in a dozen school districts. These Tier 2 students participated with

their norm-referenced peers in universal literacy instruction that had common SEL language to

help students process scenarios in a developmentally appropriate manner. During academic

instruction, the literary stories revolved around the CASEL core competencies, intertwining

situations requiring self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship

management, and responsible decision-making. In addition, a control group existed in the study

consisting of students not receiving any SEL programming as part of their academic day.

The study analyzed the students not identified as at-risk with those identified as at-risk

for emotional and behavioral disorders. Unlike traditional SEL programs, the SELF curriculum

offered Tier 2 interventions for at-risk students complimentary to the universal core program to

target those students at-risk and in need of greater support. As part of the study, all 300+

teachers participated in an extensive, multi-day professional development on the Social

Emotional Learning Foundation (SELF) curriculum. They examined everything from the

foundations of SEL to the implementation of the curriculum with fidelity. Reading some of the

literary stories and making connections to both the CASEL competencies and Common Core

reading standards, the teachers were deepening their understanding of the underpinnings of

the program and its intended outcomes.

At the conclusion of the three-year study, the researchers found a striking positive

effect that the SEL curriculum had on both groups that were receiving the SELF curriculum

versus the control group of students who were receiving no SEL programming, with an effect

size range between .20 and .65 when considered with academic achievement. The identified at-

risk students saw even greater positive outcomes that could be correlated to the universal SELF

curriculum and the Tier 2 supports (Daunic et al., 2021).

The Emergence of Specific Social Emotional Learning Programs and Approaches

As SEL programs have evolved, it has become increasingly important to differentiate

these programs from mental health services. Although both work well when layered together,

they serve different purposes, working under the same umbrella of student wellness. SEL

programs aim to enhance the skills and competencies of all students, while mental health

services primarily target students with social, emotional, or behavioral issues to alleviate

symptoms and bolster their strengths. These two approaches can complement each other within a tiered system of support services. Tier 1 programming consists of universal SEL content delivered in classrooms, benefiting all students. Tier 2 supports provide targeted interventions, including mental health services, typically delivered in small groups by counselors or special education teachers. Tier 3 interventions offer highly individualized and intensive support, reserved for a small percentage of students who need the highest level of care, with services delivered by a multidisciplinary team. While mental health interventions are more common in higher tiers, effective Tier 1 SEL programs can contribute to a positive and inclusive environment, benefiting students in Tier 2 and Tier 3 (Bergin et al., 2023). Essentially, what is good for one is good for all.

Figure 4

Tiered System of Social Support
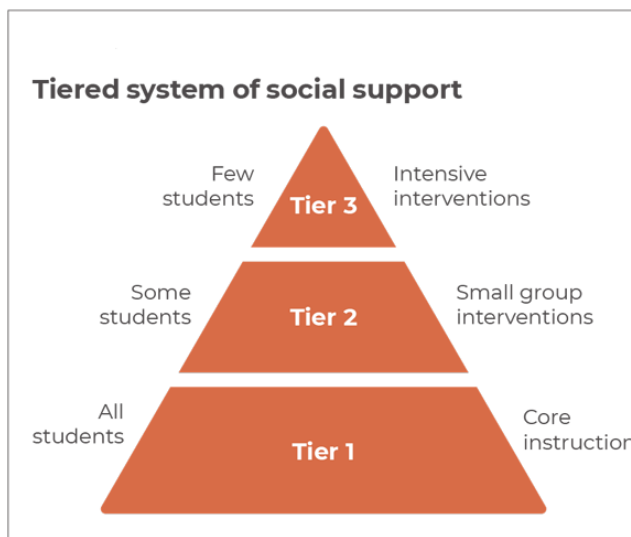
Note. The figure shows the three tiers of social support for students, with Tier 1 being support intended for all students, Tier 2 being more intensive support intended for a small subset of students, and Tier 3 being the most intensive support for an even smaller subset of students (Bergin et al., 2023).

As noted in Figure 4, a strong universal foundation is important before the integration of further targeted services, no matter the program or intervention. Whether it is a math or ELA framework, or in this case, an SEL program, a solid base is critical before Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions can be most effective. When schools first ensure that all students are receiving the core tenets of SEL, and then weave their targeted interventions around their core programming, this is known as 'vertical integration' and is proven to be most effective in mitigating student behavioral issues (Greenberg et al., 2017, p. 22).

One approach to implementing SEL is to have school counselors lead the charge, delivering lessons to students regularly – often weekly – rather than having teachers integrate lessons themselves. While this approach places more of the strain on school counselors, potentially requiring more staff, it allows teachers to integrate the lessons throughout their daily lessons, class meetings, and restorative conversations with students when behavioral issues occur in the classroom. In this model, the school counselor(s) are the inherent 'experts' on emotional regulation and managing conflict and can deliver SEL content with minimal on-going training. Additionally, when implemented with fidelity, this model often leads to higher teacher satisfaction and less stress (Perryman et al., 2020, p. 114).

Conversely, to leverage teachers - the most direct link to students - as the providers of SEL in their classroom, one such program, the *Jesse Lewis Choose Love Movement* (JLCLM) provides a la carte lessons for teachers to choose based on the needs of their students and classroom environment. Training and lessons are online and free of charge making it easy for staff members to use their professional judgment to guide their students in managing their feelings and establishing positive peer relationships. In turn, the role of the counselor is to support teachers in the implementation from the periphery, and to provide small group lessons

to Tier 2 students who need additional support and restorative conversation around the SEL

competencies (Perryman et al., 2020, p. 115).

        Another consideration for educational systems as they contemplate a systemic SEL

program, no matter who is delivering SEL content, is training all staff on trauma and learning.

Over time, chronic stress can change the brain and harm physical health and cognitive abilities.

This stress is especially difficult on school-aged children, affecting their bodies, social life,

emotions, and academics. Students who have experienced adverse childhood events (ACEs) are

far more likely to become paranoid of their surroundings, assuming everyone and everything

might hurt them. This can make students feel unsure about themselves and more likely to have

anxiety and depression, hampering their coping skills and interconnectedness with peers and

adults. Additionally, students who have experienced such trauma might act withdrawn and

become more likely to demonstrate negative behaviors in the school setting. Oftentimes, when

students struggle with focusing and work completion, educators might interpret these behaviors

as laziness, when in turn, it is a product of their childhood experiences (Terrasi & de Galarce,

2017). As a result, it is critical that staff are aware of trauma's effect on student behavior so that

the potential function of a child's behavior is not dismissed.

        The CASEL framework encompasses five essential social and emotional competencies

that can seamlessly integrate into academic instruction. Notably, social and emotional skills

often intertwine with academic standards, and there is a growing body of resources explicitly

dedicated to teaching these skills across various educational settings. As a result, students can

cultivate enhanced social and emotional abilities, which, in turn, bolster their learning

experiences by reducing disruptions and increasing engagement. In a recent study examining

how educators incorporate SEL skills into their academic lessons across different subjects,

researchers discovered that teachers adeptly infuse SEL elements, particularly during literacy-

based activities. This integration transpires through activities such as reading and composing

stories and poems, fostering students' awareness of and empathy for the emotions of others

(Taylor & Lein, 2023, pp. 39-40).

The methodology of SEL implementation is crucial to the program's effectiveness. The

same SEL program implemented at two different schools may see two different outcomes for its

students due to each school's ability to roll out the SEL program consistently and with fidelity.

When preparing for effective SEL implementation, the Harvard Graduate School of Education

argues that, using the acronym SAFE, there are four critical elements to a successful

administration of SEL; *sequenced* activities, *active* learning opportunities, *focused* time allotted

for skill development, and *explicit* skill targets for students. In addition to the SAFE elements, the

educational experts explain that SEL programs are optimized when other factors are present

alongside implementation, including proactive behavioral frameworks (such as PBIS), on-going

development of teachers and staff, strong family engagement, practicing skills across content

areas, and identifying short and long-term measurements of SEL success (Jones et al., 2018).

As with any new initiative, implementing social-emotional learning (SEL) involves a

systematic approach. First, data collection is crucial to gather information like climate data, staff

surveys, and qualitative insights from focus groups to inform decision-making. Second, engaging

with teachers, families, school leaders, and stakeholders is vital to understand their vision for

SEL and the specific needs they wish to address, avoiding top-down decision-making. Third,

using both data and stakeholder input, identify and prioritize specific needs and goals for SEL,

which could encompass content focus, instructional requirements, or content alignment across

settings. Lastly, after considering the information collected in the previous steps, utilize school-

based resources, such as MTSS documents to solidify needs and measurable goals, enabling the

building core group to select an appropriate SEL program or strategy aligned with the identified

priorities. Figure 5 displays a visual representation of the paradigm for the selection process of a school-based SEL curriculum (Jones et al., 2018).

Figure 5

Program Selection Process

PROGRAM SELECTION PROCESS

Use Data to Guide Decision-Making	Include Key Stakeholders	Identify Needs and Goals	Select a Program Using Selection Tools/Resources
Identify or collect data that will help you make informed decisions about your specific needs. This may include climate data, staff surveys, or qualitative data from interviews or focus groups.	Talk to teachers, families, school leaders, and other stakeholders about their vision for SEL and the specific needs they hope to address. Remember that making decisions from the top-down can undermine buy-in and compromise effectiveness.	Drawing from data and stakeholder input, identify and prioritize specific needs and goals for SEL programming. For example, this may include a specific content focus, instructional or structural requirements, or the desire to align content across settings.	Having considered the information collected in prior steps, use the school/OST settings worksheets and the full "Navigating SEL" report to solidify your needs and goals, and to select an appropriate program or strategy.

Note. The figure provides a process for selecting a universal SEL program that involves data, key stakeholders, goal identification, and resource development (Jones et al., 2018, https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Preparing-for-Effective-SEL-Implementation.pdf).

Challenges and Limitations of Social Emotional Learning

When considering the challenges and limitations to implementing an SEL program, one must first look at the educational institutions (colleges and universities) that are training and certifying prospective teachers. With the direct push for positive behavior support programs such as PBIS and SEL from educational researchers, practitioners, and federal and state governments, one would surmise that colleges and universities would put course emphasis in educational undergraduate programs. However, data from more than 1,000 certified education

graduates suggests that teacher preparatory programs are not consistent with character

education coursework (Revell & Arthur, 2007). Collectively, experienced teachers often express

insecurity teaching SEL skills and what these programs would require of them, both in time and

expertise. Despite this lack of preparation, CASEL suggests a plethora of online resources and

professional learning communities that exist to collaborate and share both experiences and

resources (Todd et al., 2022).

In a recent study that looked at the barriers of SEL implementation, the researcher

found that there is little consistency in teacher training programs as well as assessment

processes that holistically support social-emotional learning skill development (Baghian et al.,

2023). Although the research shows that SEL has positive benefits for students, initial teacher

training is important to its success, as well as on-going professional development on topics

related to SEL (Todd et al., 2022).

Implementing social-emotional learning (SEL) faces several challenges, including the

need to integrate it into an already packed academic schedule, secure funding for resources and

personnel, adequately train teachers, garner support from stakeholders, and assess its

effectiveness. Teachers are particularly concerned about the time constraints, given the

pressure to meet standardized testing expectations. Schools must ensure that SEL programs are

seamlessly integrated into the daily routine. Additionally, securing necessary funds for

curriculum, personnel, and professional development is a hurdle, requiring school leaders to

explore grant opportunities and government funds. Adequate teacher training is crucial for

effective SEL instruction. These roadblocks underscore the importance of addressing both

logistical and financial considerations when implementing SEL in schools (Kaspar & Massey,

2022).

Recognizing the growing significance of SEL in schools, along with the widespread adoption of SEL programs, it is crucial for teacher candidates to graduate from their education programs equipped to actively contribute to these initiatives. One school of thought is that colleges and universities must establish a Professional Learning Community (PLC) model among their faculty members to create an effective, successful preparatory program for pre-service teachers. This model should emphasize shared leadership, a unified vision, collective learning, and the application of acquired knowledge, all within a supportive environment. The adoption of the PLC approach has proven to be a valuable method for integrating effective SEL practices into teacher preparation curricula. This incorporation of social-emotional learning into teacher training programs not only benefits educators after graduation but also positively impacts their students. Research indicates that teachers who cultivate SEL skills not only experience improved mental health but also demonstrate more effective teaching strategies. Consequently, it is imperative for schools of education to mimic K–12 programs by integrating social-emotional learning to better support their teacher candidates (Nenonene et al., 2019).

Another challenge that faces effective implementation of SEL is the social and emotional competence of the school principal. The role of school principals extends to significant impacts on various facets of their schools, encompassing school climate, teacher well-being and retention, and student success. The personal and professional development of principals is crucial in establishing a nurturing school environment where adults and children feel welcomed, cared for, and appropriately challenged. However, there is a growing acknowledgment that principals face substantial job-related stress, posing a potential threat to their personal well-being and leadership effectiveness that undoubtedly will influence the implementation of any school initiative. When the building leaders have an elevated level of social emotional competence and positive well-being, they are more likely to lead effectively, build healthy

relationships, engage with families more productively, and ultimately lead SEL implementation

with greater success.

Figure 6

The Prosocial School Leader
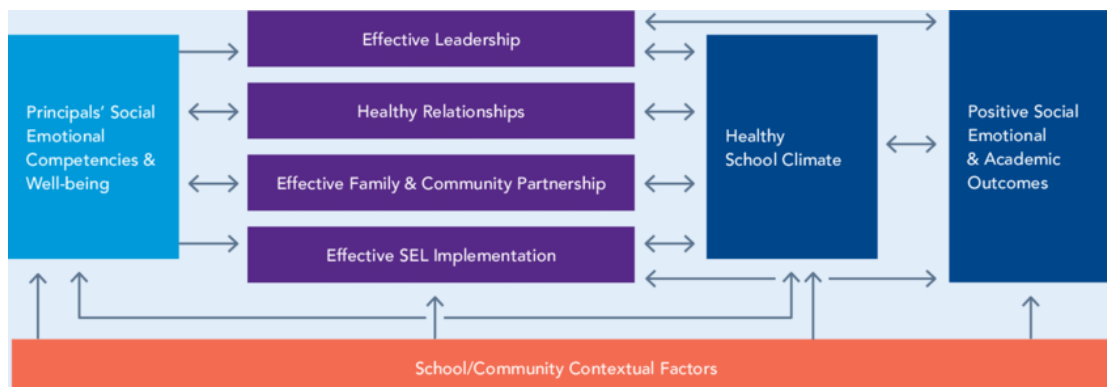
Note. The figure shows the relationship between the leadership's social emotional competence

and their ability to effectively lead the implementation of an SEL program in school (Mahfouz &

Gordon, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020620932351).

As shown in Figure 6, to set building leaders up with success it is important to

incorporate strategies that support their well-being. Just like there is a need for pre-service

teachers to be entrenched in SEL during their college years, principal preparatory programs

should have a focus on social emotional competence and cover such topics as mindfulness

practices, emotional intelligence training, and systems thinking. In addition to administrators

learning about these strategies through their educational leadership programs, there is also a

need for school district to commit to their on-going professional development during their

tenure as school leaders (Mahfouz & Gordon, 2020).

Although building leaders are one of the most critical conduits of success for SEL

implementation, they require other teacher leaders and district administrators to support their

efforts. As student mental health has declined, especially in the wake of the COVID-19

pandemic, it is more essential than ever for school districts to hire employees, such as SEL

Coaches and Instructional Specialists, who are dedicated to the social emotional well-being of

students. These specialists can help ensure fidelity of SEL programming and lead on-going

professional development for staff that supports their understanding of social emotional

learning. Furthermore, the SEL Coach plays a crucial role in influencing the teaching and learning

processes within school buildings. Their impact is direct, as they offer onsite coaching to

individual teachers, highlighting effective instructional practices. Beyond coaching, the SEL

Coach should possess expertise in collecting and utilizing assessment data to formulate data-

driven goals and initiatives. This multifaceted approach ensures that the SEL Coach not only

supports teachers in real-time but also contributes to the overall improvement of educational

practices through informed and targeted strategies based on assessment outcomes (Savitz &

Ippolito, 2023).

Critiques of Social Emotional Learning

Despite the overwhelming support for SEL curricula in schools, there are criticisms to

simply choosing an SEL program and implementing it in schools. Although there are

considerable research studies and meta-analysis studies that illustrate the positive effects of SEL

programs, these studies rarely use a social justice or cultural lens when considering how to

integrate SEL curriculum that meets the needs of students from various backgrounds. According

to Desai, et. al., this approach leads to inequitable outcomes for students because the

curriculum itself is tailored for a particular type of student rather than considering diverse types

of students and their social emotional needs. SEL programs need to consider the content that is

being offered and for whom the program is designed. Recently, there has been more focus on

including diverse cultures in SEL to acknowledge that students have varying ways of

understanding and dealing with emotions. However, the measures and goals of SEL programs

often follow a narrow perspective, not considering different types of SEL that could improve

emotional well-being.

When schools are looking into SEL programs, they should think about factors like the

students' age, ethnicity, economic background, the type of school, and the staff. Once they

choose an SEL curriculum, it is important for everyone involved, including school staff, students,

families, and the community, to look at it from a social justice standpoint. An ideal SEL program

should offer guidance on how to adapt lessons to meet the needs of a diverse range of students

and families, as not everyone sees emotional expression in the same way. It is crucial to ensure

that the SEL curriculum respects cultural diversity rather than assuming a single model of

emotional competence works for all cultural backgrounds.

For those looking at SEL from the social justice lens, the concern of equity, as it relates

to accessibility of SEL curriculum, comes into the forefront. If all students are supposed to

receive equal opportunities and experiences regarding their educational opportunities, then

they should be offered similar accessibility to curricula, regardless of socioeconomic status.

Unfortunately, due to the potential expense of such programs, SEL programming is more likely

to exist in school districts that are resource laden, whereas resource-poor districts struggle to

provide similar curricular options. In impoverished school districts, SEL programs are often seen

as luxuries, not necessities. This creates a scenario of the 'haves and have-nots' (Desai et al.,

2014).

One such criticism of social-emotional learning as a school curriculum comes from

educational pundits, Effrem and Robbins, who see the SEL "fad" as a progressive, governmental

push to create students that fit their desired mold. These proponents argue that SEL research –

despite the studies that suggest improvement in student behaviors and outcomes - is limited by

the inability to truly assess character development. Naysayers also argue that the focus on

character development and emotional regulation takes precious time away from academic

instruction, at a time when national student achievement average scores remain below

proficiency.

Effrem and Robbins also argue that there is little agreement on a definition for SEL,

including limited understanding of common standards and areas to assess. CASEL, the leading

thought leader of SEL standards and curriculum, have isolated their core competencies as the

pillars of SEL, yet Effrem and Robbins argue that the competencies are far too subjective to

quantify and that these competencies have been entrenched in good instruction by teachers for

decades. Perhaps their biggest argument is the politicizing of character education, believing that

such tenets are to be taught in the household – and to those who are most qualified to define

what good character is – rather than in classrooms with contrived definitions of ethics and

values. The *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), they argue, asserts federal control over

classrooms, with explicit directives to incorporate SEL curricula in schools. Effrem and Robinson

argue that this influence in schools is an overreach and "political manipulation" by the federal

government (Effrem & Robbins, 2019).

Another counter argument to SEL is that it can be a controlling tool that focuses on

student compliance more so than a mechanism that promotes social and emotional skills. A rigid

SEL program, in the name of "regulating" and "managing" student emotions, can become a

construct that seeks conformity from students to reinforce the status quo. Much of Varner's

critique of SEL is centered around equity, or a lack thereof for students who are outside of

society's norm, including those who are black, brown, and/or students who identify as LGBTQ+.

Varner's stance on SEL is less of a rebuke of such curricula and more of an admonishment or

cautionary tale regarding outcomes related to stringent, unchecked implementations of SEL

programs. The author argues that SEL can be implemented appropriately only when the

educators are able to dissect their own implicit biases so that they are better informed, and

thus, more intentional about allowing marginalized groups to uniquely express themselves

(Varner, 2023).

Future Direction and Implications of Social Emotional Learning

Research underscores the pivotal influence of social and emotional factors on academic

achievement. The cultivation of pro-social skills and the mastery of emotional self-regulation are

essential for all students. Because money is a limited resource for schools and academic time is

precious, it is often difficult to explicitly teach an SEL program in all schools. This, however, does

not mean that SEL skills cannot still be taught in classrooms. In fact, there are some who believe

SEL standards can and should be introduced to students across various academic disciplines

rather than being a standalone program, but to do so, the educational system must shift to

accommodate this endeavor. Teacher preparatory programs, for example, would need to

emphasize the importance of SEL in lesson planning. When considering a lesson plan template –

which usually includes objectives, steps of the lesson, student assessment, etc. - educational

institutions should begin promoting a section that includes social-emotion skills and

competencies that the prospective teacher intends to support in their academic lesson. In

addition to lesson plan design that involves SEL skills, teaching colleges and universities must

place emphasis on the CASEL core competencies – much like Bloom's Taxonomy or Maslow's

Theory are explicitly taught - so that student teachers are very aware of how to integrate social-

emotional learning into each of their lessons (Taylor & Lein, 2023).

Educational systems are increasingly acknowledging the prevalence of chronic stress

and trauma among their staff and students. In response to this recognition, they are embracing

system-wide policies and practices designed to foster healing from these harmful experiences.

These policies and practices aim to create more compassionate and supportive educational

environments. This shift represents a growing awareness of the importance of addressing not just academic needs but also the social and emotional well-being of all those within the educational community.

One vital aspect of this change in thinking is the revision of student codes of conduct. Traditionally, these codes focused on punitive measures for behavior violations. However, forward-thinking educational systems are now expanding their scope to encompass the root causes of such behaviors. By acknowledging the underlying issues that students may be grappling with, educational institutions can create more empathetic and effective solutions. These revised codes of conduct often include provisions for offering healing resources to help students address the challenges they face. These resources can take various forms, such as counseling services, mentorship programs, and access to social and emotional learning tools (Portilla, 2022).

Moreover, providing professional development to educators has emerged as an integral component of these efforts. Educators play a pivotal role in students' lives, serving as mentors, role models, and sources of support. To equip educators with the tools they need to foster a healing-oriented educational environment, professional development programs now emphasize the science of learning and human development. By deepening their understanding of how students' minds work and how trauma can impact them, educators become better equipped to address the unique needs of their students. This knowledge equips them with strategies to create safe and nurturing classrooms where learning and healing can take place side by side (Taylor et al., 2012).

Recognizing that stress and trauma affect students and staff members, educational systems are making concerted efforts to support their employees' social and emotional well-being. In an educational setting, teachers and staff members are often exposed to the same

stressors and traumas that students experience. Consequently, institutions are increasingly

offering resources and support to help staff members navigate these challenges. This support

may include access to counseling services, stress management programs, and initiatives that

promote work-life balance. By investing in the well-being of their staff, educational systems are

not only promoting a healthier work environment but also setting an example for students

about the importance of self-care and seeking help when needed (Grossman et al., 2021).

        Furthermore, classroom-based practices have taken on a pivotal role in these healing-

focused initiatives. These practices are designed to help children regulate their emotions and

behavior. In the past, classrooms were primarily seen as places for academic instruction, with

limited attention given to the social and emotional aspects of learning. However, a growing

body of research shows that students are more likely to succeed academically when they feel

safe, supported, and emotionally regulated. To create this conducive learning environment,

educators are incorporating practices such as mindfulness exercises, conflict resolution

strategies, and social-emotional skill-building activities into their daily routines. Mindfulness

exercises, for instance, can help students become more self-aware and learn to manage their

emotions. These practices involve techniques such as deep breathing, meditation, and guided

imagery, which enable students to gain better control over their emotional responses. By

incorporating mindfulness exercises into their daily routines, educators help students develop

the skills needed to manage stress and trauma-related triggers, enhancing their overall well-

being and ability to focus on their studies (Portilla, 2022).

        Beyond the classroom, there is a strong push for further governmental support for SEL

implementation in all classrooms. Although there is significant research that shows that each of

the 50 states in the United States of America have social-emotional learning state standards in

place to address preschool, all but three states are without state standards in K-12 public

schools. Nearly every state, however, does have some sort of comprehensive health standards

that are clearly defined and address some of the CASEL competencies (Eklund et al., 2018, p.

319-320). This research suggests that, in K-12 public school environments, social-emotional

learning is addressed, in part, at the secondary level and often overlooked at the elementary

level. As noted in earlier chapters, many SEL programs exist, many of which are implemented at

the elementary level; however, these programs are typically at the discretion of local school

districts rather than as an expectation from the state.

CASEL has urged the federal government to adopt specific standards of social-emotional

learning that address all five of the core competencies, or at the very least, to require all fifty

states to clearly articulate K-12 SEL standards. CASEL argues that state standards for SEL would

compel districts to implement a framework, K-12, that addresses spiraling competencies for all

students including what skills they will learn and how they will be assessed in academic settings.

CASEL believes SEL standards should be as ubiquitous as math or ELA standards and thus,

federal and state level policies would be a necessary mechanism for universal SEL

implementation (Eklund et al., 2018, pp. 317-318).

The *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), a United States law passed in 2015 with

bipartisan support, holds a significant role in shaping public education policy. While the term

"social emotional learning" is not explicitly used by ESSA's authors, the legislation's provisions

offer numerous opportunities for proponents of SEL. These opportunities encompass defining

overarching measures of success for schools and advocating for funding allocations detailed in

the ESSA law. Particularly within ESSA's Title IV, Part A, the law emphasizes the expansion of

activities that grant students access to a comprehensive education and establish systems that

promote the well-being and safety of students. Even though SEL is not overtly mentioned, ESSA

presents several potential pathways for states and local educational agencies (LEAs) to bolster

and endorse SEL initiatives (Richerme, 2020).

Summary

From the implementation of character education to teaching ethics and value-based

theories to SEL, social emotional learning has evolved in public education to be an intentional,

purposeful curriculum that is explicitly taught in schools. Although there are many varied

curricula and approaches to how it is implemented, SEL in the 21st century is almost exclusively

rooted in CASEL's five core competencies of self-awareness, self-management, responsible

decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness. These competencies provide a

continuum for students of all ages – first understanding themselves and then understanding

how they impact and influence those around them. What SEL programming is not, is a mental

health service for students; however, when the two are interwoven together, they provide a

supportive and caring framework for students.

The critiques of SEL are sparse but they reveal unpalatable truths that must be

unpacked, challenging the inherent constructs that exist in our society and our schools. These

critics often argue that SEL programs are rarely developed with a cultural lens that focuses on

social justice or equity. Some contend that SEL lessons, which are intended to be "universally"

taught, are often not provided for students who are intellectually disabled or emotionally

disturbed as they are naturally excluded in self-contained classrooms. And then, of course, there

are the naysayers who craft their political barbs and blindly thrust them towards the education

system, claiming that schools are indoctrinating children with liberal agendas.

If SEL is to be universally implemented across K-12 schools, both the federal and state

governments will need to emphasize support for such programs. Although the underwriting of

ESSA hints at bolstering SEL, it does not demand that individual states require that social

emotional learning occurs in its schools. Passing legislation would compel federal, state, and local resources to be allocated for SEL programs, and thus, the well-being of students. Government funding for SEL could also be utilized for staff improvement through ongoing professional development that focuses on training for trauma-informed instruction, culturally responsive teaching, and restorative practices - all which support pro-social development of students and the education of the whole child.

Most importantly, there is a clear dearth of emphasis on social emotional learning within teacher and principal preparatory programs. For SEL to become ubiquitous in the American education system, preparatory programs at the collegiate level need to ensure that pre-service teachers are fully aware of the CASEL core competencies and how to appropriately implement them with fidelity through SEL programming. Additionally, educational leadership programs need to educate future administrators on the importance of implementing SEL and how to effectively embed such curricula with other student-focused initiatives like PBIS, SAP, and restorative practices.

Regardless of the critical reviews, the data shows that SEL programs undoubtedly provide an additional safety net for students. When thoughtfully considered, the feedback can help shape the future of character education and social development of students. One thing that can be unilaterally accepted is that there is certainly room for improvement in SEL programming. SEL is just one pillar of student support, and when schools integrate other nurturing systems – PBIS, MTSS, trauma-informed instruction, culturally responsive teaching – students reap the benefits of a welcoming and inclusive learning environment that will lead to successful outcomes in school and beyond.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

The review of literature provides extensive detail on the importance of social emotional learning and articulates the need for schools to be the main conduit for this universal approach to supporting students. Considering the devastation that COVID-19 pandemic caused on society and households, especially within marginalized communities, the need for support beyond academics is greater than ever. Not only did student academic growth plummet during the pandemic and the ensuing years since, so did student mental health. With the number of students demonstrating a need for targeted emotional and behavioral support, a universal SEL framework that is schoolwide and spans all students and staff is imperative.

Although definitive studies that define a clear pathway for SEL are lacking, it is undeniable that such frameworks are crucial for the success of students. The literature suggests that the priorities of K-12 public schools must shift to focus on the development of the whole-child. While the focus on academic achievement must always exist, the research shows that healthier, happier, more engaged students who are educated in a safe, welcoming environment are far more likely to experience academic growth.

Purpose

The literature review focused on the purpose of SEL and the potential impact that a universal SEL curriculum has on student behavior across K-12 settings. It highlighted the challenges that students experience and emphasized the importance of proactive SEL interventions to address social emotional issues and to promote a more comprehensive approach to the prosocial development of students. Additionally, the study aimed to assess middle school teachers' perceptions of SEL before and after its implementation, using a mixed-methods approach to gather qualitative and quantitative data. Through the data analysis, the

study intended to examine state reportable disciplinary data to measure the effectiveness of SEL implementation. The chosen SEL curriculum, School-Connect, aligns with the CASEL framework and provides flexibility for teachers while offering structured lessons tailored for secondary level students.

Regarding the future of SEL in public schools, one clear and obvious area of growth outlined by the literature was the lack of social emotional learning as a focus in teacher prep programs. While most educational programs introduce pre-service teachers to Bloom's Taxonomy and Maslow's Theory, there is minimal examination of social emotional curriculums and their effectiveness. Additionally, researchers have not exactly agreed upon a common way to measure the success of SEL programming amongst public schools across the nation. Although the research suggests that SEL often demonstrates a positive effect on school climate and culture, there is no commonly accepted measure of each respective program's success.

One thing that is generally agreed upon by SEL researchers is that there is little downside to implementing an SEL program beyond the time and effort that goes into planning for the initiative. Some critics argued the importance for educators to consider marginalized groups as they further develop along the SEL continuum. In other words, social justice advocates would argue that there needs to be greater emphasis on equity and inclusion, and finding ways to incorporate scenario-based activities that are derived from various cultural, socioeconomic, and ability backgrounds rather than simply portraying the norm.

Through this action-based research study, two data streams were collected and analyzed. The first data set focused on middle school teachers' perspectives regarding their understanding of SEL and its effectiveness when implemented in the classroom. The perception survey and self-assessment was provided to the teaching staff before implementation of SEL, to be completed at their option. Additionally, after implementing the SEL curriculum in a classroom

setting for a semester, the same survey was provided to teachers to see if their perception of

SEL programming had changed. This data provided the researcher with both qualitative and

quantitative data for the research study, particularly on how effective they believed the

curriculum was at reducing negative student behaviors, and to demonstrate if teacher attitudes

changed over time after implementing the SEL curriculum.

The second data set involved the comparison of state reportable student behavioral

data, which typically included behavioral events that required the suspension of a student or

students, and thus, reported to the PDE Office for Safe Schools. This aggregate data was

collected for Penndale students from September 2021 through January 2024 (before

implementation) and then from February 2024 through May 2024 (during implementation). This

quantitative data allowed the researcher to look at baseline behavioral data prior to

implementation of the SEL curriculum and then compare it to behavioral data during and after

implementation of the SEL program to look for trends.

Both data sets that were collected assisted the researcher in identifying teachers' belief

in the SEL curriculum across a universal setting, as well as the program's effectiveness at curbing

negative student behaviors. The following three research questions guided the study:

1. What are middle school teachers' perceptions about the efficacy of social emotional

    learning and its impact on student behavior?

2. Does the implementation of a specific, research-based SEL curriculum have a positive

    impact on student behavior?

3. How does the implementation of a research-based SEL curriculum influence staff

    perceptions on student behavior in their classroom?

Teachers' understanding of evidence-based SEL and their belief in its ability to shape

student awareness and decision making is crucial to the long-term success and sustainability of

any curriculum, as it has a profound effect on their enthusiasm behind their instructional

delivery. This research study delves into the SEL framework, exploring challenges, opportunities,

and experiences highlighted in the literature, with a specific focus on the perceptions of the

educators delivering the SEL content. The study's objective is to develop recommendations that

augment the universal social emotional learning platform and provide a more integrated

approach to student well-being and academic success.

      The Institutional Review Board approval letter can be found in Appendix A of this

research paper. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this research study on August

11th, 2023, as there was no need for edits after the initial submission. Resubmission would only

be required if there were changes to the procedures within the study or specific events that

impacted on the safety and well-being of the participants.

Setting and Participants

      The entire scope of the research study was administered at Penndale Middle School

within the North Penn School District. Penndale Middle School is the largest of three middle

schools in the school district, serving approximately 1250 students. The middle school structure

in North Penn is grades 7th through 9th, which makes it unique compared to other middle

schools in southeastern Pennsylvania. Of the three middle schools in the district, Penndale is the

most diverse and has the greatest socioeconomic need, and for the past two years the

researcher has served as the principal.

      Approximately five years ago, the thirteen elementary schools within the North Penn

School District implemented the Second Step SEL curriculum for students K-6. Additionally,

every start to the elementary school day across the district begins with a *morning meeting*. In

turn, the district's middle schools have been searching for a middle-level SEL program to

universally administer to students. District and building level SEL Core Teams were identified to

select an SEL curriculum and to develop a scope and sequence for the roll out of the program. At

the district level, the Core Team consisted of an SEL Coach, a BCBA, middle school principals,

and school climate coordinators from respective buildings. Conversely, the Penndale Middle

School Core Team was comprised of the building principal (researcher), school climate

coordinator, health teacher, special education teacher and inclusion facilitator.

The daily schedule at Penndale Middle School is an "A/B" day block schedule, with each

block scheduled for 84-minute blocks. One block for each grade level is separated into two half

blocks of 40 minutes with four minutes of transition time built into the block. This block allows

for minor classes in one half and an advisory period in the other half. The SEL lessons were

taught to 7th and 8th grade students during this advisory period during the academic day, which

ensured that the SEL curriculum was being implemented universally to all students within these

grade bands. The middle school schedule runs on a six-day cycle, and SEL lessons were

administered once per cycle.

All staff members directly involved in teaching the *School-Connect* SEL lessons were

provided with training on the interface and orientation on the scope and sequence of the

curriculum prior to the first SEL lesson. The Penndale Middle School Core Team continued to

meet regularly through the second semester of the 2023-2024 school year to monitor and adjust

practice based on staff feedback. Also, Core Team members were available as needed to help

staff members navigate the online SEL program and facilitate lessons with students. Each cycle,

the Core Team provided all staff with the core concepts taught in the most recent SEL lesson

and what would be taught in the upcoming SEL lesson. This was done so that all staff members

could revisit topics in their general education classes and reinforce the SEL topics learned by 7th

and 8th grade students during the advisory period.

To obtain the perception of middle school teachers regarding SEL and its impact on behavior, a research-based survey instrument was identified and offered to Penndale Middle School teachers to complete. The pre-survey was provided to staff in January 2024, just prior to the implementation of the SEL curriculum which began in February 2024. As shown in Figure 7, 21 staff members participated in the pre-survey given in January 2024.

Figure 7

Pre-survey Participants' Years of Experience

Please indicate the number of years you have worked in education:
21 responses
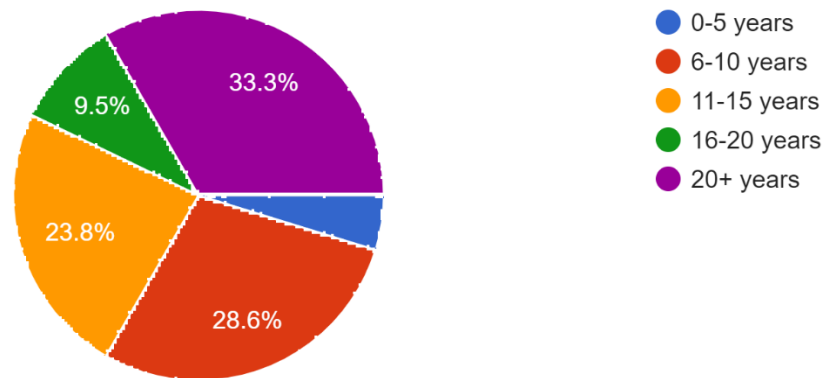
Note. The figure displays the years of teaching experience for each of the pre-survey participants given in January 2024.

After administering the SEL program during the second semester of the 2023-2024 school year, the post-survey was provided to staff in late May 2024. 38 staff members participated in the post-survey given in late May 2024, after the majority of the SEL lessons were provided to students. Staff members invited to participate in both surveys were classroom teachers who work directly with students, regardless of grade level and their role with the *School-Connect* SEL curriculum. The format of the survey was a google form, so participants

could electronically acknowledge their consent to anonymously partake in the research study.

The informed consent document provided to prospective participants of the research study can

be found in Appendix C. Participation was anonymous and voluntary.

Figure 8

Pre-survey Participants' Years of Experience

Please indicate the number of years you have worked in education:
38 responses

- 0-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-15 years
- 16-20 years
- 20+ years

34.2%
15.8%
13.2%
28.9%
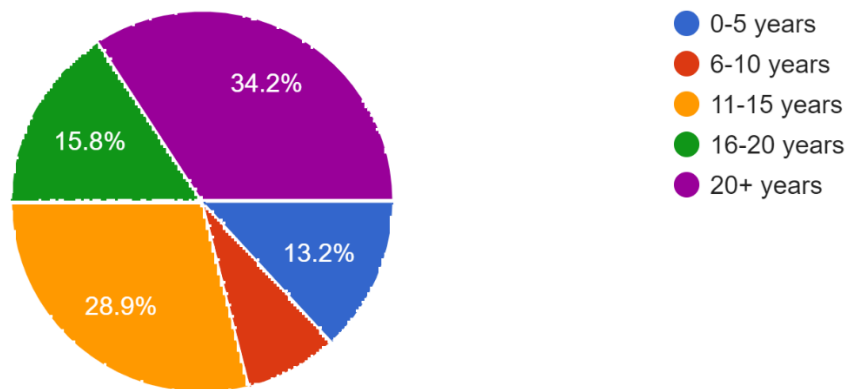
Note. The figure displays the years of teaching experience for each of the post-survey

participants given in late May 2024.

As noted in Figure 7 and Figure 8, participants in the study brought a variety of

classroom experiences to the study. Additionally, staff members who responded spanned across

all grade levels in the building (7th-8th-9th), namely because some teachers taught multiple grade

levels. Because of complete anonymity in both surveys, it was not possible to compare

responses of specific staff members from January to late May. However, the purpose of the

study was to gauge teacher perception from before SEL implementation to after SEL

implementation, as a litmus test, to understand if teacher attitudes across the building had

changed. Also, state reportable student behavioral data was provided to teachers so that they were aware of the building's climate and culture beyond their respective classroom and hallway.

Intervention and Research Plan

Throughout the literature review, successful studies heeded one consistent caution: ensure staff buy-in by seeking their feedback and providing intentional and methodical opportunities for training and professional development. Without properly educating school staff on the purpose of social emotional learning for students during the instructional day, staff were more likely to have negative perceptions regarding the implementation of an SEL curriculum that steals instructional minutes from the academic day. Additionally, the research suggested ongoing professional development that supports teachers' ability to facilitate SEL lessons with students as well as professional learning communities that identify ways to interject SEL in cross-curricular environments beyond the classroom where the SEL lesson was introduced to students.

As the Penndale SEL Core Team began planning for the rollout of the *School-Connect* curriculum, the team felt that it was imperative to provide many opportunities for the staff within the building to familiarize themselves with the program. In November 2023, building administration introduced the Penndale staff to the *School-Connect* interface so that they could see the many different components to the program, including lessons, community-building prompts, and other ancillary resources. Staff were able to look at the topics and themes within the curriculum and offer feedback to the Penndale SEL Core Team as they embark on curating the lessons and developing the scope and sequence for the near future. Health teachers identified topics they covered in their health curriculum for each grade so that efforts were not duplicated. Teachers felt that it was important that many of the introductory lessons were utilized and not dismissed since the SEL curriculum was being implemented mid-year.

The SEL Core Team continued to meet to sharpen the focus of the scope and sequence of the curriculum, using staff feedback to help shape the lessons, prioritizing a user-friendly format. In early February 2024, building administration utilized professional development time to reflect on the schoolwide discipline data and highlighting the need to support the social emotional needs of students. Additionally, staff were provided with the *School-Connect* training and orientation, led by the *School-Connect staff* developers. This gave staff a better understanding of the curriculum and its purpose and the chance to see a mock lesson. Again, staff asked questions and gave the SEL Core Team more feedback before the official rollout in mid-February. The following week, the Core Team engaged all 7th and 8th Grade students in the introductory SEL lesson, outlining the purpose of social emotional learning and the basic expectations for the lessons. This was also an opportunity for the teaching staff to observe a modeled lesson and helped to ease their worries before respective teachers facilitated the *School-Connect* curriculum. Additionally, SEL Core Team members provided multiple opportunities before school for staff to ask any questions before commandeering the SEL lessons. On February 20th, 2024, the official launch of SEL began at Penndale Middle School during the 7th and 8th Grade advisory period.

Leading up to the implementation of the SEL curriculum at Penndale Middle School, the researcher hypothesized that consistent SEL conversations with 7th and 8th Grade students regarding self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness would lead to students making more positive choices during the academic day. Thus, the researcher surmised that there would be a correlation between the selected SEL curriculum and a decrease in state reportable offenses. In this research study, all classroom teachers in the building who directly work with students were invited to participate in the research study. Their participation was entirely voluntary and anonymous. 21 teachers

volunteered to participate in the pre-survey, identifying their comfortability with social

emotional learning and their level of belief in its efficacy.

Once every six days, each respective grade level (7th and 8th grades) would receive the

same SEL lesson. Teachers would be provided with the necessary digital resources for the

lesson, with additional options for them to use based on the conversation amongst their

classroom of students. This allowed teachers to use a basic, universal framework to follow, but

also permitted them the autonomy to extend the lesson using complimentary resources if time

permitted. Following the lesson, the School Climate Coordinator provided follow-up to all staff

outlining the main ideas and themes of each SEL lesson so that all staff could adopt common

language to augment the core SEL lesson and activity. This step was another opportunity for all

staff members to engage with the *School-Connect* curriculum, no matter their role in the SEL

implementation.

The *School-Connect* platform required a financial investment, albeit notably lower than

comparable SEL products explored. The annual school license costs $3000, encompassing all

lessons, supplementary resources, and staff training. These expenses were accommodated

within the site-based building budget. In the event of program success, there will be no extra

costs besides the annual license fee and time allocated for internal professional development.

Research Design, Methods, and Data Collection

The research study used a mixed-methods approach due to the multiple data

measurements used to extrapolate information regarding the efficacy of a social emotional

learning curriculum in a middle school setting. These measurements were both in the form of

qualitative and quantitative data. Depending on the specific data examined, the research study

used a mixed-methods approach and a causal-comparative research method to draw

conclusions.

The purpose of the research study is to better understand the perception of middle school educators regarding SEL's impact on student behavior. In nearly all of the research studies identified in the review of literature a mixed-methods approach was utilized to inform the researchers about the effectiveness of each respective SEL program. Therefore, a data tool that allowed teacher feedback that included both quantitative and qualitative was critical to this study's outcome. Teacher ratings will provide quantitative data, particularly on how effective they believe the curriculum will be in reducing student behaviors. Teacher commentary on SEL will provide the researcher with qualitative data as to how well they understand the purpose of SEL.

Before implementing the SEL curriculum across grade levels, the researcher surveyed staff in January 2024 using an anonymous self-assessment and questionnaire for teachers to complete, composed of Likert scales and open-ended responses to questions. Teachers will self-assess their understanding of SEL and provide their perception of its effectiveness when implemented in the classroom. This resulted in qualitative and quantitative data for the researcher to analyze at the research study's conclusion. Below, in Figure 9, the sample questions from the Self-Assessment and Questionnaire can be seen.

Figure 9

Sample questions from the Teacher Self-Assessment and Questionnaire

Note. The figure is a sample of the survey questions that staff were asked before and after they facilitated the SEL curriculum with their students. Questions 1 through 9 of the 32 questions are shown above. The entire questionnaire can be found in Appendix D.

Additionally, the researcher gave staff the same teacher self-assessment and questionnaire in June 2024 after the school implemented the SEL curriculum for a semester. This allowed for a snapshot of teacher perceptions both before and after the rollout of the *School-Connect* at Penndale Middle School, which the researcher could use to analyze how teacher perceptions may have changed. Ultimately, these perception surveys helped the researcher answer the first research question: What are teacher's perceptions about the efficacy of social-emotional learning and its impact on student behavior?

The other major data set used in the research study was student discipline data pulled from Penndale Middle School. Specifically, the researcher targeted state reportable offenses

from before the implementation of the SEL curriculum to after the SEL curriculum, to compare

the number of state reportable infractions to see if there was a correlation between student

behavior and systemic conversations with students regarding the CASEL core competencies of

self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, social awareness, and

relationship skills (CASEL, 2023). State reportable offenses are those student conduct offenses

that must be reported to the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE). Such offenses

typically include issues regarding violence, weapons, drugs, and alcohol, and generally result in

suspension or contact with law enforcement. These incidents get submitted to PDE's Safe

Schools Office. In contrast, minor incidents, such as tardies or class cuts are simply recorded by

the school and typically not reported to PDE.

In the study, the researcher isolated behaviors from the 2022-2023 school year as a

baseline for overall student discipline throughout the school year. Initially, the research study

was supposed to include an SEL curriculum at the start of the school year; however, issues with

grant funding prevented the SEL program from starting until February 2024 at the start of the

second semester of the school year. Because the *School-Connect* SEL curriculum was not

implemented until the second semester of the 2023-2024 school year, the student disciplinary

data was broken down into semesters for comparison. The baseline data was represented as the

state reported offenses from the second semesters from the 2022-2023 school year and the

2021-2022 school year, respectively.

After implementation of the *School-Connect* SEL curriculum, student discipline data was

pulled, and state reported offenses were isolated. Ultimately, the purpose of the study was to

identify if there was a cause-and-effect relationship that the SEL curriculum had on student

behavior. Again, student disciplinary data was broken down to strictly the timeframe that SEL

was being implemented during the second semester of the 2023-2024 school year (February

through May 2024).

Although initially intended to begin at the start of the 2023-24 school year, the delivery

of the SEL lessons were delayed and, in turn, were truncated to be delivered from February 2024

through the end of May 2024. The researcher sought to use the causal-comparative research

method to see if there was a cause-and-effect relationship between the universal SEL curriculum

and student behavior. The students were to receive explicit SEL instruction during their advisory

period for a finite period of time, and over time, the researcher would track the number of state

reportable offenses. To that end, the SEL curriculum (or lack thereof) was the independent

variable while student behavior was the dependent variable in the study. This was intended to

allow the researcher the ability to examine existing differences in student discipline, year over

year, to draw conclusions based on behavioral outcomes. Essentially, the intention of the causal-

comparative research method was to help the researcher identify if there was a relationship

between the timeframe that SEL lessons were delivered versus the timeframe that SEL was not

delivered, in order to answer the second research question: Does the implementation of a

specific, research-based SEL curriculum positively impact student behavior?

After implementation of SEL in 7th and 8th grades at the end of May 2024, the same self-

assessment questionnaire was given to the teaching staff. This was done to identify if

perceptions of the faculty and staff changed due to the implementation of the SEL curriculum. In

the survey, staff were given the opportunity to assess whether their mindset shifted after

months of utilizing the SEL curriculum with their students in the classroom setting. This also

allowed teachers to identify if the implementation of the SEL curriculum led to them

incorporating further elements of the SEL curriculum in their lessons beyond the environment

where SEL was being discussed explicitly with students. This feedback provided both

quantitative data and qualitative data for the researcher to examine.

The third and final research question was: How does the implementation of a research-

based SEL curriculum influence staff perceptions on student behavior in their classroom? The

goal of this research question was to utilize the pre-assessment to better understand how staff

members viewed social emotional learning at the onset of its implementation. Furthermore, the

intention of the post-survey was to see if facilitation of the SEL lessons provided staff members

with greater clarity on the purpose of SEL and its efficacy. The self-assessments given to

teachers both before and after the SEL curriculum was employed with students allowed the

researcher to look at staff perceptions and identify whether there was a change in their overall

belief in SEL programming in the middle school setting. This data will demonstrate if the staff

training, teacher preparation, and ultimately, the implementation of the *School-Connect*

platform led to teachers having more or less confidence in the efficacy of social emotional

learning in the school setting. Table 1 shows the data collection plan and timeline.

Table 1

Data Collection Plan and Timeline

RESEARCH QUESTION(S)	TYPES OF DATA TO COLLECT	DATA SOURCES (detailed explanation of the types of data you will collect)	TIMELINE FOR COLLECTING DATA
What are teacher's perceptions about the efficacy of social-emotional learning and its impact on student behavior?	Qualitative & Quantitative	Teacher perception/Self-Assessment Questionnaire	**January 2024:** Pre-Survey
Does the implementation of a specific, research-based social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum have a positive impact on student behavior?	Quantitative & Causal-comparative research method	Student Disciplinary Data from prior school years to show the baseline of the behavioral data prior to implementation of the SEL curriculum. Student Disciplinary Data from February 2024-May 2024, will be analyzed and compared with prior discipline data.	**February 2024-March 2024:** Prior years data **May 2024:** Data from 2nd Semester 2024
How does the implementation of a research-based SEL curriculum influence staff perceptions on student behavior in their classroom?	Qualitative	Teacher perception/Self-Assessment Questionnaire	**May 2024:** Post-Survey

Note. The table shows the data collection timeline for the research study, including the data

sources used and the research question to which it corresponds.

Allowing staff to respond in an open response format allowed them to provide qualitative feedback to the researcher regarding their understanding of social emotional learning. Conversely, the Likert scales provided quantitative data that allowed the researcher to see how teacher perceptions fluctuated during the SEL implementation. One of the main priorities of the research study was to identify the perception that teachers have regarding the effectiveness of a universal SEL program in a middle school setting, and having before and after data helped the researcher acknowledge how staff feelings changed over time.

The *School-Connect* platform required a financial investment, but it offered considerable savings compared to similar products. The school license cost $3000 and included all lessons, supplementary resources, and staff training. These expenses were accommodated within the site-based building budget. Should the program prove successful, there will be no extra charges beyond the time invested in internal professional development and ongoing coaching. The researcher did not utilize any data collection and manipulation tools to analyze data, therefore, there were no additional costs associated with the research study.

Validity

Validity in action research is more about ensuring the trustworthiness of the research findings than achieving perfect objectivity. There are four key elements to establish trustworthiness, and thus, increase the validity of the data including credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility provokes the researcher to ascertain how believable the findings are to ensure that accurate conclusions are drawn. Transferability, however, addresses how well the findings can be applied to other contexts. This can be done by describing the setting and participants in detail to allow readers to assess the transferability to other situations. Dependability focuses on the consistency of the research process. This involves detailed documentation of methods and data collection procedures so that someone else could

repeat the study and potentially get similar results. Lastly, confirmability ensures that the

findings are not solely the product of researcher bias (Hendricks, 2017).

In this study, the data was triangulated through multiple data collection methods. These

data collection methods included qualitative and quantitative data through the teacher self-

assessment questionnaires (both before and after SEL implementation) and student disciplinary

data. Student disciplinary data was retrieved from the PDE Office of Safe Schools as all state

reportable offenses are viewable and obtainable for the public. Using multiple data sources

allowed the researcher to corroborate the efficacy of the SEL curriculum within the selected

educational environment rather than fixating on a smaller, myopic data set.

Additionally, the researcher was part of a larger SEL Core Team that allowed for inherent

peer debriefing regarding the data collected in the study. The Core Team, composed of

educational professionals across the school building and an external committee member, was

aware of the research study but had no investment in it. As part of the responsibility of the Core

Team, they met often to discuss steps to improve the effectiveness and facilitation of SEL lessons

throughout the school year. The team also looked at the data collected from the staff

questionnaires and the student disciplinary data to ensure it was valid and to help confirm that

the findings were accurate and not a direct result of the researcher's bias.

Providing specific details regarding the setting and participants is crucial in the research

process to assist with validity. The researcher provided in-depth information about the

environment in which the SEL lessons would be taught and the independent and dependent

variables within the study. The researcher also made clear their inherent biases so that their

biases were understood. These strategies allowed for greater transparency and further increased

the validity of the study.

Summary

This mixed methods research aimed to explore teachers' perspectives and understanding of social and emotional learning, and to ascertain whether there was a relationship between implementing a universal SEL program and a reduction in student behavioral issues. Data were gathered through various means, including pre and post questionnaires, alongside an examination of student disciplinary records spanning recent years. The study focused on a single school, with active teachers serving as participants. By gaining insights into SEL and teachers' viewpoints, the collected data will inform future research endeavors, shape professional development initiatives, and facilitate the integration of further resources and support systems.

The data collected during this research study was triangulated to analyze the effectiveness of an SEL curriculum in a middle school setting and to see if staff perception changed after implementation of the SEL program. In Chapter IV, Data Analysis and Results, the researcher will go into greater depth about the data analysis and communicate the study's results.

CHAPTER IV

Data Analysis and Results

In this chapter, the researcher will explain the process used for collecting data throughout the Capstone project, including an interpretation of the findings from the reported data. In this mixed-methods study, multiple sources of data were identified to provide specific information for each of the three research questions posed by the researcher. Each of the three research questions will be extrapolated further and the data will drive the conclusions of each respective question. Below are the three research questions that directed the study:

1. What are middle school teachers' perceptions about the efficacy of social emotional learning and its impact on student behavior?

2. Does the implementation of a specific, research-based SEL curriculum have a positive impact on student behavior?

3. How does the implementation of a research-based SEL curriculum influence staff perceptions on student behavior in their classroom?

Teacher Self-Assessment and Questionnaires

The teacher self-assessment and questionnaire, which was created by Dr. Nicholas Yoder from the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders, was entirely optional and given to Penndale teachers prior to the official implementation of the *School-Connect* social emotional learning platform and lessons. In the pre-survey, the dataset contains unique definitions of "Social-Emotional Learning" provided by the respondents (Yoder, 2014). Each definition has been mentioned only once, indicating a wide variety of perspectives on what Social Emotional Learning entails. Some of the definitions include:

- Content to help and assist students through depression, anxiety, etc.

- An attempt to instruct learners with respect to emotional, social, and community well-being.

- Learning that considers self-control, self-awareness, and interpersonal skills.

- Meeting the emotional needs of our students.

- A lifelong process of developing skills required for healthy emotional-social functioning.

- Participating in activities that are not academic but instead address the social and emotional well-being of students.

- Social-Emotional Learning is helping kids feel better about themselves and helping them understand their role in society so they can play a positive role in it.

Each of these respective participant definitions reflects a unique understanding of Social-Emotional Learning, emphasizing its importance in addressing emotional well-being, interpersonal skills, community involvement, and personal development. Respondents highlighted the importance of content and activities designed to support students' mental health, addressing issues such as depression and anxiety. This approach involves teaching emotional, social, and community well-being, fostering self-control, self-awareness, and interpersonal skills. It aims to meet the emotional needs of students through a lifelong process of developing the necessary skills for healthy emotional and social functioning. By participating in non-academic activities that focus on their social and emotional well-being, students are better equipped to understand their role in society and contribute positively to it. This holistic approach, known as Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), helps students feel better about themselves and their social interactions.

By asking participants to define SEL, the pre-survey aimed to get a better grasp on what teacher's perceive the purpose of SEL, and thus, how it might be beneficial, or not, to student outcomes. It is evident that staff, theoretically, perceive SEL to potentially have a positive

impact on student wellness especially as it relates to self-awareness and interpersonal skills. The respondents varied, spanning all three grade levels taught in the school building (7th through 9th grades), and most having at least six years of teaching experience.

The responses from the self-reflection questionnaire highlighted participants' perceptions of their knowledge, experience, and strategies related to social-emotional learning (SEL) and its core competencies as outlined by CASEL - self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Interactions were assessed in four domains including Student-Centered Discipline, Teacher Language, Responsibility and Choice, and Warmth and Support. For each of the domains, the questionnaire utilized a Likert rating scale of one through five, respectively represented by the following:

1 – I do not implement this practice

2 – I struggle to implement this practice

3 – I implement this practice reasonably well

4 – I generally implement this practice well

5 – I implement this practice extremely well

Similarly, the post-survey utilized the same questions along with the same rating scale. This was determined by the researcher in order to identify if there was a change in teacher perception regarding SEL implementation, and more specifically, if teachers perceived a change in their ability to deliver in each of the four domains – Student-Centered Discipline, Teacher Language, Responsibility and Choice, and Warmth and Support – after having taught the lessons over a four-month period.

In the post-survey given to staff at the conclusion of the study, participants were able to generate greater depth in their definition of "Social-Emotional Learning". Although definitions had some similar thoughts and ideas, it was clear that respondents had a much deeper

understanding of SEL. The central theme in their statements is the importance of Social-

Emotional Learning in fostering students' overall development. This includes teaching students

to understand and manage their emotions, build positive relationships, and make responsible

decisions, thereby supporting their emotional and social well-being alongside academic success.

This qualitative data allowed the researcher to acknowledge that staff, after implementing the

School-Connect lessons with students, were able to better articulate their understanding of the

purpose of SEL at the middle school level.

Data Analysis of Questionnaire

        In the pre-survey questionnaire given to teachers in January 2024 prior to introducing

the *School-Connect* platform to students, 85% of study participants identified being "somewhat

familiar", "familiar" or "very familiar" with SEL classroom practices, demonstrating a basic to

strong understanding of social emotional learning. After the SEL pilot, 95% of respondents

identified being "somewhat familiar", "familiar" or "very familiar" with SEL classroom practices.

Additionally, over 70% of respondents in the pre-survey noted that they believe it to be

"important" or "very important" to implement SEL lessons with students during the instructional

day, whereas after implementation, 74% acknowledged the incorporation of SEL lessons to be

"important" or "very important." What was most notable about this post-survey response was

that there was a dramatic increase in the percentage of respondents who believed

implementing SEL lessons was "very important," going from 33% to nearly 53% over just a few

short months.

Figure 10

Post-survey Question: Teachers' Perception on Importance of Implementing SEL during the

Instructional Day

In your opinion, how important is it for middle schools to implement SEL lessons during the instructional day?
38 responses
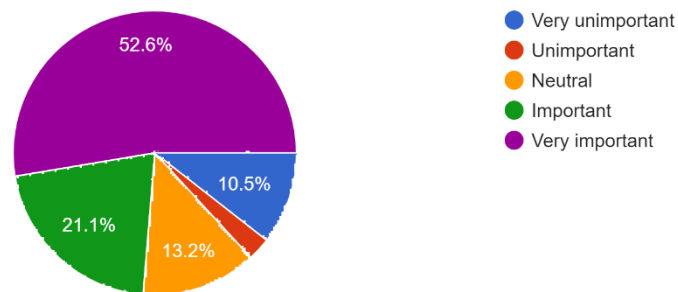
Note. The figure, taken from the post-survey completed in late May 2024, demonstrates teacher

perception on how important it is for middle school students to be exposed to SEL lessons

during the instructional day. The entire questionnaire can be found in Appendix D.

Figure 10 illustrates the perceptions that staff held regarding the importance of SEL

lessons during the instructional day. Furthermore, when participants were asked if they were

willing to incorporate SEL within their classroom, more than 80% responded positively, either

stating that they were "willing" or "very willing" to facilitate SEL lessons. Additionally, only one

responding staff member had a negative view regarding their role in implementing SEL lessons

to students during the academic day. Below, Figure 11 demonstrates teachers' willingness to

incorporate SEL lessons in the classroom setting.

Figure 11

Pre-survey Question: Teachers' Willingness to Incorporate SEL in the Classroom

What is your willingness to incorporate SEL in your classroom?
21 responses
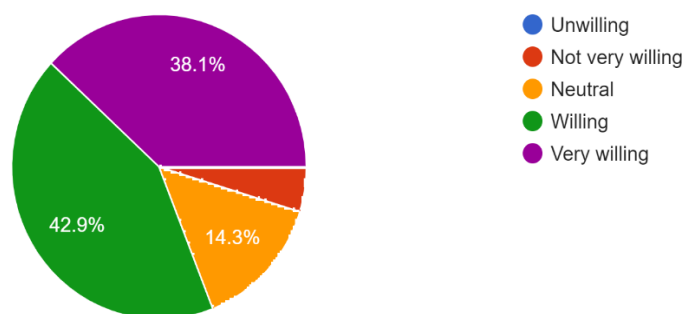
Note. The figure, taken from the pre-survey completed in January 2024, demonstrates the

willingness that teachers had to implement SEL lessons within their classroom. The entire

questionnaire can be found in Appendix D.

Staff buy-in, regarding any schoolwide initiative, is critical to successful implementation.

At the very least, the pre-survey made it clear that middle school teachers held a positive,

optimistic outlook for SEL implementation at its inception at Penndale Middle School. Although

in the post-survey there was a nominal increase to the percentage of surveyed participants who

were "willing" or "very willing" to incorporate SEL lessons, there was a significant increase in the

percentage of staff who were "very willing" to do so, going from 38% to 47%. With more than

80% of staff willing to implement SEL at the onset, the initiative appeared to be setup for

success. Additionally, at the beginning of the SEL journey, 86% of surveyed participants believed

SEL to be a "somewhat effective", "effective", or "very effective" tool in promoting positive

behaviors of middle school students. By the end of May 2024, that number rose to a staggering

92% of respondents viewing SEL as effective, leading the researcher to believe that participating

staff were seeing value in the program. Consequently, those who saw SEL as "effective" or "very effective" increased from 48% to 58%.

Figure 12

Post-survey Question: Teachers' Belief in Effectiveness of SEL

How effective is Social-Emotional Learning in promoting positive behaviors of middle school students?
38 responses

Legend:
- Ineffective
- Not very effective
- Somewhat effective
- Effective
- Very effective
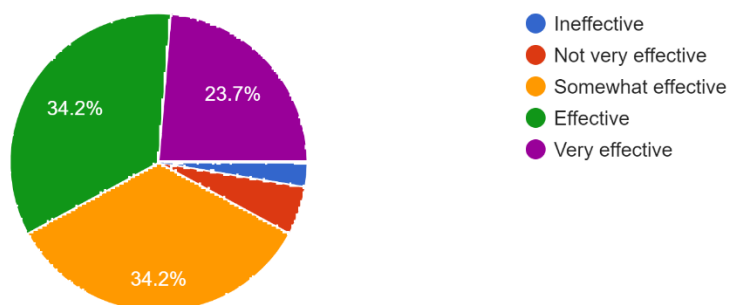
Note. The figure, taken from the post-survey completed in late May 2024, demonstrates how effective staff perceived SEL to be in promoting positive behaviors. The entire questionnaire can be found in Appendix D.

Figure 12 asks staff about their belief regarding the effectiveness of SEL and its impact on promoting positive student behavior. This prompt gets to the crux of two of the study's research questions:

1. What are middle school teachers' perceptions about the efficacy of social emotional learning and its impact on student behavior?

2. How does the implementation of a research-based SEL curriculum influence staff perceptions on student behavior in their classroom?

The initial perception that staff held about SEL was generally positive; however, that belief was emboldened after SEL was actually implemented with students during the

instructional day during the second semester of the 2024-25 school year. In turn, this has led the

researcher to believe that the implementation of a research-based SEL program positively

influenced staff perceptions on student behavior in the classroom.

Going deeper into the analysis of the self-reflection questionnaires, the researcher

sought to breakdown the larger domains within the surveys. When analyzing the four domains

in the teacher questionnaire surveys – Student-Centered Discipline, Teacher Language,

Responsibility and Choice, and Warmth and Support – the domain with the highest rating on the

pre-survey was "Teacher Language" with an average rating of 4.05, closely trailed by "Warmth

and Support" at 3.97. Conversely, the lowest average rating was "Responsibility and Choice"

with an average rating of 3.21. As noted in Table 2, it was evident in the results of the

questionnaire that all participants had a greater level of self-confidence in the domains of

"Teacher Language" and "Warmth and Support", especially when compared with their self-

ratings in the "Responsibility and Choice" area of focus.

Table 2

Teacher Questionnaire Pre-Survey: Average Score of Each Domain

Four Domains from Survey	Average Respondent Score
Student-Centered Discipline	3.54
Teacher Language	4.05
Responsibility and Choice	3.21
Warmth and Support	3.97

Note. This table illustrates the average score that teachers self-reported for each of the four

domains when taking the pre-survey teacher questionnaire. The entire questionnaire can be

found in Appendix D.

In the post-survey questionnaire provided to staff, each of the domains reflected a positive increase in staff perception across the four domains within the questionnaires. Based on the staff responses from January to late May, each area increased by approximately six percent or more. Regarding "Warmth and Support," specifically, there was nearly a ten percent increase in the average score as self-reported by staff at Penndale Middle School, as the average in each response went from 3.97 to 4.36, surpassing the "Teacher Language" domain which was previously the highest of the respective categories within the questionnaire. Table 3 shows the rise across the board in each of the domain averages, which echoes the positive change in staff attitudes towards SEL in the middle school setting and their own SEL competency.

Table 3

Teacher Questionnaire Post-Survey: Average Score of Each Domain

Four Domains from Survey	Average Respondent Score
Student-Centered Discipline	3.77
Teacher Language	4.29
Responsibility and Choice	3.43
Warmth and Support	4.36

Note. This table illustrates the average score that teachers self-reported for each of the four domains when taking the post-survey teacher questionnaire. The entire questionnaire can be found in Appendix D.

The researcher cross-examined the data by looking at each individual prompt within each of the domains on the pre and post-surveys to identify particular responses that saw a dramatic shift in teacher perception from January to the end of May 2024. In an effort to use the data to illustrate a major shift in staff thinking, the researcher identified responses that

increased or decreased by ten or more percentage points over the four-month time period

based on staff responses that fit the "I generally implement this practice well" and "I implement

this practice extremely well" (well/extremely well). The purpose was to compare the before and

after surveys and use the quantitative data to isolate the prompts and responses that best show

a change in staff attitudes, beliefs, and/or a more or less favorable opinion towards the varying

tenets of social-emotional learning.

When looking at responses from the "Student-Centered Discipline" domain, there was a

rather significant increase in a multitude of prompts that suggest that staff were able to shift

their mindset in terms of student discipline, focusing on the student and his or her needs rather

than simply looking for punitive measures.

Figure 13

Teacher Self-Reflection Questionnaire Survey Data: Student-Centered Discipline
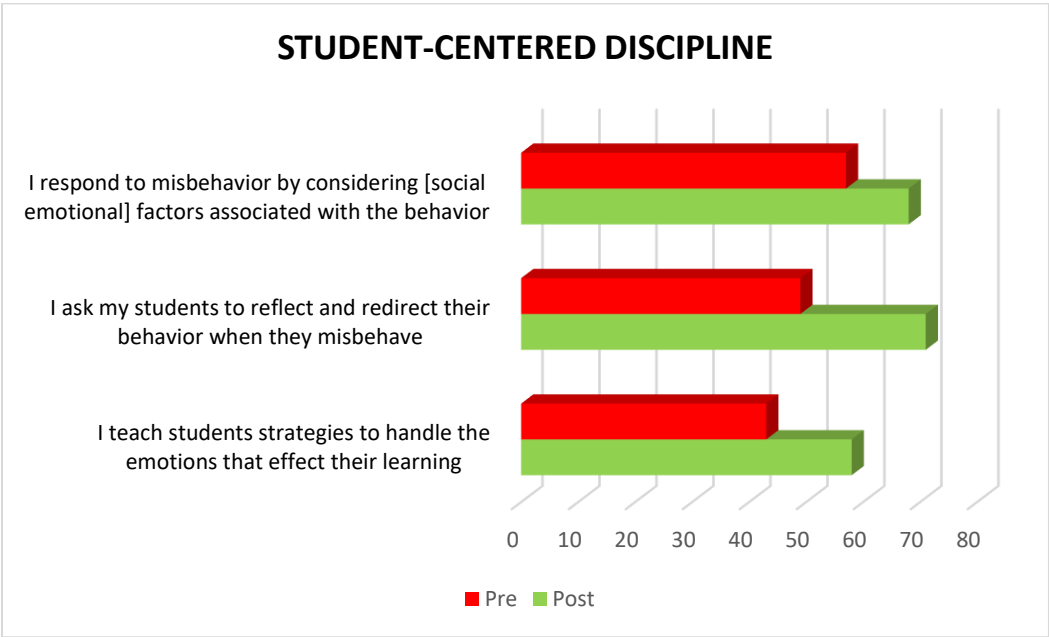
Note. The figure represents the change in teacher perception from the pre-survey to the post-

survey, after SEL was implemented in the classroom regarding "Student-Centered Discipline."

The entire questionnaire can be found in Appendix D.

As seen in Figure 13, there were sharp increases in staff responses to recognizing the whole-child and the outside experiences that they bring to school, as well as being intentional about redirecting students and discussing coping strategies to handle their frustrations and stressors. SEL is entirely based on student reflection, and the more times students are asked to reflect on their actions, the greater the likelihood for them to generate empathy for others. It is pretty astounding to see that when staff members were asked how often and how well they ask students to reflect and redirect their behavior, 71% responded to the post-survey with "well/extremely well" as compared to only 49% in the pre-survey. If nothing else, this uptick suggests that staff are learning with students that reflection is critical to student success.

In the "Teacher Language" domain, there was a significant change in teacher responses from the pre-survey to the post-survey. When prompted with, "I promote positive behaviors by encouraging my students when they display good work habits," staff responses of "well/extremely well" rose from 81% to 91%. This dramatic increase from staff has led the researcher to assume that they are more likely to use reinforcing language with students as a proactive measure to encourage positive behaviors.

In education, it is paramount for the adults in the building to provide students with a level of care beyond simply teaching lessons and grading papers. Thought Leader, John Maxwell has stated, "Students don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." This notion aptly describes the intention and purpose behind the "Warmth and Support" sector of the teacher self-reflection questionnaires provided to staff at the beginning and end of the SEL pilot. As previously noted, the "Warmth and Support" domain saw the greatest increase in positive sentiment from staff respondents. When extrapolating the data from the two surveys, a number of prompts solicited positive energy after the implementation of the SEL lessons. This can be seen in Figure 14.

Figure 14

Teacher Self-Reflection Questionnaire Survey Data: Warmth and Support
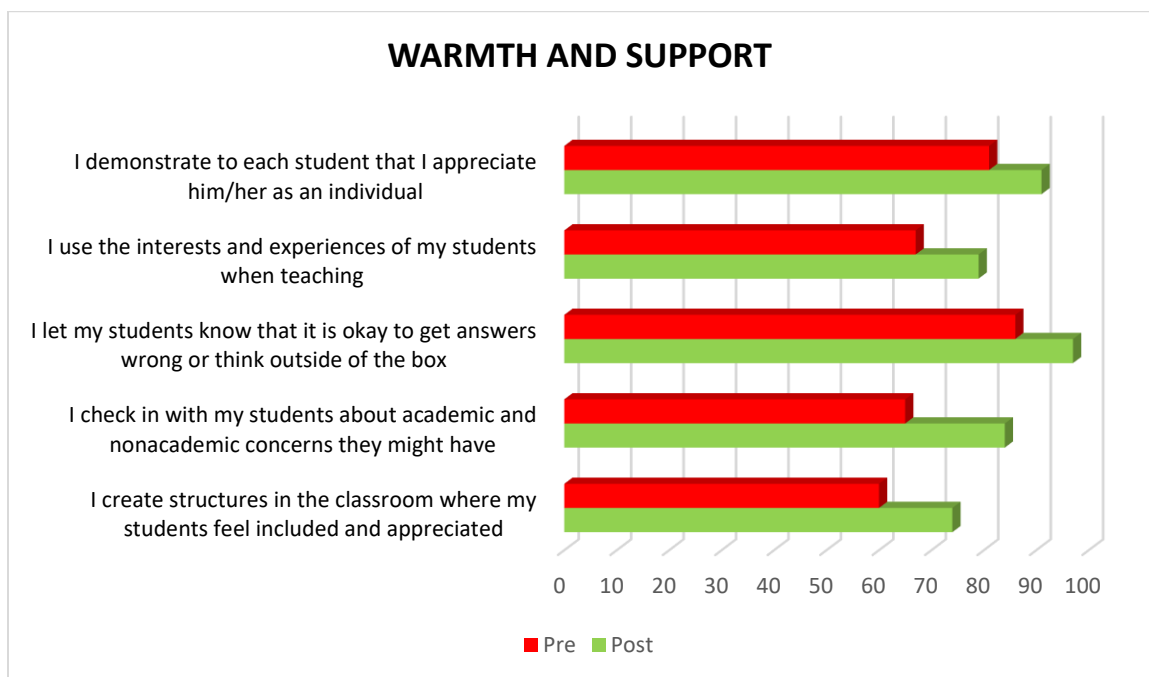
Note. The figure represents the change in teacher perception from the pre-survey to the post-survey, after SEL was implemented in the classroom regarding "Warmth and Support." The entire questionnaire can be found in Appendix D.

As illustrated in Figure 14, teachers identified in the self-reflection questionnaire a change in their own approach to students within their classroom environment. Specifically, teachers noted a greater likelihood in talking to students about their adolescent concerns – both academic and nonacademic – and a greater likelihood of seeking out ways to make students feel more included and appreciated. With nearly twice as many participants in the post-survey as compared with the pre-survey, the researcher noted a dramatic positive shift in teacher attitudes from the onset of the SEL lessons to the end of the lessons throughout the second semester of the 2023-24 school year.

Data Analysis of Student Behavioral Data

The researcher also set out to analyze student behavioral data prior to implementing the *School-Connect* SEL platform, versus after implementation. More specifically, the researcher identified "state reportable offenses" as the data measurement as there is less subjectivity with such behavioral data. Because the study occurred during the second semester of the 2023-24 school year, and in particular February 2024 through the end of May 2024, the researcher isolated behavioral data on a semester to semester basis to identify any trends.

Figure 15

Penndale State Reported Discipline by Year, by Semester
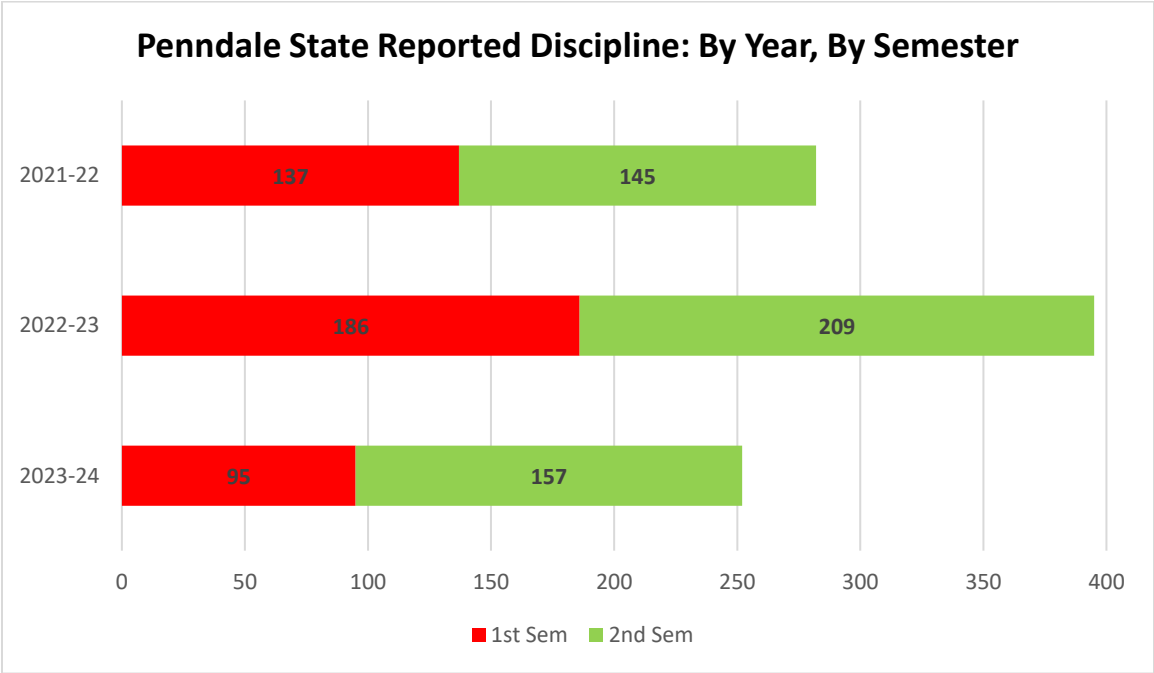
Note. The figure illustrates the number of State Reportable Offenses for Penndale Middle School students during each semester of the past three school years. The entire questionnaire can be found in Appendix D.

Figure 15 shows the state reported offenses that occurred at Penndale by semester, year over year. The researcher was looking for any trends in the student discipline data that

might show a causal-comparative effect of the SEL lessons that were implemented over the

course of the second semester of the 2023-24 school year at Penndale Middle School. The 2022-

23 school year certainly had far more state reported offenses when compared to the prior and

ensuing school years, respectively; however, it was difficult for the researcher to identify a clear

pattern.

Results

This study triangulated the obtained data by utilizing diverse data collection methods.

The research gathered both qualitative and quantitative data via teacher self-assessment

questionnaires administered before and after the SEL program's implementation, alongside

student disciplinary records. These disciplinary records were isolated to those infractions that

were reported to the Pennsylvania Department of Education's (PDE) Office of Safe Schools,

where all state-reportable offenses are publicly accessible. By integrating various data sources,

the researcher could validate the effectiveness of the SEL curriculum in the targeted educational

setting, rather than relying on a limited and narrow data set.

Each research question was intended to hone in on a specific area of the study,

providing the research with unique findings to drive different conclusions on varied aspects of

the study. The first question was: what are middle school teachers' perceptions about the

efficacy of social emotional learning and its impact on student behavior? This helped the

researcher understand how teachers perceived social emotional learning prior to

implementation. As noted in the aforementioned Data Analysis of Questionnaire, staff began

their *School-Connect* journey with positive perceptions on SEL. Most notably, 85% of

participating staff viewed SEL as "somewhat effective" to "very effective", and more than 80%

were "willing" to "very willing" to implement curated SEL lessons in their classroom setting.

Based on the data from the pre-survey questionnaire it was evident at the onset of the study

that staff were open to facilitating SEL and had a positive perception of the initiative.

The second research question was: does the implementation of a specific, research-

based SEL curriculum have a positive impact on student behavior? This question aimed at

identifying if there was a relationship between SEL lessons and student behavioral referrals.

More specifically, the researcher utilized the causal-comparative research method to tease out

if there was a data link between the behavioral data and the SEL lessons facilitated each cycle

with students. Although there are clear disparities, year over year, in the state reported

discipline, the review of the semester by semester disciplinary data does not show a clear and

obvious change in student behavior. When looking at the second semester of the 2022-23

school year versus the second semester of the 2023-24 school year when SEL lessons were

utilized in the classroom setting, there was nearly a 25% drop in state reported offenses.

However, an even greater disparity existed in the first semester of each of these school years,

respectively. Simply put, there is not enough data to draw obvious conclusions related to a trend

in student disciplinary infractions and the implementation of the SEL lessons over this time

period.

The researcher's third research question was: how does the implementation of a

research-based SEL curriculum influence staff perceptions on student behavior in their

classroom? This question sought to provide the researcher the ability to draw conclusions on

teacher perception subsequent to implementation due to having a post-survey after teachers

facilitated SEL lessons with all 7th and 8th grade students. Essentially, after seeing how

implementing such lessons impacts students in the classroom, the participating staff members

could reasonably hypothesize if SEL discussions have a positive impact on students and their

decision making. The responding staff members clearly demonstrated a shift in their own

behaviors within their classroom environment, which may be the most critical data within the

study. In each of the four domains of the self-reflection questionnaire – Student-Centered

Discipline, Teacher Language, Responsibility and Choice, and Warmth and Support – participants

expressed a shift in their approach to the students in their classroom, as evidenced by an

increase in each of the aforementioned domains of the survey after facilitating SEL lessons with

their students.

Table 4

Teacher Questionnaire Surveys: The Change in Average Score of Each Domain

Four Domains from Survey	Pre-Survey: Average Score	Post-Survey: Average Score	% Change
Student-Centered Discipline	3.54	3.77	6.50%
Teacher Language	4.05	4.29	5.93%
Responsibility and Choice	3.21	3.43	6.85%
Warmth and Support	3.97	4.36	9.82%

Note. The table shows the change in the average score that teachers self-reported on the self-

reflection questionnaires for each of the four domains from the beginning of SEL

implementation to after implementation. The entire questionnaire can be found in Appendix D.

Furthermore, as noted in Table 4, the post-survey data suggests that staff participants

saw great value in utilizing the *School-Connect* SEL platform with students, with nearly all of the

survey data showing positive increases across the prompts. Most important to the survey

surrounding teacher perception of SEL at the middle school level was teacher willingness to

implement lessons, their viewpoint on the SEL's importance, and how effective they believe

social emotional learning to be in the academic setting. As per the survey data, staff became

more willing to implement SEL in their lessons with 47% of respondents being "very willing" as

compared to only 38% at the beginning of the SEL pilot initiative. Similarly, there was a sharp

increase in the percentage of participants who believed SEL was "very important," with 53% in

the post-survey as compared to only 33% in the pre-survey. Additionally, as noted in Figure 16,

the percentage of staff respondents who believed the SEL program to be an "effective" or "very

effective" step in promoting positive behaviors in middle school students rose from 86% to 92%

between the surveys.

Figure 16

Change in Staff Perception of SEL
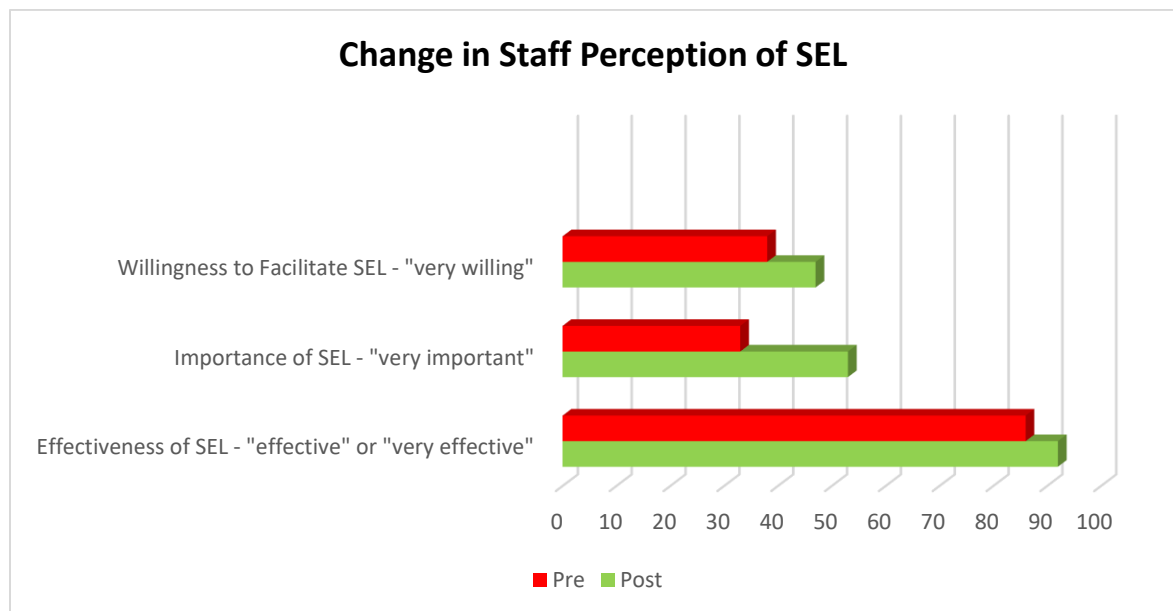
Note. This figure shows the change in staff perception of SEL from the beginning of

implementation to the end of implementation, as per data from the pre and post-surveys. The

entire questionnaire can be found in Appendix D.

Discussion

In the research study examining teacher perceptions about Social-Emotional Learning,

the data analysis process played a pivotal role in unraveling the nuances of teacher attitudes

and understanding towards the SEL initiative at Penndale Middle School. Through a meticulous

examination of pre and post-survey questionnaire responses, the researcher was able to delve

into the evolving perspectives and insights of the participating staff members before and after

exposure to the implementation of the *School-Connect* SEL initiative. The analysis entailed both

quantitative and qualitative approaches, scrutinizing staff open-ended responses and the

changes to their Likert scale responses from the pre and post-surveys.

The quantitative data enabled the researcher to identify statistical shifts in perceptions

over time, highlighting changes in attitudes and beliefs of the Penndale Middle School teachers

and staff. Specifically, the pre-survey data demonstrated that staff perceptions surrounding SEL

were positive at the start of the initiative. The respondents demonstrated an openness to

piloting SEL in the classroom and they were willing to facilitate the *School-Connect* lessons with

students. Meanwhile, the post-survey data made it clear that enthusiasm for SEL only increased

as survey participants were more inclined to respond favorably about their own social emotional

practices within their respective classrooms. The qualitative analysis offered depth of staff

understanding of SEL and its purpose in the school setting. In the post-survey, staff members

provided the researcher with responses that had a higher degree of acumen and awareness

regarding the tenets of SEL as compared to the brevity provided in the open-ended responses in

the pre-survey. By triangulating both quantitative and qualitative findings, the researcher could

construct a comprehensive understanding of teacher and staff perceptions towards SEL.

Additionally, the researcher also sought to use the causal-comparative research method

to investigate the impact of Social-Emotional Learning on student discipline. The interpretation

of the data analysis process underscored the complexity of assessing the effects of SEL on

student behavior. Despite meticulous analysis, the findings did not yield sufficient evidence to

demonstrate a clear and obvious impact of SEL lessons on student discipline.

Summary

The research study conducted at Penndale Middle School focused on analyzing data obtained from teacher perception surveys to identify the sentiment that staff held toward SEL before and after implementation, and whether their perception shifted due to the implementation of intentional SEL lessons within the classroom environment. Through an analysis of the staff surveys the researcher identified changes in teacher perception that revealed consistent positive sentiment for SEL lessons within the *School-Connect* platform as staff gained a better understanding of the purpose of SEL and as they became more comfortable with the learning platform. Additionally, the study also extracted student disciplinary data from before the implementation of these SEL lessons and then compared the behavioral data to identify if there were any causal effects of SEL and student behavior. Despite not identifying any clear trends, the analysis of the behavioral data did shed light on the need for more systemic class wide conversations regarding specific behavioral trends specific to the context surrounding specific student behaviors.

Throughout the study the researcher was able to obtain data to analyze and draw conclusions that show discernible trends which helped provide greater hope for the future of SEL at the middle school level. However, as with any research study, there are inherent variables that impact the overall outcome of the data. In Chapter V, the researcher will provide further discussion on the conclusions, limitations and future recommendations.

CHAPTER V

Conclusions and Recommendations

In this chapter, the researcher will provide their conclusions and recommendations from

the research study, as well as the limitations that may have impacted the outcomes of the study.

Using the data collected from the pre and post-surveys from the self-reflection questionnaires,

as well as the student behavioral data, outcomes from the research study will be presented.

Additionally, considering the limitations within this particular study, the researcher will provide

reflections on how future research could be more effective and efficient regarding social

emotional learning and its impact on the well-being of middle school students.

Conclusions

At the inception of the study, the researcher identified three leading questions to guide

the research process. Below are the three research questions that directed the study:

1. What are middle school teachers' perceptions about the efficacy of social-emotional

   learning and its impact on student behavior?

2. Does the implementation of a specific, research-based SEL curriculum have a positive

   impact on student behavior?

3. How does the implementation of a research-based SEL curriculum influence staff

   perceptions on student behavior in their classroom?

Research Question One

Each of the aforementioned questions attempts to identify a unique aspect of SEL and the

impact, or potential impact, that an SEL program could have within a middle school. Two of the

three research questions, specifically, target the perceptions of teachers and staff and their

belief in the effectiveness of such an initiative. As with any initiative, staff buy-in is critical, and

the first research question hones in on teacher perception prior to implementing a research-

based SEL program within the school, identifying baseline attitudes of staff. Penndale Middle

School staff members were provided an optional and anonymous survey with a combination of

open-ended response and Likert-scale questions about social-emotional learning including

questions about their own classroom practices. The research-based survey asks teachers to

evaluate their own teaching practice as it relates to their own social-emotional competence. The

survey tool emphasizes that teachers must also develop their own SEL competencies, as those

directly influence their interactions with students both socially and academically.

     During the review of literature, numerous sources referenced the need to have staff

members on board with the start of any SEL initiative if the educational institution wants to see

success. In particular, this was noted by the *Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional*

Learning, who argued that It is crucial that schools carefully plan their approach before

implementing any SEL program. While delivery method, staffing, and funding are significant

considerations, schools must also assess their unique strengths and requirements (CASEL). Quite

a few sources expressed the need to allow for stakeholders to have a voice in planning for the

logistics of SEL implementation, and therefore, the multiple surveys, staff trainings, and

feedback sessions inevitably helped the SEL pilot gain traction leading up to the second

semester of the 2023-24 school year at Penndale Middle School.

     The pre-survey provided staff participants the option for open response to expound on

their pre-conceived notions of SEL. This allowed staff to demonstrate whether they had a true

understanding of what "social-emotional learning" means to them, and could also provide the

researcher with more insight into whether or not they had a grasp on its purpose in schools.

Although many of the open-ended responses lacked a strong depth of the topic, it was clear that

participants had a solid, working knowledge of SEL and the role that the curriculum and the

school play in the process. Responses from staff were typically rooted in various elements of the

CASEL competencies, demonstrating a foundational grasp of the purpose of SEL.

Furthermore, the quantitative results of the pre-survey outlined a basic understanding

that staff held about SEL and provided the researcher with a baseline on their willingness to lead

the lessons and facilitate dialogue with students surrounding social-emotional learning. The pre-

survey also outlined staff perceptions on the effectiveness of SEL prior to implementing any

lessons. Staff were generally positive to start the SEL journey at Penndale Middle School, with a

limited amount of apprehension. 80% of staff members reported a positive outlook to

incorporate SEL lessons within the school day whereas only one staff member had a negative

viewpoint while the remaining balance were neutral towards SEL. Not only were reporting staff

members willing to facilitate the *School-Connect* resource, they also believed the curriculum and

its lessons to hold importance during the academic day, as just over 70% acknowledged the

implementation for SEL lessons to be "important" or "very important." Additionally, as reported

in January 2024, the pre-survey results highlighted that staff demonstrated a belief that SEL was

a generally effective way to impact student behavior. This was evidenced by 86%

initial respondents perceiving SEL to be "somewhat effective," "effective," or "very effective"

and can be seen very poignantly in Figure 11.

It is also important to note that within section two of the pre-survey self-assessment,

respondents reflected on their current SEL practices within their classroom environment.

Inevitably, the everyday instructional practices of teachers have a direct impact on the social,

emotional, and academic skills of their students. This, too, provided a baseline for the

researcher to comprehend how effective participants were at implementing fundamental

components of the SEL core competencies in their classes prior to facilitating the *School-Connect*

lessons. As was illustrated in Table 2, the two domains where staff respondents self-assessed

with the highest ratings were "Teacher Language" (4.05 out of 5) and "Warmth and Support"

(3.97 out of 5).

Positive teacher language considers how educators communicate with students,

emphasizing encouragement of student effort and improvement. Effective teacher language

goes beyond mere praise, guiding students on how to monitor and regulate their own behavior

rather than simply dictating correct behavior. Having a high self-reported score shows that staff

members believe that they are using effective teacher language during instructional moments

with students. Warmth and support in the classroom refer to nurturing environments where

teachers demonstrate care for students through actions such as asking questions, addressing

concerns, sharing personal stories, and promoting a safe atmosphere for risk-taking and inquiry.

Teachers also establish inclusive structures, such as restorative circles or sharing 'new and

goods,' to foster peer and teacher appreciation among students. Similarly, high marks in the

"Warmth and Support" domain, as self-reported by staff, illustrates their belief that they have

created safe and supportive environments for students, at least as a baseline before embarking

on the SEL journey with their students.

The other two domains – Student-Centered Discipline and Responsibility and Choice –

had well represented self-ratings of 3.54 and 3.21, respectively, albeit, these ratings were

significantly lower than the aforementioned domains. Student-centered discipline involves

classroom management strategies that are developmentally appropriate and motivational for

students. Effective implementation of student-centered discipline means allowing students to

be self-directed and involved in classroom decisions. Teachers avoid over-managing or using

punitive measures, instead fostering shared norms and values with students. Proactive

management strategies are emphasized, ensuring consistency and alignment with classroom

norms. Responsibility and choice in the classroom refer to how teachers empower students to

make responsible decisions regarding their work. Teachers establish an environment where

students contribute meaningfully to class procedures and academic choice. Although these two

domains may have scored lower compared to "Teacher Language" and "Warmth and Support,"

these ratings proved to be an effective baseline for the researcher to use to compare ratings

over the course of multiple surveys, after the post-survey was given.

In using the pre-survey data, the researcher was able to determine that there was a firm

enough understanding of SEL held by teachers, including the interplay between their own

teaching practices and the impact they have on students' social-emotional competencies. More

importantly, the pre-survey highlighted teacher optimism for the SEL initiative, as the majority

of staff respondents believed that the research-based *School-Connect* curriculum could

potentially deliver positive results concerning student behavior. Consequently, this strong belief

held by the Penndale staff at the inception of the initiative allowed the researcher to conclude

that staff perception regarding the efficacy of social-emotional learning and its impact on

student behavior was positive.

Research Question Two

The second research question in the study was, does the implementation of a specific,

research-based SEL curriculum have a positive impact on student behavior? The researcher

sought to pull data showing the quantity of state reportable offenses during the timeframe that

the SEL curriculum was utilized and then compare the quantity of state reportable offenses prior

to using SEL during the academic day. Although the student discipline data from the second

semester of the 2023-24 school year was significantly lower than the data from the second

semester of the 2022-23 school year, the same could not be true when comparing the data from

the first semester with the second semester from the 2023-24 school year. In the latter

scenario, it was the same students in the same school year, yet the number of state reportable

offenses, in that case, had increased dramatically.

Because of the arbitrary, back and forth nature of the data sets, and the limited amount

of time working with the *School-Connect* platform, the ambiguous disciplinary data was too

narrow in scope for the researcher to draw any causal relationship between the execution of the

chosen SEL platform and an increase in positive student behavior and decision-making. As a

result, the researcher was unable to conclude the impact, one way or another, that SEL had on

student discipline at Penndale Middle School, and the researcher will discuss limitations in

further depth throughout this chapter.

Research Question Three

On a more positive note, the researcher was able to identify and utilize both qualitative

and quantitative data to draw conclusions surrounding the final research question. The third

research question was, does the implementation of a research-based SEL curriculum influence

staff perceptions on student behavior in their classroom? Having the pre-survey results from

January 2024 as baseline data and feedback, the researcher was able to analyze this information

and compare it with the staff responses from the post-survey to see if perception of staff had

changed over the course of the SEL implementation. 38 staff members completed the optional

post-survey questionnaire as opposed to only 21 participants before introducing SEL lessons.

In the open-ended prompts about SEL, staff responses showed significantly deeper

insights in the post-survey following four months of facilitating SEL lessons. Early responses prior

to implementation often spoke about coping strategies and decision-making, which are

perfectly fine responses but often stated in a fragment of a sentence. In the post-survey

responses, participants provided far more robust language and depth in their responses,

speaking to the CASEL competencies, fostering empathy, and developing the 'whole-child.'

Meanwhile, nearly every quantitative measure from the pre- to post-surveys demonstrated a positive change in staff perception towards SEL and its impact on student behavior. Participant willingness to facilitate SEL amplified, belief in the effectiveness increased, and perception of SEL's importance for students rose dramatically over the four-month implementation. This was illustrated in Figure 16, showing the significant change in staff sensitivity to the SEL core programming being presented to students over the second semester of the 2023-24 school year.

Beyond the willingness, effectiveness and importance of SEL, the questionnaire tools presented to participants before and after implementation brought to light the positive growth made by staff regarding their own SEL competency. As noted in Table 4, staff participants acknowledged an uptick in each of the four domains of – Student-Centered Discipline, Teacher Language, and Responsibility and Choice, and Warmth and Support.

In each domain, the respondents demonstrated a clear and obvious change in their interactions and approaches toward students. Teachers identified that their own attitudes surrounding their social-emotional teaching practices were improving through the facilitation of the *School-Connect* SEL lessons in just over a four-month period. Through the self-reflection tools, respondents reported being more likely to use positive, reinforcing language with students, more likely to show a greater degree of warmth and support to students, and more likely to ask students to reflect on their choices. The data suggests that the SEL lessons have changed staff behaviors and attitudes as they have begun to develop their own core competencies further, which has improved their instructional practices and approach to their students.

After analyzing all of the quantitative data from the survey instruments provided to participants before and after the SEL initiative, it is rather conclusive that the implementation of

the research-based SEL curriculum has influenced staff perceptions on student behavior at

Penndale Middle School. Participants expressed a greater willingness to facilitate lessons and

they articulated a stronger, more emboldened belief in SEL's effectiveness and importance for

students. Most importantly, teachers demonstrated an immense amount of personal growth in

their own personal SEL journey that undoubtedly has an impact on their perception of the

universal core intervention for students.

Limitations

Due to unforeseen circumstances, the duration of the SEL implementation was limited

to four months rather than the anticipated seven to eight months. Initially, *RethinkEd* was the

SEL curriculum that Penndale Middle School was going to use in 7th and 8th grade classrooms.

However, the funding for the SEL program was tied to grant funding through the Montgomery

County Intermediate Unit and the grant was written by the county for high school (grades 9-12)

SEL participation. Originally, the school district was informed that they would qualify because

North Penn middle schools operate under a 7th-8th-9th grade model, but unfortunately, just

before adopting *RethinkEd*, the school district was told that their middle schools do not qualify

for the grant funding. The operating costs for *RethinkEd* were between $15,000 and $20,000 for

a three-year contract per building. These costs exceeded what the school district was willing to

budget for when considering an SEL program. As a result, the school district's SEL committee

began seeking out other less expensive SEL curriculum options.

The switch from *RethinkEd* to *School-Connect* was not as simple as merely interjecting a

different program. Rather, the district's SEL committee needed to verify that the *School-Connect*

curriculum met the needs of the school district and its students and staff. As a result,

implementation was pushed back to the second semester of the 2023-2024 to provide ample

time for staff to become familiar with the curriculum using appropriate staff in-service time as per the professional development calendar set forth by the school district.

The confines of the Capstone project being limited to a one-year initiative was another limitation to this particular study. This type of research study would be best as a three to five-year study to truly see if SEL had an impact on the school environment over a sustained period of time. Disciplinary data, when tracked in an acute month to month manner such as this, is influenced by so many varying factors. However, if the behavioral data was tracked over a three-year period, for example, true patterns could emerge to determine if there was a causal relationship between the SEL lessons and student behavior.

Along this same vein, the North Penn School District experienced a traumatic event in one of the three middle school in mid-April 2024 that involved. This event occurred at Pennbrook Middle School, less than a mile from Penndale Middle School, where one 7th grade student had attacked another 7th grade student with a metal Stanley cup in the cafeteria during lunch. As a result, the victim was bleeding from their head, which required EMS services and the individual being taken to the hospital in an ambulance. In a matter of one or two days, this event became a national news story and sent shock waves throughout the district. Community members were calling for more strict disciplinary procedures and began demanding at school board meetings and in the media for immediate consequences for any aggressive student behavior. This created great tension within all school buildings within the North Penn School District as small underlying student issues became magnified and principals began to err on the side of caution in regards to student discipline. Consequently, building administrators became far quicker to leverage student suspensions, thus, leading to further state reportable offenses which may have skewed the behavioral data being scrutinized in the study.

Another local factor unique to the North Penn School District, and more specifically, Penndale Middle School, was the installation of the *Halo* vape detectors in all student bathrooms throughout the building in February 2024. This technology immediately alerts the security and building administrative teams when a student is vaping in the bathroom. Per district policy, building administration, with the support of school security, is expected to conduct a search of student belongings. Inevitably, this led to the discovery and confiscation of far more vapes then otherwise would have been discovered. Furthermore, this led to additional offenses that get reported to the state, and thus, led to a greater number of suspensions.

Another limitation in the research study was the number of participants who completed the researcher's SEL pre-survey. The pre-survey, which was entirely optional and anonymous, was completed by 21 staff members. The post-survey, which was provided to staff after facilitating the *School-Connect* curriculum, was completed by 38 staff members and provided a better overall sample size. A step that would have benefited the researcher would have been to survey staff members from the other two middle schools within the North Penn School District that were also embarking on a similar SEL journey.

Because the surveys were entirely anonymous, it was impossible to have the same staff members complete both the pre-survey and the post-survey. The researcher could only use the pre-survey and post-survey data as a comparable litmus test regarding the overall perception of the staff before and after SEL implementation. While this was a limiting factor on how the data could be utilized, it still was useful data to better understand teacher perception regarding the implementation of the SEL curriculum with all 7th and 8th grade students.

Due to the building schedule, implementing the SEL curriculum to 9th grade students during the 2023-24 school year was not feasible. Having 9th grade students participate in the SEL implementation, and thus incorporating all 9th grade teachers, would have truly created a

universal SEL program across the entire school. Because the SEL Core Team was not able to accomplish this without disrupting the building schedule, they were limited to only two-thirds of the building participating in social emotional learning.

Undoubtedly, the researcher's personal bias surrounding the topic of SEL and their desire to see the success of the initiative could have affected the overall study. Additionally, due to the researcher's former experience as an elementary school principal where SEL was implemented daily, it is reasonable to surmise that inherent bias existed to create a similar environment at the middle level.

Recommendations for Future Research

The data collected and analyzed within the scope of the research study has provided the researcher with a far deeper understanding of the perceptions and beliefs that teachers and staff hold towards SEL. This, however, is just one small development in the scope of the larger social-emotional learning journey within the school and district, and it is important for future exploration and analysis to continue by building off of prior studies such as this. Although the research study was able to provide some answers, it certainly opened up a myriad of questions that could allow the researcher to expand further on the development of teacher perception of SEL as well as the impact SEL might have on student behavior.

Within this study specifically, the researcher would have benefitted from targeted observations within classrooms. The pre- and post-surveys, using the four teacher domains – Student-Centered Discipline, Teacher Language, Responsibility and Choice, and Warmth and Support – identified teachers reflecting and growing in their practice regarding specific teaching strategies and approaches. Targeted walkthrough observations, with the intention of seeing specific SEL teaching practices in the classroom would have provided a greater layer of fidelity to this specific research study.

Furthermore, such observations, coupled with teacher interviews at the end of the semester and SEL implementation, would have provided the researcher with extensive feedback. Qualitative data such as this would have generated a deeper, more concentrated layer of feedback from staff, allowing the researcher to identify a more genuine level of staff perception towards SEL and its impact on student behavior.

As noted throughout the review of literature, numerous sources referenced a need for more specific data tools to help researchers identify what success looks like with an SEL program. Simply identifying upward or downward trends in student discipline data is limiting, as the number of variables is considerable. Unquestionably, any researcher would find greater fidelity if the research were to span three to five years versus one semester within a school year as was the case in this study.

Possibly more important than student disciplinary data is the use of student data that would show social-emotional growth over time. Within the North Penn School District, all secondary students completed a "belonging survey" which was a perceptual tool used as a litmus test on student well-being. "Belonging surveys," for example, or aggregate data from the Pennsylvania Youth Survey (PAYS) which is given to students in sixth through twelfth grades every two years, would be able to provide researchers with a better idea of where students are at in their mental health journey. As valuable of a tool that this is, its use in a larger SEL research study would require a more systemic, chronological timeline that spans multiple years of SEL implementation, a much longer a time period than this Capstone study affords.

Beyond the borders of the school district, future research on the topic of SEL would benefit students, staff, and administrators as SEL is certainly not going away any time soon. The need for mental health supports is too great and exponentially getting more challenging for students and educational communities. SEL will continue to expand, however, further

exploration on the matter will provide the pathway to more effective social-emotional learning and greater student success. Future research should focus on developing frameworks and practices within SEL that actively address and mitigate biases, thereby fostering inclusive environments where all students, regardless of background, can thrive and develop essential social and emotional competencies. In the review of literature, a central concerning theme of researchers involved the potential for implicit bias in SEL curricula and its impact on minority groups and students of color.

There was limited data to draw specific conclusions, however, there was enough concern to warrant a deeper look into how SEL programs can be more equitable for all students. Something that cannot be denied is the clear and obvious disproportionate discipline data that exists for children of color, especially for black, brown, and Hispanic students. More extensive research and development of SEL programs that intentionally and purposefully target the needs of these students would likely have a universal benefit for all students.

Summary

As student stress and anxiety continues to exponentially rise due to a number of societal factors, the need for student mental health supports is more imperative than ever. Rather than simply adding more mental health services as a reaction, school communities are implored to provide more expansive Tier 1, universal programming to support the social-emotional development of children. This programming, however, cannot stop at the elementary level, where SEL has become rather ubiquitous, and must continue into the teenage years of adolescents.

The data identified within this research study only adds to the credibility for developing a districtwide plan to continue with SEL lessons for middle school students, and potentially at the high school as well. The high level of optimism and momentum within the school community

suggests that further augmentation of the SEL curriculum would lead to greater student

outcomes socially, emotionally, and academically. It is the researcher's recommendation that

the *School-Connect* platform continue to be leveraged for all students within the three middle

schools of the North Penn School District. As noted in the various surveys of this study, the

teacher feedback suggests a high degree of support for the initiative and its cause, as the

participants within the study expressed great benefit to their own teaching practices, and

ultimately, the potential to benefit all students. Additionally, continued research on SEL would

benefit the entire educational community. The CASEL competencies are a great starting point

for educators to reference, but further studies need to identify data measurements that outline

what SEL success looks like for schools.

In conclusion, this research study underscores the importance of teachers' perceptions

of SEL in fostering the success and development of students. As teachers enhance their capacity

to facilitate SEL lessons and strengthen their own social-emotional competencies, their influence

on children's growth will be even more profound.

References

Baghian, N., Shati, M., Sari, A. A., Eftekhari, A., & Rasolnezhad, A. (2023). Barriers to mental and

    social health programs in schools: A qualitative study. *Iranian Journal of Psychiatry*,

    18(2), 97–107.

Balch, M. (1993). Values education in American public schools: Have we come full circle? *ASCD*,

    94, 1–34.

Bergin, C., Cipriano, C., Wanless, S., & Barnes, T. (2023). Five key questions educators ask about

    SEL. *Kappan*, *104*(7), 47–52.

CASEL. (2023). *What is the CASEL Framework?*. https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-is-

    the-casel-framework/#:~:text=The%20CASEL%205%20addresses%20five

Daunic, A. P., Corbett, N. L., Smith, S. W., Algina, J., Poling, D., Worth, M., Boss, D., Crews, E., &

    Vezzoli, J. (2021). Efficacy of the social-emotional learning foundations curriculum for

    kindergarten and first grade students at risk for emotional and behavioral disorders.

    Journal of School Psychology, *86*, 78–99. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2021.03.004

Desai, P., Karahalios, V., Persuad, S., & Reker, K. (2014). A social justice perspective on social-

    emotional learning. *Communique*, *43*(1), 14–16.

Edutopia. (2011). *Social and emotional learning: a short history*.

    https://www.edutopia.org/social-emotional-learning-history/

Effrem, K., & Robbins, J. (2019). Social-emotional learning: K-12 education as new age nanny

    state. *Pioneer Institute for Public Policy Research*, *192*.

Eklund, K., Kilpatrick, K. D., Kilgus, S. P., Haider, A., & Eckert, T. (2018). A systematic review of

    state-level social-emotional learning standards: Implications for practice and research.

    School Psychology Review, *47*(3), 316–326. https://doi.org/10.17105/SPR-

    2017.0116.V47-3

Espelage, D. L., Rose, C. A., & Polanin, J. R. (2016). Social-emotional learning program to

promote prosocial and academic skills among middle school students with disabilities.

Remedial and Special Education, *37*(6), 323–332.

https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932515627475

Green, A. L., Ferrante, S., Boaz, T. L., Kutash, K., & Wheeldon-Reece, B. (2021). Social and

emotional learning during early adolescence: Effectiveness of a classroom based SEL

program for middle school students. *Psychology in the Schools*, *58*(6).

https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22487

Greenberg, M. T., Domitrovich, C. E., Weissberg, R. P., & Durlak, J. A. (2017). Social and

emotional learning as a public health approach to education. *The Future of Children*,

27(1), 13–32. https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.2017.0001

Grossman, J., Sepanik, S., Portilla, X., & Brown, K. (2021). *Educational equity: Solutions through

social and emotional well-being*. MDRC.

Hendricks, C. (2017). *Improving schools through action research: A reflective practice approach*

(4th ed.). Pearson.

Jones, S., Bailey, R., Brush, K., & Kahn, J. (2018, March 26). *Preparing for effective SEL

implementation*. Harvard Graduate School of Education.

https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Preparing-for-

Effective-SEL-Implementation.pdf

Kaspar, K. L., & Massey, S. L. (2022). Implementing social-emotional learning in the elementary

classroom. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *51*(4). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-

022-01324-3

MacDonnell, M., McClain, K., Ganguli, A., & Elias, M. J. (2021). It's not all or nothing: Exploring

the impact of a social-emotional and character development intervention in the middle

grades. *RMLE Online*, *44*(2), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/19404476.2020.1868226

Mahfouz, J., & Gordon, D. P. (2020). The case for focusing on school principals' social–emotional

competencies. *Management in Education*, *35*(4).

https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020620932351

McDaniel, S., Bardhoshi, G., & Kivlighan, M. (2022). Universal SEL implementation to improve

community and prosocial skills: A pilot study. *School Community Journal*, *32*(2), 57–76.

Milson, A. (2000). Creating a curriculum for character development: A case study. *Clearing

House*, *74*(2), 89–93.

Nenonene, R. L., Gallagher, C. E., Kelly, M. K., & Collopy, R. M. (2019). Challenges and

opportunities of infusing social, emotional, and cultural competencies into teacher

preparation. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, *46*(4), 92–115.

Perryman, K., Popejoy, E., & Conroy, J. (2020). A phenomenological study of teachers and

mental health paraprofessionals implementing the Jesse Lewis Choose Love program.

*Journal of School-Based Counseling Policy and Evaluation Counseling Policy and

Evaluation*, *2*(2), 113–130. https://doi.org/10.25774/9wpw-pq36

Portilla, X. (2022). Healing school systems: solutions for educational equity through social and

emotional well-being. *MDRC*.

Revell, L., & Arthur, J. (2007). Character education in schools and the education of teachers.

Journal of Moral Education, *36*(1), 79–92.

Richerme, L. K. (2020). Every Student Succeeds Act and social emotional learning: Opportunities

and considerations for P-12 arts educators. *Arts Education Policy Review*, *122*(3), 1–7.

https://doi.org/10.1080/10632913.2020.1787284

Rose, C. A., Monda-Amaya, L. E., & Espelage, D. L. (2011). Bullying perpetration and victimization

in special education: A review of the literature. *Remedial and Special Education*, *32*.

Savitz, R. S., & Ippolito, J. (2023). Case study of an SEL coach and instructional specialist:

Understanding a new role. *Michigan Reading Journal*, *56*(1), 35–48.

Schonert-Reichl, K. A. (2019). Advancements in the landscape of social and emotional learning

and emerging topics on the horizon. *Educational Psychologist*, *54*(3), 222–232.

https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2019.1633925

Snyder, F., Flay, B., Vuchinich, S., Acock, A., Washburn, I., Beets, M., & Li, K.-K. (2009). Impact of

a social-emotional and character development program on school-level indicators of

academic achievement, absenteeism, and disciplinary outcomes: A matched-pair,

cluster-randomized, controlled trial. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*,

3(1), 26–55. https://doi.org/10.1080/19345740903353436

Taylor, A., & Lein, A. (2023). Integrating social and emotional learning (SEL) into academic

content: A path for education preparation programs. *Kentucky Journal of Excellence in

College Teaching and Learning*, *19*, 38–55.

Taylor, L., Weist, M., & DeLoach, K. (2012). Exploring the use of the interactive systems

framework to guide school mental health services in post-disaster contexts: Building

community capacity for trauma-focused interventions. *American Journal of Community

Psychology*, *50*(3), 530–540.

Terrasi, S., & de Galarce, P. C. (2017). Trauma and learning in America's classrooms. *Phi Delta

Kappan*, *98*(6), 35–41.

Todd, C., Smothers, M., & Colson, T. (2022). Implementing SEL in the classroom: A practitioner

perspective. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*,

95(1), 18–25.

Varner, E. (2023). Toxic SEL: Beware the temptation to become the compliance police. *Journal of*

    General Music Education, *36*(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/27527646231157684

Whalen, C., & Moore, A. (2023). *Effectiveness of RethinkEd's wellness curriculum for students*

    with neurodiversity [White paper]. RethinkEd. https://www.rethinked.com/wp-

    content/uploads/2023/10/effectiveness-rethinked-wellness-curriculum-students-

    neurodiversity-white-paper-v26-20230912.pdf

Yoder, N. (2014). *Self-assessing social and emotional instruction and competencies: A*

    tool for teachers. Center on Great Teachers & Leaders: American Institutes for Research.

    https://gtlcenter.org/sites/default/files/SelfAssessmentSEL.pdf

Appendices

Appendix A. IRB Approval

PennWest
UNIVERSITY

Institutional Review Board
250 University Avenue
California, PA 15419
instreviewboard@calu.edu
Melissa Sovak, Ph.D.

Dear Stefan Muller,

Please consider this email as official notification that your proposal titled "Middle School Teachers' Perceptions of Social Emotional Learning and Its Impact on Student Behavior" (Proposal #PW23-018) has been approved by the Pennsylvania Western University Institutional Review Board as submitted.

The effective date of approval is 08/09/2023 and the expiration date is 08/08/2024. These dates must appear on the consent form.

Please note that Federal Policy requires that you notify the IRB promptly regarding any of the following:

(1) Any additions or changes in procedures you might wish for your study (additions or changes must be approved by the IRB before they are implemented)

(2) Any events that affect the safety or well-being of subjects

(3) Any modifications of your study or other responses that are necessitated by any events reported in (2).

(4) To continue your research beyond the approval expiration date of 08/08/2024, you must file additional information to be considered for continuing review. Please contact instreviewboard@calu.edu

Please notify the Board when data collection is complete.

Regards,

Melissa Sovak, PhD.
Chair, Institutional Review Board

Appendix B. IRB Proposal
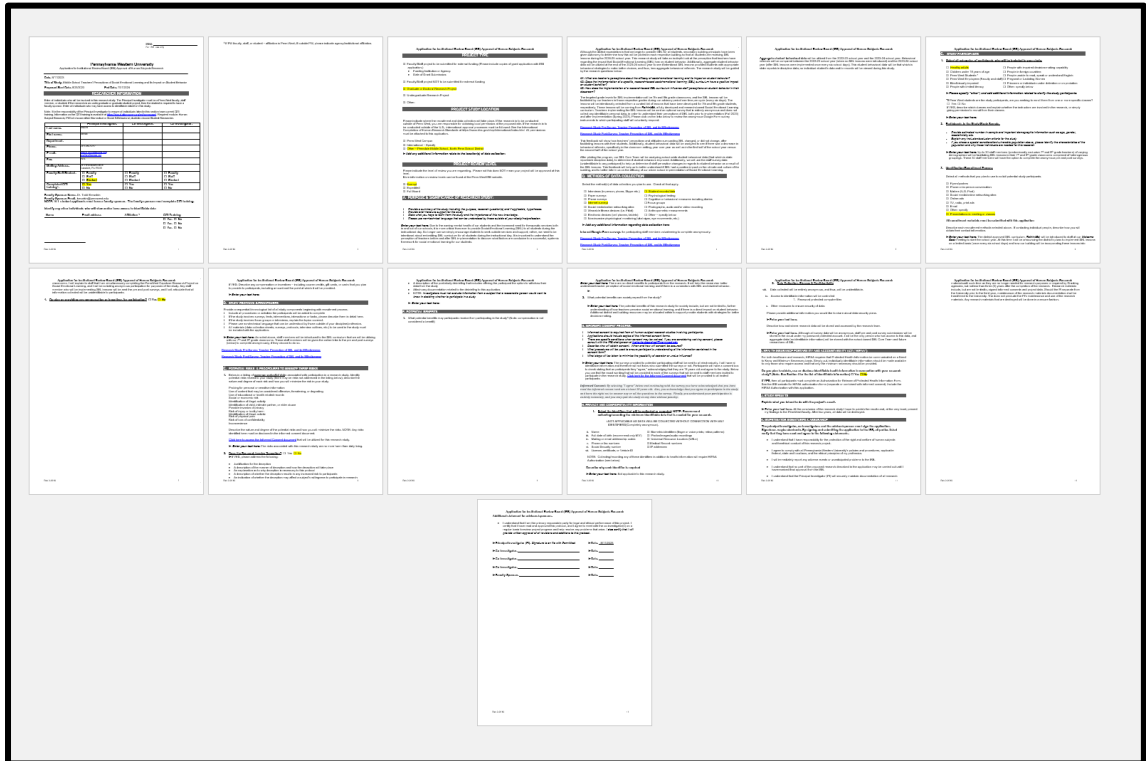
Appendix C. Participation Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT

Title of Study: Middle School Teachers' Perceptions of Social Emotional Learning and Its Impact on Student Behavior

KEY INFORMATION

You are being asked by Stefan Muller and Dr. Todd Keruskin, PennWest faculty advisor, to participate in a research study. Participation in the study is voluntary, and you may stop anytime.

The purpose of the study is to better understand teacher perceptions of social emotional learning and its impact on student behavior.

In this study, you will be asked to complete a pre-survey and a post survey regarding your perceptions of social emotional learning. Each respective survey will take approximately 20 minutes to complete. The potential risks during the study are no more harm than daily living. Remember, you may stop taking the survey at any time. In addition, if you have any questions regarding the research study you can email me at mul5165@pennwest.edu or mullers@npenn.org.

There are no direct benefits to participants from the research. It will help researchers better understand teachers' perceptions of social emotional learning.

SECURITY OF DATA

The online study is completely anonymous; you will not be asked to give any information that could identify you (e.g., name). The survey is NOT linked to IP addresses. Individual responses will not be presented, just the aggregated data.

Remember, taking part in this study is voluntary. If, while taking the survey, you feel uncomfortable or no longer want to participate, you may stop at any time. To stop taking the survey, you may close your browser completely.

There are no consequences if you decide to stop participating in this study.

There is no identifiable information collected from you during this study; all other information from this study will be confidential within local, state, and federal laws. The PennWest University Institutional Review Board (IRB) may review the research records. The study results may be shared in aggregate form at a meeting or journal, but there is no identifiable information to be revealed. The records from this study will be maintained for up to three (3) years after the study is complete.

Your information collected in this research will be used and/or distributed for future research, even if all your identifiers are removed.

If you have questions about the research or a research-related concern, you can contact Dr. Todd Keruskin at keruskin@pennwest.edu. If you have a question about your rights as a research participant that you need to discuss with someone, you can contact the PennWest University Institutional Review Board at InstReviewBoard@pennwest.edu.

If you would like a copy of this informed consent, please print this screen or contact Stefan Muller at mul5165@pennwest.edu.

By continuing with the survey and selecting "I agree" in the first question, you have acknowledged that you have read the informed consent and are at least 18 years old. Also, you acknowledge that you agree to participate in the study and have the right not to answer any or all the questions in the survey. Finally, you understand your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may quit the study at any time without penalty.

Appendix D. Teacher Self-Assessment Questionnaire

Research Study Survey: Teacher Perception of SEL and its Effectiveness

Thank you for considering participation in this research study on Social Emotional Learning and its Effectiveness. All collected responses on this survey are entirely anonymous, and by clicking "Submit" you are consenting to this research study. In May 2024 a post-survey with the exact same questions will be sent to those who participated in delivering SEL lessons. You do not need to deliver SEL lessons to participate in this initial survey as the purpose is to better understand teacher practice and perception as it relates to social emotional learning. The data from both respective surveys will be compared as a before and after snapshot of teacher perception of Social Emotional Learning and its impact on student behavior. At any time during this survey you can stop the survey simply by closing this browser. If you have questions, you can contact me at mul5165@pennwest.edu, or mullers@npenn.org. Thank you again for your consideration.

* Indicates required question

1. **Informed Consent:** By selecting "I agree" below and continuing with the survey, you have *
acknowledged that you have read the informed consent and are at least 18 years old. Also, you acknowledge that you agree to participate in the study and have the right not to answer any or all the questions in the survey. Finally, you understand your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may quit the study at any time without penalty.

   Mark only one oval.

   ( ) I agree

2. Please Indicate the grade levels that you currently teach (select all that apply):

   Check all that apply.

   [ ] 7th
   [ ] 8th
   [ ] 9th

3. Please indicate the number of years you have worked in education:

   Mark only one oval.

   ( ) 0-5 years
   ( ) 6-10 years
   ( ) 11-15 years
   ( ) 16-20 years
   ( ) 20+ years

4. How would you define "Social-Emotional Learning"?

   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

5. How would you rate your familiarity with Social-Emotional Learning practices in the classroom?

   Mark only one oval.

   ( ) Unfamiliar
   ( ) Vaguely familiar
   ( ) Somewhat familiar
   ( ) Familiar
   ( ) Very familiar

6. In your opinion, how important is it for middle schools to implement SEL lessons during the instructional day?

   Mark only one oval.

   ( ) Very unimportant
   ( ) Unimportant
   ( ) Neutral
   ( ) Important
   ( ) Very important

7. How effective is Social-Emotional Learning in promoting positive behaviors of middle school students?

   Mark only one oval.

   ( ) Ineffective
   ( ) Not very effective
   ( ) Somewhat effective
   ( ) Effective
   ( ) Very effective

8. What is your willingness to incorporate SEL in your classroom?

   Mark only one oval.

   ◯ Unwilling
   ◯ Not very willing
   ◯ Neutral
   ◯ Willing
   ◯ Very willing

9. Currently, how would you rate your effectiveness of Social-Emotional Learning within your classroom?

   Mark only one oval.

   ◯ Ineffective
   ◯ Not very effective
   ◯ Somewhat effective
   ◯ Effective
   ◯ Very effective

Section 2: Self-Assessment of Current SEL Practices

The ensuing survey was taken, in part, from the *Center on Great Teachers & Leaders* (Yoder, 2014) in an effort to assess teachers' perception of their own social-emotional learning practices in their classroom.

As you complete section 2, consider both *how often* and *how well* you implement each of these practices in your classroom, based on the following 5-point scale:

1—I do not implement this practice

2—I struggle to implement this practice

3—I implement this practice reasonably well

4—I generally implement this practice well

5—I implement this practice extremely well

10. **Student-centered Discipline:** I have discussions with my students about how and why classroom procedures are implemented.

    Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5
	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

11. **Student-centered Discipline:** I implement consequences that are logical to the rule that is broken.

    Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5
	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

12. **Student-centered Discipline:** I am consistent in implementing classroom rules and consequences.

    Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5
	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

13. **Student-centered Discipline:** I respond to misbehavior by considering pupil specific social, affective, cognitive, and/or environmental factors that are associated with occurrence of the behavior.

    Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5
	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

14. **Student-centered Discipline:** I hold class discussions with my students so we can solve class problems.

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5
	○	○	○	○	○

15. **Student-centered Discipline:** I ask my students to reflect and redirect their behavior when they misbehave.

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5
	○	○	○	○	○

16. **Student-centered Discipline:** I teach students strategies to handle the emotions that affect their learning (e.g., stress, frustration).

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5
	○	○	○	○	○

17. **Student-centered Discipline:** I model strategies that will help students to monitor and regulate their behavior.

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5
	○	○	○	○	○

18. **Teacher Language:** I promote positive behaviors by encouraging my students when they display good social skills (e.g., acknowledge positive actions or steps to improve).

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5
	○	○	○	○	○

19. **Teacher Language:** I promote positive behaviors by encouraging my students when they display good work habits (e.g., acknowledge positive actions or steps to improve).

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5
	○	○	○	○	○

20. **Teacher Language:** I let my students know how their effort leads to positive results with specific affirmation.

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5
	○	○	○	○	○

21. **Responsibility and Choice:** I let my students help plan how they are going to learn in developmentally appropriate ways.

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5
	○	○	○	○	○

22. **Responsibility and Choice:** I ask for student input when making decisions about how the classroom will operate in developmentally appropriate ways.

Mark only one oval.

1	2	3	4	5
◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

23. **Responsibility and Choice:** I give students meaningful choices (with parameters) on what they can work on.

Mark only one oval.

1	2	3	4	5
◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

24. **Responsibility and Choice:** I make sure students make the connection between their choices and potential consequences.

Mark only one oval.

1	2	3	4	5
◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

25. **Responsibility and Choice:** I arrange experiences that allow my students to become responsible (e.g., classroom aids or jobs, peer tutoring, specific roles in group work) in developmentally appropriate ways.

Mark only one oval.

1	2	3	4	5
◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

26. **Warmth and Support:** I demonstrate to each student that I appreciate him or her as an individual (e.g., appropriate eye-contact, greeting each child by name).

Mark only one oval.

1	2	3	4	5
◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

27. **Warmth and Support:** I use the interests and experiences of my students when teaching.

Mark only one oval.

1	2	3	4	5
◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

28. **Warmth and Support:** I display to my students that I care about how and what they learn.

Mark only one oval.

1	2	3	4	5
◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

29. **Warmth and Support:** I let my students know that it is okay to get answers wrong or think outside of the box (e.g., modeling, praising attempts with "good thinking").

Mark only one oval.

1	2	3	4	5
◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

30. **Warmth and Support:** I check in with my students about academic and nonacademic concerns they might have.

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5
	○	○	○	○	○

31. **Warmth and Support:** I follow up with my students when they have a problem or concern.

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5
	○	○	○	○	○

32. **Warmth and Support:** I create structures in the classroom where my students feel included and appreciated (e.g., morning meetings, small moments, whole-class share outs).

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5
	○	○	○	○	○

Appendix E. NPSD District Research Approval Letter

NP NORTH PENN School District

August 7, 2023

Mr. Stefan Muller
213 Woodlawn Drive
Lansdale, PA 19446

Dear Mr. Muller:

On behalf of the North Penn School District (NPSD), your request to conduct research in our district regarding the impact that Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) has on student behavior and to incorporate SEL curriculum at Penndale Middle School is conditionally approved. It is understood that this study will take place during the 2023-24 school year, commencing late summer/early fall of 2023.

This approval is contingent upon the IRB Committee's approval of your proposed research project. Please send the IRB's written approval to my office prior to embarking upon this study.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns you may have. I wish you all the best with your research project.

Sincerely,

Todd M. Bauer, Ed.D.
Superintendent

North Penn School District 401 East Hancock Street Lansdale, PA 19446 215-368-0400 Fax 215-393-5841