

EDUCATOR PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING EMBEDDED IN
ACADEMIC INSTRUCTION

By

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative exploratory case study examined the results of the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* and individual semi-structured interviews with six teachers and three staff members regarding social-emotional learning (SEL) at the secondary school level. The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to explore how secondary teachers and staff at a mid-size public, suburban high school in Connecticut perceive the implementation of the RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) program. There were four themes that emerged from the data: becoming a warm demander (Hammond, 2015), adapting RULER SEL tools, RULER SEL and future impact, and the need for increased individual support. The first theme included the subtheme of building dynamic relationships with students. The second theme included the subtheme of professional development. Based on the findings three recommendations were made. First, schools should provide professional development opportunities for teachers and staff focused on adopting a warm demander (Hammond, 2015) approach in the classroom. Second, longitudinal studies were recommended to evaluate the long-term impact of RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) on student outcomes, well-being, and academic achievement. Third, collaborating with other schools, SEL experts, and community organizations was recommended to allow educators to share resources, and successful practices related to SEL implementation. Recommendation for future studies include a longitudinal study and comparative analysis of RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019).

Keywords: *Social-emotional learning, RULER SEL, warm demander, professional development*

DEDICATION

My work is dedicated to Isabel Poppy Wengler, a reminder that the best things do come in the smallest packages.

To my children, Hudson and Deacon, and my bonus children, Julia and Cam, I dedicate this dissertation to you, my greatest inspirations and motivations. As you grow and chart your own paths, may this dissertation serve as a reminder that no dream is too big, and no challenge too daunting when met with passion and diligence. Thank you for being my constant source of joy and strength. I dedicate this accomplishment to you with boundless love and gratitude.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Federal and state legislation can significantly influence the success criteria for schools by establishing specific standards, guidelines, and accountability measures that schools must adhere to receive funding or avoid penalties (Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2014). Federal legislation like the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) set specific academic benchmarks for elementary and secondary schools, particularly in terms of standardized test scores and graduation rates (Hamilton et al., 2019). Meeting these benchmarks often determines a school's eligibility for federal funding and can affect a school's overall reputation and standing within the community (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020). Federal and state legislation can also serve as a driving force in shaping the success criteria for schools and ultimately influence the allocation of resources, educational priorities, and the overall strategies employed to improve student outcomes (Hamilton et al., 2019).

No Child Left Behind (2002) emphasized raising test scores and neglected important aspects of learning and child development, such as social emotional learning (SEL) (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020). The Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) brought renewed focus on a comprehensive approach to student success with a broader definition, including academic development as well as social and emotional well-being measures (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020; Hamilton et al., 2019). This approach emphasized the impact of the learning environment itself (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020). The learning environment plays a critical role in students' personal, social, and academic development (Lewis et al., 2021). The passage of Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) also highlighted the potential unintended consequences of accountability-focused policies developed under No Child Left Behind (2002) on student well-being and suggested the evolving importance of considering social-emotional

factors in educational policies (Connecticut State Department of Education [CSDE], 2022; Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020; Hamilton et al., 2019; Lewis et al., 2021). A positive school climate with a strong sense of belonging and trusting relationships improves academic achievement and student engagement and helps to reduce negative effects of poverty on achievement (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020; Lewis et al., 2021). Naturally, practices and strategies that could positively impact school climate, such as SEL, became an important topic for schools and districts to consider (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning [CASEL] 2020, 2021; Eddins et al., 2020).

A sense of urgency around SEL practices re-emerged when the 2019-20 school year ended with students and staff across the United States teaching and learning from home due to the global COVID-19 pandemic (Eddins et al., 2020). The 2020-21 school year started in a manner unlike any year before, with schools offering varying models of in-person, remote, and/or hybrid instruction (Eveleigh et al., 2021). The profession again saw a renewed focus placed on SEL efforts for students and staff alike (Eddins et al., 2020; Eveleigh et al., 2021). This was spurred by the need for strong relationship-building practices embedded within academic instruction within Grades pre-kindergarten through 12 to address the growing frustrations voiced by educators who were navigating new demands with little training around these unique circumstances (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020; Eveleigh et al., 2021). Research has demonstrated the importance of recognizing emotions, the role emotions play in everyday life, and the positive impact SEL instruction has on student development; however social and emotional skills have not been explicitly taught in schools (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020; Frye et al., 2022).

There are many contributing factors and barriers that keep SEL from being fully integrated into educational research and practice (Frye et al., 2022). A predominant barrier comes from the lack of consistency and standardization of a definition of SEL adopted within the field of education (National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development [NCSEAD], 2019); Brackett & Cipriano, 2020). Social-emotional learning has been associated with a variety of definitions, programs, approaches, and frameworks (Frye et al., 2022; Hamilton et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2017). Schools and districts may have adopted, abandoned, or expanded SEL-related programs, such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (Gulbrandson, 2018), based on the operational definition of SEL schools were using at the time (Murdock, 2018). The state of Connecticut did not adopt an official definition of SEL until July 8, 2019, when Public Act 19-166 was signed by the state governor (An Act Concerning School Climates, 2019). It was not until the fall of 2021 that the CSDE (2022) launched its first-ever landscape scan of SEL activities across the state. This practice provided the CSDE with information regarding the SEL activities, professional learning opportunities, district reporting practices, and trends for all students across the state (CSDE, 2022). The CSDE's (2022) findings regarding programs and practices across the state were then summarized in an executive summary which included recommendations related to the inconsistencies in districts throughout the state. Explicit SEL instruction is a relatively new addition to modern curriculum and available research shows that SEL skills need to be embedded into daily routines (CASEL, 2013, 2020, 2021, 2022). Schools that have been focused on student achievement may find allocating daily time to SEL challenging at first but may also have largely positive impacts on SEL and achievement results (Jones et al., 2013).

Another key barrier keeping SEL from being fully integrated into educational research and practice is the difficulty for professionals in the field to agree on valid and reliable metrics to measure emotions (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020). Social-emotional learning has not been viewed as a skillset emphasized in educational research and instruction (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020). Some school districts have attempted to integrate systematic SEL using one of the most widely known frameworks developed by CASEL (2013). The lack of systematic data collection related to SEL integration has impeded consistent efforts and results (CSDE, 2022). Some attempts at SEL instruction have not yielded expected effects (Wells, 2021). Wells (2021) reported that students in the middle grades and above who indicated not feeling cared for in schools following SEL instruction also perceived attempts by adults to foster caring relationships to be inauthentic due to positional and relational power.

The lack of consistent SEL state standards is an additional barrier that has received more attention in educational research (Frye et al., 2022). Frye et al. (2022) discussed reasons to believe that state standards that drive instructional practice and promote accountability could be imprecise and variable. This imprecision is partly due to the varied ways in which standard developers in different states interpret the CASEL framework within their given context and then write CASEL-aligned standards (Hamilton & Schwartz, 2019). Each state has the flexibility to decide how they want to implement SEL standards (Hamilton & Schwartz, 2019). Each state can choose to develop standalone SEL state standards for Grades Kindergarten through 12 that are used as distinct guidelines dedicated solely to promoting social and emotional development in students (Hamilton & Schwartz, 2019). Alternatively, each state can integrate SEL standards within the existing curriculum of various subjects, ensuring that social and emotional learning objectives are seamlessly woven into the broader academic content (Hamilton & Schwartz,

2019). A standard process has not been utilized to create SEL standards (Frye et al., 2022). The unclear expectations for creating SEL standards has contributed to educator confusion and a lack of coherence with regards to implementation (Frye et al., 2022; Hamilton & Schwartz, 2019). The focus of this study was to better understand the perceptions teachers working in Grades 9-12 level have around SEL.

Definition of Key Terms

This section is intended to provide an understanding for the reader of terminology used in this study.

CASEL framework. The CASEL (2023) framework is a comprehensive approach to SEL that provides guidelines and strategies for integrating SEL into educational settings. It serves as a roadmap for educators to promote the social and emotional development of students, helping them acquire essential life skills and competencies (CASEL, 2022, 2023).

CASEL SEL competencies. The CASEL SEL competencies are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2022, 2023), which encompass a range of skills and behaviors (CASEL, 2023).

Emotional intelligence (EI). The ability to identify, label, understand, express, and regulate emotions using strategies gained from informal life experiences and formal instruction (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020).

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) is a federal law in the United States that was enacted as a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965) and replaced the previous iteration of the law known as the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) (Klein, 2016). The Every Student Succeeds Act emphasized state and local control over education and included provisions for funding, accountability, and assessment

systems to measure students' academic progress (Klein, 2016). The Every Student Succeeds Act provided states and schools with more choice and flexibility in designing accountability plans and goals that were not as focused on standardized test scores and expanded the definition of student success to include additional measures such as graduation rate and optional indicators including student engagement, educator engagement, access to and completion of advanced placement courses, school climate, and postsecondary success (Klein, 2016).

Positive behavior and supports. A proactive framework implemented in educational settings to enhance academic and social outcomes for all students that emphasizes the creation of a positive school culture by establishing clear behavioral expectations, teaching, and reinforcing positive behaviors, and providing targeted support to address any behavioral challenges (Gulbrandson, 2018).

Relationship skills. The ability to build and maintain healthy relationships with diverse groups of people by demonstrating skills such as active listening, negotiating conflict productively, communicating clearly, utilizing resources as needed, offering support to others, and resisting negative social pressures (Borowski, 2019; CASEL, 2022; Farmington Public Schools, 2022)

Responsible decision-making. Responsible decision-making is the ability to evaluate a situation, analyze available options and consider all potential consequences based on ethical standards, safety concerns, and social norms to make a well-informed decision (Borowski, 2019; CASEL, 2022; Weissberg et al., 2015).

Restorative practices (RP). A set of strategies that prioritize resolving conflicts and addressing harm by fostering communication, empathy, and accountability, aiming to repair relationships within a community or organization (Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018).

RULER framework. A systematic, evidence-based approach for intentional SEL instruction developed at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence which provides schools and districts with tools, skills and strategies aimed at developing five key areas: recognizing, understanding, labeling, expressing, and regulating emotions in oneself and others (Brackett et al., 2019; Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, n.d.)

School climate. The shared experiences of school life, or the school atmosphere, as represented by students, families, and school staff (Jones et al., 2020; Konishi et al., 2022). School climate is representative of many different aspects of the school experience including relationships between students and among students and staff, perceptions surrounding the quality of academic instruction, students' sense of belonging and safety, including both physical and emotional safety and security (Jones et al., 2020).

Self-awareness. Self-awareness is the ability to accurately recognize the emotions in oneself and others, the role emotions play on behavior and accurately identify strengths, and areas of growth within oneself (Borowski, 2019, Weissberg et al., 2015).

Self-management. Self-management is the ability to regulate emotions, thoughts, and behaviors appropriately across multiple contexts and in response to varying situations (Borowski, 2019; CASEL, 2022; Weissberg et al., 2015). Self-management also includes the ability to set and achieve positive goals both personally and professionally, provide self-motivation, and manage stressors with appropriate and effective strategies (Borowski, 2019; CASEL, 2022).

Social awareness. Social awareness is the ability to understand and empathize with others, recognize, and appreciate diverse perspectives and cultures, and navigate social interactions effectively (Borowski, 2019; CASEL, 2022; Weissberg et al., 2015). Social awareness includes skills such as perspective taking, monitoring for one's own biases, practicing empathy and

developing an understanding of social and ethical norms, as well as recognizing and utilizing various supports available in a variety of contexts (Borowski, 2019; CASEL, 2022; Farmington Public Schools, 2022)

Social-emotional learning (SEL). The process through which children learn how to manage emotions, form healthy relationships, set and achieve positive goals, and handle challenging problems in life including feeling and showing empathy for others (Durlak & Weissberg, 2011; Shriver & Weissberg, 2020). This is achieved by developing five competencies that include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2020).

Tier one instruction. The universal, high-quality teaching provided to all students in a classroom setting which aims to meet the diverse needs of learners through evidence-based practices and differentiated instruction (Fisher & Frey, 2013).

Warm demander. A teaching style that combines high expectations with empathy and support by setting rigorous standards and expecting excellence from students in a caring and nurturing way (Hammond, 2015).

Statement of the Problem

Social-emotional learning has been associated with many definitions, skills, and strategies and yet much of the available research (Frye et al., 2022; Hamilton et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2017; NCSEAD, 2019) has examined stand-alone curricula. There is a dearth of research available on the variety of approaches educators have adopted to promote SEL within classrooms at the secondary level (Frye et al., 2022; Hamilton et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2017; NCSEAD, 2019). There is also an absence of valid and reliable metrics to measure emotions and SEL (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020). The absence of these metrics has impacted the adoption of

consistent curricula in schools (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020; Hamilton et al., 2019; Lewis et al., 2021). Research on SEL has explored teacher beliefs about SEL (Collie et al., 2012; White et al., 2020) and teacher perceptions of SEL's efficacy (CASEL, 2022; Darling-Hammon & DePaoli, 2020). There is limited available research that represents how these many SEL definitions, skills, and strategies influence the perceptions of secondary teachers charged with implementing social-emotional learning (Konishi et al., 2022; NCSEAD, 2019; White et al., 2020). Thus, the aim of this study was to build on prior research and explore the perceptions teachers at the ninth through 12th grade level have around SEL embedded within academic instruction.

Available research shows that traditional stand-alone SEL programs found in many schools do not have solid evidence of their effectiveness (Jones et al., 2017). The programs appear to vary widely in impact because program evaluations often fail to measure whether students have mastered the precise skills the programs seek to impart (Jones et al., 2017). Evidence of favorable SEL program effects on specific areas of development including emotional health, self-esteem, problem behaviors, health behaviors, environmental climate, and academics were observed when universal SEL programs were implemented within low income, minority populations (Lewis et al., 2021). Social-emotional learning programs have been shown to not only increase a student's academic, personal, social and career development and success but the school climate as well (Riekke et al., 2017). The school climate research of Riekke et al. (2017) found that school climate and students' emotional well-being are positively and significantly correlated.

Social-emotional learning research to-date has primarily focused on stand-alone curricula (Hamilton et al., 2019). Stand-alone curriculum has been used in schools to address identified or perceived SEL needs of students, the impact SEL can have on student achievement measures,

and school climate data (Hamilton et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2017). There is limited research on the variety of approaches educators have adopted to promote SEL, including their perceptions of SEL as it relates to their specific implementation sites and/or content areas (CSDE, 2022; Hamilton et al., 2019; NCSEAD, 2019). Research representing educator perceptions of SEL has also shown that there are varied ideas and beliefs around how best to teach and support SEL (CASEL, 2022; Hamilton et al., 2019). Some classroom teachers have advocated for the addition of mental health providers in school and shifting more of the onus onto specialized providers (CASEL, 2022).

Most of the school related SEL or emotional intelligence (EI) studies conducted in recent years have focused on the elementary level (Yale Child Study Center, 2021). Secondary schools have been underrepresented in this research (NCSEAD, 2019). It is important for district leaders and high school administrators to understand the perspective of secondary educators on SEL and school implementation efforts (CASEL, 2022). Understanding educators' perspectives can assist school leadership in managing multiple priorities, facilitating streamlined culture, and school climate improvement efforts (CASEL, 2022). Streamlined culture refers to a cohesive and well-integrated environment within the school (Fullan, 2020). This involves a shared vision, effective communication, and a collaborative approach among staff (Fullan, 2020). Understanding educators' perspectives can contribute to cultivating a culture where everyone shares a common understanding and collaborates towards common goals (CASEL, 2022; Fullan, 2020). This understanding also contributes to fostering a greater sense of belonging for students who have been affected by disrupted educational and social experiences resulting from the COVID-19 health crisis (CASEL, 2022).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to explore how secondary teachers and staff at a mid-size public, suburban high school perceive the implementation of the RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) program. Social-emotional learning practices were defined as the routines, structures and strategies staff and teachers regularly utilized and implemented to build positive relationships with students (Weissberg et al., 2016). The RULER SEL program is an evidence-based program developed by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence (Brackett et al., 2019; Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, n.d.). The RULER SEL program is designed for use in educational settings to help students, educators, and parents develop emotional intelligence and social skills (Brackett et al., 2019). The RULER SEL program provides a framework for teaching emotional intelligence to increase student emotional IQ and improve the school environment (Brackett et al., 2019; Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, n.d.). The program includes various strategies and resources for integrating SEL into the curriculum and school culture to improve students' well-being, academic performance, and social relationships (Brackett et al., 2019).

Research Questions and Design

This study was guided by the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How do secondary school teachers and staff perceive the value of the RULER SEL program when reflecting on their interactions with students?

Research Question 2: How does the RULER SEL program support or add to tier one instruction provided by secondary school teachers?

A qualitative exploratory case study design was selected for this study. Case studies are employed across diverse fields, including education, because case studies enable researchers to

interact with participants within a particular setting while utilizing a range of data collection methods (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). A qualitative exploratory case study design was chosen for this researcher's study because this methodology aims to explore the lived experiences and viewpoints of participants (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). This researcher was interested in exploring perspectives and viewpoints held by secondary school staff and teachers implementing SEL practices within a research site that identifies as a RULER SEL school. A RULER SEL school, as defined by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, is a learning environment that prioritizes the development of emotional intelligence through practices such as recognizing, understanding, labeling, expressing, and regulating emotions (Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, n.d.). This approach allowed for a deep exploration of the nuances, context, and complexities of participant perceptions (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017).

The instruments that were used for this researcher's study included individual semi-structured interviews and the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation*. This study took place within a high school located in western Connecticut. Participants included six teachers and three staff members. Staff members were affiliated with one of the following roles within the school: administrator, coordinator, or nurse. Teachers were state certified educators. Connecticut defines a state-certified educator as someone who has met the requirements set forth by the Connecticut State Department of Education to obtain and maintain certification to teach in public schools within the state (CSDE, 2024). Teachers in this study held a valid educator license in a content area in which they teach. Data was gathered to provide descriptions of secondary staff and teacher perceptions of how SEL contributes to the understanding of programmatic strengths, barriers, challenges, and potential solutions for long-term sustainability through individual semi-structured interviews. The CASEL (2021) *School-*

based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation was designed for school-based SEL teams to elicit staff feedback regarding implementation practices and perceptions in support of planning, goal setting, progress monitoring and continuous improvement of schoolwide SEL initiatives and implementation practices. The rich and detailed descriptions obtained through these two instruments helped this researcher identify trends that serve as valuable guides for building administrators, teacher leaders, educators, and professional development providers, aiding their efforts to enhance professional practices related to the integration of SEL among teachers and staff at the secondary level (Smith & Strahan, 2004). Transferability holds significance within case studies (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018) and serves as another rationale for its incorporation in this qualitative exploratory case study.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

A conceptual framework refers to the structure that guides the research study and provides a conceptual map or a set of interconnected concepts and ideas that frame the research study's questions, methodology, and analysis (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). A conceptual framework serves as a theoretical lens through which the researcher views and interprets the phenomenon under investigation (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). The conceptual framework that guided this study initially stemmed from the personal interest of this researcher in enhancing the implementation of SEL initiatives in secondary education, particularly amidst the growing urgency surrounding SEL that school districts contend with (Fullan, 2023). This urgency was further underscored by the escalating mental health crisis among students which emphasized the critical need to prioritize emotional well-being and resilience (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). Anchored in Mayer and Salovey's (1997) foundational emotional intelligence ability model, this study drew inspiration from the holistic SEL framework advocated by CASEL

(2023) and the Yale University's Center for Emotional Intelligence (Brackett et al., 2019) framework, RULER. This researcher's personal interest came from changing disciplinary practices moving on a continuum from exclusionary discipline towards restorative practices (Evans & Vaandering, 2016). Deepened by the evolving intersectionality of equity and social justice work (Oluo, 2019), there is a recognition of the critical need to address systemic inequalities (Kendi, 2019; Shriver & Weissberg, 2020; Starr, 2019; Oluo, 2019) within educational contexts that also added to this researcher's personal interest in this topic. Additionally, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on instructional models has significantly influenced the mental health and overall well-being of both students and staff, emphasizing the necessity of creating supportive environments (CASEL, 2022). The researcher was motivated by understanding how these interconnected elements collectively influence student success within and beyond the boundaries of the educational system, as emphasized in the works of Evans and Vaandering (2016) and White et al. (2020). This researcher is a school administrator. This researcher's approach to working with staff draws upon time spent as a special educator in schools located in urban areas and in classroom observations guided by mentor texts used for professional development from a variety of authors on topics including child development (Mooney, 2013; Wood, 2017), student agency (Berger et al., 2014; Liljedahl, 2021), culturally responsive teaching, systemic racism and the impact on diversity, equity, and inclusion practices (Hammond, 2015; Kendi, 2019; Muhammad, 2021; Oluo, 2019).

The SEL framework by CASEL (2020) was the basis of the conceptual framework guiding this study. The theoretical framework for this study was the emotional intelligence ability (EI) model espoused by Salovey and Mayer (1997). This framework viewed EI as a form of intelligence that employs a unique set of cognitive abilities (Brackett et al., 2023). These

abilities are interconnected, demonstrate correlations, exhibit connections with other existing intelligences, and evolve over time and through life experiences (Mayer et al., 1999; Mayer et al., 2003). This theory emphasizes the development of EI as a set of abilities that enable individuals to perceive, understand, and regulate emotions effectively (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). The emotional intelligence ability model consists of four key components, including perceiving emotions, using emotions, understanding emotions, and managing emotions to influence or impact decision making, relationship formation, and daily behaviors (Brackett et al., 2023; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). According to Ray (2014), Goleman played a significant role in bringing the concept of EI into the school setting. Popularizing the concept of EI and its potential impact on various aspects of personal development and education, Goleman (1995) collaborated with CASEL and contributed to the development of the CASEL framework. This framework offers guidelines for integrating SEL into educational settings (CASEL, 2020). Shaping the understanding that EI is a critical component of SEL, Goleman's (1998) work provided a foundation for its implementation in schools (Ray, 2014).

Goleman (1995, 1998) emphasized that skills such as self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and relationship building are crucial for success in school and life, stressed that these skills can be taught and cultivated, and that schools should prioritize the development of emotional intelligence alongside traditional academic subjects. Educators and researchers began to recognize the value of incorporating emotional intelligence into the school curriculum based on Goleman's work (Brackett et al., 2023; Opengart, 2007). This recognition led to the integration of EI into programs and initiatives aimed at promoting SEL in schools (CASEL, 2021; Lantieri & Goleman, 2014). The theoretical underpinnings of EI are frequently incorporated into SEL programs in educational settings (Brackett et al., 2023).

Assumptions, Limitations and Scope

When conducting a qualitative exploratory case study, particularly when the researcher serves as the primary instrument, adopting a reflexive approach is crucial (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). A reflexive approach involves ongoing reflection on the researcher's role and influence throughout the study (Creswell, 2014). It is essential to recognize and acknowledge the subjective interpretation of the data, as qualitative research inherently involves an interpretative perspective (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Creswell, 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This researcher deemed it essential to comprehensively assess the assumptions, limitations, and scope of the study in all aspects of the research to achieve this objective.

Assumptions about the appropriate method type in qualitative research are rooted in the belief that different methods offer unique perspectives and approaches to understanding the research topic (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Creswell, 2014). This researcher assumed that employing a qualitative exploratory case study approach would enable research participants to articulate their personal understanding of SEL and engage in open and honest discussions about their experiences. An assumption was made that the emotional intelligence skills and strategies acquired through staff professional development on the RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) program will transfer to real-life contexts. This was assumed to include staff interactions with students, purposeful planning for integration of information shared during professional development over time, and the creation of personal working definitions of SEL. It was assumed that participants in this study would be working in an educational setting where SEL is valued and prioritized. It was also assumed that participants in this qualitative exploratory case study would be honest and genuine about their experiences and in their responses to the research questions posed. Another assumption was that teachers and staff in Connecticut high schools

would presumably interact with all students at some point in their high school career, providing support as administrators, coordinators, or nurses.

There are limitations to this study. The findings of a qualitative exploratory case study, due to its focus on a single case, may lack generalizability and may not be representative of broader populations or contexts (Yin, 2014). This limited scope restricts the transferability of this study's conclusions to other settings or individuals. Another limitation is the subjective interpretation of data inherent in qualitative research, including single case studies (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). The researcher's biases, preconceptions, and positionality may influence the analysis and findings, which could potentially compromise the researcher's objectivity (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). The reliance on a single case may heighten the risk of researcher bias, as interpretations may be shaped by a narrow range of perspectives and experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Bias may arise from various factors, such as the researcher's preconceptions, personal beliefs, or inadvertent influence on the study participants or data collection process (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Subconscious biases or prior knowledge of the framework being studied may unintentionally influence the interpretation of the data or the analysis process (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The researcher's personal views or expectations may subtly shape their understanding of the findings or their interactions with the study participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018).

Another limitation may be the participants' knowledge of the researcher's role within an educational setting, which could lead to participant reactivity (Maxwell, 2005). Participants knew this researcher's name and had access to the internet to learn more about this researcher and her role as an administrator in another school district prior to individual interviews. Participants may have consciously or subconsciously adjusted their behavior, opinions, or

responses to present themselves in a favorable light, conform to social norms, or avoid potential judgment or criticism from the researcher (Maxwell, 2005). A reflexive approach, involving continuous reflection on the researcher's role and influence throughout the research study, was necessary to prevent any potential limitations that could restrict the findings of the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Another limitation was the potential for limited data availability. Qualitative exploratory case studies often rely on a relatively small amount of data which can restrict the depth and breadth of the analysis (Creswell, 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This limitation hinders a researcher's ability to fully explore and understand the complexities of the phenomenon under investigation (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The single case design presented challenges in terms of ensuring the trustworthiness and rigor of the study (Maxwell, 2005). Strategies such as member checking, prolonged engagement, and triangulation helped mitigate these limitations, but they did not eliminate the inherent limitations of studying a single case (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Maxwell, 2005; Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

This qualitative exploratory case study explored the perceptions and experiences of nine teachers and staff members at a single high school. The reason for conducting semi-structured interviews with the selected participants was to gain an understanding of how teachers and staff from a variety of backgrounds and interests perceived SEL and RULER including inherent strengths, challenges, barriers, resources, and training needed for high quality SEL implementation at the same study site. The CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* was used to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and perceptions of SEL as a teacher or staff member by exploring the day-to-day SEL practices at their school. The scope of this research study took place at a suburban high school with a graduation rate of 97%

in Connecticut (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). The following faculty and staff were interviewed: three teachers who instructed courses within the humanities; three teachers who instructed non-humanities courses; and three support staff members that were affiliated with the following roles in the high school environment: administrator, coordinator, or nurse.

Rationale and Significance

Some evidence has suggested that when schools use an evidence-based approach to SEL the schools have seen significant improvements in multiple areas of school climate, including students feeling a sense of belonging (Baumsteiger et al., 2021). Most research focused on the impact of SEL has been conducted and written about at the elementary and middle grades (Yale Child Study Center, 2021). There is limited research available that is representative of the impact of SEL in secondary education (Yale Child Study Center, 2021). Wells (2021) found that teachers who talked authentically about their own emotions and highlighted when they made mistakes resonated with students and produced more favorable perceptions of caring relationships from the perspective of students. Wells' (2021) research also stated that classroom policies and procedures need to be grounded in fairness and teachers need to build individualized relationships with students. Wells (2021) emphasized the idea that it is not enough to introduce SEL into classrooms and that future research also needs to explore the quality of the implementation of SEL and other influential factors such as teacher training, cultural considerations, and the overall school environment to ensure a comprehensive understanding of its impact on students' well-being and academic success. The conclusions drawn from the research in Wells' (2021) study were intended to explore how teachers perceive SEL given the program at their current school and past experiences. Research that explores how teachers

perceive SEL and SEL programs within a given school can provide recommendations to school leaders tasked with continuing this work (Wells, 2021).

The significance of this researcher's study lies in its extension of research on teacher and staff perceptions of SEL models to accommodate various groups and developmental stages, with a particular focus on those in the secondary setting (Darling-Hammond, 2015). This study aimed to address the existing knowledge gap concerning the perceptions of SEL among teachers and staff at the secondary level and elicit the perceived strengths, benefits, challenges, barriers, resources, and training needed for effective RULER SEL implementation. This study was also an opportunity to explore strategies and actions that can be implemented to effectively support the long-term integration of SEL as students have returned to full time in-person learning following the COVID-19 pandemic. This study sought to contribute valuable insights and address the need for comprehensive understanding and practical guidance in promoting SEL at the high school level.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to explore how secondary teachers and staff at a mid-size public, suburban high school perceive the implementation of the RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) program. Existing literature points to the lack of comprehensive research on effective SEL implementation in secondary schools and the need for better metrics to measure emotions and SEL accurately (Frye et al., 2022; Hamilton et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2017; NCSEAD, 2019). Considering the challenges in implementing SEL effectively, this study sought to uncover educators' diverse perceptions and approaches to SEL, with the overarching goal of contributing to effective implementation strategies (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020; Hamilton et al., 2019; Lewis et al., 2021). The utilization of a qualitative

exploratory case study was chosen to provide a nuanced understanding of participant perspectives and interactions within the RULER SEL program (Creswell, 2013). This study was guided by the CASEL (2020) SEL framework and the theory of emotional intelligence (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). This study aims to fill the gap in understanding secondary education and offer insights for improved SEL implementation in high schools (Darling-Hammond, 2015; Yale Child Study Center, 2021). Chapter 2 includes this study's literature review.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review helps to establish the current state of knowledge on a particular topic and provides a comprehensive understanding of the existing research, theories, and findings related to the topic (Efron & Ravid, 2019). This understanding aids in identifying gaps in the existing literature, paving the way for the formulation of research questions or hypotheses (Efron & Ravid, 2019). This study's literature review also allowed this researcher to situate her own work within the broader scholarly discourse, demonstrating how her study contributes to, diverges from, or builds upon existing knowledge (Efron & Ravid, 2019). The conceptual and theoretical frameworks applicable to this study are presented in this chapter. Themes identified in the literature reviewed included (a) evolution of social-emotional learning, (b) educational policy's impact on social-emotional learning, (c) impact of social-emotional learning, (d) how social-emotional learning differs from behavior focused programs, (e) lack of consistent curricula and assessment practices, and (f) teacher perceptions of social-emotional learning will be discussed. This chapter will end with a summary.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Schools play a significant role in supporting students' overall health and well-being. Schools that implement SEL practices, approaches, and/or programs teachers are better able to develop positive relationships and focus on the emotional skill building that supports academic development and success (CASEL, 2022). Consistent and caring relationships between staff and students have been shown to buffer the effects of childhood trauma on brain development (Blad, 2017; CASEL, 2022). This has increased the focus schools place on structured opportunities provided to develop these relationships and leverage them to teach social-emotional

competencies (Blad, 2017). Educators grapple with the practical challenges of managing a school building, addressing various administrative, operational, student discipline, and educational needs while ensuring an environment that is conducive to learning exists for students (Lemov & Bambrick-Santoyo, 2018). The practices of exclusionary discipline have been called into question in favor of practices that recognize the obligations schools share related to conflict resolution and empathy as a means of holding students accountable, repairing harm, and working to reintegrate students into the school community instead of removing them (Woods & Stewart, 2018). This section introduces the conceptual framework, including the personal interest of the researcher, the topical research that supports this study, and the theoretical framework that informs this study (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017).

Personal Interest

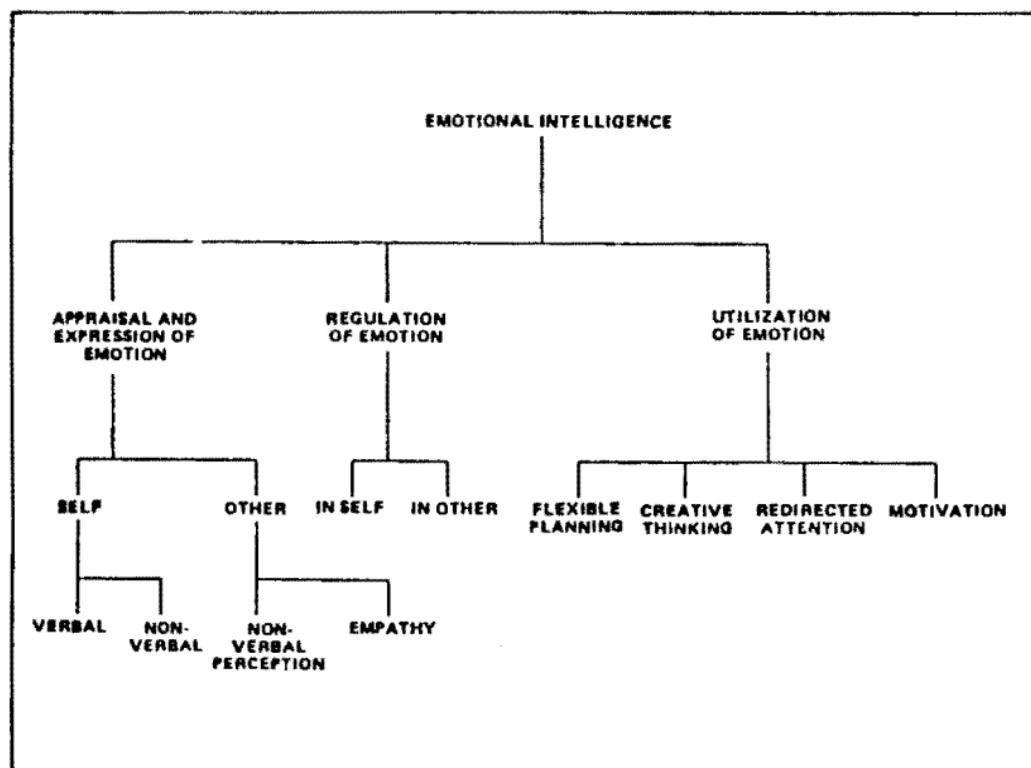
This researcher's personal interest, experiences, and curiosity served as the driving force behind this study, including what motivated the researcher to explore how secondary teachers and staff perceive the implementation of the RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) program. Creswell (2014) emphasized the importance of aligning research with a researcher's passions and experiences, as doing so can enhance the depth and authenticity of the work. Topical research established the purpose and significance of the study (Efron & Ravid, 2019). A comprehensive review of existing research identified gaps in the literature and served to situate the research study within the current state of knowledge (Creswell, 2014). The theoretical framework is the formal theory that informs a study and is the foundation upon which a research study is built (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016). The theoretical framework provides the lens through which the researcher views the research topic, research questions, and interprets data (Creswell, 2014).

This study was motivated by the researcher's personal interest in this topic, which stems from the evolving disciplinary practices in education. Schools have shifted from exclusionary methods to restorative approaches focusing on education and reintegration, and as a result this researcher was guided by Mayer and Salovey's emotional intelligence ability model (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Salovey & Mayer, 1990), the SEL (CASEL, 2020) framework presented by CASEL and RULER (Brackett et al., 2019). This researcher's workplace adopted an SEL program grounded in emotional intelligence (EI) which further fueled this researcher's interest in this area. Students returned to full-time in-person learning following the COVID-19 pandemic, and schools focused on student and staff mental health, well-being, and explicit teaching practices and strategies that leveraged interpersonal and intrapersonal skills (CASEL, 2022; White et al., 2020). This researcher's approach as a secondary school administrator to working with students and staff has been influenced by time spent as a special education teacher, leader of school wide SEL implementation and training efforts, and district core values derived from CASEL's core SEL competencies (CASEL, 2013, 2022, 2023).

The transition from exclusionary discipline to restorative practices requires a comprehensive and systematic approach that involves training for school staff, establishing clear policies and procedures, and providing ongoing support for implementation (Evans & Vaandering, 2016). The transition also requires a shift in the school culture and a commitment to equity, empathy, and collaboration (Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018). Social-emotional learning plays a crucial role in driving the transition from exclusionary discipline to restorative practices in schools (Huguley et al., 2022). Developing students' social and emotional skills involves fostering self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, all of which are vital components of a comprehensive SEL

approach (CASEL, 2021). These skills are foundational for creating a positive and inclusive school climate and supporting restorative practices (Anfara et al., 2013; CASEL, 2021; Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018).

Much of the SEL work being done in schools today continues to be influenced by the work of Mayer and Salovey's (1997) emotional intelligence ability model. Mayer and Salovey's (1997) model explored how emotions and cognition intersected and identified different skills that could be improved upon. The emotional intelligence ability model included the ability to recognize emotional patterns and the meanings associated with them and use that knowledge to reason and problem solve to improve relationships and outcomes (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Mayer et al., 2004). Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence*, went on to popularize EI based on this model, but it is the CASEL framework that predominantly influenced school-based SEL programming and approaches, as well as state SEL standards (CASEL, 2020; CSDE, 2022; Frye et al., 2022; Goleman, 1995). Figure 1 shows the conceptualization of EI as proposed by Mayer and Salovey (1997).

Figure 1*Emotional Intelligence Ability Model*

Note. From “What is emotional intelligence?” In P. Salovey & D. Sluyter (Eds.) by J. D.

Mayer and P. Salovey, 1997, *Emotional development and emotional intelligence:*

Educational Implications. 3-31. Basic Books. Copyright 1997 by Basic Books.

Social-emotional learning initiatives in schools have been significantly shaped by Mayer and Salovey’s (1990, 1997) emotional intelligence ability model. Mayer and Salovey’s (1990, 1997) model proposed that individuals can comprehend, control, and utilize their emotions effectively in various social contexts by cultivating a range of skills, such as self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, social awareness, and relationship management. This belief continues to shape SEL programming and practices, curriculum development, assessment and evaluation,

teacher professional development, school climate and culture, and parent and community engagement, all with the goal of fostering students' emotional well-being, social skills, and healthy relationships (CASEL, 2013, 2022, 2023). Schools are working towards establishing a positive and inclusive environment that nurtures the social-emotional development of students, positioning them for success in both their academic journey and in life. This effort involves integrating the principles of the emotional intelligence ability model (Brackett & Rivers, 2014; Durlak et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2013; Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

The CASEL (2023) framework underscores the significance of EI within the realm of SEL. This framework addresses a critical need by offering schools a robust organizational structure for data and knowledge management related to SEL (CASEL, 2021). This framework achieves this goal by incorporating the principles of emotional intelligence theory into its core competencies (CASEL, 2021; Frye et al., 2022). This framework plays a pivotal role in facilitating the implementation of SEL programming and approaches, aligning them with evolving SEL state standards and responding to the changing landscape of educational requirements (CSDE, 2011; Frye et al., 2022). The CASEL (2023) framework serves as a multifaceted resource that not only acknowledges the importance of EI but also empowers schools to navigate the complexities of modern SEL initiatives.

Educators must think about a comprehensive approach that includes explicit instruction in the SEL competencies that were defined by CASEL (2013) and Weissberg et al. (2015) as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making when addressing the social emotional needs of students. Educators also must contend with and determine how these competencies are developed and integrated into core academic instruction. Seventy-nine percent of teachers surveyed in *CASEL's: Voices from the Classroom*

reported on the mental health of their students and indicated that they believed students' mental health was worse than before the COVID-19 pandemic (CASEL, 2022). High-quality data to guide decision making about how best to address the social-emotional needs of students, especially at the secondary level, was not readily available or consistent (CASEL, 2022; NCSEAD, 2019).

Topical Research

This qualitative exploratory case study builds on previous research which found that the development of personal identity and supportive relationships, including the skills necessary for both, are the cornerstone of SEL approaches and research (Baumsteiger et al., 2021; CASEL, 2022; Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020; Hamilton et al., 2019). Social-emotional learning has been shown to positively impact students and staff alike, including areas such as overall well-being, job satisfaction, student engagement, student achievement and school climate (CASEL, 2022; Hamilton et al, 2019; Jones et al, 2017; NCSEAD, 2019). This researcher determined that there is a dearth of research available on what to do to best support SEL in schools and understand why a particular approach, or approaches, work within a given school district.

Understanding teacher and staff perceptions of RULER SEL requires an acknowledgment of the historical evolution of SEL and the emergence of the RULER framework within this landscape (Brackett et al., 2019). This historical perspective provides a foundation for comprehending the theoretical underpinnings and fundamental principles that shape the RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) approach. Additionally, an exploration of the impact of educational policies on the integration and implementation of RULER SEL in school environments reveals the significant influence of policy frameworks on the support and sustainability of RULER SEL initiatives (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020; Durlak et al., 2011). Understanding how

RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) impacts various aspects of school climate, student well-being, and academic performance is critical to comprehending its effectiveness. Synthesizing empirical findings and theoretical frameworks elucidates the broader implications of implementing RULER SEL programs (CASEL, 2022).

Conducting a comparative analysis between RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) and other behavior-focused programs sheds light on the distinctive features, methodologies, and outcomes associated with RULER SEL by highlighting its unique contributions within the broader context of SEL programs (CASEL, 2023). Investigating the curricula and assessment practices related to RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) allows for an evaluation of the consistency, effectiveness, and challenges associated with implementing RULER SEL across diverse educational contexts. This examination explored the complexities of designing and evaluating curricular frameworks and assessment tools within RULER SEL pedagogy (Brackett et al., 2019). Understanding the perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of teachers and staff regarding the RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) approach provides valuable insights into the efficacy, challenges, and potential improvements within its implementation and practice in educational settings. Synthesizing research findings illuminates the perspectives of educators, emphasizing the significance of addressing these perceptions in fostering a positive and effective educational environment (Brackett et al., 2019).

Theoretical Framework

A literature review was conducted to identify patterns and trends that were uncovered and connected through building a comprehensive understanding of SEL (Efron & Ravid, 2019). This researcher's study was grounded in the theoretical framework of the theory of emotional intelligence (Salovey & Mayer, 1990) that was presented in 1990, and then re-addressed in 2004

(Mayer et al., 2004). The original authors, Mayer and Salovey, with the addition of Caruso, explicitly defined the theory, further developed the theory, and proposed a measurement for the theory (Mayer et al., 2004). Mayer and Salovey (1997) defined EI as one's capacity to reason about emotions to think metacognitively. There are certain abilities that need to be developed to promote emotional and intellectual growth including the ability to perceive emotions accurately, understand emotions and emotional knowledge, as well as access, demonstrate, and reflectively regulate emotions in pursuit of a productive goal (Mayer & Salovey, 1997).

The application of the theory of emotional intelligence provides a lens to understand and interpret the dynamics of social-emotional learning within the RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) framework. This study examines the connections between emotional intelligence (Mayer & Salovey, 1997) and the components of RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) and seeks to elucidate how the cultivation of EI aligns with and supports the principles and practices embedded in the RULER SEL program. Comprehending the interplay between EI (Salovey & Mayer, 1997) and RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) is crucial for developing a nuanced understanding of how educators and staff members perceive and engage with the program's principles in their daily interactions with students and within the school environment. This holistic perspective underscores the interconnected nature of EI and SEL and its profound implications for fostering a positive and supportive educational ecosystem (Goleman, 1995).

Emotional intelligence as presented by Salovey and Mayer (1990) is the “ability to monitor one’s own and other’s feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions” (p. 189). Emotional intelligence is a combination, or synthesis, of three areas of prior research including the work of Darwin (1872) and his functional view of emotion. Darwin’s (1872) work highlighted the value that emotional

information holds in relation to survival. The research field then expanded to include Bower's (1981) network theory of emotion, which recognized the impact that emotions have on cognition, judgment, and behavior. The third area of research that contributed to the evolution of EI is Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences and the shift that occurred from focusing solely on cognitive abilities to placing greater emphasis on interpersonal and intrapersonal skills when considering what constitutes intelligence.

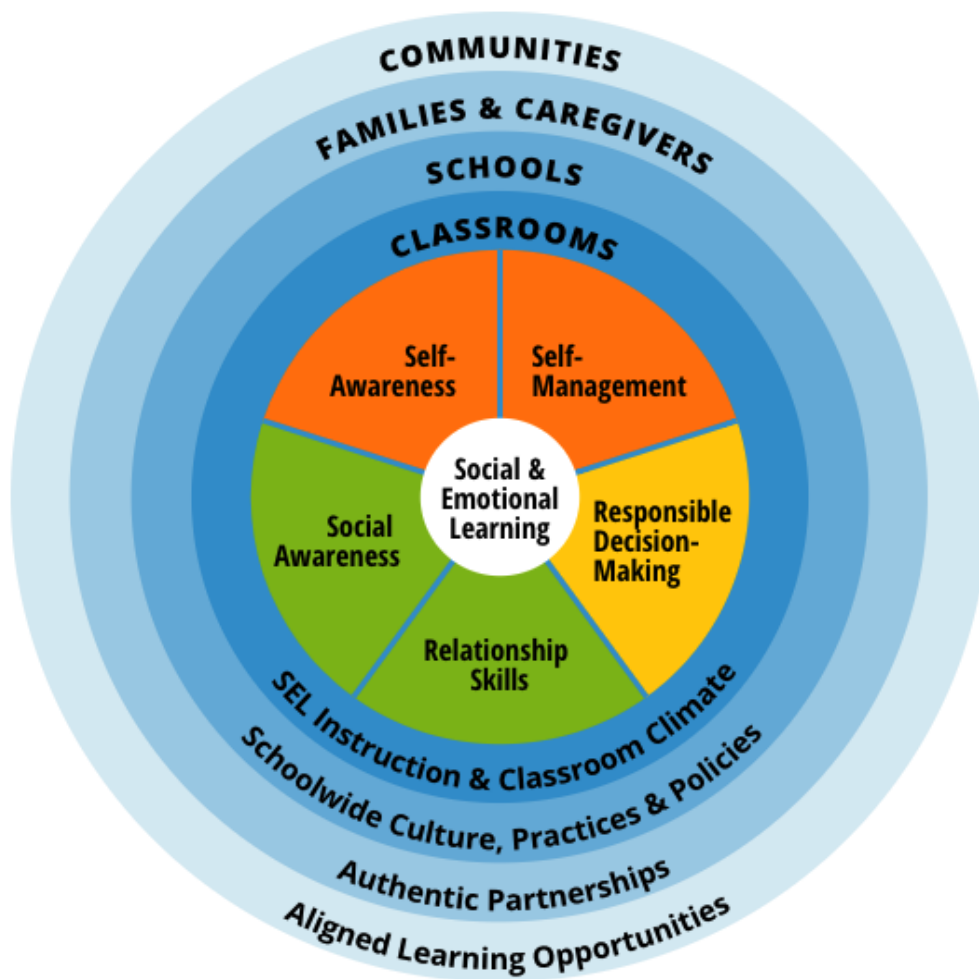
Salovey and Mayer's (1990) work was essentially born out of renewed interest in social intelligence and what role emotions play in determining how the intersection of cognition and emotional processes can enhance thinking. Schools also saw an interest in better understanding and developing ways of teaching emotional intelligence with the release of Goleman's seminal book (1995). Goleman's (1995) work helped highlight the critical role of emotional intelligence in personal and professional success, prompting educational institutions to explore effective strategies for integrating emotional intelligence development into their curricula and overall educational approach. Given the impact of legislation such as No Child Left Behind (2002) and later, Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) (Klein, 2015, 2016), educational institutions were again challenged to adapt to the evolving definition of student success. The Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) and its predecessor, No Child Left Behind (2002), played roles in influencing the formal emergence of SEL in schools, albeit indirectly (Klein, 2015, 2016). No Child Left Behind (2002) and Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) did not explicitly mandate SEL; they contributed to a shift in the educational landscape by promoting a broader, more holistic view of education that allowed for the consideration and incorporation of social and emotional factors in schools (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020). The emphasis on a well-rounded education and local decision-making provided a conducive environment for the formal

emergence of SEL in schools (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020). A major focus of SEL work in schools centers on helping students identify emotions within themselves and others and develop specific strategies for using this knowledge to their benefit and the benefit of others (NCSEAD, 2019).

The EI lens helps researchers, educators, and practitioners to understand complex phenomena, identify individual differences, inform practical implications or interventions, and support an interdisciplinary approach to better understanding SEL implementation in schools (Goleman, 1995). Utilizing EI as a conceptual framework also helped this researcher to better understand complex social and psychological phenomena that are related to emotions. This includes what educators value in their SEL implementation as it relates to specific domains such as responsible decision-making, social awareness, or relationship skills (Sprenger, 2020).

Emotional intelligence also looks at individual differences in emotional abilities which helps one to understand how different people respond to and implement the same curriculum according to different attributes such as subject area, time in the profession, as well as others (Sprenger, 2020). Emotional intelligence informs the development of practical implications from research conducted as part of this study through the process of critically reviewing data, to inform the development of interventions or enhanced training, aimed at building emotional competencies within specified domains (Hoffman et al., 2018). The theory and concept of EI draws from psychology, neuroscience, and other fields (Goleman, 1995). This allows for a holistic understanding of emotions and their role in both behavior and cognition (Hoffman et al., 2018). The inherent interdisciplinary nature of EI aligns with the mission and vision of the research site as well (Goleman, 1995; Hoffman et al., 2018; Sprenger, 2020).

The CASEL (2022) framework is grounded in EI and articulates five SEL core competencies. These competencies are supported by evidence-based practice and approaches that guide the SEL work of school districts, researchers, and developers (CASEL, 2013; Davidson et al., 2018). Figure 2, the CASEL Wheel, depicts these five core competencies as interconnected components, highlighting their collective importance for promoting social and emotional development in individuals. It serves as a guide for educators, policymakers, and practitioners to integrate SEL into educational curricula and practices (CASEL, 2021).

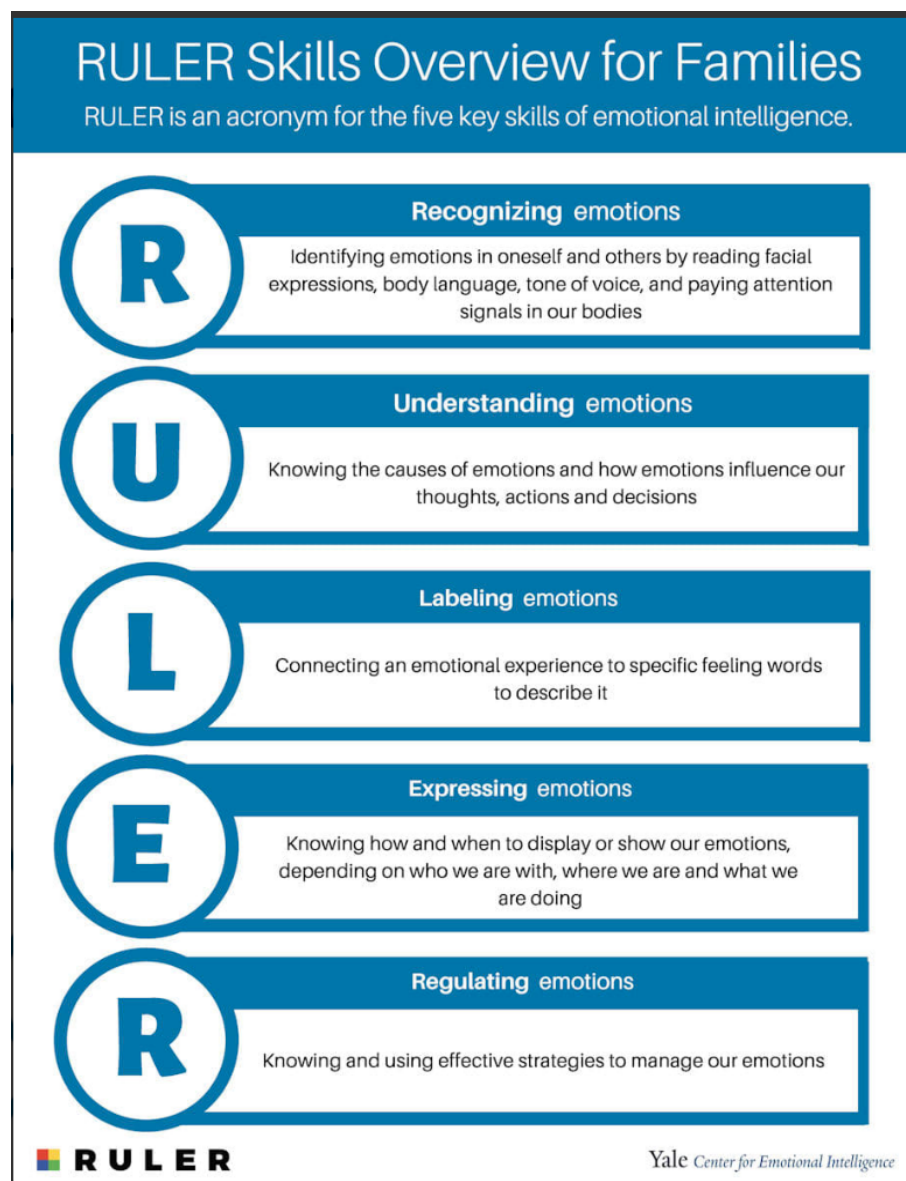
Figure 2*CASEL Wheel*

Note. From “What is emotional intelligence?” by Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2021, *Our history*. <https://casel.org/about-us/our-history/>. Copyright 2021 by Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning.

The RULER framework, developed by researchers at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence (Brackett et al., 2019), aims to cultivate the five competencies outlined by CASEL (2022) through an approach that emphasizes adults understanding SEL. The RULER framework

focuses on educators and their personal SEL developmental needs before targeting the needs of students (Brackett et al., 2019). The RULER acronym represents the five skills that this program has developed for specific lesson plans built around students' understanding and use of emotions in navigating school life as well as social influences, relationships, and decision-making (Brackett et al., 2019). The five skills according to Brackett et al. (2019) include a person's ability to (a) recognize, (b) understand, (c) label, (d) express, and (e) regulate.

The RULER framework also introduced four tools including (a) the Charter, (b) the mood meter, (c) the meta moment, and (d) the blueprint (Brackett et al., 2019). These tools are meant to be explicitly taught and used continuously with all students to help them understand, identify, and appropriately label emotions, build self-regulation skills, and problem-solve complex issues for optimal outcomes within and beyond school (Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, n.d.). Figure 3 shows the five skills of EI that the RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) program targets through lessons, tools, and techniques.

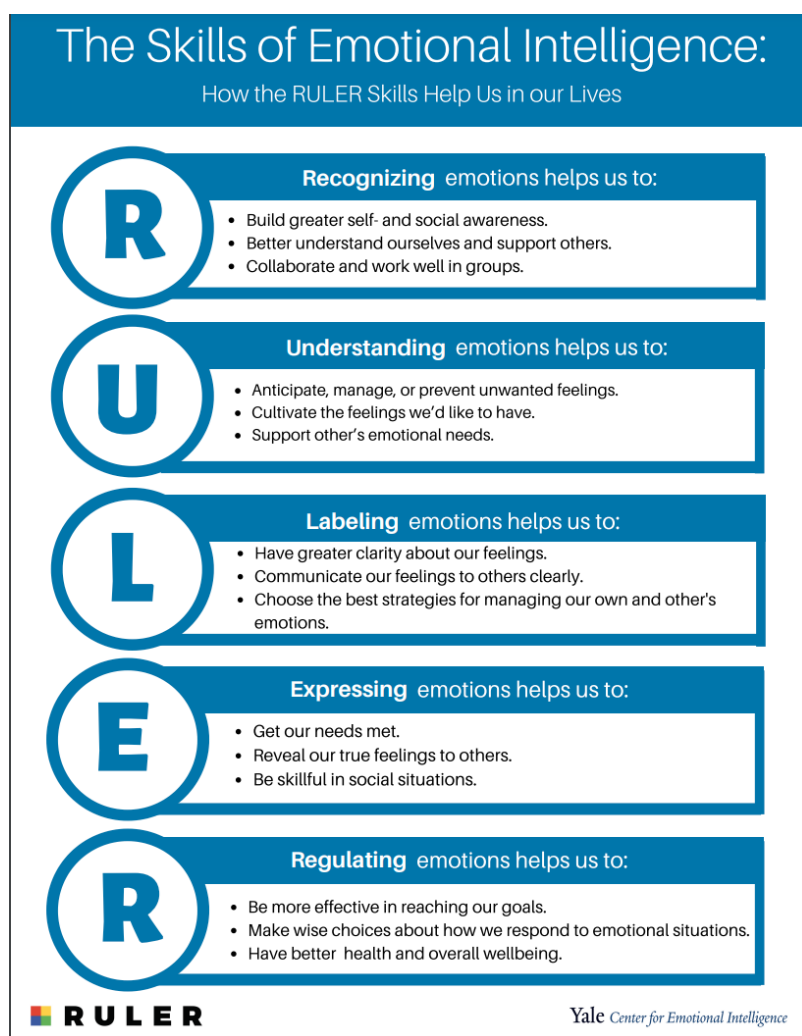
Figure 3*RULER Overview*

Note. From “RULER Skills Overview for Families,” by Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, 2020, *RULER Resources for Families*. <https://www.rulerapproach.org/ruler-resources-for-families>. Copyright 2020 by Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence.

Figure 4 depicts how these skills, as outlined in the RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) program are intended to transfer and help people in their everyday lives beyond a school setting.

Figure 4

RULER Skills of Emotional Intelligence



Note. From “The Skills of Emotional Intelligence,” by Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, 2020, *RULER Resources for Families*. <https://www.rulerapproach.org/ruler-resources-for-families>. Copyright 2020 by Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence.

Collectively, EI theory inclusive of the EI ability model and SEL framework by CASEL jointly emphasizes the importance of implementing SEL in classroom settings across all educational levels (CASEL, 2020; Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). The current body of research primarily concentrates on the elementary level (Frye et al., 2022; Hamilton et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2017; NCSEAD, 2019). The theoretical framework for this study was the emotional intelligence ability model (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). The SEL framework by CASEL (CASEL, 2020) was the conceptual framework guiding this study. Utilizing EI and the SEL framework by CASEL (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; CASEL, 2020) as the theoretical and conceptual framework for this study assisted this researcher in recognizing the significance of EI as a foundation for building social and emotional skills outlined or embedded within SEL frameworks, approaches, and practices.

Evolution of Social-Emotional Learning

Explicit and intentional instruction focused on SEL is relatively young pedagogy that has evolved through the work of many researchers (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020; CASEL, 2022; Cherry, 2022; Goleman, 1995; Mayer & Salovey, 1997; NCSEAD, 2019). The origins of this growing pedagogy can also be traced back to the work of Darwin and his recognition of the functionality of emotions on survival instincts and the behaviors that support these instincts (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020; Ludwig & Welch, 2019). Researchers began to demonstrate the explicit connection between understanding emotions and the role they play in behavior, thinking and decision-making, and additional theories began to emerge that broadened the definition of what it meant to be intelligent (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020; Cherry, 2022). Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences and the theory of emotional intelligence as proposed by Salovey

and Mayer (1997) began to pave the way for what researchers now refer to as social-emotional learning (Brackett et al., 2019; Brackett & Cipriano, 2020).

It was a long-held belief that how intelligent someone was could be determined by their verbal and mathematical abilities (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020; Gardner, 1983). These abilities were typically assessed using traditional IQ assessments that focused on logical reasoning abilities without mention of emotion, perception, the arts, and other areas where people had excelled (Gardner, 1983). Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences had a similar effect on educators that educational policy would have when the ESSA was passed (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020). The Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) challenged long standing beliefs held by legislators (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020) and encouraged educators to consider what additional abilities could constitute success for a student. The role of emotions and a person's ability to use their understanding of emotions for interpersonal and intrapersonal skill development became worthy of greater consideration (Davidson et al., 2018; Gardner, 1983).

The theory of emotional intelligence (Salovey & Mayer, 1990) grew out of earlier research, including the implications of Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences and Payne's (1985) dissertation which focused on the study of emotions related to fear, pain, and desire (Baumsteiger, et al., 2021; Brackett & Cipriano, 2020). This is when the greatest emphasis in research to-date placed on the role emotions play in a person's overall functioning and success (Cherry, 2022). Emotional intelligence was proposed as an ability that can be developed and leveraged and as such, this ability is crucial in determining a person's behavior, reactions, judgements, communication, and ability to relate to others effectively (Baumsteiger et al., 2021; Brackett & Cipriano, 2020; Cherry, 2022; Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Cherry (2022) pointed out that EI is about a person's ability to understand and use their own emotions and use that

understanding to interpret others and respond appropriately. The second part of EI, the perception of emotions as they relate to self and others, is what provides a baseline for what has come to be seen as the field of social-emotional learning (Cherry, 2022; Goleman, 1995; Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

Mayer and Salovey's (1997) updated research on EI presented this theory in terms of abilities that were not fixed but instead could be improved over the course of one's lifetime. Other notable authors such as Goleman (1995) drew on available brain and behavioral research and began a conversation in education about what constituted success in and beyond the school setting and how schools supported this evolving definition. Schools implementing programs focused on improving student behavior or that included elements of SEL noted the positive impacts of SEL on school climate, in-class student engagement, and/or academic achievement as well as students accomplishing personal and professional goals (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020; Cherry, 2022).

The Fetzer Institute hosted a conference in 1994 with researchers, educators, practitioners working in schools and child advocates who came together to discuss the current state of disjointed programs and school-based efforts to address the whole child, not just the academic development of youth (CASEL, 2021). These leaders were joined together in their belief that schools had a responsibility and were in the position to address the social and emotional needs of all students from kindergarten through graduation from high school (CASEL, 2021). It was at this conference and through these discussions that the term social-emotional learning was introduced (Borowski, 2019; CASEL, 2019; Elbertson et al., 2009). It was also through the Fetzer Institute sponsored conference that CASEL was formed and its mission of ensuring high-

quality, evidence-based SEL became an integral part of every child's school experience was solidified (CASEL, 2021).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning continues to be a leader in the field of SEL by influencing educational policy and standards as well as promoting continuous learning (Borowski, 2019; Davidson et al., 2018). A group of nine contributors to CASEL in 1997 published the initial guidelines for educators implementing SEL, initiating the process of providing clarity on the practices and approaches that would formally define this field (Borowski, 2019; CASEL, 2021; Davidson et al., 2018; Elias et al., 1997). The work of Elias et al. (1997) has evolved as evidenced by the SEL framework CASEL initially introduced in the late 1990's expanded to include forming collaborative partnerships with families and communities (CASEL, 2020; Davidson et al., 2018). The Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning (2022) defined SEL as the process of acquiring and applying the necessary knowledge, attitudes, and skills to understand and manage emotions, feel and show empathy for others, set and achieve positive goals, establish and maintain healthy relationships, and make responsible decisions.

Experts in the SEL field consider SEL to be a growth-oriented approach to build up the five-core social and emotional competencies rather than an intervention-based approach (CASEL, 2022; Hamilton, et al., 2019; NCSEAD, 2019). These competencies include (a) self-awareness, (b) self-management, (c) social awareness, (d) relationship skills, and (e) responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2022). The Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning (2013, 2022) emphasized that these competencies are interconnected and mutually reinforcing and that they can be nurtured through explicit instruction, supportive school environments, and meaningful engagement with families and communities. This approach recognizes that social and

emotional competencies can be nurtured and enhanced through deliberate and intentional efforts over time (Goleman, 1995). Adopting a growth-oriented approach enables educators to foster a culture of continuous learning and development in the realm of social and emotional competencies (Sprenger, 2020). This approach supports students' long-term well-being, success, and resilience (Hoffman et al., 2018; Sprenger, 2020).

Social-emotional learning in schools is typically classified into three categories. These categories are explicit SEL programs or curricula, practices that are embedded within academic instruction or dedicated advisory blocks, and strategies that promote secure relationships between students and staff as well as a positive school-wide climate (Hamilton et al., 2019). There is an underlying understanding that SEL is a developmental process across these categories (CASEL, 2022; Hamilton et al., 2019). The five SEL competencies defined by CASEL (2023) encompass developmental tasks that will become increasingly more sophisticated as children get older and better able to recognize, understand, and regulate their emotions. Children are better able to use emotional information as it is presented to them by others when responding as they get older (Denham, 2018).

Educational Policy's Impact on Social-Emotional Learning

Society acknowledged the crucial role of emotions and emotional intelligence in personal and professional success (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020). The urgency to teach these skills in schools was not always present (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020). Schools typically teach either what is currently valued by society and/or what schools are evaluated on (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020). Educational policies set by federal and state legislators tend to shape what is taught in schools and changing policies often reflect changes in curricula (Allbright & Marsh, 2022; Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020)

Schools became narrowly focused on one definition of success, namely student test scores, in the early 2000s (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020). This was directly influenced by the NCLB legislation that provided financial incentives for high student test scores (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020). The field of education witnessed a rise in investments into science, technology, engineering, and math programs as well as literacy programming (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020). This occurred with little to no acknowledgment of the skill set needed to positively impact social and behavioral outcomes for students, as these outcomes were not measured under NCLB (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020).

There was a renewed focus on SEL in schools with the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015 (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020; Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020). The definition of student success was expanded under ESSA to include measures for social and emotional well-being in addition to academic achievement (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020). School climate experts Darling-Hammond and DePaoli (2020) wrote about the role of relationship building and stated:

Stable, caring relationships are front and center in every school building that exemplifies positive climate. Such relationships with teachers and other adults foster students' brain development and are linked to better school performance and engagement, increased emotional regulation, social competence, and willingness to take on challenges. (p. 7)

Goleman's (1995) work had also underscored the importance and impact of emotional regulation on academic engagement. The ESSA legislation more closely resembled prevalent educational and emotional intelligence theory and SEL became a go-to approach for schools exploring how to cultivate the competencies previously defined by Goleman (1995) and then updated by CASEL (2022).

Impact of Social-Emotional Learning

The impact of SEL on student outcomes can be viewed in a variety of ways. The Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning (2013, 2022) classifies impact by time. This is measured by short-term, intermediate, and long-term student outcomes (Borowski, 2019). Social-emotional learning experts and researchers Hamilton et al. (2019) wrote more extensively about the impact SEL has on student outcomes and said, “Widespread enthusiasm for SEL reflects research that indicates that developing SEL skills among children can improve outcomes in adulthood...improved academic and behavioral outcomes both in school and in the long term” (p. 3). Social-emotional learning has the potential to help students develop their own unique identities and navigate novel social situations such as those posed by the rise in social media use among pre-teens and teenagers (Tan & Wegmann, 2022). The way in which students view themselves, others, and students’ workload can also improve and contribute to an overall positive perception of school climate and classroom community (Borowski, 2019).

Social-emotional learning can also help students identify their own biases and influence the ways in which they relate to others who are different from themselves (Tann & Wegmann, 2022). This can have a positive effect on student-student and student-staff relationships, academic success, overall emotional regulation, and a decrease in the likelihood of drug use and/or disciplinary incidents (Borowski, 2019; Tan & Wegmann, 2022). The impact of SEL can be seen as students progress through high school and beyond in improved graduation rates and persistence in overcoming obstacles to reach personal and professional goals (Tan & Wegmann, 2022). Social-emotional learning fosters readiness for postsecondary education and the ability to work effectively and respectfully with a diverse group of people (Tan & Wegmann, 2022). The influence of SEL can also be observed in active contributions to communities and demonstrated

traits of an engaged citizen, increased career success, and perceptions of a better family/work-life balance (Borowski, 2019; Gunn, 2019; NCSEAD, 2019; Weissberg et al., 2016).

Intervention-based approaches have been used to study school climate, and several intervention-based approaches target a specific aspect of school climate (Baumsteiger et al., 2021; Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020). One example that supports the use of intervention-based approaches to improve school climate is the implementation of restorative justice practices (Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018). Restorative justice programs have been shown to effectively address issues such as student conflict resolution, disciplinary actions, and creating a sense of community within schools (Darling-Hammond, 2023). Fostering open communication, empathy, and understanding among students and staff, restorative justice practices contribute to a more positive and inclusive school climate (Darling-Hammond, 2023; Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018). Studies have demonstrated that the implementation of restorative justice approaches leads to reduced disciplinary incidents, improved student-teacher relationships, and a stronger sense of belonging among students (Darling-Hammond, 2023).

Schools that adopt restorative justice interventions often experience enhanced overall school climate (Darling-Hammond, 2023). Implementing restorative justice can lead to a more conducive and supportive learning environment for all stakeholders (Darling-Hammond, 2023). Social-emotional learning is a holistic approach to addressing a range of competencies and skills rooted in EI that has been shown to positively influence students and staff, especially as they build the stable and caring relationships seen as a cornerstone in schools that are reported to have a positive climate (Baumsteiger et al., 2021; Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020; Lewis et al., 2021; Stefanovic et al., 2021). This work needs to be done in partnership with all stakeholders who work with students and schools (Tan & Wegmann, 2022).

How Social-Emotional Learning Differs from Behavior Focused Programs

Social-emotional learning is focused on cultivating social and emotional skills with the belief that these skills are not fixed and can be taught, improved, practiced, and utilized to help individuals grow both personally and professionally beyond their school years (Baumsteiger et al., 2021; Gunn, 2019). Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and Restorative Practices (RP) are two popular approaches used in schools and other settings to promote positive behavior, create a supportive environment, and address disciplinary issues (Gulbrandson, 2018; Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018; Kittelman et al., 2019). Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports and RP share some similarities with SEL and each other, PBIS and RP differ in their primary focus and strategies. Both PBIS and RP aim to promote positive behaviors and create a positive school environment (Gulbrandson, 2018; Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018), they use different approaches to achieve these goals.

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports is a proactive and preventative framework that aims to improve student behavior and academic performance by creating a positive school culture (Gulbrandson, 2018). This framework is based on the understanding that when students feel safe, supported, and engaged they are more likely to exhibit positive behaviors (Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018). The key features of PBIS include a tiered approach, clear expectations, positive reinforcement, and data-driven decision making (Gulbrandson, 2018). Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports employs a tiered system of support (Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018). This includes universal strategies provided to all students in tier one, targeted interventions for those requiring additional support in tier two, and intensive, individualized interventions for a small group of students in tier three (Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018).

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports establishes clear behavior expectations that are explicitly taught and consistently reinforced across all school settings (Gulbrandson, 2018; Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018). The emphasis of PBIS is on positive reinforcement and recognition of desired behaviors through praise, rewards, or acknowledgment (Gulbrandson, 2018; Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018). Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports relies on data collection and analysis to identify trends, make informed decisions, and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions (Gulbrandson, 2018; Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018). This was a very popular framework adopted by many schools and at one point was in over 25,000 schools within the United States (Kittelman et al., 2019). Positive Interventions and Supports follows an intervention framework with multiple levels focused on prevention rather than punishment to change and share expected student behavior within schools (Lee, n.d.; Kittelman et al., 2019).

Presented as an organizational framework, Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports streamlines educators' efforts to clarify behavioral expectations, teach expected behaviors, establish processes for rewarding positive behaviors, and implement systems for tracking student behavior (Lee, n.d.). Social-emotional learning, on the contrary, is an approach to building students' self-awareness (Borowski, 2019). Students who build self-awareness can assess their own personal strengths and needs, make informed decisions, and adapt to new challenges and opportunities (NCSEAD, 2019). Individuals who demonstrate enhanced emotional regulation and behavior adjustment positively influence themselves and others at school, home, and within their communities (Borowski, 2019; NCSEAD, 2019; Tan & Wegmann, 2022).

One of the greatest differences between SEL and behavior focused programs such as PBIS are the differences in the guiding principles and intended outcomes of each type of program (Lee, n.d.). Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports is focused on teaching

students appropriate behavior expectations through explicit instruction, practice and feedback based on different physical locations within a school building, and the clearly defined expectations present within each of the situations or locations (Lee, n.d.). Social-emotional learning is focused on developing self-awareness and the understanding of emotions in others in service of developing the skills necessary for navigating complex social situations during and beyond school years (CASEL, 2013, 2022, 2023). The impact of such comprehensive learning is reflected in the five competencies, as outlined by CASEL, that impact personal and professional goals extending beyond graduation (Baumsteiger et al., 2021; CASEL, 2023; NCSEAD, 2019; Weissberg et al., 2016).

Restorative Practices

A school leader's time is the most valuable commodity they have at their disposal (Lemov & Bambrick-Santoyo, 2018). School administrators strive to be instructional leaders of the building, however the practical realities of running a school, including managing student behavior, require a lot of school administrators' time and attention daily (Lemov & Bambrick-Santoyo, 2018). Changing school disciplinary practices from exclusionary discipline towards restorative practices is a shift in the approach to addressing student misbehavior (Evans & Vaandering, 2016). Exclusionary discipline, which often includes suspensions, expulsions, or other punitive measures, focuses on removing students from the educational environment as a consequence for their actions (Anfara et al, 2013; Evans & Vaandering, 2016; Hultshorn & Mulholland, 2018). Restorative practices emphasize repairing harm, building relationships, and fostering a sense of community within the school setting (Hultshorn & Mulholland, 2018). Restorative practices tend to fall under the umbrella term of SEL due to the emphasis on

repairing relationships, learning through reflection, and subsequent action or dialogue (Anfara et al., 2013; Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018).

Restorative practices aim to create a supportive and inclusive school climate where students feel valued and respected (Evans & Vaandering, 2016). Restorative practices experts Evans and Vaandering (2016) shared that instead of simply punishing students for their misconduct, those educators engaging in restorative practices encourage dialogue and understanding, which in turn allows individuals involved in a conflict to take responsibility for their actions and find solutions that address the harm caused. This approach is based on the principles of accountability, empathy, and restoration (Evans & Vaandering, 2016). This approach also requires extensive training, time, and a school culture and climate that embraces this shift and is dedicated to teaching the necessary SEL skills to support it (Huguley et al., 2022; Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018).

Restorative practices are a relational and community-building approach that focuses on repairing harm caused by behavior and building a sense of belonging and connection within a school community (Evans & Vaandering, 2016). This framework seeks to address conflicts and disciplinary issues in a way that promotes accountability, empathy, and learning from mistakes (Kittelman et al., 2019). The key features of RP according to Evans and Vaandering (2016) include (a) restorative circle, (b) dialogue and communication, (c) accountability and responsibility, and (d) community building. This comprehensive approach to conflict resolution fosters a safer and more inclusive school environment (Brackett et al., 2019). Restorative practices align closely with the overarching goals of the RULER SEL program by emphasizing the need for interconnected strategies that support emotional well-being and positive social

interactions within the school community (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020; Brackett et al., 2019; Kittelman et al., 2019).

Restorative practices emphasize open communication, active listening, and dialogue to repair relationships and address conflicts (Evans & Vaandering, 2016). Encouraging individuals to take responsibility for their actions and make amends for the harm caused, restorative practices prioritize accountability over solely punitive measures (Kittelman et al., 2019). Additionally, these practices center on building a sense of community (Evans & Vaandering, 2016). This approach fosters positive relationships between students, teachers, and other members of the school community (Evans & Vaandering, 2016).

The terms RP and SEL can also sometimes be used interchangeably, although they also differ (Evans & Vaandering, 2016; Gulbrandson, 2018). Restorative practices are in essence the vehicle to further develop SEL skills through structured practice, feedback, and multiple practice opportunities (Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018). Gulbrandson (2018) expanded upon this idea of RP acting as a vehicle for SEL when writing about what RP provides to students and staff alike, including a positive community, a process, and an opportunity for students to practice SEL and skills to navigate complex social interactions and situations successfully. Restorative practices provide opportunities and structures for students and staff alike to practice using SEL (Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018). Restorative practices alone do not teach SEL skills (Gulbrandson, 2018; Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018).

Lack of Consistent Curricula and Assessment Practices

Multiple research studies on SEL exist, however the predominant focus of research studies has been on stand-alone curricula rather than the abundance of approaches educators have adopted within their classrooms (Hamilton et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2017). Social-

emotional learning is associated with a variety of definitions, programs, approaches, and frameworks (Hamilton et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2017). Given this broad overview, SEL experts Hamilton and Schwartz (2019) provided an educator's perspective when they wrote, "educators have access to a mind-boggling number of frameworks that list and define specific skills...As with most approaches to school reform, SEL has the potential to be beneficial or harmful, depending on how it is defined and practiced" (p. 1). There was a growing group of educational leaders who began to question the rapidly growing interest in and implementation of SEL, as scaling up at such a rapid rate can compromise the consistency and quality of SEL practices (Finn & Hess, 2019; Hamilton & Schwartz, 2019; Shriver & Weissberg, 2020).

There were more than 100 SEL-related frameworks in existence as of March 2020 (Shriver & Weissberg, 2020). Each framework was complete with its own definition and prioritization of SEL skills (Shriver & Weissberg, 2020). Numerous widely-used terms in education, and like many of these terms SEL faces challenges from educators, advocates, and vendors who may, at times, misunderstand or misuse the term to advance their own vision of what SEL is, how it should be integrated into a school's curriculum, and in what proportion it should be offered alongside academic content (Finn & Hess, 2019; Shriver & Weissberg, 2020). This is done for a variety of reasons including financial gain, professional clout, or an attempt at creating a wider buy-in from stakeholders (Finn & Hess, 2019; Shriver & Weissberg, 2020). This impact perpetuates skepticism and ambiguity about what SEL is and what skills should, or can, be taught (Finn & Hess, 2019). Starr (2019) wrote about the different meanings SEL holds with different educators. Some meanings for the term SEL are similar, but there are vast differences that also exist and pose a risk when implemented without a deep understanding of the purpose of building SEL competencies (Starr, 2019). It is crucial to consider the needs exhibited by a

specific population of students (Starr, 2019). Starr (2019) wrote, “Yet, there’s a risk to such looseness, as educators with scant time to read deeply into the research might be tempted to choose the shiniest apple, implementing a model that may not be the right fit for their needs” (p. 70).

Research has shown that attempts to define SEL have often lacked valid and reliable metrics to measure emotions and SEL (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020). This has subsequently affected the adoption of consistent SEL curricula or frameworks into schools (Jones et al., 2017; Brackett & Cipriano, 2020). The metrics, such as the Devereux Advanced Behavioral Health Assessment (DESSA) (2023), that do exist to measure social and emotional competence in children are limited and subjective. This can further create uncertainty as schools try to determine how best to integrate SEL and measure the success of their efforts in doing so (Finn & Hess, 2019). The lack of standardized assessment tools and universally agreed-upon indicators has contributed to a fragmented implementation of SEL programs, highlighting the pressing need for a comprehensive and standardized approach to evaluate the efficacy of SEL initiatives within educational settings (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020). The absence of a unified assessment framework has hindered the establishment of a cohesive understanding of the impact of SEL on students' academic performance and overall well-being (Finn & Hess, 2019). This underscores the necessity for additional exploration of a standardized measurement system that captures the multifaceted dimensions of social and emotional development in educational environments (Finn & Hess, 2019).

Schools need ways to monitor and measure the effectiveness of their chosen SEL framework (Hamilton & Schwartz, 2019). This helps determine if it is beneficial to students and to what extent these efforts positively impact student experiences within and beyond high school

(Hamilton & Schwartz, 2019). Social-emotional learning programs may also appear to vary widely in impact because program evaluations often fail to measure whether students have mastered the precise skills the programs seek to impart (Hamilton & Schwartz, 2019; Jones et al., 2017; NCSEAD, 2019). Concerns about how available data is used have also been raised by education experts Finn and Hess (2019) who wrote, “It’s possible to assert that things are going well or that ‘programs are working’ largely on the basis of anecdote or cherry-picked survey data– and it’s hard for doubters to disprove such claims” (p. 1). Starr (2019) argued that educational leaders must remain skeptical of SEL metrics and remember to ask questions about what is being measured, how it is being measured, and who is part of that measurement.

Valid and reliable measurement of SEL is important for schools and districts and is also especially important for teachers tasked with overall SEL implementation and instruction of specific SEL-related skills such as self-awareness (Shriver & Weissberg, 2020). Years of research has shown that what educators teach and which skills they emphasize are directly related to and influenced by what is assessed and assessment results (Hamilton & Schwartz, 2019). Not all SEL programs are created equal and even when one is shown to be successful in one setting, the program is not guaranteed to have the same effects in all settings (Shriver & Weissberg, 2020; Starr, 2019). Hamilton and Schwartz (2019) described how almost all educators they surveyed believed that educators were addressing SEL but could not concretely describe what that meant or how SEL implementation efforts and effectiveness, or positive outcomes, were measured. Hamilton and Schwartz (2019) wrote, “Educators need support from school, district, or state leaders to identify manageable priority areas and adopt clear definitions of student outcomes they are promoting” (p. 3). Having a high-quality assessment strategy and setting a clear purpose for data collection, analysis, and use can help educators determine which

strategies are most helpful with their students or school and provide clarity for teachers tasked with implementation to avoid a sense of burnout or overload (Finn & Hess, 2019; Hamilton & Schwartz, 2019; Shriver & Weissberg, 2020; Starr, 2019).

The SEL movement from its onset perpetuated the belief that SEL was for all students; nevertheless, the implementation of this belief in practice varies across different schools and districts (Starr, 2019; Shriver & Weissberg, 2020). Starr (2019) noted this by saying, “To date, the discourse around SEL has been dominated by White researchers and reformers, though much of the programming has been directed at Black and Brown students in urban districts” (p. 1). This reality has also contributed to the ambiguity for educators around the purpose(s) and implementation of SEL at the school and classroom level (Starr, 2019). Proponents of SEL have argued that equity work has always been a central tenet of SEL and would point to the inclusion of skills aimed at developing the ability to examine personal biases, promote understanding and acceptance of each other's unique identities, lived experiences, culture, and generational trauma as a means of addressing racial divisions and equity/opportunity gaps (Shriver & Weissberg, 2020; Starr, 2019).

Teacher Perceptions of Social-Emotional Learning

Given the ambiguity surrounding SEL curricula and assessment practices, understanding how teachers think about SEL in schools provides a more complete understanding of how SEL practices may be incorporated into schools and academic curricula (Hamilton et al., 2019). Researchers and educators have noted that SEL has the potential to improve students’ school experience in many areas including achievement, engagement, school climate and student behavior (CASEL, 2022; Hamilton et al., 2019; NCSEAD, 2019). A series of surveys (Bridgeland et al., 2013; DePaoli et al., 2017; McGraw-Hill Education, 2018) with nationally

representative samples of public-school principals and educators were given to explore the importance of students developing SEL skills at school (as cited in Hamilton et al., 2019). Hamilton et al. (2019) summarized the findings of these surveys. The results showed that both educators and administrators believed that students should develop these skills at school and did not prioritize specific SEL skills at the expense of other skills (CASEL, 2022; Hamilton et al., 2019).

Surveys given to educators about the importance of SEL and their ability to positively impact student outcomes reveal high levels of confidence in the potential for social-emotional learning to foster students' overall well-being, enhance interpersonal skills, and contribute to academic success. (CASEL, 2022; Hamilton et al., 2019; NCSEAD, 2019). This suggests that they also view the time and resources spent on pursuing a deeper understanding of SEL and implementing SEL programs as beneficial and supportive of their academic instruction goals and efforts (Hamilton et al., 2019). Secondary educators have been shown to opt to use informal SEL classroom practices as opposed to school-wide programs and curricula that are more widely used at the elementary level (Hamilton et al., 2019). Educators also have reported how well supported SEL initiatives are at the district level, impacts the quality of SEL implementation, and the types of support provided (Hamilton et al., 2019; CASEL, 2022).

Social-emotional learning is not just for students (Starr, 2019). Social-emotional learning is just as important for the teachers and adults who work with children as it is for the children themselves (Stefanovic et al., 2021). Starr (2019) wrote, "It's not something that we do for children alone, without also attending to the social and emotional lives of the adults who work in our schools. Rather, SEL must be woven into *all* the interactions within a school community" (p. 2). Stefanovic et al. (2021) designed a professional learning course to address the SEL needs of

school and district-level leaders. Ninety percent of those who took the course reported that the program would impact their practice and was applicable in their workplace (Stefanovic et al., 2021). This included a commitment to focusing on the SEL of staff and a heightened sense of self-awareness by educators (Stefanovic et al., 2021).

Hamilton and Schwartz (2019) reported on the ambiguity expressed by educators when asked to describe how they knew they were addressing SEL. Starr (2019) also wrote about his skepticism and the lack of clarity associated with SEL. Starr (2019) discussed the different meanings people hold when thinking about and discussing SEL. Educators associate SEL with Dwek's (2007) work around growth mindset or Duckworth's (2018) work around grit. Other educators think of anti-bullying programs, character education programs, or even collaborative learning when thinking of SEL (Starr, 2019). It is unclear how educators, even those within the same school or district, define SEL and the practices implemented within individual classrooms (Hamilton et al., 2019).

Educators surveyed as part of *American Educator Panels Survey* viewed SEL as both positive and productive and believed they were implementing SEL in some form with students and within their classrooms (Bhalla, 2019; Hamilton et al., 2019). Educators have also expressed the difficulty when trying to define what SEL implementation means in concrete terms (Hamilton & Schwartz, 2019). Barriers such as time and the need to balance academic curricula needs have been noted by educators as reasons SEL was not consistently implemented or done so with fidelity (Hamilton et al., 2019). Educators also named lack of training, knowledge, and confidence as other potential barriers to consistent SEL implementation (Hamilton et al., 2019). Educators described the lack of clarity and lingering questions about how to incorporate SEL within diverse classrooms (Bhalla, 2019; Denston et al., 2022; Hamilton et al., 2019; Starr,

2019). Denston et al. (2022) wrote about the impact that teachers' social-emotional competencies and the understanding they hold of their own personal development can affect the ways in which they present these skills to students. Denston et al. (2022) stated that an educator's understanding of their own SEL journey will shape the interactions the educator has with students. Denston et al. (2022) suggested that teachers' perceptions of SEL can and will influence student perceptions of SEL and skill development. It is important to understand what district and school leaders can do to support SEL development within their staff in service of their students.

Summary

The theoretical framework of this study was based on the emotional intelligence ability model proposed by Mayer and Salovey (1997). CASEL's (2020) SEL framework served as the conceptual framework of this study. This qualitative exploratory case study's literature review revealed consistent findings that emphasized the positive impact of SEL on both students and staff, highlighting its enduring effects beyond the school years and experiences (CASEL, 2022; Hamilton et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2017; NCSEAD, 2019). Previous SEL research has provided valuable insights into standalone programs, program fidelity, and reported outcomes in schools (Hamilton et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2017). Nonetheless, to best support SEL in educational settings and gain a deeper understanding of which approaches are effective within a district, professional learning, and implementation efforts can greatly benefit from high-quality data provided by practitioners involved in daily implementation, guiding informed decision-making (Hamilton et al., 2019; NCSEAD, 2019). Chapter 3 explores the methodology employed to rigorously investigate and analyze the practical implementation and outcomes of the RULER SEL program within a secondary school setting.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The vital role played by SEL in elementary and secondary education has been increasingly acknowledged, and has been especially propelled by milestones such as the 2015 passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020; Hamilton et al., 2019). This momentum has been further fueled by the impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic, which compelled schools nationwide to suspend in-person learning in March 2020 (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020). Schools are striving to create nurturing and supportive environments that address the holistic development of students, and SEL has emerged as a pivotal framework or approach to use with students and staff alike (CASEL, 2020). Fostering students' social and emotional competencies through SEL not only enhances their academic performance but also equips them with essential skills for success in their personal and professional lives (CASEL, 2020; Durlak et al., 2011).

Social-emotional learning encompasses diverse definitions, skills, and strategies, with prevailing research primarily focusing on isolated curricula (Frye et al., 2022; Hamilton et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2017; NCSEAD, 2019). Notably absent from these definitions is comprehensive research on the range of approaches educators employ to foster SEL in secondary school classrooms (Frye et al., 2022; Hamilton et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2017; NCSEAD, 2019). Additionally, the lack of valid and reliable metrics for measuring emotions and SEL hinders the establishment of consistent curricula in schools, which impacts the adoption of such curricula (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020; Hamilton et al., 2019; Lewis et al., 2021). Research on SEL has examined teacher beliefs and perceptions of efficacy (CASEL, 2022; Collie et al., 2012; Darling-Hammon & DePaoli, 2020; White et al., 2020). There is limited available research addresses how the myriad SEL elements influence the perceptions of secondary teachers implementing

SEL (Konishi et al., 2022; NCSEAD, 2019; White et al., 2020). This study aimed to expand on prior research by exploring the perceptions of ninth through 12th grade teachers concerning SEL integration within academic instruction.

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to explore how secondary school teachers and staff at a mid-size public, suburban high school perceive the implementation of the RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) program. Social-emotional learning practices were defined as the routines, structures and strategies staff and teachers regularly utilize and implement to build positive relationships with students (Weissberg et al., 2016). This researcher believed that understanding teacher and staff perspectives, beliefs, and experiences could provide valuable insights into the effectiveness and potential challenges of SEL implementation (CASEL, 2022; NCSEAD, 2019). This insight could also provide resources for effective long-term integration of SEL within a school site (NCSEAD, 2019). The following research questions guided this qualitative exploratory case study:

Research Question 1: How do secondary school teachers and staff perceive the value of the RULER SEL program when reflecting on their interactions with students?

Research Question 2: How does the RULER SEL program support or add to tier one instruction provided by secondary school teachers?

The study employed a qualitative exploratory case study approach that allowed this researcher to explore lived experiences of secondary school staff and teachers related to these research questions and the meaning participants attributed to those experiences. This researcher employed semi-structured interviews with individual secondary staff members and teachers at a secondary school in Connecticut to explore the perceptions of SEL and personal experiences with SEL implementation, including their insights into perceived challenges and effective

resources or support that has been provided. Participants in this study also completed the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation*. This survey was designed by CASEL (2021) to elicit the understanding of teacher and staff experiences and perceptions of SEL within a specific school building.

This study's qualitative exploratory case study method was grounded in the conceptual framework of SEL as outlined by CASEL (2020). The SEL framework developed by CASEL (2020) provides a comprehensive and widely recognized model for understanding and fostering social and emotional skills in educational settings. This qualitative exploratory case study aimed to explore the nuanced dynamics of SEL implementation within a mid-size suburban high school in Connecticut. This framework not only guided the research design but also offered a foundation for analyzing and interpreting the qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews and participant completion of the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation*. The use of the SEL framework by CASEL (2020) enhanced this study's theoretical coherence and allowed this researcher to make meaningful connections between this study's research findings and existing literature on SEL.

This study's qualitative exploratory case study method was further grounded in this study's theoretical framework. The theoretical framework for this study is the emotional intelligence ability model (Mayer & Salovey, 1990, 1997). Conducting a comprehensive examination of staff and teacher perceptions of the RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) program at a mid-size suburban high school in Connecticut required this researcher to recognize the crucial role played by understanding how emotional intelligence and the SEL framework by CASEL (2020) inform this research. Together these frameworks offered a holistic lens to understand the complex interplay between emotional intelligence, social-emotional

competencies, and the implementation of the RULER SEL program (CASEL, 2020; Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

A qualitative exploratory case study was the best choice for this study because the study's research topic, which was secondary teacher and staff perceptions of RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) implementation, was complex and multifaceted. This study's research questions also required an understanding of context and case studies excel at capturing nuances and contextual factors related to a subject (Creswell, 2014). Case studies are an ideal choice for an in-depth examination of a subject and allow for a holistic understanding of the subject by capturing multiple perspectives and factors that may be overlooked in other research designs (Creswell & Poth, 2017). This qualitative exploratory case study sought to understand secondary teacher and staff perceptions of RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) in a mid-size suburban high school, which makes this design the best methodological choice.

Site Information and Demographics

The study site was a mid-size suburban public high school that served students in Grades 9-12 in Connecticut with approximately 900 students and 74 staff members (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2022). The student to teacher ratio was 12.5:1 with 74.5% of students identifying as white (NCES, 2022). The school's enrollment of students of color was 25.5% of the study body, which was lower than the Connecticut state average of 50% (NCES, 2022). Approximately 16% of the school's students were identified as being eligible for free or reduced lunch (NCES, 2022). This school was in an academically high achieving district that placed in the top 25% of all schools in Connecticut for overall test scores and consistently carried a graduation rate of 97% (NCES, 2022).

This researcher had no affiliation with this high school or knowledge of employees within the school district. The school site was chosen because it was a mid-size suburban school, with a graduation rate above the state average (NCES, 2022) in its second year of implementing a specific SEL program known as RULER (school administrator, personal communication, November 14, 2023). Given the school's size and academic achievements, this researcher deemed it essential to understand a sample of the school staff's perspective on social-emotional learning. This researcher's lack of association helped ensure impartiality in examining the staff's perspectives on SEL implementation. According to Creswell and Poth (2017), maintaining distance or lack of direct involvement can enhance objectivity and reduce bias in qualitative research.

Participants and Sampling Method

This researcher received approval from the University of New England's Office of Research and Scholarship Institutional Review Board (2020) to conduct this study. There were approximately 74 teachers and staff employed at the research site (NCES, 2022). This researcher obtained written permission from the district's superintendent to conduct research at the secondary school within this school district. This researcher gained access to teacher and staff e-mail addresses through the school's principal. This researcher e-mailed a recruitment flier (Appendix C) and participant information sheet (Appendix D) to these 74 teachers and staff from her University of New England e-mail address for recruitment purposes. The following criteria was used to determine a prospective staff member's eligibility to participate in this study: (a) age 18 or older, (b) must self-identify as a high school teacher in any subject or a staff member who works as an administrator, coordinator, or nurse at the study site, (c) must self-identify as having at least one school year of experience with the RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) program.

This qualitative exploratory case study sought nine participants. Interested participants were asked to respond to the researcher directly. The recruitment period was open until nine participants who had met the criteria to participate responded. This researcher interviewed the first nine participants that met eligibility criteria to participate. Participants were able to choose pseudonyms to help ensure confidentiality. This researcher maintained a master list to hold names of the participants and their pseudonyms that were stored in a secure file.

Teachers comprised six of the nine participants, and of these teachers three teachers instructed humanities courses and three teachers instructed non-humanities courses. These courses were chosen because every high school student in Connecticut is required to take humanities courses for four years and non-humanities courses for at least three years of their high school experience (An Act Concerning Revisions to the High School Graduation Requirements, 2017). Teachers of humanities courses and non-humanities courses work with students of varying ability levels in Grades 9-12. The three staff members were affiliated with one of the following roles within the school: administrator, coordinator, or nurse. Teachers and staff affiliated with specific courses and roles were identified as participants to obtain a cross sample of the adult population of the school and they represented the diversity of ideas and beliefs within the research site.

A key decision in this research design involved working with a smaller sample size. Creswell (2013) suggested that smaller sample sizes can be advantageous in qualitative research when the focus is on in-depth exploration and understanding of a particular phenomenon. Saldana (2013) emphasized that smaller sample sizes can lead to richer data and deeper insights. Saldana (2013) also noted that this is especially true when the analysis is combined with other rigorous data analysis techniques.

This study employed purposive sampling to select research participants. Purposive sampling is a non-random sampling technique widely used in qualitative research to deliberately select individuals or groups who possess specific characteristics or experiences relevant to the research objectives (Creswell, 2013). Purposive sampling involves selecting participants or cases based on specific criteria that are relevant to the research objective and questions posed within this study rather than randomly selecting participants from a larger population (Creswell, 2014). The goal of purposive sampling is to obtain a sample that will most likely provide valuable insights and information related to the research questions (Creswell, 2014). A researcher using purposive sampling must use their judgment and expertise to identify individuals who can offer diverse perspectives, unique experiences, or specialized knowledge relevant to the study (Creswell, 2014; Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2014).

There are different types of purposive sampling including critical case sampling, typical case sampling, expert, homogenous and maximum variation sampling (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2014). Maximum variation sampling, also known as heterogeneity sampling or purposive diversity sampling, is a method in qualitative research where the researcher deliberately selects a diverse range of participants or cases to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2014). The goal of maximum variation sampling is to capture a broad spectrum of experiences, perspectives, and characteristics relevant to the research question (Patton, 2014). Maximum variation sampling was chosen because participants were selected who represented a wide range of characteristics or viewpoints to capture diverse perspectives that exist among a school. All Connecticut high school students will at some point in their high school career take a humanities course, a science or non-humanities course (An Act Concerning Revisions to the High School Graduation Requirements, 2017), and presumably

interact with staff who support them in the capacity of an administrator, coordinator, or nurse. This type of sampling allowed for a focus on specific aspects of interest and gained in-depth insights of the beliefs and experiences of selected participants (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2014).

Instrumentation and Data Collection

Instrumentation and data collection in qualitative research refers to the tools, techniques, and methods used to gather data in qualitative studies (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research focuses on collecting rich, descriptive data through various means including but not limited to observations, interviews, documents, artifacts and focus groups (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It is imperative for a qualitative researcher to maintain rigor in data collection by maintaining detailed records of the research process to help ensure the trustworthiness, reliability, and validity of the collected data and subsequent analysis (Creswell, 2014; Palinkas et al., 2015). It is equally as important for the researcher to triangulate data or use multiple sources or methods to cross-check results and increase a study's reliability and the likelihood of validity (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Patton, 2014). Semi-structured interviews with participants were utilized as research instruments to elicit data that was analyzed for trends. Participants were also asked to complete the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* following the acceptance of the semi-structured individual interview transcript. Response data from the CASEL (2021) survey was analyzed by this researcher for trends.

The elements of a case study include (a) case selection, (b) data collection, (c) data analysis, (d) contextualization, (e) in-depth exploration, and (f) application. Creswell and Poth (2017) advised researchers to select a case that is pertinent to their research question and objectives. A case can be chosen as a research site for its uniqueness, relevance, or to provide a

critical test of existing theories (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Qualitative data collection methods commonly used in qualitative exploratory case studies include interviews, observations, documents, and, in some cases, surveys (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative data analysis techniques, like thematic analysis or content analysis, can be applied to identify patterns, themes, and relationships within the data (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Case studies can either aim to develop new theories or apply existing theories to new studies to understand the case's dynamics and implications (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

A qualitative exploratory case study is a research method used to investigate a particular phenomenon within its real-life context (Creswell & Poth, 2017). A qualitative exploratory case study is a comprehensive and in-depth examination of a single case or a small number of related cases used to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances surrounding the subject of study (Creswell, 2014). This research method enabled this researcher to discover staff member and teacher perspectives related to SEL initiative. A qualitative exploratory case study design provided a deeper understanding of staff and teacher engagement with SEL initiatives and their potential influence on student outcomes (Creswell, 2017). Additionally, this study offered recommendations for leaders tasked with providing staff ongoing professional learning opportunities. Data was collected from semi-structured, in-depth interviews with participants chosen through purposive sampling from a range of secondary content area teachers and staff at the selected research site. Participant responses to the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* were also collected using Research Electronic Data Capture (REDCap) after the completion of individual interviews (Harris et al., 2019). Utilizing data obtained through individual semi-structured interviews and survey responses provided participants with opportunities to reflect on their prior experiences and evolving practices. This approach allowed

participants to discuss how they made meaning of the term SEL identified factors that have supported their professional growth and development, and articulated their perceptions of strengths, barriers, or challenges related to SEL implementation. This format also provided opportunities for participants to share proposed solutions to identified barriers to the implementation of SEL initiatives.

Each semi-structured interview was conducted individually with each participant virtually and recorded through Zoom with the participant's approval. Zoom is a video conferencing and online meeting platform that allows users to host and join virtual meetings, webinars, and collaborate remotely (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2023). These interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes. The participant and this researcher chose a date and time that was mutually agreeable for the interview to be conducted on the Zoom platform. The Zoom link for each scheduled interview was sent to the participant by this researcher.

The participant information sheet was reviewed at the start of the interview. Participants were asked to review the participant information sheet and confirm they wished to continue. Participants had an opportunity to discuss any questions or concerns before the interview began. The participant then acknowledged verbally they would like to proceed with the interview. The recorded interviews were transcribed using Zoom's auto-transcription feature and reviewed for accuracy by this researcher. The virtual interviews took place in a private setting and away from public view so that the conversation could not be overheard. The interview was recorded on Zoom and participants had the option to leave the camera feature on Zoom on or off. This researcher sent emails to inform any additional interested participants after completing interviews with three participants in each category. This communication conveyed that the research study had reached its limit and that their participation was not required.

Another crucial aspect of this study's research instrumentation involved the practice of memoing during the interview process. Memoing is the systematic process of a researcher taking notes and recording reflective thoughts, insights, and observations that arise during interviews (Saldana, 2013; Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). Memoing was a valuable tool in this research because it helped this researcher maintain an ongoing dialogue with her data and assisted in the identification of emerging themes, patterns, and contradictions (Glaser, 1978). Memoing also aided in the process of data analysis and interpretation by providing a rich source of context and researcher reflections (Saldana, 2013). This researcher engaged in memoing to enhance the rigor and depth of this study. Memoing guided this researcher's data analysis and contributed to the overall complexity of findings.

The semi-structured interview recordings were stored on this researcher's personal password protected computer. The transcripts were stripped of any personally identifiable information, and participant names were replaced with a unique pseudonym as defined in the master list. Participants were also able to withdraw from the study at any time until the interviews were complete and the master list was destroyed; however, no participants withdrew from the study. Participants were made aware that if they withdrew from the study any data collected from that participant would be destroyed in conjunction with regulations determined by the University of New England's Office of Research and Scholarship Institutional Review Board (2020). All other study data will be retained for three years after the completion of the study and then destroyed in accordance with requirements set by the University of New England's Office of Research and Scholarship Institutional Review Board (2020). All data collected was stored on a password protected personal laptop computer accessible only by this researcher.

This researcher used member checking to ensure the interview responses were accurate and reliable. Member checking, also known as participant validation or respondent validation, is a qualitative research technique that involves returning study findings to the participants to seek their feedback, corrections, or validation (Creswell, 2018). The member checking process enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of this study's findings. The member checking process included this researcher sending each participant a copy of their interview to ensure their responses were accurately transcribed. The transcripts were sent to each participant via email from this researcher's UNE email address and they were provided five calendar days to review, retract, or withdraw information. If no revisions were suggested by the participant after five calendar days the transcript was considered to be accurate. Once member checking of the transcript was complete the transcript was accepted as an accurate representation of the participant's interview.

Participants were also made aware that following the acceptance of their transcript the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* would be sent to them through REDCap (Harris et al., 2019). Research electronic data capture is a secure, web-based application designed for data collection and management in research studies (Harris et al., 2019). The application provides a user-friendly interface for researchers to create and manage online surveys and databases (Harris et al., 2019). Each participant received the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* and completed the survey using REDCap. The CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* was designed for school-based SEL teams to elicit staff feedback regarding implementation practices and perceptions in support of planning, goal setting, progress monitoring and continuous improvement of schoolwide SEL initiatives and implementation practices. Using this data in conjunction with data obtained during

interviews allowed opportunities for participants to reflect on their prior experiences and evolving practices to discuss how they each made meaning of the term SEL, what has supported their professional growth and development and what they see as barriers, or challenges to the implementation of SEL initiatives. This format also elicited opportunities for participants to share proposed solutions to overcoming these identified barriers.

Data Analysis

Data collected in this qualitative exploratory case study was analyzed in accordance with the three phases of data analysis as described by Ravitch and Carl (2021). Ravitch and Carl (2021) defined data analysis as including (a) the development of a data organization plan for analysis, (b) engaging in the collection process, and (c) interpreting the data so that it can be presented in written form and supported by visuals. This researcher developed an interview protocol grounded in the established research questions that guided semi-structured individual interviews with nine teachers and staff members selected through purposive sampling (Creswell, 2013). The subsequent data analysis provided a robust foundation for identifying patterns, themes, and insights within the diverse perspectives gathered during the interviews and in alignment with the overarching goals of the study.

The recorded interviews were transcribed using Zoom's auto-transcription feature and reviewed for accuracy by this researcher. The data collected for this study came from the participant responses in the semi structured interviews and participant responses to the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation*. This researcher manually coded the data using Microsoft Word; no coding programs was used. This researcher labeled different segments of text with codes that described the meaning of the segment. Once all the data had been coded, this researcher analyzed the data to identify codes that aligned or connected to create

broader themes or descriptions. This researcher analyzed the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* to code which statements participants most often strongly agreed with or strongly disagreed with.

Each participant interview was documented, recorded, and transcribed via Zoom. The researcher used in vivo coding to then derive codes from the data itself to reflect the perspective of the interviewees (Creswell & Poth, 2017). In vivo coding is a qualitative research coding technique that involves using participants' own words or phrases to label and categorize segments of data (Saldana, 2013). This approach aims to maintain the authenticity of the participants' language and perspectives, which can be particularly valuable in capturing the nuances and meanings embedded in their responses (Saldana, 2013). This researcher labeled different segments of text with codes that described the meaning of the segment. This researcher then analyzed the data to identify codes that align or connect to create broader themes or descriptions that captured what the codes meant in relation to the research questions previously identified (Saldana, 2013).

Following the interviews, the nine selected staff members and teachers completed the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* which utilized a five-point Likert scale. Participants answered the questions on this survey using the following designations: (1) Strongly disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Neither agree or disagree; (4) Agree; and (5) Strongly agree. This researcher analyzed this survey data to determine which questions most frequently elicited a strong agree or a strong disagree response. This researcher compared the data elicited from surveys with the trends identified in staff interviews. This comparative analysis was guided by the emotional intelligence ability model (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Salovey & Mayer, 1990) and the SEL framework by CASEL (2020). This comparative approach aimed to provide a

comprehensive understanding of the congruence or divergence between self-reported perceptions in surveys and the nuanced perspectives expressed during interviews.

Limitations, Delimitations, and Ethical Issues

Establishing a strong foundation for a qualitative research study is essential and can be accomplished by acknowledging the scope and boundaries of the study, addressing the study's potential limitations, and highlighting the study's ethical considerations (Creswell, 2014). This section serves to contextualize this study's framework by discussing the limitations, delimitations, and ethical issues that underpin this research. Research, by its nature, is subject to limitations that may affect the scope and generalizability of the findings (Creswell, 2014). Limitations in research refer to factors or constraints that may affect the study's scope, generalizability, or precision (Creswell, 2014). Delimitations define the boundaries or parameters within which the study is conducted (Creswell, 2014). Ethical considerations are central to the responsible conduct of research (Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1979).

Limitations

All studies have limitations that researchers have to consider, even when the study has been methodically planned and vetted (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A limitation of this study was its limited generalizability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The findings may be context-specific and may not be easily generalized to larger populations, since qualitative research focuses on in-depth understanding of a limited population (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Another limitation of this study was the potential for researcher bias, given that qualitative research entails the active involvement of the researcher (Morse, 2015). This involvement introduces the possibility of bias in data collection, interpretation, and analysis (Morse, 2015). A researcher's subjectivity and preconceptions can influence a study's findings (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). This subjectivity can

impact the reliability and validity of the findings (Morse, 2015; Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). This study emphasized standardized data collection procedures, including the consistent use of interview and survey questions with each participant (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). Maintaining transparency in research methods and utilizing techniques like member checking were employed to ensure that the research was as objective and unbiased as possible (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017).

Sample size was another limitation of this study. Qualitative studies often have smaller sample sizes when compared to quantitative research (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). This study aimed for depth and richness of data. The smaller sample size limited the generalizability of this study's findings (Guest et al., 2020). Another limitation of this study was the effect this researcher's professional role may have had on participants' responses. Participants may have felt pressured to provide responses that aligned with this researcher's expectations due to this researcher's position as an administrator within another Connecticut school district (Rubin & Babbie, 2016). This could lead to social desirability bias, where participants provided socially acceptable responses rather than expressing their true thoughts, opinions, or experiences (Rubin & Babbie, 2016).

Delimitations

Delimitations help define the scope of the study (Creswell, 2014). This study was delimited to a large, suburban high school in Connecticut. Consequently, the findings of this research and conclusions may not be readily applicable to other regions with distinct cultural, social, or economic contexts. This study was centered on a specific high school in its second year of implementing a particular SEL program, as described by the school's website (2023) and acknowledged by the district's superintendent and high school principal (school administrator, personal communication, November 14, 2023). This means that specific learning opportunities

were being provided to the staff and faculty of this high school to introduce the intended outcomes and specific curriculum expectations within a defined time frame.

Another delimitation of the study was that it also utilized purposive sampling for the participant selection process and a small sample size. Purposive sampling includes specific criteria for participation (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). This study's participation criteria included teachers who self-identified as instructing a humanities course, teachers who self-identified as teaching a non-humanities course, and staff members who were affiliated with one of the following roles within the school: administrator, coordinator, or nurse. A small sample size was another delimitation of this study. This study's small sample size allowed this researcher to spend more time with each participant within an interview. This extra time allowed participants to respond and share unique perspectives. This additional time added to the depth and richness of the information provided by participants and allow for more time to be spent with each participant during the member check process.

The research is also delimited to a specific time frame encompassing the period from February 2024 to March 2024. Events, trends, or developments occurring before or after this time frame fell outside the scope of this study. The timeframe for this study may influence the dynamics and characteristics of the high school environment. The findings will represent that snapshot in time and may not reflect long-term or historical trends and changes within the school.

Ethical Issues

Conducting research with human participants requires careful consideration of ethical principles and guidelines. These ethical principles and guidelines, as outlined in *The Belmont Report*, include respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (National Commission for the

Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). This researcher employed several key practices to ensure the autonomy and dignity of individuals participating in the study. The principle of respect for persons requires researchers to treat participants as autonomous agents and ensure that they have the autonomy to make informed and voluntary decisions about their participation in the study (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The process of obtaining informed consent is a key component of respecting persons (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). This researcher regarded participants in this study as autonomous agents. This researcher made participants fully aware of the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits which allowed participants to make an informed and voluntary decision to participate. This was accomplished by including these elements in the participant information sheet (Appendix B). The participant information sheet was provided during the study's recruitment phase via email and shared at the beginning of each semi-structured interview.

The principle of beneficence requires researchers to maximize potential benefits and minimize potential harms to participants (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). This researcher outlined any potential risks or discomforts associated with participation. Participants may have worried that the opinions they expressed about this district-wide SEL initiative, especially if they did not support this initiative or were critical of certain components of the initiative, may have a negative professional or personal impact on them. It was important for this researcher to be transparent and adhere to the procedures outlined in the informed consent process, which included maintaining confidentiality.

The Belmont Report also outlined the principle of justice as including the fair distribution of the benefits and burdens of research (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). This researcher also ensured that the selection of research participants was fair and did not exploit vulnerable populations (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The criteria used for participant selection was not discriminatory. The criteria did not exclude any group unfairly as all staff were invited to join the study via a recruitment email.

Once participants were selected, they were treated equitably throughout the research process. This researcher ensured that all participants had the same opportunities, rights, and protections. Each participant met with this researcher individually in a mutually agreed upon location that did not make their participation in the research obvious or known to others. This location allowed for a private conversation in the form of an individual semi-structured interview where the researcher adhered to the same initial question set that had been vetted, edited, and revised for alignment to the research questions. All participants received a copy of their transcript and were provided five calendar days to review, retract, or withdraw information.

Trustworthiness

Ensuring the trustworthiness of the study was of paramount importance (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Trustworthiness pertains to the credibility, reliability, and validity of the research findings and the overall research process (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Given the subjective nature of SEL (Creswell & Gutterman, 2019), it was crucial to adopt rigorous methodologies and employ various strategies to enhance the trustworthiness of the data and interpretations presented in this study. This section outlines the comprehensive strategies this researcher employed to establish trustworthiness throughout the research process. Drawing from the principles of qualitative

research (Creswell & Gutterman, 2019), this section presents the measures that were taken to enhance credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in the study.

Credibility

According to Ravitch and Carl (2021) the credibility of a study focuses on ensuring the trustworthiness and reliability of the research findings. This researcher engaged in prolonged immersion within the research context, to foster a deep understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives. This researcher through this prolonged engagement built a strong rapport and trust with participants which facilitated open and honest dialogue (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Additionally, member checking was utilized to validate and verify the accuracy of the interpretations. Initial transcripts of each participant's recorded interview were shared with each participant and allowed them to provide feedback and corrections, further strengthening the authenticity of the data and ensuring that the research accurately represented their voices (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Ravitch and Carl (2021) discussed the importance of providing a well-detailed description of the research process. Each participant was asked the same questions, the recording of each interview was all done by the same device, and the transcription of each recorded interview was completed by the same software via Zoom. The triangulation of data sources was also employed (Patton, 1999). This approach involved integrating data from multiple sources, including interviews and the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* to corroborate the research findings from different angles (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The convergence of evidence from diverse sources enhanced the reliability of the interpretations and minimized potential biases or subjectivity (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Reflexivity in the context of qualitative research refers to the researcher's continuous awareness and consideration of their own role, biases, and assumptions throughout the research process (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Reflexivity involves an active acknowledgment and critical examination of the researcher's subjectivity and potential influence on the study's design, data collection, interpretation, and findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This researcher aimed to enhance the credibility and rigor of her research by openly recognizing and addressing her personal perspectives and potential impact on the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This researcher ensured objectivity and integrity of the study by transparently reflecting on her role as a researcher and its potential influence on data collection and analysis. The combination of these methodological approaches, including prolonged engagement, member checking, triangulation, and reflexivity, reinforced the credibility of the research findings and fostered confidence in the validity and significance of the study's contributions to the field of SEL at the secondary level.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings and conclusions of the study can be applied or transferred to other settings, contexts, or populations beyond those directly involved in the research (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Transferability is a concept often associated with qualitative research, where the emphasis is on understanding the nuances of a particular phenomenon within a specific context (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Transferability is important because it allows readers and future researchers to assess the relevance and applicability of the study's findings to other situations or groups (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The insights that were garnered from this study hold the potential to be relevant and beneficial in other mid-size suburban high schools, bridging the existing gap in research concerning the strengths, barriers, and challenges faced by faculty and staff when integrating SEL at the high school level. It was

important to acknowledge that the findings may vary across different high schools based on the availability of resources, support systems, and the individual experiences of faculty and staff with SEL integration. The study's participants were limited to one specific high school so the transferability of the findings may be low. The outcomes may still be valuable in informing practices in similar high school settings, despite this limitation.

The application of these findings beyond the immediate context of this study could provide valuable insights for fostering successful SEL integration in various high school environments. Educators and administrators in different settings can modify approaches and suggestions to align with their distinct needs and situations by acknowledging potential variations and contextual elements. The theoretical insights derived from this study could contribute to a broader understanding of SEL implementation and serve as a stepping stone for further research in diverse high school settings. This study's transferability may be limited, but its implications remain valuable for enhancing SEL practices in secondary education.

Dependability

Ensuring the dependability of research findings is crucial for establishing the credibility and trustworthiness of any study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The dependability of the research process and findings pertains to the consistency, stability, and reliability of the methods employed, data collected, and interpretations made regarding teacher and staff perceptions of SEL at the secondary level (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The research instruments and process of data collection remained the same throughout this study. The interviews were documented, recorded, and transcribed on Zoom. Member-checking was completed after each individual interview. This approach allowed for the correction of potential misinterpretations and ensured that the participants' voices were accurately represented.

Findings from both the participant interviews and CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* were compared to establish dependability through triangulation. Inconsistencies or discrepancies between these two sets of data were carefully examined and contributed to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of teacher and staff perceptions of SEL. Researcher reflexivity, which involves the consistent self-evaluation by the researcher, was also embraced as a continuous aspect of this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A robust documentation system was meticulously devised prior to initiating the research phase to ensure the coherence and reliability of both data collection and analysis procedures.

Confirmability

Maintaining confirmability in research is essential to establish the objectivity and neutrality of findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Confirmability refers to the steps taken to ensure that the research process, data collection, and interpretations are grounded in the participants' experiences rather than influenced by the researcher's biases or preconceived notions (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Reflexive journaling was employed to record personal reflections, assumptions, and feelings that might have influenced the research process (Malacrida, 2007). This method served as a self-reflective tool for this researcher to document her thoughts and experiences and helped her become more aware of her own biases, values, and potential influences on the study (Malacrida, 2007). Reflexive journaling allowed this researcher to acknowledge and address her subjectivity, which in turn fostered a deeper understanding of the dynamics between this researcher and the research context (Malacrida, 2007). This researcher aimed to mitigate the impact of personal perspectives on the data collection and analysis, thereby enhancing the objectivity of the study by regularly engaging in introspective self-examination.

A thorough documentation system was established to maintain transparency throughout the research process. Detailed records were maintained regarding decisions made at various stages, including data collection and analysis. This provided a comprehensive audit trail that contributed to the overall confirmability of the study. An audit trail, in the context of this study, refers to the detailed and systematic documentation of the decisions, processes, and steps taken at various stages of the research by this researcher. It served as a chronological record that outlined this researcher's actions, choices, and the rationale behind them. The purpose of maintaining an audit trail was to provide transparency and accountability in the research process (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Triangulation (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Patton, 1999) was also used to further enhance the confirmability of this study. This was achieved through the combination of comparing interview data with the survey data.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of this qualitative exploratory case study's methodology. This chapter explored instrumentation and data collection, data analysis, and addressed the study's limitations, delimitations, and ethical considerations. Trustworthiness was emphasized. This research employed a qualitative exploratory case study approach to gain insights into the experiences shaping faculty and staff perceptions of SEL at the high school level. This design facilitated the exploration of participants' experiences through semi-structured interviews and the use of the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation*. Purposive sampling (Creswell, 2014) was employed. The qualitative data collection involved semi-structured individual interviews. Participants also engaged with the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation*. Chapter 4 delves into the analysis of the collected

data, uncovering patterns, themes, and insights that emerge from educators' perspectives on SEL integration into academic instruction.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

SEL encompasses a variety of definitions, skills, and strategies, with existing research largely concentrating on distinct curricula (Frye et al., 2022; Hamilton et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2017; NCSEAD, 2019). Notably, these definitions lack comprehensive research on the diverse ways educators promote SEL in secondary classrooms (Frye et al., 2022; Hamilton et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2017; NCSEAD, 2019). The absence of valid and reliable metrics for measuring emotions and SEL impedes the establishment of consistent curricula in schools, which affects the adoption of such curricula (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020; Hamilton et al., 2019; Lewis et al., 2021). Research on SEL has explored teacher beliefs and perceptions of efficacy (CASEL, 2022; Collie et al., 2012; Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020; White et al., 2020). Limited available research has addressed how various SEL elements influence the perceptions of secondary teachers implementing SEL (Konishi et al., 2022; NCSEAD, 2019; White et al., 2020). This study aimed to expand on prior research by exploring the perceptions of ninth through 12th grade teachers and staff concerning SEL integration within academic instruction.

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to explore how secondary school teachers and staff at a mid-size public, suburban high school perceived the implementation of the RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) program. Social-emotional learning encompasses the development of emotional regulation, social skills, goal-setting abilities, problem-solving strategies, and empathy (Durlak & Weissberg, 2011; Shriver & Weissberg, 2020). This development is facilitated through the acquisition of five key competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020). These competences are developed through explicit instruction and supported through various class and school-wide practices (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020; Frye et

al., 2022). The SEL practices for this study were defined as the routines, structures and strategies staff and teachers regularly utilize and implement to build positive relationships with students (Weissberg et al., 2016). The following research questions guided this qualitative exploratory case study:

Research Question 1: How do secondary school teachers and staff perceive the value of the RULER SEL program when reflecting on their interactions with students?

Research Question 2: How does the RULER SEL program support or add to tier one instruction provided by secondary school teachers?

This study employed a qualitative exploratory case study research design. This research design allowed the researcher to explore lived experiences and the meaning participants attributed to those experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Semi-structured interviews with individual secondary staff members and teachers at a Connecticut secondary school were used to explore participants' perceptions of SEL and their personal experiences with SEL implementation. The interview protocol asked questions to prompt participants to share their perceived challenges with SEL implementation as well as better understand what they believed to be effective resources and supports for effective SEL implementation. Participants in the study also completed the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation*, which was designed to elicit understanding of teacher and staff experiences and perceptions of SEL within a specific school building.

This study employed maximum variation sampling as outlined by Patton (2014) to ensure a comprehensive exploration of experiences, perspectives and characteristics related to the research questions. This sampling method was chosen by this researcher to select participants who represented a diverse range of characteristics or viewpoints: therefore, capturing a wide

spectrum of perspectives within the research setting. Every high school student in Connecticut is required to enroll in a humanities course and a science/non-humanities course (An Act Concerning Revisions to the High School Graduation Requirements, 2017). It is the assumption of this researcher that all Connecticut high school students would presumably at some point in their high school career interact with staff who support them in the capacity of an administrator, coordinator, or nurse. Maximum variation sampling facilitated this researcher's ability to focus on specific areas of interest while enabling a thorough exploration of the beliefs and experiences of the chosen participants (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2014). Nine teachers and staff were interviewed and surveyed at a high school in Connecticut to investigate how they perceived the implementation of the RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) program at their school building. The participants included six teachers representing various subject areas and three staff members with affiliations to roles such as administrator, content coordinator, or nurse within the school environment. The participants' experience working at the secondary level ranged from 3 to 29 years. Not all participants worked exclusively at the research site for the duration of their teaching experience. Participants' average years of experience teaching overall at the secondary level was 13 years. The small sample size chosen for this qualitative exploratory case study allowed the researcher to dedicate ample time to conducting in-depth interviews with a diverse group of teachers and staff. Table 1 displays the demographic information of the participants, as derived from their responses to the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* and individual interviews.

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

Participant	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Years of Experience	Content Areas Taught
Teacher A	Male	White/Caucasian	4	Math
Teacher B	Female	Not Specified	15	Science
Teacher C	Female	White/Caucasian	12	Special Education
Teacher D	Female	White/Caucasian	3	English
Teacher E	Male	Not Specified	14	Electives
Teacher F	Male	White/Caucasian	23	English
Staff A	Female	White/Caucasian	10	Not Specified
Staff B	Female	White/Caucasian	29	Not Specified
Staff C	Female	Not Specified	11	Not Specified

Note: Each participant's pseudonym was used in place of their name for the study and staff roles were not specified to provide confidentiality.

This study employed the three-pronged data analysis approach outlined by Ravitch and Carl (2021). The data analysis process encompassed this researcher creating a comprehensive plan for organizing and managing the data, actively engaging with the collected information, and ultimately presenting the data in either visual or written formats for interpretation. This researcher diligently adhered to these steps throughout the data analysis process. The tools utilized for data collection included semi-structured interviews and a survey. This chapter will

delve into a detailed explanation of the data analysis methodology, the presentation of findings or results, and conclude with a summary.

Analysis Method

The chosen data analysis method for this study followed the three-pronged approach proposed by Ravitch and Carl (2021). This involved creating a plan for organizing and managing the data, actively engaging with the data in an immersive manner, and presenting the data in visual or written formats for interpretation and analysis. Text transcription was generated by Zoom and then underwent manual coding for accuracy and completeness, requiring multiple reviews of the transcripts. Survey data was also manually coded. This researcher reviewed participant responses to each question and statement on the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* which utilized a five-point Likert scale. Participants answered the questions on this survey using the following designations: (1) Strongly disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Neither agree or disagree; (4) Agree; and (5) Strongly agree. This researcher noted the number of responses in each designation and analyzed this survey data to determine which questions most frequently elicited a strong agree or a strong disagree response. This researcher then compared the data elicited from surveys with the trends identified in staff interviews. The following subsections provide a more detailed explanation of how the researcher executed the three-pronged data analysis process.

The data organization and management plan for this study commenced with the establishment of digital file folders, each designated with a participant chosen pseudonym, as designated on this researcher's master list. Each folder contained the audio recording from the participant interview, the text transcription generated by Zoom, and a two-column template used by this researcher as a transcription and memoing document for each interview. The audio

recording was securely saved to the Cloud, and the Zoom auto-transcription feature was employed to transcribe the audio into text after conducting an interview. This transcription and audio recording were then downloaded and saved to the digital file folder. The transcription was copied and pasted into the template before being saved to the digital file folder. Handwritten notes made by the researcher during the interviews were transcribed into the notes section of the document adjacent to the corresponding transcription.

A deductive coding chart was created by this researcher to serve as an initial guide in the coding process. Deductive coding involves applying pre-existing categories or theoretical frameworks to analyze data (Saldana, 2013). This researcher started with a predetermined set of codes and then used these codes to systematically analyze interview and survey data. Table 2 displays the deductive codes utilized in this study, along with their respective definitions. These codes and definitions were developed based on the CASEL competency areas which include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2022, 2023) and the emotional intelligence ability model espoused by Salovey and Mayer (1997). The emotional intelligence ability model consists of four key components, including perceiving emotions, using emotions, understanding emotions, and managing emotions to influence or impact decision making, relationship formation, and daily behaviors (Brackett et al., 2023; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). These key components can be found within the five CASEL competency areas and are reflected in the sources listed in Table 2.

Preceding the immersive engagement in the data plan, a coding framework worksheet was established as a tool to amalgamate all the notes and codes extracted from each participant's transcription and notes into a unified document. The purpose of this document was to enhance the manageability of working with raw data and facilitate the identification of commonalities as

well as differences of opinions among participants based on their interview responses and the survey results. The coding framework worksheet served as a crucial organizational tool, streamlining the integration of notes and codes from individual participant transcripts into a cohesive document. This facilitated efficient handling of raw data, enabling the identification of both shared perspectives and divergent opinions among participants, drawing insights from both interview responses and survey results. Table 2 presents the deductive codes employed during the research, along with their corresponding definitions. This table provides a structured overview of the coding framework used to analyze the data and to categorize and interpret the information gathered during this study.

Table 2

Deductive Coding

Deductive Codes	Definition	Source
Self-Awareness (SA)	The ability to accurately recognize the emotions in oneself and others.	CASEL, 2022 Salovey and Mayer, 1997
Self-Management (SM)	The ability to regulate emotions, thoughts, and behaviors appropriately across multiple contexts.	CASEL, 2022 Salovey and Mayer, 1997
Social Awareness (SAS)	The ability to navigate social interactions effectively.	CASEL, 2022
Relationship Skills (RS)	The ability to build and maintain healthy relationships with diverse groups of people.	CASEL, 2022 Salovey and Mayer, 1997
Responsible Decision-Making (RDM)	The ability to evaluate a situation to make a well-informed decision.	CASEL, 2022 Salovey and Mayer, 1997

The second phase of data analysis was being immersed and engaged with the data. This required several readings of the transcripts and the note taking document for each participant (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This researcher also needed to review the audio recordings for clarification purposes, analyzing both tone and intonation which was then captured in the research notes and compared to the initial memoing transcribed at the time of the interview. Transcripts were reviewed multiple times during the coding process to ensure accuracy. All coding was completed manually and no coding software was used. Microsoft Word's navigation search option tool facilitated the identification of common words and phrases and aided in the determination of potential emergent codes and thematic elements. All codes were then transferred to the qualitative coding framework worksheet previously described and were manually tallied. The cumulative count for each code was calculated and presented at the bottom of the coding framework worksheet with similar codes grouped together (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

The interview data underwent a comparative analysis with the results of the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation*. This researcher analyzed the survey data to determine which questions most frequently elicited a strong agree or a strong disagree response. This researcher then compared the data elicited from surveys with the trends identified in staff interviews. This comparative analysis was guided by the emotional intelligence ability model (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Salovey & Mayer, 1990) and the SEL framework by CASEL (2020). This comparative approach aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the congruence or divergence between self-reported perceptions in surveys and the nuanced perspectives expressed during interviews. Notable emergent codes were also noted throughout this process.

Presentation of Results and Findings

The data presentation in this study involved both visual and written formats. A table was constructed to illustrate the coding derived from the raw data. A journal was maintained throughout the analysis to uncover and record emergent codes and potential themes throughout the analysis process. These codes encompass dynamic relationship building, warm demanding, professional development and RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) tools, civic-minded contributors, and increased collaboration. Themes and subthemes were identified by this researcher throughout the data presentation phase, based on the most frequently recurring words and phrases used by participants in interviews and the responses from the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation*. The codes with the highest frequency of responses were established as the primary themes and subthemes. Table 3 delineates the emergent codes determined from the data gathered in interviews and the responses to the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation*.

Table 3*Emergent Codes*

Emerging Codes	Response	Data Source
Dynamic Relationship Building (DRB) 44	Includes getting to know students beyond academic content	Interviews/survey
Warm Demanding (WD) 68	Includes setting high expectations, providing high support and accountability rooted in relationships	Interviews/survey
Professional Development and RULER Tools (PDRT) 51	Discusses the need for ongoing professional development and RULER tool adaptations	Interviews/survey
Civic Minded Contributors (CMC) 38	Includes beliefs about the value of SEL after high school and the impact on college, career, and communities	Interviews/survey
Increased Collaboration (IC) 23	Includes the fidelity of implementation and established common language across multiple stakeholders	Interviews/survey

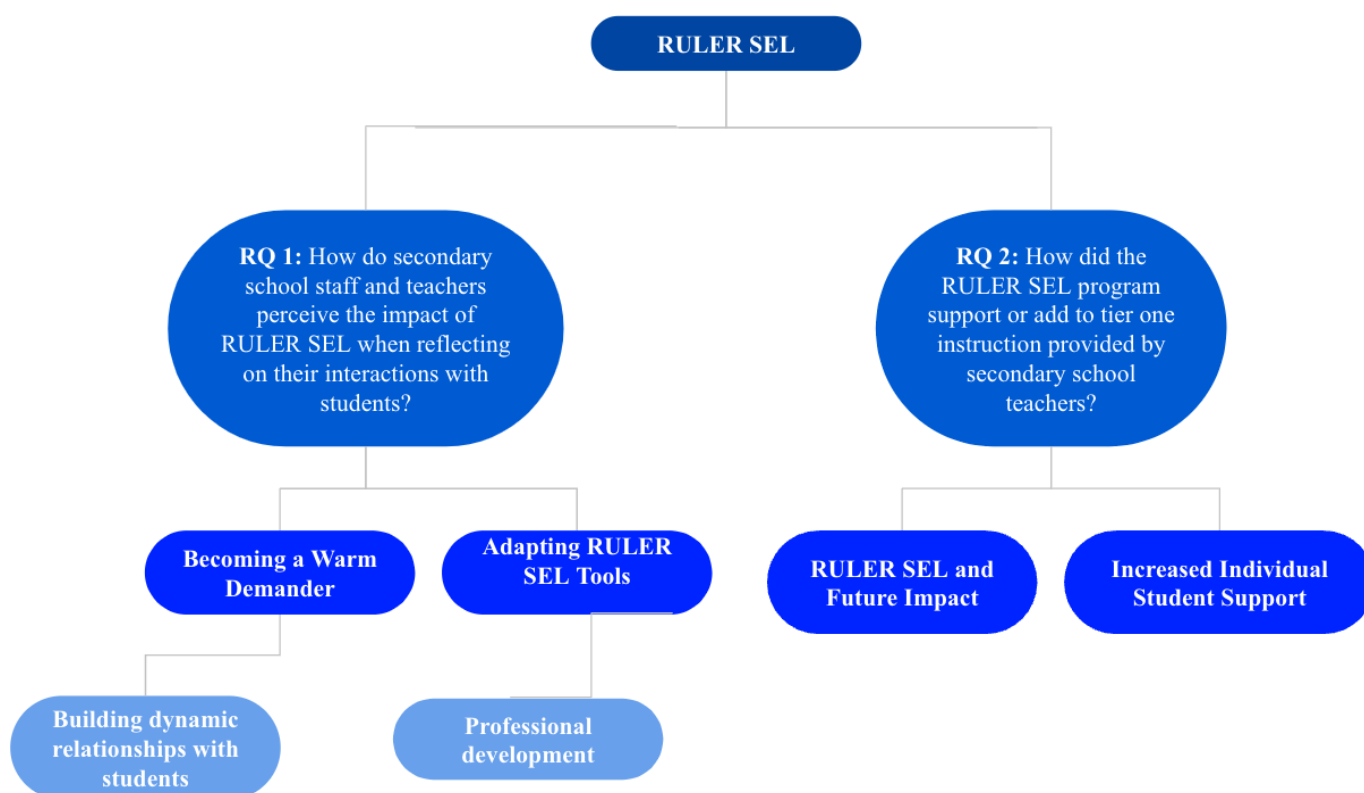
Note. The number of times a topic was discussed by participants is listed next to each code.

The analysis of the relationship between emergent themes and subthemes was further explored through a visual representation in the form of a hierarchical diagram, as shown in Figure 5. The initial two themes were derived from questions aligned to research question one, while the third and fourth themes were established based on responses aligned to research

question two. Figure 5 is a hierarchical diagram that serves as a comprehensive visual tool, conveying the relationships and hierarchy between emergent themes and subthemes in this study.

Figure 5

Emergent Themes and Subthemes



The CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* was specifically created for school-based SEL teams to gain staff feedback on implementation practices and perceptions, supporting planning, goal setting, progress monitoring, and continuous improvement of schoolwide SEL initiatives. This survey was used by this researcher to elicit deeper insight into the experiences and perspectives of SEL from the perspective of teachers and staff members, delving into the day-to-day SEL practices at their respective school. The CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* utilized a five-point Likert scale, and participants designated their responses as follows: (1) Strongly disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Neither agree nor disagree; (4) Agree; and (5) Strongly agree. Participants are asked to use this scale to answer a series of statements in the following categories: (1) SEL Instruction, (2) Youth Voice, Engagement, and Supportive Climate, (3) Staff Learning and Modeling, (4) Supportive Discipline, (5) Continuum of Integrated Supports, (6) Family Partnership, (7) Community Partnership, (8) Reflecting on Data, and (9) Workplace Perceptions.

The survey data was captured by REDCap and then analyzed by this researcher to identify questions that frequently elicited strongly agree or strongly disagree responses. The subsequent step involved a comparison between the survey data and trends identified in staff interviews. This comparative analysis adhered to the emotional intelligence ability model (Salovey & Mayer, 1990, 1997) and the SEL framework by CASEL (2020). The aim of this approach was to offer a comprehensive understanding of the congruence or divergence between self-reported perceptions in surveys and the nuanced perspectives expressed during interviews. The survey results for each category of the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* are shown in Appendix H. The questions that frequently elicited strongly agree

or strongly disagree responses are represented in bar graph form, which will be presented in the next section as part of the presentation of results and findings for this study.

A total of eight codes were identified after this researcher completed the coding process for interview questions aligned to research question 1. Five codes were derived from the CASEL (2022, 2023) competency areas and the key components of Salovey and Mayer's (1997) emotional intelligence ability model. These codes were specifically labeled as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making as noted in Table 2. Three additional codes surfaced from the interviews and the data collected through the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation*. These supplementary codes included dynamic relationship building, warm demanding, professional development and RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) tools. These codes led to the emergence of two overarching themes, becoming a warm demander, with the subtheme of building dynamic relationships with students, and adapting RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) tools, with the subtheme of professional development.

The coding process for interview questions aligned to research question 2, resulted in seven codes that emerged from the interviews and participant responses to the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation*. These codes included the five derived from the CASEL competency areas (2022, 2023), and the key components of Salovey and Mayer's (1997) emotional intelligence ability model, as well as two additional codes, civic-minded contributions and increased collaboration. These codes led to the determination of the following two themes. These themes were RULER SEL and future impact and increased individual student support. Table 4 includes a detailed listing of each theme, its corresponding subthemes, and the research question alignment which will be further discussed in this section.

Table 4*Resulting Themes and Subthemes*

Themes	Subthemes	Research Question Alignment
Becoming a Warm Demander	Building dynamic relationships with students	Research Question 1
Adapting RULER SEL Tools	Professional development	Research Question 1
RULER SEL and Future Impact		Research Question 2
Increased Individual Student Support		Research Question 2

Note. Emergent and deductive codes were used to create each theme and subtheme.

Theme 1: Becoming a Warm Demander

Becoming a warm demander was the primary theme that emerged from the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* and the interview responses from questions aligned to research question 1. This idea of a warm demander did not appear in the literature review. All participants during the interview process identified the idea of a warm demander as a term that came from their professional learning work on culturally responsive teaching that coincided with their learning on the RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) program. All participants referenced their school-wide shared text *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students* (Hammond, 2015) which introduced them to the concept of a warm demander. The faculty and staff at this research site read this book together and participated in professional learning activities during a school year that were related to the themes and information

introduced by the author. The term warm demander was referenced on 68 occurrences as seen in Table 3.

Reflecting on the impact RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) has had on participant interactions with students, all participants said they either were or were in the process of becoming a warm demander (Hammond, 2015). Each participant considered the connection between Hammond's (2015) concept of being a warm demander and RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019). Participants identified several points of intersection including emotional regulation, cultural responsiveness, and high expectations. Both RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) and the work of Hammond (2015) emphasized the importance of emotional regulation. Utilizing a warm demander approach, teachers help students regulate their emotions by creating a supportive and caring environment (Hammond, 2015). The RULER SEL program explicitly focuses on teaching individuals how to regulate their emotions effectively (Brackett et al., 2019; Hammond, 2015).

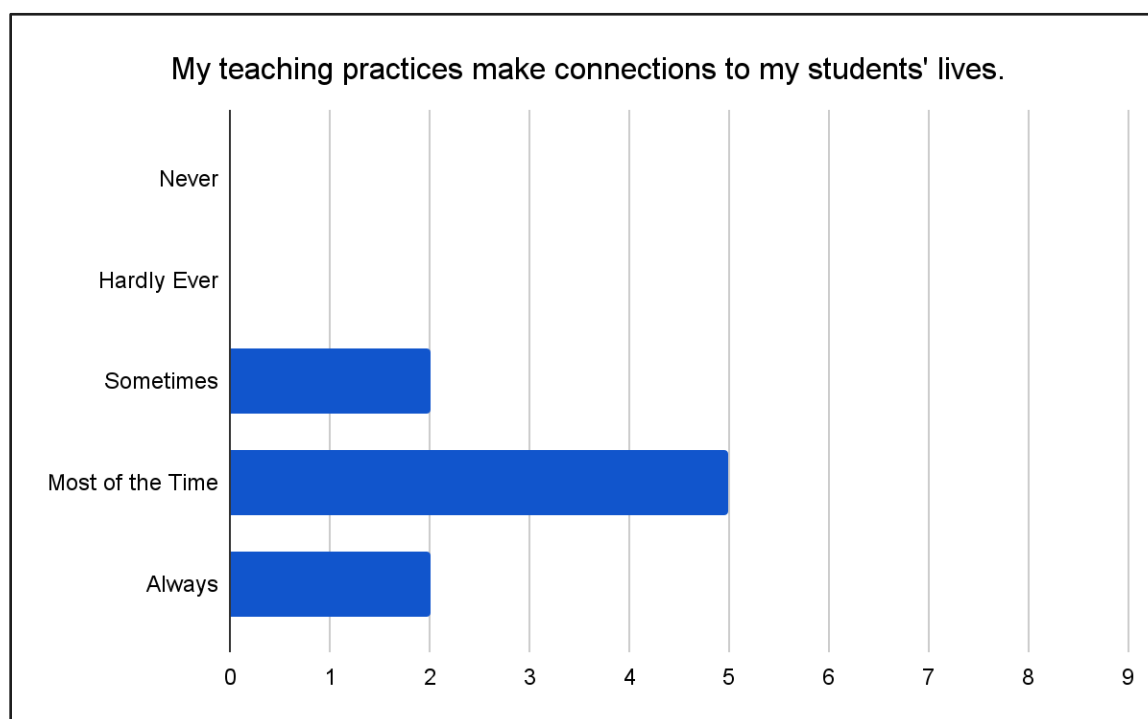
Teacher B reflected on her interactions with students and shared:

I consider myself a warm demander in the classroom and in my interactions with students. I prioritize building strong, positive relationships with my students. I believe in creating an environment where everyone feels valued and supported. I genuinely care about each student's well-being and strive to understand their individual needs. At the same time, I set high expectations for academic performance and behavior. I firmly believe that every student has the potential to excel, and I challenge them to reach for success. I see my role as not only a mentor but also as someone who pushes students to realize their full capabilities. It's important to me that my students feel both supported and motivated to achieve their best while figuring out exactly what makes them who they are, their unique identity in this world.

Participants described Hammond's (2015) warm demander concept as emphasizing the understanding of students' cultural backgrounds in terms of cultural responsiveness. The RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) program does not specifically focus on cultural responsiveness, RULER SEL acknowledges the diversity of emotions and encourages understanding and respecting the emotional experiences of individuals from different backgrounds. Teacher D stated:

I believe that creating a culturally responsive learning environment is essential for the success and well-being of all my students, especially as they are developing SEL skills. By acknowledging and appreciating the diverse cultural experiences they bring to the classroom, I aim to make each student feel seen, heard, and valued. That includes the wide range of emotions they each bring to the table and also the understanding that how students show or display the same emotion may look different from student-to-student and culture-to-culture.

Comparatively, the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* results reported from the nine participants in response to the statement, *My teaching practices make connections to my students' lives*, most frequently elicited a strong agree response with two responses for “always,” five responses for “most of the time,” two responses for “sometimes,” and zero responses for “hardly ever” and “never.” Figure 6 shows these results.

Figure 6*Survey Results on SEL Instruction*

Teacher A, B, D, E and F spoke about the importance of having diverse representation within their lessons and curriculum to build SEL skills within their students and feel relatable for students during their respective interviews. Staff A and C spoke about the emphasis on what they called a both/and mindset, rather than an either/or mindset. Staff A and C emphasized that teachers set high expectations for students while providing support for emotional understanding and regulation, and in part do so by getting to know students and use those connections to students' lives in their everyday pedagogy. Social-emotional learning plays a crucial role in enabling students to recognize and address their own biases, thereby shaping their interactions with individuals from diverse backgrounds, as noted in the literature review (Tann & Wegmann, 2022). Social-emotional learning has the potential to foster positive outcomes in student-student

and student-staff relationships, academic achievement, emotional well-being, and a reduction in the likelihood of substance abuse and disciplinary issues (Borowski, 2019; Tan & Wegmann, 2022). Teacher E shared:

In my teaching, I'm really committed to creating a learning environment that resonates with the diverse experiences of my students. I have kids from lots of different places and experiences. I really believe that for education to be truly impactful, like have long-lasting impact, it must go beyond textbooks and connect with the realities of my students' lives. This involves things like integrating real-world examples, culturally relevant content, and fostering an inclusive classroom atmosphere and environment.

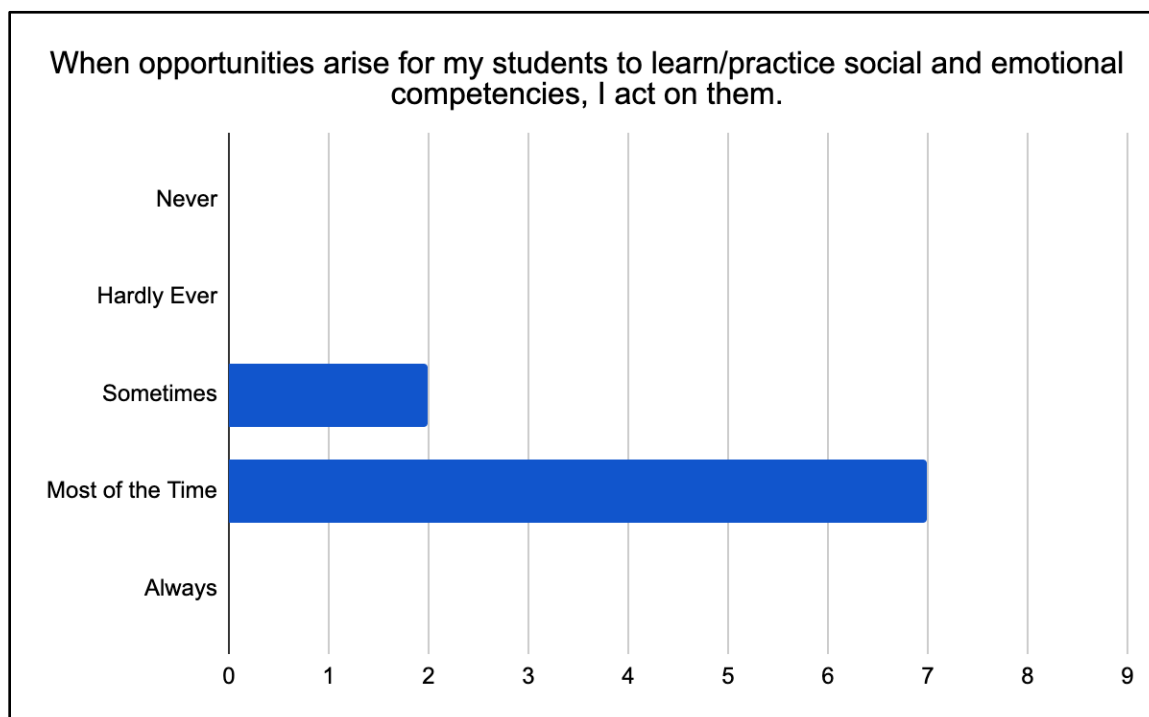
Similarly, Teacher F shared about a negative experience in a classroom interaction among two students. Teacher F adjusted his lesson the next time he saw this class to reflect what had happened and allow students to make connections to the impact these students had on each other and the whole class community. Teacher F shared:

I went home that night and thought [to myself], I can't do what I had planned the next time I see these kids. In that moment I knew I had to change things up and I did. I see social-emotional learning as a cornerstone of my instructional philosophy. By incorporating activities that encourage self-reflection and emotional intelligence, I aim to empower students to navigate their own biases and develop a greater understanding of others. This, in turn, shapes their interactions with individuals from various backgrounds, fostering empathy and respect. That lesson was probably way more impactful than any other I did that year and I can say that confidently because I still have kids from that class who talk about it.

Teacher A stated, “I use personal connections to create a safe and supportive space. I need students to feel comfortable in discussions and I encourage them to explore their own perspectives and challenge preconceptions through these connections.” Similarly, Staff C shared, “We want and encourage teachers to create spaces that reflect their students, where they feel like their identities are honored and valued and then once that is in place it becomes so much easier to hold students to such high expectations.” Staff A built off this same sentiment when she shared:

It was like all of a sudden a light went on. When we read about this idea of a ‘warm demander’ it just clicked. Yes! This, this right here is what we have been doing. We couple the cultivation of student identity with high expectations and it has a huge positive impact on our culture and climate.

Tann and Wegmann (2022) noted that social-emotional learning holds the capacity to assist students in crafting their individual identities and navigating unfamiliar social scenarios, particularly those arising from increased social media usage among pre-teens and teenagers. This process can enhance students' perspectives on self, others, and academic responsibilities, fostering a positive perception of the school climate and classroom community (Borowski, 2019). Comparatively, the responses provided by nine participants to the statement, *When opportunities arise for my students to learn/practice social and emotional competencies, I act on them*, on the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* most frequently elicited a strongly agree response. Seven participants responded “most of the time,” two responses were received for “sometimes,” and zero responses were received for “hardly ever” and “never.” Figure 7 shows these results.

Figure 7*Survey Results on SEL Opportunities*

Hammond's (2015) warm demander concept may be more directly associated with academic expectations and cultural responsiveness, but data from the interviews demonstrated that there are notable connections with RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019). These connections were expressed particularly in terms of fostering emotional intelligence, building relationships, and promoting a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Participants spoke about accomplishing this by creating opportunities and taking advantage of naturally occurring opportunities to make connections to students' lives, and to promote, teach and help students practice social and emotional competencies. Staff C shared, "Both the RULER approach and embodying this idea of what a warm demander is, well, both approaches contribute to creating holistic and positive educational experiences and social opportunities, for students and I would

argue, staff alike.” Teacher D, who was a somewhat newer teacher having joined the profession within the last three years, shared this sentiment when discussing the impact of the warm demander concept has had on her evolving pedagogy. Teacher D stated:

I knew I always wanted to build a classroom community where students were comfortable being who they were and respecting each other’s differences. When we talked about Hammond’s warm demander, I was like oh yeah, this is how I get there. It was kind of like, yeah of course you need both, both a place where emotions matter, where they are validated and seen because they are part of achieving great things and risk-taking. I don’t see how you can do that without reflecting the students, their lives and experiences and helping make those connections to content or their lives after high school on a regular basis.

Staff B reflected this sentiment as well when she said, “It might sound cliché, but it truly is almost like a mantra at this point— we are warm demanders— we care deeply about our colleagues, our students, and their families.” Staff A and C shared that the roll-out of RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) and the whole-school read of Hammond (2015) occurred by happenstance due to interruptions to professional learning given the COVID-19 pandemic (Eddins et al., 2020), but that the results among staff appeared to be positive. Staff A, B, and C reflected on the complementary nature of the interconnected work and the impact seen on staff interactions with students and conversations as a larger faculty.

Subtheme 1: Building Dynamic Relationships with Students

Building dynamic relationships with students was the first subtheme that emerged from the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* and the interview responses from questions aligned to research question 1. Hamilton et al. (2019) wrote about the

different ways SEL can impact schools including explicit SEL programs or curricula, SEL practices that are embedded within academic instruction or dedicated advisory blocks, as well as strategies that promote secure relationships between students and staff as well as promote a positive school-wide climate. Participant interviews varied in terms of how and where relationships with students are cultivated, depending on teacher or staff role within the school. Data from interviews demonstrated how participants shared the perspective that building relationships with students that go beyond purely academics is a clear and significant way RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) has impacted their interactions with students. Teacher F stated:

The relationship teachers have with students extends way beyond the classroom because in doing so you are honoring the complexities of who they are as a person. No one is just a student, or just an athlete, or just a sister or cousin, etc. When a student walks into your classroom they can be, and they are, all of those things at once. No one part is turned off anymore.

The interview with Staff B also illustrated how dynamic relationship building with students is one tangible way that RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) has impacted interactions between staff and students. Staff B acknowledged that in their opinion relationships have always been the hallmark of great educators. Social emotional learning and staff training on RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) made relationship building that extended beyond the classroom more of an explicit expectation. Staff B said, “Building relationships that take into account the whole person in front of you is not new in education, what is somewhat new, is the emphasis that this is not only okay, it’s almost the expectation now.” This idea aligns with how CASEL (2013, 2022, 2023) defined SEL and the goal of SEL as focusing on developing self-awareness and

understanding others' emotions in service of developing the skills necessary for navigating complex social situations during and beyond school years. This idea of practicing SEL with students through the building of dynamic relationships as one that will serve students during and beyond their school years was also expressed by Teacher A. Teacher A said:

I recognize that students are multifaceted and when students come into my classroom I don't know what they are coming in with or as. I think about the days I walk in after a bad night of sleep, or the time I know I set my alarm but it didn't go off. Students didn't know what a chaotic start I had to the day, but I did and I had to make a choice about who I was going to show up as. I've had a lot of years of practice and help doing this. Students are still in this learning/experimentation phase when it comes to emotions. It's my job to help them understand, process, regulate and realize that this is not just a high school thing, it's a life skill.

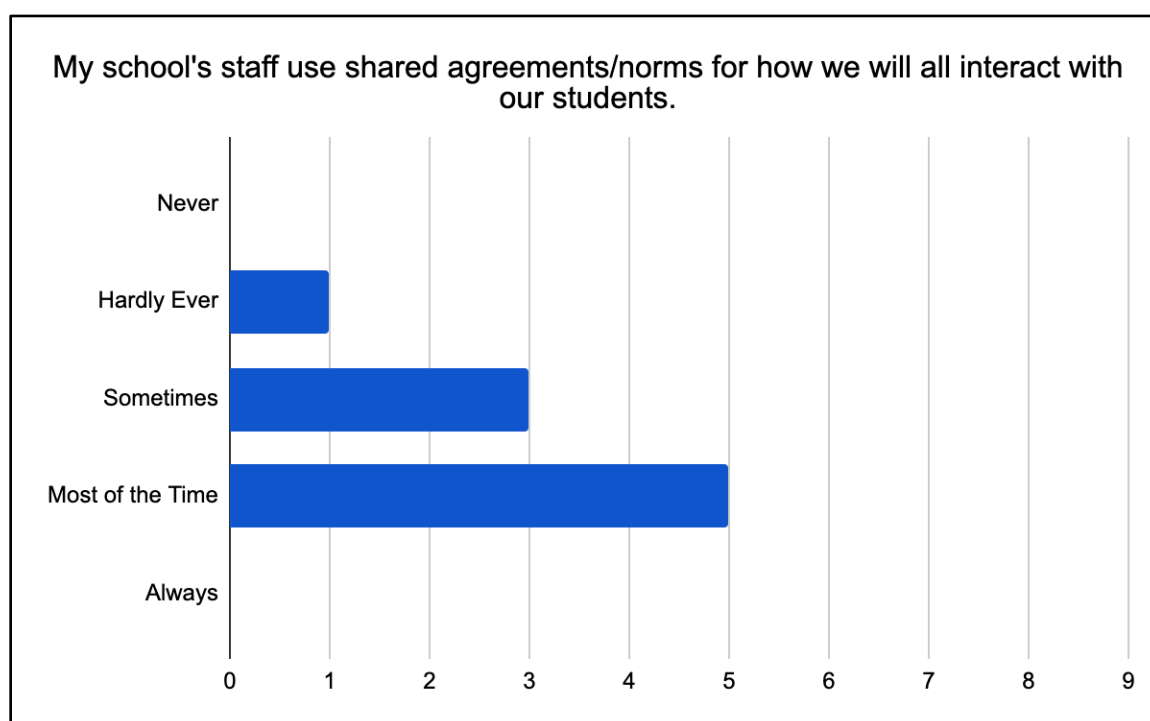
Participants reflected on the impact RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) has had on their interactions with students and spoke about when and where noticeable shifts occurred during and after the initial training provided by school leaders and the RULER team. Staff A, Staff B, Staff C, and Teacher C discussed school and classroom charters and how these were developed. The RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) program is composed of four core tools including: (a) the Charter, (b) Mood Meter, (c) Meta-Moment, and (d) Blueprint. These core tools are introduced to promote emotional intelligence and foster a positive emotional climate in educational settings. The charter involves collaboratively creating a set of guidelines or agreements about how individuals within a community will express and respond to emotions (Brackett et al., 2019). The charter helps establish a shared understanding of emotional norms and values within a group (Brackett et al., 2019). Staff B shared, "The charter, again, was not a new concept, but a practice

made explicit. It explicitly implied that relationships would exist and allowed not just the adult to have a say in how they would exist.” Staff A spoke about her experience with the charter and said, “It reminds us to think about how we treat people and how we want to be treated, which sounds simple, but it isn’t always.” Teacher C shared her similar experiences in reference to the charter and said, “We are agreeing that the only way we learn from and with each other is through a shared understanding of how we treat each other and the types of relationships that have to be present.”

Comparatively, data from participants’ responses to the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* responses to the statement, *My school’s staff use shared agreements/norms for how we will all interact with our students*, most frequently elicited a strongly agree response. Nine participants completed this survey question. Five participants responded “most of the time,” three participants responses “sometimes,” and one participant responded “hardly ever.” Figure 8 shows these results.

Figure 8

Survey Results on Shared Agreements



Five participants discussed relationship building with students in terms of specific activities or planned opportunities that target one or more core competencies such as (a) self-awareness, (b) self-management, (c) social awareness, (d) relationship skills and/or (e) responsible decision-making. Educators should consider adopting a holistic approach that incorporates deliberate teaching of the SEL competencies outlined by CASEL (2013) and Weissberg et al. (2015). Educators also need to address and establish methods for the development and integration of these competencies into core academic instruction. According to a survey discussed in *CASEL's Voices from the Classroom*, 79% of teachers expressed concerns about their students' mental health, noting that they perceived a decline compared to the period before the COVID-19 pandemic (CASEL, 2022). Teacher E stated, "I'm not sure that students' mental health actually got worse after COVID or if we are just more attuned to asking the right questions and normalizing mental health struggles so kids feel more comfortable also sharing them." Teacher F and Teacher C also discussed how their relationships with students help them understand and gauge differences in individual students' emotional presentations. Teacher C stated, "I definitely use my relationships with students so that I know when someone is off. It's important that they know I know and care enough to want to ask." Teacher F shared:

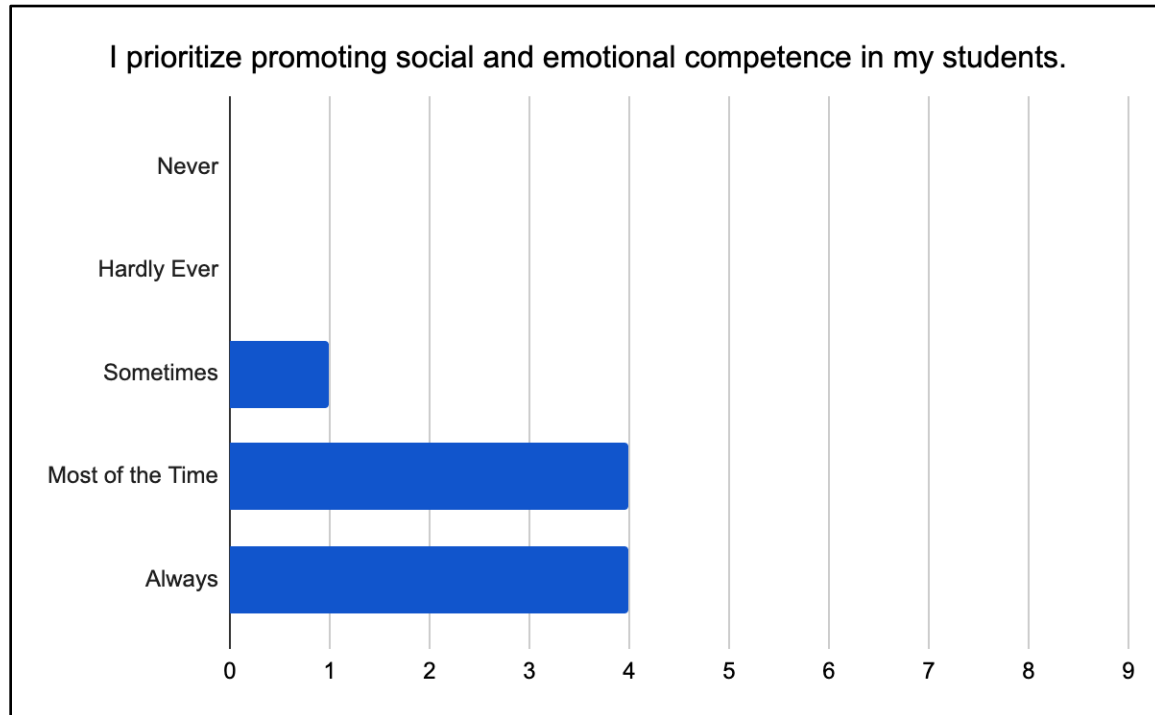
For some reason there seemed to be a lot of relationship issues, friendship breakdowns, etc. that kept happening and I think it's important to use those opportunities to not only make content relatable, but talk about establishing healthy boundaries in many different contexts.

Comparatively, the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* results reported from the nine participants in response to the statement, *I prioritize promoting social and emotional competence in my students*, most frequently elicited a strongly agree

response. Four participants responded, “always,” four participants responded, “most of the time,” and one participant responded, “sometimes.” Figure 9 shows these results.

Figure 9

Survey Results on Promoting SEL Competence



Theme 2: Adapting RULER SEL Tools

Adapting RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) tools was the second theme that emerged from the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* and the interview responses that aligned to research question 1. The RULER framework introduces four tools, including (a) the Charter, (b) the Mood Meter, (c) the Meta-Moment, and (d) the Blueprint (Brackett et al., 2019). These tools are intended for explicit instruction and ongoing use with all students (Brackett et al., 2019). These tools aim to facilitate understanding, identification, and accurate labeling of emotions, cultivate self-regulation abilities, and foster problem-solving skills for achieving positive outcomes both within and beyond the school environment (Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, n.d.). Participants spoke about their knowledge of these tools in varying degrees and the ways in which these tools were introduced during professional learning as well as the ways in which they have been modified to meet the needs of secondary students. Teacher B, Teacher C, Teacher D, Teacher F and Staff B discussed their perceptions of the RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) tools in terms of developmental appropriateness. Teacher B stated, “I think the ruler SEL program as a whole is fantastic. I do think it is implemented a little bit differently in high schools just based on the developmental appropriateness for the high school age.” Staff B shared:

I think the [RULER] tools are implemented loosely, at most. I think there are teachers that really do want to know how students are feeling, but they aren't going to use the Mood Meter. It's high school. I get teachers that email me saying, I noticed this student is off, do you know anything, or is there anything I should know? How can I help? So, I think they're very attuned to their students, and you know, how they're feeling, but they aren't using specific RULER tools for that.

Teacher C shared:

I believe RULER to be a very effective resourcing tool for kids and adults to explore their own feelings and emotions. I think it's especially impactful at the elementary levels. And I see it firsthand and hear it firsthand in multiple ways. It's harder to be implemented that way, at the high school level. And I think we've tried to do a good job. I think we've tried to do that in our [department-based] lessons, or in just how we work with kids, whether it's small group settings, or as a result of something that happened, but it probably could be formalized a little bit more at the high school level explicitly said like, maybe not RULER, but your effort, our efforts, in helping you grow as a person as a human being. Part of that is our responsibility to help you understand why you feel the way you feel about something. So I don't know if it has to be called RULER, or referred to as a specific RULER program tool at the high school. We don't stop and say, let's take out the Mood Meter, but there is an understanding or assistance in helping kids and adults understand why they felt a certain way about a thing and what that means to them.

Teacher B also discussed RULER tools and the ways they are implemented and adapted at the high school level. Teacher B added:

I don't know what [aspects] of RULER is happening in every classroom. I know we have, like, the Mood Meters hanging in every classroom, but I can't really speak to like how many teachers might be doing, like check-ins or checkouts or doing work explicitly with the Mood Meter. But I do know, they're [Mood Meters] in classrooms. And I do know that the hope was from the elementary schools, learning these languages and learning to like, label your emotions and pinpoint where you might be on a visual chart. The hope is that as students get older, they continue to do that in high school. I should say, I do know

check-in's and check-out's are happening in some classrooms, but I just don't think anyone is explicitly using the Mood Meter to do this or referring to it on the wall.

Teacher B, Teacher D, Teacher F, Staff A, and Staff B also discussed how they personally modified RULER tools or saw this being done by others. Participants spoke about the introduction to RULER tools at professional learning and noted that RULER tools seemed more applicable to elementary schools. Participants also spoke about the discussions that occurred in professional learning sessions around how these tools might be adapted and utilized at the secondary level. Teacher B shared:

I think of the [RULER] tools as just enhancing the conversation about the true need of like students' mental health. I do still think that we're kind of at this point where mental health in schools is still a new phenomenon, even though it might have been something that people have been studying for maybe a decade or two, it's still in the spectrum of education. It's a new thing that we're still learning. Something like, the Meta-Moment, is a good reflection tool, but in a high school classroom we're not stopping and naming this, if anything it's a reminder to me of how much student emotions affect their day-to-day, their ability to concentrate, you know, do the work, learn and all of that stuff. So, I think continuing to have these conversations, teachers are really becoming more open to the conversation of the way in which mental health affects academic performance and education and environment and all of that stuff.

Teacher D shared similar thoughts and said,

My impressions are that, though RULER is very important, it is kind of hard to gauge in the high school level. So I do see it very active in probably kindergarten through sixth grade. Up to sixth grade, you see it very active there. But at the high school level, I think

there's measurements you can sense with students, and then you kind of move from there as they interact into your classroom. It's the social interactions that drive your next steps and I guess those, I could somewhat attribute to the charter. That is something almost every classroom does in the first week of school and [is] probably underutilized, but it is a good entry, or icebreaker activity, that kind of sets the tone for what you want to see in students, what they can expect from you and kind of just implies this mutual relationship must exist.

Teacher F elaborated on professional learning sessions that introduced RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) tools and his impressions of the support and resources provided. Teacher F shared:

We most notably did learning like that during COVID. I remember, every single day, every class we talked about some sort of SEL, RULER, type of check in for COVID because we felt like we can't see these kids and they're not physically in front of us. So, we need to make sure they're okay. There was purposeful conversation about how to incorporate RULER into our lessons and a lot of that took place in the format of checking in with students, following up with some who shared something or just seemed, I don't know, off I guess. We didn't show the Mood Meter, but I think the kids kind of knew where this was coming from. Since we've been back, in-person, I wouldn't say this has gone away, but I wish we had more conversations about the next iteration, how to keep RULER going and in our work.

Teacher A, Teacher C, Teacher E, and Staff A, discussed the ways that RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) tools had been introduced in the school building with modifications in professional learning settings. They also discussed the ways in which the school supported

implementation and the ways in which support could be improved. Teacher A said, “I think the school has been transparent in training. RULER is a train-the-trainer model and I think the team that was trained gave us the information as it was given to them.” Staff A shared:

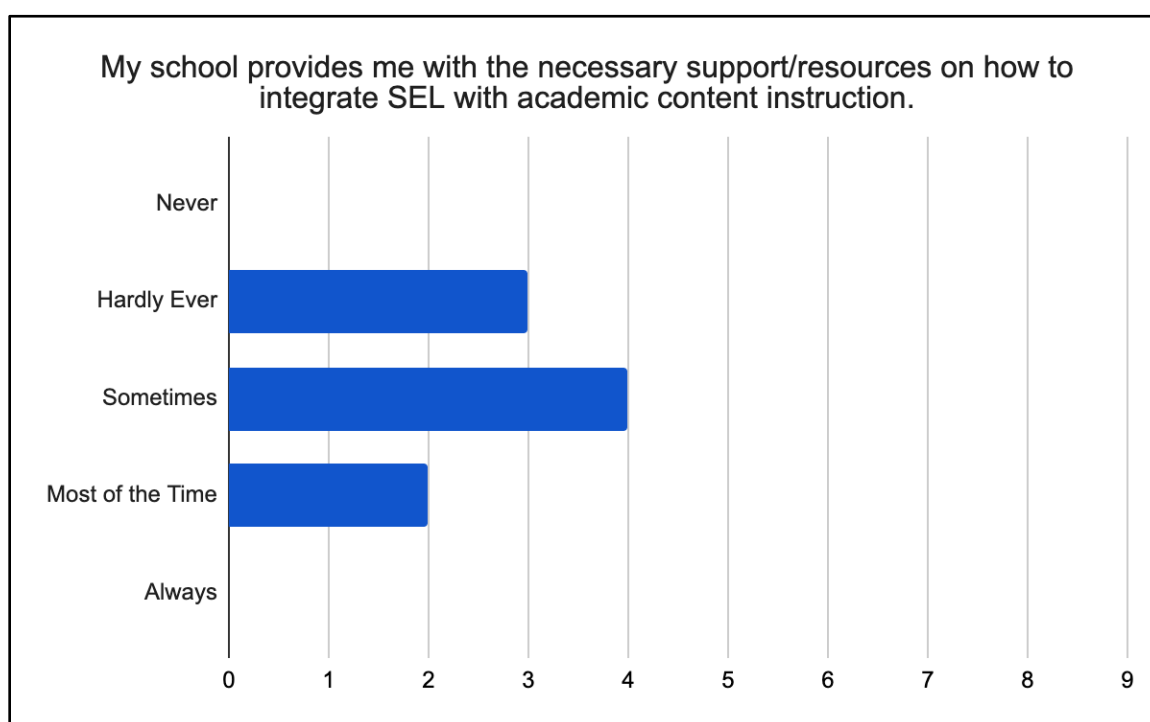
I think we can always do a better job of helping people see how these ideas, strategies, and tools can be implemented with fidelity in individual classrooms. One of our best learning sessions, I think, was when we asked teachers and staff to come to a faculty meeting and talk about an SEL-related problem of practice they had experienced in the past week or two. The stage was set with a reminder of the RULER tools and strategies and then everyone was broken into smaller groups to really engage with colleagues. They had time to share these problems of practice and problem-solve together. So, was this a strict RULER professional development (PD) session? No. But, it was great PD. Some teachers will still bring it up and say things like, ‘remember that time we got together, well I learned the way [name] does this thing and it’s really impacted the way I started doing it.’ We don’t do enough of that and that is probably what people want the most of, but at the same time we have a lot of competing priorities.

Participants referred to much of the professional learning and emphasis placed on RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) being situated around the COVID-19 pandemic that shut schools down in March 2020. Staff and students returned to school in fall 2020 in varying configurations including virtual, hybrid and in-person learning modalities (CASEL, 2022; Eveleigh et al., 2021). Competing district and school priorities, or initiatives, were also discussed and provided as a reason why RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) does not appear to be as important as it once was. Comparatively, the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* results included a strong negative response from the nine participants in response

to the statement, *My school provides me with the necessary support/resources on how to integrate SEL with academic content instruction*, elicited a strong negative response. Three participants responded “never,” four participants responded “sometimes,” and two participants responded “sometimes.” Figure 10 shows these results.

Figure 10

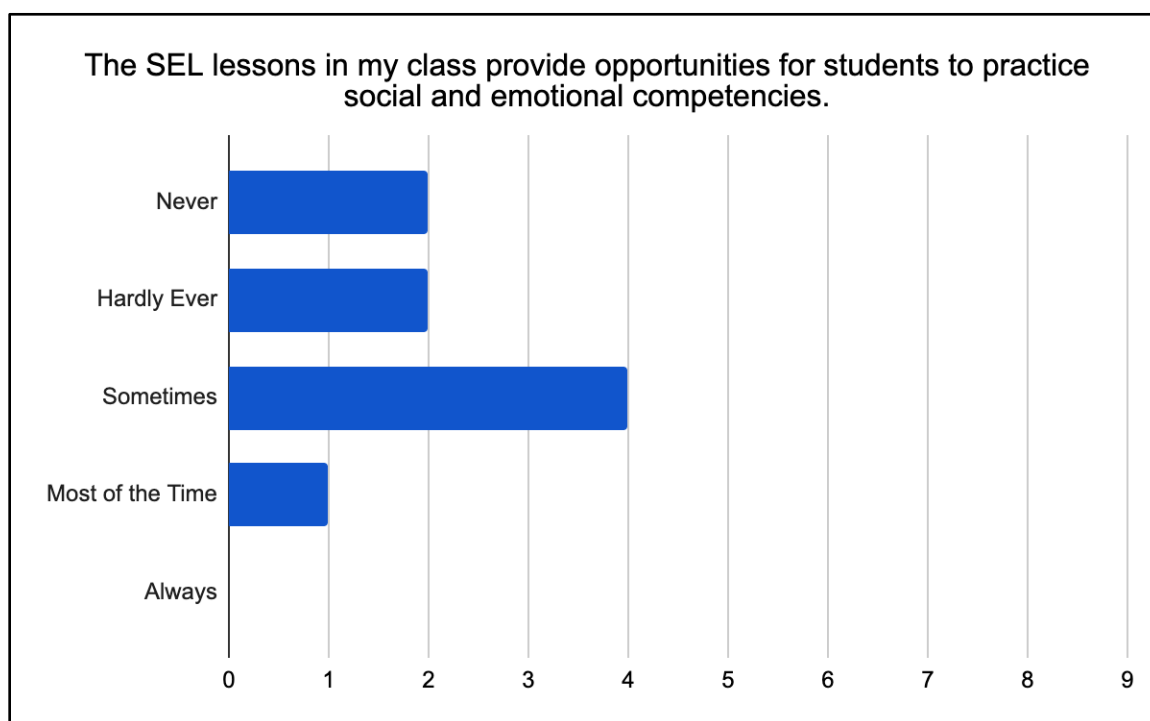
Survey Results on Supports and Resources



The results reported from participants in response to the statement, *The SEL lessons in my class provide opportunities for students to practice social and emotional competencies*, also elicited a strong disagree response. Two participants responded, “never,” two participants responded, “hardly ever,” four participants responded “sometimes,” and one participant responded “most of the time.” Figure 11 shows these results.

Figure 11

Survey Results on SEL Lessons



Subtheme 2: Professional Development

Professional development was the second subtheme that emerged from the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* and the interviews with participants related to Research Question 1. Social-emotional learning is crucial not only for students but also for the teachers and adults who interact with children daily (Starr, 2019; Stefanovic et al., 2021). Starr (2019) emphasized that SEL should not be limited to students alone but should also be integrated into the social and emotional well-being of adults working in schools. This sentiment was echoed by Stefanovic et al. (2021), who developed a professional learning course targeting the SEL needs of school and district-level leaders. The Office of Educational Leadership and Learning at Florida Atlantic University, in partnership with Dana Zorovich-Godek, an adjunct instructor and policy leader at CASEL, introduced this professional development course tailored for school administrators at both the school-based and district levels (Stefanovic et al., 2021). The course, which was not officially named by the authors, was highly impactful, with 90% of participants acknowledging its relevance and potential to enhance their practices in the workplace (Stefanovic et al., 2021). Participants discussed the importance of having time together to construct a school-wide understanding of what SEL is, discuss what tools, strategies, and/or resources they have, and how to use these tools, strategies, and resources with students. Teacher E and Teacher C discussed professional learning in terms of the impact it had on adults in the school. Teacher A emphasized the value of professional learning as it relates to improving interactions with students. These participants as well as Teacher F and Staff C also spoke about school-wide goals related to SEL and the impact they have had on professional learning.

Teacher E and Teacher C discussed the ways in which professional learning focused on RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) has allowed teachers and staff in the school to develop a

common language and understanding around the mental health needs of students. Teacher E shared:

I do still think there are some people who are closed minded or more closed minded to mental health in general. There are still some people who firmly believe that like students are here to learn and go to English and Science, and that really needs to be the focus, and not so much the mental health. So, I do think, again, changing perspectives of adults can also be difficult and learning that like, yes, we are here in an educational setting, but we take students as they come, and they have a lot of stuff that they deal with outside of the hours of the school day. So, we do have to address both in order to get students to be in the best place for their school day. Professional learning on RULER SEL makes this a conversation that even the most resistant staff have to be part of. Maybe that's a win in itself.

Teacher C contributed similar thoughts and recounted an experience in a professional learning session about SEL and how the work around RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) pushed teachers and staff thinking about the evolving role of teachers in school. Teacher C spoke about what initially drew her to teaching and how that has changed over time. Teacher C said:

It's back to the work with the adults. Um, I don't know, I think there's a mentality that goes around that I think we have wonderful and highly intelligent and really caring people who work here. But unfortunately, at the high school level, what still has always been, and will continue to be in some level, is content area experts. So they, myself included, enter the profession to be an expert in let's say, physics. Nowadays, the need for that, a physics expert, to also be just an expert on kids and humans and helping all kids from all kinds of backgrounds, like understand physics is way more challenging than

physics itself. So like my role, I see it as I'm always sort of helping colleagues and students sort of understand how a kid may feel in order to help the teacher feel like they can be more successful in educating that student.

Teacher C also spoke about some of the conversations with colleagues that have come during or after professional learning on RULER and how those conversations impacted interactions between adults in the school building. Teacher C spoke about how conversations in professional learning provided teachers and staff with the needed time and peer feedback to make sense of RULER and build a heightened awareness of SEL and mental health needs.

Teacher C said:

When discussing struggling students, I've had more than one colleague say I just don't see it that way or I didn't really think of it that way and thank you for naming that for me.

Thank you for giving me some words around that.

Teacher A spoke about the impact of professional learning on interactions within the school, but focused on the interactions between teachers and students. Teacher A shared the impact professional learning has had on his awareness related to the impact emotions can have on student success. Teacher A said:

I think emotions can be a barrier to some students. So, students who are in the practice of getting better at being able to identify their emotions, label them and express them again, are working towards reducing a barrier that is standing in between them and accessing their education. I have to consider my role in this process so it continues to become normal for students, to discuss their emotions and process those with me, a counselor, or a trusted adult, and then get themselves into a headspace where they can go to class and be present, fully present.

Teacher A, Teacher C, and Teacher E discussed the positive impact professional learning had on social interactions within the school building. These participants also noted that professional learning time spent on SEL had been limited. They discussed the competing professional learning priorities and if RULER-specific professional learning should be focused on the theoretical underpinnings or the practical implications. They all noted lingering questions about RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019), consistent implementation practices, and the next level of work as a school faculty.

Barriers to consistent implementation of SEL have been identified by educators, including time constraints and the need to balance academic curricula, as noted in the literature review (Hamilton et al., 2019). Additionally, educators face challenges such as lack of training, knowledge, and confidence in implementing SEL practices (Hamilton et al., 2019). There is also uncertainty about how to effectively incorporate SEL in diverse classrooms (Bhalla, 2019; Denston et al., 2022; Hamilton et al., 2019; Starr, 2019). Denston et al. (2022) highlighted the impact of teachers' social-emotional competencies and understanding of personal development on how they teach SEL skills to students. Denston et al., (2022) emphasized that teachers' perceptions of SEL can influence student perceptions and skill development. Teacher F and Staff C discussed the impact of professional learning as it related to school-wide SEL goals.

Teacher F shared their knowledge of the school development plan and how this plan is organized. The school development plan outlined the high school's year goals around three areas, teaching and learning, academic achievement, and culture and climate (Teacher F, personal communication, March 2024). Social-emotional learning goals explicitly articulated in the culture and climate section (Teacher F, personal communication, March 2024). Teacher F

shared his thoughts on how these goals impact professional learning and vice versa. Teacher F shared:

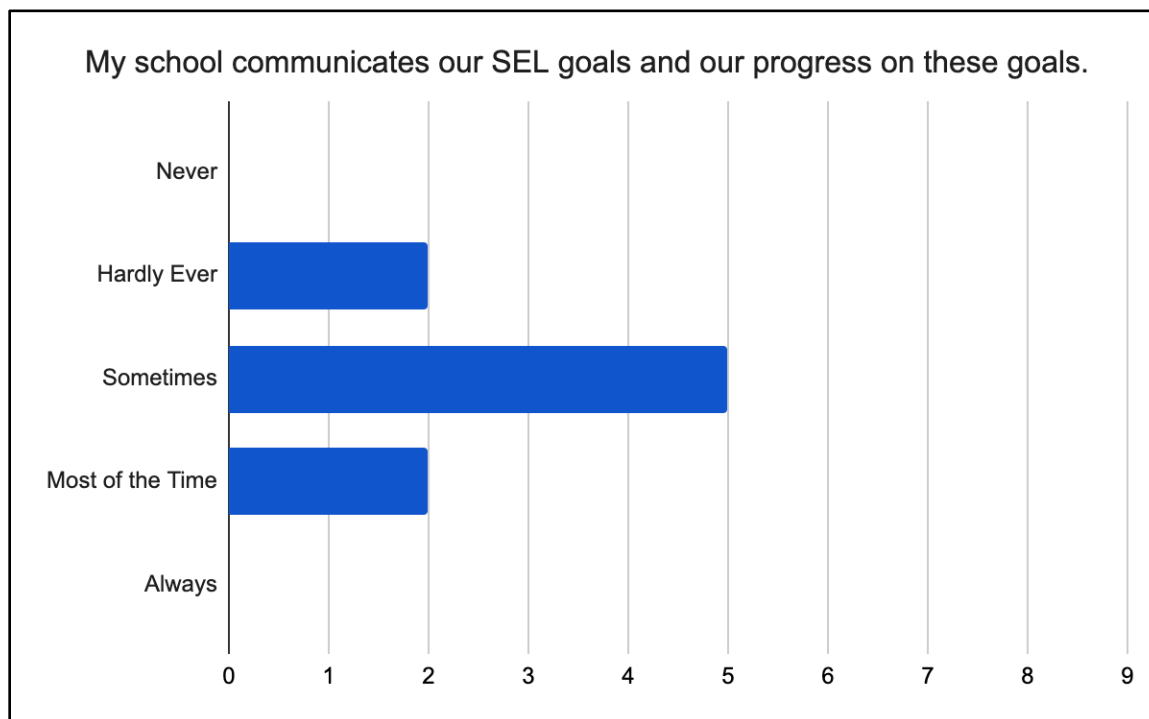
Professional learning is necessary because it's not, like a blanket implementation, like I think certain areas, certain courses, and special populations need it more. So professional learning isn't without its challenges. The expectation has been set in professional learning that RULER is a school-wide effort and this is where you'll see it. And then there is an autonomy piece, like on a teacher team level to say like, this is what it's going to look like in History or Science because we know that in order for kids to learn, let's say U.S. History, they need to access it, they need to be present. So how am I going to help my kids feel like they can be present? And, that's going to look different in AP US History, than it does in a different course like maybe, World History. I'm very, like, education-minded, like, kids come to school to be educated. So I'm a little old school in that sort of philosophy. I think all of this can be embedded into like, good teaching and instruction. And if it is, then hypothetically, we're helping kids where they should be in the classroom, understand, not just the curriculum, but also their emotions, which hypothetically then, if done well, may reduce some of the need to feel like we have to pull kids out and, and service them in other ways, emotionally or whatever. So, I think that's all connected in a lot of ways. The tier one stuff, the school-wide goal stuff, the good curriculum, etc. So how does RULER help us with that within the classroom? I think that could be described and articulated more clearly and that is where professional learning has to be ongoing. That's where we could probably do better.

Staff C also addressed professional learning in terms of the impact school-wide goals have had on planning and implementation of RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019). Staff C also

acknowledged the challenges with planning and implementation of RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) . Staff C likened the work of SEL to equity work and discussed similarities in terms of implementation barriers that schools can often face. Staff C said:

I think it's all about coherence. So, I think about it like equity work, if you treat the professional learning around RULER, as a separate session from everything else, and not built into all the things that we do, and the way that we are, then people will only see it as a separate bucket. And so if SEL and equity work are important to us, then we should be seeing that in our instruction work in our curriculum work. In all the work that we do there, it should be like the underlying work. My worry, again, is that we've done it sort of in pockets in like sessions. And since a session hasn't happened recently, I think the perception is that it's something we used to do. It's not something we currently do.

Similarly, participants discussed their knowledge of school-wide SEL goals as it relates to their school development plan, as this plan drives their teacher and staff evaluation goal setting. Progress on SEL goals was discussed by participants with mixed reactions. Three participants were able to readily articulate the tool and measures used to share progress. Six participants discussed the use of a school-wide survey given to students, staff, and families to gain feedback on SEL goals, as well as other items, but were unfamiliar with recent results. Four participants shared the belief that this data had been used to determine professional learning needs for the school building. Comparatively, the results of the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* in response to the statement, *My school communicates our SEL goals and our progress on these goals*, elicited the most responses for “sometimes.” Two participants responded, “hardly ever,” five participants responded, “sometimes,” and two participants responded, “most of the time.” Figure 12 shows these results.

Figure 12*Survey Results on SEL Goals***Theme 3: RULER SEL and Future Impact**

RULER SEL and future impact on students was the primary theme that emerged from the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* and the interview responses that align to research question 2. Social-emotional learning experts and researchers such as Hamilton et al. (2019) emphasized the positive impact of SEL on student outcomes, citing improved academic and behavioral results both in the short term and in adulthood. Surveys conducted among educators by organizations like the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (2019) and CASEL (2022) have indicated high levels of

confidence in SEL's ability to enhance students' overall well-being, interpersonal skills, and academic success. Educators view the investment of time and resources in understanding and implementing SEL programs as beneficial to their academic instruction goals (Hamilton et al., 2019). Secondary educators tend to favor informal SEL classroom practices over school-wide programs more commonly found at the elementary level (Hamilton et al., 2019). Furthermore, educators have highlighted the importance of district-level support for SEL initiatives, as such support significantly influences the quality of SEL implementation and the types of support available (CASEL, 2022; Hamilton et al., 2019).

Participants articulated clear beliefs about the benefit of developing SEL competencies in their students and the benefit these have on short-term successes, such as academic achievement and peer relationships as well as long-term benefits including career preparation, professional success, becoming a contributing member to their community, and overall personal satisfaction. Participants often referred to building SEL competencies in students for the purpose of building resilience and preparing students to think through novel or challenging situations to persist and see something through to completion. Teacher B shared her thoughts on why SEL is important in schools and said, “It's all in an effort to, you know, help that kid make thoughtful, meaningful choices for themselves in and out of school, and then especially once they leave high school.” Participants discussed the complementary nature of the RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) program to tier one instruction in terms of providing tools and strategies that promote emotional intelligence, self-regulation, positive relationships, and a supportive learning environment all to prepare students for life after high school. All participants discussed a focus on how SEL would benefit students as they entered college, careers, or other vocational choices that await them.

These findings aligned with the research described in the literature review. Social-emotional learning plays a crucial role in helping students recognize their own biases and shaping how they interact with individuals from diverse backgrounds (Tann & Wegmann, 2022). This has been linked to various positive outcomes such as improved relationships among students and between students and staff, enhanced academic performance, better emotional regulation, and reduced incidences of drug use and disciplinary issues (Borowski, 2019; Tan & Wegmann, 2022). The impact of SEL becomes evident as students progress through high school and beyond, and leads to higher graduation rates, increased perseverance in overcoming challenges, and allows for the attainment of personal and professional objectives (Tan & Wegmann, 2022). Social-emotional learning also cultivates readiness for postsecondary education and equips students with the skills to collaborate effectively and respectfully in diverse environments (Tan & Wegmann, 2022). Furthermore, the influence of SEL extends to active participation in communities, exhibiting traits of an engaged citizen, achieving greater success in careers, and fostering perceptions of a balanced family and work life (Borowski, 2019; Gunn, 2019; NCSEAD, 2019; Weissberg et al., 2016).

Participants recounted experiences with students who they referred to as being emotionally intelligent or socially and emotionally skilled. Participants shared anecdotes about these students persisting through challenges, exhibiting resilience, organizing projects or fundraisers that positively contributed to their community. Participants also shared examples that highlighted kind or empathetic interactions they had witnessed between students, or students and adults. Participants used the terms “emotionally intelligent” and socially and “emotionally skilled” to highlight the student's ability to recognize, understand, and manage their emotions effectively. Participant examples also referenced students’ proficiency in navigating social

interactions, building positive relationships, and making responsible decisions. Teacher B discussed how one student she had in class in a previous year had learned that a classmate had family members trying to leave Ukraine in the winter of 2022 after Russia had deployed troops into Ukraine.. Teacher B shared that the student she was thinking about did not really know the affected classmate yet, this student felt compelled to figure out how to help and show this person in our community support the affected classmate. Teacher B said, “Sometimes it’s small moments and other times it’s big ones, but I’ve found that emotionally intelligent students are never afraid of a challenge and have a heightened awareness of others.” Teacher B shared her thoughts on the impact of RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) on her teaching. Teacher B said:

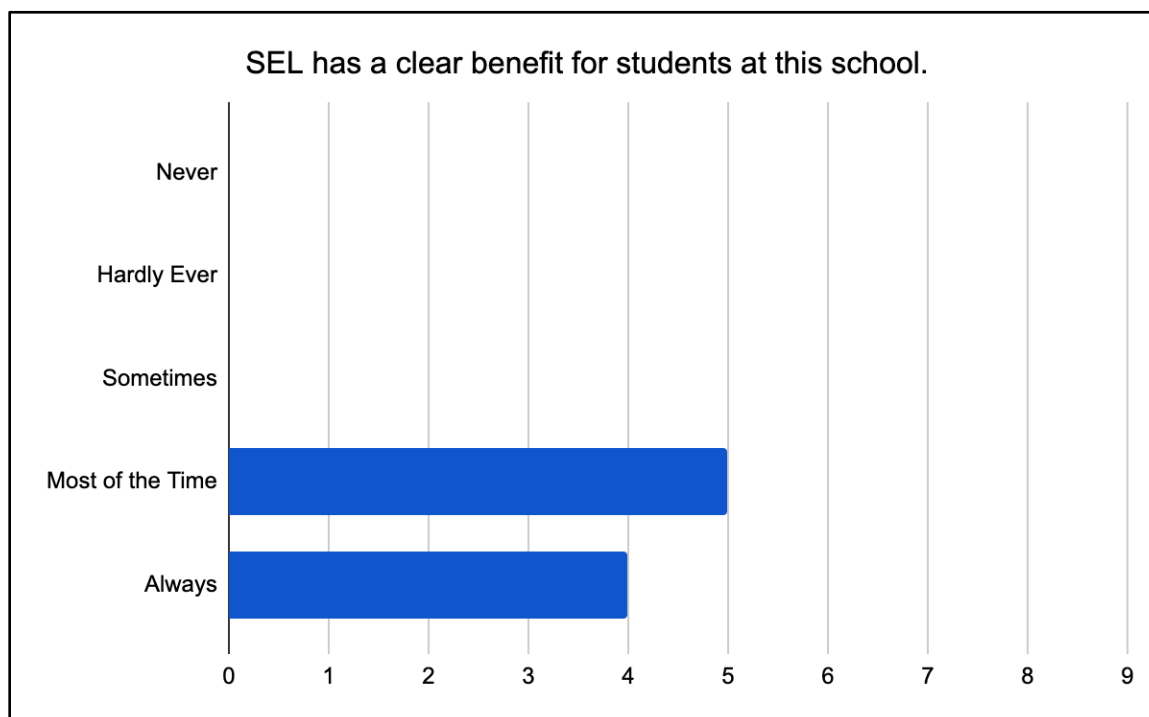
I’m reminded that people become emotionally intelligent with good modeling and lots of opportunities to practice and receive feedback. I think people will create those spaces and explore that with students when they feel they have the skills, the tools, to do that successfully. Some of that, I think, comes with time, with confidence. But, SEL programs, like RULER, also expedite that process with newer teachers. And, I have to admit, I’ve also gotten some good ideas through some of the work we have done and conversations I’ve had.

Teacher C and Teacher E also shared similar thoughts when discussing examples of students who they believed to be emotionally intelligent. They also reflected on how RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) impacted or influenced their teaching practices, in relation to these students. Teacher C and Teacher E reflected on their underlying belief that developing SEL competencies allows students to access their current learning and achieve academic success. Participants also discussed the significant impact they believe this has on a student’s future successes. Teacher C spoke about the impact developing SEL competencies has on relationships

and the ability to become, what she called, a civic-minded contributor. Teacher C shared, “I see SEL skills as directly impacting a person’s ability to understand and appreciate complex interdependent systems and their effects on others, as well as their local and global communities through service and civic engagement.” Teacher C also added that the RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) is one way she has added strategies to her repertoire. Teacher C said:

I’ve been at this for a while, so I can’t say RULER seemed all that new to me, but in terms of strategies, yeah, I think I can say our professional learning helped me think about what I was doing in class and maybe how I was saying things to students. RULER and talking about SEL in general makes you think about how you give students a voice in your room and the relationships you create with students. Those relationships are more impactful than any content I give.

Comparatively, the results of the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* in response to the statement, *SEL has a clear benefit for students at this school*, elicited a strong agree response. Five participants responded, “most of the time,” and four participants responded, “always.” Figure 13 shows these results.

Figure 13*Survey Results on Benefit of SEL*

Teacher E reflected on a student he had and how building a relationship with that student took time. He described hearing about this student before finding him on his roster. Teacher E recalled his initial reaction to seeing that name given what he knew about this student's behavior and what had been described as a lack of engagement. Teacher E said, "We had just talked about RULER's meta-moment and I thought about this student and wondered when he last felt invested, felt proud." Teacher E went on to describe how that relationship was built and shared the way in which RULER SEL influenced his thinking. He said, "I didn't follow RULER per se, I feel like I had the experience at that point to you know, do the work, but it gave me a tool, the meta-moment, that I incorporated into things I was already doing." Similarly, Staff A and Staff C

spoke about RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) as being complementary to previous work and learning with staff and students. Both staff members identified the strong connection to students' future preparation as a driving force behind continuously looking at ways to improve SEL in both students and teachers alike.

Staff A recalled her experience learning about RULER and thinking back to a graduate school project she completed using Goleman's (1995) seminal work, *Emotional Intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*. She discussed the similarities and shared, "I remember thinking that RULER feels like the practical application that Goleman alluded to was necessary, but did not exist in any systematic way." Staff A and Staff C discussed the ways in which RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) provides common language and builds the SEL skills of adults who go through the learning together as well as the students they impact. Staff C shared, "RULER packages good teaching practices together in a way that is digestible, even though we do a lot to modify it at the secondary level." Staff B also discussed the complementary nature of RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) and shared:

We had spent a lot of time as a district, and faculty, examining the five CASEL competencies. We thought this was the right work, we knew these were the real skills students needed to develop in high school to be successful in and after high school. But, the questions were always there- how do we do this in a coherent way? How do we build staff capacity? How do we know if we've been successful? Made progress? RULER SEL was one of many approaches we could have taken. What we liked about it was the ways the tools made sense at the lower levels with things we were already doing, and the flexibility to modify and adapt as students got older. Yes, there are scripted lessons and

we use them, loosely, but we do have ready-made resources and when everything feels important it's good to have some solid resources you can rely on and refer to.

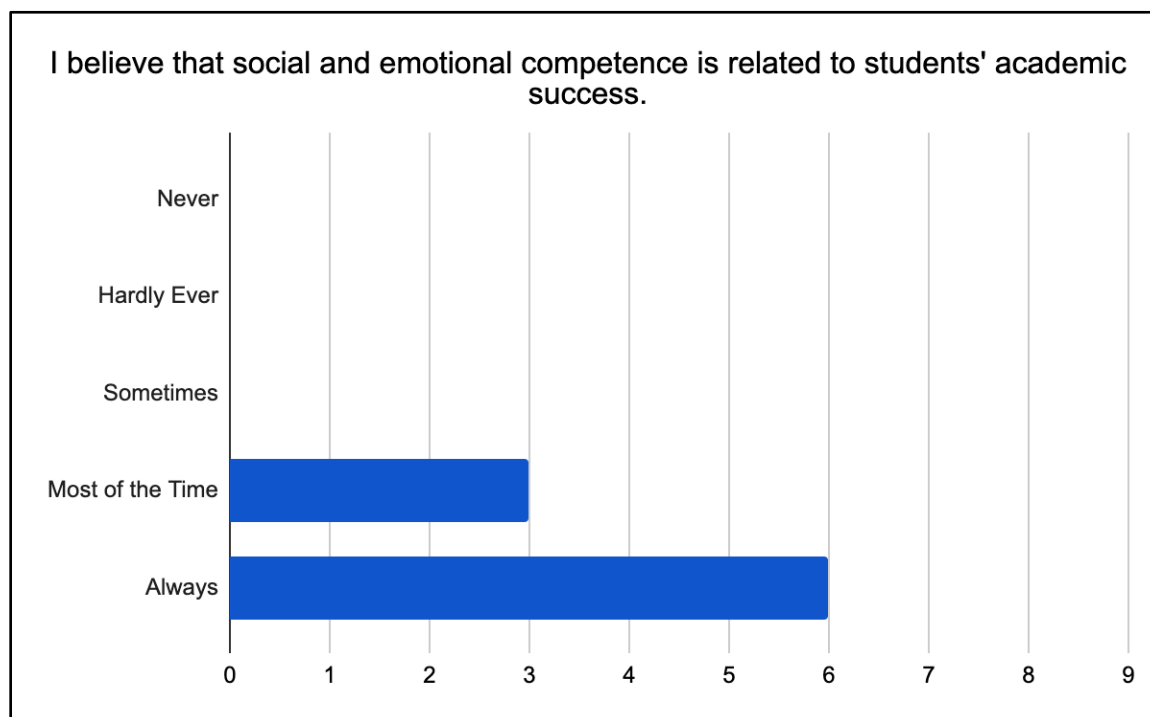
Staff C also added:

We know that students who can better regulate their emotions, can better access curriculum, the support their teachers provide and will ultimately do better in and after school. It is our responsibility to provide students with the tools they need to do well while they are here with us, but ultimately once they leave us. So, it becomes our responsibility to not only educate students in terms of content, but to help them develop as a whole person and to care just as much about their future as we do about their present.

Teachers A, B, D, E, and F used the words framework and program interchangeably when discussing RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019). All participants indicated that regardless what adults at the school called it, RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) placed an emphasis on building a common understanding of what SEL competencies are and why they are important. The work done around RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) was not perceived as new work by any of the participants interviewed, but instead participants talked about the ways in which RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) kept discussions of SEL present in professional learning and added strategies or tools to already established practices or underlying beliefs about the importance of SEL. Comparatively, the results of the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* in response to the statement, *I believe that social and emotional competence is related to students' academic success*, elicited a strongly agree response. Three participants responded, "most of the time," and six participants responded, "always." Figure 14 shows these results.

Figure 14

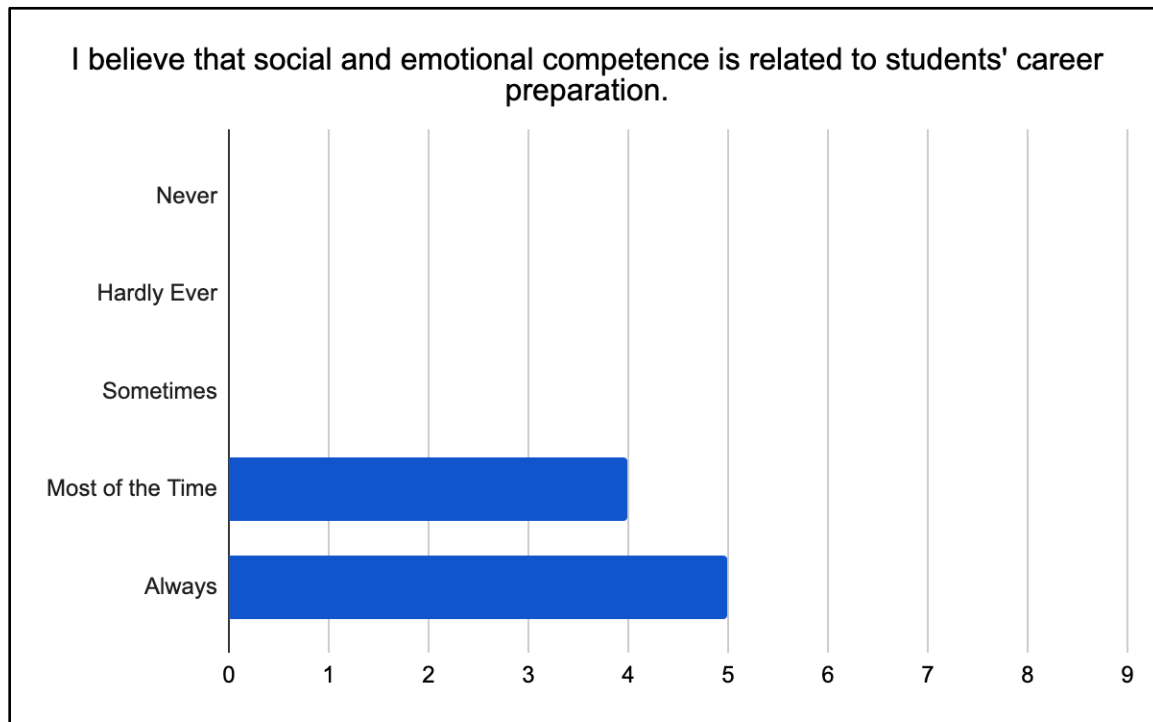
Survey Results on Relation to Academic Success



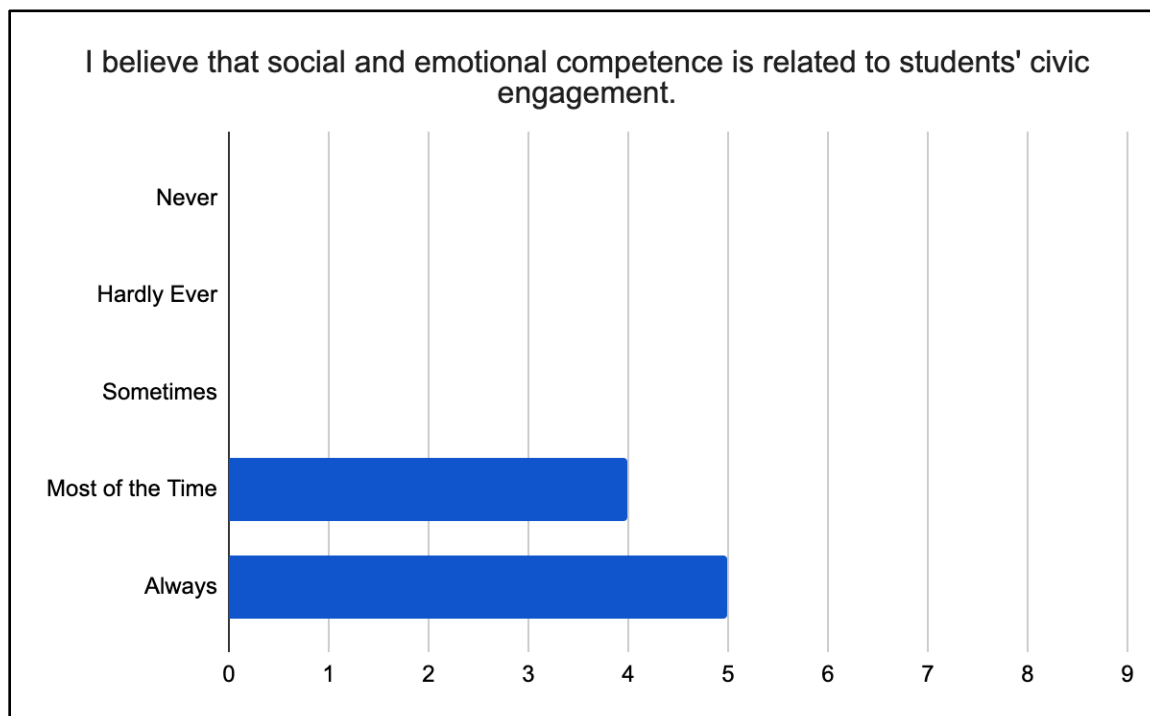
Similarly, the results of the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* in response to the statement, *I believe that social and emotional competence is related to students' career preparation*, elicited a strong agree response. Four participants responded, "most of the time," and five participants responded, "always." Figure 15 shows these results.

Figure 15

Survey Results on Career Preparation



The results of the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* in response to the statement, *I believe that social and emotional competence is related to students' civic engagement*, also elicited a strong agree response. Four participants responded, “most of the time,” and five participants responded, “always.” Figure 16 shows these results.

Figure 16*Survey Results on Civic Engagement***Theme 4: Increased Individual Student Support**

The need for increased individual student support was a common concern from the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* and the interview responses that align with research question 2. Social-emotional learning experts view SEL as a growth-oriented strategy aimed at cultivating the five core social and emotional competencies rather than a behavioral intervention (CASEL, 2022; Hamilton et al., 2019; NCSEAD, 2019). These competencies encompass self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2022). The Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning (2013, 2022) stressed the interconnectedness and mutual reinforcement of these

competencies by highlighting the importance of explicit instruction, supportive school environments, and meaningful engagement with families and communities in their development. This perspective acknowledges that social and emotional skills can be nurtured and improved through intentional and coordinated efforts over time (Goleman, 1995).

Participants discussed feelings around the commitment of most individuals within the school to SEL goals and the belief that this work was valuable, but noted that such a commitment is not shared among all teachers and staff and discussed the impact on students. Teacher B shared concerns with buy-in within her own department and said:

I'm concerned that it [RULER] really hasn't had as much of an impact on the teachers in my department as it could have. I think the posters are up and we know about the tools. But they almost sort of compartmentalize it. And I feel like teachers in my department think that the RULER program is something that happens in an advisory program. It's not really meant for the science classroom. Some do it really well and I can see their commitment and the reach out they do to other teachers and counselors to support kids, but others, well, they see it compartmentalized, and that's a problem.

Teacher F also discussed some of the challenges he believes are present in the school building in relation to RULER implementation and the need for increased individual support for students. Teacher F said:

I think there are people who really buy in and do really well with it [RULER SEL]. But I think it's sort of been used as like, fodder for other people who are a little bit more apprehensive to SEL work. I don't know that the buy in is there for everybody. So, I worry that it's more of a joke for a third of the staff. I mean, that's a ballpark and, you

know, guess on how many, but I think it's working really well for some and then the other ones are using it as a joke.

This study's literature review also noted that when schools adopt a growth-oriented approach, they can cultivate a culture of continuous learning and development in social and emotional competencies, supporting students' long-term well-being, success, and resilience (Hoffman et al., 2018; Sprenger, 2020). Schools often encounter challenges related to SEL due to potential misunderstandings or misuses of the term (Finn & Hess, 2019). Challenges can also be related to disagreements about how to balance SEL with the delivery of academic content (Finn & Hess, 2019; Shriver & Weissberg, 2020). This phenomenon is motivated by various factors such as financial incentives, professional recognition, or efforts to garner broader support from stakeholders (Finn & Hess, 2019; Shriver & Weissberg, 2020), resulting in continued skepticism and uncertainty regarding SEL's essence and the appropriate skills to teach (Finn & Hess, 2019).

Participants differentiated between the clarity provided during professional learning sessions around what RULER SEL is and how it complements the work educators are doing all the time, and the ambiguous nature of SEL itself. Participants shared that each student and each situation is unique and therefore the application of the RULER SEL tools, such as the mood meter and the meta-moment (Brackett et al., 2019), cannot be uniform. Staff A noted that there are decisions made by the teacher or staff member when a situation occurs that make SEL non-standardized by nature. Staff A shared:

As educators, we understand that every student and every situation is different. This means that applying SEL tools like those in RULER can't always follow a one-size-fits-all approach. There are moments in the classroom where we, as teachers or staff members, have to make decisions based on the specific context and needs of the students

involved. This uniqueness makes SEL inherently non-standardized, and it's crucial for us to be flexible and responsive to the diverse emotional, social, and cultural experiences our students encounter.

Starr (2019) highlighted the diverse interpretations of SEL among educators and noted both similarities and significant differences that can pose risks when implementing SEL without a thorough comprehension of its purpose in developing competencies. Considering the specific needs of student populations is paramount (Starr, 2019). Starr (2019) cautioned against the potential drawbacks of ambiguity, noting that educators, constrained by limited time for in-depth research, may opt for popular models that might not align with their requirements or needs. Participants discussed different factors that influence their understanding, beliefs, and practices related to SEL implementation within their classrooms and interactions with students, including prior learning and experiences with other SEL-related programs, prior to the introduction of RULER. Staff B said:

There are a lot of different backgrounds, training, and SEL programs represented within our teaching staff. Some people have come from other districts that identified as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports districts, others have come from places that taught the Second Step or Restorative Justice (Darling-Hammond, 2023). I believe that all of those experiences impact how a person thinks about RULER and what parts resonate more than others.

Staff B mentioned different programs such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) which is a widely-used framework that emphasizes proactive strategies for teaching and reinforcing positive behaviors in students (Gulbrandson, 2018). Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports focuses on creating a positive school climate and culture through

clear expectations, teaching social skills, and using data to make informed decisions (Gulbrandson, 2018). Second Step is another program Staff B spoke about that focuses on SEL by teaching skills like empathy, emotion management, and problem-solving (Frey & Sylvester, 1997). Second Step is often used alongside PBIS or as part of a broader SEL curriculum (Lee, n.d.). Restorative Justice was the third program referenced by Staff B and is a different approach that focuses on repairing harm and restoring relationships when conflicts or disciplinary issues arise (Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018). It emphasizes accountability, empathy, and building a sense of community within the school (Evans & Vaandering, 2016). Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports and Restorative Justice were referenced in the literature review as they are often compared to RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019; Lee, n.d.).

Staff B also discussed how these different backgrounds and understandings related to SEL can be a benefit to the school and help to socially construct a better definition of what teachers and staff want SEL to look like and feel like in the school building, as this definition would be representative of multiple perspectives. Teacher C also shared her perspective on the ways in which different teacher and staff perspectives are missing opportunities to come together to support the students who appear to be struggling the most. Teacher C shared:

My personal experience with my students, I feel like they're very, very able to articulate what they're feeling about things, you know, in class and so I think that goes along with the Vision of the Graduate work. I think both of those things have given them the vocabulary to explain what they're going through. I'm just worried that it's not systemic, like it's just not happening everywhere. It's happening in very small pockets. We have all this expertise, but we never come together to actually discuss it. Even in teams, we're so focused on content and the logistics, that the kids who need us the most, who are asking

for help in some of the hardest ways, we don't have a systematic way of talking about them and planning for what they actually need.

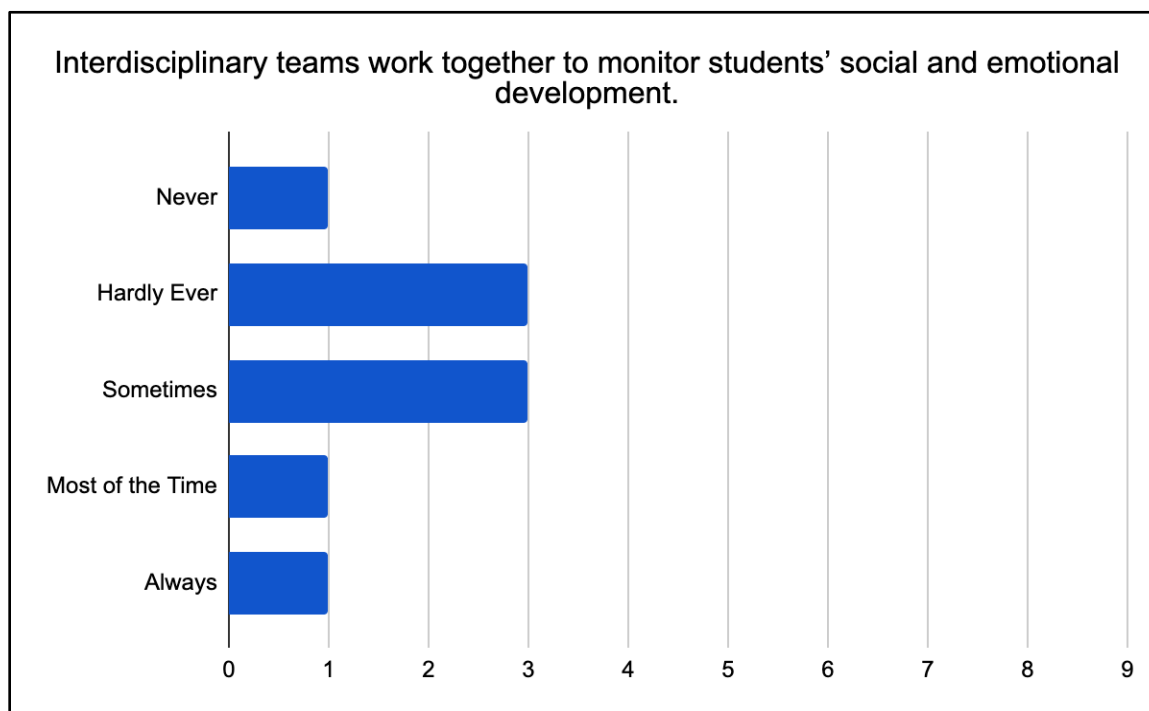
Some participants referenced a student intervention team structure. Most participants did not reference this structure or articulate how it is used to support students. A secondary school level intervention team is a group of educators and professionals who collaborate to identify and support students who may be struggling academically, socially, or emotionally (Navo & Williams, 2020). This team develops and implements strategies and interventions to address students' needs, monitor progress, and promote students' overall well-being and success in school (Navo & Williams, 2020). Teacher D shared that she is aware of the intervention team structure in the school building but noted that to her knowledge no content area teachers participate on this team. Staff C also acknowledged an established intervention team structure. Staff C also noted that the intervention team's structure is not an ideal configuration as it lacks representation in terms of having an academic component. Staff C said, "Everyone on the intervention team comes with good intentions, but it is a missed opportunity to not have specific content teachers attend this meeting for specific students." Teacher E and Teacher F also discussed individual student support feeling very dependent on the mental health providers assigned to specific cases. Teacher F shared:

I think it's true of any team, some staff have more experience and maybe even more connections to help get students the help they need. Maybe if we had more opportunities to get the teachers of specific students together, we would be able to do more to help the ones that seem to be having the hardest time, or just aren't doing what they need to be doing.

Staff A and Staff B also discussed some of what they described as unintended consequences of having a heightened awareness of and focus on SEL, including the lack of appropriate or accessible juvenile mental health supports and school partners. Staff B shared:

Again, I think that if we don't keep, if we don't keep coming back to things, and regularly reflecting on how well they're working, it just becomes one thing and a long list of initiatives that keep starting. And education is full of started initiatives that sort of fizzle out. The same is true when we keep coming up with the same problems, the same challenges and have no providers or partners to help us help students. I think that's a problem. We are so much better at identifying what supports specific students need, but just because we can identify them doesn't mean those supports actually exist or can be accessed in a timely way by our students and families. It's very frustrating.

Staff A said, "We have good teaming structures, we have gotten very precise at identifying student needs or lagging skills, but how teams then work together is an area we are still working on." Comparatively, the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* results reported from the nine participants in response to the statement, *Interdisciplinary teams work together to monitor students' social and emotional development*, elicited neither a strongly agree response nor a strongly disagree response. One participant responded, "never," three participants responded, "hardly ever," three participants responded, "sometimes," one participant responded, "most of the time," and one participant responded, "always." Figure 17 shows these results.

Figure 17*Survey Results on Interdisciplinary Teams*

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to explore how secondary teachers and staff at a mid-size public, suburban high school perceive the implementation of the RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) program. The existing literature highlighted the limited research on effectively implementing social-emotional learning in secondary schools and the necessity for improved metrics to accurately measure emotions and SEL (Frye et al., 2022; Hamilton et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2017; NCSEAD, 2019). Given the challenges faced in implementing SEL effectively, this study aimed to uncover educators' diverse perceptions and approaches to SEL and ultimately contribute to the development of effective implementation

strategies (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020; Hamilton et al., 2019; Lewis et al., 2021). A qualitative exploratory case study was utilized to gain a nuanced understanding of participants' perspectives and interactions within the RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) program (Creswell, 2013). Nine participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview approach. The nine participants also completed the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation*. The main themes that emerged were becoming a warm demander (Hammond, 2015), adapting RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) tools, RULER SEL and future impact, and the need for increased individual support. The subthemes of building dynamic relationships with students emerged as a product of participants' efforts to embody the attributes of a warm demander, as well as the role of professional development in refining participant implementation of SEL. Chapter 5 will discuss the significance of the research findings and their implications. This will be followed by actionable recommendations and suggestions for future studies. Additionally, the chapter will provide a comprehensive summary and offer insights into the implications for practice and potential avenues for further study.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

SEL is an educational approach aimed at developing students' skills in managing emotions, building positive relationships, and making responsible decisions, fostering their overall well-being and academic success (CASEL, 2020). Research on SEL has primarily focused on stand-alone curricula and has not been inclusive of the exploration of diverse approaches used by educators at the secondary level (Frye et al., 2022; Hamilton et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2017; NCSEAD, 2019). The lack of valid metrics to measure emotions and SEL has hindered the adoption of consistent curricula in schools, which has impacted educators' perceptions and practices related to SEL implementation (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020; Hamilton et al., 2019; Lewis et al., 2021). There remains limited understanding of how these aspects influence secondary school teachers' perspectives on SEL embedded within academic instruction, despite existing research into teacher beliefs and perceptions regarding SEL (Konishi et al., 2022; White et al., 2020).

Traditional stand-alone SEL programs lack solid evidence of effectiveness and often fail to measure students' mastery of specific skills (Jones et al., 2017). Universal SEL programs have shown positive effects, especially among low-income and minority populations (Lewis et al., 2017). This highlights the potential benefits of diverse approaches to SEL implementation (Jones et al., 2017; Lewis et al., 2021; Riekie et al., 2017). Secondary schools have been underrepresented in SEL research, which emphasizes the importance of understanding educators' perspectives to enhance school climate, streamline culture, and address students' needs (CASEL, 2022; Fullan, 2020; Yale Child Study Center, 2021). Challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic further underscore the importance of secondary school representation in SEL research (Fullan, 2020). The understanding of educators' perspectives can contribute to fostering a greater

sense of belonging and collaboration among stakeholders, ultimately promoting holistic student development and well-being.

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to explore how secondary teachers and staff at a mid-size public, suburban high school perceive the implementation of the RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) program. The existing literature pointed to a significant gap in comprehensive research regarding the effective implementation of SEL in secondary schools and stressed the necessity for improved metrics to accurately measure emotions and SEL at the secondary school level (Frye et al., 2022; Hamilton et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2017; NCSEAD, 2019). Given the challenges associated with implementing SEL effectively, this study aimed to uncover educators' diverse perceptions and approaches to SEL, ultimately contributing to the development of effective implementation strategies and offer insights for improved SEL implementation in high schools (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020; Darling-Hammond, 2023; Hamilton et al., 2019; Lewis et al., 2021; Yale Child Study Center, 2021). The following research questions guided this study:

Research Question 1: How do secondary school teachers and staff perceive the value of the RULER SEL program when reflecting on their interactions with students?

Research Question 2: How does the RULER SEL program support or add to tier one instruction provided by secondary school teachers?

A small sample of six teachers and three staff members were interviewed and surveyed by this researcher about their perspectives and experiences with SEL. Participants came from one research site in Connecticut. This research design allowed this researcher to obtain a sample of the teacher and staff of the school that would represent the diversity of ideas and beliefs within the research site and capture a broad spectrum of participants' experiences, perspectives, and

characteristics relevant to the research question (Patton, 2014). This study utilized the three-pronged data analysis method described by Ravitch and Carl (2021). This approach involved developing a detailed strategy for structuring and handling the data, actively immersing in and interacting with the gathered data, and ultimately conveying the findings through either visual and written means for interpretation.

This researcher utilized a deductive coding approach based on established frameworks including CASEL competency areas (CASEL, 2022, 2023) and the emotional intelligence ability model by Salovey and Mayer (1997). A coding chart was created to guide the coding process, aligned to the deductive codes and their definitions derived from these frameworks. A coding framework worksheet was developed before engaging deeply with the data. This worksheet was developed to organize notes and codes from interview transcripts. Organizing notes aided in the synthesis of data and identification of commonalities and differences among participants' perspectives. This systematic approach enhanced data management and facilitated the extraction of insights from interview data and survey results. The deductive process of constructing categories beforehand allowed this researcher to assess whether the collected data aligned with the anticipated themes or if new themes emerged during the analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach allowed this researcher to explore the data while remaining open to unexpected findings or patterns. Four themes and two subthemes surfaced from this process. The first theme that emerged from the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* and the interview responses from questions aligned with research question 1 were becoming a warm demander, with the subtheme of building dynamic relationships with students. The second theme was adapting RULER SEL tools, with the subtheme of professional development needs. The first theme that emerged from the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation*

and the interview responses from questions aligned to Research Question 2 was RULER SEL and future impact on students. The second theme that emerged was the need for increased individual support for students. This chapter provides a comprehensive summary of the findings' interpretation, implications, actionable recommendations, and suggestions for future research, and culminates in a conclusion.

Interpretation and Importance of Findings

Interpreting the significance of the findings in this study involved adopting a reflexivity-based approach, as advocated by Ravitch and Carl (2021), which emphasizes continuous reflection on the researcher's role and influence throughout the data collection and analysis phases. This approach was crucial to ensure this researcher's perspectives did not unduly restrict this study's interpretation and outcomes. A person-centered approach, also recommended by Ravitch and Carl (2021), was employed to accurately represent the participants' perceptions shared during interviews and through responses to the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation*. This involved remaining faithful to the participants' viewpoints and acknowledging their individuality during the analysis process.

Direct quotations from participant interview responses were included in the findings, even when their opinions diverged from the broader dataset to authentically capture the participants' perceptions. This transparency aimed to support and reflect the participants' opinions accurately. The interpretation of the findings was conducted within the framework of Salovey and Mayer's (1997) emotional intelligence ability model and the SEL framework by CASEL (2020). All identified themes and subthemes were aligned with the interview questions and survey responses, which will be further elaborated upon in this section.

Research Question 1

Research question one asked, how do secondary school staff and teachers perceive the value of the RULER SEL program when reflecting on their interactions with students? This question was created because there is uncertainty about how to effectively incorporate SEL in diverse classrooms (Bhalla, 2019; Denston et al., 2022; Hamilton et al., 2019; Starr, 2019). Incorporating SEL into all school improvement measures involves integrating SEL competencies and strategies into various aspects of educational planning and assessment (Durlak et al., 2011). This approach recognizes the importance of addressing students' social and emotional development alongside academic achievement to support holistic growth and well-being (Durlak et al., 2011). This was seen at this research site where strategies around culturally responsive teaching were paired with strategies to develop SEL. This pairing allows teachers and staff to feel equipped to manage the needs of a classroom of diverse learners. It is crucial for district and school leaders to support SEL development among staff to benefit all students effectively. Social-emotional learning is an ongoing process that can oftentimes feel ambiguous by nature despite professional development efforts (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009), as was expressed in participant interviews. Participants expressed that social interactions are influenced by multiple factors all at the same time, so no situation is exactly like another. Interviews with participants revealed that while teachers seek to operate in facts, procedures, and scripted language, there is no one way to approach SEL. Participants shared that ongoing, continuous improvement can feel difficult for those who seek definitive answers or solutions.

All participants expressed the importance and a school-wide focus on becoming a warm demander (Hammond, 2015), or an educator who sets high expectations and provides personalized experiences and opportunities to develop SEL competencies. The subtheme of

building dynamic relationships with students emerged as a product of participants' efforts to embody the attributes of a warm demander. Participants' use of RULER SEL tools (Brackett et al., 2019) varied, but all participants agreed that modifications were necessary for the secondary school level and discussed examples of how that was accomplished given specific strategies and tools outlined by RULER. All participants agreed on RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) being applicable at the elementary levels as the program is written, but discussed the revisions or program modifications that they find necessary for students on the precipice of planning for life after high school graduation. During interviews, several participants, including Teachers B, D, and F, shared their experiences of adapting RULER tools for their use or observing others do the same. They mentioned that RULER tools were introduced during professional learning sessions and felt that these tools were particularly suitable for elementary school settings, but would not be well-received by secondary school students without changes. Participant B shared a specific example related to the use of a RULER tool known as the Meta Moment (Brackett et al., 2019). Participant B said:

Something like, the Meta-Moment, is a good reflection tool, but in a high school classroom we're not stopping and naming this, if anything it's a reminder to me of how much student emotions affect their day-to-day, their ability to concentrate, you know, do the work, learn and all of that stuff.

Participants also addressed the role of professional development and the ways in which such learning experiences provided time for reflection and peer feedback that contributed to participants' understanding and implementation of RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) in their classrooms and interactions with students.

Research Question 2

Research question two asked how does the RULER SEL program support or add to tier one instruction provided by secondary school teachers? This researcher created this question to better understand participants' personal experiences with SEL implementation. This included insights into perceived challenges and effective resources or support provided. Participant responses to interview questions aligned to research question two were focused on the strong beliefs held by participants about the positive impact developing SEL competencies in students provides and how developing such competencies has lifelong implications for students. Participants in this study identified a range of ways in which the development of SEL competencies in students contributed to their success in college, career, and community engagement. Specifically, participants noted that SEL skills such as self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and effective communication not only facilitated academic achievement and career readiness but also promoted positive relationships, responsible citizenship, and active participation in community initiatives. These findings highlight the multifaceted benefits of integrating SEL into educational programs and underscore SEL's importance in fostering well-rounded individuals who are prepared to thrive in various aspects of life.

Participants discussed the necessity of collaboration among various stakeholders and highlighted instances where such collaboration was already occurring, albeit in isolated pockets. They emphasized the importance of using a common language to identify and address SEL needs and goals effectively. Participants spoke about how this shared understanding and common language enables stakeholders, including educators, administrators, parents, and community members, to work together cohesively towards promoting SEL competencies in students. Understanding educators' perspectives can aid school leadership in handling multiple priorities,

promoting a streamlined culture, and enhancing school climate (CASEL, 2022). The concept of a streamlined culture encompasses a cohesive and well-integrated environment within the school, characterized by a shared vision, effective communication, and collaborative staff interactions (Fullan, 2020). Schools can foster a culture where everyone shares a common understanding and collaborates toward common objectives by grasping educators' viewpoints on SEL implementation within tier one instruction as well as the type and frequency of support needed in service of implementation efforts (CASEL, 2022; Fullan, 2020). This understanding is particularly crucial in creating a greater sense of belonging for students affected by disrupted educational and social experiences due to the COVID-19 pandemic (CASEL, 2022). Experts in SEL view SEL as a growth-oriented strategy aimed at developing the five social and emotional competencies outlined by CASEL, rather than merely an intervention (CASEL, 2022; Hamilton et al., 2019; NCSEAD, 2019). These competencies are interconnected and mutually reinforcing and can be cultivated through explicit instruction, supportive school environments, and meaningful engagement with families and communities (CASEL, 2013, 2022). This perspective acknowledges that social and emotional skills can be nurtured and improved through deliberate and sustained efforts over time (Goleman, 1995). Embracing a growth-oriented approach empowers educators to foster a culture of continuous learning and development in social and emotional competencies, supporting students' long-term well-being, success, and resilience (Sprenger, 2020; Hoffman et al., 2018).

Participants also highlighted the necessity for enhanced individualized support for students to further bolster their SEL development efforts including more transparency around teaming structures and forging additional partnerships with student support providers. The literature also supports the benefits of individualized supports and recognizes the importance of

identity development (Borowski, 2019; Tan & Wegmann, 2022). Individualized support can encompass various strategies tailored to meet the unique needs of students, such as personalized goal-setting, targeted interventions, mentorship programs, and counseling services (Durlak et. al, 2011). Social-emotional learning holds promise in aiding students to develop their individual identities and navigate new social landscapes, such as those created by the proliferation of social media use among pre-teens and teenagers (Tan & Wegmann, 2022). Social-emotional learning can enhance students' perceptions of themselves, others, and their workload, leading to a more positive view of school climate and classroom community (Borowski, 2019). Additionally, SEL supports students in recognizing their biases and influencing their interactions with individuals from diverse backgrounds (Tan & Wegmann, 2022). This support positively impacts students' relationships with peers and educators, academic achievement, emotional regulation, and reduces the likelihood of substance use or disciplinary issues (Borowski, 2019; Tan & Wegmann, 2022). Furthermore, SEL cultivates preparedness for higher education and the capacity to collaborate respectfully with a diverse array of people (Tan & Wegmann, 2022). This influence of SEL extends to active community involvement, characteristics of engaged citizenship, improved career outcomes, and perceptions of a healthier balance between work and family life (Borowski, 2019; Gunn, 2019; NCSEAD, 2019; Weissberg et al., 2016).

Implications

Research has shown that evidence-based approaches to SEL can lead to significant improvements in school climate, particularly in fostering students' sense of belonging (Baumsteiger et al., 2021). Much of the existing SEL research has focused on elementary and middle grades, leaving a gap in understanding the impact of SEL in secondary education (Yale Child Study Center, 2021). This qualitative exploratory case study aimed to fill this gap by

exploring teacher and staff perceptions of SEL models specifically in the secondary setting, including strengths, benefits, challenges, barriers, resources, and training needs for effective implementation of the RULER SEL (Brackett et al, 2019) approach. The implications of this study's findings are multifaceted and extend to various stakeholders including educators, policymakers, researchers, and practitioners in the field of social-emotional learning and emotional intelligence. This study underscores the importance of eliciting diverse perspectives to better understand secondary staff and teacher perceptions of how SEL contributes to the understanding of programmatic strengths, barriers, challenges, and potential solutions for long-term sustainability. This study's findings emphasize the value of incorporating diverse pedagogical approaches, such as the warm demander (Hammond, 2015) approach and customized SEL tools, to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes. Policymakers can use these findings to inform the development of policies and initiatives that promote SEL integration in educational settings, fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment. District and school leaders can use these findings to inform the development of a coherent and responsive professional learning plan to support teacher and staff development and help teachers and staff refine their understanding of SEL and implementation of SEL strategies. Understanding teachers' perspectives on SEL in schools is crucial due to the ambiguity surrounding SEL curricula and assessment practices. This understanding provides insight into how SEL practices can be effectively integrated into schools and academic curricula (Hamilton et al., 2019).

It is important to note that SEL is not solely for students; as Starr (2019) emphasized, it is equally essential for teachers and adults working with children. Stefanovic et al. (2021) echoed this sentiment, highlighting that SEL should be integrated into all interactions within a school community, not just limited to children. Denston et al. (2022) pointed out that an educator's own

SEL journey significantly shapes their interactions with students. Teachers' perceptions of SEL can impact student perceptions and skill development (Denston et al., 2022). District and school leaders play a critical role in supporting SEL development among staff, which ultimately benefits students (Hamilton et al., 2019). The implications of this study highlight the potential of SEL and EI frameworks to enhance educational practices, promote positive student outcomes, and support the holistic development of individuals within educational communities. This work also underscores the need to consider the SEL needs of students through an established equity framework, such as the equity and social and emotional learning: A cultural analysis model developed by Simmons (2019), that promotes culturally responsive teaching and learning to account for the development and inclusion of all students. In her work, Simmons (2019) emphasizes the intersectionality of equity and SEL, highlighting the importance of addressing students' diverse cultural backgrounds, identities, and experiences within SEL initiatives. This framework encourages educators to adopt culturally responsive practices that validate and affirm students' identities, promote empathy and understanding, and foster a sense of belonging and inclusivity in the learning environment.

Recommendations for Action

This researcher makes several actionable recommendations based on the findings from this qualitative exploratory case study on the perception of RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) implementation among secondary teachers and staff at a suburban high school. First, this researcher recommends schools and districts provide professional development opportunities for teachers and staff focused on adopting a warm demander (Hammond, 2015) approach in the classroom. These workshops or training sessions should equip educators with strategies for building dynamic relationships with students, and emphasize empathy, high expectations, and

support. Encouraging the customization of RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) tools to suit the specific needs and context of the school and its students is crucial. Facilitating collaborative discussions among staff to share best practices and innovative integration methods can further enhance SEL implementation. Teacher B, Teacher D, and Teacher F, spoke about needing ongoing time with colleagues to share best practices including how colleagues are modifying RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) tools. These participants spoke about the importance of getting feedback to improve school-wide practices and build coherence around the implementation of SEL practices, strategies, and routines.

Longitudinal studies or follow-up studies are recommended to evaluate the long-term impact of RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) on student outcomes, well-being, and academic achievement at this research site. Gathering feedback from students, families, teachers, and staff will help gauge the effectiveness and sustainability of RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) initiatives. School sites should also identify clear structures to create broader teacher and staff awareness of interdisciplinary teaming structures that discuss how to provide individualized support for students who may require additional assistance developing SEL competencies. The strategies, resources, and available community partners discussed as part of this teaming structure will contribute to building teacher and staff efficacy. Self-efficacy is essential for buy-in and continuous learning efforts (Bandura, 1997). Sharing knowledge about counseling services, mentoring programs, or peer support networks that may be available can aid staff in navigating challenges and promoting overall well-being and continued development of SEL competency areas. Developing a high-quality assessment strategy and establishing a clear purpose for data collection, analysis, and utilization can assist educators in identifying effective strategies for their students or school. It also provides clarity to teachers implementing these

strategies, helping them avoid burnout or overload (Finn & Hess, 2019; Hamilton & Schwartz, 2019; Shriver & Weissberg, 2020; Starr, 2019). This was most notably seen in the results of the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* in interdisciplinary teaming which elicited neither a strongly agree response nor a strongly disagree response (see Figure 17). During individual interviews, some participants referenced a student intervention team structure. Most participants did not reference this structure or articulate how it is used to support students.

Collaborating with other schools, SEL experts, and community organizations is advised. Such collaboration would allow educators to share insights, resources, and successful practices related to SEL implementation. This collaborative approach can lead to joint initiatives, research projects, and professional development opportunities that enhance collective learning and support. Establishing mechanisms for collecting ongoing feedback from stakeholders regarding their experiences with RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) implementation is also crucial. This feedback should inform adjustments, improvements, and refinements to RULER SEL strategies (Brackett et al., 2019) and programs over time. This cycle of continuous improvement can foster a more supportive and inclusive environment that promotes social-emotional learning, positive relationships, and holistic well-being among students and staff alike.

Recommendations for Further Study

This researcher proposes several recommendations for further study. This researcher suggests conducting a longitudinal study to track the long-term impact of RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) implementation on student outcomes, academic performance, social-emotional development, and overall well-being. Such a study could span multiple academic years and include alumni to assess sustained changes and variations over time. Sustained changes refer to long-term improvements or alterations in student outcomes, academic performance, social-

emotional skills, and well-being that persist beyond the initial implementation period of RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019). Variations over time could encompass fluctuations or shifts in these outcomes, identifying patterns or trends in how RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) impacts students over the course of the study. This type of study could provide valuable insights into the lasting effects of specific SEL initiatives.

Results of the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* in response to its statements, (a) SEL has a clear benefit for students at this school, (b) I believe that social and emotional competence is related to students' academic success, and (c) I believe that social and emotional competence is related to students' career preparation, all elicited strongly agree responses from participants. This finding was also consistent with participant interviews. A longitudinal study tracking the long-term impact of RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) implementation would allow researchers to observe changes and developments over an extended period. This could include shifts in student outcomes, academic performance, social-emotional skills, and overall well-being. Such insights would contribute to understanding the sustainability and durability of RULER SEL interventions (Brackett et al., 2019) over time, providing valuable information about the lasting effects of specific SEL initiatives. A longitudinal approach would also enable researchers to identify trends, patterns, and potential causal relationships that may not be evident in short-term studies especially given the adaptations to RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) tools that participants spoke about in their interviews. A longitudinal study could also help researchers understand the trajectory of SEL's impact on various subgroups within the student population, such as students with different socio-economic backgrounds, learning abilities, or cultural contexts. The findings from a longitudinal study tracking the long-term impact of RULER SEL implementation (Brackett et al., 2019) could inform targeted

interventions and support strategies tailored to specific student needs and contextual factors. Additionally, all participants' commitment to fostering culturally responsive learning environments, influenced by their collaboration with Hammond (2015), underscores the importance of understanding how their efforts contribute to this endeavor. This understanding can guide future work in this area, helping educators refine and enhance their practices to create inclusive and supportive learning environments for all students.

This researcher also believes a comparative analysis of RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) with other SEL programs, such as Second Step (Frey & Sylvester, 1997) and PBIS (Gulbrandson, 2018) or approaches, such as restorative practices (Evans & Vaandering, 2016), implemented in similar educational settings could offer insights into the strengths, weaknesses, and unique contributions of different SEL frameworks. Exploring the specific training and support needs of teachers and staff involved in SEL implementation, along with student perspectives on SEL initiatives, could provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing SEL effectiveness and outcomes. Investigating contextual factors, implementation challenges, and the broader impact of SEL on school climate and culture can inform strategies for overcoming obstacles and promoting positive school environments. Cross-cultural or multi-site studies can also contribute to understanding how SEL practices vary across diverse contexts and inform culturally responsive SEL programming. Advocates of SEL assert that equity work has long been a fundamental tenet of SEL and they highlight the incorporation of skills focused on assessing personal biases, fostering understanding and acceptance of diverse identities, lived experiences, cultures, and generational trauma as essential steps toward addressing racial divisions and closing equity and opportunity gaps (Shriver & Weissberg, 2020; Starr, 2019).

Pursuing these avenues for further study could allow researchers to deepen the understanding of SEL implementation, effectiveness, and impact, leading to evidence-based strategies that promote positive outcomes for students, teachers, and school communities. The efforts put forth by secondary schools and districts can greatly benefit from the use of high-quality data provided by the practitioners tasked with implementing SEL daily instead of from the research of specific programs or associated frameworks (NCSEAD, 2019). The data gleaned from practitioners could be used to guide decision making regarding certain elements such as the time a school allocates to professional learning focused on SEL, the professional learning model that is utilized for delivery to staff and/or students, the selection of skills or practices that are emphasized during instruction, or even program selection (Hamilton, et al., 2019; NCSEAD, 2019).

The findings of this study will hopefully contribute to the existing literature by providing a complex understanding of the factors influencing staff buy-in, engagement, and effectiveness in implementing SEL initiatives (Creswell, 2017). Ultimately, these insights may inform educational leaders including school and district administrators, and educators in fostering a supportive and responsive environment that maximizes students' social-emotional growth and overall well-being. Professional learning providers may also be able to use this information to design authentic and meaningful learning opportunities for staff and teachers to improve professional practice around SEL implementation at the secondary level. This multifaceted approach can significantly enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of SEL programs in schools.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to explore how secondary teachers and staff at a mid-size public, suburban high school perceive the implementation of the RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) program. This study was guided by two research questions:

Research Question 1: How do secondary school teachers and staff perceive the value of the RULER SEL program when reflecting on their interactions with students?

Research Question 2: How does the RULER SEL program support or add to tier one instruction provided by secondary school teachers?

This study revealed the significance of adopting diverse pedagogical approaches and customized SEL tools to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes through a reflexive-based approach (Creswell, 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2021) and alignment with established frameworks (CASEL, 2020; Salovey & Mayer, 1997). This study's findings underscored the multifaceted benefits of SEL integration and emphasized SEL's role in promoting academic achievement, positive relationships, responsible citizenship, and community engagement. Recommendations for action included providing tailored professional development opportunities, facilitating collaborative discussions among staff, and establishing mechanisms for ongoing feedback to enhance SEL implementation. Suggestions for further study encompassed longitudinal research to track the long-term impact of SEL interventions and comparative analyses of different SEL programs to inform evidence-based strategies. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of SEL implementation at the secondary school level, and offers valuable insights for educators, policymakers, researchers, and practitioners striving to foster supportive and inclusive learning environments that nurture holistic student development and well-being.

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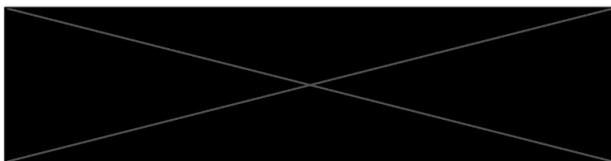
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APPENDIX A

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT THE STUDY SITE



January 23, 2024

Felicia Poskus
Doctoral Candidate
University of New England

Subject: Permission to Conduct Research at [REDACTED] High School

Dear Ms. Poskus,

I am writing to formally grant permission for your proposed research study at [REDACTED] High School. We appreciate your interest in conducting research within our educational community, and we welcome your contribution to the advancement of knowledge in the field.

After careful review of your research proposal and considering its potential benefits to the educational community, we are pleased to approve your request to conduct your study titled "Educator Perceptions of Social-Emotional Learning Embedded in Academic Instruction" at [REDACTED] High School. We understand the importance of scholarly endeavors and believe that your research can provide valuable insights that may contribute to the improvement of educational practices.

Please be advised that your research activities must adhere to the following [Board of Education research policy](#).

We appreciate your dedication to advancing educational research, and we look forward to the positive outcomes that may result from your study.

Thank you for choosing [REDACTED] High School for your research, and we wish you success in your endeavors.

Sincerely,



Superintendent, [REDACTED] Public Schools



APPENDIX B

IRB EXEMPT APPROVAL



**Office of Research Integrity
Institutional Review Board**

Biddeford Campus
11 Hills Beach Road
Biddeford, ME 04005
(207) 602-2244 T
(207) 602-5905 F

Portland Campus
716 Stevens Avenue
Portland, ME 04103

DATE OF LETTER: February 5, 2024

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Felicia Poskus
FACULTY ADVISOR: Ian Menchini, Ed.D.

PROJECT NUMBER: 0224-02
RECORD NUMBER: 0224-02-01

PROJECT TITLE: Educator Perceptions of Social-Emotional Learning Embedded in Academic Instruction

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project
SUBMISSION DATE: February 4, 2024

ACTION: Determination of Exempt Status
DECISION DATE: February 5, 2024

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption Category # 2(ii)

The Office of Research Integrity has reviewed the materials submitted in connection with the above-referenced project and has determined that the proposed work is exempt from IRB review and oversight as defined by 45 CFR 46.104.

You are responsible for conducting this project in accordance with the approved study documents, and all applicable UNE policies and procedures.

If any changes to the design of the study are contemplated (e.g., revision to the research proposal summary, data collection instruments, and/or other approved study documents), the Principal Investigator must submit an amendment for review to ensure the requested change(s) will not alter the exempt status of the project.

If you have any questions, please send an e-mail to irb@une.edu and reference the project number as specified above within the correspondence.

Best Regards,

Bob Kennedy, MS
Director of Research Integrity

APPENDIX C

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE EMAIL

Dear XX,

I am currently a doctoral student at the University of New England. I am conducting a study titled *Educator Perceptions of Social-Emotional Learning Embedded in Academic Instruction* for my dissertation. The purpose of this research study is to explore the perceptions teachers and staff at the ninth through 12th grade level, in year two of implementing the RULER SEL program, have around SEL embedded within academic instruction. I am seeking nine participants to participate in my doctoral research study.

You are eligible to participate in this study if you are

- Over 18 years of age
- A high school teacher in any subject
- A staff member who is affiliated with one of the following roles within the school: administrator, content coordinator, or nurse.
- Have at least one school year of experience with RULER SEL

Participation in this research is voluntary. Participation will consist of one recorded interview of approximately one hour and the completion of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation*. The interview will be conducted on Zoom at a time of your convenience. If there are more than nine people who express interest, only the first three humanities teachers, the first three non-humanities teachers, and the first three staff members who are affiliated with one of the following roles within the school: administrator, content coordinator, or nurse, will be selected to interview. Following the completion of each interview and review of your interview transcript, each participant will receive the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation*. The survey will be administered using Research Electronic Data Capture (REDCap). This survey will be sent from the researcher's UNE email and will take approximately 10 minutes to complete. All data will be kept confidential and pseudonyms will be used to protect the identities of respondents. All identifying information, including school names, locations, or staff, will be deidentified.

The results of this project will be shared with district leadership as a de-identified document in the aggregate.

Please review the attached Participant Information Sheet which outlines the specific details of this study including confidentiality and privacy measures.

If you are interested in sharing your experience with implementing SEL at the secondary level, please contact me via email at fposkus@une.edu and we can set up a time for an interview over Zoom.

If you would like additional information or have any questions, please reach out to me at the above listed email.

Thank you for your consideration of participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Felicia Poskus
Doctoral Student
University of New England
fposkus@une.edu

APPENDIX D

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET



Office of Research Integrity
Institutional Review Board

Participant Information Sheet

Version Date:	February 2, 2024
IRB Project #:	0224-02
Title of Project:	Education Perceptions of Social-Emotional Learning Embedded in Academic Instruction
Principal Investigator (PI):	Felicia Poskus
PI Contact Information:	fposkus@une.edu, 860-899-7013

INTRODUCTION

- This is a project being conducted for research purposes. Your participation is completely voluntary.
- The intent of the Participant Information Sheet is to provide you with important details about this research project.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions about this research project, now, during or after the project is complete.
- The use of the word 'we' in the Information Sheet refers to the Principal Investigator and/or other research staff.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS PROJECT?

The general purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study is to explore the perceptions of high school teachers who are in year two of implementing the RULER SEL (Brackett et al., 2019) program have around SEL embedded within academic instruction. Nine participants will be invited to participate in this research as part of the principal investigator's dissertation research.

WHY ARE YOU BEING ASKED TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS PROJECT?

You are being asked to participate in this research project because you self-identify as being 18 years of age or older, a high school teacher in any subject, or a staff member who is affiliated with one of the following roles within the school: administrator, content coordinator, or nurse; and have at least one school year of experience with RULER SEL.

WHAT IS INVOLVED IN THIS PROJECT?

- You will be asked to participate in one semi structured interview with the principal investigator that will last approximately 60 minutes over Zoom and complete the CASEL (2021) *School-based Staff Survey on SEL Implementation* as an electronic survey that will take approximately 10 minutes to complete.
- You can choose a pseudonym to be used in place of your name for the study.
- You will be given the opportunity to leave your camera on or off during the interview, and your interview will be recorded using Zoom.



INNOVATION FOR A HEALTHIER PLANET

Office of Research Integrity
Institutional Review Board

- You will be emailed a copy of your interview transcript to review for accuracy. You will have five calendar days to respond or the PI will assume that you have no comments and the transcript will be assumed to be accurate.
- Following the completion of your individual interviews an electronic survey will be sent to you and will last approximately 10 minutes.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS INVOLVED FROM BEING IN THIS PROJECT?

The risks involved with participation in this research project are minimal and may include an invasion of privacy or breach of confidentiality. You have the right to skip or not answer any questions, for any reason.

Please see the 'WHAT ABOUT PRIVACY & CONFIDENTIALITY?' section below for steps we will take to minimize an invasion of privacy or breach of confidentiality from occurring.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS FROM BEING IN THIS PROJECT?

There are no likely benefits to participants by being in this research project; however, the information collected may help further understand the experiences of secondary school teachers and staff implementing social-emotional learning.

WILL YOU BE COMPENSATED FOR BEING IN THIS PROJECT?

You will not be compensated for being in this research project.

WHAT ABOUT PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY?

We will do our best to keep your personal information private and confidential. However, we cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Additionally, your information in this research project could be reviewed by representatives of the University such as the Office of Research Integrity and/or the Institutional Review Board.

The results of this research project may be shown at meetings or published in journals to inform other professionals. If any papers or talks are given about this research, your name will not be used. We may use data from this research project that has been permanently stripped of personal identifiers in future research without obtaining your consent.

- Data will only be collected during one-on-one participant interviews using Zoom and the survey using REDCap, no information will be taken without participant consent, and interview transcripts will be checked by participants for accuracy before they are added to the study.
- Pseudonyms will be used for all participants and any personally identifying information will be stripped from the interview transcript.
- All names and emails gathered during recruitment will be recorded and linked to a uniquely assigned pseudonym within a master list.



INNOVATION FOR A HEALTHIER PLANET

Office of Research Integrity
Institutional Review Board

- The master list will be kept securely and separately from the study data and accessible only to the principal investigator.
- The interview will be conducted in a private setting to ensure others cannot hear your conversation.
- You will be given the option to turn off your camera during Zoom interview.
- After you have verified the accuracy of your transcribed interview the recorded Zoom interview will be destroyed. Once all transcripts have been verified by the participants of this project, the master list of personal information will be destroyed.
- All names and emails gathered during recruitment will be kept on a master list separately from the study data collected during the interviews.
- All other study data will be retained for 3 years after the completion of the study and then destroyed. The study data may be accessed upon request by representatives of the University (e.g., faculty advisors, Office of Research Integrity, etc.) when necessary.
- All data collected will be stored on a password protected personal laptop computer accessible only by the principal investigator.
- The results of the project will be shared with district leadership as a de-identified document in the aggregate.

WHAT IF YOU WANT TO WITHDRAW FROM THIS PROJECT?

You have the right to choose not to participate, or to withdraw your participation at any time until the Master List is destroyed without penalty or loss of benefits. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in this project.

If you request to withdraw from this project, the data collected about you will be deleted when the master list is in existence, but the researcher may not be able to do so after the master list is destroyed.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS PROJECT?

You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research project. If you have questions about this project, complaints or concerns, you should contact the Principal Investigator listed on the first page of this document.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT?

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you would like to obtain information or offer input, you may contact the Office of Research Integrity at (207) 602-2244 or via e-mail at irb@une.edu.

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Question 1: What is your current position?

Interview Question 2: Can you share your overall impressions of the RULER SEL program?

Interview Question 3: How has the RULER SEL program influenced your interactions with students?

Interview Question 4: Are there any noticeable changes in the quality of communication between school staff, teachers, and students after implementing RULER SEL? If so, can you provide examples?

Interview Question 5: How have RULER SEL strategies been integrated into tier one instruction to support students' social-emotional development?

Interview Question 6: How do you think RULER SEL has contributed to the culture and climate within the school environment?

Interview Question 7: How do you perceive the impact of RULER SEL on students' engagement and academic performance?

Interview Question 8: Have you observed any challenges or barriers in implementing RULER SEL in your interactions with students? If so, how did you address or overcome them?

Interview Question 8: From your experience with RULER SEL, what barriers do you see in implementing it in your educational setting?

Interview Question 9: As someone involved in the RULER SEL program, what potential solutions do you propose for overcoming challenges related to RULER SEL integration and ensuring its long-term sustainability?

Interview Question 10: Are there specific aspects of RULER SEL that you find particularly beneficial or challenging in your role as a secondary staff member, and how do these perceptions influence your overall approach to implementation?

Interview Question 11: Is there anything I did not ask that you would like to share?

Interview Question 12: Is there any question or answer you would like to elaborate on?

Version date 2/5/24
IRB #0224-02

APPENDIX F

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN SURVEY EMAIL

Dear *[insert school name]* staff,

Thank you for completing your individual interview as part of this researcher's dissertation research at the University of New England. Please take this survey **[INSERT LINK]** as the second part of the dissertation research you are participating in. This survey will assist in gaining a better understanding of your experiences and perceptions of social emotional learning (SEL) as a staff member. This researcher is interested in learning more about the day-to-day SEL practices at your school, and your thoughts and ideas about them. Please answer to the best of your ability; there is no right or wrong answer.

What is Social Emotional Learning (SEL)?

Social-emotional learning (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

Schools play an important role in supporting young people's social and emotional development. Districts and schools engage in many different practices to grow and develop students and staff member's social and emotional competencies to help them be successful. Broad areas of social and emotional competence are: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

Your input is critical, and this researcher appreciates your careful, honest responses. **The survey should take approximately 10 minutes.** Your participation in this survey is voluntary and you may stop at any time. Your privacy is important to this research and your responses will be kept confidential.

If you have any questions about the survey, you may contact Felicia Poskus at fposkus@une.edu.

Sincerely

Felicia Poskus
fposkus@une.edu
University of New England

Version date 2/5/24
IRB #0224-02

APPENDIX G

SURVEY PROTOCOL

CASEL (2021) School-based Staff Survey on Schoolwide SEL Implementation

Directions: Please respond to the statements below as honestly and completely as possible; there are no right or wrong answers. If you are unsure about a question, please respond in a manner that most closely reflects your experiences.

How often has each of the following occurred over the summer and/or so far this school year?

SEL Instruction	Never	Hardly ever	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always
My school uses an SEL program or approach to promote students' social and emotional competence.					
The SEL lessons in my class provide opportunities for students to practice social and emotional competencies.					
When opportunities arise for my students to learn/practice social and emotional competencies, I act on them.					
My school provides me with the necessary support/resources on how to integrate SEL with academic content instruction.					
I integrate SEL into my academic lesson plans.					
My teaching practices make connections to my students' lives.					

Youth Voice, Engagement, and Supportive Climate	Never	Hardly ever	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always
At this school, students take an active role in working to improve aspects of the school and or classroom.					
At this school, staff care about students' feedback and ideas.					
At this school, staff incorporate students' feedback/ideas into aspects of the school and or classroom.					
The culture at my school supports SEL.					
My school's staff use shared agreements/norms ¹ for how we will all interact with our students .					
Students feel comfortable talking to adults at this school about personal problems.					

¹ Shared agreements/norms are statements or routines the school community has determined together about how they will relate and interact with one another.

	Never	Hardly ever	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always
Staff Learning and Modeling					
I have participated in professional learning on how my interactions with students can promote their social and emotional competence.					
My principal models social and emotional competence in the way he/she interacts with staff in our school community.					
My school provides me with the necessary support/resources to better reflect on how my identities and experiences can shape my perspectives.					

	Never	Hardly ever	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always
Supportive Discipline					
My school's disciplinary practices promote students' social and emotional competencies.					
I model problem-solving strategies that students can use to resolve conflicts.					
My school's rules are applied equally to all students, no matter their race/ethnicity.					
My school's rules are applied equally to all students, no matter their family's income level.					
My school's rules are applied equally to all students, no matter their academic abilities or achievement.					
My school's rules are applied equally to all students, no matter their past behavioral issues/ referrals.					

Continuum of Integrated Supports	Never	Hardly ever	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always	I'm unsure
At this school, staff use a multi-tiered system of supports (such as MTSS or PBIS) to meet the social and emotional needs of all students.						
My school provides me with the necessary support on how to best implement SEL in the classroom.						
Interdisciplinary teams work together to monitor students' social and emotional development.						

Family Partnership	Never	Hardly ever	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always
I seek input from families about how to best meet their students' social and emotional needs.					
I communicate with my students' families as a way to build positive relationships.					
I involve my students' families in meaningful decision making.					

Reflecting on Data

	Never	Hardly ever	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always
My school communicates our SEL goals and our progress on these goals.					
My school communicates what data are collected on students' social and emotional skills.					
My school uses student data to better understand issues of equity.					
	Never	Hardly ever	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always
My school uses student data to better understand issues of equity.					

Community Partnership

	Never	Hardly ever	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always
At this school, community partnerships (such as businesses or community organizations, etc.) promote students' social and emotional skill development.					
At this school, community partnerships support students and families during challenging times (such as school or life transitions, food insecurity, etc.)					
At this school, after-school programming and or extracurricular activities share our SEL initiatives/language.					

Workplace Perceptions	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Staff members at this school strive to promote students' social and emotional competence.					
I prioritize promoting social and emotional competence in my students.					
I believe that social and emotional competence is related to students' academic success.					
I believe that social and emotional competence is related to students' civic engagement. ²					
I believe that social and emotional competence is related to students' career preparation.					
I plan on staying at my school in this role next year.					
SEL has a clear benefit for students at this school.					
I feel excited to come to work each day.					
I feel frustrated by my job.					

² Civic engagement encompasses the lessons that teach students how to analyze issues in the world around them that affect their lives, develop an understanding of how they can make a difference, and learn how to work with others to create solutions. Civic education prepares students to be tomorrow's engaged citizens.

9) This school year, what grade(s) do you teach? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Kindergarten-Grade 8
- ☐ Grade 9
- ☐ Grade 10
- ☐ Grade 11
- ☐ Grade 12
- ☐ Ungraded (including special education students aged 18-22)
- ☐ Other (Please specify: _____)
- ☐ N/A - I do not teach students.

10) How many years have you worked in education (in any role)? (Round to the nearest number of years). _____**11) Are you a member of your school's SEL team?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

12) What is your gender?

- ☐ I identify as a woman
- ☐ I identify as a man
- ☐ I do not identify as a woman or a man
- ☐ I prefer not to say

13) What is your race or ethnicity? (Select all that apply).

- ☐ Asian/Asian American
- ☐ Black/African American
- ☐ Latino/a/x/Hispanic
- ☐ Indigenous/Native American
- ☐ White/Caucasian
- ☐ Other: _____
- ☐ I prefer not to say

Thank you for taking this survey!

APPENDIX H

CASEL (2021) SURVEY RESULTS

SEL Instruction	Never	Hardly ever	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always
My school uses an SEL program or approach to promote students' social and emotional competence.	0	3	3	4	0
The SEL lessons in my class provide opportunities for students to practice social and emotional competencies.	2	2	4	1	0
When opportunities arise for my students to learn/practice social and emotional competencies, I act on them.	0	0	2	7	0
My school provides me with the necessary support/resources on how to integrate SEL with academic content instruction.	0	3	4	2	0
I integrate SEL into my academic lesson plans.	0	2	3	4	0
My teaching practices make connections to my students' lives.	0	0	2	5	2
Youth Voice, Engagement, and Supportive Climate	Never	Hardly ever	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always
At this school, students take an active role in working to improve aspects of the school and or classroom.	0	1	4	4	0
At this school, staff care about students' feedback and ideas.	0	1	4	2	2
At this school, staff incorporate students' feedback/ideas into aspects of the school and or classroom.	0	1	4	4	0
The culture at my school supports SEL.	0	2	2	5	0

My school's staff use shared agreements/norms for how we will all interact with our students.	0	1	3	5	0
Students feel comfortable talking to adults at this school about personal problems.	0	0	4	4	1
Staff Learning and Modeling	Never	Hardly ever	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always
I have participated in professional learning on how my interactions with students can promote their social and emotional competence.	0	1	5	1	2
My principal models social and emotional competence in the way he/she interacts with staff in our school community.	0	0	2	5	1
My school provides me with the necessary support/resources to better reflect on how my identities and experiences can shape my perspectives.	0	1	2	5	1
Supportive Discipline	Never	Hardly ever	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always
My school's disciplinary practices promote students' social and emotional competencies.	0	0	6	2	1
I model problem-solving strategies that students can use to resolve conflicts.	0	0	4	3	2
My school's rules are applied equally to all students, no matter their race/ethnicity.	0	0	3	3	3
My school's rules are applied equally to all students, no matter their family's income level.	0	0	3	3	3
My school's rules are applied equally to all students, no matter their academic abilities	0	0	3	3	3

or achievement.					
My school's rules are applied equally to all students, no matter their past behavioral issues/ referrals.	0	0	4	3	2
Continuum of Integrated Supports	Never	Hardly ever	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always
At this school, staff use a multi-tiered system of supports (such as MTSS or PBIS) to meet the social and emotional needs of all students.	1	1	3	3	1
My school provides me with the necessary support on how to best implement SEL in the classroom.	0	3	4	2	0
Interdisciplinary teams work together to monitor students' social and emotional development.	1	3	3	1	1
Family Partnership	Never	Hardly ever	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always
I seek input from families about how to best meet their students' social and emotional needs.	0	1	5	3	0
I communicate with my students' families as a way to build positive relationships.	0	0	4	2	3
I involve my students' families in meaningful decision making.	0	2	3	1	3
Community Partnership	Never	Hardly ever	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always
At this school, community partnerships (such as businesses or community organizations, etc.) promote students' social and emotional skill development.	0	1	7	0	1

At this school, community partnerships support students and families during challenging times (such as school or life transitions, food insecurity, etc.)	0	2	3	3	1
At this school, after-school programming and or extracurricular activities share our SEL initiatives/language.	0	1	5	1	2
Reflecting on Data	Never	Hardly ever	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always
My school communicates our SEL goals and our progress on these goals.	0	2	5	2	0
My school communicates what data are collected on students' social and emotional skills.	0	1	5	2	1
My school uses student data to better understand issues of equity.	0	0	3	5	1
Workplace Perceptions	Never	Hardly ever	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always
Staff members at this school strive to promote students' social and emotional competence.	0	0	5	3	1
I prioritize promoting social and emotional competence in my students.	0	0	1	4	4
I believe that social and emotional competence is related to students' academic success.	0	0	0	3	6
I believe that social and emotional competence is related to students' civic engagement.	0	0	0	4	5
I believe that social and emotional competence is related to students' career preparation.	0	0	0	4	5
I plan on staying at my school in this role next year.	0	0	0	2	7

SEL has a clear benefit for students at this school.	0	0	0	5	4
I feel excited to come to work each day.	0	0	3	4	2
I feel frustrated by my job.	0	3	5	1	0