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Addressing And Assessing Social-Emotional Learning Standards: An Educator's Perspective

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ADDRESSING AND ASSESSING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING STANDARDS:

AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study considers the results of a needs assessment survey conducted at the Cranberry Elementary School in Cranberry, Massachusetts. Fifteen early childhood educators responded to questions involving social-emotional learning (SEL) in the classroom, specifically relating to the Massachusetts Standards for Preschool and Kindergarten Social and Emotional Learning, and Approaches to Play and Learning. A thorough literature review revealed a gap in the literature regarding teachers' experiences implementing SEL programs.

The results revealed information about the current understanding and potential for improvement in implementing those standards. Five themes emerged from the data: *Interest Level, High Level of Comfort, Assessment, Time, and Professional Development.* This research revealed both commitment to the instruction of social-emotional learning skills from educators, as well as need to feel validated for their efforts.

This study offers recommendations for school leaders and educators responsible for assessing and addressing social-emotional learning standards, including continued monitoring of school culture and climate, ongoing professional development, the inclusion of cooperating districts in further study, and the inclusion of SEL training in teacher preparation programs.

This research study added to the body of knowledge about the gap within the existing literature.

DEDICATION

This work, my continuing education, and my career is dedicated to my grandfather, Antonio Vesce. His passion for learning inspired me and his love of books lives on through my students. I share this achievement with him.

Thanks to my partner, Ricky, for keeping our life running while I pursued this goal. I couldn't have done it without you. Thanks to my family and friends for reminding me to laugh and live life and for believing in me without fail, especially my dad. He waited a long time for this.

Thank you to the fifteen participants for taking the time to share your experience and thoughts. I feel very fortunate to work with all of you. I am appreciative to my school principal and superintendent for providing me the opportunity to conduct the study and for supporting this endeavor.

Friend and colleague, Kate Salas, thanks for your support and guidance. You proved the power of our school community. I am eternally grateful and hope we will work together again someday.

Thanks to Dr. Collay and Dr. Shatto for your advice and direction throughout this process. Your support was unwavering, no matter how many frantic emails I sent. Your patience and humor were invaluable!

Finally, to my students, you are the reason I am as happy on a Monday as I am on a Saturday. Remember, at least once in your life, someone thought you were perfect and amazing. Someone saw in you the ability to do anything you set your mind to and experienced all the potential of your love and kindness. That's who you were to me. Take that out into the world and you will make it a better place.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Author and motivational speaker, Leo Buscaglia once said: "It is paradoxical that many

educators and parents still differentiate between a time for learning and a time for play without

seeing the vital connection between them" (Buscaglia, n.d.). Play provides children with an

opportunity to practice skills associated with social-emotional learning. Not only does recess

promote gross motor development, but children practice turn-taking, managing feelings, and

relationship building. In Massachusetts, the Massachusetts Standards for Preschool and

Kindergarten Social and Emotional Learning and Approaches to Play and Learning attempts to

bridge the two for preschool and kindergarten students.

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is not a new area of study. SEL has connections to prior

research on emotional intelligence conducted in the 1990s. Akers and Porter (2016) defined the

skills of emotional intelligence as:

- *self-awareness*—the ability to recognize an emotion as it "happens,"

- *self-regulation*—the ability to employ techniques to handle emotions,

- *motivation*—clear goals and a positive attitude,

- *empathy*—the ability to recognize how people feel, and

- *social skills*—the development of good interpersonal skills.

Attributes of emotional intelligence (EI) and the expectations identified in the social and

emotional learning standards overlap. Gil-Olarte Marquez, Palomera Martin, and Brackett (2006)

found, "Students with high EI tended to be more prosocial and perform better in school"

(p. 122). The authors' findings indicated high school students would benefit from lessons that

incorporate elements of social-emotional learning. Such benefits include improved student

performance, increased prosocial behavior, and decreased maladaptive behavior (Gil-Olarte Marquez, Palomera Martin, and Brackett, 2006). The means of addressing those skills, however, continue to evolve.

Although SEL has been defined in many ways, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has been active in combining research, practice, and policy related to social-emotional learning. CASEL (2018) has identified five competencies that make up the key components of social-emotional learning:

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

CASEL has worked with numerous people and organizations to conduct research, integrate instruction, and coordinate efforts to promote and provide effective social-emotional learning experiences for students. Massachusetts has relied heavily on the work of CASEL to develop their own definition of SEL, as well as establish the current standards.

Overall, the goal of SEL is to promote the development of happier, healthier children. As human beings, we spend our lives interacting with others. Through these interactions, we may begin to define ourselves. The early childhood years present an opportunity to develop the competencies that educate the whole child. Through direct instruction, children can learn self-awareness and self-management, as well as social awareness and how to relate to others. Through the utilization of strategies, such as providing choices, asking questions, and encouraging achievable goals, children can also be taught responsible decision-making.

Statement of the Problem

Social-Emotional Learning Standards are now part of the landscape of PK-12 schooling. California, Georgia, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nevada, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Washington have partnered with CASEL to collaboratively develop social-emotional learning standards for their schools. Additionally, eleven states that originally applied to join the collaborative, but were unable to participate, will have access to the materials the collaborative develops.

Leading the charge to implement the SEL standards are classroom teachers. Their influence on the classroom can be profound. They have a unique opportunity to both promote, as well as explicitly teach, social-emotional skills. While this is exciting, teachers do not necessarily have the educational background and/or expertise for providing social-emotional learning experiences. Martinez (2016) found, "Despite the recognized importance of teachers' beliefs about SEL and their preparation to teach these programs, few studies have examined teachers' experiences with adopting SEL programs and implementing them in classrooms" (p. 2). Thus, there is a gap in the literature regarding teachers' experiences implementing SEL programs. To address this gap, this research study will specifically address the implementation successes and challenges for early childhood.

Purpose of the Study

The skills developed through social-emotional learning may be used to address a host of common school issues, such as behavior, discipline, and safety. However, the potential of SEL instruction is far greater. Mindess, Chen, and Brenner (2008) identified emotional well-being and social competence as a basis for brain development and emerging cognitive abilities. Their study also showed that well-developed language and communication skills contribute to all areas of a

child's development, including academic, social, and physical health. These early childhood indicators affect how an individual functions later in life, both privately and in workplace situations (Mindess, Chen, & Brenner, 2008). One measure to ensure healthy social-emotional development is to begin explicit instruction in the primary grades. Massachusetts, for example, has established SEL standards to be explicitly taught for PreK-K with additional standards embedded throughout the K-12 curriculum. This study will attempt to understand teachers' needs in relation to implementing and assessing social-emotional learning standards. Teachers bear the responsibility for integrating instruction that supports social-emotional learning alongside academic content. Support in the development of instructional methods and classroom climate may be needed and ongoing assistance and performance feedback is critical. Both require an individualized approach to each school setting. Documenting teachers' needs is fundamental to providing targeted support.

Research Question

The overarching question driving this study is: What do early childhood educators need to successfully implement and assess social-emotional learning standards in preschool and kindergarten?

Conceptual Framework

The inclusion of Social and Emotional Learning Standards in Massachusetts is a recent example of school reform in the state. The educators participating in this study are already immersed in implementing SEL standards. In addition, the elementary school has several programs in place to address social and health issues. The conceptual framework guiding this study is based on Payton et al.'s (2000) identification of factors that promote mental health and reduced risk behaviors in children and youth. They found teachers' capacity to teach these skills

to be critical to the success of program implementation. The authors state, "Adequate training in effective teaching strategies and ongoing technical support are crucial to the implementation of programs with integrity. Teachers who are ill-prepared compromise the benefits that students receive even if the content and design of a program are exemplary" (Payton et al., 2000, p. 5). The early childhood educators' perspectives of implementing and assessing SEL standards are essential. Therefore, this study will examine the concepts of teachers' understanding of the standards, as well as their perceived ability to successfully teach social-emotional skills.

Significance

A teacher has an opportunity to establish and influence the classroom community. Social-emotional learning in the classroom may include well-structured, research-based lessons or something more casual, such as daily morning meetings or games that encourage sharing, turn-taking, and building rapport. By modeling strong social skills, teachers subtly influence the way students relate to one another. According to CASEL, "SEL, when it's most effective, is part of daily classroom life where teachers use everyday instruction to foster positive working relationships, increase student engagement, and model constructive behaviors" (CASEL, 2016).

In 2017, the Massachusetts Consortium for Social-Emotional Learning in Teacher Education (SEL-TEd) conducted a needs assessment survey of teacher educators. The study surveyed seventy-six professionals in teacher education: teachers, administrators, mentors, and supervisors. The findings indicated multiple obstacles to SEL implementation, including constraints of the curriculum, state-mandated licensure requirements, standardized testing and assessment, curriculum frameworks, and other time-related pressures. Lack of experience in SEL was another recurring theme (Massachusetts Consortium for Social-Emotional Learning in Teacher Education, 2017).

It is also worth noting that only 3.9 percent of those surveyed represented K-12 public institutions (Massachusetts Consortium for Social-Emotional Learning in Teacher Education, 2017, p. 2). According to the Massachusetts Public School Directory (2018), there are currently 1,171 elementary schools in Massachusetts. Thus, the voices of many teachers have yet to be heard, underscoring the significance of this study.

Definition of Terms

Common core: The common core is a set of high-quality academic standards in mathematics and English language arts/literacy (ELA). Several states are developing social-emotional learning standards. (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2018).

Emotional intelligence (EQ or EI): Emotional intelligence is the skill in perceiving, understanding, and managing emotions and feelings (emotional intelligence, n.d.).

Learning standards: Learning standards are concise, written descriptions of what students are expected to know and be able to do at a specific stage of their education (The Glossary of Education Reform, 2014).

Social-emotional learning (SEL): Social-emotional learning refers to the skills we use to recognize and manage our own emotions and being able to recognize emotions in others (Psychology Glossary, 2017).

Teacher efficacy: Based on Hoy's (2000) definition, teacher efficacy is the judgment of his or her capabilities to bring about desired outcomes of student engagement and learning, even among those students who may be difficult or unmotivated (Protheroe, 2008).

Teachers' social-emotional capacity: A teacher's social-emotional capacity is based on both his/her psychological state, including psychological burdens (depression, stress, emotional

fatigue, etc.), as well as his/her coping ability—ability to utilize cognitive, behavioral, and emotional strategies to deal with stress (Buettner, Jeon, Hur, & Garcia, 2016).

Conclusion

The benefits of social-emotional learning education are evident. Many school systems are acknowledging the importance of SEL. For example, in 2015 Boston Public Schools hired an assistant superintendent of social-emotional learning and wellness, the first such position in the country. The intent is to help focus the school district's resources on the enhancement of non-academic skills, such as collaboration, self-advocacy, anger management, and conflict resolution. Boston Public Schools aim to provide targeted intervention and support on interpersonal interaction, as well as assist students and families who have gone through a traumatic event (Boston Public Schools, 2016).

Despite the acknowledgment of the benefits of SEL, it is not a part of most teacher training programs. This is problematic because teachers must feel both confident and competent to commit to daily instruction. Zins, Weissberg, Wang, and Walberg (2004) stated:

> If SEL is to be widely and well implemented, preparation of new and in-service teachers is necessary. Such preparation should include field experience for teachers-to-be and the modeling of positive, supportive classroom environments for new and veteran teachers. These experiences should be thoroughly grounded in the disciplines of psychology, education, and related fields of study. (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004, p. 213)

There is a need for an increased emphasis on educating and supporting teachers in the area of social-emotional learning. This is not an endeavor solely for guidance departments. School counselors cannot do this alone. Districts need to work together in more efficient and effective ways—but most teachers do not know where or how to start. This initiative requires a

comprehensive effort, including administrative, school board, and state support. Therefore, it is

critical to acknowledge the teacher perspective.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This study addressed a gap in the literature by addressing and assessing the educator's perspective in teaching social-emotional learning standards. The literature review provides an overview of the history and research on social-emotional learning. It will discuss the benefits and limitations of explicit instruction, as well as research-based programs. Because the implementation of social-emotional programming is often schoolwide, it will also consider social-emotional learning in relation to school culture and climate. Finally, this literature review will look at teachers' social-emotional capacity and how it relates to their ability to teach social-emotional learning standards.

The literature that contributed to this review was found by employing three strategies: (a) online journal searches, (b) review of published literature reviews, and (c) review of relevant books chapters. Searches were conducted using the terms social-emotional learning, early childhood education, and teacher education. These search terms were then combined with emotional intelligence, character education, school culture, school climate, teacher efficacy. This led to the topic of teachers' social-emotional capacity.

In addition, online databases, such as EBSCO, ERIC, and ResearchGate were utilized to identify sources for this literature review. After compiling and comparing articles, key themes and connections were identified.

Social Emotional Learning: The New Standard

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were developed in 2009 by leaders from forty-eight states, two territories, and the District of Columbia. According to the Common Core State Standards Initiative (2018), "State school chiefs and governors recognized the value of

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consistent, real-world learning goals and launched this effort to ensure all students, regardless of where they live, are graduating high school prepared for college, career, and life." With origins in college and career readiness, the CCSS now include expectations for K-12, as well. Teachers, administrators, parents, and others invested in education policy contributed to the development of the standards, which are continually revised and amended based on both research and policy changes.

Schools are not immune to the realities of violent acts. In some instances, they are even the target. Around the country, school systems have had to respond to traumatic incidents such as the fatal shootings at Sandy Hook elementary school in Connecticut and teen sexual assaults in California. Reactions to these incidents range from the implementation of bullying policies and laws to the development of trauma-sensitive schools, and from increased school security measures to active shooter response training. One proactive measure has been the recent addition of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) to the CCSS.

An organization pioneering those efforts is the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). CASEL was founded in 1994 and comprises researchers, educators, and child advocates. The focus has remained on the positive development of children (CASEL, 2017). For example, CASEL has embarked on a state scan project with the intent to assess the development of learning goals, standards, and guidelines for social and emotional learning, preschool through high school, in all 50 states (CASEL, 2017). Some recent findings include:

- Almost all states (96 percent) now have preschool standards documents that contain a set of free-standing standards for SEL.

- Ninety percent of these documents actually use the terms "social" and "emotional" in the title for their free-standing SEL standards (10 percent of states use other terms, such as "social and personal").

- Idaho, Pennsylvania, Washington, Illinois have comprehensive SEL standards through early elementary grades.

- Many other states are moving in this direction. (CASEL, 2017)

As part of its "Building Supportive Environments" initiative, Massachusetts established SEL standards and practices and began offering professional development training to support educators and administrators in 2016. However, implementation has been gradual.

Although such policies may be considered progressive, social-emotional learning has a long history and a strong foundation. Developmental theorists such as, Piaget, Vygotsky, Skinner, and Bandura have articulated theories that encompass social learning and behavior. It is also a common focus for many non-traditional students. In 2013, Riordan looked at the results of twenty-three studies on students with autism. His work noted the increased anxiety of autistic students directly relating to difficulties with reading social situations, interpreting facial expressions, and other behavioral challenges.

Now that SEL is emerging as a focus for *all* students, it should be considered in terms of supporting the general population. However, not all educators feel adequately prepared to address and assess social-emotional learning standards. This literature review will discuss the potential benefits of conducting a needs assessment survey of educators. It will also consider the potential need for professional development, as well as the effect on school climate and culture.

Explicit Instruction

Research and the development of statewide SEL standards indicate the need for explicit instruction. Yoder (2014) identified 10 teaching practices that support social-emotional learning:

- student-centered discipline,

- teacher language,

- responsibility and choice,

- warmth and support (teacher peer),

- cooperative learning,

- classroom discussions,

- self-reflection and self-assessment,

- balanced instruction,

- academic press and expectations, and

- competence building—modeling, practicing, feedback, and coaching.

Shapiro, Kim, Accomazzo, and Roscoe (2015) identified the importance of a consistent and comprehensive program regarding social-emotional learning. The authors stated:

> Findings from resilience research have revealed that most children have both intrinsic and learned capacities to overcome the adversities they face. Social Emotional Learning (SEL) interventions in schools are intended to uncover, recognize, and nurture these endemic capacities in children, disrupting trajectories toward problem occurrence, and strengthening their prospects for school and life success. (Shapiro, Kim, Accomazzo, & Roscoe, 2016, pp. 1-2).

Many school districts attempt to address the social-emotional needs of their students using a variety of techniques, including research-based programs and curriculums. A singular SEL

program, however, cannot address the varying needs of every school. Questions remain as to how to best assess the individual needs of the district, including students and staff, provide meaningful social-emotional learning opportunities, measure the effectiveness of instruction, and assess the outcomes.

Benefits and Limitations of Explicit Instruction

Emotional intelligence has been linked to academic achievement. Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger (2011) considered the impact of SEL programs on students and found students who participated in SEL programs outperformed nonparticipating students by 11 percentile points on standardized tests, theoretically moving a middle of the class student to the top 40 percent (Durlak et al., 2011). Ogundokun and Adeyemo (2010) also found a significant correlation between emotional intelligence and academic achievement in their study of secondary school students. Students with high levels of emotional intelligence were better able to manage stress and anxiety. Those with better interpersonal skills were also more likely to seek academic support from peers and teachers (Ogundokun & Adeyemo, 2010, p. 135). Teaching social-emotional learning skills may help students better understand why and how academic content is relevant to their lives. Elias (2006) discussed how students often feel disconnected from what is being taught and how it relates to their own lives. Social-emotional learning can support a sense of self-worth, as well as goal setting.

The limitations of explicit instruction include a lack of teacher training, school commitment, and fidelity to the chosen program. Payton et al. (2000) advise continued support of teachers throughout the implementation of the program, including technical support, observation, and coaching, as well as advanced training, as needed. It is also important to note that some studies have indicated a window or timeframe when the explicit instruction of SEL

skills is most effective. For example, in a study of students in higher education Mohzan, Hassan, and Halil (2013) did not find a significant relationship between emotional intelligence and students' academic achievement. However, because their respondents were future teachers, they indicated both the value and importance for these skills in the field of teaching. The authors stated, "Teachers with emotional intelligence skills are better able at maintaining classroom management performance and remain in the teaching profession" (Mohzan, Hassan, & Halil, 2013, p. 311). These findings suggest the value of developing social-emotional skills in teacher preparation programs.

Zins, Weissberg, Wang, and Walberg, in a discussion of the work of Fleming and Bay (2004) noted that the quandary facing many educators is that although they recognize the need and benefits of addressing the social and emotional development of their students, they also feel they lack time and training to adequately do so. School-based SEL programs provide an opportunity for teaching the whole child, as well as a renewed approach to teacher training.

Research-Based Programs

The works of CASEL, as well as those of other organizations, such as the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders, have provided reviews on researched-based programs for supporting the general population. Some of the programs reviewed were: Caring School Community, I Can Problem Solve, Open Circle, PATHS, RULER Approach, and Second Steps. These programs, as well as others, are described in CASEL's program guide, *Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs* (2013).

In addition, the National Center for Education Research (2010) in the research report, *Efficacy of Schoolwide Programs to Promote Social and Character Development and Reduce Problem Behavior in Elementary School Children*, looked critically at eight social-emotional

instructional programs for public schools. The team collected data and assessed outcomes for each program based on the program's ability to promote six social and character development goals: character education, violence prevention and peace promotion, social and emotional development, tolerance and diversity, risk prevention and health promotion, and civic responsibility and community service, as well as behavior management (National Center for Educational Research, 2010). The report stated, "Elementary school is thought to be a critical time for prevention; 7 is the average age at which students start down the path of problem behavior" (p. 3). Schools have universal access to children over an extended period of time, making them an obvious choice for providing both developmental lessons, as well as prevention efforts.

The findings did not identify a specific program for supporting social-emotional learning for all. District needs vary and must be individually assessed to establish best practice. However, the report did indicate that a commitment to raising student awareness of these skills with instructional practice has advantages and benefits worth pursuing. For any skill to be mastered, the practice must occur over time and with consistency. The approach to SEL must be comprehensive, incorporating all aspects of school life, including academics, relationships, school culture and climate (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Otherwise, important opportunities, such as teachable moments may be missed.

When teachers are educated in practices that best support SEL, opportunities to address such skills increase, whether explicitly taught or embedded within other lessons. In a report for CASEL, Payton, et al. (2000) concluded:

Beyond identifying a framework of elements for quality programs and selecting programs that best incorporate these elements lie the challenges of establishing policies and training

experiences to support educators in effectively implementing and institutionalizing high-

quality SEL programs. (p. 7)

Finding the right match of the program, teachers, and students requires taking into consideration

the climate and culture of each school. This study will attempt to understand teachers' needs in

relation to implementing and assessing social-emotional learning standards.

School Culture and Climate

School climate and culture are often used in the same sentence, sometimes

interchangeably, to describe the overall feeling of a school. However, although equally

important, they each represent something unique. According to Gruenert (2008), "The collective

mood, or morale, of a group of people has become a topic of concern, especially in our new age

of accountability" (p. 57). In contrast, he describes school culture as relating to common

expectations that evolve into "unwritten rules" used to govern the school. This common culture

is then passed on to the next generation of teachers and students as a culmination of beliefs and

preferences (Gruenert, 2008). Culture influences climate. Therefore, social-emotional learning

may provide an overarching impact on both.

A positive school climate can encompass the social, emotional and physical environment

of a school. When educators, students, and families work together as a community, a shared

vision can be achieved. Teaching SEL can have a positive impact on the school community, as

educators' model and nurture skills that emphasize the benefits of learning and working together.

Jones and Bouffard (2012) expand on this theme by expressing that adults and students with

strong SEL skills and effective SEL practices should be a schoolwide approach. The authors

stated:

Growing research on the role of such social highlights the need for schoolwide approaches to SEL that intentionally leverage the processes of group influence and social context. Isolated, classroom-focused approaches do not tend to utilize these mechanisms. In contrast, school-wide approaches can facilitate spillover and changes in culture and climate; so that the whole of the school's SEL approach is greater than the sum of its parts. (Jones & Bouffard, 2012, p. 11)

When students feel supported, they thrive. A Best Practice Brief entitled, *School Climate and Learning* (2004), reported a review of studies on the impact of support in school and found a caring school climate is associated with:

- Higher grades, engagement, attendance, expectations and aspirations, a sense of scholastic competence, fewer school suspensions, and on-time progression through grades (19 studies)

- Higher self-esteem and self-concept (5 studies)

- Less anxiety, depression, and loneliness (3 studies)

- Less substance abuse (4 studies) (Best Practice Brief, 2004, p. 5)

Although the concepts of school culture and school climate may seem vague and intangible, the effects can be measured in academic performance, behavior reports, as well as a review of counseling referrals. SEL has the potential to influence the academic, behavioral, and emotional aspects of school.

Improved Student-Teacher Relationships

Rimm-Kaufman and Sandilos (2017) discussed how students benefit socially when they can develop positive relationships with their teachers. They defined positive teacher-student relationships as those with low conflict, a high degree of closeness and support, as well as

independence (Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, 2017, p. 2). Students who feel a connection to their teachers may also benefit by being more adjusted, demonstrate appropriate social skills and resiliency and perform better academically (Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, 2017, p. 2).

The teacher has an opportunity to establish and influence the classroom community. Social-emotional learning in the classroom may include well-structured, research-based lessons or something more casual, such as daily morning meetings or games that encourage sharing, turn-taking, and building rapport. By modeling strong social skills, teachers subtly influence the way students relate to each other. According to CASEL (2016), "SEL, when it's most effective, is part of daily classroom life where teachers use everyday instruction to foster positive working relationships, increase student engagement, and model constructive behaviors." However, teachers must feel empowered and prepared to offer these learning opportunities.

Academic Achievement

When students are engaged and eager to learn, it stands to reason that academic achievement will improve. McCormick, Cappella, O'Connor, & McClowry (2015) report similar findings. Their study looked at the impact of an SEL program on kindergarten and first graders from inner city schools. The authors consistently found a direct impact on math and reading achievement with the implementation of emotional support and organization in grade one (McCormick, et al., 2015, pp. 13-14). Although SEL did not indicate academic achievement for kindergarteners, it is important to consider that kindergarten students demonstrate a wider range of academic skills upon entering school. Some students have attended preschool programs with an academic focus. Other children have been in daycare for many years. While students may have acquired some social skills, they may have no academic experience. Still, other children have had no prior social experience. Additionally, McCormick, et al. (2015) suggested that the

impact of an SEL program on kindergarteners' academic achievement may not have been as great because kindergarten teachers also have the broad responsibility of teaching students how to manage their behavior, conduct themselves in the classroom, and participate in classroom routines. This makes SEL a primary focus for kindergarten students, to build the classroom culture, as well as support the development of individual skills.

Although this study focused exclusively on the primary years, SEL has shown to improve achievement in other grades, as well. Editors Zins, Weissberg, Wang, and Walberg (2004) present the work Elias in the chapter entitled, *Strategies to Infuse Social and Emotional Learning into Academics*. Elias looked at the Social Decision Making and Social Problem Solving (SDM/SPS) program exclusively. It is a research-based SEL program that provides a systematic, integrated approach including readiness, instruction, and application. According to Elias, the students benefited from the program in multiple ways, including:

- Greater sensitivity to others' feelings

- Better understanding of the consequences of their behavior

- Increased ability to size up interpersonal situations and plan appropriate actions

- Higher self-esteem

- More positive prosocial behavior

- More positive behavior and leadership behaviors with peers

- Better transition to middle school

- Lower than expected levels of antisocial, self-destructive, and socially disordered behavior, even when followed up into high school

- Improvement in their learning-to-learn skills in academic areas that had been infused with social decision making, and

- Improved use of skills in self-control, social awareness, and social decision making and problem-solving in situations occurring both inside and outside the classroom (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004, p. 117)

SEL strengthens the classroom and promotes a community of learners. This research implies that the effects have the potential to be long-lasting.

Decreased Need for Behavioral Interventions & Supports

Many school systems are moving toward a proactive approach to emotional health and well-being. Kendziora and Yoder (2016) reported:

School-based SEL programs (1) enhance students' social and emotional competencies and classroom behavior; (2) improve attachment and attitudes toward school; (3) decrease rates of violence and aggression, disciplinary referrals, and substance abuse; and (4) improve academic performance (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016, pp. 4-5)

For example, each state has policies in place for addressing, documenting, and reporting incidents of bullying in public schools. SEL can provide an avenue for bullying prevention. Espelage, Rose, and Polanin (2015) found that youth violence and other disruptive behaviors were decreased when school-based violence prevention programs incorporated SEL skills (p. 2). By teaching self-regulation skills and emotional management, educators can have a direct impact on how students interact with one another. Studies such as these suggest promise for all students. Elias (2004) found multiple approaches and interventions were beneficial, and even necessary, for promoting SEL. Increased opportunities to successfully negotiate social interactions and relationships increased the likelihood of positive results, which in turn inspired increased confidence and hope in children (Elias, 2004, p. 62). The research demonstrates that most

children can learn how to be respectful and responsible human beings, despite backgrounds and previous experiences.

Teachers' Social-Emotional Capacity

The benefits of teaching social-emotional learning skills continue to be researched and documented. How teachers feel about implementing SEL warrants further study, especially since they have the ability to influence the outcome of a program. Schonert-Reichl ((2017) linked the success of an SEL program with the overall environment of the classroom, citing that students must be provided opportunities to not only learn but practice, SEL skills in a safe and supportive environment. According to Schonert-Reichl (2017), "Teachers' social-emotional competence and well-being strongly influence the learning context and the infusion of SEL into classrooms and schools" (p. 139).

However, we cannot teach and model skills we do not possess. Waajid, Garner, and Owen (2013), in their study of teachers and teacher training programs, found a general lack of awareness and understanding of how emotional responses impact both teaching and learning (p. 33). Jones and Bouffard (2012) reported similar findings in their Social Policy Report. Not only did teachers typically receive limited training, but training for support staff was virtually nonexistent (Jones & Bouffard, 2012, p. 13). The authors found a need for supporting teachers and other staff in positive interactions, effective reactions to emotional and social challenges, conflict resolution, clear expectations, building supportive school cultures and climates, maintaining respectful interactions, initiating opportunities to help others, and acknowledging mistakes and using them as an opportunity for growth (Jones & Bouffard, 2012, p. 14). It is clear that there is a lot of work to be accomplished before SEL becomes a significant part of academic life. In order to provide educators with support, we must first consider their needs.

Conceptual Framework

In Massachusetts, the Pre-School and Kindergarten Standards in the Domains of Social-Emotional Development and Approaches to Play and Learning have slowly been incorporated into educational practice since their adoption in 2016. The goal is to promote social competence and emotional well-being with the belief that students will not only be more successful in school but later on in life. Although educators may agree with the need for social-emotional education and practice, the way to accomplish this instruction is less clear.

Many districts, including the school system participating in this study, have adopted programs to address a variety of social and health issues. The conceptual framework of this study is based on the framework developed by Payton et al. (2000) for promoting mental health and reducing risk behaviors in children and youth. The authors assert:

> Quality SEL programs provide training that goes beyond acquainting teachers with their purpose, methods, and materials. It includes efforts to promote teacher acceptance of the program, such as opportunities to explore their attitudes toward the program, practice using program materials and receiving feedback, and develop classroom implementation plans. Quality programs also build teachers' capacity in program delivery by providing on-site technical assistance, such as observation and coaching, advanced training, and help with implementation monitoring. (Payton et al., 2000, p. 5)

Most of the participants of this study have been offered education in Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Responsive Classroom (RC), and Calm Classroom. Each program has been adopted and implemented in varying degrees of fidelity based on individual teaching style, years of experience, interest level, and commitment to continued training. It is

important to note that although these programs offer support with behavior, they do not provide lessons to explicitly teach social-emotional skills.

Payton et al. (2000) discussed the potential issues created with a multi-program approach. They refer to a lack of coordinated efforts, competing agendas, limited time and resources all contributing to diminished teacher support and eventually program failure. By looking at the work of Payton et al., as well as research supporting social-emotional learning in schools, it is clear the educator's perspective is an important part of making any program successful. Assessing the needs of the educators, as well as addressing their needs, will not only inform program decisions but increase their likelihood of success—ultimately benefitting the students.

Conclusion

In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) became a law. For most states, including Massachusetts, ESSA took effect at the beginning of the 2017-2018 school year. In Massachusetts, two of the five overarching strategies to advance the goal of success after high school for all students are addressed in this study: 1) Promote educator development and 2) Support social-emotional learning, health, and safety (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2017, p. 13). Social-emotional skills can impact school culture and climate, as well as promote availability for learning. However, educators must be supported in presenting this learning.

Education is ever-evolving, responding to the changing times, as well as the needs of students and families. Finding the right match of program, teachers, and students require taking into consideration the climate and culture of the school. Organizations continue to document the positive impact of explicit instruction of SEL, as well as research best practice methods for integrating SEL into schools.

The cumulative work of Bandura (1971) has told the story of human behavior, including the theory of social learning. Bandura stated:

In the social learning system, new patterns of behavior can be acquired through direct experience or by observing the behavior of others. The more rudimentary form of learning, rooted in direct experience, is largely governed by the rewarding and punishing consequences that follow any given action. (p. 3)

This theory can be applied to the emerging social-emotional learning goals, standards, and benchmarks currently being established. Bandura (1971) explained, "During the course of learning, people not only perform responses, but they also observe the differential consequences accompanying their various actions" (p. 4). By educating teachers in ways and practices that best support SEL, opportunities to address these skills increase.

Social-emotional learning continues to evolve as a focus in public education. By teaching students how to live in a healthy, well-adjusted way, we not only reduce conflict and stress within the classroom but create more time for learning. The work of Bandura has applications in the field of SEL as educators consider how best to address these skills through the development of research-based programs. Supporting educators through the process is key to the success of the endeavor.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The focus of this research was the early childhood educators' perspective of understanding, addressing, and assessing the social-emotional learning standards. To accomplish this purpose, the study investigated educators' familiarity and comfort level with the MA Preschool and Kindergarten Social and Emotional Learning and Approaches to Play and Learning Standards. It also determined what, if any, barriers they perceived are standing in the way of implementing the SEL standards, as well as if the supports/professional development is needed.

Setting

The purpose of this study was to consider how one school system in Massachusetts approaches SEL, as well as how they are responding to the inclusion of social-emotional learning standards. According to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) website, "In April of 2016, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) held a special meeting on Social and Emotional Learning to provide an opportunity for members to hear a number of key ideas, information, and examples from experts in research, policy, and practice, and have the opportunity to discuss the topic of SEL." Massachusetts has joined a two-year Collaborating States Initiative (CSI) organized by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). DESE's goals include the following:

- Engaging with our stakeholders, especially our teachers, administrators, and specialized instructional support personnel (SISP);

- Integrating SEL principles with existing policies, resources, and initiatives; and

- Building useful, well-aligned resources.

(Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2017)

The focus of this study was early childhood education professionals in one small community located just outside of Massachusetts' South Shore.

In the heart of cranberry country, this town dissolved its partnership with a larger district to establish its own high school nearly thirty years ago. The sole elementary school currently serves approximately 800 students in PreK-Grade 5. According to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2017), 96% of the student body identifies as white. Students with disabilities make up 18.4% of the population, while 38.6% are considered "high need." The economically disadvantaged make up 25.6% of the student body.

All grade levels engage in Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports (PBIS), Responsive Classroom (RC), and Calm Classroom in varying degrees of frequency and fidelity. These interventions have all been implemented with the common goal of enhancing social-emotional skills, creating a positive school culture and climate, as well as reducing behavior problems.

Participants

The population chosen for this study included early childhood professionals and paraprofessionals for PreK-K responsible for implementing the MA Preschool and Kindergarten Social and Emotional Learning and Approaches to Play and Learning Standards in a northeastern public elementary school in the United States. The potential participant pool included thirty individuals. Because the format of the study was a semi-structured interview and the goal was to reveal the breadth and depth of participants' experiences, the sample was narrowed to no more than fifteen educators. Priority was given to those individuals whose sole responsibility is to educate PreK-K students.

Research Design

The intended outcome of this study was to provide recommendations on how best to support educators with the implementation of SEL standards in Cranberry (pseudonym), Massachusetts. A qualitative methodology was used to establish what teachers already knew about the Massachusetts social-emotional learning standards, how successfully they feel they are addressing the standards and what additional supports they need to successfully implement and assess the SEL standards. Qualitative methodology was selected because it provides a means for exploring and understanding educators' perceptions (Creswell, 2007). Data was collected using semi-structured, open-ended, recorded interviews. A set of standardized questions was utilized, the interviewer asked for further clarification and/or follow-up queries, as needed. A narrative approach was chosen as a way for educators to describe their own understanding and experiences with social-emotional learning, as teachers and learners of the standards. Muylaert, Sarubbi, Gallo, and Neto (2014) concurred, explaining that narrative interviews "allow the deepening of research, the combination of life stories with socio-historical contexts, making the understanding of the senses that produce changes in the beliefs and values that motivate and justify the actions of possible informants" (p. 189).

Interview Questions

The study participants were asked the following questions:

How would you describe your familiarity with the SEL standards?

Are you more comfortable implementing/assessing some standards over others? If so, why do you feel this way?

Are any of the standards challenging to implement/assess? If so, why do you feel this way?

To what extent do you believe the SEL Standards are connected/aligned with initiatives already in place throughout the school (for example, Responsive Classroom, PBIS, Safe and Supportive Schools)? Please explain.

To what extent are you implementing SEL in your daily practice?

What aspects of social-emotional learning do you feel you are currently implementing with success and how are you accomplishing this? Please explain.

What are the barriers you see standing in the way of implementing/assessing the SEL standards?

What supports/professional development/coursework (if any) have you had to support your understanding of social-emotional learning standards? Please explain.

What supports/professional development (if any) do you need in order to improve your assessment of social-emotional learning standards? Please explain.

Analysis

Responses from the recorded interviews were transcribed. The transcripts were reviewed and analyzed for potential themes. An informal analysis was performed based on initial impressions and notes taken during the interviews, as well as reflections. This informed typologies and themes.

Hatch's (2002) framework for designing data analysis was utilized. It was chosen because the process reveals patterns, themes, and relationships through the organization and dissection of data. Hatch's (2002) nine-step Typological Analysis was employed for analyzing and coding themes. The process included an identification of typologies to be analyzed. Entries relating to typologies were marked. A summary sheet of marked entries was created. Patterns, relationships, and themes within the typologies were sought. Entries were coded based on

identifiable patterns, including which questions elicited specific responses. A determination was made as to whether or not the patterns were supported by data. Relationships among patterns were identified. One-sentence generalizations were created from the patterns. Data excerpts that support these generalizations were selected. Because the research questions used in this study asked for educators' understandings and perceptions teaching social-emotional skills through the use of interviews, rich data highlighting several themes was expected.

Participant Rights

All participants were protected through the utilization of several strategies. First, the approval of the University of New England Institutional Review Board (IRB) was sought before conducting the study. Once approved, permission to conduct research on site was obtained from the superintendent of schools, as well as the building principal. Next, all potential participants received an introductory email. The email described the nature of the study, motivations for participation, the steps taken to ensure confidentiality, and encouragement to review and sign the consent form. Pseudonyms for the school and staff was used. Consent forms and other materials were maintained in a locked filing cabinet or stored on a password-protected computer. All data was destroyed upon completion of the study, further preserving the confidentiality of the participants.

Benefits and Limitations

The benefits of this approach include the perspectives of highly motivated, dedicated educators. The participants have a range of teaching experiences and years of service. Therefore, their cumulative responses provided a rich narrative. Because the interviewer is known to the participants, a rapport was easily established.

However, a known interviewer may also speak to a limitation of this study, if a participant felt embarrassed sharing information. In addition, a participant may have felt the interviewer was looking for specific information and believe she had to give the interviewer what she wants to hear. For this reason, the interviewer made every attempt to clarify the topic and purpose of the interview. The small sample size may have limited the generalizability of the study and because the focus is early childhood, the results may not be applicable to higher grades.

Conclusion

Massachusetts is embarking on an emerging field of study. Although the concept of social-emotional learning is not new, we are becoming more aware of the impact these skills have on all facets of life. Many initiatives address facets of SEL, such as trauma-sensitive schools, anti-bullying campaigns, and behavior support systems. However, no one program covers all the skills. Also, inclusion within the core curriculum implies the ability to work on SEL skills while playing a math game or discussing conflict within a piece of literature.

The classroom teacher has the potential to establish the classroom climate. According to Jennings and Greenberg:

> Socially and emotionally competent teachers set the tone of the classroom by developing supportive and encouraging relationships with their students, designing lessons that build on student strengths and abilities, establishing and implementing behavioral guidelines in ways that promote intrinsic motivation, coaching students through conflict situations, encouraging cooperation among students, and acting as a role model for respectful and appropriate communication and exhibitions of prosocial behavior. (p. 492)

Conversely, when teachers are ineffective or inadequately address social and emotional issues children in the classroom are less likely to be on task and performance can suffer (Marzano & Marzano, 2003). These teachers may also miss organic opportunities to embed SEL skills within a lesson. By determining a baseline of what teachers already know and feel comfortable with regarding SEL, we can better understand how to support them, thereby supporting the students. Research is emerging on the benefits of SEL for students (CASEL, 2017). Information regarding teachers' needs, however, warrants further consideration and study.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore educators' understandings and perceptions of teaching social-emotional skills through the use of interviews. The researcher sought to determine how educators are addressing the Massachusetts Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Standards, what is working well, and where there are challenges. The overarching question driving this study was: What do early childhood educators need to successfully implement and assess social-emotional learning standards in preschool and kindergarten?

A brief description of each participant group precedes a description of the themes in order to familiarize the reader with the participant sample. Names of the participants were excluded in an effort to protect anonymity and to ensure confidentiality.

Table 1

Individual Participants' Demographics

Participant	Years' Experience	Position
1	18	Teacher
2	3	Teacher
3	15	Teacher
4	16	Teacher
5	2	Teacher
6	3	Teacher
7	24	Teacher
8	3	Specialist
9	20	Specialist
10	22	Specialist
11	2	Paraprofessional
12	3	Paraprofessional
13	10	Paraprofessional
14	3	Paraprofessional
15	4	Paraprofessional

Participant Groups

Three groups of professionals participated in this study.

Classroom Teachers

Seven classroom teachers were interviewed for this study. Two of the educators represent preschool classrooms, while the remaining five teach kindergarten students. All of the teachers were responsible for addressing and assessing the twelve SEL standards. The group's years of teaching experience ranged from two years to over twenty years. Two out of the seven teachers were currently working on master's degrees. The remainder of the teachers had a master's level education or higher.

Specialists

Three specialists participated in this study. Each of these participants was responsible for curriculum unique to her field. They worked with students in preschool through grade five. However, because they taught children in preschool and kindergarten, they were also responsible for implementing and assessing the SEL standards.

Paraprofessionals

Five paraprofessionals were interviewed for this study. They represented a varied array of educational and work experiences. All of the participants had been working in this school system for at least two years. They all worked with either preschool or kindergarten students, therefore, they were all responsible for supporting the implementation of the SEL standards.

Thematic Patterns Derived from Interviews

The researcher amassed and collated extensive notes before determining thematic patterns, phrases, and experiences from the participants of this study. These are the following five categories that emerged from the data.

Table 2

Categories and Words/Phrases from Axial Coding

Categories	Words/Phrases	
Early Childhood Educators	Many years' experience Preschool Educated	Early childhood Kindergarten Trained
Comfort level	Comfortable Fairly comfortable	Very comfortable
Assessment	Lack of clarity in observations Guidance Recording time/tool	Lack of assessment tool Observations Formal assessment
Time	Time to support one another Time to discuss students	Time to observe students Time to teach the standards
Professional Development	Supports Coursework Workshops	Professional Development (PD) Training Opportunities

Once the five categories were established, selective coding was used to identify themes in relation to the corresponding research questions.

Table 3

Themes Aligned With Corresponding Research Questions

Research Questions	Themes
1. What is your role in implementing the Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Standards?	Early Childhood Educators
3. Are you more comfortable implementing some standards over others? If so, why do you feel this way?	Comfort Level
5. Are you more comfortable assessing some standards over others? If so, why do you feel this way? *6. Are any of the standards challenging to assess? If so, why do you feel this way?*	Lack of Formal Assessment Tool
10. What are the barriers you see standing in the way of implementing SEL standards? *11. What are the barriers you see standing in the way of assessing the SEL standards?*	Time
13. What supports/professional development (if any) do you need in order to improve your implementation of social-emotional learning standards? Please explain. *14. What supports/professional development (if any) do you need in order to improve your assessment of social-emotional learning standards? Please explain.*	Professional Development

Thematic finding 1: Meeting criteria, interest in the study, and other participant characteristics.

Each participant was required to be an early childhood educator who was responsible for implementing the social-emotional learning standards in either preschool or kindergarten. The educational background and teaching experience ranged from two years to over twenty years. The majority of the participants expressed an eagerness to discuss their understanding of SEL and the impact on the children they work with each day. All of the participants felt they had a role and responsibility for teaching the SEL standards. All of the participants willingly shared the

challenges for implementing the SEL standards and many suggested these challenges were the motivation for participating in this study.

Another interesting component noted is the majority of the participants expressed a personal comfort level with social-emotional learning skills in general. All of the participants have chosen careers in the field of education. Strong communication skills, the ability to speak, as well as listen, are integral to the job. Empathy, approachability, and the ability to build rapport are also key characteristics of a great teacher. The thematic pattern observed was that these women, likely as a result of their personalities and experiences, are innately adept at teaching social-emotional skills. As one participant noted, "I feel they [the standards] are equally within my comfort range to implement, especially as a seasoned teacher." One of the women with a background in communication stated, "Since communication is the cornerstone of my education, it is important that I integrate those skills to the best of my ability. It's part of everything I do."

Thematic finding 2: Comfort level with the Social-Emotional Learning Standards.

Teaching what you know is naturally easier than teaching something you do not know. Therefore, it was not surprising to find that all of the participants expressed a degree of comfort with the SEL standards. The educators, collectively as a group, used several descriptors to characterize their comfort level with the SEL standards. All of the women expressed familiarity, as well as the ability to model the standards. The section below highlights the educators' comfort level. For example, some of the participants site personal and professional experience as factors. Listed below are some of the exact statements derived from the interviews that support the educators' perceptions of their ability to implement the SEL standards.

"I would say I feel fairly comfortable implementing all of the standards."

"I feel comfortable providing instruction and strategies on these standards, however, the population is so diverse that a lot of differentiation is needed."

"I think I'm more comfortable implementing relationship skills standards because we work so hard all year to help our kids create friendships and learn what it means to be a good friend. Being able to have relationships with others is such an important skill, so I think I focus on that the most and it comes easiest to me. Anything we do on a given day can be turned into a team-building activity."

"I'm very comfortable implementing the standards. We talk about this with the kids every day. It's part of classroom expectations. It can be part of a story I read, how the characters interacted and stuff. Maybe we do some role play to discuss an issue that occurred during our center time. It's part of getting through a day."

"I feel comfortable with the standards. I think we are all good at building relationships with the kids, but that comes from experience. That is important for modeling many of the standards."

This section summarizes the overall perceptions that the participants describe regarding their comfort level implementing the SEL standards. As mentioned previously, the ability to build relationships and communicate successfully is intrinsic to teaching. Subsequently, the next section will highlight the collective personal reactions and feelings that the educators have about assessing the SEL standards.

Thematic finding 3: Assessment

Another thematic finding revealed throughout the interviews was assessment. Common responses derived from the interviews, which will be supported by the participants' statements

below, include a lack of clarity in what is being observed, time, and the absence of an assessment tool.

> "We don't really have a standard way of assessing the standards. I think we need a good assessment and that would help instruction too."

> "I think all of the standards can be assessed fairly easily through observations, especially watching the kids play, but how do you know that I'm seeing the same thing as you? Are we looking at the situation the same way? Some kind of guidance would help."

> "Social skills are more subjective than academic standards. In my opinion, they require a good deal of observation and recording time."

> "To informally assess the standards--it's not challenging. When asked to formally assess, like with a program, like TSG (Teaching Strategies Gold), well that was *very* challenging. It took more time to collect and record data than we could actually spend with the kids!"

> "It can be difficult to assess. Our time with the kids is limited. Maybe we don't get to have a heart-to-heart with every kid every day. We don't always know what's going on, what's the motivation, but we try."

> "Our role is mostly observation, but I'm not always sure I'm assessing correctly. Sometimes there's an uncertainty. The social-emotional stuff, it's not black and white. You make a judgment."

> "We don't really have a tool to assess. It's hard to know if we are talking about the same thing if we mean the same thing."

As the statements above exemplify, the educators experienced several different reactions to assessing the SEL standards. The responses ranged from frustration due to the lack of an assessment tool to concern for understanding a child's motivation for his/her behavior. The

variety in responses demonstrates an overall need for clarity, communication, and consistency for what is being measured. As the next section will detail, many of the educators indicate time is also a factor for successfully addressing and assessing the SEL standards.

Thematic finding 4: Time

The theme of time presented itself in variations throughout the interview process. This section will break down time into two sub-themes with corresponding statements. One recurring theme was time to teach the SEL standards. Below are several statements derived from the interviews that support this theme:

"Time and classroom support are always barriers. We are provided time to implement curriculum, but it's time for the organic situations that are trickier to manage. We have obligations to our schedule and lack of support in the room to address other students' needs. When what we really should be doing is taking advantage of a teachable moment."

"The amount of time needed to prepare children for the academic demands and rigor vs. implementing the SEL standards is challenging. Then again, failure to implement these standards and the push of children who are not developmentally ready for academics seems counterproductive."

"Finding the time, while teaching academics, to work on these skills can be hard. It's not like it's on the schedule or anything. Then again, when kids have problems, can't work together, etc. well that takes time from your day too."

"The barriers that I see standing in our way is limited time in our schedule. It's very challenging to meet all of the SEL standards in a day, even a week. We have one para and she's not here all the time. It's hard to assess everyone, to know if they're meeting all of the SEL standards."

"Sometimes I feel as though the curriculum gets in the way of implementing the SEL standards. We have our reading scheduled, math scheduled, you know? And sometimes it can be so rigorous that we forget to slow down and focus on the social-emotional piece. It's all about the academics because it's time for math or whatever."

Next, several of the participants endorsed another variation of the time theme as time for collegial collaboration. Six out of fifteen participants felt time to communicate on the behalf of their students was important. Corresponding statements that support this need are provided below:

"Our biggest barrier is time. We have these kids for the day and it's a challenge. There is just so much to do, so much to get done. We need to be able to debrief and reflect sometimes, with the kids and with each other."

"Being alone in the classroom for part of the day limits my ability to implement certain centers where I may observe standards in action, not to mention acting on a teachable moment."

"As always, I feel like time can be the biggest barrier when implementing the standards. Not having our paras full time means I'm likely missing situations that are occurring, so it's definitely harder to assess. Plus, if I have to use my para for academic time, then where am I supposed to be finding the time to teach the standards?"

"I think time is a big factor. We don't have the opportunity to talk with the teacher about the kids, to check-in, or even get an idea on how the day is going so far or even how lunch went, for example."

"One of the biggest barriers is time and para support. We don't have a social-emotional curriculum, so we're just doing the best we can and fitting it in where we can."

"The biggest barriers? Time and communication. When do we ever get to just talk to each other, check in and say, hey, did you notice this one is having trouble with that one? Or does so and so seem tired to you, is something going on? I mean we try to do that, but who has time? Before you know it, it's the end of the day and a million other things have happened."

While the above statements focused on the collegial aspect of time to support, observe and discuss the students, the final portion of the results section will seek to highlight the need for professional development and training. The focus will be on the development of a common understanding and language among educators.

Thematic finding 5: Professional Development/Training

The final theme that emerged as a result of data analysis was development and training opportunities. This researcher was interested in what supports/professional development/coursework had already been taken in order to support understanding of social-emotional learning. In addition, the researcher wanted to know if the participants were interested in additional training. Thematic statements including the educators' past experience will be discussed in further detail below.

First, all of the participants discussed their background with social-emotional learning. Common reactions described amongst the group included coursework, workshops, and training. The corresponding statements regarding their professional development experience are presented below:

"I've only had what the school has provided for PD (professional development) and that's pretty much just like, Responsive Classroom stuff. I have not had outside coursework or training."

"I have taken whatever training they've (the school) provided it over the years, including Responsive Classroom. And I've taken note of the excellent modeling by colleagues."

"I have sought out PD for social-pragmatic development, even if it's not specifically SEL, it covers the basics. It brings it all together."

"I haven't had any formal training in SEL, but I would love to!"

"I have taken some workshops focusing on social-emotional learning in the past and I'm going to be taking a class on social-emotional learning from PDI in the fall to help increase my understanding of SEL."

Most of the participants relied solely on the school to provide training for social-emotional learning. The following statements describe the interest level of the participants in future professional development opportunities:

"I would totally be interested in more SEL training. I am always looking for practical ideas and strategies to use."

"I would love to get more in-depth training for SEL. Maybe more training in Responsive Classroom? I think that would help with implementation."

"More SEL training--absolutely! I'd go to any and all of them!"

"In an ideal world, it would be great to have full-time paras back in the room and while I'm making wishes, should we all get the same SEL training? Shouldn't they (administration) be training *all of us*?"

"I would always welcome continued PD to further my own development of SEL practices."

"I would welcome any training. I think it would be great if all of the teachers and paras had the same training."

As the above statements exemplify, the participants expressed unified views regarding their openness to further SEL training. The next section below will illustrate a theme that emerged regarding the perspectives of the paraprofessionals. Regarding the paraprofessionals, the participants referenced feeling a lack of opportunities.

A finding unique to this study focuses on the paraprofessionals' responses to professional development and further training. The specifics of this will be presented more extensively in the discussion section; however, all of the paraprofessionals interviewed referenced financial challenges. Corresponding structural statements to support this thematic finding are listed below:

"I have not sought additional coursework since becoming a paraprofessional. I am also the parent of a special needs child, so time and finances don't really allow for it, but I would be open to any training the school provides. I want to learn more."

"I think that the school should continue to offer SEL training to all staff, including the paras. We are all working with the same population, the same kids, every day. We should be there."

"We (the paraprofessionals) have not been offered specific training. It's tough because as a para, we don't make much money and we have to pay for it ourselves."

"I have had some training, but I had to pay for it on my own. It's been my own choice and out of my own pocket."

"I have not had any SEL training. No one has ever asked me and I can't pay for it right now. The money I make doing this job, well, it's just not an option for me to take a class or anything. You know, it's not a priority. If they (administration) offered it I'd go, sure, I'd be there."

This section described the relevant themes extracted from the fifteen qualitative interviews conducted. It is important to note that though roles and responsibilities vary, there were several common needs identified. The diversity of educational positions is critical to address in order to represent a full range of perspectives and perceptions.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore educators' understandings and perceptions teaching social-emotional skills. This chapter is a compilation of the data collected from interviews. Responses were carefully examined through multiple coding techniques to provide a thorough analysis of the results. Five themes emerged from this data providing a strong framework to understand the educators' perspectives. The themes include participant characteristics, comfort level with the SEL Standards, assessment, time, and professional development. An in-depth discussion of the thematic findings and the correlation to the literature review will be presented in the final chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

In June of 2015, Massachusetts established Standards for Preschool and Kindergarten

Social and Emotional Learning, and Approaches to Play and Learning. According to the

Massachusetts Department of Education (2015), "Young children's evolving social-emotional

development must be a key consideration in developing curriculum, as well as in guiding

children's social interactions and behaviors." Although early childhood educators are responsible

for teaching and assessing these standards, little has changed in terms of curriculum, academic

expectations, or level of support.

This qualitative case study allowed the researcher to gain a better understanding of how

some early childhood educators at Cranberry Elementary School (pseudonym) perceived their

needs while attempting to address and assess the SEL standards. One guiding question drove this

work:

What do early childhood educators need to successfully implement and assess social-

emotional learning standards in preschool and kindergarten?

This research study consisted of fifteen early childhood educators, who participated in

semi-structured, open-ended recorded interviews conducted during the months of June 2018 to

August 2018. The findings represent the educators' understanding and experiences implementing

and assessing the SEL standards. This chapter discusses an interpretation of the findings,

considers the implications of the findings, and concludes with recommendations for further

studies.

Interpretation of Findings

Meeting criteria, interest in the study, and other participant characteristics

An analysis of the data clearly showed that early childhood educators had a high-interest level in SEL, not only as a topic of conversation but the impact on students. However, although the majority of the participants valued SEL, many felt challenged to incorporate the teaching into their days. Waajid et al. (2013) reported similar findings in their work with preservice teachers provided with SEL training. After the experience, the teachers reported a new awareness of the correlation between emotions and academic (Waajid et al., 2013).

Comfort level with the Social-Emotional Learning Standards

All of the early childhood educators reported a strong comfort level with the SEL standards. Although some of the standards lend themselves more easily to teaching and observing, a universal comfort level with the content was demonstrated. A commitment to SEL instruction was evidenced by the participants' willingness to sit with the interviewer and discuss their experiences at length.

Assessment

With respect to assessing SEL, the responses demonstrated an overall need for clarity, communication, and consistency for what is being measured. This was linked to both time for communication, as well as professional development and the development of both a common language and common understanding of what is being assessed.

Time

When conducting these interviews, the topic of time arose in a variety of ways. Time to teach SEL skills explicitly, as well as implicitly was a factor. Educators need to feel the

administrative team values this learning as much as academics. Brackett et al. (2012) found a correlation between the extents to which teachers feel that their school culture supports SEL programming and the impact of that programming.

Another facet of time revealed through the interview process was time for collegial collaboration. Many of the participants felt the need for time to talk with colleagues on behalf of shared students. They felt increased communication among educators would benefit the children.

Professional Development/Training

All of the participants in this study were open to professional development on social-emotional learning. Some had even utilized their personal time and money in order to gain further understanding and knowledge. However, for the paraprofessionals, this proved to be cost-prohibitive. They voiced a common message that they would like to be included in training offered by the district. This response aligns with McCormick, Steckler, and McLeroy (1995) who found professional development significantly increased the success of new programs/initiatives.

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Implications

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Although the sample size of this study was small, it did provide a number of implications. Most importantly it revealed that in order to implement the SEL standards, educators felt they needed time. Time was needed for teaching the skills, as well as opportunities to observe students. Time was also needed time to communicate with other educators. According to Shah (2012):

> Collegiality stimulates enthusiasm among teachers and reduces emotional stress and burnout. It also creates a sense of belonging among organizational members and makes the bonds more cohesive. Collegial cultures make teachers more committed to their organization and to their profession. (p. 1243)

Children learn from modeled behavior. Therefore, it makes sense to practice the skills we are trying to impart to our students.

During this study, all of the educators felt the need for ongoing professional development in the area of social-emotional learning. This speaks to teacher efficacy. The investment of educators is critical to the successful implementation of the social-emotional learning standards. However, little consideration has been given to supporting teachers through the process, especially the wellbeing of the teachers themselves. Schonert-Reichl (2017) found mindfulness approaches and other forms of self-care, as well as preparation and increased understanding, all helped to build the social-emotional wellbeing of teachers. According to Schonert-Reichl (2017) "We need to optimize teachers' classroom performance and their ability to promote SEL in their students by helping them build their own social-emotional competence" (p. 139).

Recommendation for Further Study

The findings of this study indicate numerous opportunities for possible research studies in regards to social-emotional learning and the educator's perspective. For example, a further exploration of school culture and climate would reinforce the validity and reliability of this study. We cannot build the social-emotional skills of our students without continuing to develop our own skill sets. Opportunities to support communication amongst educators should be sought. This might include building in more transition time between specials, so that teachers and specialists can have a quick check-in and exchange information or staggering the time when paraprofessionals begin and end their days. These suggestions would not only allow educators to discuss shared students, but to develop a rapport as professionals, thus strengthening the sense of school community.

A user-friendly tool for assessing social-emotional skills should be paired with ongoing professional development. This would encourage the development of a common language and deepen understanding. Paraprofessionals should be included in this endeavor.

Also, although this study was small, the inclusion of cooperating districts may reveal different strengths and challenges. Considering the way similar districts approach SEL may enhance our own practice. For example, Cranberry Elementary School should examine how other districts address scheduling with a focus on fostering communication throughout the day between teachers, paraprofessionals, and specialists. Cranberry Elementary School should also consider avenues for sharing the expense of professional development opportunities.

Finally, research is needed to examine the inclusion of SEL training in teacher preparation programs. The work of Waajid et al. (2013) revealed a shift in teaching style from teacher-centered to learner-centered with an increased focus on addressing students' needs when preservice teachers were provided with coursework that facilitated their understanding of SEL. Since the expectation of addressing and assessing social-emotional learning standards is being established throughout the country, more studies are needed to help prepare future teachers, as well as provide ongoing support for those already in the field.

Limitations

The design of this case study included limitations, which potentially affected the outcomes. Cranberry Elementary School was selected for this study based on proximity to the researcher. Consequently, a convenience sample, rather than a random sample was used. Although an adequate sample of early childhood educators participated in the interview process, they do not represent the opinions of all early childhood educators in the state. It is also important to note that the researcher is also an early childhood educator in the district and is a

known interviewer to the participants. To address the potential for bias, Hatch's (2002) typological analysis method was applied. In addition, a peer reader from an outside source provided another measure to prevent bias.

Conclusions

The Massachusetts Standards for Preschool and Kindergarten Social and Emotional Learning, and Approaches to Play and Learning are now a part of the early childhood experience. Based on the findings of this study, early childhood educators at Cranberry Elementary School share a strong level of comfort with the SEL Standards. The emerging themes: *Interest Level, High Level of Comfort, Assessment, Time, and Professional Development* support current research on social-emotional learning, as well as school culture and climate. The background characteristics of teachers, social-emotional competence, and pedagogical skills all influence the classroom (Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

However, educators are already under a great deal of pressure to facilitate the curriculum and provide academic support. Although all of the participants in this study were proponents of social-emotional learning, they did not always feel it is valued by others. In order to foster these skills in our young children, we must assist early childhood educators by supporting the development of their social-emotional learning, as well.

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UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND
CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

Project Title: Addressing and Assessing Social-Emotional Learning Standards: An Educator's Perspective

Principal Investigator(s): Naomi Stahl
165 Tremont Street
Taunton, MA 02780

Advisor: Dr. Michelle Collay
mcollay@une.edu

Introduction:
You are being asked to take part in a research study of how the Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Standards are being addresses and assessed in our school. I am asking you to take part because you have a role in educating PreK and/or Kindergarten students. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

What the study is about:
This study will document teachers' perceptions of their needs in relation to implementing and assessing social-emotional learning standards in PreK-K classrooms.

What I will ask you to do:
If you agree to be in this study, I will conduct an interview with you. The interview will include questions about your familiarity with the Social-Emotional Learning Standards, implementation successes and challenges, as well as SEL assessment challenges, and suggestions for improving. The interview questions will take about 30 minutes to complete. With your permission, I would also like to record the interview.

Risks and benefits:
I do not anticipate any risks to you participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life.
There are no specific benefits to you. However, please keep in mind that our school community includes a group of highly motivated, dedicated educators. By participating, we contribute a range of teaching experiences and years of service.

Your answers will be confidential. The records of this study will be kept private. If I make the report public in any form, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a locked file or on a password-protected computer; only the researcher will have access to the records. If I record the interview, I will destroy the tape after it has been transcribed, which I anticipate will be within two months of its recording.

Taking part is voluntary:
Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. You may skip any questions that you do not want to answer. All responses will be valued, even if you decide not to take part or to skip some of the questions. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time.

If you have questions:
The researcher conducting this study is Naomi Stahl. Dr. Michelle Collay is my lead advisor. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Naomi Stahl at stahln@carver.org or at (774) 766-0222. You can reach Dr. Collay at collaym@une.edu or (207) 602-2010. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at irb@une.edu. You may also report your concerns or complaints anonymously at the Office for Human Research Protections at https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

_____

Addressing and Assessing Social-Emotional Learning Standards: An Educator's

Perspective

Statement of Consent: I have read the above information and have received answers to any

questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study.

Your Signature _____ Date _____

Your Name (printed) _____

In addition to agreeing to participate, I also consent to having the interview recorded.

Your Signature _____ Date _____

Signature of person obtaining consent _____

Date _____

Printed name of person obtaining consent _____

Date _____

This consent form will be kept by the researcher for at least three years beyond the end of the

study.

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND
CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

(June 2018 email)

Hello Friends,

Many of you know I have been working on my Ed.D. in Educational Leadership through the University of New England. It has been a long road and I appreciate all of the support and encouragement I have received from you so far. As I enter the final stretch, I am calling on you once again in the form of an interview. The focus of my dissertation is the Massachusetts Standards for Preschool and Kindergarten Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), and Approaches to Play and Learning.

My goal is to determine how they are being addressed, what is working well, and where there are challenges. I would also like to know if you have had any professional development to support your understanding of SEL and whether you would be interested in additional training. Finally, I would like to know how SEL is being assessed.

Your participation is completely voluntary and you may opt out of any question in the interview process. All of your responses will be kept confidential. They will only be used for statistical purposes and will be reported only in aggregated form. The interview will take approximately 20 minutes to complete.

If you have any questions about this survey and/or have an interest in participating, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you in advance for providing this important feedback.

Sincerely, Naomi

Appendix C
Letter of Permission from the Superintendent

Superintendent of Schools

Director of Curriculum,
Instruction & Technology

February 28, 2018

University of New England
11 Hills Beach Road
Biddeford, ME 04005

To whom it may concern:

I am writing to express my support and approval for **NAOMI STAHL** to conduct a needs assessment survey with the ____ Public Schools staff. It is my understanding the survey is being used for Naomi's doctoral dissertation with the topic focusing on individuals concerned with early childhood education in our schools, who are responsible for the MA Social and Emotional Learning Standards.

Please contact my office, at anytime, if I can be of any assistance.

Sincerely,

Superintendent of Schools

Appendix D

Interview Questions

Social-Emotional Learning Implementation and Needs Assessment Survey

    1. What is your role in implementing the Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Standards?
Administrator
Classroom Teacher
Paraprofessional
Specialist
Other

    2. Please review the Social-Emotional Learning Standards. How would you describe your familiarity with the SEL standards?

SELF-AWARENESS
Standard SEL1: The child will be able to recognize, identify, and express his/her emotions.
Standard SEL2: The child will demonstrate accurate self-perception.
Standard SEL3: The child will demonstrate self-efficacy (confidence/competence).
SELF-MANAGEMENT
Standard SEL4: The child will demonstrate impulse control and stress management.
SOCIAL AWARENESS
Standard SEL5: The child will display empathetic characteristics.
Standard SEL6: The child will recognize diversity and demonstrate respect for others.
RELATIONSHIP SKILLS
Standard SEL7: The child will demonstrate the ability to communicate with others in a variety of ways.
Standard SEL8: The child will engage socially, and build relationships with other children and with adults.
Standard SEL9: The child will demonstrate the ability to manage conflict.
Standard SEL10: The child will demonstrate the ability to seek help and offer help.
RESPONSIBLE DECISION MAKING
Standard SEL11: The child will demonstrate beginning personal, social, and ethical responsibility.
Standard SEL12: The child will demonstrate the ability to reflect on and evaluate the results of his or her actions and decisions.

    3. Are you more comfortable implementing some standards over others? If so, why do you feel this way?
    4. Are any of the standards challenging to implement? If so, why do you feel this way?
    5. Are you more comfortable assessing some standards over others? If so, why do you feel this way?
    6. Are any of the standards challenging to assess? If so, why do you feel this way?
    7. To what extent do you believe the SEL Standards are connected/aligned with initiatives already in place throughout the school (for example, Responsive Classroom, PBIS, Safe and Supportive Schools)? Please explain.
    8. To what extent are you implementing SEL in your daily practice?
    9. What aspects of social-emotional learning do you feel you are currently/already implementing with success and how are you accomplishing this? Please explain.
    10. What are the barriers you see standing in the way of implementing the SEL standards (e.g., systemic, colleagues, and/or curriculum)? Please explain.

11.   What are the barriers you see standing in the way of assessing the SEL standards (e.g., systemic, colleagues, and/or curriculum)? Please explain.

12.   What supports/professional development/coursework (if any) have you had to support your understanding of social-emotional learning? For example, have you specifically sought professional development surrounding SEL? Please explain.

13.   What supports/professional development (if any) do you need in order to improve your implementation of social-emotional learning standards? Please explain.

14.   What supports/professional development (if any) do you need in order to improve your assessment of social-emotional learning standards? Please explain.