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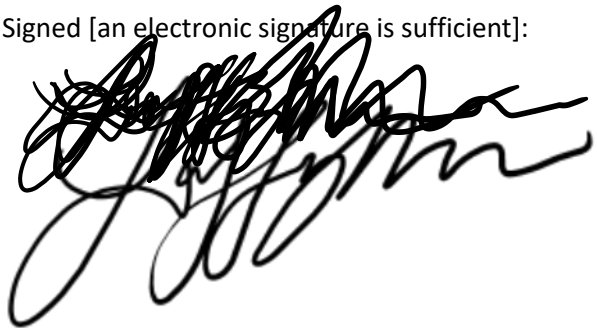
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Cover Sheet

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ABSTRACT

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This research aims to understand how social emotional learning (SEL) manifests in the classroom in the most effective and frictionless way. Undergirding this research is a constructivist paradigm and existing literature on barriers to implementation, emotions in education, and teacher's perspectives on SEL to answer two research questions: (1) 'How does socioeconomic status of a school impact a teacher's ability to implement targeted SEL skill training for students?' and (2) 'How do teachers perceive and experience challenges in implementing student SEL skill training, and are there differences by socioeconomic status?' Seven teachers at a diverse (race, SES) school were interviewed to better understand how they perceived challenges in the ecosystem. Research found that teachers navigate a system of challenges and identity that can be summarized along four main theme areas, each with their own sub-themes: (1) Teachers' perceptions of challenges within self, (2) Teachers' perceptions of challenges in the system, (3) Teachers' perceptions of the challenges in understanding the student context, and (4) Teachers' perception of the challenges in understanding the students' family and home context.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The purpose of education has been widely discussed and debated for centuries (Gallie, 1955). For some, high academic achievement can be an important means to economic productivity, incomes, employability, and economic growth. The human capital view of education has dominated educational debates, especially in the US which is the context of this study, and has been widely critiqued as overly neoliberal and politicized, deviating from more holistic aims of education (Klees & Hickling-Hudson, 2012). Contrastingly, education can be viewed as a tool to empower individuals to realize their rights and free their minds, such as under Liberation theory (Freire, 2000). Somewhere in between these two perspectives sits the view that education can achieve multiple aims and that practitioners should foster both academic and social emotional capabilities, seek balance between multiple objectives of learning, and nurture the whole child. This has led to initiatives in integrating social emotional learning (SEL) within school curricula in the US. The following research is an exploration of teachers' experiences of such an approach to fostering skills beyond academic achievement – SEL – which broadly speaking, refers to the explicit teaching of non-academic skills (e.g., conflict management, emotional regulation) in the classroom. SEL will be more robustly defined in Chapter 2.

This introduction provides the context and rationale guiding my research, including my positionality and motivations as I approach this study. Chapter 2 reviews the existing literature to understand the theories undergirding SEL. Chapter 3 discusses the philosophical underpinnings before detailing out the methodology. Chapter 4 presents a descriptive overview of the findings emerging from data collection. Chapter 5 builds on this by providing a discussion of the high-level themes and how they interact with the existing literature. Finally, Chapter 6 provides a synthesis, reflections, and directions for future research in this area of study.

Going beyond education as economic capital: SEL in the United States

Social emotional learning (SEL) has a relatively recent *official* journey. The US-based Collaborative to Advance Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is an organization that was created to integrate high-quality, evidence-based SEL in the educational mainstream from preschool to high school (Cascarino, 2013), and only took roots in 1994 (Edutopia, 2011). In 2001, the Conference for State Legislators passed the first resolution to teach SEL in schools, and in 2004, Illinois became the first state to develop SEL standards (Hoffman, 2009). At the national level, SEL has found pockets and

homes in the federal landscape, albeit never explicitly by name. For example, SEL has recently gained importance in federal criteria for district funding. The U.S. Department of Education's recent round of *Race to the Top* competition (2009 – 2013), a competitive grant that rewarded states and local K-12 districts for education innovation and reform, awarded significant bonus points for applications that made social and emotional learning a key ingredient in districtwide improvement efforts (Cascarino, 2013). The introduction of the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015 (ESSA) includes provisions and incentives to prioritize SEL, including Title I (focused on underserved and disadvantaged student populations), Title IV (21st century schools), and Title II (Teacher, Principal, and School Leader Prep) (Grant et al., 2017). Most recently, The $123 Billion K-12 educational provision in the recent American Rescue Plan (ARP) of 2021 funds support for "students' learning and development, educator well-being, family and community partnerships, and more inclusive equitable learning environments" (CASEL, 2022, p. 2). As displayed above, there has been significant traction and opportunity to promote SEL in school and district settings. However, despite widespread demand for social and emotional learning and recognition of its value, SEL remains at the periphery of K-12 education (Cascarino, 2013).

Positionality and dedication

I enter this space of research with dual identities. First, my professional identity and background is in the private sector, with experiences in social sector (education) consulting and early-stage grant philanthropy for innovators in the US K-12 education space. I acknowledge that despite a passion for the work in education, my experiences are incomplete having not been a practitioner. My perspective is one of an outsider looking into a system. As a researcher, I approach with humility, gratitude, and an inclination towards learning and curiosity. Personally, I am a son of immigrants from the Philippines. My parents immigrated to the United States in pursuit of better educational and professional opportunities for themselves and their kids, which sometimes manifested in an overt pressure to exceed academically. While I valued this deeply, I felt that some of my mental and emotional health suffered due to the high expectations placed upon me. However, I was lucky to learn in a well-resourced public school district where I had many teachers and extracurriculars who offered a space to nurture my passions, emotions, and mental health outside of core academics. But for two immigrant parents accustomed to scarcity, education was the catalyst to creating more opportunity for their kids. It was this persistent focus on their own academic achievement that enabled them to pursue a better life in America while supporting a large extended family back home. It's what allowed them to build a middle-class life in an affluent community where their

immigrant son could benefit from a school system that made him feel like he mattered. I sit with discomfort as an outsider and familiarity as an insider to understand how emotions can matter in education, and it is what motivates me to understand the contextual challenges associated with implementing SEL.

I dedicate this research to my parents – the symbols of what belief, motivation, and powerful education can be – and my teachers – who showed me that education can go beyond academics and help a student feel like they matter.

Research Questions

My questions are driven by two broader wonderings: First, how can the educational system reduce the barriers to implementing SEL? Second, how does circumstance influence who does and does not have access to this type of learning? Thus, the research questions posed are:

1. How does socioeconomic status of a school impact a teacher's ability to implement targeted SEL skill training for students?
2. How do teachers perceive and experience challenges in implementing student SEL skill training, and are there differences by socioeconomic status?

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Though emotions have been inherent in education for decades, the explicit study of emotions in education has only taken root in the past few decades. Concepts regarding emotions, especially as they relate to power in the education system, have permeated early concepts in the history in education, such as emotionology, emotional regime, or emotional community (Sobe, 2012; Toro-Blanco, 2020). These concepts, while proving to be a fruitful starting point, do not fully extend and intersect with the emerging field of Social Emotional Learning (SEL).

The present research on implementing SEL from the perspective of teachers is important because there is a scarcity of research on how the explicit teaching of SEL is influenced by various identity factors through a teacher's lens, despite a prevalence of literature on emotions in education more generally. To better situate the research within the existing field, this chapter will first build a foundational understanding of SEL, looking at existing definitions in the field and its potential impact on learners. Second, this chapter will discuss the existence of emotions in education and

their contextual nature to understand why an identity-driven understanding of emotions is important. Third, this chapter will discuss the critical role of teachers and how they engage in implementing SEL to justify the development of research to delve deeper into their perspectives. Finally, this paper will synthesize key gaps and lay the foundation for the research to follow.

CURRENT STATE OF SEL

Defining SEL

Before delving deeper into the current literature on social and emotional learning (SEL), it is essential to establish an understanding of SEL at the onset. Since SEL is a practical field, many frameworks and conceptions of the idea exist. However, there are no universal definitions of SEL. In the following sections, I synthesize available conceptualizations and applications to describe what SEL means for this project.

The previously mentioned US-based Collaborative to Advance Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), an organization that was created to integrate high-quality, evidence-based SEL into education, has developed a definition of SEL that states "social and emotional learning involves the processes through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (Cascarino, 2013, p. 9). This definition encapsulates much of how current literature conceptualizes SEL: a focus on a few core skill areas not currently represented in standardized curriculum.

Other frameworks bring different, but similar, concepts and skill areas into the definition. A meta-analysis of 213 school-based, SEL programs and their impact categorizes SEL as the explicit focus and teaching of "noncognitive factors" that include self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness (Durlak et al., 2011). Similarly, an exploration of existing SEL programs and their benefits defines SEL as "the capacity to recognize and manage emotions, solve problems effectively, and establish positive relationships with others" (Zins & Elias, 2007, p. 234). While the three conceptions emphasize a different set of skill areas, one can use these three definitions as anchor points to generally understand SEL as non-academic skills that impact how an individual navigates a community and society.

Another aspect of SEL is the actual processes and tactics that help children acquire certain skills. Through an investigation of systemic SEL in the US, another study defines SEL as a coordinated set of evidence-based programs and practices for enhancing social-emotional-cognitive development, positive behavior and interpersonal relationships, and academic performance (Mahoney et al., 2021). The first portion of this definition summons the aspect of tangible evidence-based programs and practices that facilitate learning rather than only focusing on the skills acquired. Moreover, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), a charitable foundation focused on reducing the inequality gap in education, conceptualizes a definition that defines SEL through the processes it embodies: "interventions that improve pupils' decision-making skills, interaction with others and their self-management of emotions" – with interventions being further categorized as school-level approaches, universal programs, and more specialized, targeted interventions for particular students (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021). This definition adds more specificity and organizational structure to understand how SEL manifests in the classroom.

Further discussions of SEL define it beyond just a set of learned skills. In his work advocating for the incorporation of SEL in mainstream education, Cohen (2006) investigates SEL, character education, and mental health programming in the US, resulting in another framing of SEL that roots itself in participation in democracy that creates a strong foundation of pleasure, engagement, and meaning. These include abilities to listen to ourselves and others, be critical and reflective, become flexible problem-solvers and decisionmakers, develop communicative capabilities, and foster collaborative capacities. Essential dispositions include responsibility, appreciation, social justice, and inclination to serve others and participate in acts of good will (J. Cohen, 2006). This definition builds on the prior conceptions of SEL by connecting to broader goals of social responsibility, democracy, and social justice – ascribing social imperative to this area of learning.

The prior definitions summarize two critical aspects of the definition of SEL: the dispositions and skills *and* the processes and programs by which these skills are taught. In the following research, both aspects of the definition will provide critical framing for how SEL is discussed and evaluated. While the ideas associated with SEL have been around much longer, it is not until recently that academics and practitioners have tried to formally define it like the aforementioned studies.

CONCEPTIONS	MAIN IDEAS	APPLICATION
CASEL	Application of knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, achieve positive goals, have empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions	Identification of skill areas that SEL may emphasize and build
Durlak et al., 2011	"Noncognitive factors" that include self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness	
Zins & Elias, 2007	The capacity to recognize and manage emotions, solve problems effectively, and establish positive relationships with others	
Mahoney et al., 2021	A coordinated set of evidence-based programs and practices for enhancing social-emotional-cognitive development, positive behavior and interpersonal relationships, and academic performance	Identification of SEL as a process and mechanisms taught in a classroom
EEF	A set of interventions that can be broadly categorized into three layers: school-level approaches, universal approaches, and specialized approaches	
Cohen, 2006	SEL roots itself in participation in democracy that create a strong foundation of pleasure, engagement, and meaning	Extension of SEL into social values to signify its important role in education

Barriers to effective SEL

While SEL has gained momentum at both the federal and local level, the nascency of the formalized concept has exposed barriers and challenges that make implementing SEL complicated. Lack of support from the school- and district-level leadership, low-quality and less formalized teacher training on SEL, and an absence of school-family partnerships have been named as some of the main impediments to success (Durlak et al., 2011). Other studies point to limited local-buy in, limited financial and personnel resources, poor integration into educational practice, and low sustainability throughout the day or even the year – all of which are exacerbated in schools situated in low-income settings (Bailey et al., 2019; Jones & Bouffard, 2020). The existing literature provides insight into a variety of challenges, both short- and long-term, situated at the system level. Research has also uncovered a correlation between pre-school socialization and overall higher socio-emotional ability. This is significant because barriers to pre-school education are also prevalent along lines of socio-economic status and development (Arapa et al., 2021). Thus, the barriers to pre-school education can act as barriers to socio-emotional ability.

Much of the literature surrounding the barriers to implementation approaches the question from a systemic perspective and oftentimes comes from a lens of an outside researcher, rather than from a classroom practitioner.

SEL and its potential impact on students in the US

Social emotional learning is a field worth exploring because existing research has shown promising results for students where SEL is incorporated explicitly. An examination of the Fast Track PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies) found that this well-implemented multiyear social-emotional learning program had positive effects including reduced aggression, increased prosocial behavior, and improved academic engagement (Bierman et al., 2010). Positively, this study shows not only improvement in purely emotional dispositions for a student, but extends to academic success, which is critical in rallying support in educational policy. Additional studies corroborate this – Durlak et al. (2011) in their research study mention that SEL participants demonstrated significantly improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behaviors, in addition to academic performance that manifested in an 11-percentile point gain in achievement in standardized test scores (Durlak et al., 2011, p. 405). These few research studies are emblematic of a broader trend within the SEL research that corroborates its positive effects for students in the long-term.

The existing research also underscores positive effects when considering recent global events. Albeit centered in the Global North, existing research finds that SEL is improving students' education and development (Yorke et al., 2021). In the context of Covid-19, supporting students' SEL can help students catch up on lost learning and re-engage with academics. More importantly, it also positively supports mental health and well-being, two things that were significant areas of concern for children during the pandemic. The last major finding mentioned in this study is the role SEL plays for disadvantaged groups who may not have had as much general support during school closures – the pandemic exacerbated these inequalities and SEL, through its tailored and individualized approach, may help mitigate this.

Though it is a nascent area, there are still a growing number of research studies pointing to the efficacy of SEL that make it an area of research worth studying and pursuing. However, as momentum increases and implementation of programs at scale begins, it is necessary to thoroughly understand implementation challenges to sustain these initiatives across the system.

THE PREVALENCE OF IDENTITY AND EMOTIONS IN EDUCATION

After better understanding the context and importance of SEL in the United States, this section reviews the existing literature on emotions in education to understand how the field views emotion and where perspectives have yet to be further developed. Emotions in education are not a new concept; from studies of emotion in higher education to studies of diverse learners and emotion to studies of student affect, the current literature outlines many instances where emotion is making an impact (Mahoney et al., 2021; Nation et al., 2020; Thomson et al., 2017; Xue, 2012). Each piece of research is undergirded by theories that speak to the drivers of differentiated emotional experiences in education. This section will start with a broader framework (intersectionality) to better interrogate the existing literature on emotions in education.

Intersectionality in the social sciences

Experiences and their associated emotions are influenced by intersectional identities with associated advantages and disadvantages. In 1989, Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the phrase intersectionality to frame how race, class, gender, and other individual – often marginalizing – characteristics interacted to create a unique individual experience (Crenshaw, 2012). It is not just

the overlapping of these identities that is important, it is also how systems and structures of power interpret, control, and coexist with these intersectional identities. Arguably, a school and the hierarchy of teacher-student acts as a structure of power, and therefore must be interrogated through an intersectional lens. This is made even more important by the fact that emotion itself can be seen as a tool of power; Zembylas notes that with a focus on emotions comes the important questions of power and authority – who gets to decide what emotions are "right"? What is the power dynamic in a classroom once you incorporate the teacher-student relationship as it relates to emotion? (Zembylas, 2011). Because power dynamics are seemingly inherent in emotions, it is necessary to deconstruct their existence through an intersectional lens to better understand how influence and impact can shift depending on the identities present in the ecosystem.

Researchers of intersectionality encourage the application of this theory to the social sciences, urging that "scholars can and should draw from wide range of empirical research that is not necessarily defined as intersectional, but which nevertheless enables an intersectional analysis" (Carbado et al., 2013, p. 307).

Emotions as Context-Driven: Biocultural Model of Emotions and Emotional Geographies

Equipped with an understanding of an intersectional framework, one can better understand the existing literature on emotions in education and why contextualization plays a large role in differentiated experiences.

There is much debate around how much influence culture and biology have on emotions; Matsumoto and Hwang (2012) offer a *Biocultural Model of Emotion* that states that there are different domains of emotions, and each domain has portions influenced by biology and portions influenced by culture. Thus, each actor in the system has a conception of emotion that is different than the other (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2012). Because emotions themselves can be impacted by their context, any sort of pedagogy or approach to managing emotion may also be altered due to the context or identity of each actor in the ecosystem. Another aspect of the *Biocultural Model* is its differentiation from existing cross-cultural and cross-ethnic studies. The prior studies purport that culture influences emotion uniformly, when in reality, culture changes emotion relative to the individual it's affecting (Levenson et al., 2020). The *Biocultural Model* nurtures an empirically informed view that culture's impact on emotion varies by component of emotion (e.g., language,

physical reactions), type of emotion, context, and the individual. This warrants a more nuanced exploration of how emotional education is influenced by the surrounding context.

Another theory giving credence to emotions as contextual concepts is *emotional geographies*. *Emotional geography* is the study of emotions as a dynamic affect determined by the socio-spatial movements and relations amongst an ecosystem (Davidson & Milligan, 2004). Said differently, this view of emotion problematizes emotion as deeply influenced by outside factors and impacted by the directionality and relationship to other actors in the ecosystem. Further, emotions circulate among people and require an awareness of how sociocultural factors, like race and ethnicity, are understood and influence emotion (Zembylas, 2011). If one views emotions as both culturally dependent and dependent on others in the ecosystem, one must also view any sort of pedagogy associated with emotion in the same way – as culturally and relationally dependent in terms of effectiveness and receptivity.

Another aspect of emotional geographies is the role it plays in an individual's sense of belonging. A study of a Scottish primary school found that emotions impacted not only the level of belonging a student felt, but they also shaped and were shaped by a child's intersectional identity (Kustatscher, 2017). The findings of the study state that "children's emotional geographies have highlighted the complexity of multiple identities by exploring, for example, migrant children's feelings of belonging in advantaged or disadvantaged neighborhoods, young people's gendered, classed and raced experiences of citizenship and participation in particular locations, or the gendered and raced emotions involved in girls' identities and relationships in schools" (Kustatscher, 2017, p. 66). In this statement alone, Kustatscher draws upon several identity drivers that influence a student's emotional disposition. A broader scan of literature in the space points to other influential identity factors, including gender structures (Evans, 2017; Thomson et al., 2017), socio-economic status (van Poortvliet, 2021), race (DeCuir-Gunby & Williams, 2007). The intersection of those aspects influences SEL administration and emotions more broadly.

Though there is a large body of research on how emotions themselves vary by culture, context, and background. There is a gap on how this extends to relevant social and emotional pedagogy. Furthermore, there remains a large amount of investigation to understand how SEL impacts students of unique identities, especially diverse learners (Kennedy, 2019). This dissertation contributes to the body of both intersectional and emotional geography educational research –

conceptualizing SEL as a process emanating from one individual (the teacher) to another (the student) and interrogating the intersectional identity factors that promote or impede the success of this type of learning.

THE ROLE OF A TEACHER IN IMPLEMENTING SEL

After discussing how emotions in the educational ecosystem are shaped by context, this section will review the literature on the teacher's role in SEL curriculum. While the literature on SEL mentions an expansive set of actors (administrators, teachers, students, families, etc.), there is a convergence on teachers being the most critical component of SEL implementation. First, I will explore how a teacher's lived experience and perceptions impact different factors of implementation and then more specifically look at one mode of shared learning that teachers value and is concurrently relevant to SEL tenets they strive to teach students through SEL.

Teachers' interpretations of SEL and results in the classroom

First, teachers' interpretations of SEL and the system they exist in had significant influence on key outcome indicators. A study surveyed over 600 teachers in Canada and found that teachers' perceptions of their school climate was correlated with their stress, job efficacy, and overall satisfaction (Collie et al., 2012). This same study notes that teachers' comfort and commitment to SEL not only impact how they teach SEL but also their own social-emotional well-being. This research establishes a positivist connection between what a teacher interprets in their contextual environment and the outcomes associated with teaching SEL. However, a deeper understanding of how these perceptions of the environment affected teachers' perceptions of challenges and ease of implementation is lacking.

There is also an abundance of literature that discusses teachers' interpretations of personal factors and how they influence educational outcomes. For example, an empirical study of pre-school teachers in Greece uncovered that teachers' perceptions of their own social and emotional skills impacted the efficacy of their SEL pedagogy and strength of the teacher-student relationship (Poulou, 2017). This inward reflection of SEL skills starts to consider the teacher's understanding of the self and how that influences the effectiveness of SEL implementation. Additionally, empirical research of 150 students that sought to understand the relationship between teachers' emotions and students' emotions also found that a teachers' own emotions impacted instructional behavior

and the emotional dispositions of their students (Becker et al., 2014). This research displays another instance where the teachers' behaviors greatly impact students' emotional outcomes; however, teachers' emotions are assessed by the student, and there is an absence of a teacher's own perception of their emotions. Lastly, a set of studies that surveyed teachers' levels of confidence in SEL established that there was a correlation between a teacher's belief in SEL and their pedagogical decision-making (Attias, 2020; Kenway & Youdell, 2011). When a teacher perceived the value of SEL as positive and significant, their actions led to effective behavior and practice change to better implement the curriculum.

The existing research paints a holistic picture of perceptions that teachers have regarding SEL and the impact on SEL instruction and efficacy. This dissertation contributes to the research by building on the wealth of evidence that indicates teachers matter; teachers' perceptions of various elements in the education system must be directly interrogated and elevated to develop a firsthand understanding of their realities and challenges. Unfortunately, while the efficacy of SEL teaching relies heavily on teacher implementation, there is scant research on teachers' direct perceptions of their SEL abilities or of the SEL ecosystem (Cefai & Cavioni, 2014). The existing research also focuses on outcomes and efficacy while lacking a perspective or robust understanding of how teachers perceive barriers and challenges in the SEL ecosystem.

Teacher Communities of Practice as a way of learning

Existing literature on communities of practice is called upon because these learning structures are utilized for both students and teachers as it relates to SEL. Broadly, communities of practice are a gathering of people who care about similar issues and interact regularly to learn from one another (Wenger et al., 2002). Another view is taken by Eden, when they state that a community of practice is a process by which people "mutually guide each other through their understanding of the same problems in their area of mutual interest, and this way indirectly share tacit knowledge" (I. Eden et al., 2016, p. 389). Eden et al. (2016) contend that the Community of Practice is as much the process it takes to form together as it is the community that is eventually set up. In the context of SEL and this research specifically, both the teachers and students engage in a process of forming these groups that reinforce SEL learnings taught at the beginning of the school year.

Moreover, Communities of Practice are an inherently vulnerable space. Teachers often gather in Communities of Practice for shared learning – signified by a common focus, personal and

professional relationships, safe but challenging spaces and a shared commitment (Patton & Parker, 2017). Because SEL is rooted in vulnerability to an extent, this learning structure can prove to be a useful tool in both the learning and implementation of SEL. This present research provides helpful context to understand teacher's practice and training in SEL, and creates space for further investigation into the role community and community-values play in SEL.

CONCLUSION

A review of existing literature on the topic demonstrates that research on SEL and emotions in education is abundant but disconnected. By first looking at the current definitions of SEL and the state of SEL in the US, a continuously evolving definition that grows with each research study and implementation emerges. It also demonstrates a largely outside-in, systemic view of the challenges of the SEL in the education system rather than a first-hand account from practitioners in the field who discuss challenges beyond the failures of the system. Second, review of existing literature on emotions in education develops a strong understanding that emotions are deeply influenced by context and environment of a particular education system, but does not apply this lens to probe how context influences the implementation of SEL. Finally, the literature review elevates teachers as a critical stakeholder in the implementation of SEL; it problematizes the lack of teacher perspective on certain aspects of the SEL education ecosystem and exposes a lack of literature discussing the challenges that teachers face in implementation through firsthand accounts. Thus, this literature review has influenced the following research in several ways:

- First, while there is a lot of theory underpinning the contextual influence of emotions, this has not yet extended as deeply into the influence on SEL itself. The present study, which understands how external factors can impact the way teachers and students teach and perceive SEL, is a natural step beyond the literature on intersectionality, the *Biocultural Model of Emotions*, and *Emotional Geography* research.
- Second, the current literature discusses barriers to implementation of SEL shallowly relative to the efficacy and importance of SEL; the literature also appears to focus the discussion at a system-level (teacher support, funding, time, etc.). While these are crucial challenges that prevent SEL from flourishing, it is only one piece of the puzzle. The present research emphasizes the inquiry of other layers in the system that have a large influence on how well SEL is implemented and impacts students.

- Third, a large portion of literature explores teachers' perceptions of SEL and gives significance to the role they play in the SEL ecosystem. However, the current literature does not specifically ask teachers, the main stewards of SEL, what they perceive challenges to be. This is a lost opportunity to hear the perspectives of those who are arguably the most important stakeholder in the SEL implementation ecosystem. This present research will take a teacher-first lens to understanding the challenges to implementing SEL, a field that is relatively new, deeply contextual, and highly impactful.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter illustrates the theory and methodology used to conduct research to answer the initial research questions and generate the findings of this paper. First, the philosophical underpinnings of the research are defined to set the foundation of the rest of the methods. Second, the resulting qualitative research design is explained to provide perspective for the findings to follow. Third, efforts to promote rigor are described to establish trustworthiness of this research. Finally, ethical risks and mitigation strategies are outlined to ensure that no harm was conducted during research.

PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS

The way a researcher understands the world affects how a certain issue will be researched. In line with my philosophical approaches to the world, this research is grounded in a constructivist paradigm, which understands reality by constructing the social world through a multitude of viewpoints (Lincoln et al., 2011). In this paradigm, realities are local, specific, and co-constructed. Specifically, this present research utilizes a relativist ontology, with an interpretivist epistemology, and a value-engaged axiology.

First, the constructivist paradigm informing this research encompasses a relativist ontology. A relativist ontology states that the world is not absolute; rather, it is informed by the unique structures, identities, experiences, and languages of individuals (O'Grady, 2002). The research aims and questions focus on understanding teachers' perceptions of barriers to implementing a certain type of learning, focusing on a variety of teachers' perspectives informed by their unique experiences to conceptualize a broader understanding of barriers to SEL in the classroom. The belief that the world is constructed through unique, individualized stories influences how the rest of the research methods are structured, which are outlined later in this chapter.

Related, this paradigm is associated with an interpretivist epistemology. Interpretivism states that understanding reality begins with the individual actor, their actions, intentions, reactions, and subsequent responses. This epistemology also lends itself to qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews, to construct a multi-perspective view of education (O'Reilly, 2009). As described later in this chapter, semi-structured interviews are well suited for an interpretivist epistemology. The goal of this research remains to understand emerging themes and discover what barriers teachers conceptualized in this field. It is not to confirm any positivist, data-oriented hypothesis. Rather, the goal is to continue a discussion on the potential challenges in the education system when implementing SEL.

Third, this paradigm connects with a value-engaged axiology. Research's axiology can be defined by whether or not moral value or worth is ascribed to a particular set of research questions or potential resulting insights (Heron & Reason, 1997). Engaging in both a reflexive process on identity, evaluating my connection with the research, and by reading the emerging literature, there is ascribed value to implementing SEL; this exploration is driven by a desire to uncover the barriers within systems with the hope that it can help the US educational system identify areas for growth.

The utilization of a constructivist paradigm necessitates a method that honors the key tenets described in each of its component parts. Thus, a qualitative research design was used to create space for a multiplicity of perspectives that led to a relative, not absolute, understanding of reality.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN

Qualitative methods were chosen because of paradigmatic alignment. Linked with an interpretivist epistemology, qualitative research is employed when answering "questions about experience, meaning and perspective, most often from the standpoint of the participant" (Hammarberg et al., 2016, p. 499). Relatedly, the main aim of the research is to understand the unique perspectives of teachers in a "local, specific, and co-constructed" manner. Qualitative methods thus allow for that meaning to emerge without a specific prescribed outcome. It is a process of discovery based on the individual experiences of each teacher. For example, in a qualitative study to understand the role of empathy in teaching culturally diverse students, thirty-four teachers were interviewed to understand their beliefs on empathy's role in teaching diverse students. As a result of the qualitative methodology, three major themes (positive interactions with diverse students, supportive classrooms, and student-centered practice) with rich subtext emerged to support these claims (McAllister & Irvine, 2002). With similar aims and drawing on the principles of qualitative

research, interviews were used as a primary method which allow for an immersion into lived experiences and a constructivist worldview.

Interviews

Seven semi-structured, virtual interviews with teachers based in Washington, D.C., United States were conducted, selected using a purposive and snowball sampling technique. Interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams at various times during the day. They were an hour long, recorded, and automatically transcribed using the videoconference software. In this section, the suitability of interview as a method, the complexities in conducting interviews virtually, and the subject matter addressed in the research instrument is discussed.

Interviews are a powerful tool because they enable "culturally embedded normative explanations of events and behaviors because they represent ways in which people organize views of themselves, of others, and of their social worlds" (Orbuch, 1997, p. 455). Further, Orbuch notes that the analysis of these interviews can let imperceptible themes emerge, including context and situations, cultural frames, and overall theoretical understandings of phenomena. While existing barriers were identified in the literature, the exploration of themes beyond these systemic barriers was not present. Thus, this present study uses interviews to explore perceptions and realities that teachers are facing. While interviews are useful for letting these subtle narratives emerge, it is equally important to acknowledge that the process of interviewing inherently fractures a story; stories are inevitably specific and incomplete recollections of 'what happened' and 'why'" (Miller & Glassner, 2021). Further, coding and categorization realistically retell only parts of stories instead of presenting the holistic picture. This paper mitigates that risk by going through a systematic approach of thematic analysis where the initial excerpts shared are reread in the context of the full interview to understand the environment in which they were shared. After understanding the context of the interview, the findings make an explicit effort to contextualize the excerpts of the interviews and situate the evidence within the broader narrative of each interview.

Interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams at various times during the day. They were an hour long, recorded, and automatically transcribed using the videoconference software.

Although in-person interviews allow for deeper engagement with people's experiences, digital interviews provide benefits that were instrumental in conducting this research. First, digital interviews were used because they remove temporal and geographic barriers to research, allowing more accessible exploration of sociocultural research and spaces (Quinton & Reynolds, 2018).

Digital interviews also enable interviewees to be in their own space and set their own conditions to have the most productive and comfortable interviews. A specific set of teachers in a particular school were reachable without expending the time or money to travel to the site. Despite time and financial constraints, rich data utilizing digital interviews was still able to be collected. The nature of the digital interview allowed the interviewee to feel most comfortable in their 'own' space – Some taking it from their own homes and others taking it from the very classrooms in which they teach SEL, which may not have been possible had in-person interviews been conducted.

However, it is important to note that important context may be lost in this virtual format. When conducting virtual interviews, one misses the opportunity to physically experience a space when conducting an interview and physically getting a feel for the space of conversation – in this case, it was the lack of feeling a classroom, the halls of the school, and the neighborhood itself. On a micro-level, it means missing non-verbal cues and information that can be gleaned when one is physically in conversation (Roberts et al., 2021). This was addressed by finding meaningful ways to build the missing context. For example, spending ample time on background information within each interview before diving into the specific research questions, allowing space for robust and open-ended answers during the interview, and becoming familiar with the school, its geography, community, and history and sharing that narrative in this paper were all steps taken to mitigate potential pitfalls with digital interviews.

Content-wise, the semi-structured interview was divided into three main categories: background and experience, perceptions and understandings of SEL, and barriers. These categories had specific lists of reference questions embedded beneath them, but it was emphasized during the interviews that teachers could deviate from the questions or opt out if there was another direction they would rather go. The full interview schedule can be found in **Appendix B.**

Purposive sampling

Participants for this study were chosen using purposive sampling, which is the selection of participants using logical criteria that would lead to both a representative and information-rich set of evidence in pursuit of a specific set of research questions (Battaglia, 2008). The following sub-sections outline the two-level selection criteria regarding the school first and the specific teachers second.

School selection criteria

The school of study (anonymized as 'VN' for purposes of this study and referenced as '[name of school]' in direct quotes) is based in Washington D.C. and focuses on creating "an inclusive community that provides authentic experiences and engages the whole child" (*[School's Website]*, 2022). This is a district school situated in the Navy Yard neighborhood.

This school was chosen as a context of research to increase likelihood of high-quality, context-rich, and ethical research. First, the school has a reputation in the educational community as a leader in social emotional learning which signals a strong conception of SEL. The school and its partners have codified a specific conception of SEL that is successfully implemented in their classrooms; on a broader scale, the school has been awarded a multi-million USD grant to scale and study this model in 20 schools within D.C. and a large school district in greater Houston area, reaching nearly 11,000 students in underserved schools ([Website of National Non-Profit], 2022). This provides confidence that the model is worth studying and is something developed, providing a strong foundation from which to build further conceptual and theoretical understanding. Second, the student population is diverse, with 50 percent of the student body identifying as low socio-economic status (SES) (through a proxy of whether they are eligible for free and reduced lunch) and over 50 percent identified as students of color. This was to ensure that the nuances of being a diverse teacher interacting with a diverse set of students were given space to emerge within the discussion. Specifically, the identities of low SES and students of color were part of an initial hypothesis that identity led to differentiated experience with SEL. Finally, this school has a unique model where they work with a third-party national non-profit to fuel their Research and Development efforts in codifying and scaling this SEL model ([Website of National Non-Profit], 2018). This reduces the burden on teachers, frees capacity for them to practice their instruction, and reinforces their learning with partners who have the resources and skillset to reflect back to the researcher what they are doing (Reimer & Bruce, 1994). This supports teachers to have a deeper understanding of the model they will be speaking about and tactically frees their capacity to speak with a researcher.

Some potential limitations were considered when picking an SEL-forward school, chief of which was: if this organization was so well-versed in SEL, could teachers really speak to barriers in implementing this type of learning for students? Ultimately, the decision was made to sample here because the school was more advanced in its conception and experience with SEL, which provides teachers a shared language and understanding to communicate with an external researcher. Second, because teachers were trained and equipped with SEL skills themselves, teachers were presumed to be more willing to share their authentic experiences having practiced in such psychologically safe environments with supportive administrators. Finally, while it may seem that

teachers at this school have adapted to SEL now, it was not *always* easy to teach SEL at this school and in their prior teaching experiences. The duality of experiences as a prior teacher outside the school and early teacher in the school enriched the comparisons.

Teacher selection criteria

Because school selection was the most important filter, teacher selection was simplified and based on two main things: age of students taught and diversity.

First, regarding age taught, teachers were only chosen if they taught early childhood (Kindergarten through Grade 5). This was done because the literature points to the importance of SEL in early childhood, so the perspectives sought after were those of teachers associated with an earlier age bracket to have more relevance in future policy discussions (McCelland et al., 2017). Second, diversity was considered across many dimensions. Of the seven teachers interviewed, six were female-identifying and one was male-identifying. Four of the teachers were teachers of color. Practically, teachers taught across a range of subjects (STEM, humanities, general studies, and Spanish). From an experience standpoint, teachers' time in the field of education ranged from five to eight years at their current school and six to seventeen years of experience in the educational field (including teacher training, school leadership, and teaching at various schools). Ensuring a diverse sample was important because certain teaching practices and experiences in class, especially around behavior management, are impacted by identity factors such as race and gender (Martin et al., 2006). By representing a diverse set of individuals, the nuances of teacher identities can uncover the nuances of the challenges associated with SEL.

Three main limitations associated with this sample are the gender imbalance, the sample size, and the absence of certain actors in the ecosystem. The sample is predominantly women, and while this is indicative of a broader trend of teacher gender demographic in the United States, it is still important to note as potentially having an impact on the data. Second, the sample is small. However, it is first important to understand that the goal of qualitative research is to access certain realities and let themes and perspectives emerge from those narratives (Miller & Glassner, 2021). Understanding this purpose puts less emphasis on a large sample from which to extrapolate to describe what *is,* which does not align with the constructivist paradigm guiding this research. Tactically, a deeply analytical approach was taken to extract as much rich data from the hour-long interviews conducted to mitigate this concern. By going deep rather than broad, a more prioritized and comprehensive narrative of the teacher experience can be investigated and subsequently shared with the reader. The last main limitation is a lack of student and administrator

representation in the sample, which limits perspective of the complex SEL educational ecosystem and the firsthand account of barriers within those layers. Ultimately, the decision was made to focus solely on teachers because the literature points to their involvement and experience as both unique and critical to the success of any initiative in the classroom (Becker et al., 2014; Cefai & Cavioni, 2014; Collie et al., 2012; Poulou, 2017). Additionally, intentional effort was made to speak from the position and perspective of the teacher, as opposed to extrapolating expansively on administrators' and students' situations. This mitigates any potential misrepresentation of the data gathered with this methodology and sample.

Data analysis

The data was analyzed utilizing a traditional thematic coding process that begins with transcriptions and ends with broader themes that synthesize what is found in the interviews (Elliott, 2018).

First, each hour-long interview was recorded through Microsoft Teams and then transcribed using a combination of automated transcription and manual editing, resulting in a transcript that was then used to code to understand emergent themes. In summary, seven hours of interviews were transcribed into ninety-eight pages of transcript. Supplementing these was a handwritten journal spanning the time frame of three months (from recruitment of teachers to final revision of draft).

Next, each transcription was coded using NVivo coding software. Through the process of inductive coding, each interview resulted in anymore between fifty-five to eighty codes per interview and 115 unique codes in sum (**Appendix D**). The searchable coding within Nvivo allowed for exceptionally organized and traceable pieces of evidence with broader themes that emerged within the research. Once each interview was coded, unique codes were grouped into seventeen sub-themes, and eventually, roughly four themes with eleven sub-themes emerged that will be discussed in the *'Findings'* and *'Discussion'* portion of this dissertation. It is important to note that not all codes are discussed to prioritize the analysis in this present research.

ENSURING RIGOR

To ensure this study was rigorous, a few key decisions were made to address credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This framework of rigor was established by Guba (1981) to assess rigor in the context of qualitative research and, when addressed properly, can ensure trustworthiness of any qualitative study (Guba, 1981).

To strengthen the credibility, or the extent to which the evidence or findings reflect reality, I engaged in *'member checks,'* which is the process of sharing transcripts back with participants (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Full transcripts and were sent back to participants along with an invitation to adapt or discuss any general or specific parts of the interview. Though qualitative research is designed to expose subjective realities, member checks can improve accuracy and build trust with the research participants. Second, to ensure transferability, which allows for comparability between different contexts, extensive descriptions of the context of the school and teacher sample identified for this study were shared. Additionally, context on the current state of SEL in the United States was described to ground the reader in the environment that the study took place in case selection of a new geography is pertinent (Cascarino, 2013; CASEL, 2022; Edutopia, 2011; Grant et al., 2017; Hoffman, 2009). Dependability, focused on replication of the process along the way, was addressed informally through utilization of a research journal which captured changes in methods and decision points in research design and formally through a comprehensive description of interview and sampling methods so the research may be redesigned and redeployed in future studies. Finally, to address confirmability and researcher bias, a few actions were taken. First, pilots of the interviews were conducted with peers to solicit feedback and practice objectivity in interviews. Second, high-level themes were discussed with co-supervisors before findings were fully integrated to discuss whether the interpretation of the data was driven by the richness of the data and not personal bias. Third, a reflexivity section was included at the end of this paper and embedded in sections where applicable (e.g., reflections on sample decisions, ethics, etc.). Reflexivity is a key process that is required of qualitative researchers to interrogate their own positionality and power dynamics as it relates to the research participants; the act of reflecting on one's own identity builds trustworthiness (Dodgson, 2019).

ETHICS

Ethical dilemmas are ever-present in qualitative research. At the broadest level, researchers must grapple with how to ensure the interests of participants are not misrepresented or abused because of the conducted study (Halai & EdQual RPC, 2006). It is worth noting that before research began, the proposal was cleared by an institutional review board (CUREC). Still, ethical concerns in qualitative research of power, anonymity, and time-balance arose specifically in this study.

The first main ethical concern is balancing power dynamics, especially between a researcher and teacher who is subject to scrutiny (Reimer & Bruce, 1994).

To mitigate this concern, there were a few actions taken. Recruiting participants through a vetted partner was the first step taken. As stated earlier in this Chapter, the national non-profit and VN were given direction to select trusted interview participants along the mentioned criteria from the teachers in their network. Since these organizations knew the interviewees more intimately and recruited through an opt-in model, participants were already entering the space with a baseline level of trust and autonomy. Second, as a researcher, one can build trust by being open and communicative, especially when first interacting and recruiting the participants (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Upon introduction, an email communication was immediately sent with a project overview, participant information sheet, and informed consent form. Additionally, an offer was given to talk informally before formally accepting the interview role. At the end, interview schedule requests were sent with a two-week time frame to allow for as much flexibility as possible. A related third step to mitigate the power imbalance was to be as flexible as possible, both in planning and the actual interview. Because of time zones, there would often be a time frame that was more convenient in the teacher's schedule but at odd times in my location. Teachers' convenience was consistently prioritized, with an open opportunity to switch at the last minute if unexpected duties as a classroom teacher came up (emergency student, class trips, etc.). Third, supported by the semi-structured nature of the interview, conversation was initiated by the researcher at the start but then transitioned to being interviewee-led if there was an area teachers wanted to explore more. This open, active-listening position establishes an additional layer of trust and empowered the interviewee to feel in control of both the hour and the overall narrative of their story (Weger et al., 2014).

A second area of ethical concern was preserving anonymity, especially considering the positionality of the teachers relative to who or what they may be criticizing within their school.

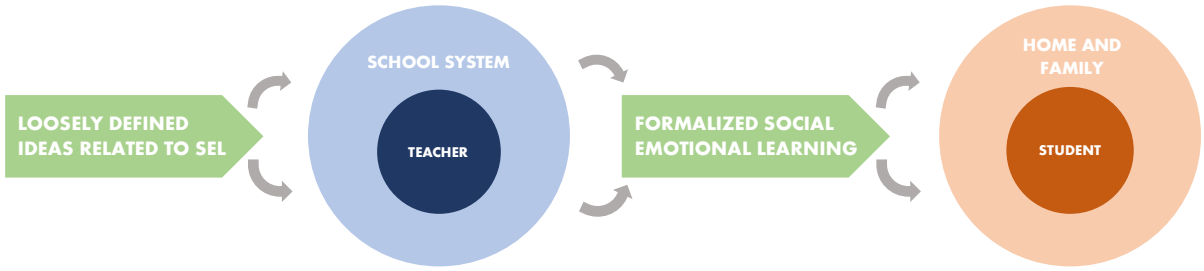
First, each participant was given and signed an informed consent form ensuring that they were okay with participating and having their interviews recorded. While original transcripts and records were stored in the University of Oxford's Nexus365 drive, the findings in the chapter are anonymized with hyper-specific identifiers removed from the chapter and discussion. Therefore, the themes and certain criticisms can emerge without identifying specific individuals. Lastly, as mentioned prior, *member checking* was conducted (i.e., sending data back to participants and letting them adjust their transcript) to ensure their words were reflective of their views and any information they were concerned about sharing was redacted.

Finally, one general ethical concern is the strain research might take on human subjects with busy lives and time constraints (Reimer & Bruce, 1994).

One approach to mitigate this is to allow participants to opt out of the study. In the participant information form, interviewees were given permission to opt out until a certain time frame (mid-June) even after they had agreed to research. Giving participants the optionality to opt out gives flexibility and respect for the teacher's busy time. The last approach is to reciprocate benefit to participants. In this vein, it was mentioned that the research and findings can and will be shared back to the partner organizations and participants to provide helpful insight. Many participants expressed interest in this offer which provided some incentive to contribute to the research fully.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

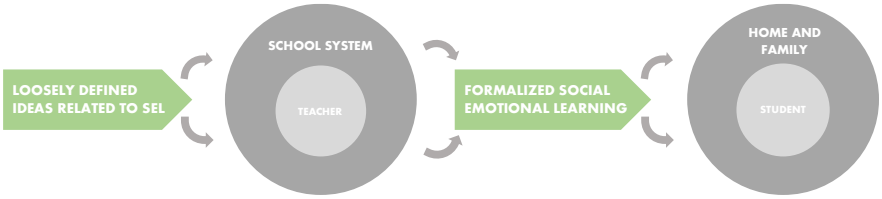
The findings of these seven semi-structured interviews and methodology described in Chapter 3 will be presented in narrative form from the perspective of the teacher. As a field, there are many conceptions of the systemic barriers to implementing curriculum (Cascarino, 2013; J. Cohen, 2006; Durlak et al., 2011; Education Endowment Foundation, 2021; Mahoney et al., 2021; Zins & Elias, 2007), but rarely any from the full perspective of a teacher. This chapter will describe – from the internal to external – how a teacher experiences the educational system and the challenges they find as they implement SEL. I argue that SEL navigates layers in a system of identity, with each layer having its own nuances that effectively mold the conception of SEL, before reaching the student. This framework is illustrated below and will also be used to navigate and summarize the 'Findings' section:



The first section will describe the model of SEL through the lens of interviewed teachers – both in what they teach and how they then define it. Second, I will discuss the initial self-reflection that teachers go through as it relates to their identity, personal beliefs around SEL, emotional health, and training. Third, I will describe how teachers exist within and experience broader constructs of

support or barriers at the system level. Fourth, I will describe how a teacher then thinks about their students and the nuances they must consider around identity and trauma to best adapt and implement SEL. Fifth, I will discuss how a teacher considers the students' family and home life and their impacts on the students.

TEACHING SEL AT VN



To better understand how teachers perceive barriers to implementing SEL, it is important to understand how teachers are experiencing and defining SEL on their own terms. The teachers interviewed at VN have a specific implementation of social emotional learning that informs their overall perceptions of SEL. This distinct implementation of social emotional learning comprised of skills, mindsets, and rituals, which will be described throughout this chapter. Rather than approaching this section by describing each specific procedure in full, it focuses more on the skill areas teachers collectively hoped to build with supporting examples of how they facilitate this learning.

Equipping students to communicate and articulate emotions effectively with one another

Teachers perform a plethora of activities that promote better communication and connection between students. It starts at the beginning of the day, with teachers providing warm greetings as soon as students enter the school. Teacher 6 describes that "[o]ne of the biggest things at the very start of the day when students walk into the school building at [name of school] is that there are greeters all throughout the building to help the students feel very welcomed. And if a student comes in not feeling great, then having those people around is very useful to talk through the emotion if that's helpful for them or help them feel better." This teacher reflects on how this intentional greeting establishes clear and positive communication between adults and students by allowing space to "talk through the emotion" and sets a precedent for healthy communication from the beginning of the day.

As teachers continue the day, they incorporate an intention setting exercise within the morning routine that helps students articulate their objectives for the day. Teacher 4 shares that "[w]e'll set a goal for the day, so they'll pick either one of our class agreements or they'll set their own personal

goal for what they want to accomplish." This emphasizes intentional communication and verbalization of students' needs and aspirations while also encouraging openness with one's surrounding community.

As teachers described more intangible strategies, such as intentional choices in specific language and tone, or the tangible structures, such as partner time or group reflections, that were ingrained in their teaching, they reflected on how important these instructional moves and incorporations were to strengthen students' emotional articulation. Teacher 3 notes that the VN implementation of SEL "allows us those problem-solving structures to vocalize how they are feeling. And they couldn't have learned that without the structures that we've had in place before. They wouldn't be able to name [their emotions] and have the language for it." Teacher 4 further shares that because of these structures, "they communicate so much more clearly, because if they feel like something isn't fair or something frustrates them, they have the words to say what they need to say to solve their problem and get back to the academics and be more productive." Both teachers appreciated the emotional articulation and complex language these tangible structures build for students.

A teacher at VN clearly prioritizes emotional articulation as a foundational skill. Students can demonstrate and build on these skills through structures like the warm greetings and intention setting. Teachers' reflections on how these structures impact students also corroborates the role emotional articulation has within this conceptualization of SEL.

Caring and supporting emotional regulation

Once students can identify and name their emotions, teachers then express care in helping students regulate these emotions. The teachers at VN do this end-to-end, with Teacher 7 commenting again on the greeting at the beginning of the day, stating, "[i]t starts with the way we greet other students, being intentional about connecting with them from the beginning of the class. It's beyond what people used to call temperature check. It's understanding where they come from. When they first arrive at school, the goal is to make sure they're feeling okay and giving them the opportunity to get acquainted with the space before jumping into instruction. " Teacher 7 reinforces the notion that the check-ins create mutual awareness of emotions and are the first step in caring for and supporting emotional regulation before entering the day.

Teacher 5 further shares that it is also about "understanding their own emotions within a spectrum. So doing their own social, emotional check-ins. And I would say students are also regularly checking in with one another as well whether that's at recess at lunch." As a teacher, Teacher 5 reflects an

understanding that an initial check-in on emotions is a catalyst for continuous check-ins throughout the day. They also go even deeper and acknowledge how it's not only about regulating one's own emotions but also recognizing how those emotions fit within the broader schema of existing emotions.

Teachers also indicated how their intentionally curated physical spaces promote emotional check-ins and regulation. Nearly all teachers told stories of the "Centering Space," an area positioned in the middle of the classroom. Teacher 4 elaborates on this explicit design and its purpose: "*[points to chair in the middle of the room]* This little chair is our space right here, so it's away from where we're doing whole group instruction, or if students are working at their desk, it's far enough away that they feel like they have some space to themselves, but it's not off in a corner. It's not like a way so that they're separated so that we can't see them, or they can't see us. And the centering space is for when a student is feeling overwhelmed or frustrated and or if they don't like the game that we're playing for community building – instead of having a big behavior because they're upset about the choice, they'll just go sit." The teachers emphasized how important it is that the space is in the center of the classroom, so a student doesn't feel excluded or ostracized because they are frustrated. It literally acknowledges that emotions are central to the way the community engages and makes it visible that a student needs help. It teaches students those emotions don't need to be hidden and helps the student find their own space to emotionally regulate accordingly.

The teachers exercise their care and support of emotional articulation in how they engage with the students tactically (in their instructional moves), in principle (through their own emotional intelligence and understanding of the nuance of emotions), and physically (in their creation of spaces that foster a safe space for emotional regulation).

Fostering community- and relationship-building

Once teachers establish the skillset for effective articulation and regulation, they express an ability to focus on another important aspect of SEL at VN: community- and relationship-building. A teacher at VN has many structured opportunities to strengthen community and relationships within the classroom – from "Community Building," where students engage in a playful activity to build trust and have fun with one another to "Purposeful Partnering," where students engage one-on-one in a playful activity and connect with a peer individually. There is also a "Wish You Well" which Teacher 1 describes as a time where "we can send well wishes to people that we care about to make sure that they're doing okay. That's also their opportunity to share, if they would like, anything that may be weighing heavy on them," creating another opportunity to build connection among peers. All

teachers echoed similar reasons for why they implement these practices. Teacher 3 summarizes well: "[e]ach of the activities specifically are intended to help students build empathy and compassion for one another. I always tell my students 'the shortest distance between the truth and people is their story,' and with this model you really, really get to know students and who they are as individuals. And you build these routines throughout the day so that they can get to know one another." Teachers consistently leveraged the multiple and differentiated structures built into the schedule to promote a strong and trusting relationships among the peers.

Teachers also facilitate community by helping students bridge differences when there is a risk of dysfunction within a community. Teacher 2 shared a few instances where students had conflict with one another and talks us through their resolution strategies: "[w]e also take time help students manage their conflicts with others, where the students are now using the skills that we learn together to actually go through those stages of 'I'm disagreeing with this person, instead of hitting them, I'm going to use my what we say assertive voice, big voice to have a conversation about it.'" Prior to and during these conflicts, teachers and students discuss the strategies to name the emotions and work through conflict in a calm and healthy way, building a skill that is crucial to overcoming potential rifts between students.

Promoting student agency

Teachers also seek opportunities to promote student agency. Throughout the day, teachers offer students opportunities to lead activities or exercises, whether it's creating a "Purposeful Partnering" game, leading a "Breathing Exercise", or leading the "Wish You Well" exercise. Teacher 5 notes that they do this because it gives students plenty of space to "show leadership and make and model those things that we're learning together." Teachers recognize that these opportunities throughout the day can showcase students' leadership and build agency.

Teachers also reflect on how providing students with choice and listening to their needs contributes to agency. Teacher 4 mentions that "[with any activity], we always offer the option to pass […] If we are playing some sort of game [involving] touch and you don't want to be touched or if we say close your eyes and you're not comfortable closing your eyes, there's always an option to pass and to just sit in the experience like with us." Teachers express that they do this intentionally, so everyone feels they have agency to do what feels best for them. Teachers remember this provision of optionality positively, sharing that "kids love feeling like they are heard" and that it results in a "much stronger relationship when the student is able to make their own choices."

By creating opportunities throughout the day to demonstrate leadership and emphasizing the ever-present option to opt out, teachers put into action the belief that students deserve and need agency to thrive in a classroom and beyond.

DEFINING SEL FROM A TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE

As teachers implemented SEL at VN and reflected on their personal pedagogies, it was clear that each interviewed teacher had a similar but varying definition of what SEL meant. Before attempting to define SEL, it is important to note that there is an expressed understanding that there is not one standard definition of SEL. Teachers expressed a common sentiment that while some of the elements of SEL showed up in prior teaching experience, there was rarely a name for it. Teacher 5 shares: "I know SEL was always part of my personal pedagogy, but I never had any formal trainings on SEL in my student teaching experience. We had similar practices, like community circles and morning meetings, but not a cut and dry practice." Teacher 6 even shared experiences outside of teaching that built their awareness of SEL-related skills without explicit naming: "I did a lot of volunteering that was actually a lot of social emotional learning without having called it that. I don't think anyone defined it as that, but really focusing on children developing what we believe to be their innate skills or virtues of being truthful and kind and respectful to other people. And so I had been doing that work for many, many years and I still continue that today." These stories make clear that SEL is not a completely new concept but new in its formal conceptualization. Teachers also mentioned encountering elements of SEL in disciplines such as child and cognitive development or embedded in Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs). Despite this lack of cohesion, teachers were able to formulate their own definitions with commonalities across three components that created the foundation for shared discovery and interrogation: self-awareness, building relationships and community, and integration and support of academics.

SEL has a focus on an ability to be self-aware and self-manage.

First, teachers constantly mentioned how a deeper self-understanding was one key outcome of SEL. Teacher 4 builds on this, saying it is about "teaching kids how to manage emotions or explicitly teaching students that they are not their emotions" while Teacher 5 adds that it is "a recognition that emotions are changing." These two excerpts are emblematic of how teachers in this researched group view SEL as an explicit deepening of emotional awareness, and, beyond that initial awareness, a more deliberate reaction to those emotions.

SEL provides skills and knowledge to build relationships and community.

Second, teachers emphasized SEL as a provision of knowledge and skills that helped students make connections, build relationships, and interact with others in a safe community. Teacher 6 defined the skills associated with SEL as learning how to "how to help yourself feel better so that so that you are then able to learn for yourself and interact with and work with other people," connecting the skills to the overarching goal of effectively creating relationships with peers. Teacher 4 describes a great outcome as "the sense of community that we build by doing SEL. It shows up everywhere. The kids are willing to collaborate. Every student in my room is willing to work with every other student. You know they feel like we're a family here." Teachers lauded the safe, connected space that they were able to create in their classrooms. The tangible community-building practices teachers deployed in their classrooms seemed to inform and strengthen a lot of teachers' personal definitions of SEL.

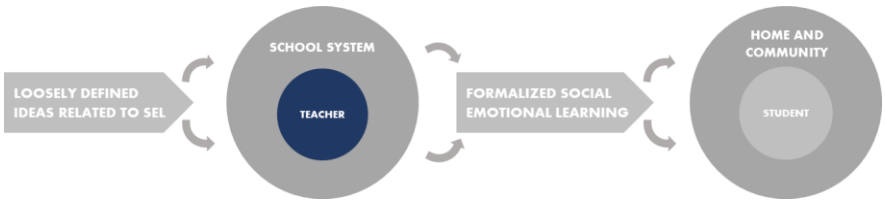
SEL cannot be separated from core academics; it supports and enhances academics for students.

Third, teachers made the strong claim that SEL is inextricably integrated with and supportive of strong overall academics within a school. Put simply, SEL cannot be defined in isolation to academics. Teacher 3 shares from their experience from teaching humanities courses: "I would say when it comes to literacy and humanities and, just think of yourself when you're reading literature, you're reading poetry, you're reading something that's incredibly meaningful and you're having this discussion with the rest of your class… The way in which you can be vulnerable and say what you mean and challenge one another is if you have that connection with the rest of the group. You're not going to say something incredibly meaningful around people that you don't know you don't care about." This reflection speaks to the intangible skills that SEL builds that eventually influence how students deepen and strengthen meaning in core academic subjects. Teacher 2 shares a different perspective on how SEL influences academics, mentioning that "[t]he reality is, if your children are not in a calm state, they're not going to learn anyway. So if I start my day digging right into the math content, and the students already came in at a high stress level, they're going to miss those first 30 minutes of math." Teachers very much view SEL as an integral driver of increasing vulnerability or clearing emotional roadblocks that enable students to learn any subject most effectively. Teacher 1 summarizes this positive impact clearly, expressing, "[w]hen you establish those positive relationships with students, it has a positive impact for when it is time to get down to business and academics. And what I found is the students that I put the most effort and getting to knowing them, and listening to them and caring about them, those are the students that engage the most with academics, or engage the most with me, in any type of capacity." The consistent mention of SEL's

support of academics merits a holistic redefinition of the concept of SEL through the lens of teachers at VN.

While the definition of SEL is still far from universal, there are similarities in VN teachers' conceptualizations of SEL. By implementing the same types of practices, rituals, and reflections within the same school, interviewed teachers reported similar themes within their conceptions of SEL, indicating that shared experience leads to shared understandings of this ambiguous field.

Teachers have their own personal experience, emotional state, and training that inform the way they *interpret* and *disseminate* SEL



Teachers use their own identity as a starting point of reflection to understand the potential barriers in implementing SEL. In this section, teachers share reflections on their own identity and positionality, their own authentic belief in SEL, their own emotional health and well-being, and finally learned ways of teaching as areas that can act as barriers or determinants of success depending on how those factors are considered and addressed.

Teachers reflect on their individual emotions, shaped by their unique identities and experiences

As teachers told their individual stories, there was a clear acknowledgement that one's own emotional behaviors, influenced by unique life experiences and identity, impacted how well they were able to teach SEL. As Teacher 3 spoke about their experience learning how to teach SEL through VN, they elaborate that "[w]hen I came to [name of school], you start with the teacher. You start with the human being in the room saying 'these are the triggers that I have in the classroom and these are the reasons why… So we took a lot of time reflecting upon our own experiences and our identity and what we bring into the classroom and how aspects of our identity could project in specific ways. It's recognizing things within ourselves and understanding them at a deeper level before actually executing a specific system." Teacher 3 brings the reader through their individual self-awareness and regulation that emerged before even thinking about practical application, explicitly tying identity to personal emotional state which sets the tone for how to teach SEL. Teachers' reflections on identity, specifically around race, also showcase how identity impacts ones' ability to teach SEL, acting as both a strength and area of concern depending on the individual. For

example, Teacher 1 talks about how being a teacher of color positively impacts the way they can administer SEL. They express that "[t]here were a lot of students of color in my grad classes. And I do think that as people of color, we tend to have a different view on education. And we tend to try to understand the outside factors and barriers a little bit more, because we may have been faced them ourselves, or know a lot of people who had faced those similar things." Teacher 6 also discussed some of their personal reflection shared when going through initial teacher training at VN, which they mentioned was a huge priority for the school: "I'm mixed[-race] so my parents come from two totally different backgrounds. I grew up around a very diverse group of people, and that's within my personal life and like my work or my interactions and my community with like my religion and things like that, but also at school. And I was exposed to people of varying backgrounds, not just race, but also socioeconomic status, religion, gender." Both teachers then make connections between their diverse backgrounds, exposure, and how it enabled them better to connect with their students. In parallel, Teacher 2 shares a sentiment on the importance of race, especially as it relates to being a white educator in today's climate: "[w]e've always held difficult conversations and had an open space where students felt included – and made sure that it's just a safe space. As an educator… what's the best way for me to go about just me being a white educator and my place and how perceptions from families and parents and understanding that their children are safe with me, that's something that I've always had to be mindful of." They grapple with how identity influences their ability to make students feel psychologically and emotionally safe, and by extension, teach SEL.

It is heartening to observe teachers acknowledging their own personal identities as having a role in their emotions and how they implement SEL. It raises an important consideration that teachers must account for when understanding the best way to engage with a student on SEL.

Teachers recognize the importance of authentic belief in the power of SEL

Next, teachers shared experiences that revealed how instrumental a strong belief in SEL was to the perceived success of SEL implementation. Teachers observed this in how VN seeks and eventually hires their educators. Teacher 7, who has been on teacher selection panels for new hires, notes that "[t]he realest thing is to be part of that hiring process with other teachers that have come to [name of school]. And I think it starts there, it starts with vetting people who understand that this job offers me an opportunity to explore [SEL] and sharing the reality that this is what we do here. Even if you're not there, respecting wherever you are in your path [to believing in SEL] and understanding that you wanna be part of this and making it very clear from that hiring process and

starting there and saying they're just willing to say 'we don't prioritize this at my school. I really want to. I really believe in social emotional learning. I want to implement it and I think this is the best place to learn.'" In seeking out candidates that have this authentic belief, they demonstrate a conviction that one of the most important barriers to overcome right at the beginning of the SEL journey is a willingness to trust that SEL is valuable for their own experience and that of their students. If it is not something that is apparent at the beginning, the selection team must believe that there is room for growth and learning in this area. Moreover, Teacher 1 shares a reflection from teaching within VN and stresses how "you have to truly, truly believe [SEL]. And I also think that you have to be willing to be open and authentic with your students. Because if you give off the vibe, or you look as if this is not something that's near and dear to you, students can pick up on it. If you're not being your authentic self with it, students can pick up on it; you have to be willing to model some of these things so they can see the importance of actually doing these practices outside of the classroom. Because we don't just want them to do SEL, from 8:30 to 3:15 when they're with you. We want them to do it, we want it to be a lifelong thing." These teachers' narratives of both procedure and internal reflection underscore how foundational belief is in enabling an authentic and engaging learning experience for the students.

Teachers emphasize the importance of care of their own emotional health

As teachers spoke about the challenges of implementing SEL, the topic of their own emotional state frequently emerged. Reflecting on their experiences post-pandemic, Teacher 2 notes that "I don't think we were necessarily prepared coming back into school full time [with] that heightened level of stress that the kids and teachers and adults are all facing out of the pandemic. We just definitely needed more support in the sense of, yes, we have this great foundation and practice, but we're seeing new behaviors, and what this like experiences that the students are having that were never happening prior to the pandemic." Like other teachers, they go on to discuss how teachers have felt the emotional stress that comes with teaching in a post-pandemic-era classroom. The new, challenging situations deplete emotional capacity to a level that may not be enough to teach SEL effectively. Teacher 3 goes on to say that "[i]f I had my wish list granted, it would be for the district to prioritize, like the mental health and well-being of their teachers. You can't have a whole child without a whole adult. The only amount of compassion that teachers can give to their kids is the amount of compassion they are given," further recognizing that a teacher's emotional identity, if not supported and nurtured, can limit SEL's impact. Without the emotional capacity and support to overcome these potential barriers, teachers may not be able to give their kids the compassion required to teach SEL well.

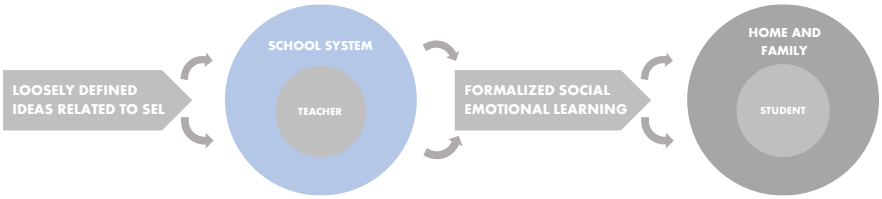
Teachers acknowledge how learned perspectives on teaching may influence SEL practice

As teachers told stories of prior training and the initial stages of teaching SEL, many expressed the feeling that a lot of how one approaches SEL is influenced by prior ways of teaching. Each of these teachers came from a unique set of training and background from child development and psychology, the liberal arts, special education studies, among other unique disciplines. From an experience standpoint, a few teachers shared experiences being at schools that not only deprioritized SEL but also promoted a harsh disciplinary style of behavioral management at odds with the SEL philosophy. In telling a story of the last school system they were a part of, Teacher 3 states "[i]t is incredibly hard to adjust your thinking to this specific model based upon your upbringing and then your experience in education and what you have been taught as a teacher." They go on to say that this punitive way of behavior management, engrained in the cultures of their old school systems, took time to unlearn before they could fully embrace the SEL mentality. Teacher 7 shares an even more personal experience that speaks to the transition when they first started at VN: "I started working in the inner city, a huge shock cultural shock from working internationally. Huge difference in socioeconomics. Diverse, racially speaking. And one of the things that I remember that first year at [name of school] is that I ended up myself in the middle of trainings crying, I was crying and that, in some ways, was like a healing process for me the first few months, because I felt that the last three years, for a number of reasons, I had to learn a language that was not always helpful or healthy for our students and our schools, but I learned it because that signified that I was being successful in the setting that I was in." As Teacher 7 reflected on the language and behaviors that they had to unlearn, they discuss the emotional, but necessary, challenge of understanding their own history and positionality and how that affected SEL teaching ability. Teachers also shared struggles with simply familiarizing themselves to a different way of teaching. Teacher 4 reflects on their experience further along in the journey of acclimating to SEL at VN, having come from a school that was strict and overtly disciplinary: "[a]t first it didn't feel very natural. I guess I knew that it was what was expected of me at the school. I'm talking specifically about the routines like having the safe space, the elements of SEL… It was so new and didn't necessarily flow the way that it flows now." This notion of "unnaturalness" connects back to how easily a teacher sees SEL as part of their own "natural" teacher identity. When a teacher has been raised on one mode of teaching and learning and identifies so closely with that, some time and adjustment is required before a teacher feels fully confident in their own ability to teach SEL well.

Teachers' personal narratives reveal much about how they view their emotional and professional selves and how these perceptions influence the teaching experience. Each of these factors molds the

conceptions of SEL that were earlier discussed in *SEL Definitions*, and what emerges is a version of SEL that is tweaked in relation to the personal beliefs, identity, and emotions that a teacher exhibits. As the reflections suggest, it may be important to start by understanding oneself fully before attempting and expecting to disseminate a subject as deeply personal and emotional as SEL.

Teachers interact with a wider school system – one that can either support or hinder their ability to teach SEL



Teachers exist within the broader school system and therefore must navigate those structures accordingly. In this section, teacher's express the ways that they interpret the school system as they discuss the system's expectations and symbolic support, tangible resources, and overarching culture and how those factors influence their ability to teach SEL.

Teachers are significantly impacted by the expectations and symbolic support provided by administration

The administration is seen as the top of the decision-making structure; if they support SEL and prioritize it, this makes it much easier for teachers to prioritize time for SEL. Teacher 5 expresses their thoughts and gratitude for the administration at VN: "I feel like it really starts with them. They're usually the ones that are greeting our students every day. They're the ones that are interacting. So they're kind of you know, right along the lines with us. I think they're always open to listening and learning and then just also networking and finding us opportunities as a teaching staff to continue to build their practice and stay current with their practice. I would say in the admin level they're kind of paving the way for us, or if there isn't a social emotional learning opportunity, or a grant or something that you know, we can find ways to improve or you know, find means to improve." Teachers find much value in the role modeling, interpreting it as a strong signal that SEL matters. In turn, this eases some of the barriers that they might have in their own belief or the way that they are able to practically create time for this type of job.

Contrastingly, when teachers experience a lack of administrative support, they can feel constrained in their flexibility to teach SEL. Teacher 4 shares a story of a peer who was at a school that was less proactive about creating time for SEL: "I was talking to a friend recently and their school says that

they're an SEL school and the administration believes that they are doing what they need to do. But then when it comes time for professional development, my friend, is supposed to be in charge of leading the SEL program at their school. They don't give her time to give the professional development, they say 'oh no, you just you make the slides and send the slides to teachers.' So I think the perception that SEL is being done but not really doing it with fidelity could be a barrier for some teachers that other schools." The contrast between these two experiences exposes how crucial administrative support is to implement SEL, as it affects the ability of teachers to create space for this type of curriculum.

Teachers have trouble implementing SEL when they do not have access to resources

Relatedly, administrative support can manifest in resources that can hypercharge SEL implementation or act as a barrier if resources don't exist. Teachers at VN all expressed how the administrative support of SEL manifests itself in structured time to focus on this important piece of the schedule, where it may fall off the schedule at under supported schools. Teacher 1 extrapolates on how administration enables a tactical focus on SEL, stating "over the summertime, when they are structuring the master schedule, they already have a block of time that is set for SEL. Before they start to put in this amount of time for math, this amount of time for reading and all of that, SEL is already one of the first things that they account for during the day." This guaranteed allocation of time reduces any friction for teachers and allows them to focus on both academics and SEL without having to sacrifice time for one or the other. Teachers contrasted this with experience at prior schools where each minute of the day was planned with no room outside of the strictly academic agenda. Further proof comes from Teacher 7, who shares a story about trying to connect with one of their students on SEL-related topics without having enough time in the day: "[i]t's hard to transition that student into a full day of school, when sometimes that kid just needs, you know, a couple of hours of just to connect with and do some other things. But, you know, schedule wise and system wise is just hard to address a situation like that, right?" Though they acknowledge that it may be the most helpful thing in that specific moment, they speak of being beholden to the time constraints even with the supportive administration.

More generally, teachers struggle when system-wide resources, such as human capital, are not available despite symbolic support from their administration. Teacher 2 shares how they are impacted by the "human capital to be able to come to the classrooms and support the students in smaller groups, because that at the end of the day is part of the idea of SEL. We finally got more [substitutes] as the year went on, but like the beginning of the year there were no subs. So you

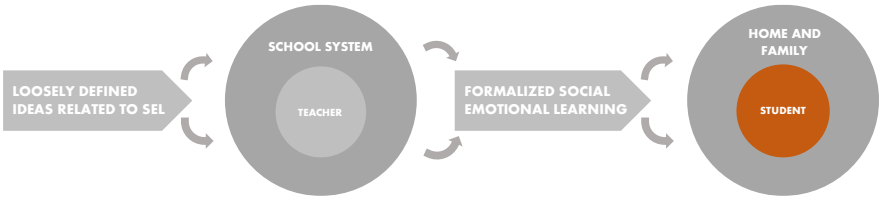
might not have your prep time or just that 30 minutes of mental space. So we're already short-staffed in general, and if teachers are out, that impacts another class." Teacher 7 shares their hope for the future of SEL at VN, which builds on the notion that human capital is an instrumental challenge to overcome to help SEL thrive: "[w]e will need more, more people in the in the building, maybe more Spanish teachers, maybe more specialist teachers, maybe even an extra classroom teacher for class just to make it. You know, to address all these differences and the situations." When teachers have tangible tools and resources to do their jobs well, their confidence in their ability to implement SEL effectively soars. While teachers at VN seem to benefit from the existence of resources at their school, it is clear from narratives from teachers at less supported schools that SEL implementation can be difficult.

Symbolic support and resources result in a culture that affects how teachers motivate themselves to implement SEL

When they exist, support and resources result in a culture that prioritizes SEL and sets a precedent that reinforces itself throughout the school. Teachers exist within this broader culture and are deeply influenced by it. Many of the teachers cited their principal's leadership and culture she exhibits as massive enablers to an SEL-forward culture. Teacher 3 notes that "seeing [the principal] interact with other students and her response to teachers in itself is puts like empathy and compassion at the forefront of our practices. It takes a village, you need to involve the families. You need to involve the administrators. You need to involve people at the district level. And so the learning moment here is not here is the adult in the room that is going to raise your child through this umbrella. It needs to be everybody prioritizing it or it's not going to work." This excerpt demonstrates the power of culture; interviewees clearly mentioned how the mindset and belief at the leadership level trickles down to the teachers and influences how they act and implement SEL. Teacher 1 summarizes well, stating that SEL is "the expectation. That is the expectation of being a teacher [name of school] is that SEL is in your forefront, SEL is something that you care about, and that you are going to do it to your fullest. And then there's also like tons of resources and time to observe other classrooms. So it's kind of like just really embedded in our school culture."

Again, teachers aren't implementing SEL in an isolated classroom; they must teach within a systematic school culture that starts with administrative support and expectation setting, affects the available resources, and results in an overarching culture of SEL. When teachers feel supported by the system, their ability to teach SEL flourishes.

Teachers have the nuanced challenge of caring for and understanding individual students who have their own set of characteristics that impact the way SEL is *received*



After first understanding their own selves and identities, teachers then told stories of the children's unique experiences and identities that shaped how they received the SEL flowing out from the teachers. As teachers shared their experiences implementing SEL in the classroom, they also shared the nuanced considerations around identity and student trauma that emerged with each student.

Teachers seek to understand how a student's race and socioeconomic status influence receptivity to SEL

First, teacher's pay particular attention to the specific nuances and context of student race, socio-economic status, and other identity factors in order to support their students in the proper way. Commenting on the diversity of the community and classroom, Teacher 4 discusses how the diversity in the classroom enhances the conditions for SEL to thrive: "The conversations that were difficult for me sometimes in high school [regarding race] just because of the schools that I had gone to previously are easy for them; in 2nd grade they're able to talk about and reflect and share questions will be around race and equity and inclusion. It's really cool to see they are getting a head start on something that was difficult for me when I was 18 or uncomfortable. You know it's just natural to them." Teachers also mentioned differences in receptivity depending race of the students. For example, one teacher noted that for them, it felt easier to connect with black students on SEL but found it more difficult to connect with white students. As teachers spoke about implementing SEL in the classroom, a student's identity is top of mind – it influences how deeply they can connect and engage with each student on this content area. Diversity does bring a new set of considerations for teachers when teaching SEL, but can also equip students with a valuable environment in which they can learn and build community. In addition to race, teachers expressed how they were mindful and aware of student's socio-economic situations and how that may impact a student's perception of SEL. Teacher 2 noted that "I knew [some students] were coming from poverty, I knew they're waking up, maybe not eating dinner the night before or were in [other] stress. I mean, the students that I had, for my first nine years, most of them were in much poorer conditions than the students that I had at [name of school]. It was like survival mode, almost like what can you immediately do to

make sure these kids are nourished and loved. The school was very loving to them." Going one step further, Teacher 1 mentions from their own experience that "a couple of things that I've noticed is that students who come from a higher socio-economic status, they don't crave as much teacher attention as students from lower socio- economic status." These reflections demonstrate a teacher's understanding that each student's unique socioeconomic identity can impact the way a student perceives and receives SEL.

Beyond race and SES, other factors like gender identity came up in discussions but were not as prevalent threads. However, their mention still speaks to the general idea that a students' identity impacts the way they receive SEL. While there is not consensus on how certain identity factors impact receptivity and effectiveness of SEL, the acknowledgement that identity deeply affects student-level receptivity of SEL is still important, since it requires teachers to acknowledge and discuss individual differences present in students as the center of the learning process and ecosystem.

Teachers must navigate the appropriate ways of dealing with different levels of student trauma

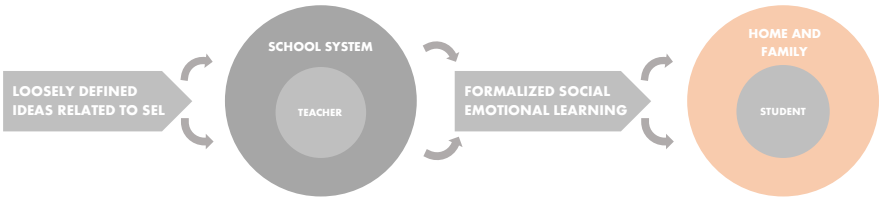
Lastly, as teachers reflected on their experiences teaching SEL in the classroom, they shared stories of students who experienced varying levels of receptivity and needs based on potential adverse or nuanced emotional experiences that occurred in students' lives. The historical trauma is such an important consideration because it requires teachers to critically understand what may be driving certain student behaviors that closely relate to SEL. Teacher 3 shares a story of a difficult student that was facing conflict at school, understanding that "[trauma] is a big part of it; you see it in the way that they either interact with one another. For example, for a fourth grader, at the very beginning of the school year, [they and another student] would fight with one another, even though they wanted to make friends. So I think when I'm looking deeper into it, [I wonder] what is that specific need that you have there? You can't stop arguing or fighting with each other because you want so badly to belong there." This scenario and resulting reflection bring to light the thought given to hidden drivers behind certain adverse behaviors. Importantly, teachers may find understanding student trauma challenging if they have not learned about formal strategies to address this in traditional teacher training. Teacher 2 reflects on their own teacher training in this regard, "I did not get any formal training on like, the trauma and what they're experiencing, and how do I then go in as the classroom educator, deal with that on a daily basis?" Even if teachers receive formal training, there is still no guarantee that SEL can reach its full potential, affecting how willing a student is to engage. As Teacher 5 communicates, "[students who have] experienced

trauma in their lives and might not be as receptive to, you know, jump into a big community and doing," which is a critical piece of the SEL implementation puzzle.

As teachers taught during and after the shut-down of in-person classes during the pandemic, they also shared stories of needing to understand the exacerbated trauma caused in this moment. Teacher 1 reflects on their experience coming back into the in-person classroom and managing kids with completely changed emotional capacities: "[i]f you've been at home for a full year, and you're like the only child in your home, coming back to school and like having to interact with other people on a different level. And like a struggle. It's really hard to break." Teacher 3 expounds on the differentiated trauma that students have faced coming back from the pandemic and having to create nuanced strategies for each child: "I think one of the hardest parts about this pandemic is that the pandemic has impacted so many students differently. And so you can have a kid that is online learning on a beach in Florida because their parent has a vacation home. At the same time, you can have the same student in the same class that's also online learning and six of their siblings are also in the same room and they are in charge of feeding them, of logging them in of helping them with their work, so they have all experienced it differently. So when they've come back from the pandemic you can definitely see and feel the differences." Rather than supporting one or even a few types of student experiences, teachers find themselves needing to be more mindful of the various contexts and emotional impacts emerging from pandemic. These differentiated emotional experiences present complexity that teachers need to consider, but in some cases, may not be equipped to address.

Teachers are grappling with the varying personal identities that may shape student emotions. There are many layers to the student identity that teachers are discovering, unpacking, and addressing that can act as barriers to implementing SEL well. However, as these teachers demonstrate, being aware of these differences can help them adapt their mindsets and styles to reach each student most effectively.

Teachers recognize that the home context of each student influences a student's willingness to learn SEL



Beyond the individual students, teachers are constantly mindful of the connection between the home and school environment of a child and how the that may impact a student's ability to engage in SEL. Teachers find that it influences students on both on a holistic and day-to-day level. Excerpts below share thoughts from teachers who notice and address the nuances that students face in their home lives.

Teacher's notice the impact of daily stress at home has on student receptivity to SEL

First, teachers demonstrated an acute awareness of how the daily home life of a student can affect whether a student wants to learn SEL on any given day, potentially making it more difficult to implement SEL. They note that there's a "readiness to learn" that can be altered before the student even enters a classroom. Teacher 6 reflects: "From the moment students wake up to the moment they get to school and it's just like some traffic jam, spilled coffee, a new bill for dental work, whatever it may be, I wonder how are those students feeling in that moment? Because I mean, with students who I've worked with, like if they're hungry, if they're, like, thinking about something traumatic that happened to them, whether it was that warning the day before, what we want to do is make sure students feel safe and connected at school." Teacher 5 furthers this sentiment, expressing that "emotions and are kind of all over the place. A lot of the time or, you know, something might have happened that may. Students could really affect their day, so they might come in and be super upset about something that happened last night, right before they came." As students enter a classroom, teachers are alert to the fact that there might be some event or experience that affects the mindset and emotional state of their students. As demonstrated in earlier sections of this paper, this drives a large emphasis on check-ins on emotions before continuing with the day. Whatever a student experiences outside of the classroom has an immediate impact on the mood and openness of a student, influencing how willing they are to engage in the SEL-focused activities. This potentially exacerbates the challenges or barriers a teacher faces as they implement SEL.

Teachers notice a student's general holistic home stability (influenced in part by SES)

On a more long-term scale, teachers spoke about how the overall stress of a home situation at scale can open or close a student's willingness to engage, providing a necessary consideration when trying to discuss community, connectedness, and emotions inherent in the SEL. When reflecting on how this impacts their perceptions, Teacher 2 explains, "I would say like I find the students that are having a lot of stress at home are even more receptive to learning [SEL]. I don't want to diminish a student that has their own problems that they're going through, yet they have both parents or a

household that is supportive, but their problems might just be more conflict resolution things with peers or have someone at soccer told me I looked like this, or I'm not a good athlete. But [there are] groups of students that could be causing fights because they're seeing fighting in their neighborhoods." In Teacher 2's experience, the absence of stability at home, whether it is support or parental presence, creates space in the classroom for them to connect more deeply with students and students to connect with one another.

The status of the adults at home (e.g., whether they are present) is also a deeply important home factor that teachers must understand and navigate. Teacher 1 shares their reflections, noting that "[i]t's much easier for me to connect with students who do not have many adults in their life that they trust, or many adults in their life that give them lots of attention. I feel like when it's easier to connect with those students because I'm giving them something that they miss something that they need. Whereas kids who come from families where they have like strong adults in their life, strong positive relationships, they don't necessarily lean on me as much for that, like they were engaged, but they don't crave it as much as students who don't receive that type of attention at home." Again, the teachers observe that there are notable effects of a student's home life that may influence how a teacher interacts with each of their students.

Teachers also note that there may be a disconnect between what students are experiencing at home and what they learn at school – specifically around conflict resolution. Teacher 7 shares a story of students who are told at home to deal with teasing from other students by engaging in physical or verbal fights. They expand on this idea: "[i]n school, students are hearing one thing, seeing one thing, and we're telling them how to self-regulate or how to manage conflicts, but they're hearing something and seeing something different at home. The difference between home and school culture sometimes makes it hard to get students to engage in some SEL practices." In this situation, teachers experience friction with some learned behaviors at home and forced to navigate implementation questions of how best to interact with students.

Teachers continue to acknowledge then interrogate the home context of the student – both in the short- and long-term. This awareness promotes teacher's behaviors regarding check-ins and tailored teaching approaches to ensure students are ready to enter the classroom with an openness and willingness to engage in SEL

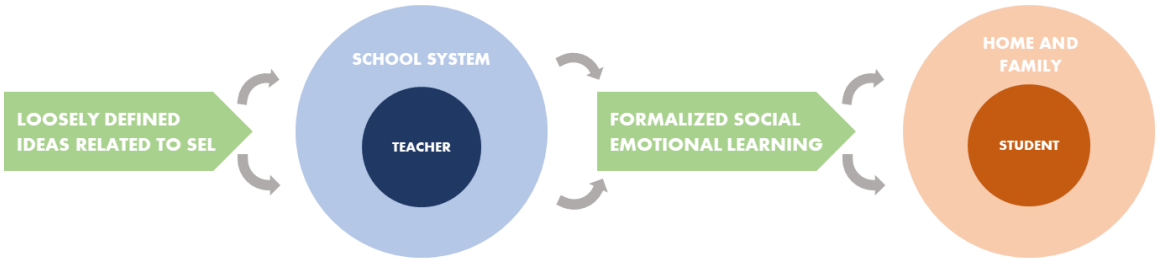
Teachers must navigate layers of challenges in the implementation of SEL

Through conversations with seven teachers at VN, this paper has uncovered that teachers must understand and address various nuanced layers before SEL reaches an individual student.

A teacher must first interrogate and reflect on their own identity and behaviors influence their SEL implementation. The resulting conception of SEL may differ based on the background that the teacher comes from. Moreover, the teacher's identity interacts with the surrounding school system that shapes how a teacher experiences SEL (Diagram A1).

Teachers must then find ways to implement the resulting conception of SEL with each individual student, with each student's identity situated within a home life that impacts a student's own receptivity to SEL (Diagram A2).

Through a teacher's lens, this research sees the conception of SEL continuously evolving as it passes through various layers. Teachers, equipped with these shaped conceptions of SEL, must navigate a system of identity factors and implement SEL in a way that addresses or at least considers these nuances. This framework illustrates the ecosystem that SEL flows through and the layers of challenges it interacts with before reaching the student.



A1 A2

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

In conjunction with the literature review, the findings continue to build a holistic understanding of emotions and SEL in the field. Broadly, because the view of US education has historically been focused on human capital and fairly neoliberal (Klees & Hickling-Hudson, 2012), this work

contributes to the discussion on other diverse perspectives through research on SEL. Using the structure of the 'Findings' as a thematic framework, this section systematically compares the findings to the existing literature.

Teachers' perceptions of challenges within self

The findings exemplify teachers' reflection inwards and a realization that the first challenge to understand in implementation begins with the individual. As teachers shared their narratives in the classroom in many variations, they communicated sub-themes of individual emotions influenced by identity and experiences, authentic belief in SEL, emotional health, and prior experience in education as perceived challenges and necessary considerations that impacted SEL efficacy.

This matches existing literature in a few ways. First, the existing literature outlines how teachers' perceptions of their own SEL skills, their own emotions, and their belief in SEL influence outcomes (Attias, 2020; Becker et al., 2014; Kenway & Youdell, 2011; Poulou, 2017). Similarly, the findings of this study outline how the teachers' perceptions of their own training, their own emotional behavior, and authentic belief in SEL are aspects that most teachers acknowledge as potential challenges when implementing SEL. Second, some of the existing literature on the teachers' perception of the self utilizes self-assessment and self-reflection as a direct method for data collection to center the practitioner lens (Attias, 2020; Poulou, 2017). The present study's findings share the belief that the teachers' perspective is significant and methods aimed at building a firsthand perspective of the challenges in implementing SEL merit further exploration. Lastly, recall that the existing literature on emotions in education accentuates how context, environment, and identity impact the teaching experience (Crenshaw, 2012; Levenson et al., 2020; Matsumoto & Hwang, 2012). In these teachers' discussions of their own emotional experiences, they signal the influence that similar aspects had on their ability to implement SEL, whether it is a challenge, catalyst, or simply a consideration they need to be mindful of before beginning to teach SEL.

This present research fills gaps in the field by providing additional sub-layers not discussed widely in the literature. For example, rather than simply understanding that a teachers' perception of their own emotional ability influences efficacy of SEL pedagogy (Poulou, 2017), the findings are able to contextualize how and why that may be occurring through the narratives of the interviewees. The findings from the present research show that identity and lived experience could be influencing emotional ability, or perhaps a teacher's own mental and emotional health is under duress which

changes the capacity they have to give themselves fully to teaching SEL. This angle of research helps contextualize a correlation that has only been visible at a cursory level historically.

Teachers' perceptions of challenges in the system

Second, the present findings also touch on teachers' perception of their surrounding system and the challenges present within that system. They discuss stories of expectations and support from administration, resource access, and school culture influencing how well they can implement SEL.

The findings of this research align with existing research on systemic barriers. As previously mentioned, the existing research points to the lack of support from SEL from the school- and district-level leadership, limited financial and personnel resources, and limited local buy in as some major challenges with the implementing SEL (Bailey et al., 2019; Durlak et al., 2011; Jones & Bouffard, 2020). The findings in this present research validate this, with teachers sharing narratives on topics such as leadership role modeling (*"I would say at the admin level, they're kind of paving the way for us and helping us with that" [Teacher 5])* and mentioning the availability of time in the schedule and additional personnel as deeply impacting their practice. Another key alignment with existing research is the importance of Communities of Practice (CoPs) to reduce barriers and frictions with implementing SEL. The existing literature calls out CoPs as instrumental in reinforcing ways of teaching and collaborative learning within an educational ecosystem (Eden et al., 2016). Excerpts from interviews validate this claim, especially when teachers discuss components in the system that have supported their SEL practice and reduced the barriers to implementation *("There was always someone who had two or three years under their belt that could give me examples or welcome me into their room to see it" [Teacher 4]).*

This research fills gaps within this sub-theme by looking at challenges *from the perspective* of teachers. Much of the discussion in the existing literature scopes the systemic challenges using an outside-in researcher perspective. Rarely does the research ask the teachers, from their point of view, what they deem to be the most pressing challenges and experiences that influence their practice. By prioritizing interviews with teachers and choosing to unpack those narratives, this dissertation addresses that scarcity.

Teachers' perceptions of the challenges in understanding the student context

Next, the findings shed light on how teachers perceive their students and how they see those factors impact their SEL implementation. Specifically, teachers shared stories of their perceptions of the

students' identities and subsequent level of student trauma, having to navigate those nuances, then how to best adapt their practice for highest impact.

Again, these findings align with the research on intersectionality and the contextuality of emotions in education, which states that emotional expression and receptivity is context-, environment-, and identity-dependent (Crenshaw, 2012; Kustatscher, 2017; Levenson et al., 2020; Matsumoto & Hwang, 2012). In the present research, when dissecting how teachers perceive their students and what they notice as influencing their own SEL practice, aspects of gender, race, and socioeconomic status arose as just a few of the identity factors that mattered. Though the findings do not go so far to establish one aspect of identity as the driving factor of difference in experience, the consistent mention of student identity factors in teacher narratives make it clear that an intersectional and cultural view of students truly influences teacher practice. Communities of Practice also emerged as a critical method of learning for student communities in addition to teacher communities. This contributes to the broader literature on CoPs that states that these modalities of learning are useful in the educational context (Eden et al., 2016; Patton & Parker, 2017).

These findings fill the gap in the existing literature because there has been little said in-depth on how teachers perceive their students' identities and emotions. While the research may point to these aspects influencing SEL outcomes, it is rare to read about if teachers notice these differences and if they do, how they are grappling with students' intersectional identities.

Teachers' perception of the challenges in understanding the students' family and home context

Finally, the findings give evidence of how teachers understand the students' family and home contexts and how that may impact their implementation of SEL. They interrogate how short- and long-term home stability may act as challenges to navigate when attempting to implement SEL with high fidelity.

These present findings are another contribution to the literature of how context matters and deeply influences how emotions (and by extension, how emotions are taught and received) manifest in an educational setting (Crenshaw, 2012; Kustatscher, 2017; Levenson et al., 2020; Matsumoto & Hwang, 2012). Teachers acknowledge how the contextuality of adult presence and level of stability of home life have implications for how much emotional capacity any of their students have to learn both SEL and core academic content *("There's a range of things that could happen to the students from the moment they woke up and what we wanna do is make sure students feel safe and connected*

and that they belong at school" [Teacher 3]). This emphasis corroborates the notion that emotional pedagogy cannot be implemented without fully appreciating the home environment that a student engages with outside of the classroom. Additionally, the intersectionality aspect continues to remain relevant because the home environment and level of stress may be impacted by the identity factors (race, gender, and socioeconomic status). Another specific point of overlap that the findings have with the literature is in the idea of emotional geographies, which states that emotions are influenced by their relationship with other actors in the system (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2012). These present findings, which connect the student with their home environment, speak to that directionality of emotions and understand students' emotional receptivity as a by-product of what a student experiences at home and their relationship to actors in that space.

This research's findings fill in evident gaps in the literature by creating a deeper understanding of teachers' perceptions of home and family context of the student; there is much existing literature speaking to home and family context being challenges to implementation, but not as much generated data and critical reflection through the lens of teachers on how teachers think about these challenges and how that influences their own practice.

Across all thematic findings, the literature provides a great foundation for interrogation. There is a significant amount of research on the contextuality of emotions, the importance of teachers' reflection of self, and the challenges present at the system level. However, there are a series of gaps that this research addresses and lays new foundation for. These include the introduction of novel teacher perspectives (of the system, student, and home context) and the extrapolation on sub-themes embedded within specific systems (e.g., teachers' reflections on their racial identity as a sub-theme of teacher self-reflection and how that influences teacher practice).

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This research has investigated the process of implementing social emotional learning through the lens of a teacher and the various forms of challenges that occur within and beyond the education system. Drawing on stories shared in teacher experiences, themes of teacher awareness of the self, system, student, and students' homes and families emerged, each with their own specific set of sub-themes and considerations. Cross-cutting in all these themes was a dialogical corroboration and reinforcement of the importance of context, environment, and identity present in the existing literature. Though SEL has yet to become part of mainstream public education, this research hopes

to contribute to the growing movement to learn more about the practice, its benefits, and challenges – all while elevating the voices of those who are on the ground teaching diverse learners every day.

REFLEXIVITY

As I have finished this research, I have reflected across the field of SEL, the research process and community, and myself.

First, SEL continues to be an area that has great belief from those who practice. Interviewing teachers at a school where SEL is done well has given testimony to how powerful it can be for both teachers and students. Though this research did not focus explicitly on how much teachers benefited from SEL, the shared reflections give basis to make this claim. Additionally, SEL, as with any educational initiative, takes a whole coordinated, trusted system to implement effectively. Through direct dialogue with the teachers, the connection between a teacher and all the other stakeholders creates a consistent feedback loop that affects a teacher's ability to teach. This present study obviously digs deep into one stakeholder's perspective, and further investigation on other stakeholders' perspectives would likely reinforce the importance of a coordinated system.

Second, the research process itself solicited a few realizations and reflections throughout and retroactively. First, in earlier interviews, I noticed that my personal interest in SEL was influencing my conversations, with a fair amount of validation and interviewer commentary on every interviewee's response. After transcribing the first two interviews, I realized this tendency to take up more space than needed and course corrected for the remaining five interviews. Second, I must acknowledge the lack of student and administration perspective in the research and how this may give an incomplete picture of the SEL ecosystem. Thus, it was necessary to resituate and remind myself to write from the perspective of the teacher always, because that is where my findings originate. Despite this acknowledgement, I stand by the intentional choice to prioritize teachers to better unpack this critical perspective in the educational ecosystem.

Finally, reflecting on my positionality, my personal experiences had a significant role (both positive and negative) in the research. As mentioned above, the consistent validation and caveating drove a lot of my voice within the hour-long interview. The validation stemmed from a desire to signal my passion and knowledge about the space, shaped by my experiences with SEL in consulting and philanthropy. The caveating stemmed from a hyperawareness of my outsider perspective – there

were moments where I would spend far too long communicating my respect for the work and my "approaching from a place of learning." While both the validation and caveating were useful in building trust and rapport, a balance is needed. It was imperative that I allow their voices and insights to emerge and thus, a change in interviewing style was necessary.

FUTURE RESEARCH

There are a couple areas suited for further investigation that may lead to a more robust understanding of SEL, both within the US and globally:

First, it may be worth researching how the other diverse actors in the ecosystem perceive SEL. As these findings have demonstrated, teachers have an extremely nuanced view of SEL and the challenges they must navigate to make it work in the classroom. Looking at the inverse relationships of the actors that teachers mentioned (e.g., student, home and family, and administration) would provide a more holistic picture of navigating SEL. Then, a comparison of how those bi-directional relationships compare with each other (e.g., teacher to student vs. student to teacher) could develop a better picture of the disconnects and may lead to better mutual understanding between actors in the ecosystem.

Second, to further build the literature on perceived challenges in implementing newer and unique types of learning, a similar exercise on understanding challenges from the actors' perspectives on topics such as anti-racist pedagogy, civic education, or other curricula outside of the core academic discourse might prove beneficial. With this research, comparisons between perspectives can be made to interrogate whether nuances with implementing SEL are specific to SEL or applicable to a range of "alternative" types of learning.

The overall study and both research recommendations have policy implications around what may be important to teach (e.g., incorporating SEL into standard curriculum across the US) and how the system prepares teachers accordingly (e.g., institutionalizing SEL and emotional pedagogy training across preparation programs, ensuring that those programs explicitly begin with or heavily incorporate intentional self-reflection of identity). All recommendations are made with the overarching goal to elevate the voices of those *within* the system and expand society's idea of what it means to have a meaningful education. Only through deep listening can the trajectory of the education system change and transcend the boundaries of what has previously existed.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: CUREC Approval

[redacted]

From: Pinar Kolancali
Sent: Saturday, March 26, 2022 2:44 PM
To: [redacted]
Cc: Student CUREC
Subject: Curec Approval CIA-22HT-012

[redacted]

Apologies for the delay in getting back to you on your application to DREC.

Your application for, 'Moving Beyond Barriers: Implementing Social Emotional Learning in Low SES Contexts', has been considered on behalf of the Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the procedures laid down by the University for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to inform you that, based on the information provided to DREC, the proposed research has been judged as meeting appropriate ethical standards, and accordingly, approval has been granted. I would like to inform you that you will be required to update us on any amendments to your study should you need to change your research methods and may need to complete a data protection impact assessment if you use online platforms to conduct and record interviews. There is an application for this, and it is kept separate from the ethics committee. Please see the link below for more information.
https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/policy/data/checklist

Please continue to follow all current guidance issued by CUREC during the pandemic, notably COVID-19: CUREC guidance on research involving human participants, https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/coronavirus

If needed, please follow the guidance on online data collection and research methods issued by the University,
(1) https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/covid-19/data#collapse2299911
(2) https://infosec.web.ox.ac.uk/article/guidelines-for-using-zoom

If relevant, please also check the CUREC website for their best practice research guides, https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/resources/bpg

Yours sincerely,

Pinar

Dr Pinar Kolancali
Postdoctoral Researcher
Departmental Research Ethics Committee Member
15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY
Email: pinar.kolancali@education.ox.ac.uk

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Appendix B: Interview Schedule

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

- Name
- Role
- School
- Grade(s) taught
- Years at the school
- Years of training received
- Gender identity
- Race/ethnicity

INTRODUCTION

Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us today! The purpose of this interview is to understand your perceptions of the effectiveness of social emotional learning in your schools and what challenges you face in implementing this curriculum. This interview will last approximately 1 hour and will be split in three parts: Background / Demographics, Perceptions and Understanding of SEL, and Barriers to SEL. If at any point during the interview you feel uncomfortable or need to withdraw, please let me know.

I will anonymize all your audio and transcript data so that it is unidentifiable. There are no right or wrong answers; while I have set questions I'm asking you, if there's a different direction you'd like to go please feel free to redirect me and address those pieces. I'm here to learn and want to thank you again for your time. Are there any questions before we begin?

CONTENT

1. **Background / Experience**
    - 1.1. What is your prior experience in the education sector (e.g., training, practitioner, researcher // how long)?
    - 1.2. Tell me about your teacher training (not SEL specific, previous and ongoing)
        - 1.2.1. Probe: How did this training impact the way you think / helped you develop your understanding of SEL?
        - 1.2.2. Resources for training?
        - 1.2.3. Admin support?
        - 1.2.4. Peer support?
        - 1.2.5. Professional development seminars?
    - 1.3. What does social emotional learning mean to you?
    - 1.4. Have you engaged with SEL or had any experience with SEL outside of this school setting (e.g., in policy)?

2. **Perceptions and Understanding of SEL**
    - 2.1. Can you tell me about the official SEL curriculum at your school?

2.2. How does social emotional learning appear, practically, in your classroom?
  2.2.1. Probe: How has this showed up over the past year due to pandemic and remote learning?
2.3. How does this interplay with the existing school structures / curriculum?

3. Barriers

3.1. What are your own opinions of SEL education / curriculum?
3.2. Can you tell me about implementing SEL in the classroom?
  3.2.1. Probe re: the lines of socioeconomic
  3.2.2. Probe re: the lines of gender
3.3. How do students react to SEL education / curriculum?
3.4. Describe your administration's role in implementing social emotional learning?
3.5. What pain points do you see, if any, in implementing social emotional learning?

4. Final questions

4.1. Is there something I missed out on? Is there any other story you want me to tell?

WRAP-UP

Thank you so much for your time. If you have any questions in the meantime please let me know; my email address is [redacted] We are looking forward to keeping in touch and will reach out if you have any additional questions.

Appendix C: Project Overview for Recruitment of Teacher

BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research aims to understand barriers teachers face in implementing formal and informal social emotional learning and pedagogy in schools within the US. The pandemic has revealed how important socio-emotional health is and the role it plays in the likelihood of youth succeeding personally, educationally, professionally, especially during Covid-19 (RISE Programme, 2021). Literature shows that there is inequality in the provision and delivery of socio-emotional education/learning (SEL) to the most underserved youths. In my own personal and professional experience teachers have been a key motivator for SEL, closing the provision and motivation gap for the most underserved.

For this reason, my research aims to understand what helps SEL thrive or fail in schools / school systems and what ensures provision in an equitable manner? Two sub-aims and research questions are:

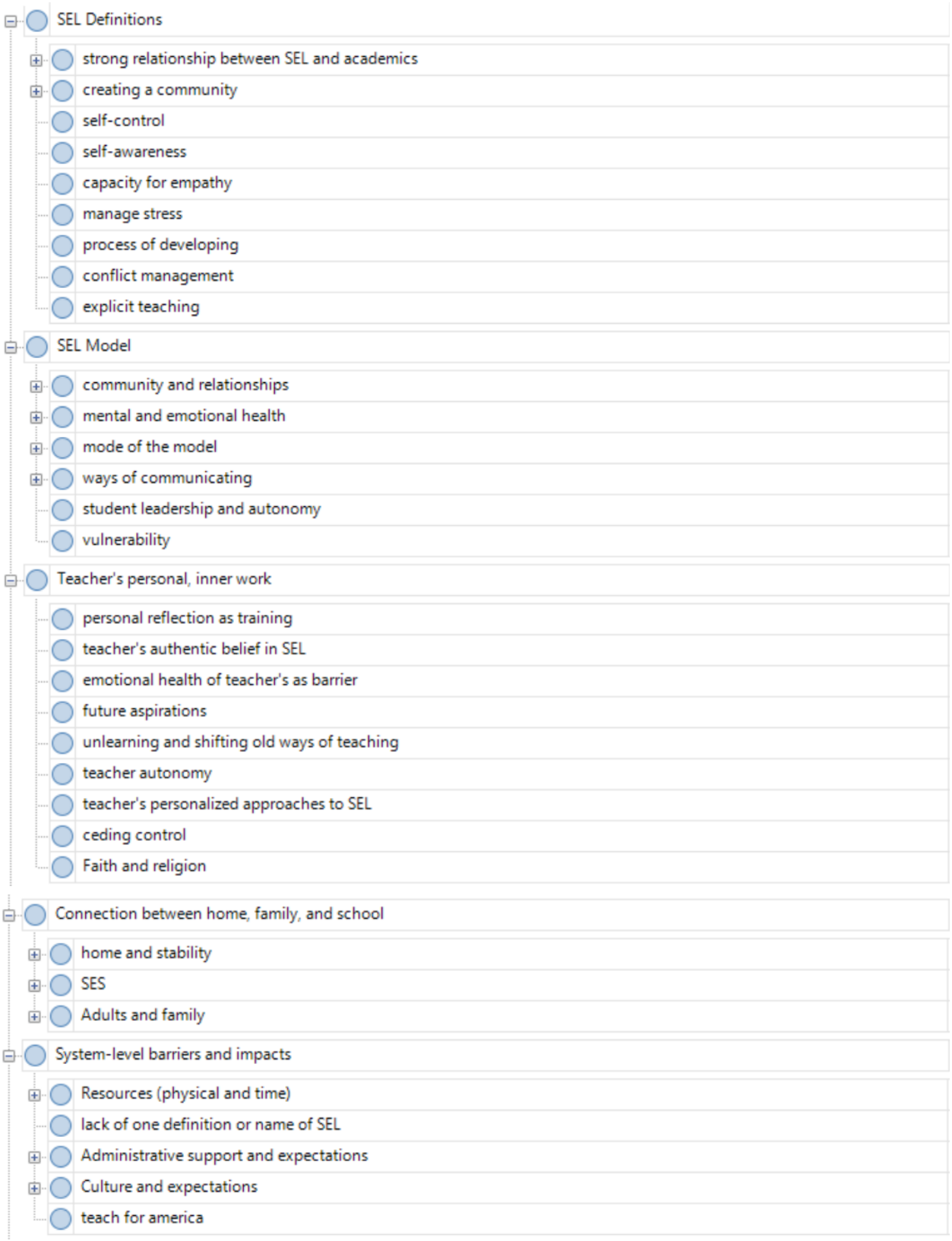
1. How does socioeconomic status of a school impact a teacher's ability to implement targeted SEL skill training for students?
2. How do teachers perceive and experience challenges in implementing student SEL skill training, and are there differences by socioeconomic status?

METHODS

This is an intended mixed-method (if data allows) qualitative study involving an analysis of an existing data set followed by semi-structured interviews.

- **Qualitative semi-structured interviews:** Participants will be asked to answer a set of qualitative questions during a 1 hour semi-structured interview.
- **[If available] Secondary data set analysis:** An analysis of social emotional learning outcomes data in the United States will be used as a primary filter to prioritize specific schools / school districts for research. Potential school-level data of interest:
    - % FRL (or general indicators of socio-economic status)
    - SEL outcomes data (as a proxy to understand schools that are implementing SEL well / seeing outcomes resulting from intentional SEL)

Appendix D: Coding Structure (Level 1 and 2, representative but non-exhaustive)



- Student trauma and mental health
  - students with trauma with differentiated and specific needs
  - post-pandemic struggles
  - individualized emotions needing specific attention
  - lack of receptivity from students with trauma
  - receptivity from students with trauma
  - Understanding the intent of the student
- Learning through community
  - teacher learning by role modeling for each other
  - sharing best practices as professional development
  - teacher's role modeling for students
  - getting feedback as training
  - having a community as supporter for SEL
  - cross-functional collaboration
- Race impacting SEL
  - diversity and SEL being dually present
  - person of color impacting teacher's training
  - race and equity professional development
  - systemic racism causing trauma
  - lack of receptivity from white students
  - receptivity from students of color