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SPECIALTY SECTION

This article was submitted to
Educational Psychology,
a section of the journal
Frontiers in Education

RECEIVED 17 November 2022

ACCEPTED 06 February 2023

PUBLISHED 24 February 2023

CITATION

Dyson B, Shen Y, Howley D and Baek S (2023)
Social emotional learning matters: Interpreting
educators' perspectives at a high-needs rural
elementary school.
Front. Educ. 8:1100667.
doi: 10.3389/feduc.2023.1100667

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Social emotional learning matters: Interpreting educators' perspectives at a high-needs rural elementary school

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Introduction: School educators' have a great influence on the adoption, sustainability, and development of school-based Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs. The purpose of this school-based research was to investigate educators' experiences and perspectives on implementing SEL in a high-needs rural elementary school setting.

Methods: Fifteen school educators ($n = 15$), including ten K-5 classroom teachers, one special education teacher, one social worker, and three school leaders, participated in this study. In addition, lessons were observed, and 17 sets of field notes were taken during 17 different days of visit (60–90 min) over the two semesters. A case study design drawing on qualitative research methods was utilized.

Results: The inductive analysis and constant comparison of the collected data generated six themes: *prerequisite for academic success, essential skills for everyday life, lack of time, lack of preparation and development, home-school disconnection, and pushback from students.*

Discussion: The study provided qualitative evidence to support the need for quality SEL implementation and revealed nested levels of constraints for school educators' implementing SEL from the "voices" of school educators. The study also calls for collaborative efforts and shared strategies to facilitate "legitimate" long-term partnerships between universities and schools, families, and communities, particularly in rural areas, in promoting a more holistic vision of the social and emotional development of our children.

KEYWORDS

social and emotional skills, life skills, high-needs, elementary school, school educators, buy-in, constraints

Introduction

As key stakeholders in the education process, teachers and school leaders have a great influence on the adoption, sustainability, and development of school-based Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs. SEL is defined as "the process through which individuals learn and apply a set of social, emotional, behavioral, and character skills required to succeed in schooling, the workplace, relationships, and citizenship"

(Jones et al., 2019, p. 19). Schools have a fundamental goal of teaching children to learn core curriculum subjects, such as mathematics and science. In addition to these fundamental academic skills, education studies, politics, and experience have become more aware that social and emotional competencies influence learning (Elias et al., 1997; Jones et al., 2013; Osher et al., 2016). The need to develop future citizens is now prioritized through the combination of academic and social-emotional development (Oberle et al., 2014). Typically, education policy has two goals that have been proposed for schools: (a) improve academic success; (b) strengthen social and emotional competencies (Ellis, 2003). Previous studies have suggested several potential SEL pedagogies to decrease behavioral issues, improve psychological well-being, and enhance academic achievement among students at elementary and middle school levels (Gordon et al., 2016; Hulvershorn and Mulholland, 2018; Dyson et al., 2021).

Teachers have been recognized as the most critical figures implementing school-based SEL programs (Humphrey et al., 2018; Dyson et al., 2019). However, previous research indicated that in-service teacher training in SEL was not adequately provided to address the needs of students (Walker, 2020). In addition, other studies argued that pre-service teachers should receive more training in SEL in their teacher education programs to be better prepared to deliver SEL-based programs (Fleming and Bay, 2004; Katz et al., 2020). Given that they are the ones who deliver SEL pedagogical practices to students in school, their perspectives toward SEL need to be investigated to promote the effectiveness of SEL-based programs (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002). In a longitudinal school-based SEL program, Humphrey et al. (2018) found a higher level of teachers' buy-in and enthusiasm for SEL would lead to a better quality of program implementation and more comprehensive student learning outcomes. However, when teachers' buy-in in SEL is low, the quality of the SEL-related practices and the students' SEL learning outcomes can be impeded (Ee and Cheng, 2013). Subsequently, teachers' buy-in and enthusiasm influenced their curricular and instructional decision-making toward SEL in classrooms (Ennis and Chen, 1995).

A successful school-based SEL program relies on joint efforts between school leaders and teachers. When school leaders' interests and supports toward SEL were weak, teacher's professional development in SEL and the program implementation at schools would highly unlikely to be encouraged and supported, which resulted in SEL programs being "insufficiently coordinated, monitored, evaluated, and improved" (Greenberg et al., 2003). However, when school leaders' interests and supports toward SEL were robust, sustainable support for teachers' professional development in SEL and the schoolwide implementation of SEL programs can be prioritized (Durlak and DuPre, 2008; Evans, 2014).

Research has studied constraints that educators encountered during the implementation of SEL programs. By investigating early childhood teachers' perspectives on SEL in urban classrooms, Humphrey et al. (2018) found limited time, lack of support, and insufficient resources as barriers for teachers to SEL implementation. Avramidis and Norwich (2002) identified several variables that influence teachers' attitudes toward SEL, including child-related variables, teacher-related variables, and educational environmental-related variables. Turnbull (2002) proposed several key factors influencing teachers' response to schoolwide reform

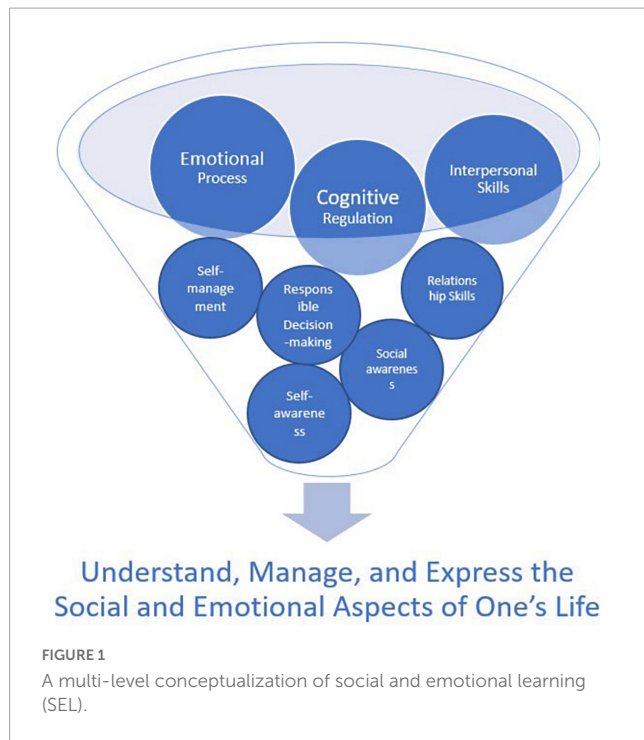
programs (e.g., schoolwide SEL programs), including teachers' in-service training, school leaders' support, support from program developers and staff members, and control over classroom implementation. Jones and Cater (2020) pointed out that the lack of a clear understanding of SEL among school leaders is a significant constraint that impedes schoolwide SEL programs and reduces teachers' willingness to use SEL practices in classrooms. However, studies have shown that when those constraints are minimal, the implementation quality of SEL programs and students' SEL learning outcomes can be significantly improved (Zins and Elias, 2007; Collie et al., 2012; Anyon et al., 2016).

To date, only a few research have been conducted qualitatively to explore educators' perspectives on SEL programming, especially with teachers, school leaders, and other school staff in high-needs rural elementary school settings (Dyson et al., 2019; Jones and Cater, 2020). A qualitative study with seven teachers in a high-needs rural elementary school indicated that a new curriculum grounded in SEL empowered students to be responsible citizens by discussing issues over race, immigration, and gender discrimination (San Antonio, 2018). Another study, which was grounded in the promotion of a county-wide SEL program in rural schools, highlighted the importance of the interdisciplinary professionals' collaboration (e.g., teachers, social workers, school psychologists, university research experts, and parents) and the recursive organizational consultation process involving perspectives from multiple stakeholders (Meyers et al., 2015). Despite those encouraging findings, more research about the development and promotion of SEL programs in high-needs rural schools is needed.

Elementary schools are recognized as high-needs if there is a high percentage (>60%) of students from families with incomes below the poverty line, or a high teacher turnover (Higher Education Act, 2020). Students in high-needs schools often experienced "unhelpful schooling relationships and deleterious learning outcomes" (Palacios and Lemberger-Truelove, 2019), demanding a higher level of social and emotional support from school educators. Understanding school educators' perspectives of SEL in a high-needs elementary context can help us better conceptualize SEL and facilitate SEL programming for students (Humphrey et al., 2018). With this in mind, the purpose of this study was to explore educators' buy-in and constraints toward SEL in a high-needs elementary school setting, understanding what worked and what needs to improve. Recommendations that facilitate programs and practices grounded in SEL were discussed based on the findings.

Research on social and emotional learning

Social and Emotional Learning has been developed as a conceptual framework to promote children's cognitive, emotional, and academic competencies (Corcoran et al., 2018). SEL is a comprehensive concept and many researchers tried to define SEL in different ways with different terminologies. Therefore, a multi-level conceptualization of SEL is established to present the popular definitions of SEL and its nature of multiple layers (see Figure 1). At a macro-level, SEL can be defined as the process of acquiring "the



ability to understand, manage, and express the social and emotional aspects of one's life" (Elias et al., 1997, p. 2). At a meso-level, SEL includes competencies of cognitive regulation, emotional processes, and social/interpersonal skills (Jones and Bouffard, 2012). SEL can be further recognized at a micro-level as five interrelated skills: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2023). Our research is based on the three SEL definitions and the study was grounded in the school context and the voice of the educators participating in the research.

An emerging body of literature has shown that a wide range of SEL competencies is connected with students' later success in multiple contexts, including school and workplace (Durlak et al., 2010; Jones and Doolittle, 2017). Some of the meta-analyses within the last ten years have added evidence to the benefits of SEL for students, advancing the case for further implementation within schools. Durlak et al.'s (2011) meta-analysis of 213 school-based SEL programs observed significant positive effects, including increased social-emotional competencies, enhanced behavioral adjustments, reduced mental stress, and improved academic performance. Sklad et al.'s (2012) meta-analysis also suggested that SEL programs significantly reduced antisocial behavior and substance abuse. By examining the core SEL competencies (e.g., attitudes toward self, pro-social behavior, conduct problems, emotional distress, etc.), Wigelsworth et al. (2016) confirmed that SEL programs effectively achieved the intended outcomes in these areas. Taylor et al.'s (2017) meta-analysis of 75 reports from 69 SEL programs found significantly improved academic and school performance. More recent findings from Corcoran et al.'s (2018) meta-analysis of academic achievement-oriented school SEL programs indicated that in comparison to traditionally teacher-centered classes, students in SEL-based classes achieved more significant improvement in reading and mathematics.

Despite the considerable amount of quantitative evidence in SEL (Durlak et al., 2011; Sklad et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2017; Corcoran et al., 2018), there exists a need to investigate school educators' voices regarding their perspectives on SEL in school-based settings (Dyson et al., 2019). This study aimed to address this shortfall within a high-needs elementary school context (Elias and Haynes, 2008; Blair and Raver, 2015), particularly by examining school educators' voices through the theoretical lenses of human developmental perspectives (Jones et al., 2019).

Theoretical perspectives

Research on how interactions between individuals and contexts influence social and emotional development has been a significant area of focus in the study of human development (Smith and Thelen, 2003; Bornstein and Lamb, 2015). Two theories, the human developmental cascades theory (Masten and Cicchetti, 2010) and the social-ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1992), were utilized to guide the interpretation of school educators' perspectives on the complex constructs and implementation of SEL in a high-needs elementary school setting.

Human developmental cascades theory refers to the cumulative development of a person's competencies in one domain, resulting in the far-reaching and non-obvious development of competencies in other domains (Masten and Cicchetti, 2010; Adolph and Robinson, 2013). Thus, the development of a person's competencies in one domain over a period of life becomes the cornerstone for competencies in other newly emerging domains so that "competence begets competence" (Masten et al., 2005, p. 492). Human developmental cascades have a spreading effect within and across domains of function in a developing system. As Described by Thelen (1989), "Changes in any one domain, therefore, may become amplified and have system-wide reverberations" (p. 349). Developmental cascades have a profound influence on human development, which may result in positive or negative adaptive behaviors (Masten and Cicchetti, 2010). Drawing on the human developmental cascades theory, we sought to understand why educators showed significant buy-in toward SEL in a high-needs elementary school setting.

Social-ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1992) focuses on a continued state of human development with four interrelated vital factors: the process, the person, context, and time (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998). Among those four factors, the process and the context are the two most important factors that have been addressed in Bronfenbrenner's social-ecological systems theory (Tudge et al., 2009). Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) described the process of human development as a "complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment" (p. 996). Bronfenbrenner also suggested that individuals develop within a multi-level system of environmental and social organizations, including microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. This framework represents SEL from a broader social-ecological model perspective where transactions among people within their social and physical settings, over time and across personal, cultural, institutional, and political levels are examined (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1992). SEL

research grounded in the social-ecological systems theory focuses on exploring the development of children's SEL competencies within different levels of social environments and organizations, ranging from the proximal environments, such as schools and families (micro-level system), to the more distal environments, such as government policies and support (meso-level system), and attitudes and ideologies of the society (macro-level system) (Bornstein and Lamb, 2015). In applying the social-ecological systems theory, we sought to understand what constraints have impeded the SEL implementation and how the processes of SEL implementation could be facilitated in a high-needs elementary school setting.

Materials and methods

Research design

A case study design (Stake, 2005) was utilized to explore the school educators' perspectives on SEL in a US high-needs elementary school setting. Two sources of data, interviews and field notes, were used for this study. Data collection and analysis were followed by qualitative research traditions (Miles et al., 2014).

Participants and contexts

This study was in partnership with 15 school educators (Table 1), including 10 K-5 teachers, one special education teacher, one social worker, and three school leaders at one high-needs elementary school in the US. School educators' consent was received following university IRB regulations for this study. All participants and the school were given pseudonyms.

Whitehead school is recognized as a high-needs rural elementary school since 98% of school students come from families with incomes below the poverty line and qualify for free or reduced-price meals (Higher Education Act, 2020). Whitehead school is operated in partnership with the school district and a local university, which serves 375 K-5 students with diverse ethnic backgrounds (59% African American, 20% Caucasian, 11% Hispanic, 10% Multi-Racial). Whitehead school is a "Lab School" created by North Carolina lawmakers through a state provision act in 2018. "A lab school shall provide an opportunity for research, demonstration, student support, and expansion of the teaching experience and evaluation regarding management, teaching, and learning." (Public School First NC, 2022).

A lab school operates much like a charter but is managed by a collaborating university. The Lab School act is intended to support high-need and low-performing schools, and improve student academic outcomes. Lab schools, like charter schools, can employ experimental teaching methods and are afforded more flexibility in designing and implementing their curriculum, their choice of calendar, and staffing models. When we talk about Whitehead school, we refer to it as a partnership school, since it had a close partnership with a university.

School-wide restorative practices have been adopted in Whitehead school since the academic year of 2019 to develop students' SEL competencies. In 2021, all educators in the school

TABLE 1 Participants information.

Name	Position	Race/Ethnicity	Years of experience
Samantha	Grade 5 teacher	Caucasian	24
Melissa	Grade 1 teacher	Caucasian	4
Teresa	Principal	African American	23
Jessica	Grade 5 teacher	Caucasian	24
Connor	Assistant principal	African American	10
Kinsley	Social worker	African American	10
Trinity	Grade 4 teacher	Hispanic	3
Julianna	Grade 5 teacher	Caucasian	19
Barbara	Grade 3 teacher	Caucasian	17
James	PE teacher	Caucasian	6
Angela	Grade 3 teacher	Caucasian	9
Martin	School director	Caucasian	51
Helen	Grade 2 special ed teacher	Caucasian	3
Tony	Grade 4 teacher	Caucasian	17
Taylor	Grade 2 teacher	Caucasian	5

also participated in a 2-day restorative practices professional development to better facilitate students' SEL in the classrooms. Restorative practices focus on establishing "environments where members of the community take responsibility to repair harm when it occurs" (Gonzalez, 2012, pp. 300–301). The restorative circle was a frequent pedagogical practice utilized in the classrooms at the Whitehead school. Facilitated by the teachers daily, either at the beginning or the end of the classes, every student had a chance to share and speak on a specific topic by turns with a talking piece in the 10–15 min restorative circle. For example, teachers utilized the restorative circle to solve students' conflicts in class, listen to students' reflections and feedback, and help students with academic goal setting and planning.

Data collection

Whitehead was visited twelve times by the researchers over the Spring and Fall semesters in 2021 to build rapport with the participants and school context, observe classes, and interview educators. Trained data collectors interviewed the school educators regarding their perspectives on SEL before, during, and after school hours. Fifteen individual interviews and one focus group were conducted. Each individual interview lasted for 40–45 min. The focus group interview lasted for 65 min. Semi-structured questions were asked about the school educators' specific SEL practices, as well as challenges related to their SEL practices. Example questions include: "Is social and emotional learning important in your class (or the school) and why?" and "What problems/issues or challenges do you see coming from the implementation of social and emotional learning?"

Non-participant class observations using organized methods of taking field notes were conducted in this study

(Emerson et al., 2011). The second and the third authors observed the classes and took field notes during 17 different days of visit (60–90 min) at the Whitehead elementary school over the two semesters. After each observation, the authors talked to the teacher regarding their perspectives on SEL implementation in their classrooms. A total of 15 individual interviews, one focus group, and 17 sets of field notes were written during the visit to the school.

Data analysis

Inductive analysis and constant comparison were used for data analysis (Miles et al., 2014). The process started with transcribing interviews, followed by importing all the data into NVivo 12 plus for further organization and management. Open coding was employed first. Open coding is the process of assigning labels to statements or events in the data and summarizing them in a word or short phrase (Miles et al., 2014). Open coding formed the first cycle of data analysis (Emerson et al., 2011), which produced nodes or thematic descriptions of the school educators' perspectives of SEL implementation at the Whitehead school. The second stage of analysis involved axial coding (Emerson et al., 2011; Miles et al., 2014), which aimed to identify conceptual links, discover relationships among categories, and generate themes by constant comparison and triangulation of the interview data from different educators and field notes.

Trustworthiness of the data analysis was achieved by guaranteeing the findings have credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Miles et al., 2014). Credibility was achieved through the extended periods of time staying with the teachers and school leaders during three-weekend professional development workshops on restorative practices. The continual presence would reduce possible distortions in data credibility. Consistent member checks also achieved credibility during the data analysis process. All the interview transcripts were reviewed by the school educators so that they would have the opportunity to adapt and modify any parts of the transcripts. The dependability of the findings was achieved by having a colleague who is familiar with this research but not directly involved in the study (the fourth author). This colleague reviewed and challenged our interpretations of the interview data and the themes that were subsequently drawn, resulting in a more reflective process for the data analysis. Confirmability of the findings was addressed by providing a reflexive, self-critical account through an iterative peer debriefing process with research colleagues and school educators. The non-participant observations, interviews, and field notes triangulated the findings. Transferability is a messy concept, and it was difficult to determine whether the findings found in Whitehead school could be found in other school contexts (Miles et al., 2014). However, findings from this study do contribute to the paucity of SEL studies in the context of rural high-needs elementary schools. Trustworthiness was strengthened by utilizing different data analysis strategies, constantly challenging the interpretations of the findings, establishing conceptual relations, and uncovering key themes through frequent peer debriefing within the researcher team.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore educators' buy-in and constraints toward SEL in a high-needs elementary school setting. Six themes were drawn from the interviews with the school educators and observations in the school: *prerequisite for academic success, essential skills for life success, lack of time, lack of preparation and development, home-school disconnection, and pushback from students*. The themes of *prerequisite for academic success* and *essential skills for life success* implicated the school educators' buy-in of SEL. The school educators' perceived constraints to SEL implementation were presented in the other four themes.

Educators' buy-in of SEL

Teaching and learning in schools have strong social, emotional, and academic components (Zins et al., 2004). Educators at Whitehead Elementary expressed a unified buy-in around the value of SEL and believed students' SEL competencies fostered by the RP approach are pivotal for their academic and life success.

Prerequisite for academic success

Educators at the Whitehead elementary school perceived the importance of promoting students' SEL development for their academic success. Samantha, a grade 5 teacher, shared a strong sense of buy-in toward SEL from the current staff and the necessity of incorporating SEL into the overall classroom atmosphere: "the people [teachers] we have this year have more of a 'hang in there' buy-in ... the need for [SEL] is so great ... they [students] can't learn academics if these basic needs of comfort, safety, and security aren't met first." For Melissa (Grade 1 Teacher), SEL competencies were vital prerequisites for students' academic achievement: "If [students] are not able to act well socially, it gets in the way of academics." Teresa (School Leader) added to Melissa's point, "[SEL] is not only helping those kids develop social skills and develop comradery with their peers. It's definitely helping them academically." She continued: "I see the possibility is definitely a decline in the number of days missed from school for disciplinary behavior. I see another benefit of just the ability to have conversations and to communicate in a positive way." Student's behavioral changes relating to academic performance were also observed after the one-year implementation of the schoolwide SEL implementation of restorative practices: "I am hearing a lot less, like, during math, I used to hear 'I can't, I can't, I'm not going to try,' and I feel like that's slowly changing." (Jessica, Grade 5 Teacher). Connor (School Leader) commented: "They [students] need to turn those behaviors toward academic learning ... until we teach them how to be in relationship with one another, we can't accomplish some of the other goals."

Essential skills for everyday life

Educators acknowledge the importance of buy-in in SEL, believing SEL competencies were essential for students' life success, including relationship building, conflict resolution, social awareness, and self-awareness. For Kinsley (Social Worker), SEL provided an excellent opportunity for the students to learn trust,

which is the foundation of relationship building: “SEL is about trust. For trust with my kids and myself, they have to be able to know that they can come to me openly and know upfront.” She also expressed the importance of educational efforts to promote SEL in schools: “If they [students] aren’t emotionally prepared, if they aren’t given the opportunity to learn differently, they’re not going to be successful.” Trinity (Grade 4 Teacher) perceived SEL as “understanding yourself and how you interact with other people in a positive way,” which is essential for building a positive relationship with others. In the class, Julianna (Grade 5 Teacher) observed that students “enjoyed talking about themselves, they enjoyed learning about their peers, they enjoyed learning about their teachers. so that consistency is something that I think that they enjoy along with the relationship building of things.” Julianna also added that “it’s definitely important for our students to learn about kindness, compassion, about treating, treating one another with respect.”

Conflict resolution was another essential SEL quality perceived by the educators at the Whitehead Elementary school. Barbara (Grade 3 Teacher) commented after the one-year schoolwide SEL program, “the [students’] conversations have changed. I mean, before it was, let’s argue about it, let’s yell and let’s fuss and fight, and now it’s, okay, let’s talk this out, let’s figure this.” James (PE Teacher) explained his understanding of the importance of SEL as “teaching kids how to have feelings and how to nurture those feelings and how to, you know, repair harm when there is a negative or bad feeling.” He further addressed that SEL taught the students “work together collaboratively” and learned “how to be kind” and “how to resolve conflict.” The strategy of teaching peaceful conflict resolution was observed during the classes: “Conflict corner was one of the commonly used teaching strategies to develop students’ SEL in classes. It is a place where students in conflicts could talk about the happenings, share their feelings, and reach a peaceful solution under the mediation with teachers” (Field Note, Research Team, YS).

The educators perceived social awareness and self-awareness as the other two essential qualities for students’ life success. Connor accentuated the importance of teaching the students “to be productively interactive” and preparing them to be “not only good students but good citizens, good people to be around.” Teresa and Barbara respectively added to Connor’s point that SEL skills prepared students “to be a part of a class community, to be a part of a school community, to be a part of a city community.” Students needed to “understand that ‘I’m upset’ and ‘Let’s not overreact on things that maybe we shouldn’t.’” The improvement of social awareness and self-awareness was also reflected in the observation field notes during one of the PE classes: “Students stayed behind the lines and played fair. When students made mistakes, they were not upset. Some smiled and laughed, while others refocused quickly and moved to another pin to protect” (Field Note, Research Team, DH).

Educators’ constraints to SEL implementation

Despite the evident and strong buy-in expressed by the educators, many constraints still impede and challenge the SEL implementation at the Whitehead elementary school. The educators perceived *lack of time*, *lack of preparation and*

development, *home-school disconnection*, and *pushback from students* as salient constraints for SEL implementation at the Whitehead elementary school.

Lack of time

Lack of time was the most frequently mentioned constraint for SEL implementation at the Whitehead. Tayler (Grade 2 Teacher) commented that time is “a big constraint,” as “you can’t get to every person [in one class], so that is a definite constraint.” She further explained that teaching SEL is a “slow and gradual process” and “goes against the instant gratification that we’re so accustomed to.” Angela (Grade 3 Teacher) added to Teresa’s point that “I think sometimes you have to look at where’s that sweet spot, but then there are so many other things you want to put in that sweet spot too, so being able to balance all in the class is very important.” Barbara reiterated lack of time is “the biggest one” challenge for SEL implementation as “it takes a lot of time. It takes a lot of energy too. Some days I don’t want to talk about it. Some days I just want to, you know, go sit down and move on.” For Tony (Grade 4 Teacher), the lack of time to teach SEL was attributed to “academic pressure,” which made “teachers feel like they don’t have the time to focus on SEL in an intentional way.” Connor expressed his concern about the lack of time for effective SEL implementation, “we still don’t have enough time to do that [SEL] because that’s hard work, right? You can’t just give them a list and say, here, go do this. They’ve got to feel it. And that takes time.”

Lack of preparation and development

Lack of professional preparation and development was another salient constraint frequently discussed by the educators at the Whitehead elementary school. Samantha mentioned limited preparation opportunities for teaching SEL: “I do not think any of my experience has prepared me for what I am dealing with these kids [SEL]. And this is my 19th year. I don’t even have the ending for that.” In a similar manner as Samantha, James commented on the professional development for SEL as “it [SEL] is not really a professional development that I’ve ever seen or been offered.” Despite the lack of professional preparation and development for SEL, James also shared that the counselor and social worker helped the teachers for SEL in an informal way, “those conversations [about SEL] are definitely happening. But I don’t think they’re happening in a controlled like ‘Hey, let’s sit down and talk about it. I think it’s done pretty much on teachers’ free time or after school.” Due to the lack of preparation and development, teachers were hesitant or uncertain about how to teach SEL in the classes: “During the class observations, the teacher spoke to students individually or removed them from the immediate situations. It appears that the teacher is a little uncertain as to how much restorative practice is being conducted in classrooms.” (Field Note, Research Team, DH).

Recently, the school organized two professional development workshops on SEL for the teachers, but “there’s been no kind of meaningful follow-up, which I think is another piece that’s missing” (Martin, School Leader). Connor added to the comments for the recent SEL workshops “you [SEL researchers] not only have to work with teachers in that workshopping setting, but you also have to work with them in their classrooms. It’s coaching and just ongoing discussions.”

Home-school disconnection

Educators recognized home-school disconnection as another constraint for SEL implementation at the Whitehead. James observed and reflected: “A lot of our students go home to a very non-nurturing kind of destructive area or household. And I think it’s hard for them because when they come here to us, they still have their defense up.” He accentuated that: “I think our kids here are heavily, heavily influenced from their home life . . . the number one quote that is always said is ‘My mama told me that if I get hit, I need to hit back.’” Helen (Grade 2 Special Ed Teacher) complained about the consequences of the home-school disconnection on students’ SEL development “teachers want to use the same [SEL] strategies at school, at home, but parents are so overwhelmed too that that’s hard to keep consistent.” The principal also added to Helen’s point with specific examples of what students might experience in their home environments: “Students don’t always feel heard at home . . . because that’s just not the way family dynamics are set up.” Trinity proposed a way to improve the “home-school disconnect” by trying to “connect with parents and do some education on what the school process of [SEL] is” and teaching the parents “some of this [SEL] language and stuff that we’re using at school in case they wanted to use that at home.” A field note also reflected the educators’ perceptions of building a home-school connection on students’ SEL development during a summer restorative practice workshop: “The teachers and school leaders in the workshop acknowledged the importance of building common SEL language between teachers, students, and parents” (Field Note, Research Team, YS).

Pushback from students

Though the students overall have demonstrated some positive SEL progress, there also has been pushback from students, which provided challenges to the student’s social and emotional development at school. Connor cited students’ confrontational nature owing to their challenging backgrounds beyond the school: “a lot of our kids are very streetwise, they use a lot of confrontation, they use language with one another that is oppositional, and they are suspicious of authority figures.” Teresa added to Connor’s point: “Some of our kids are very angry. They’re very defensive. They can be very aggressive with one another. They can be very aggressive with the adults in the buildings.” Samantha shared:

I’m almost desensitized to reacting because there’s so much all the time with so many of them. You might have one situation in your school over a few years, and here it’s almost all of our kids all of the time.

Despite teachers’ efforts, behavior issues among students also have been observed outside of their classrooms. James commented on his students’ behaviors in PE classes as “some kids do not understand how to control their voice and how to say things. So, they come across as very abrupt, very rude”; “One student firmly refused to walk to the line, and the PE teacher had to talk with his classroom teacher about his behavior” (Observations, Research Team, SB). Kinsley suggested that “sometimes your kids are just off,” but teachers have to “set specific expectations that are clear and concise” so that students “know what our expectations are.” During classroom observations, we found:

Younger students in third and fourth graders who have been instructed with restorative practices within the last academic year were polite, cooperative, and self-disciplined in the classes (Field Note, Research Team, YS).

Teachers also mentioned other external social media that might negatively influence students’ SEL development, such as “news media and all of the conflict and chaos that’s going on in the society” (Teresa).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore educators’ perspectives or voices of SEL in a high-needs rural elementary school setting, our research at this lab school/partnership school provides an understanding of what works and what needs improvement when schools attempt to develop students’ SEL skills. Six themes were drawn from the interviews with the school educators and observations in the school: *prerequisite for academic success, essential skills for life success, lack of time, lack of preparation and development, home-school disconnection, and pushback from students*. The study confirmed the importance of SEL and revealed nested levels of constraints for school educators’ SEL implementation from the school educators’ perspectives.

School educators in this study confirmed the importance of SEL, acknowledging the interrelated and dynamic relationships between students’ social, emotional, and academic competencies. Previous studies have shown quantitative evidence to conclude that SEL competencies are associated with students’ academic success in schools (Durlak et al., 2011; Sklad et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2017; Corcoran et al., 2018). Adding to the previous quantitative evidence where a general reciprocal relationship between SEL competencies and academic success was recognized, this study adds more in-depth qualitative evidence about the relationship between students’ SEL competencies and academic success perceived by these elementary school educators. Drawing on the human developmental Cascades Theory (Capaldi, 1992; Dodge et al., 2008), we found evidence from the educators’ voices that students’ SEL competencies can be fundamental to students’ academic success and life skill development. In other words, positive changes and development of students’ SEL competencies have complemented and enhanced the students’ potential for academic and later life success. Based on this finding, the study advocates more SEL programs and practices should be available for students in high-needs rural elementary schools. The research strongly advocates for school-based SEL research making use of qualitative research methods concentrated on the school context and relevant family and community connections to transform our understanding of the need for quality SEL implementation (Jagers et al., 2019).

In adopting a social-ecological systems perspective, we found nested levels of contextual constraints and process challenges the school educators had to confront when infusing SEL into the current teaching practice at the Whitehead. Constraints of lack of class time and pushback from students were recognized by the school educators in the immediate school context. Those constraints were categorized as the micro-level. A lack of professional preparation and development was recognized by the school educators as a significant constraint at the meso-level. In addition, school educators also perceived home-school disconnection as a salient constraint for students’ SEL development at the meso-level.

Due to the pressures of the current school agendas, educators reported a lack of time as the most salient barrier to teaching SEL in the classrooms (Jones et al., 2017; Oberle and Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Humphrey et al., 2018). To combat the barrier of limited time, Ottmar et al. (2015) conducted an SEL intervention, where teachers were trained to create a well-managed and positive social environment in the classrooms. The study suggested the infusion of SEL into existing school curricula to overcome the constraint of limited class time caused by high demands for academic performance. In addition to the strategy of infusing SEL into the current school curriculum, we also suggest that SEL practices could be “sequenced, active, focused, and explicit” in the organization and sequencing of selection activities to achieve greater students’ learning outcomes in SEL (Durlak et al., 2011).

Educators in high-need schools tend to have job-related stressors and burnout (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2007; Pas et al., 2012). Those negative feelings and experiences can be deteriorated with students’ pushback, which may lead to poor quality classroom instructions and may aggravate school and classroom climate (Hamre and Pianta, 2005; Downer et al., 2007). We advocate that high-need elementary school leaders reduce students’ pushback by promoting schoolwide policies for SEL and using consistent SEL languages, which may “shift the norms, culture, and climate of their school” (Brackett et al., 2019, p. 154).

Lack of professional preparation and development emerged as a salient challenge for school educators to implement SEL successfully and was considered a meso-level constraint. It has been recognized that school educators’ SEL competencies, pedagogical skills, and their understandings of students’ SEL states and lives outside of school have significant influences on school-based SEL programs’ process and effectiveness (Weissberg et al., 2015). However, previous studies have reported that the majority of school educators, especially teachers, received very few pre-service preparation and in-service professional learning experiences that focus explicitly on the content and pedagogical knowledge for students’ SEL development (Bridgeland et al., 2013; Schonert-Reichl, 2017; McKown, 2019). The inclusion of children’s development, teacher-student relationship, and positive learning environment in the pre-service teacher education program has been suggested as a way to empower school educators to facilitate implement SEL practices or programs at schools (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). These contextual factors have been recognized to be highly associated with the effectiveness of school-based SEL programs (Stoiber, 2011). In-service teachers continued professional development explicitly focusing on SEL should also highlight the importance of the context, colleague collaboration, roles of modeling, expert support, and opportunities for reflection and feedback (Immordino-Yang et al., 2019; Jagers et al., 2019).

Home-school disconnection stands out as another salient barrier at the meso-level of the social-ecological system for students’ SEL. To provide students contextual opportunities to practice the SEL values learned at schools consistently in their homes, effective communications must be built between program providers, school personnel, and families (Payton et al., 2000). Families have played a critical role in students’ SEL development since norms and values held by family members have a significant influence on their children’s SEL (Meléndez and Martinek, 2015). The extent of family involvement in the school often determines the success of the SEL program (Holt et al., 2017; Jagers

et al., 2019). To avoid fragmented SEL programs or practices “through which students pass like pinballs in a pinball machine” (Elias, 2019, p. 234), we suggest high-needs rural elementary schools adopt a multi-level SEL approach (Weissberg et al., 2015; Gordon et al., 2016; Brackett et al., 2019). Knowledge and strategies for developing SEL competencies are shared among multi-level social organizations, such as schools, families, and communities. Consequently, students will have the opportunity to learn and practice SEL competencies consistently across those social contexts. We also encourage affordable technologies (McKown, 2017; Williamson, 2017) to be employed for more effective communications regarding effective strategies to develop SEL competencies between the school and the family.

The major limitation of this study is the transferability of the findings. Since Whitehead is a lab school that is operated in partnership with the school district and a local university. It could be argued that this school has more resources and opportunities to conduct SEL programs compared to other public high-needs elementary schools. In addition, the number of participants in this study was relatively small. Those limitations might raise concerns about the transferability of the findings to other settings. Despite those limitations, we would argue that our findings would contribute to future SEL studies in the context of rural high-needs elementary schools.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore educators’ buy-in and constraints toward SEL in a high-needs rural elementary school setting. In the process of observing classes and interviewing educators, we sought to better understand what works and what needs to be improved. The study provides evidence to support the importance of SEL and revealed nested levels of constraints for school educators’ implementing SEL from the “voices” of school educators. The study recommends future school-based SEL research utilizing a qualitative research approach to gain more in-depth knowledge and understanding of the needs for contextually relevant SEL implementation. The study also calls for collaborative efforts and shared strategies to facilitate “legitimate” long-term partnerships between universities and schools, families, and communities, particularly in rural areas, in promoting a more holistic vision of the social and emotional development of our children (Meyers et al., 2015; San Antonio, 2018; Jagers et al., 2019).

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

BD conducted the research and wrote the manuscript. YS collected the data and drafted the manuscript. DH and SB collected and analyzed part of the data and contributed to the writing and proofreading process. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2023.1100667/full#supplementary-material>

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