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SCHOOL-BASED SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING PROGRAMS IN AN URBAN
SETTING: BARRIERS AND FACILITATORS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF
THOSE WHO IMPLEMENT THEM

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at the

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ABSTRACT

Recent research in education indicates that social and emotional learning (SEL) programs in urban K-12 schools not only improve students' academic level but also improves their quality of life. This study employed semi-structured interviews with SEL teachers to understand the barriers and facilitators to the implementation of a SEL (Social-emotional learning) program in an urban district.

From the study, several barriers were identified by participants. The most significant one pertained to the limited training and in some cases, the quality of the training prior to implementing a SEL program, as well as the need for ongoing training. Participants also indicated that there was a need for more unity in terms of SEL being embraced by the entire staff and implemented as a school-wide initiative. Another barrier was economic, specific to funding of the initial year of the program but more importantly, the sustainability in terms of quality implementation.

Facilitators identified by participants included partnerships the district has with non-profit organizations to provide SEL implementers and the amount of student engagement SEL programming encouraged and gained.

Keywords: Social emotional learning, implementation, urban education

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Social-emotional learning gives tomorrow's workforce the tools for success, while educators find it contributing to a positive school climate and increased academic success. Beyond immediate outcomes in the classroom, SEL prepares employees to solve problems, manage emotions and communicate.

- Committee for Children

Social emotional learning (SEL) programs have been important in U.S. schools since at least 1994. Today it is estimated over 200 types of classroom based SEL programs exist. The effects of these programs are seen in improvements in students' academic scores, social skills, emotional intelligence and reduced referrals for behavioral problems in the classroom (Hoffman, 2009). The importance of implementation of SEL is clear due to the growth of policies that mandate this type of programming be put into schools on a state-by-state basis. Difficulty in measuring the total success of SEL programming is often due to the variation of how programs are implemented. Research shows that no one intervention is perfect or can exist in all schools, neighborhoods, and countries due to the uniqueness of cultural demographics and traumatic occurrences that

affect today's youth (McCallops, Barnes, Berte, Fenniman, Jones, Navon & Nelson, 2019). Current areas of study do not accurately examine the social validity of SEL.

This qualitative study examines the barriers to implementing SEL programs in an urban school district. The goal of this study is to investigate the barriers to SEL implementation as perceived by program implementors and solutions to overcoming those barriers for sustainability of the programs. Many currently published studies that surround SEL implementation are rooted in program observation or evaluation. This study is unique in its approach because it assesses the experiences of the people who implement specific SEL curriculum during the school day.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining SEL

A recent Rand Corporation online article (Hamilton, Doss & Steiner, 2019) states:

Seventy-two percent of principals indicated that promoting students' social and emotional skills was either their school's top priority or one of their school's top priorities. Notably, principals in urban schools chose SEL as their top priority at greater rates than their nonurban counterparts, (p. 2).

In order to understand why SEL is highly valued in the urban education system in the United States, there needs to be an understanding of *what* SEL is.

The most basic definition of SEL is, "The process of acquiring core competencies to recognize and manage emotions, to solve problems effectively, to set and achieve positive goals and establish positive relations with others, make responsible decisions and handle interpersonal/challenging situations constructively and capably" (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011, p.406).

To simplify these needs, an organization known as the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2012) identified five competencies as the building blocks for SEL. These competencies are: (1) self-awareness, (2) self-management, (3) social awareness, (4) relationship skills, and (5) responsible decision making.

Each of the five competencies has its own definition and set of abilities that support them. Self-Awareness is defined as “the ability to accurately recognize one’s own emotions, thoughts and values and how they influence behavior” (CASEL,2019.) Examples of self-awareness include recognizing emotions, self-confidence and self-efficacy. Self-management refers to” the ability to successfully regulate one’s emotions, thoughts and behaviors in different situations” (CASEL, 2019). Impulse control and goal setting are often exemplifying of self-management that SEL programs begin with. Social awareness is “the ability to take perspective and empathize with others.” Empathy and respect for others are 2 keystone concepts of social awareness. “The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and group defines relationship skills. Two of the most transferable skills in this category are teamwork and communication. The fifth and final competency is responsible decision making. Responsible decision making is referred to as “the ability to make constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards.” (CASEL, 2019.) Identifying and solving problems are two concepts within responsible decision-making that many SEL programs address.

Goals of SEL

Understanding the goals of SEL is just as important as defining SEL. The proximal goal of SEL is to foster the development of the competencies mentioned above. “Competencies provide strong foundation for better adjustment and academic performance as reflected in more positive social behaviors, fewer conduct problems, less emotional distress, and improved test scores and grades (Greenberg et al., 2003, cited in Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011, p. 406). The focus of most

SEL programs is universal prevention and promotion. Zins and Elias (2007) state the goals of SEL relate to proactively engaging children in positive behaviors and prohibiting negative behaviors.

The distal goals of SEL pertain to educating the whole child. Research shows the long-term goals of SEL programming aim to address and eliminate health and mental health issues such as depression, suicide attempts and stress. Another long-term goal of SEL is to promote strengths in cultural diversity (Barnes, 2019).

History of SEL

Where did the development of SEL and its current ideals come from? Social-emotional learning programs were in development as early as the mid-90's as a result of interest in published psychological literature. Two pieces of literature are referenced in several existing SEL studies. The paramount work is Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence* (1995). The secondary publication referenced is Gardner's *Multiple Intelligences* (1993) (cited in Zins & Elias, 2007, p. 234 & Ross, Powell & Elias, 2002, p. 44). 2001 saw the beginning steps to state laws requiring SEL to be implemented into education standards.

In 2001 the National Conference of State Legislators passed a resolution supporting the teaching of social emotional skills in schools, and in 2004 Illinois became the first state to develop specific SEL standards for K–12 students; such standards are also being considered by several other states (Hoffman, 2009).

While SEL standards and programs are still currently developing from state to state, and most of the need was recognized in the mid-90's, programmers and researchers reach even further back in time for program creation inspiration. Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger (2011) reference Waters and Sroufe's 1983 description

of competent people as a building block for SEL researchers and program designers (p. 406).

Outcomes of SEL for Teachers

Most of the research on the outcomes of SEL focuses on students, but teachers are the primary deliverers of SEL in schools. A positive measure of SEL on teachers and parents is that “growing numbers of educators and parents recognize the relationships between academic and social–emotional learning, particularly within the context of schools’ systems of support. “(Zins & Elias, 2007, p. 234). However, it takes a certain type of social-emotionally competent teacher to successfully implement SEL programming in the classroom. Students typically do not learn alone but rather in collaboration with their teachers, in the company of their peers, and with the encouragement of their families. Hoffman (2009) claims teachers with higher social emotional competence are more empathetic and are therefore more likely to have an easier time implementing SEL. There’s also a nod to the fact that teachers are not required to be trained on how to administer an SEL program. Notably, however, in Ohio, the state where the proposed study will take place, the state government passed the Supporting Alternatives for Fair Education (SAFE) Act in 2018, which requires that all teacher preparation programs address SEL.

Implementation Science

A large variable in the success of SEL programming is how it is implemented. There is relatively little research on SEL implementation as the study of program implementation—known as implementation science—is still somewhat new.

The term implementation science refers explicitly to the study of ‘variables and conditions that affect changes at practice, organization, and systems levels; changes that are required to promote the systematic uptake, sustainability and effective use of evidence-based programs and practices in typical service and social settings. The goal of the interdisciplinary field of implementation science is to bridge the gap between research and practice (Fixsen, Naoom, Blasé, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005), (cited in Douglas, Campbell & Hinckley, 2015, pp. S1827-S1828).

There are eight identified aspects to implementation that researchers should assess: (1) fidelity; (2) dosage;(3) quality (e.g., are the main program elements delivered clearly and correctly?); (4) participant responsiveness (e.g., are students attentive during program lessons?); (5) program differentiation (program uniqueness) (cited to Dane & Schneider, 1998); (6) monitoring of control/comparison conditions; (7) program reach (participation rates, program scope); and (8) adaptation (program modification, reinvention) (Durlak & DuPre, 2008, p. 329). Durlak and DuPre’s 2008 article refers to a health study, but the principles of implementation science described apply to educational research as well.

What Makes a Successful SEL Program Successful?

Now that a definition of SEL and implementation science have been provided, this section focuses on the implementation of SEL in schools. Currently, a large-scale problem that exists with the way SEL programming is implemented within urban districts is that too many programs that all approach a different social problem are implemented in too short of an amount of time. These programs are produced in a fragmented manner that only focus on a small portion of larger social issues (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg

&Walberg, 2007). Essentially the programs end up pitted against each other and most likely end up competing for funding, space, and time. Another problem with implementing SEL programs in an urban school could mean that these programs end up playing into cultural bias and ignore the neo-indigenous background of the student population.

The problem of saturating a school with too many SEL programs at once does have the potential to exist in schools that are not exclusively in an urban district. The next few examples concern positive implementation tactics that support SEL. Transferring effective programs into real world settings and maintaining them there is a complicated, long-term process that requires dealing effectively with the successive, complex phases of program diffusion. These phases include dissemination, adoption, implementation and sustainability. Without data on implementation, research cannot document precisely what program was conducted, or how outcome data should be interpreted (Durlak & DuPre,2008, p.340).

Stoiber (2011) noted from previous research teacher training and technical support in addition to monitoring of data is crucial to the success of implementation of an SEL program.

Research completed by Durlak and colleagues (2011) and referenced again by Jones and Bouffard (2012) found that the most effective programs were those that incorporated four elements represented by the acronym SAFE: (1) sequenced activities that led in a coordinated and connected way to skills, (2) active forms of learning, (3) focused on developing one or more social skills, and (4) explicit about targeting specific skills. Social validity, defined by Schwartz and Baer (1991) as “how an intervention is

viewed as acceptable, relevant, and viable” is noted by Gueldner & Merrill (2011) to be vital to the success of an SEL program.

Rationale and Research Question

SEL programs benefit youth and adolescents in a multitude of ways. Urban districts have an interest in implementing social and emotional learning programs due to a unique set of challenges most non-urban district do not face. Some of the greatest challenges are poverty, systemic racial and cultural segregation and high student mobility (RTI, 2019). T.N. Barnes’ (2019) comparison of SEL programs shows that some urban programs blatantly ignore cultural bias. Barnes also notes a lack of fidelity and follow-up on researcher’s part. Fidelity in programming is of extreme importance to sustainability of SEL programs.

Joanna Durham-Barnes’ 2011 study speaks to the voice of both personal and professional challenges urban teachers face. Some stand out features of this study Durham-Barnes notes as specifically urban are the efficacy and passion these teachers have for their work and pride in giving scholars justice and empowerment through education to succeed in life. They are aware of the inequities and stressors, in particular lack of parental participation, but they still take pride in providing urban scholars with education.

Jagers and colleagues (2016) conducted research that showed CASEL’s five competencies are not the only defining component to effective SEL. SEL does not aim to eradicate institutional racism as most programming focuses on one urban issue and the individual child, not the whole system. Jagers does not disagree that SEL does have a

positive impact on urban students but makes suggestions as to how existing programs can focus more on the needs of the marginalized urban system.

The primary research question driving this study is, “What are the barriers and facilitators to implementing a successful SEL program in urban elementary schools?”

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The design for this research project is phenomenology. For the purpose of this research, the group is the program implementor and the phenomenon is the experience of implementing SEL in urban schools. Qutoshi (2018) states that phenomenology is a “methodological space within the social science research to study human phenomena at a deeper level of conscious to understand human experience.” This method was chosen over narrative research because phenomenology digs deep into the human experience and the direct affect it has on the outcome of the programming that is studied.

One-on-one semi-structured interviews were chosen as the tool to receive the most honest answers about how teachers and implementers think about SEL programming. Interviews were conducted with participants who implement SEL programming at two elementary schools housed within the Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD).

At one site I was able to interview a full-time classroom teacher and an implementer and at a second site I worked just with an implementer. In the case of this study, a full-time classroom teacher is defined as a certified licensed educator who is employed directly with the school. An implementer is an individual employed by an

agency outside of the district, invited to deliver SEL programming within the school building by way of a collaborative partnership the organization has with the school district. Implementers are not necessarily licensed teachers, but they are qualified and trained by their hiring agency to teach programming within the schools. In order to protect the confidentiality of the participants pseudonyms are used for the 2 school buildings and the agencies and programs the implementers are employed by are not noted by name.

Researcher Background

I found great importance in doing this research because I have been employed as an SEL Teaching Artist/Instructor over the course of the past 5 years. I understand the dedication it takes to implement SEL programming in an urban school. As a researcher it was important to me that the voices of those who implement SEL programs be heard loud and clear.

I wanted to approach the topic of SEL from the implementer and the educator's view as most research focus' only on student outcomes and verified achievement numbers. Approaching SEL from the voice of the implementer aims to let the reader of this research know what is valued about SEL particularly in urban schools. As I thought about my questions surrounding SEL implementation and listened back to the participants interviews, I reflected deeply on my own implementation experience in the classroom.

Site and Sample

CMUSD's student population is classified as 100% economically disadvantaged by the Ohio Department of Education. There are currently approximately 39,000 students in

the district. Sixty-eight of a total of the 107 school buildings in the district service students in elementary schools (grades K-8). Table 1 breaks down student demographics and the district overall. In addition to looking at demographic information, it is important to note that SEL programs have existed for several years in CMSD, making the district an excellent target population for the sample. Urban districts have led the way in SEL curriculum development. In fact, it wasn't until 2019 that the Ohio Department of Education created standards to help districts in the state define SEL and organize interventions—prior to that, districts mostly were left to their own regarding SEL programming.

Table 1:

CMSD Student Demographics.

Group	%
Black, Non-Hispanic	64.1
With IEP	24
Hispanic	16.3
White, Non-Hispanic	15.4
Limited English proficiency	9.7
Multiracial	2.7
Asian or Pacific Islander	1.3

This study includes two CMSD schools that have implemented SEL programs over the past five years. Purposive sampling was selected to acquire participants from the three school buildings. Participants were sought out due to access to the buildings and the programs that exist in these schools that adhere to SEL standards.

The sample size for this study ended up much smaller than expected due to a change in interview format and the availability of participation. The target number of participants for this study was 9 positive responses from an approach of 18 school day program implementors and classroom teachers. An unprecedented event happened amid the data gathering process of this research. The outbreak of the Covid-19 Pandemic disrupted the ability to contact prospective respondents at their school sites and with the sudden disruption of school closures, due to unknown (but understandable) reasons, very little response agreeing to or declining to participate in the research occurred after a second e-mailed attempt.

One classroom teacher sent a response of decline simply stating “it would not be the appropriate time to be involved” in the research. No response at all was received from classroom teachers at an initially proposed third site. Gathering participants became difficult due to those who teach in classrooms on a daily basis quickly having to change their daily routines, possibly cater to family members in ways that they would not have to if schools and business’ were open as normal and perhaps even stress of having to stray from the norm or lack of knowledge of what would come next in their daily life all affected the outcome of data collection for this research. No third attempt was made to contact prospective respondents out of respect for the fact that the world is not currently “business as usual” and those who are used to being in a school building are feeling the stresses of not being able to be in contact with their students as they normally would in a day.

At the end of the attempted call for participants, 3 people responded. The identities of participants including their work settings and places remain anonymous, but,

some basic demographic information was collected and listed in Table 2 to understand more about their experience.

Table 2:

Participant Demographics

Participant	Race	Gender	Experience	Years	Grade(s)
A	African American	Female	Classroom Teacher	5	6 th
B	African American	Female	SEL Program Implementor	4	Pre-K through 8th
C	African American	Male	SEL Program Implementor	4	Pre-K through 8th

Citing the demographics of these participants in Table 2 helps identify the point of view their answers approached. The participants gender, number of years involved with SEL and identified race were large factors in the quality, fidelity and adaptation of the programs they deliver or currently possess and are not delivering to their students.

Table 3:

Building Student Demographics

		Student Demographics			
		Black, non-Hispanic	White, non-Hispanic	Other Race Identity	With an IEP
Building	Center School	94.4%	Fewer than 10 students	Fewer than 10 students	25.1%
	Eastwind Elementary	97.6%	Fewer than 10 students	Fewer than 10 students	23.1%

note. school names are pseudonyms, but stats are as listed with the ODE

Table 3 recognizes the differences in the two building's student demographics. Understanding this information lets us understand the relationships implementers and students may (or may not build) based off of racial differences alone.

One of the programs that currently exists in the was originally developed as a theater class to be taught by Teaching Artists with professional experience in the industry. Shortly after its initial development, in order to sustain a purposeful existence within the schools, SEL and English language arts components were added. SEL was a necessity for this program because theater arts align with CASEL's five competencies. Reading a script with a character forces people to examine what emotion looks like within themselves and others both internally and externally, exploring the areas of both self and social awareness. All scripts and stories include conflict as an integral part of their structure. Examining conflict, reading through, acting out and discussing it is another way to build problem solving skills and supports responsible decision making. Discussing how a character achieves what they want and discovering a character's voice both assist with self-management. Last but not least the very act of talking/reading through a script and building characters with interactions fosters relationship skills. While this program aligns with all 5 of CASEL's competencies, it is non-traditional in terms of the presentation through theatrical arts.

The program has existed in several CMSD elementary and Junior High schools over the last five years and continues to grow in the district yearly. It is important to note the curriculum was developed and the implementation is provided by an outside agency in a collaborative partnership with the school building.

A leadership-based curriculum is another whole school program in several CMSD schools that touts SEL as a base component. Much like curriculum that has a sole social-emotional approach, this leadership program aims to support development of the whole child. This program follows the SAFE structure. Based off the book “*The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*,” their website (2020) claims the curriculum includes self-management, responsible problem solving and relationship building skills. This program is implemented by school staff and administration. This is a non-traditional program in that it follows the description of only 3 CASEL competencies/ODE SEL standards.

Data Collection

One-on-one semi-structured interviews (interviewer protocol can be found in Appendix A,) were conducted with one full-time teacher and two agency program implementers at two CMSD schools that have record of current or previous programming within the last 5 years. I was most interested in learning about structural facilitators or barriers to implementation, including opinions of the participants in terms of what they feel and/or have experienced with a special focus on impact at the student and/or classroom level.

Participant A’s interview took place in person in her classroom before schools were closed due to Covid 19. Her interview took approximately 15 minutes because she has possession of an SEL program for her classroom, but she is not implementing it. She also only had approximately 20 minutes for the interview before she had to retrieve her class. Participant A’s answers were recorded on a password protected handheld device.

Due to the Covid 19 pandemic the two implementers verbally agreed to the consent prior to being asked questions conducted in a virtual format called ZOOM after

normal school hours. The time of each interview varied greatly due to the change in circumstances. Participant B and C had more time to reflect on their answers as they were not face-to-face and during work time. Interview B was approximately 30 minutes and Interview C was approximately 90 minutes. The interviews were recorded virtually. Participants were given the option to review their recordings and transcriptions to ensure they reflected their experiences correctly giving further validity to the findings.

Data Analysis

In order to understand the depth of data analysis for this study first person language will be used in this section. It is fair to say that the data was informally analyzed long before formal analysis and even transcription began.

The creation of themes amongst the three interviews became clear as I listened and replayed each recording back at least three times after the initial interview. I found it important to capture what each participant lingered on as they answered questions. Participant C was the most introspective and reflective as his interview lasted almost 90 minutes. Participant B had many points made in about 30 minutes that were powerful points to the data.

Participant A had the least to say and I had to curtail some of the questions as I discovered she was not implementing a SEL program, but her body language and vocal tone changed to frustration when I asked questions about training and programs in the school.

Program staff buy-in, reflections of self and training were large repeating themes for all three participants. After listening to the recordings and transcribing them by had the highlighted points were plugged into a data organizing system called NVIVO.

NVIVO allowed me to funnel out and keep the most powerful quotes in relation to the interview questions asked. After an outline was configured, I began writing the final paper based off the strongest answers given by all three participants.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Barriers to SEL Implementation in Urban Schools

The data suggested a number of factors that make it difficult to successfully implement SEL in urban schools. Those are described in this section below.

Barrier #1. The first barrier noted in interviews lack of buy-in from building staff that programming was necessary. As one participant stated:

When I first started there was some apprehension to the content and um, really mostly around necessity because they really didn't know the content very well.... So, it's not a typical K-8 pedagogy to be feelings based so there was some apprehension at the beginning. (Participant B, April 2020).

There was an obvious change in student performance and educator behavior somewhere along the span of the 4 years participant B was at this building. If no value was found there certainly would not be advocacy from the staff to keep the program in place for more than a year. Understanding the reception of SEL programs in an urban school directly relates to how the program is implemented within the classroom. When teachers are tasked with ensuring their students have passing grades for standards in common subjects, misinformation about how often they are implementing SEL can be communicated to administration and expectations of outside facilitators can get confusing

if pre-existing programs are not being facilitated as recommended or at all. All three participants interviews supported the concept that lack of staff buy-in is a large barrier to the implementation of SEL programming in the school. Participants B and C both stated in their interviews that getting their program into the school and sustaining the goal was difficult their first couple of years. Participant A noted lack of buy in by explaining that an SEL program was given to her but no training has been provided by the school or the district, and she's not aware of who else in the building has been asked to implement the program she was given as identified in barrier #2.

Barrier#2. A barrier indicated by participant A, the only participant who identified as a classroom teacher, is that training for new SEL programs in the classroom is nonexistent.

Interviewer: Do you feel that the training for the implementation of the SEL program was adequate?

Respondent: Oh there's no training so that would be no training at all for this program here... I think it would have made a lot of difference just to understand what the components are and how they can fit into a regular day so I am not aware of any of this and then it's like, well to just give it to you and say to do it it's like okay, well give me a little bit of background information on why so I'm.... (Participant A, February 2020.)

Participant A is in possession of a new SEL program that currently sits in a binder on the classroom counter. There's frustration in her voice as she emphasizes there has been no training to implement the program in the classroom. She has no idea what grade levels in their building are participating in the program, what the background of the program is or how to implement the program throughout the day. Due to a lack of number of respondents for this research, it cannot be verified that this is the norm for in school SEL programming. The amount of frustration expressed in this interview

surrounding lack of training and the knowledge that this participant has taught in other locations indicates that this may be an unfortunate circumstance in the implementation of SEL programs during the school day. The knowledge that improper implementation of an SEL program can harm students has caused this teacher to shelve the new program for now. Participant A referenced a tool used in CMSD called an AEP (Academic Enrichment Plan.) AEP's are the plans and guidelines classroom teachers are to follow in terms of what programs and strategies are to be utilized within their building for the year concerning both SEL and common standards. She was given a formal SEL curriculum but, Participant A currently is not facilitating it within her classroom.

Barrier#3. Grant dollars are limited to priorities established by federal, state and local dollars as well as private foundations and often align to areas of STEM and/or accountability associated with high stakes testing. The following response is part of respondent C's answer to one of my final questions about sustainability. He sees financial burden on the school system as a very large barrier:

Finances is a big thing. If anything, that's the biggest thing, financially keeping this program going. So, that's a tough question. It's like a yes or no. Yes, cause I know it's important. Yes, I've seen, I know it's like this, sometimes you can't see (but) you know it's affecting people's lives. There's a lot of factors like money and keeping it. Those factors play.... Unfortunately, you don't want it to but in real life, they do. (Participant C, April 2020.)

Barrier#4. The content specific to SEL and the intensity of emotions related to the implementation can result in highly charged emotional distress among SEL teachers and implementers. This requires SEL implementers to continually be aware of their own level of stressors and mental health. Participant B states that emotional boundaries between student and instructor are a necessity "to protect yourself and set good

boundaries for your students so that they have realistic expectations of what you can do for them.” (Participant B, April 2020.)

Facilitators to SEL implementation in Urban Schools

Facilitator#1. Intensive professional development is required at the onset of the program, followed by ongoing professional development the first year and subsequent years. Participant B noted the robustness of the training they received before and during implementation in their respective schools and how that training assists continued facilitation of their program.

Our program focused on three content areas, so we had expert training in all three of those areas. Intensive training, we did restorative justice training, trauma -informed care, all the things that helped us create the environment we wanted. (Participant B, April 2020.)

Participant C agreed that the rigorous training before implementing this program has helped him grow relationships with staff and students in his building. Participant A, however, has experienced the opposite of this as indicated in Barrier #2. All three participants agreed that a high level of leadership is needed to carry out the amount of professional development necessary to sustain SEL program implementation in their building.

Facilitator#2. A high level of student engagement is required for success of these programs. SEL aims for students to develop intentional and humane relationships with each other in accordance with CASEL’s 5 competencies. Participant A, while not facilitating a program in the classroom indicated that students in the building were more engaged in activities they could relate to and a movement- based atmosphere with some

dialogue offered more opportunity for engagement than pencil and paper activities.

Participant B answered a question about student engagement with delight in her voice:

Yes, yes and yes... I think students felt empowered to kind of govern what they had the emotional capacity for day to day. Students were really engaged. It was almost impossible to get them to leave my room. (Participant B, April 2020).

Terms like “empowered” indicate participant B had a passion for the curriculum she was facilitating, and that passion seemed easily transferred to her students. I suspect that allowing the students to interact more and the absent expectation of standard classrooms where students have to sit in desks and always raise their hands to answer brought some of the excitement to students.

Participants A and C agreed that students were highly engaged in the programming in their building. Participant C added that he experienced great amounts of engagement that were usually positive but could be negative in terms of a student having difficulty expressing an emotion in a safe way. The positive outcome for attendance factors strongly into fidelity and quality of the program.

Contextual Factors that Affect Implementation

There are several factors that affect implementation of a SEL program that may not be considered barriers or facilitators, but they play a part in contributing to or detracting from these barriers and facilitators.

Contextual factors can be measured by Durlak & DuPre’s (2008) 8 principles of implementation (referenced on page 7 of this study). Table 4 indicates which factors participants mentioned in their interviews

Table 4:

Durlak & Dupre's 8 principles of implementation referenced by participants

	Fidelity	Dosage	Quality	Participant Responsiveness	Differentiation	Control/ Comparison	Reach	Adaptation
Participant Principle A		√	√	√			√	√
B	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
C	√	√	√	√	√		√	√

Factor#1. Fidelity. It is important to note that fidelity is a necessity for the sustainability of an SEL program. Participants B and C facilitate programs that have a theater base. SEL is approached by investigating how students respond to the emotion presented to them in the materials. Interactions touch on each of the 5 CASEL competency areas as students are not just given scenes and games to have a fun time. It is important to note this as the ODE standards mandated in 2019 utilize CASEL's 5 competencies as a basis for assessment. Fidelity is measured through a computer program. The data collected from each class is electronically sent to the data management company their program works with.

Factor #2. Dosage. The amount of time spent on SEL programming per day and per week speaks to the effectiveness of the program. Table 5 reflects the programs facilitated by this study's participants.

Table 5:

Program timing

Participant	Minutes per Day	How many days/week	Times per week each grade level participated	When was the program?
A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
B	40-50	4	Once	During a core content class period
C	40-50	4	Once or twice	During “Specials” (Music/Gym etc.)

Factor#3. *Quality.* Modifications to curriculum. When asked if curriculum could be implemented without modification in a class period one participant stated:

Yes, it is. Cause we do it. The whole period is dedicated to drama and SEL. Honestly, with SEL and with what we’re learning in the program each day is a new day. You may have an idea or a plan of what your schedule’s going to be but, depending on what the student is going through or what has happened in that day it may take a turn to the left; which we address and we go with and acknowledge and we work through what needs to be worked through and still have time for our lesson if need be. (Participant C, April 2020)

The empathy and focus speaks to the quality of the program implementation. In answering the question asked, Participant C indicates the importance of the SEL aspects of the programming over the theatrics in the curriculum.

Factor#4. *Participant Responsiveness.* This factor is addressed as a facilitator. The responses from all three participants were positive when it came to student engagement. Participant C goes even further in explaining that engagement may look different. It may not always be positive, but even negative engagement in the form of a

student having an emotional break down offers an opportunity for more exploration into unpacking issues that relate to the 5 competencies.

You never know what you are going to get but you know to address it and to acknowledge it and make sure that the student is safe, make sure that the student is heard and make sure the whole class is safe and is heard. (Participant C, April 2020).

Factor #5. Differentiation. When speaking about differentiation it is important to note equity. While SEL is not built to effectively address issues of equity in a school, it was important to ask questions surrounding bias of marginalized populations and how the race and gender of SEL facilitators really affect the outcome of what the students are learning.

There's a maternal instinct that I think a lot of female teachers have. I think it gives me an advantage, but I also think that this program in particular is very much, you can use your strengths whatever strength you bring to the table... I think because I am an African American woman and I was teaching in a predominately African American school I understand my students in a different way... not having to work past the biases a white teacher would have to, I do think that was an advantage. Especially in this kind of work. (Participant B, April 2020.)

I'm at a school with mostly African Americans and I am. Right there that was an easy connection to it. That safety that I was talking about is in there. I can relate to them more. I believe yes, for my situation it did affect the way (the program was implemented), (Participant C, April 2020).

Without the bias's that Caucasian facilitators inherently have in dominate African American urban school buildings, approach to a social subject, like emotions can have an environment of less judgement and more ease of discussion.

Factor #6. Control/Comparison. Control/Comparison could not be measured in this study. Participant A is not currently facilitating an SEL program in her class and the

program that participants B and C implement do have a control group the agency they are employed with tracks, however that is not a factor that has importance in this research.

Factor #7. Reach. Program sustainability has a parallel relation to reach, as the longer a program is able to sustain, the more of the population it will likely reach. SEL is a vast subject matter but has the advantage of evidence -based success in both academic grades and improvements in problem behaviors.

The last two questions I asked dealt directly with the facilitators' thoughts about the sustainability of the SEL program in their building. The final question asked was one of the more difficult for the participants to answer. The question was if they believed SEL programming in their building, as it is currently, could sustain for 5 years in a building, why or why not? Participant B was the only participant who answered the question with great certainty that is a school building or district was willing to see the value and put in the energy and time a program could succeed. Participants A and C struggled to answer this question with any certainty, both stating the question was hard to answer for very different reasons, after a brief pause participant A stated:

ooh... wow... now that's a hard question to answer. More leadership in terms of this is what we're going to use um, either building wide or grade band wide and let's kind of work on that. But again, I feel since we are trying to do other programs school wide like Leader in Me that this SEL may take a backseat because it's a challenge to implement the Leader in Me...building wide so I think maybe these other programs...SEL programs have taken a back seat. (Participant A, Feb. 2020)

While he is in his 4th year of implementing the program, participant C still doesn't believe it has buy-in from the whole building. "That's a tough question for me... with social-emotional learning what I've learned is not a quick fix. It's a process that happens over time. "(Participant C, April 2020).

Factor #8. Adaptation. After they were asked about sustainability participants were asked what changes could be made to make SEL in their school buildings better.

Just the length of time if we decide to actually implement it and as we mentioned before who has to implement it. If it is an outside provider, I think it would be easier for the teachers in the building to have SEL programs implemented versus us having to do it. Because if we have to do it, it may be put on the back shelf, back burner I should say. (Participant A, Feb. 2020)

A factor related to adaptation of a program that SEL does not inherently address is the social and cultural needs of students. When asked if the current SEL programming implemented did *not* approach social and cultural needs of their students the answers were overwhelmingly that the students' needs were met except participant C:

I notice sometimes if we dig into that things could go off rails. Like, we could have a whole different discussion about that without really hitting the fat of the social-emotional learning unit... As educators we need to be a little bit more prepared to talk that through with them. Hear them, to make sure they're heard but also to plant seeds that they can think as well, differently. I just feel it could be better. (Participant C, April 2020).

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

It is difficult to conclude that there is one correct answer to fighting the barriers that SEL programming faces within urban districts. A larger scale study of both schoolteachers and outside program providers needs to be done to provide more conclusive evidence.

The participants answers to both the barriers they face and the success they've had were thoughtful. I learned the most important factor to making SEL programs successful in urban schools is time. Time to build trust, time to retain trust, and time for the programming to show positive outcomes. This is a large problem specifically with urban school districts due to the transient nature of staff and students.

This research relates to what is already known in many ways. Participant C's struggles with buy-in and trust echo the research of Durham- Barnes who's studies pointedly talk about challenges that are present specifically in urban education. While he doesn't comment on parental involvement, he speaks to the struggle that urban educators face in that they have pride and passion for empowering their scholars, but acknowledges behavioral problems and staff burn out interfere in his program's success.

All three respondent's answers support earlier research of Durlak & Dupre's 8 principles of implementation, Hoffman's studies and the more current work of Dr. Robert Jagers defending the need for more data on SEL.

The challenge to research that currently exists is the voice in which this research is presented. There are very few studies that currently exist in SEL that are qualitative in nature. The important contribution of this study is the voice of the implementers and teachers who find SEL to be a necessity in urban education. Core subjects have standardized measurements fueling their necessity as school curriculum whereas SEL programs are very rarely measured in a standardized way and are much more adaptive to the environment they are facilitated in. Core subjects and S.T.E.M. programs are often focused more on hard skills students need to procure and sustain a job after school. SEL focuses more on "soft" skills that are more difficult to measure and therefore funding, buy-in, professional development and emotional capacity are unique barriers to SEL programming.

A large limitation of this research was gathering participants. An unprecedented event occurred that caused schools to shut down and change the entire function of the school day as well as put fearful thoughts into people's heads about the future of social gathering, education and concern for the overall well-being of their students causing this research to be overshadowed. Several non-profit organizations that offer SEL programming such as the were able to sustain funding and continue work over an online format, however, the attendance numbers dropped and intended reach changed drastically over the course of 3 months.

Future research for the topic of SEL in urban districts would be beneficial by looking at how SEL is able to adapt to sudden changes in society and still provide for urban areas that need this type of programming the most. Further qualitative work needs to be done in regard to how urban school administration, staff and parents tie into the importance of the overall function and success of SEL. Considering the way education has changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic researchers should also consider the impact of virtual SEL programs and how they affect the urban population. How do marginalized and poor populations gain access to these programs given they do not have access to the technology they need at home? What is the responsibility of the schools to provide this technology or problem solve to grow buy-in from skeptics? How does research continue given sample sizes may be smaller as teachers and implementers have to resort to creative ways to provide content? These are all factors to consider as the educational landscape looks very different from what it was a year ago.

Based off of what I learned from existing research and interviews conducted SEL practitioners need to have the belief that the work they are doing will have positive outcomes. Time, patience and passion are the driving factors of success of SEL programs in urban districts. The best advice for SEL practitioners in urban districts is to continue to build and adapt curriculum so that it works for the particular building you are facilitating in, and most of all be patient. The change that SEL brings to students in urban districts takes time and people who believe that what SEL brings to urban schools in terms of understanding and behavior management takes passion and dedication. "... because if I'm going to train you to be emotionally available and then you go out into a world that is emotionally abusive it's going to undo everything we just talked about." (Participant B, April 2020).

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol and Questions

Setting the Context

Interviewer recording script before beginning asking questions. “Thank you for taking time to participate in the ‘barriers to implementing social emotional learning study.’ This interview will last approximately 20-30 minutes depending on your answers. Your answers are 100% confidential in accordance with the confidentiality agreement you signed when you agreed to participate in the study. Please answer the questions to the best of your ability in a clear voice so the recording can be transcribed. You and your school building will not be referred to by name in any portion of the recording, transcription or publication of this research. I would like to remind you your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you may refuse to answer any part of any question asked or stop the interview at any time. If you don’t have any questions for me I will now proceed with the interview.”

Interview Questions

IQ1: Please state your self-identified gender and race/ethnicity.

IQ2: How many years have you taught in your current building? At your current grade level (s)?

IQ2.5: Are there any factors of how the teaching climate in this building has changed over the years you’ve been here that you would like to discuss?

Interviewer: “I will now ask questions specific to your thoughts on the social emotional learning programs implemented in your building. Social emotional learning will be referred to as SEL.”

IQ3: Please describe what you have done this year to address SEL in your classroom.

IQ4: What specific activities have you implemented? Is there a name of a program you implement the activities through?

IQ5: How many SEL programs are you currently utilizing within your classroom (in-house and outside organization provided?)

IQ6: How often do you implement SEL?

IQ7: Is it just you who facilitates the SEL activities or do you have help? Who helps?

IQ8: What kind of training did you receive to implement SEL?

IQ9: What is the biggest impact or change you’ve noticed since the implementation of SEL programming in this building (or since you have been in this building and implementing SEL?)

IQ10: Are SEL programs able to be implemented as a full curriculum without modification in a class period? Why or why not?

IQ11: What are some of the barriers to fully implementing these programs/curricula in the classroom?

IQ12: From your perspective, have these programs affected the attitude of your scholars? In a positive or negative manner? Which program (if multiple) do you find has the most impact on your scholars and why?

IQ13: From your perspective, have these programs affected the attitude of you, your coworkers and administration within the building? In a positive or negative manner?

IQ14: Is there an approach to SEL you prefer or that your students react to in a more positive manner than others? What is the basis to the approach (ex. arts, social studies, health base or other core subject or special approach)?

IQ15: Do you feel that SEL does not adequately approach the social or cultural needs of your students in any way?

IQ16: What do you feel can be done better to serve marginalized populations when implementing SEL within your building?

IQ17: Does SEL programming as it currently exists within your building, have enough of an outcome to sustain longer than five years, in your opinion. Why or Why not? What changes could contribute to the program's sustainability?

Interviewer: "That concludes this interview. I would like to invite you to review the preliminary results so that you can check them for validity. Thank you for taking the time to participate in this important research."

Appendix B: Consent Form

Invitation to participate letter/school staff consent form (to be published on school letter head):

My name is Kristen L. Moldovan, I am a graduate student in the Department of Curriculum and Foundations at Cleveland State University. I am working with Dr. Adam Voight of CSU on this study. I am asking for your participation in a research study. For more information please contact me by phone at 419-503-3233 or e-mail me at k.moldovan@vikes.csuohio.edu.

The purpose of this study is completion of a thesis for graduation concerning the barriers to implementing social emotional learning programs in an urban school district. I want to know what the teachers voice is regarding the implementation of current SEL programs within CMSD.

This study is important because SEL became a state mandated standard in 2019. For this study, I am asking that you participate in an interview that will last approximately 20-30 minutes. In the interview I will ask questions about your opinion of the implementation of current SEL programs within your classroom and your building. We will schedule the interview at a convenient time. It will be held in the school building in a location where others cannot hear us. I will audio record the interview using a handheld recording device. Nobody outside of the research team will hear the audio recording.

The risk of participating in this study is no more than that of daily living. You may worry about sharing your ideas on the programs. I will keep your

interview comments confidential. I intend to present and publish the results of the study. There will be no way to identify you in the reported results. There are no direct benefits to participating in this study.

Your consent and participation are voluntary. You can withdraw at any time. There is no consequence for not participating.

Please read the following: *“I understand that if I have any questions about my rights as a research subject, I can contact the Cleveland State University Institutional Review Board at (216) 687-3630.”*

There are two copies of this form. After signing them, keep one copy for your records and return the other to the researcher. Thank you in advance for your support. If you agree to participate and acknowledge that you are at least 18 years old, please sign below.

Signature: _____

Name: _____ (Please Print)

Date: _____