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LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

Student and Educator Perceptions of the Implementation of a Social-Emotional Learning

Approach: A Mixed Methods Study of a Catholic School

by

Dorothy Balfe

A dissertation proposal presented to the Faculty of the School of Education,

Loyola Marymount University,

In partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education

2023

Student and Educator Perceptions of the Implementation of a Social-Emotional Learning

Approach: A Mixed Methods Study of a Catholic School

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This dissertation written by Dorothy Balfe, under the direction of the Dissertation Committee, is approved and accepted by all committee members, in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

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To Cohort 17—my dear friends. What a journey, but we did it.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents. Their love, support and dedication to the family gave us roots that hold us up today.

Mom and Dad, you believed in us. In your kind and gentle ways, you showed us what integrity is. You encouraged us to be who we needed to be, not what you wanted us to be. I learned from you to love learning, trust myself, and never give up on my dreams.

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ABSTRACT

Student and Educator Perceptions of the Implementation of a Social-Emotional Learning

Approach: A Mixed Methods Study of a Catholic School

by

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The goal of this mixed methods study was to examine educator and student perceptions of the implementation of social-emotional learning (SEL) and the RULER (i.e., recognizing, understanding, labeling, expressing, and regulating) approach in a Catholic school. The study investigated the perceptions of teachers, staff, and students about the implementation of SEL and RULER across elementary and middle school grade levels. The RULER approach is a K–12 SEL initiative designed to build the emotional intelligence and social-emotional competencies of all members of a school community. Data were gathered over a 4-month period through interviews with teachers and students, an educator survey, document analysis, and classroom and campus walkthroughs. The study produced findings around SEL and RULER implementation. The findings suggested SEL and RULER was valued by educators but there are challenges to implementation that may be obviated if the implementation team has a thorough understanding of the process of implementation of an initiative. Recommendations are provided to public and Catholic elementary and middle school leaders and SEL and RULER developers.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Human development occurs in a social-ecological context, influenced by the individual and the environment (Nickerson et al., 2019). Bronfenbrenner's (1981) bioecological systems theory forwards the idea there are four interconnected systems in a child's life—the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The theory recognizes multiple aspects of a developing child's life interact with and affect the child. As individuals grow and develop, their biological and psychological characteristics influence them and the systems surrounding them, such as the family, school, community, and the broader social system (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Crosby, 2015). The bioecological systems framework highlights the importance of developmental contexts, and how each system in the environment is nested in, and interacts with, the next.

In schools, educators prioritize three areas of mental health to support student well-being and successful development. The components are (a) social, or how individuals relate to each other; (b) emotional, or how they feel; and (c) behavioral, or how they act (Chafouleas, 2020). Positive relationships in teaching and learning are critically important for students' successful development, and research has shown students benefit when schools incorporate practices that build social and emotional competencies into their procedures and routines (Gardynik & McDonald, 2005; Nesbitt & Farran, 2021; Taylor et al., 2017). As academic standards have become more rigorous, with students needing to meet the increasing academic demands, schools must teach the social skills that facilitate learning. Schools play a critical role in providing for students' well-being and have the capacity to help students experience improved social

competence, maintain higher attendance rates, experience higher rates of academic achievement, with less disruptive classroom behavior, and lower rates of suspension and other forms of discipline (Durlak et al., 2011; Wood & Freeman-Loftis, 2015).

Since the 1980s, there has been a growing belief, backed by cognitive neuroscience research, that schools should teach more than just academics to students. Cognitive engagement and meaningful learning are enhanced when students' socioemotional competence is supported and nurtured in the school environment (Panksepp, 2004; Tyng et al., 2017). Social and emotional competence is the ability to understand, manage, and express the social and emotional aspects of life in ways that enable the successful management of life tasks such as "learning, forming relationships, solving everyday problems, and adapting to the complex demands of growth and development" (Elias, 2004, p. 13). In response to this notion, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was formed in 1994 to provide schools with social-emotional learning (SEL) programs backed by evidence-based research. The programs aim to develop psychosocial competence through self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills. These help students establish and maintain positive relationships and demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts (Zinsler & Dusenbury, 2015).

The quality of implementation is crucial to the success of SEL initiatives in schools. Implementation is a systematic process with well-defined steps (Meyers, Durlak, & Wandersman, 2012). According to CASEL and literature on SEL, implementation is a key factor for success, and the programs must be implemented with fidelity to make a difference for

students (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], n.d.-c; Durlak et al., 2011; Kendziora & Yoder, n.d.).

Problem of Practice

To support students' holistic growth and further the school's mission, St. ABC, a pseudonym, implemented a SEL program, specifically focused on RULER (i.e., recognizing, understanding, labeling, expressing, and regulating), an approach to SEL developed by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence (2022; Brackett et al., 2019). As implementation progresses, it is important to monitor the process and identify what enhancers and barriers exist to successful implementation.

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this study was to determine the steps necessary for social and emotional learning to be fully integrated into all aspects of school life. This study focused on the implementation of RULER, an evidence-based SEL approach in a developmental kindergarten (DK)–8 Catholic school. Educational programs, curricula, or cocurricular programs are often introduced into schools with insufficient attention to the intentional systems and processes that must be in place to optimize the environment for successful implementation (Fixsen et al., 2005). Implementing and sustaining evidence-informed programs is complex. Implementation strategies typically comprise multiple components that may be adapted to local contexts (Bauer et al., 2015).

This complexity results in many programs or initiatives failing to reach the desired outcomes. An implementation endeavor requires consistent use of theory to build knowledge about which evidence-based strategies work, where they work, and why they are effective. For

programs to be successful, they must be implemented to meet the standards to achieve the outcomes as defined by the innovation or program (Meyers, Katz, et al., 2012). Educational practice is slow to adopt research and practice-based evidence, and uptake or adoption may be uneven in different classrooms, schools, and districts. Without concerted attention to evidence-based implementation strategies, the school runs the risk of having the SEL approach be an optimistic aspiration at best and at worst, an expensive error (Bauer et al., 2015).

When educators fail to address the gap between what works and the implementation of these practices, groups of individuals are denied proven benefits. There has been evidence many students, including those historically marginalized, may benefit from a school setting that fosters socioemotional competencies (Aro et al., 2019; Eisenberg et al., 2015; Gardynik & McDonald, 2005). SEL focuses on equipping students with the competencies that build student agency and the positive development of children and young people (Mahoney et al., 2021). It is well-positioned to create learning environments where all students feel engaged, respected, safe, and empowered, irrespective of their culture, race, identity, and background. Students who develop social-emotional competencies and skills through SEL programs in schools can build strong, respectful, and lasting relationships, which can facilitate co-learning to reflect critically on the root causes of inequity. Although, SEL alone does not eradicate the deep and long-standing inequities in the education system. SEL has the power to help students develop collaborative solutions to address structural, systemic, and cultural norms that are barriers for Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color, and against students with disabilities (Metz, Woo, & Loper, 2021; Schlund et al., 2020).

SEL in schools creates opportunities for schools to serve and recognize students who have been marginalized and minoritized or experienced contemporary, systemic, or historic trauma. SEL affirms young people as individuals and cultivates more inclusive learning environments by helping students and teachers understand how students' unique identities shape and support their learning (Niemi, 2020). A school environment infused with SEL practices centers on the lived experience of students. All students' culture, history, values, assets, and lived experiences are centered, with families and communities playing an essential role in partnership with the school experience (Chartock, 2010).

SEL implemented in this way acts as a transformative force allowing students to build relationships grounded in an appreciation of differences and similarities and create culturally responsive and justice-oriented learning environments. Issues of power, privilege, prejudice, discrimination, social justice, empowerment, and self-determination must be made explicit, and students and teachers are encouraged to critically examine the causes of inequity (Allen et al., 2013; Brannon et al., 2015). Social justice-oriented SEL positions students as agents of change by using practices that focus on critical social analysis, social justice advocacy, collective action, and asset-based, positive identity development rather than social problem solving and student compliance (Halliday et al., 2019; Jagers, 2016; Ramirez et al., 2021).

Purpose of the Study

This mixed methods study aimed to examine educator and student perceptions related to implementing SEL, specifically focused on the implementation of the RULER approach. It was important to understand how teachers perceived SEL implementation as they are responsible for the instruction, and student perceptions offered insights into how the program, specifically the

RULER approach, impacts the students. The study sought to identify the next steps to achieve systemic or school wide SEL implementation. Analyzing data gathered from educators and students led to a better understanding of the implementation process of SEL. The results of the study could help Catholic school leaders as they plan to implement RULER or any other SEL initiatives in their schools.

Historic Context

For years to come, health officials, educators, and social scientists in the United States and worldwide will discuss the historic year of 2020 (Howard, 2021). A global pandemic, police brutality, systemic racism, and xenophobia led to increased economic, psychological, and socioemotional distress. As communities struggled with the turmoil brought about by COVID-19, the spring of 2020 saw the killing of George Floyd, Ahmad Arbury, and Breonna Taylor (Howard, 2021). Their deaths led to increased anger and sadness in more than a third of the U.S. population in the period immediately following, with more pronounced levels of these emotions for Black Americans. Black Americans also experienced a significantly higher increase in depression and anxiety than White Americans during this time (Eichstaedt et al., 2021). In addition, White racial grievance quickly racialized the coronavirus, fomenting xenophobic, anti-Asian sentiment that resulted in increased violence against Asian Americans (Gover et al., 2020; Reny & Barreto, 2022). In January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported Chinese authorities determined an outbreak of pneumonia cases in Wuhan, China, was caused by a novel coronavirus, later named COVID-19. As the number of confirmed worldwide COVID-19 cases grew, on March 11, 2020, WHO (World Health Organization [WHO], n.d.-a) characterized

COVID-19 as a pandemic. As a result, private and public schools across the United States began to close in response to the spread of COVID-19.

Context of the Study

Pseudonyms identify all locations, participants, and organizations in this study. The study was conducted in St. ABC school, located in a large urban diocese in the western United States. The founding religious order was the Sisters of Catherine, who worked in collaboration with the Theodoran priests in the parish of St. Theodore. All names associated with this study are pseudonyms. The school has approximately 550 students and 70 staff members. St. ABC school was an urban area close to a large research university. Many students were part of two-parent families, many of whom have both parents who work. St. ABC's mission statement attests to the school's value on the Catholic faith, education of the whole child, and parent partnerships.

All diocesan schools, parish schools, and many private schools in the Diocese of ABCDE in the western United States choose to participate in accreditation. The goal of accreditation is school improvement, and the processes of improvement result in a term of accreditation granted by the accrediting agency.

The accreditation process requires schools conduct a self-study to determine areas of strength and growth and then create goals leading to school improvement. Data collection includes stakeholder surveys, interviews, student test scores, and Assessment of Children/Youth Religious Education (ACRE) results. St. ABC's most recent accreditation was completed in 2018. A set of goals created by the faculty came from the accreditation process based on data collected during the process. The goals for St. ABC identified areas for school improvement. One was to create a culture of respect and compassion among students. In response, the

administrators called for parent and teacher volunteers to form a committee to investigate how to develop a school culture built on respect and compassion. The group of volunteers became the Social Emotion Learning Committee. They began to investigate evidence-based programs designed to help young people and adults develop and maintain caring relationships and make responsible, empathic decisions. The committee chose to research programs CASEL determined to be evidence-based, well-designed, and classroom-based, that offered multiyear programming and delivered high-quality training and implementation support (RULER, n.d.-a). The committee chose the RULER approach to help the school achieve its goal. RULER is a K–12 SEL approach that focuses on developing the emotional intelligence of all stakeholders in a school community to deepen social and emotional skills leading to healthier emotional climates and better-quality relationships (Brackett et al., 2019).

In the summer of 2019, members of the committee traveled to the Yale Center of Emotional Intelligence (2022) in New Haven, Connecticut, to train on implementing the RULER approach at St. ABC school. The committee began to train faculty and staff in August of the same year. RULER focuses on building adult stakeholders' SEL skills first, so they are agents of change for students. The creators of the approach recommend adult stakeholders receive training for an entire year before introducing it to students and families (Brackett et al., 2019). The faculty and staff training was underway when the school shifted to remote teaching in March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 global pandemic. The committee decided to delay further training in the RULER approach to give teachers the chance to work on the tasks and responsibilities of managing their hybrid classrooms. At this time, private and public schools

across the United States began to move to remote instruction, and many campuses remained closed. The closures continued for the remainder of the year.

Then, in August 2021, schools began to open again. Implementation of social distancing measures and stay-at-home orders across the country, although integral in limiting and delaying infection rates to avoid overwhelming the medical system, led to a wide range of personal experiences and significant psychosocial impacts on students and families (Grose, 2022; Minkos & Gelbar, 2021). Although some families appreciated the time spent together in the home with immediate family, others felt socially isolated and experienced fear and anxiety. Coupled with a potential loss of income, change in routines, and positive health habits, these feelings possibly added to an increased sense of psychological distress (Brooks et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). In addition, individuals who have been directly impacted, either by experiencing the loss of a loved one, or had a family member, friend, or themselves fall ill, could experience a heightened sense of risk.

As students returned to in-person learning in the fall of 2021, schools were called upon to ensure the learning environments were physically and emotionally inviting and safe. Teachers needed to be proactive and responsive to the needs of students who may have experienced traumatic stress during distance learning or who had continued to experience stress during the weeks and months after returning to in-person learning (Minahan, 2019). Students may have had difficulty processing emotional and social responses or sustaining attention. Others may have struggled to use memory effectively, and exhibited behaviors such as hyperarousal, physical aggression, irritability, crying, regression of skills, and somatic complaints. These difficulties may have led to interpersonal or academic challenges; depression, anxiety, adjustment disorders;

or posttraumatic stress disorder (Madrid et al., 2006; Swick et al., 2013). Although more time is needed to understand the neuropsychological implications of the COVID-19 global pandemic fully, there are preliminary hypotheses that students who contracted the virus may be at higher risk of developing executive functioning weaknesses, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, somatic symptom disorder, and neurocognitive disorders (Condie, 2020). This unprecedented return to school accelerated the need to ensure schools are safe and caring environments that offer greater support than is typical for students' academic, behavioral, and socioemotional needs.

Just as students experienced social, emotional, academic, and behavioral impacts because of the COVID-19 global pandemic, teachers, administrators, and school staff have also been evaluated. In addition to health and economic security concerns, faculty and staff needed to pivot from in-person to remote instruction. In a matter of days, educators began to provide remote instruction, which required they master new digital platforms; new ways of presenting material; and new ways of interacting with students, parents, and colleagues. As a result, teacher workload increased, but their social support decreased, and many teachers reported feeling burned-out, stressed, and anxious. Students' socioemotional, academic, and behavioral impacts have varied across districts, schools, classrooms, and students. However, it was important to keep in mind all students, teachers, and administrators were experiencing some level of collective trauma during the COVID-19 global pandemic (Alves et al., 2021; Harper & Neubauer, 2021; Kim et al., 2022; Kraft et al., 2020; Lizana et al., 2021).

The student benefit of in-person learning led to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2022) recommending

schools prioritize the safe return of students to in-person instruction. In response, St. ABC school began to offer hybrid instruction, with students alternating between on-campus and remote lessons conducted on Zoom (www.zoom.us). Teachers' workload increased as they were required to shift from remote to in-person instruction in every lesson, attending to students in the classroom and students on Zoom to ensure they all met their academic goals. When teachers and support staff became aware of students who needed academic, social, or emotional support, they created plans to assist them. In August 2021, the SEL committee began training teachers again and introduced the RULER approach to parents. Teachers began to use RULER tools in their classrooms and other SEL strategies such as mindful breathing, journaling, and conflict resolution strategies. Unfortunately, the stresses of the COVID-19 global pandemic on the school community disrupted the original implementation plan for the new SEL program.

Research Questions

This mixed methods study research focused on the implementation of a social-emotional learning (SEL) approach at a Catholic school in the western United States. The following research questions guided the research:

RQ1. What are educator perceptions of the implementation of a social-emotional learning program with a specific focus on the RULER approach?

RQ2. What are student perceptions of the implementation of a social-emotional learning program with a specific focus on the RULER approach?

Conceptual Framework

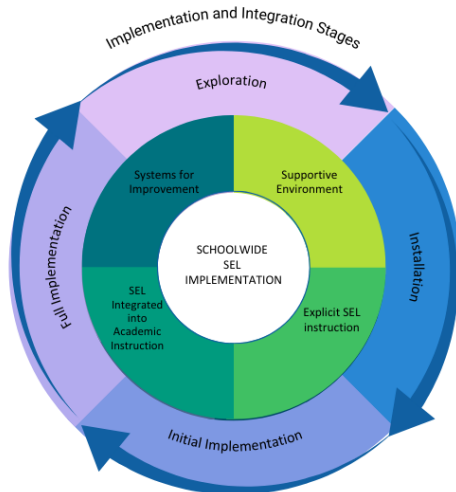
Classrooms and schools are interconnected systems that comprise the characteristics of administrators, teachers, staff, students, families, and the relationships between these groups

(Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Successful implementation of best practices relies on the social and organizational context in which these practices exist (Bronfenbrenner, 1981). An influential voice in the social and emotional development of all children is CASEL. CASEL acknowledges for SEL to be most impactful for students, integration across key social settings such as classrooms, schools, homes, and communities is essential. However, the organizational context must support integration (Oberle et al., 2016). To address the specific needs of this study, I created a single conceptual framework—the Schoolwide SEL Implementation and Integration Framework (see Figure 1)—by combining elements of CASEL’s Schoolwide Implementation Framework and NIRN’s Implementation Stages Framework (CASEL, n.d.-a; National Implementation Research Network [NIRN], 2023).

The National Implementation Research Network (NIRN, 2023) developed a framework for practitioners using a new program or scaling an established practice or program (see Figure 1). The framework describes four discernable stages of implementation: (a) exploration, which involves assessing the needs of the focus population and determining the best program or practice; (b) installation of the program or practice; (c) initial implementation when practitioners begin to use the program or practice, and data informs continuous improvement; and (d) full implementation when staff use the program or practice successfully and there is evidence of improved outcomes (NIRN, 2023). The stages of implementation framework guide the study to determine at what stage the school is in implementation of RULER and SEL and what steps should occur to achieve full implementation.

Figure 1

Schoolwide SEL Implementation and Integration Framework



Note. This model combines elements of CASEL’s Schoolwide Implementation Framework and NIRN’s Implementation Stages Framework. It shows the iterative nature of implementing a schoolwide initiative such as SEL or RULER. Implementation is a continuous process with multiple steps of adapting to and learning about new practices and structures. Adapted from *Indicators of Schoolwide SEL - CASEL Schoolguide*, by Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, (n.d.-a), <https://schoolguide.casel.org/what-is-sel/indicators-of-schoolwide-sel/>, copyright 2023 by Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning; and *Active implementation overview (module)* by National Implementation Research Network, 2023, <https://implementation.fpg.unc.edu/resource/1429/>, offered under a creative commons license.

CASEL also provides support for practitioners as they work to integrate practices across settings, specifically SEL practices in schools. Implementation teams in schools may refer to the indicators of systemic implementation, which is a set of 10 indicators that show the complete picture of high-quality, systemic implementation. The indicators are cultivated over time and may take 3 to 5 years to fully realize. To facilitate systemic implementation four important actions must occur. These are (a) building of foundational support and planning, (b) strengthening of adult knowledge of social and emotional learning, (c) promotion of SEL for students, and (d) ensuring continuous improvement takes place (CASEL, n.d.-a).

This study used four of the indicators, with permission, to assess the level of SEL implementation at St. ABC. In addition, the indicators served as a guide to determine where the school should focus learning and implementation efforts to achieve systemic implementation. The RULER approach was an important tool in SEL implementation at St. ABC. The school context provides other influences and methods that also informed the SEL practices in the school. For example, the school has a strong Catholic identity so Catholic social teaching (CST) may inform SEL routines. In addition, teachers, students, and families might add their perspectives and practices. The indicators of schoolwide SEL framework and implementation stages framework are further developed in Chapter 2.

Research Design and Methodology

The study evaluated the process of implementation of a SEL approach in a Catholic school. I attempted to offer a detailed, thick description and analysis of the phenomenon in its real-life context to better understand it (Yazan, 2015; Yin, 1981). I gathered qualitative and quantitative data from an anonymous faculty and staff survey; professional development documents; SEL committee correspondence; class and faculty charters; classroom observations; school site walk-throughs; and semistructured interviews with students, teachers, staff, and SEL committee members. The data informed planning efforts and is driving improvements to SEL implementation.

Limitations of the Study

This mixed methods study used a small sample size and was limited to one school. The research took place in a Catholic school in the western United States, so the findings of the study may not be generalizable beyond this context.

Much of the study relied on stakeholders' subjective perspectives. Participants may have been predisposed to report primarily positive impressions of the program, given my role as a faculty member, chair of the SEL committee, and leader of professional development sessions on SEL and the RULER approach. To obviate possible researcher bias, I triangulated the data and remained cautious of potential bias. Some participants of the study were members of the SEL committee at St. ABC school, where I worked. Although these factors may have limited the range of perspectives in the interviews, they may have increased participants' willingness to share their successes and challenges during the implementation process.

Delimitations

By narrowing the focus to a study of one school, I aimed to learn from stakeholders about implementing a SEL approach, and what the next steps should be to achieve systemic implementation.

Assumptions

I assumed all teachers and staff value development of social-emotional competencies of students to enhance student well-being and school climate. I also assumed participants were honest and forthcoming in their responses given my role in the school. I also assumed teachers were willing to examine their own cultural leanings and how they did, or did not, fit with their students' cultural behaviors and beliefs.

Definitions of Key Terms

Assessment of Children/Youth Religious Education (ACRE). The National Catholic Education Association offers assessment instruments designed to strengthen religious education programs. ACRE helps schools evaluate the attitudes and faith knowledge of students in Catholic

schools. The tool provides national scores for comparison, and offers processes for tracking data over time (ACRE Assessment, n.d.).

Catholic Social Teaching (CST). The Roman Catholic church has developed a body of teachings, regarding how a Catholic should behave in social life. This is known as CST or Catholic social doctrine. Crucial to CST is a universal and unconditional respect for human dignity, and the right of every human being to pursue their integral human development (Bouckaert & Zsolnai, 2011).

High-Quality Systemic Implementation of SEL. A schoolwide approach to SEL, where SEL is integrated throughout the school's academic curricula and culture, with ongoing collaboration with families and community organizations (CASEL, n.d.-a).

SEL Committee. A group of teachers responsible for introducing and implementing RULER in a school setting. Three members of the current SEL committee received training from the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence (2022).

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). The process whereby children and adults acquire the skills to recognize and manage their emotions, set and achieve positive goals, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish and maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle interpersonal situations constructively (Zins et al., 2007).

RULER Approach. An evidence-based, whole-school approach to SEL, grounded in the theory of emotional intelligence. The approach was developed at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence (2022; Hoffmann et al., 2020). RULER is an acronym for five key emotion skills: recognizing emotions, understanding the causes and consequences of emotions, labeling emotions, expressing emotions, and regulating emotions. The approach offers four Anchor tools

to facilitate teaching and learning about the skills of emotional intelligence. The first tool is the Charter, which is a shared agreement between people about how they want to feel at work or at school. The second tool is the Mood Meter, which facilitates building individual's self- and social-awareness emotions. The Meta-Moment guides people to respond to emotional triggers in effective ways. The Blueprint offers a structure to use when interpersonal conflicts arise, with the aim of building empathy and perspective taking (RULER, n.d.-b).

Summary

Chapter 1 provided an overview of the study on implementation of a SEL approach in a Catholic school. The mixed methods study examined teacher and student perceptions related to implementing SEL, specifically focused on the RULER approach. Additionally, the study identified next steps to achieve systemic SEL implementation. The findings of this study add to existing implementation research of SEL in Catholic schools during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Chapter 2 provides a map of the existing literature that supported the research on the positive effects of SEL in schools and the process and challenges of implementing SEL programs and approaches in schools. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology used in the study, and Chapter 4 explores the data from surveys, interviews, observations, and documentation. Chapter 5 provides an analysis of the data and recommendations for schools on the importance of implementation processes on SEL programs, specifically focused on the RULER approach, as used in Catholic schools.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study aimed to explore educator and student perceptions of the implementation process of a social-emotional learning (SEL) approach in an urban Catholic school. The review of the literature defines the concept of SEL, provides background on the development of SEL in schools, describes how SEL relates to student success, discusses the importance of equitable implementation, expands upon the role of implementation in the success of school wide SEL programs or approaches, and explains the barriers and enhancers to successful implementation of SEL in schools and classrooms.

What Is SEL?

Currently, there are over 100 SEL frameworks, and each uses their own descriptions of social and emotional competencies (Shriver & Weissberg, 2020). Despite the wide range of frameworks, the literature has shown there is consensus on the basic principles of SEL. SEL is the process whereby individuals develop competencies that enable them to understand, manage, and express the social and emotional aspects of their lives to successfully manage life tasks such as learning, forming relationships, solving everyday problems, and adapting to the demands of growth and development (Elias, 2004). SEL frameworks address intrapersonal and interpersonal attitudes and skills, implement developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive elements grounded in research, and offer evidence-based supports for practitioners to implement and evaluate programming (Jagers et al., 2019; Ramirez et al., 2021). Shriver and Weissberg (2020) stated SEL seeks to “educate both head and heart in ways that optimize the achievement and positive development of every child” (p. 56). To analyze the implementation process of an SEL

program this study focused specifically on RULER (i.e., recognizing, understanding, labeling, expressing, and regulating), an evidence-based approach designed to be used in schools to develop stakeholders' social and emotional competencies (Brackett et al., 2019).

Background

SEL has its modern origins in the pivotal research project of Comer. In the late 1960s, Comer and his colleagues at Yale University piloted the School Development Program in New Haven, Connecticut. It focused on two poor, low-achieving, predominantly African American elementary schools. Comer hypothesized a focus on the whole child, not just on improving test scores, would lead to improved academic achievement. The schools in the program evidenced increased academic achievement, improved attendance rates, and experienced a reduction on behavior problems. The program was subsequently modified by Comer, and extended to other schools in the district (Anson et al., 1991; Comer, 1988).

In the 1980s, growing international competition gave rise to an emphasis on educational accountability. With the publication of *A Nation At Risk* in 1983, the U.S. Department of Education exerted much of its energy on standards-based education, teacher and school accountability, and high stakes testing (Aidman & Price, 2018; Mayer & Cobb, 2000; Zins et al., 2007). Since early 2000, there has been a strong drive in the United States and other nations toward incorporating SEL into education research, policy, and practice. There has been growing agreement for schools to be successful in their educational mission they must integrate academics and SEL (Humphrey, 2013; Zins et al., 2007). This trend has emerged from a need to address the high occurrence of social, emotional, mental, and behavioral problems among

students and to build competencies that increase children’s well-being and their capacity to learn (CDC, n.d.).

In 1994, a group of educators, child advocates, and researchers came together at the Fetzer Institute with a shared commitment to support the development of whole child. They introduced the term “social and emotional learning” as a conceptual framework. It was created in response to the group’s discussions on strategies to enhance students’ social-emotional competence, academic performance, and to reduce students’ mental health, health, and behavioral problems. Shortly thereafter the Collaborative for Advancing Social, and Emotional Learning was formed by meeting attendees with the mission to provide schools with SEL programs backed by evidence-based research. In 2001, the organization became the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). The CASEL organization has become a leading resource to provide support for SEL education from preschool through high school. It offers a model that comprises a series of generalized processes by which SEL works, rather than one specific program (California MAP to Inclusion & Belonging, n.d.).

To assist educators in selecting from the interventions that relate to issues of student health, mental health, character, and behavior, CASEL developed a guide to interventions that meet CASEL’s eligibility requirements and align to their framework. The programs are considered well designed, evidence based, with documented impacts on student outcomes (Lawson et al., 2019). This study focused on RULER, one of 86 programs included in CASEL’s program guide (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], n.d.-b). Developed by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence (2022), RULER includes programming for grades K–8 and promotes SEL across settings from the classroom to home. RULER is

described as an approach, rather than a program as it provides a set of principles, guidelines, and practices to guide implementation rather than planned activities (Brackett et al., 2019). The approach is based in emotional intelligence theory, which defined briefly is the ability to perceive, access, understand, and regulate emotions (Mayer et al., 2004) and the theory informs skills that can be learned through the approach. Known as the RULER skills, they are designed to help students and adults *recognize* emotions in themselves and others; *understand* the causes and consequences of emotions; *label* emotions using nuanced vocabulary; *express* emotions in a culturally relevant way, according to cultural norms and social context; and use helpful strategies to *regulate* emotions (Brackett et al., 2019).

To support the development of these emotion skills in K–8, RULER uses four Anchor or foundation tools (Brackett et al., 2019). The first is the Charter. This is a document created by students and teachers. It encourages individuals to engage in conversations about their needs and wishes for their classroom or community and to arrive at a set of norms and goals. These become a reference for the class or community. Individuals are asked to be mindful of other’s emotions and to work collaboratively to hold each other accountable to the joint agreement.

The second Anchor tool is the Mood Meter (Brackett et al., 2019). The four quadrants of the Mood Meter represent two aspects of subjective emotional experience. The *x* axis represents valence, or feelings of pleasantness or unpleasantness and the *y* axis indicates arousal or energy levels, from low to high. The Mood Meter is a concrete tool that allows students and adults to explore emotion skills by engaging in a Mood Meter check-in. This routine helps to develop the five RULER skills. As individuals explore the quadrant they are in, they begin to *recognize* their emotions, they learn to *understand* the causes and consequences of these emotions, they *label*

and *express* the emotions, and finally, determine what emotion *regulation* strategies might be helpful.

The third Anchor tool, the Meta-Moment, focuses on emotion regulation. It supports RULER skill-building by providing individuals a systematic way to regulate their emotional and or behavioral responses. It helps them to become aware of shifts in their thinking, their behavior, and their physiology and provides ways to pause and regulate their emotions, through breathing exercises. Individuals learn to picture their best self; someone they aspire to be for others and for themselves. In summary, the Meta-Moment teaches how to recognize intense emotional experience, when and how to stop and take a breath, how to activate ones' best self, and what strategies are useful to regulate the intense emotions (Brackett et al., 2019).

The fourth and final Anchor tool is the Meta-Moment (Brackett et al., 2019). Designed to build conflict resolution skills, empathy, and perspective-taking, it requires students and educators to reflect on a particular conflict and analyze the causes and consequences of the emotions around that conflict. It calls upon individuals to imagine their best selves and to reflect on more effective ways to resolve disagreements and conflict. This tool encourages a learning community to reflect on how conflict impacts them, and how they can collaborate to create a more supportive and emotionally safe school environment.

In addition to the Anchor tools, there are core classroom routines that build the RULER skills and include reflections about classroom climate and the use of the Mood Meter to build connections between learning and emotions (Brackett et al., 2019). RULER's Pre-K through fifth grade Feeling Words Curriculum provides educators with skill-building SEL units for use throughout the academic year. The Feeling Words Curriculum encourages students and educators

to analyze the “emotional aspects of personal experiences, academic materials, and current events” (Hagelskamp et al., 2013, p. 532). At the secondary school level, even though the Anchor tools still function to teach about emotion skills, the curricular content is matched to the realities of adolescents. Lessons explore emotion-laden topics about relationships, civic engagement, agency, and identity. RULER’s online platform provides resources for educators to support their personal and professional learning. It is also the source for all classroom content and materials for the implementation team.

RULER adoption occurs in phases. It begins with educators’ personal and professional learning, then moves to classroom instruction for students, and finally approaches family engagement and education. First, a small team from a school attends training on the RULER tools and principles and then provides support for all school staff as they develop their knowledge about RULER skills. The staff then begin to implement RULER in their classrooms, and finally, families learn the skills and principles.

Results from randomized control trials and quasi experimental evaluations conducted in preschool and elementary school settings supports the effectiveness of the RULER approach. Studies showed improved student social behaviors, higher year-end grades, and improved interactions between teachers and students in the classroom (Brackett et al., 2012; Hagelskamp et al., 2013; Rivers et al., 2019).

These results support a key tenet of SEL, which is students’ social-emotional functioning underpins their academic success. There has been growing scientific evidence of the link between what are considered the soft skills of SEL competencies, and improvements in both social and academic competences (Durlak et al., 2011; Humphrey, 2013; McLeod & Boyes,

2021; Sklad et al., 2012). The programs aim to develop psychosocial competence through the core competencies of self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills (Humphrey, 2013). In 2019, a landmark bill was introduced to the U.S. House of Representatives to establish a grant program to develop and support the social and emotional skills, mindsets, and habits of children (A. B. 130, 2021).

Historic Context

In January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported Chinese authorities determined an outbreak of pneumonia cases in Wuhan, China, was caused by a novel coronavirus, later named COVID-19. As the number of confirmed worldwide COVID-19 cases grew, on March 11, 2020, WHO characterized COVID-19 as a pandemic (World Health Organization [WHO], n.d.-a). As a result, private and public schools across the United States began to close in response to the spread of COVID-19. The closures continued for the remainder of the year, and schools began to open again in August 2021. Implementation of social distancing measures and stay-at-home orders across the country, integral in limiting and delaying infection rates to avoid overwhelming the medical system, led to a wide range of personal experiences, and significant psychosocial impacts on students and families (Hanno et al., 2022; Minkos & Gelbar, 2021). Individuals' experience of the COVID-19 global pandemic was different depending on cultural beliefs, social connectedness, past experiences, developmental stage, and the degree of power each individual possessed (Harper & Neubauer, 2021; Minahan, 2019). The pandemic had the negative characteristics associated with disasters and related stressors of financial insecurity, safety and health concerns, hypervigilance, and hyperarousal. Coupled with uncertainty as to when the COVID-19 global pandemic would be over, it impacted

mental and physical health. As of May 27, 2022, the pandemic had led to over 1 million deaths in the United States and 6 million worldwide (World Health Organization, n.d.-b).

SEL has risen in the educational agenda in recent years. Given the difficulties experienced by students during the pandemic socioemotional support and skill development are considered crucial to student well-being (Moir, 2021). Schools must be places of physical and emotional safety, where trusting relationships, peer support, collaboration, and mutuality exist, where individuals' strengths and experiences are recognized, and where practices are racially, ethnically, and culturally responsive to the school community (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, n.d.).

As schools planned to reopen in the fall of 2021, states were in the process of developing support and guidance on navigating the social-emotional, and physical health of students and adults in the system, particularly those most disenfranchised from schools. A 2020 review of the 50 states' COVID-19 response plans found 38 states referred to SEL or student well-being. A significant percentage of states identified SEL as being a high priority because of the COVID-19 global pandemic, with a challenge being the need for more staff training on SEL strategies (Yoder et al., 2020).

Study Site Context

St. ABC adopted the RULER approach in 2019, just before the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated remote instruction. At this stage, the school was in the early stages of RULER implementation. Teachers received training in the approach and were beginning to implement some of the strategies and use the tools as the school was considering the move to online learning. Once the decision was made to begin remote instruction, teachers, staff, and

administrators pivoted within 3 days to teaching via Zoom. Challenges ranged from learning how to use the many digital tools required for remote instruction, grading student work, differentiating instruction and meeting the academic needs of all students, setting norms and expectations, and helping students for whom the remote format proved inaccessible. As chair of the SEL committee, I made the decision to delay additional RULER training.

Positive Effects of SEL on School-Age Students

Well-implemented, universal SEL programming, both in and out of school, promotes a broad range of short and long-term academic and behavioral benefits for K–12 students (Durlak et al., 2011; Mondri & Reynolds, 2021; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Wigelsworth et al., 2016). In early childhood when development is susceptible to environmental influences, the value of policies and programs aimed at improving the life chances of young children must not be overlooked (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Elementary school students who perceive their school to be a caring place, where members of the community show kindness, empathy, and compassion toward each other evidence lower rates of absenteeism, and have higher academic performance (Wallender et al., 2020; West et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2020). As students enter middle school, strengthening their social and emotional competencies may serve as a way for them to cope with the challenges of this period by providing them the skills to problem solve, communicate, and make decisions and connections between their thoughts and emotions (Green et al., 2021).

High levels of socioemotional competencies are also related to greater determination and school engagement, less technology abuse, less bullying, reduced risky health and sexual behaviors, and reduced antisocial behaviors (Nasaescu et al., 2018; Salmela-Aro et al., 2021). Studies of adolescent behavior have shown students who bullied, or were victims of bullying,

were predicted by low social awareness and prosocial behavior, and less robust socioemotional competencies such as self-management, motivation, and responsible decision making (Llorent et al., 2021). When high school policy promoted a positive school climate that included addressing social and emotional competencies, bullying, and cyberbullying of students, there was a potential for improved student outcomes. High school and college students who received training in emotional regulation techniques, mindful breathing, and coping strategies indicated decreased worry about future social stress, increased positive affect, and increased in-class focus. Students also reported a greater sense of belonging in the class, and an improved learning environment (McLeod & Boyes, 2021; Rajkumar et al., 2021).

Connecting SEL and Social Justice

All students benefit when schools foster student SEL skills and competencies and when their educational environment supports both academic and social-emotional growth (Battistich et al., 2003; Carroll et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2017). SEL practices serve as a support for educators as they seek to understand the student experience, identify student needs, and provide support for students. By integrating SEL practices into their classrooms, teachers and staff can develop more trusting relationships with students and reflect on their own social and emotional competencies. Systemic implementation of SEL in schools fosters supportive classroom environments, where students share their ideas, share about their lives and backgrounds, and can monitor and regulate their behavior and emotions in the classroom. The core social-emotional competencies of self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills help students establish and maintain positive relationships, and demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts

(Humphrey, 2013; Ramirez et al., 2021; Zinsler & Dusenbury, 2015). The systemic implementation of SEL practices serve to center student voice and engagement and the supportive school climate creates space for students to engage with each other, critically examine the root causes of inequity, and to develop knowledge and attitudes required for collaborative action to address inequity (Schlund et al., 2020).

SEL carries certain assumptions about the need to instruct students in social and emotional competencies, the universality of the need for these competencies, the explanation of a model of emotion that accounts for cultural differences in the expression, and experience of emotion (Humphrey, 2013; Parekh et al., 2021; Simmons, 2019). To date, much of the discussion around SEL has been conducted by White researchers and reformers, raising the question about their role in teaching students of color about perseverance and behavior regulation (Humphrey, 2013; Starr, 2019). Lists of social and emotional competencies are not apolitical, nor are they value-free or culture-free. The aim is to create an SEL framework that moves away from a Western cultural bias, to one that is culture-sensitive and celebrates the diversity of student experience, traditions, beliefs, customs, and values (Castro-Olivo, 2014; Humphrey, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Mahfouz & Anthony-Stevens, 2020; Ramirez et al., 2021).

To move toward transformative social and emotional practices in the classroom, practitioners must ask themselves guiding questions about whose voices are present, whose are absent, what practices promote or obstruct social justice, and how this is manifested in the school culture (Mavrogordato & White, 2020). An effective program or approach is one that centers student voice and experience, leads to higher levels of critical consciousness among the members, and affords practitioners the ability to adapt practices that lead to transformative

outcomes for all students (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2002; Mavrogordato & White, 2020; Shin et al., 2010). These transformative outcomes in Catholic schools also include a focus on the tenets of Catholic Social Teaching (CST).

Catholic Social Teaching

The Roman Catholic church has developed a cohesive body of thought known as CST or Catholic social doctrine. These teachings guide Catholics to live responsibly and build a just society. In 1998, the U.S. Catholic Conference provided seven key themes in church teaching. One of the themes is the universal and unconditional respect for human dignity, with the right of every human being to pursue their integral human development (Bouckaert & Zsolnai, 2011; McKenna, 2019). When Catholic schools attend not only to the academic growth of the child but also the social and emotional development of the child, they educate the whole child which is at the heart of Catholic education. Although this might be considered natural to Catholic schools, explicit instruction and implementation of SEL embedded in the teaching of the church is needed now more than ever as students cope with the effects of the COVID-19 global pandemic on their return to in-person instruction (Wodon, 2022).

Criticism of SEL

Critics warn the benefits of SEL are exaggerated. They cite a lack of clarity and consensus around SEL, the plethora of programs and frameworks available to schools, the piecemeal nature of many programs, and a lack of high-quality assessment strategies as potential pitfalls to the goals and success of the SEL initiative (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Finn & Hess, 2019; Hamilton et al., 2019; Hamilton & Schwartz, 2019). There are other concerns about SEL. For example, the terminology can be confusing, with many priorities coming under the broad

banner of SEL, such as mindfulness, grit, employability skills, workforce readiness, equity, and cultural competence. Beyond confusion with language, some states have encountered political resistance to schools' involvement with SEL. The contention is it is the primary responsibility of families (Schlund et al., 2020). Groups active on conservative issues complain SEL is indoctrination that threatens to divide students from their parents and a vehicle for critical race theory. SEL has also faced criticism from groups who believe it has not adequately addressed racism experienced by many students of color. These groups contend SEL's focus on managing emotions is a way to control students' behavior rather than addressing underlying problems of racism and poverty (Jagers et al., 2019; Meckler, 2022; Simmons, 2021). There is general consensus, however, schools should indeed address students' social and emotional development, and the discussion now must be how to integrate SEL programming and implement it to fidelity into the daily work of schools (Shriver & Weissberg, 2020).

The Role of Implementation in the Success of Initiatives in Organizations

To implement and sustain evidence-based or evidence-informed programs is a complex endeavor. Implementation strategies typically comprise multiple components that need to adapt to real-world, local contexts (Bauer et al., 2015; Shelton et al., 2020). An implementation effort requires consistent use of theory to build knowledge about which evidence-based strategies work, where they work, and why they are effective. To achieve the desired outcomes, programs must be implemented with quality, and a focus on the implementation process. The complexity of this process results in many programs or initiatives failing to reach the desired outcomes, with failures in implementation of projects, programs, and strategies being as common as they are widespread (Decker et al., 2012). Managing change in organizations is a dynamic practice and

determining success and failure rates is not an uncomplicated process. The difficulty around implementation and organizational change is reflected in the ongoing debates about their rates of failure. Hughes (2011) called into question the oft-quoted statistic of a 70% change failure rate and posited it does not account for the distinguishing features of change, which are its open-endedness, pervasiveness, and fluidity. Further, he explained how organizational change failure rates assume the influence of a single change initiative can be seen in isolation and measured separately. In a meta-analytic review of over 200 school-based SEL programs, data showed stronger outcomes were obtained when implementation was better, and programs failed to achieve desirable outcomes when implementation was poor (Durlak et al., 2011).

Implementation Science and Research

Implementation science is the scientific study of methods to promote the systematic uptake of research findings and other evidence-based practices into routine practice to improve the quality and effectiveness of health services and care, by enhancing the adoption, implementation, and sustainability of the practices (Eccles & Mittman, 2006; Powell et al., 2015). Researchers and practitioners in the field seek to (a) identify and understand the barriers and facilitators that influence acceptance and adoption of evidence-based practices in real-world settings, and address the challenges associated with bridging the gap between research and practice in health care and other areas of professional practice, and (b) develop strategies to facilitate adoption and implementation of evidence-based interventions in clinical and community settings (Nilsen, 2015; Shelton et al., 2020; Smolkowski et al., 2019). The field addresses the range of factors that are critical when promoting successful implementation and when evaluating frameworks that enlighten areas of implementation. The work done in schools

on SEL benefit from the findings of implementation science as many schools use evidence-based programs or approaches to build student SEL skills and competencies, and experience varying levels of success in their implementation efforts.

School-Wide Implementation of SEL

A core part of the work of schools is to promote the well-being of students. A school-wide, evidence-based SEL approach helps to create a supportive environment that is conducive to well-being and learning (Wells et al., 2003; Wyn et al., 2000). Schools are well-situated to support students' socioemotional and behavioral needs, and SEL competencies and skills can be effectively taught using a variety of classroom-based and whole-school approaches (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). A wide range of SEL practices have been introduced into schools and classrooms. These include evidence-based kernels, programs with kits for each grade level, and systemic whole-school approaches that aim to infuse SEL into all practices and policies (Brackett et al., 2019). Critical to each of these methods of integrating SEL is the quality of the implementation, and knowledge of the many barriers and facilitators to successful implementation (Chiodo & Kolpin, 2018). Implementation is the process by which the SEL approach or program is put into practice. It is not a single event, but a set of well-defined, well-planned, and intentional activities put into practice with the aim of translating evidence and ideas into policies and practices to the real world (Fixsen et al., 2009; Metz, Albers, et al., 2021). In addition, the presence and strength of the activity or program being implemented can be detected by observers, as it is described in enough detail (Fixsen et al., 2005).

A review of over 500 studies on the impact of program implementation on SEL outcomes determined that implementation is crucial (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). The findings showed

Carefully implemented programs produced higher program outcomes. Another finding was implementation levels approximating 60%, considered satisfactory implementation, increased the chances of program success and practical benefits for students or participants (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). Studies in the review noted there was significant variation in the levels of within-program implementation, which suggested partial adaptation of a program is still associated with positive outcomes.

Although the content material of SEL approaches is important for desirable student outcomes, equally as important is the process of implementation, and the understanding the process be part of a long-term, coordinated effort (Fixsen et al., 2005; Kress & Elias, 2006; Zins et al., 2007). A persistent challenge to successful implementation of SEL in schools has been inconsistent and sporadic implementation efforts (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Evans et al., 2015; Wandersman et al., 2008). Administrators, teachers, and staff are often unprepared for the challenges and effort required to create comprehensive programming that is successful in the long term. Rather than a “train-and-hope” approach to implementation, where individuals are taught a desired skill in the hope they will generalize the use of that skill, there is a need to actively program generalization through practice, emphasis, and effective techniques (Joyce & Showers, 2002; Stokes & Baer, 1977; Timler, 2013). Generalization refers to the occurrence of relevant behavior across settings and subjects.

RULER’s theory of change (ToC) highlights the critical role of implementation. ToC is a tool that allows for systematic and conscious reflection of the underlying theories of a project, it makes the rationale for a project explicit, supports planning and assessment of the project, and addresses the steps to be taken during implementation (Paina et al., 2017; Reinholz & Andrews,

2020). Put simply, ToC is a theory of how and why an initiative works. The RULER approach has a comprehensive implementation framework that guides schools on implementation strategies and stages based on Bronfenbrenner's process-person-context-time ToC model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). It details the processes and outcomes of the RULER approach, and acknowledges that to embed SEL into a school is an ongoing journey that must occur using a phased approach to implementation (Brackett et al., 2019). As with many SEL programs, or other school-based intervention programs, without thorough implementation and ongoing support and training of teachers to teach the lessons frequently, with quality, RULER's sustainability is at risk (Goldberg et al., 2019; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2002; Hahn et al., 2002; Reyes et al., 2012). Inherent in the implementation process are factors in the school environment that impact the success or failure of a chosen approach or program, and each of these factors explicitly addressed to achieve implementation success.

Factors Influencing SEL Implementation in Schools

Implementing programs in schools is complex and requires that implementers be aware of factors that may influence the process.

Leadership

Leadership is foundational to successful implementation and needed at all levels of implementation to support practitioners and manage changes (National Implementation Research Network [NIRN], 2023; Owens & Valesky, 2022). A large majority of school principals described SEL as a top priority, with elementary principals using SEL programs and curricula, and principals in secondary schools using informal practices (Hamilton et al., 2019). School leadership is key to the success of SEL implementation (Hudson et al., 2020).

School Social Context

The social context, or culture and climate, of an organization determines what programs and interventions are chosen, how they are implemented, how decisions are made, and how problems are solved (Hemmelgarn et al., 2006; Owens & Valesky, 2022). The culture and climate of a school influence how members act or behave; how they think, feel, and interact; and form the nature and tone of the relationships between members in the organization (Hemmelgarn et al., 2006; Jones & Bouffard, 2012). A school's culture of change, or what norms and practices govern the management of change, may determine whether or not implementation is successful (Anderson, 1991).

Culture

School culture is the shared norms, beliefs, behaviors, and expectations of a school (Hemmelgarn et al., 2006; Owens & Valesky, 2022), or the way we do work around here (DuFour & Fullan, 2013). These shared factors create a social context that either supports and invites new measures or inhibits them and complements or inhibits the activities required for success of the initiatives. The aim of an SEL approach is to implement it with fidelity so it leads to a change in culture to become the way a school operates. A schoolwide shared vision and common approach toward how SEL initiatives fit into the school ecology is imperative (Hudson et al., 2020; McLeod & Boyes, 2021).

Climate

Schools have unique cultures that affect evaluation, intervention, and experiences across stakeholders, so assessing climate is a necessary part of school-based work (McMahon, 2018). When analyzing school climate there are four aspects of school life that shape the climate,

namely safety, relationships, teaching and learning practices, and institutional environment. A positive school climate, where students feel safe, cared-for, able to participate, and where faculty are responsive to students' needs, provides an optimal foundation for academic, social, and emotional learning to take place (Cohen et al., 2009; Humphrey, 2013). A sense of school cohesion felt by students, teachers, and administrators has a positive effect on student achievement (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001; Stewart, 2008). School climate may have far reaching effects for teachers and students immersed in the setting. A meta-analysis of 13 longitudinal studies of fifth–twelfth grade students revealed a significant relation between perceived school climate and student problem behaviors across time, with a medium effect size (Reaves et al., 2018). This highlights the far-reaching effects of school climate for students immersed in the context and student experience.

Teacher Capacity

A challenge to effective implementation of social and emotional learning in schools is the competing priorities teachers face. Teachers are more likely experience institutional support for academic instruction than for social-emotional development of students (Durlak et al., 2011; Gutierrez et al., 2018). As the primary deliverers of SEL programs, teacher practitioners drive the interventions. They are central to implementation and determine the rate of adoption of the programs, and the quality of the implementation (Fixsen et al., 2005, 2009). Even if a program is mandated, unless it has teacher support, with their behaviors, beliefs, formal and informal networks, aligning with the SEL work implementation will suffer and the desired outcomes will not occur (Chiodo & Kolpin, 2018; Cuban, 2016; Mavrogordato & White, 2020; Nordstrum et al., 2017). The core activities of schools, teaching and learning, are not directly controlled by

administration and described as loosely coupled activities (Owens & Valesky, 2022). In other words, even though administrators are responsible for the instructional programs in a school, they have limited ability to monitor the instruction and implementation of these programs. It is crucial then that teachers believe in SEL in their classrooms and understand how SEL competencies can benefit students and play a role in student success. Teachers must also have the resources and support they need to foster students' social and emotional development (Gutierrez et al., 2018; Hamilton et al., 2019).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework in this study is a guide to SEL implementation. It draws on generalizable knowledge to provide a foundation for implementation efforts. Most implementation frameworks share common themes, such as the unfolding over time of a new practice; implementation occurs in complex, multileveled systems; and some degree of adaption must occur for implementation to be successful (Lyon et al., 2020). As a result, multiple frameworks may be used before and throughout the implementation process. It is important the frameworks be applied conceptually and operationalized through all phases of implementation (Decker et al., 2012; Moullin et al., 2020).

The conceptual framework, upon which this study was based, is rooted in implementation science. The tenets of implementation science are two-fold: (a) researchers seek to bridge the gap between research and practice, and (b) they develop strategies to facilitate the implementation of evidence-based interventions (Nilsen, 2015; Shelton et al., 2020; Smolkowski et al., 2019). Implementation research can lead to improved outcomes for children by identifying which components of a practice or intervention are most critical to produce positive impacts. It can also

guide program improvement by addressing knowledge gaps regarding program evaluation and adaptation. Implementation frameworks may take an inward or an outward focus. The inward focused frameworks describe key aspects of implementation such as the core program components, implementation drivers, and the different stages of implementation. An outward focus conceptualizes the broader contexts, or the infrastructures, that interact with the program and that influence implementation (Foundation for Child Development, 2020).

This study combined elements of two frameworks to create a single framework from which to determine the level and integration of SEL and RULER practices in the study setting. The first is the Implementation Stages Framework and the second is the Indicators of Systemic SEL Implementation Framework (NIRN, 2023).

The National Implementation Research Network (NIRN) offers an implementation framework for practitioners using a new program or scaling an established practice or program. The framework describes four discernable stages of implementation: (a) exploration, which involves assessing the needs of the focus population and determining the best program or practice; (b) installation of the program or practice; (c) initial implementation, when practitioners begin to use the program or practice and data inform continuous improvement; and (d) full implementation, when staff uses the program or practice successfully, and there is evidence of improved outcomes (NIRN, 2023). The stages of implementation framework guide the study to determine at what stage of implementation the school is at in implementing RULER and SEL, and what is needed to achieve full implementation.

CASEL developed a framework of 10 indicators that identify high-quality, systemic SEL implementation in schools. These include (a) explicit SEL instruction, (b) SEL integrated with

academic instruction, (c) youth voice and engagement, (d) supportive school and classroom climates, (e) focus on adult SEL, (f) supportive discipline, (g) a continuum of integrated supports, (h) authentic family partnerships, (i) aligned community partnerships, and (j) systems for continuous improvement (CASEL, n.d.-a).

The indicators address focus areas crucial to achieving systemic SEL implementation in schools: foundational support and planning, strengthening of adult SEL, promoting of SEL for students, and careful monitoring to bring about continuous improvement. Indicators cultivate over time and may take 5 years to be fully realized. The framework acts as a guide to the progress and impact of SEL implementation and is independent of the program or approach used in a school (CASEL, n.d.-a; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014).

Fully implemented SEL contributes to the organizational environment of the school. It impacts teacher, administrator, and student morale and motivation; it plays a part in how decisions are made; and it affects the school's culture or values, norms, and belief systems (Owens & Valesky, 2022). In addition to explicit SEL instruction, when SEL is fully implemented it becomes integrated into academic instruction (Daunic et al., 2013; Jones & Bouffard, 2012). There are elevated levels of student engagement and voice, and positive classroom environments and disciplinary practices to support students. Academic and behavior support is offered at all tiers to meet the needs of all students. When SEL is fully implemented in a school, there is evidence of authentic family partnerships, and families share strategies to support students' social, emotional, and academic development. Staff are able to cultivate their own socioemotional and cultural competence and collaborate to build trusting relationships (CASEL, n.d.-a).

This study examined how four of the indicators manifest in the school, with specific reference to the RULER approach. The indicators were: (a) are explicit SEL instruction, (b) SEL integrated with academic instruction, (c) supportive school and classroom climates, and (d) systems for continuous improvement.

Conclusion

There has been steadily growing support for the role of social and emotional learning in schools. It is understood schools are well-placed to promote not only academic achievement, but also the psycho-socio-emotional development of students and numerous approaches and programs have been created schools may use to develop the intrapersonal and interpersonal attitudes and skills of students. The need to foster socioemotional competencies has been more pressing because of the COVID-19 global pandemic when many students and their families have been grappling with the psychosocial impacts of the pandemic.

Catholic schools have always had as their mission the education of the whole child and have drawn on CST to guide how they teach to the academic, spiritual, and socioemotional needs of students. The call now is for all schools to be even more explicit in their teaching to the whole child, and to intentionally foster an environment where students feel supported academically and emotionally and are able to form strong relationships. All students must be given the chance to develop the core competencies of self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills. CASEL was created as a resource for evidence based SEL information, programs, and practices for educators. RULER is one of several interventions that meets CASEL guidelines and is used by many schools to embed SEL into all aspects of the curriculum.

Although many states, districts, and schools have adopted SEL standards and programs, the programs are only as successful as the quality of their implementation. NIRN (2023) developed a framework grounded in the tenets of implementation science to guide practitioners and researchers as they implement practices and programs. Both frameworks acknowledge for these practices and programs to have a positive impact on students, their success depends on factors such as the nature of school and district leadership, the school climate and culture, and teacher capacity (Eklund et al., 2018). These factors should be addressed with intention, and stakeholders must understand implementation is strategic and takes time and effort. The conceptual framework in this study provided a lens to view and assess SEL implementation. It offers practitioners and researchers tools to identify successes, challenges, and next steps in the implementation process. The research questions and data collection tools in this study were grounded in the concept of systemic SEL implementation in schools. Chapter 3 details the methodology to be used in this mixed methods study to determine stakeholder perceptions on the implementation of a school-based social emotional program specifically focused on the use of the RULER approach.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This mixed methods study aimed to develop an understanding of the perceptions of students and staff as they both participated in the implementation of a social-emotional learning (SEL) program specifically focused on the RULER (i.e., recognizing, understanding, labeling, expressing, and regulating) approach. The study explored what is needed for the school to achieve systemic SEL implementation. The literature review showed benefits to a well-integrated school-wide approach to SEL. However, the difficulties associated with implementation lead to poor program outcomes, and the opportunity to impact student growth and development is lost. Thus, this mixed methods study focused on what factors enhance or challenge the implementation of SEL in a school and the next steps to achieve school-wide implementation of SEL.

Study Setting

This study focused on St. ABC school, all names are pseudonyms, located in a large urban diocese in the western United States. The founding religious order was the Sisters of Catherine, who collaborated with the Theodoran priests in the parish of St. Theodore. The school has approximately 550 students and 70 staff members, with an elementary school (i.e., Developmental Kindergarten–Grade 4) and a middle school (i.e., Grades 5–8). St. ABC school is in an urban area. Many students are part of two-parent dual-income families, many of whom have both parents who work. St. ABC’s mission statement attests to the school’s value on the Catholic faith, education of the whole child, and parent partnerships. Given the historic context

of the COVID-19 global pandemic, this study took on new meaning when collecting data on implementation processes and approaches in support of students' socioemotional health.

Research Questions

This research explored implementation of a social-emotional learning (SEL) approach at a Catholic school in the western United States. The following questions guided the research:

RQ1. What are educator perceptions of the implementation of a social-emotional learning program with a specific focus on the RULER approach?

RQ2. What are student perceptions of the implementation of a social-emotional learning program with a specific focus on the RULER approach?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework describes the system of concepts, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs the research. It is used as a lens to describe methodology, define participants, settings, procedures, and informs the development of the instruments for the study. It may also justify the methodological choices made in the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To inform the research questions in this study, I drew from two conceptual frameworks: the implementation stages framework (National Implementation Research Network [NIRN], 2023) and elements of the indicators of systemic implementation framework (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], n.d.-a). These frameworks guided the research questions and determined the nature of data collection instruments. The focus area was implementation at the classroom and building levels. Data gathered using the implementation stages framework helped determine where the school was in the process of implementing

RULER, and the indicators of systemic SEL implementation framework protocol provided a lens to analyze the data.

Method

This mixed methods study was formative and evaluative. It used quantitative and qualitative methods to gather information about the RULER implementation stage and the progress the school was making toward systemic implementation of SEL (Patten & Newhart, 2017). I aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of the events, situations, and actions in which the participants were a part, and to understand the context and its influence on the participants (Maxwell, 2012). The strength of the mixed methods study was as an administrator at the school, I could gather rich evidence from multiple sources (i.e., documents, artifacts, direct observations, a survey, interviews, and participant observations), which allowed for effective triangulation (Yazan, 2015; Yin, 1981). A significant rationale for using multiple sources of evidence relates to the initial reason for doing this mixed methods study, which was to conduct an in-depth study of a phenomenon in its natural setting or context. Interviews, observations, and document analysis related to the SEL and RULER approaches informed the research.

Sampling, Consent, Confidentiality

I invited all faculty and teaching staff to participate in a survey. They received an electronic copy of a letter inviting them to participate in the confidential survey (see Appendix A). The letter was attached to the survey (see Appendix B). Select faculty and teaching staff received an electronic copy of a letter inviting them to participate in one-on-one interviews (see Appendix C). Participants received a consent form detailing the purpose and goals of the study

and how the results would be used (see Appendix D). Participants also received my contact details.

I invited specific students in Grades 1–8 to participate via a letter addressed to their parents and sent via email (see Appendix E and Appendix F). The letter stated the risks and benefits of participation and included confidentiality protocols. Parents who chose to have their child participate received a consent form detailing the purpose and goals of the study, the confidentiality of the student, and how the results would be used (see Appendix G). Parents of participants also received my contact details. Students received a student assent form (see Appendix H and Appendix I).

To protect the confidentiality of all participants, I coded their names with pseudonyms and changed any identifying information. Information was stored on a flash drive secured in a lockbox that only I could access.

Participants

The target population for this study was the faculty and staff of St. ABC school and select students. As I worked as an administrator at St. ABC, I invited participants through faculty and staff work emails and emailed parents of students directly. I conducted semistructured interviews with an administrator who also taught religion and who was a member of the SEL committee; two with four elementary school teachers who were members of the SEL committee; homeroom teachers of the developmental kindergarten, third grade, and eighth-grade classrooms; and two teacher assistants, one who worked in kindergarten and one in fifth grade. Student participants included first-, third-, sixth-, and eighth-grade students. The students were randomly selected

from grades where students experienced greater use of the RULER approach and SEL strategies in their previous grade level.

Sampling Procedures

This study used two sampling methods to gather information from participants: convenience and purposive. I was an administrator of St. ABC school and conducted the study at that school. I used convenience sampling when inviting all faculty and teaching staff to complete a confidential online survey used convenience sampling. I also used purposive sampling to invite specific educators and students to participate in semistructured interviews. I deliberately selected a range of people for the specific information they could provide that could not be gained as effectively from other choices (Maxwell, 2012; Patten & Newhart, 2017).

Data Collection Instruments

I collected and surveyed data from multiple sources to ensure the findings of the study were more accurate and inclusive (Yin, 1981).

Surveys

In early Fall 2022, I emailed administrators, teachers, and teaching staff inviting them to participate in the confidential, anonymous Google survey (see Appendix A and Appendix B). The survey remained open for 3 weeks.

Interviews

In early Fall 2022, I conducted one-on-one semistructured interviews with select developmental kindergarten (DK) through eighth-grade teachers in the school. Participants were invited to participate in one 45-minute face-to-face interview conducted at a mutually agreed-

upon time and location (see Appendix C). Those who agreed to participate met with me for a one-on-one semistructured interview (Appendix J).

In early Fall 2022, I emailed the parents of select students in Grades 1, 3, 6, and 8 requesting permission for their children to participate in one face-to-face interview. Upon receiving written parental permission first, and then student assent, three students in elementary school participated in a 30-minute interview and two middle school students participated in a 45-minute interview (see Appendix K and Appendix L). Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed. I confirmed with each participant the validity of the transcription to ensure an accurate record of the interviewee's experience during the interview. Responses were stored on a flash drive under their pseudonym

Documents

For this study, I examined documents that pertained to the adoption and initial implementation of SEL and the RULER approach in the school, such as correspondence between administration and SEL team members, PowerPoint presentations, and accreditation documents. I also examined documentation created during the timeframe of the study. The documentation included correspondence between SEL committee members and faculty and staff, professional development agendas, principal's newsletters, meeting agendas, and teacher lesson plans. I collected physical artifacts such as class and faculty charters, and classroom activities and projects that displayed evidence of student use of the RULER approach and SEL skills (see Appendix M).

Document review data furnished descriptive information about the depth and nature of SEL and RULER implementation. It provided evidence of the RULER approach tools and SEL

strategies teachers used in the classroom and their frequency of use. The data also provided evidence of the stage of RULER implementation. The data also verified emerging trends I had identified and suggested new categories, hypotheses, implementation evidence, and next steps in implementation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Direct Observation

I conducted walkthroughs of classrooms, playgrounds, and school hallways (see Appendix N and Appendix O). The walkthroughs provided some evidence of the level of schoolwide SEL implementation across school systems and practices, and classroom climate and practices. I looked for evidence of explicit SEL instruction, SEL integrated with academic instruction, supportive school and classroom environments, specific level of use of the RULER approach, and systems for continuous improvement (CASEL, n.d.-a).

Analytical Plan

At least four principles of analysis underlie good social science research (Rowley, 2002; Yin, 1981). The first is the analytic strategies must exhaustively cover the key research questions in a study. The second principle is all rival interpretations or plausible alternative propositions must be investigated. Third, the analysis must focus on the most important issue of the study and avoid detours less important to the focal issue. Finally, the fourth principle recommends the researcher know the subject matter under study.

In this study, I examined multiple data points including documents, transcripts, memos from observations, archival records, and walkthrough protocols. I used coding and thematic analysis to analyze the data and identify promising patterns or concepts (Maxwell, 2012; Yin, 1981). The indicators of high-quality systemic SEL implementation set out by Collaborative for

Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) included building foundational support and planning, strengthening adult SEL, promoting SEL for students, and practicing continuous improvement (CASEL, n.d.-a). The indicators guided the general analytic strategy and created a starting point for noting themes and categories.

Data Analysis Procedures

Categorizing and Coding

I analyzed the multiple data points to identify patterns, themes, and connections. The data included surveys, interviews, documents, memos, and walkthrough observation notes. Data from semistructured interviews were coded and categorized using the computer-assisted qualitative software Dedoose (Dedoose software tool version 9.0.62 [2023]). I then studied the outputs to note emerging themes that identified the extent to which SEL and RULER were implemented throughout the school.

Threats to Validity

I began collecting data at the start of the academic year, and participants had not used SEL or RULER strategies over the summer break. As a result, they were not as familiar with them as they would have been if data collection had occurred at the end of the school year. Participants may have discussed questions and compared notes with each other. Some invited participants did not take part in one-on-one surveys creating a smaller participant sample size.

To strengthen validity of the findings, I systematically solicited feedback about the data and conclusions from participants in the study. This reduced the possibility of me misinterpreting participants' meanings and perspectives and helped identify my own biases and misunderstandings (Maxwell, 2012).

Timeline

Participants were invited to complete the confidential online survey in early Fall 2022, the beginning of the school year. Teacher and student participants were invited to participate in semistructured interviews in early fall. I conducted class and campus walkthroughs in November 2022, December 2022, and January 2023. Archived documents such as meeting minutes and evidence of professional development were collected between October 2022 and February 2023. Class Charters and faculty and student Mood Meters were gathered from October 2022 and January 2023.

Limitations

Sample Size

This study used a small sample size and was limited to one school. In addition, the research took place in a Catholic school in the western United States, so the study findings may not be generalizable beyond this context. Another limitation was the possibility that only educators who were invested in SEL and RULER practices answered the anonymous survey, skewing the findings. As an administrator at the school, chair of the SEL team, and member of the RULER implementation team, I may have influenced participant's responses. By only interviewing teachers who had used RULER in previous years, I did not get a complete picture of RULER implementation among the educators at the school.

Bias

I was a member of the RULER implementation team and the SEL committee at the time of the study. I led professional development sessions on the approach. To obviate possible researcher bias, I triangulated the data and remained cognizant of my potential bias (Yazan,

2015). Much of the study relied on stakeholders' subjective perspectives. Given my role as an administrator and chair of the SEL committee, participants may have been predisposed to report primarily positive impressions of the program. In addition, some participants of the study were members of the SEL committee at St. ABC school, where I worked. Although this may have limited the range of perspectives in the interviews, it may have increased participants' willingness to share their successes and challenges during the implementation process.

Delimitations

Although the sample size was small, by narrowing the focus to a study of a single site, I was able to gain a deeper understanding from stakeholders of the implementation of SEL and the RULER approach as it applied to a DK–8 Catholic school, and what was needed to achieve systemic implementation of SEL and RULER.

Conclusion

This study explored educator and student perceptions of implementing SEL with specific attention to RULER, a SEL approach at a Catholic school. The study also determined some needs and supports to the overall goal of achieving systemic SEL implementation in the school. I collected data from surveys, semistructured interviews, observations, and school documentation. Data were analyzed and coded to identify themes, patterns, and connections to determine what steps are needed to achieve full or school wide SEL implementation. Chapter 4 presents the data through the data collection methods described in this chapter and followed an outline based on the research questions. Chapter 5 offers an analysis of the data and makes recommendations for public and Catholic school leaders as they implement SEL programs or approaches in their schools. I also offer recommendations to the developers of the RULER approach.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to understand teacher and student perceptions of the implementation of social-emotional learning (SEL) in a Catholic school with a specific focus on the RULER (i.e., recognizing, understanding, labeling, expressing, and regulating) approach. RULER is an evidence-based SEL approach developed by the Yale Center of Emotional Intelligence (2022; Hoffmann et al., 2020). Research has shown students benefit when schools incorporate practices that build social and emotional competencies into their procedures and routines. Chapter 4 presents the data I collected through an anonymous faculty and staff survey, one-on-one interviews with faculty and staff, one-on-one interviews with students, classroom and campus walkthroughs, and document review. The documents presented in Chapter 4 focus on the minutes of faculty meetings, advisory boards, and parent association meetings; presentations to faculty and parents; principal's newsletters; student work; and teachers' lesson plans. The data collected were intended to answer the research questions that guided this study:

RQ1. What are educator perceptions of the implementation of a social-emotional learning program with a specific focus on the RULER approach?

RQ2. What are student perceptions of the implementation of a social-emotional learning program with a specific focus on the RULER approach?

In this chapter, findings from the data collection are reported and organized according to the two research questions. Data analysis was completed through the lens of a conceptual framework created by combining elements of the implementation stages and the indicators of systemic implementation frameworks from which to determine the level and integration of SEL

and RULER practices in the study setting (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], n.d.-a; NIRN, 2023).

The data were initially coded using deductive analysis, and then inductive analysis. Deductive coding strategies organized the data, the cycle of inductive analysis began, and finally the patterns and themes emerged. Significant themes that emerged from data collected from educators were (a) Teachers Believe SEL and RULER Are Beneficial to Students, (b) There Are Challenges to RULER Implementation, and (c) RULER Should be Shared With Families. These themes were confirmed through on-site observations and document analysis. Themes that emerged from data collected from students were: (a) The School Environment Supports the Development of Students' Social-Emotional Competencies, (b) Students Do Not Have a Clear Understanding of What Is Meant by Social-Emotional Learning, (c) Students Are Familiar With Some of the RULER Tools and Why the Tools Are Used, (d) RULER Is Not Used Consistently in the Classrooms, and (e) Students Value When Teachers Have Behavioral Expectations in Class and Follow Them Consistently.

An Explanation of How the Data Were Reported

The study was grounded in Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning's (CASEL, n.d.-a) conceptual framework of the indicators of systemic SEL implementation in schools. The indicators of systemic SEL implementation framework protocol provided a lens to analyze the data with a focus on implementation of SEL and RULER at the classroom and building levels. The framework guided the research questions and determined the data collection instruments, the artifacts reviewed, and questions asked during one-on-one interviews.

An Explanation of How the Data Were Organized by Themes

I collected qualitative data using an anonymous educator survey, interviews, observations, and through document review to understand and report on teacher and student perceptions of the implementation of SEL and the RULER approach. I used Rev.com to transcribe interview data, which I then uploaded to Dedoose—a web application for mixed methods research. The software allowed me to code the transcripts and determine themes using deductive and inductive coding. I first began with deductive coding, using a set of predetermined codes derived from the research questions and conceptual framework. Inductive coding occurred as I sifted through the data, iterating on existing codes.

To code the educator survey data, I copied free response comments from the survey into a Word document and uploaded it to Dedoose. I first used deductive, then inductive, coding to uncover themes. Qualitative data from the survey served as methodological triangulation and largely supported the main themes uncovered in the teacher and student interviews.

I sought further methodological triangulation through classroom and site walkthroughs. Once the walkthroughs were completed, I totaled the scores in each category and noted which categories served to reinforce or confirm data from educators and students and which did not support the data. The research questions determined how the findings were presented with themes from educator perceptions presented first followed by the data relating to student perceptions.

Research Question 1

Given the importance of social and emotional competencies for the well-being of students and teachers in schools, and the difficulties in implementing SEL in schools, I wanted to gain

insight into the implementation process. As such my first research question was: What are educator perceptions of the implementation of SEL with a particular emphasis on the RULER approach?

Three themes emerged from the data to answer the first research question about teacher perceptions of the implementation of SEL with a focus on the RULER approach. The following section presents data related to the three themes: (a) Educators Believe Social and Emotional Learning and the RULER Approach Are Beneficial to Students, (b) Challenges to RULER Implementation, and (c) RULER Should be Shared With Families.

Theme 1: Educators Believe Social and Emotional Learning and the RULER Approach Are Beneficial to Students

Educators interviewed at the school expressed the belief that SEL is an important factor in student well-being. They described how social-emotional competencies such as self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills facilitated student well-being and learning, and why it was important to address them in the classroom (Humphrey, 2013). As one veteran teacher explained:

The most immediate implementation of [SEL] that I've seen is when students go to yoga. I think that the pose cards associated with different animals and emotions allows students to connect with how they're feeling inside in a memorable, fun, and accessible way. For the younger students, this is a great way to provide a foundation of how to recognize personal emotions and an emotional intelligence for the people around you.

By introducing SEL and RULER into the school community, there have been more conversations about emotions and the impact they have on students, teachers, and parents.

Teachers perceived these discussions to be beneficial to students and teachers.

One teacher began by saying she did not think focusing on emotions was helpful. However, she then told me how talking about feelings in class leads to new insights for students about parents' emotions and how "moms and dads have feelings too. Absolutely." She explained how parents can be aggravated, "they have a life to live," and how these emotions are "part of living in a family." She said these feelings of aggravation are normal and how discussions about emotions can help to raise this awareness in her students, stating:

I think it was helpful because we talked about that. We talked about how some parents have a lot of stress . . . in the morning and they're probably having to do things a certain way and they want you to do things a certain way so that they can get going. And so, it's kind of like, it's a family situation where you all have to figure and be on the same wavelength.

Sixteen of the 17 teacher survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed there was a strong vision for SEL at the school. Twelve of 16 respondents agreed or strongly agreed the school culture supported SEL, while three strongly disagreed or disagreed. A teacher explained in their survey response how the daily practice of focusing on emotions builds students' emotional awareness and gives them a plan of action for their day, saying:

Through our class's daily practice of the "My Reflections" packet, students in my class have developed an awareness of their own emotions, how their current emotional state

will affect their day, how to develop a plan of action to change their emotions if necessary, or how to maintain already present levels of calmness and happiness.

This sentiment was echoed by another survey respondent who noticed “a gradual shift of the school culture” which had led to “students and teachers . . . becoming aware that SEL is important and [that they] are aware of different tools that can be used in addressing social-emotional issues that come up.”

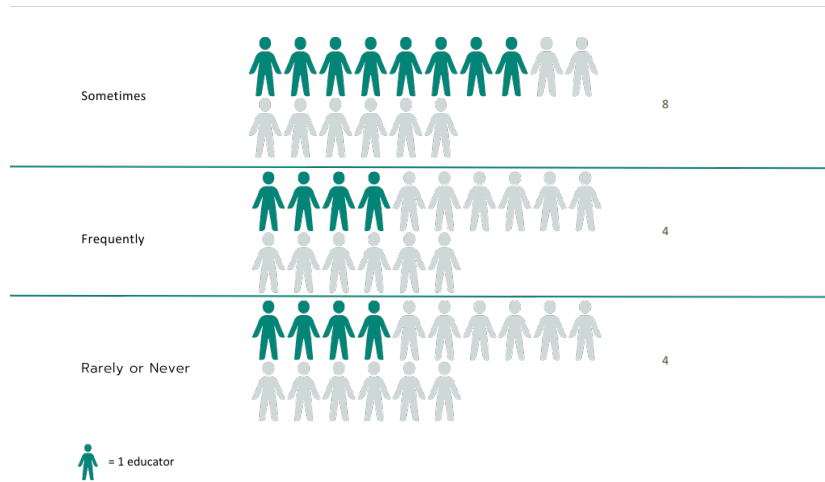
Other respondents echoed this belief with statements like: “The students are more aware of their emotions and how to deal with them,” and “Students are able to identify their feelings and express them more clearly.” Another wrote, “Students are open to share their emotions,” while another described not seeing “changes in the school perse; but perhaps an increased mindfulness within the community.”

The data collected from surveys and observations revealed RULER was not used consistently across the school. Classroom routines differ with some teachers using it almost daily, and others not using it all. However, there was evidence of teachers engaged in work to develop students’ socioemotional competencies, albeit not necessarily using the RULER approach.

Of the 16 staff or faculty members who responded to the anonymous survey, most answered that they included SEL or RULER strategies or tools in their classroom practice (see Figures 2 and 3). Twelve indicated they used SEL strategies that were not RULER strategies “sometimes” or “frequently,” and 11 responded they used RULER strategies “sometimes” or “frequently.” Four respondents indicated they “rarely” or “never” used SEL strategies and five described “rarely” using RULER strategies.

Figure 2

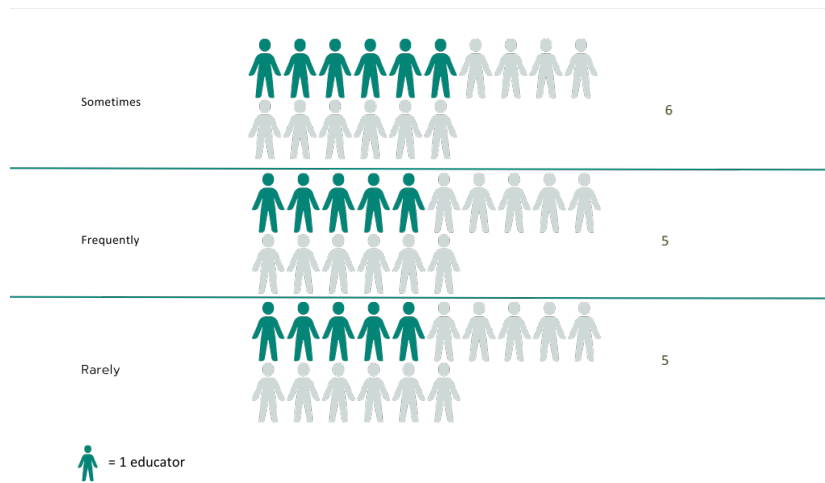
Educator Use of SEL Strategies Other Than RULER in the Classroom



Note. $N = 16$. Educators' anonymous responses to a question about their use of SEL strategies *other than* RULER.

Figure 3

Educator Use of RULER in the Classroom

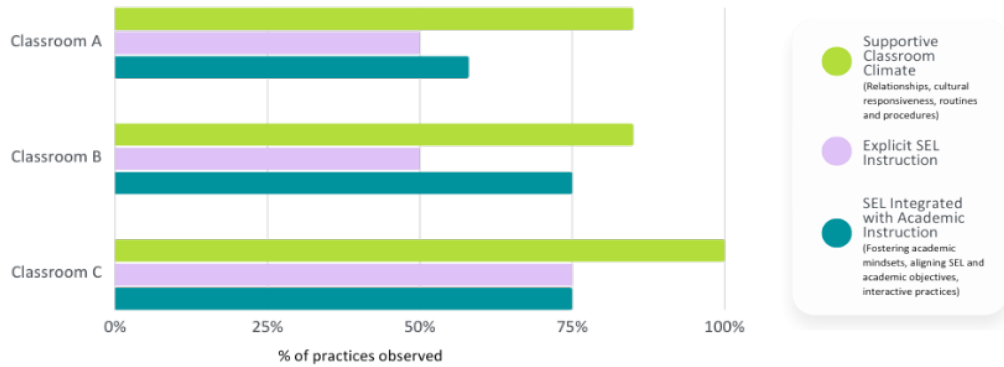


Note. $N = 16$. Educators' anonymous responses to a question about their use of RULER strategies.

I collected data during three classroom walkthroughs (see Figure 4) and four campus walkthroughs. In each of the three rooms observed, teachers intentionally built a supportive classroom climate that promoted student self- and social-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills. For example, one teacher assigned roles to students who carried out daily tasks associated with their roles. When I arrived in the classroom, a student approached me and explained what the students were working on because her role was “classroom ambassador.” The teacher had students “buddy-up” to check that the other had written down their homework and packed the necessary materials and books before they left at the end of the day. Students in a middle-school class entered the room, and after a greeting and brief introduction from the teacher, began working in their assigned groups to complete an assignment. An elementary room displayed reminders to guide students to make choices that benefit themselves and others. In all the rooms, I observed routines and procedures to promote student autonomy and develop self-direction, with teachers and staff redirecting behavior challenges discreetly and respectfully. They reminded students of classroom expectations posted around the room. On the campus walkthroughs, I briefly visited these rooms again and noted the seating assignments had changed and in one room desks were no longer in a circle around the edge of the room but now in groups of five. Teachers told me they were intentional about the seating arrangements and changed seating regularly to foster relationships among classmates.

Figure 4

Classroom Climate and Practices



Note. I conducted observations in three classrooms. They were not intended to provide data on individual teachers or classrooms but to gain insight into the progress of schoolwide SEL implementation across classrooms. I used a rubric to score items on a scale from 4 (*strong evidence*) to 1 (*weak or no evidence*).

Data from my classroom observations evidenced teachers redirecting behavior challenges discreetly and respectfully as they reminded students of classroom expectations which were posted around the room for visibility. Teachers communicated with students in a calm and friendly tone of voice.

Campus walkthroughs offered data that showed an atmosphere supportive of relationship building. For example, administration, security personnel, and teacher assistants were at the front of the school in the morning cheerfully greeting students and families as they arrived. Student interactions were generally thoughtful and respectful, and students and teachers consistently greeted each other warmly. I noted many acts of kindness, including a second grader offering to help a visitor carry books down the stairs, middle schoolers holding the door open for each other, and students straightening desks and chairs without being asked. I observed teachers and teacher aides frequently talking with individual students or in small groups while modeling supportive

language. During elementary- and middle-school lunches most students engaged in light-hearted conversations as they ate. It was evident there were groups of friends sitting together, who continued to interact as a group in the recess after lunch. Recess activities included basketball, soccer, talking with friends, reading, and visiting the school media center. During the elementary school lunch and recess times, I observed students approaching supervising adults to help with conflict resolution. The conversations were supportive and encouraged problem solving using collaboration and perspective taking. Recess and lunchtimes were well supervised by administration, teachers, teacher assistants, and parent volunteers.

In addition to positive relationship building, I noted there was a rhythm to the day with routines and procedures evident throughout the campus. Some of these included all classes sitting quietly during the principal's morning and afternoon prayer and student council announcements, students following procedures for entering and leaving a classroom, and students and teaching staff using the learning management system to post and access schoolwork.

Student work was displayed around the school. Of the 26 bulletin boards outside classrooms, 12 evidenced students' self- or social-awareness, and a desire to build relationships or make responsible decisions. One bulletin board displayed kindergarteners' responses to the question "What do you want to learn this year?" Half the students wrote they wanted to learn to be kind, help others, or be a good friend or sibling. Another elementary classroom displayed students' self-described goals, and these included, "I will speak up for myself," "I will play with other people," and "I will organize my desk." A second-grade class had student descriptions of how they could be a friend to others. Examples included: "I can be a good friend by listening"

and “I can be a good friend by listening to other people and helping.” A fourth-grade teacher asked students to choose famous peacemakers and choose their words that had the most impact on the student. One chose Gandhi’s “See the good in people and help them” (Chakkravarty, 2022). Another student also quoted Gandhi: “Be the change you wish to see in the world” (Chakkravarty, 2022). A third chose Mother Teresa’s words: “Peace begins with a smile” (Collopy, 2002).

A board outside a third-grade classroom displayed pictures of students holding hand-written messages describing their goals. A student wrote their goal was to “make new inventions to help people” and another had a goal to “include everybody.” One student wrote about making friends with those who do not have any. A bulletin board in the middle-school building was titled “Words to Live By” where students had chosen inspirational words such as “kindness,” “empathy,” “caring,” and “inclusion,” and colored them in pop art style. A middle-school teacher posted an assignment on her board specifically designed “for me to get to know you better, as well as for you and your classmates to connect more.” Scattered around both the middle and elementary school were posters with the acronym CARE that reminded students to **C**onsider **A**nd **R**espect **E**veryone. Student-made flyers in the middle-school and elementary school encouraged students to #Be Your Best and “Invite others to play with you,” “Treat others the way you want to be treated,” and “Help others.”

Review of minutes from parent board meetings showed members wished to contribute to promoting social-emotional competencies in the student body by inviting speakers to address faculty, students, and parents. A parent organization sponsored an annual “Caring Community

Time” with activities and speakers focused on promoting caring and thoughtfulness among all community members.

The data showed evidence of school-wide attention to developing students’ social-emotional competencies. The strategies and tools used were wide-ranging and reflected the developmental level of the students. Data also showed that some teachers used RULER tools and strategies in the school to enhance their classroom practices. The tools facilitated instruction and helped to build socioemotional competencies.

Benefits of RULER

The RULER approach offers four anchor tools to facilitate teaching and learning about the skills of emotional intelligence. The first tool is the Charter, which is a shared agreement between people about how they want to feel at work or at school. The second is the Mood Meter, which facilitates building individual’s self- and social-awareness of emotions. The third tool is the Meta-Moment, guiding people to respond to emotional triggers in effective ways. The fourth tool is the Blueprint, which offers a structure to use when interpersonal conflicts arise with the aim of building empathy and perspective taking (RULER, n.d.-b).

When asked to describe any changes noted in the school because of the work done with the RULER approach, 8 of the 13 respondents described how the approach was beneficial to students, offering comments like: “The children are much more aware and in touch with their feelings,” there was a greater “awareness of emotions,” and “it is easier to talk about emotions and communication is easier.” Another educator explained because of RULER students have become “accustomed to a forum in which they can put words to their feelings and share about them with their peers and teacher.” In addition, another teacher described how “RULER gives a

name/framework to approaches for addressing issues. It gives us a shared language to discuss SEL. Otherwise SEL would be kind of nebulous at the school— nothing solid or concrete, no clear way to communicate it.”

A lower-elementary teacher when interviewed initially expressed ambivalence about addressing emotions in the classroom. They later reflected on the benefits of RULER, saying:

I think the way I am, I would've addressed [students' emotions] already [but] not in such an organized and compartmentalized manner, which I feel like, I think it's a positive. It has its own little curriculum, own space, and time.

She described not receiving much warmth from teachers when she was a student in school but believed that it was okay because, in her community, “families are overly loving.” The teacher described feeling “overly loving” with the students, but at their young age, she felt like she needed to be, stating:

They're hurt. Maybe a little hug or a high five and things like that. But I feel my children here, they need that. So yeah . . . if RULER didn't exist, I don't think I would've really given feelings its own curriculum.

The data showed of the four RULER tools, the most frequently used was the Mood Meter, with the Charter being used next most frequently. The Meta-Moment and Blueprint were seldom used by teachers.

Mood Meter. The Mood Meter facilitates building individual's self- and social-awareness of emotions. Both survey respondents and teacher interviewees described the benefits of the Mood Meter in gauging student emotions. Teachers who used the Mood Meter believed it

afforded students a more nuanced vocabulary to describe their emotions. An elementary teacher who had been using the RULER program for a few years explained during an interview:

[I]t's a lot of vocabulary building for them and understanding shades of meaning. I really tie it in there. So, I kind of infuse it into lessons. I don't necessarily have [specific] SEL lesson time, but we're going over more nuanced vocabulary as we go each week, adding more words to just "sad" and getting into more specifics.

An elementary teacher talked about how students can identify that they are upset and talk about their emotions more easily and described how she helped her students develop their vocabulary around emotions, saying:

So, then I tell them, Okay, let's look for a synonym for the word "happy." And then I tell them it out loud. I have them put their name . . . on that synonym. And I have the rest of the class repeat the synonym. And some of them have already started using those other words that are on the Mood Meter.

The same teacher related her success with the Mood Meter. She described a conversation with a young student who was feeling sad, saying:

"Okay," I said, "What caused these feelings?" [And the student said,] "because we were starting language arts and I didn't wanna do language arts!" So, she was able to identify what it was made that made her upset. Wow! That was the first time I've had that success though.

Another elementary teacher explained in an interview how she uses the Mood Meter to develop students' skills at identifying their emotions and being able to talk about them. She has a big grid, and they plotted their own feeling with the color-coded stickers. She said:

I ask them, “How are you feeling?” And some of them say all the colors. And I’m like, “Okay. . .” But if they say, “Red,” and they’re smiling, I ask them, “Well, your smile doesn’t really match what red means. Can you tell me why you’re feeling red?” But also, I try to stay in the moment because they’ll tell me, “Well, yesterday this happened.” And I’m like, “Well, so you felt red in that moment. I want, you know how you’re feeling today right now at school with me, with everybody else.” So it’s just honing it in and it’s just the introduction into RULER and the social-emotional learning that I think is the foundation.

A veteran teacher described in an interview how the Mood Meter alerted her to student mood, explaining, “because I see if the kids are scoring in the red or the blue, it kind of piques my interest as to why.” Though she did not always know who the students were who were in the “red or the blue” she knew to observe her students closely on those days, and she created time for class discussions about their emotions and mood.

The survey evinced five responses about the Mood Meter, and its usefulness for teachers and students: “Students are able to identify their feelings and express them more clearly,” “Students are using the Mood Meter throughout the day to express how they are feeling,” and “The children are really familiar with the different colors and what they mean.” Another teacher wrote:

Organizing emotions into four zones of intensity/feeling associated with a color not only teaches the students how to categorize their feelings, but also makes their emotions legible so they can choose whether or not they want to move to a different zone.

Another respondent suggested that it would be helpful for other teachers to know how students responded on the Mood Meter at the start of the day, indicating that teacher valued the information about student affect gained from the Mood Meter.

Teachers adapted the Mood Meter to suit their classroom practice and routines. Two elementary classrooms created a Mood Meter using a basket with four quadrants that represented the colors of the Mood Meter. In the morning students placed their own painted pebble into the quadrant that represented their mood. Students were encouraged to move the pebble throughout the day as their mood changed.

During a campus walkthrough, a teacher approached me to tell me she had just received some good news and said with a smile, “I feel so relieved—this news puts me in the green on the Mood Meter!” In my classroom and campus walkthroughs, I saw mood meters posted in all but three homerooms. Although I did not see them used during my observations, teachers referred to them during interviews and in the survey.

Charter. The Charter is a shared agreement between people about how they want to feel at work or at school. All middle-school homerooms had a class Charter posted either on the bulletin board outside the room or on a wall inside the classroom and four elementary rooms had theirs on display. The teachers interviewed all knew of the Charter but use in classrooms was varied. An elementary teacher believed the Charter had been beneficial in her practice and described how she had used it recently in a class discussion when a student made disparaging comments about another student’s art project. The teacher explained:

I went to the Charter the other day because something happened with one of my students.

A parent [told] me that somebody criticized [their child’s] art creation. We had decorated

posters, and somebody criticized his and the parent said he took so much time doing it all on his own. And then to have somebody criticize! So, I brought it to the class, and I said, “I want you to look at our Charter here. It says to compliment people, to raise people up.” I said, “Do you think if you’re criticizing somebody’s poster that you’re complimenting them or raising them up or uplifting them? You’re not!” I said. So, yeah, I use the Charter that way for things that happen in the classroom and especially if a parent says something, but also kids come up and say certain things. And that’s when I would go to the Charter and say, “Look, what are the things we said we were going to do for people? And you’re not doing that if you say certain things.” I think, yeah, the written Charter is important because you can [refer] to it.

A middle-school teacher described how she used the Charter in class discussions. She reminded students how had worked together deciding how they wanted to feel at school, and how important it was as a group to uphold their Charter. One veteran elementary teacher explained how creating a Charter at the beginning of the year was a starting point to discuss emotions and why they are important. She continued to use it throughout the year, saying:

I start in the beginning of the year by making the Charter and talking to them about what emotions are and why they’re important. We check in with our Charter every week and see how we’re doing and get some ideas or some feedback on what is an area we need to work on. We’ll sometimes have a discussion in the middle of the week if needed. But I do a weekly kind of end-of-the-week meeting with them about it.

Of the four classrooms I visited, only one middle-school room had a class Charter posted and it was not used by the teacher while I was in the class. During campus walkthroughs, I noted class

Charters posted on bulletin boards outside five middle-school rooms, and one faculty Charter on a board in the middle school. Two faculty meeting agendas refer to student behavioral challenges with the principal asking the question “Does every class have a Charter?”

Meta-Moment. The Meta-Moment is a tool that guides people to respond to emotional triggers in effective ways and encourages them to envision their “best-self” as they respond to emotions. Two interview subjects, both veteran teachers, described how they use this tool in their practice. One elementary teacher explained:

We . . . go over the “best-self” reflection and do an activity with that. We practice that and different strategies for . . . how. . . to . . . sense when we’re in the red and we have those moments where we might make a bad choice and we need to just pause.

The same teacher explained how she used a glitter jar to incorporate the Meta-Moment in her practice, saying:

That moment where they’re all shook up, I’ll shake the glitter jar to represent that visually and then . . . they count to 10, they have their Meta-Moment then they almost feel like their thoughts are settling, they’re more calm and they can see clearly.

A middle-school teacher explained how he used the Meta-Moment when he gave detentions to students. A review of school documents supported this. At the beginning of the detention, students received a sheet with three questions that they worked on during the detention hour: Why are you in detention? How would your very best-self have handled the choice differently? How would that have changed the outcome? The teacher would discuss the responses with the students and encourage them to consult their class Charter to determine if they were abiding by

their shared agreement. A survey respondent wrote about the Meta-Moment as a potential classroom management tool, stating:

Perhaps normalize the Meta-Moment as part of classroom management? For example, when possible, instead of “verbal warnings” you can give “do overs” where the student should stop and reflect on what went wrong and what they could have done instead, and then rewind and make that choice instead.

Though it is not clear if the respondent used the Meta-Moment or any other RULER tools in their practice, their comment indicated they appreciate the value of this tool in their practice.

During my classroom and campus walkthroughs, I did not see evidence of Meta-Moment use despite some teachers referencing in interviews and the survey. There was no discussion of this tool in meeting agendas, and it did not feature in teachers’ lesson plans.

The Blueprint. The Blueprint offers a structure for students and teachers to use when interpersonal conflicts arise, with the aim of building empathy and perspective taking between the parties. There is little data to show that teachers use the Blueprint. One elementary teacher explained in an interview how she used it with limited success on the occasions when her students would experience conflicts with classmates.

The data collection pointed to the benefits to students of incorporating SEL and RULER into the regular routines of daily teaching practice. However, as reported in the section the implementation of RULER posed challenges for the teachers.

Theme 2: Challenges to RULER Implementation

Staff and faculty training in the RULER approach had been intentional and consistent the year it was adopted by the school and in the year after students returned to on-campus

instruction. Data from the survey, interviews, and walkthroughs showed that RULER use varied from teacher to teacher. Of the 16 survey responses, 11 indicated they used RULER tools “Sometimes” or “Frequently.” The remaining five indicated “Rarely” do they use RULER. Classroom walkthroughs showed Mood Meters in two of the three rooms I visited, and Charters in two. Some teachers who described SEL activities in their weekly planning used a RULER tool as the basis of the activity, such as students identifying their “best self,” which is the Meta-Moment tool, or students plotting themselves on the Mood Meter. All interview participants described RULER tools being used in classrooms.

Sixteen survey respondents agree or strongly agreed there was a clear vision for SEL at the school. However, despite the successes already experienced with RULER and SEL, there were challenges to RULER implementation. Four subthemes related to implementation emerged from the data: (a) teachers who use RULER need a clearer picture of what is required of them in terms of RULER implementation, (b) the need for continued training in the approach, (c) the need for more developmentally appropriate RULER resources, and (d) teachers not understanding how RULER helps manage student behavior.

No Clear Picture of What Is Required of Them

Interviewees described feeling unsure if they were using RULER correctly. A teacher told me, “I like the idea of RULER, but I feel like I haven’t accomplished how to teach it well or implement it well.” Another expressed concern that she had not been using the Mood Meter every day, but then settled on a plan to use it once a week, saying, “Well I’m getting more comfortable. . . . I didn’t know how to use it. I couldn’t do it every day. That was kind of

worrying me, because I don't know if they want to do it every day." Later in the interview the same teacher told me:

Well, for us, I . . . thought we had to do it every day, which was like, NO! So, I think we have to kind of tailor it to the different classes. And I think that has to be stressed because in kindergarten, when they start up, they're talking about how they do it every day. And you're thinking, oh, my gosh, I can't do it every day. So, then it makes you feel like you're not adequately doing it.

Data from document review of SEL/RULER committee meetings and professional development meetings described the importance of celebrating *any* social-emotional strategies used by teachers and encouraging teachers to use the RULER tools. The agendas of several SEL/RULER committee meetings evidenced a focus on SEL and RULER. For example, at one meeting in the spring, an agenda item stated: "(The) Mood Meter is one tool, here are others – recognizing that many faculty members are addressing SEL in other ways." At a committee meeting in spring of the following year, agenda items indicated a plan to cover the following during a faculty meeting dedicated to SEL and RULER training. There was discussion about what RULER and SEL tools faculty were being used in their practice, how to embed SEL and or RULER into lessons, and faculty success stories using SEL strategies and RULER in their classrooms. In the fall of that year, notes from a committee meeting again described a focus on SEL strategies other than RULER: "What are teachers doing in terms of SEL, not necessarily RULER, that [they would] like to share, how do we involve people and have them choose what they think is NB [important]?"

The Need for Continued Training in the Approach

Educator survey and interview responses offered insights in the amount of RULER training received and whether it was adequate. When asked in the survey whether the school provides sufficient training on how to use the RULER approach 13 respondents indicated they agreed or strongly agreed, while two disagreed and one respondent was not sure. However, four responses indicated a need for more guidance in the RULER approach and how to incorporate SEL into classroom practice. The following comments evidenced this perception: “Share more examples and give us more specific strategies,” “Small break out groups to share regularly among each other,” “Training in strategies that are more age-specific,” and “Give us more specific tools.”

The need for more training was echoed in this interviewee’s response: “I like the idea of RULER, but I feel like I haven’t accomplished how to teach it well or implement it well. I feel like we haven’t done that yet at St. ABC.” She felt the school did not have “a strong enough plan.” Asked about their comfort level using RULER in the classroom, another teacher said:

I would say I’m middle ground right now. . . . I’m still working on it because I still feel like I’m new to the program. Even though I was on the (SEL) team last year, I’m still new to it because I haven’t been able to go through all the modules.

Additional data revealed there were teachers who had more experience with RULER and used the tools to enhance their teaching. One teacher explained how RULER could be adapted, saying:

I ask when we’re in faculty meetings. . . . “Oh, how do you do that there?” Everybody has their own special way, which I like because every teacher is different and you’re

going to teach your way in your classroom. I do feel like everyone has adapted maybe something that resonates from RULER to them. And it translates easily when you're trying to teach it with your students.

Another teacher described how she tailored RULER to her practice, saying:

Find a day where kids would be more receptive to it. And I think you have to kind of read your class . . . tailor it to each class and whatever they do is like, Hey, if you even do it once a month, it's a start. Absolutely. . . . [i]t's a start. Okay? And then I would say maybe twice a month. I mean, I think that if you approach it that way, it could be more manageable for upper class teachers who are doing a lot to just get curriculum straightened out.

Through interviews, survey results, and classroom walkthroughs, it was evident that the teachers and staff were at different stages of RULER implementation. Twelve of the 16 survey participants believed they had sufficient training on how to use SEL in their practice, and eight of the participants described having sufficient training on how to use the RULER approach in their classrooms. Ten of the 16 respondents felt confident implementing SEL strategies in their classrooms and fourteen of the respondents felt confident about using RULER in their classrooms. However, when asked how often they used the RULER approach the responses were equally divided between those who rarely used it, sometimes used it, and frequently used it. This finding was supported by data from classroom walkthroughs. Although the classrooms I visited evidenced a supportive learning environment, where teachers and students were focused on building relationships, they were not all using the RULER tools regularly. Not all rooms had a class Charter, and although many had a Mood Meter posted, not all teachers used it. These

findings are reflected in the interview responses, with teachers and students describing varying levels of RULER use in the classrooms.

An elementary teacher only used the Mood Meter but used it every day, telling me:

Because we have two groups, I'll do it in the morning, [and] in the afternoon, and I hear [students] using the words by themselves, "Oh, I'm feeling blue." And then they will describe, "Because I miss my mom," and things like that.

Another elementary teacher of younger students explained that she felt making a class Charter would be hard for the students as they are so young, and that it would be "more on me than on the . . . kids." One teacher told me that their Charter was "done but not printed."

Sixteen teachers and staff answered the survey question, "I have enough time to implement the RULER approach in my classroom." Nine responded that they had enough time to implement RULER in their teaching, five answered they did not have enough time, and two were unsure.

Needing More Developmentally Appropriate RULER Resources

During interviews teachers told me the tools did not always translate well to the age group they teach. One teacher of an elementary classroom explained how the Blueprint was hard to use with young students, despite having created one designed to be more age-appropriate, saying:

Yesterday I had a student who got a red card [for not following class rules] and when I got to the part of the Blueprint [we created for the students] . . . it's not friendly for them, let me put it that way . . . the verbiage and everything. It's hard for me to get the answers out of them. Cause when I say, "Well how did you feel?" And they kinda look at me,

“Well I feel sad.” I’m like, “No, no, no. How did you feel *before* you got in trouble?”

They can’t recall that.

A teacher of young students in the elementary school explained how the Mood Meter confused her students, saying:

But I think all those words that they had on that chart was just very confusing. And kids wanted to put their [sticker] on a certain word. And I think that . . . it just delays everything. So, we made it simple . . . with just the faces on it and maybe four words for each section, which I think made it much easier for them to figure out. I think that was good. So little by little we’re trying to figure it out.

While on a campus walkthrough an elementary teacher told me how she found a video for her 5-year-old students that introduced emotions through song. She told me the colors were different from the Mood Meter colors but that her students enjoyed the song and it still taught them about how to identify their emotions. During another walkthrough, I saw a poster titled “The Peace Path” that provided a four-step protocol for students in fifth grade for resolving interpersonal conflicts. During an elementary classroom walkthrough, I noticed a teacher-made poster that combined classroom rules with elements of the Blueprint to create a conflict resolution pathway to meet the needs of the students and teacher in that classroom. Although all teachers in the school have the Blueprint to use, the peace path appeared to be more accessible for most of the participants.

Teachers Are Not Sure How RULER Helps Manage Challenging Student Behavior

Data from the teacher survey, teacher and student interviews, faculty meeting agendas, and the principal’s weekly email show concerns about students’ challenging behavior. Four out

of 10 faculty meetings agendas reviewed noted student behavior as a topic of concern. Several of the principal's weekly newsletters to school families addressed behavioral expectations for students. Classroom walkthroughs showed the use of behavior charts in the lower grades and discussions of detention in the middle school. Some teachers interviewed explained their discomfort with talking about feelings or emotions, when they believed student behavior was the real issue at hand. A teacher told me, SEL is "all about feelings, which I'm not a big fan of. My whole thing is that I would rather have [students] *act* a certain way than *feel* a certain way . . . *that's* important to me." She believed that it was "fine" for younger students to talk about their feelings, but older students needed to be more concerned with how they act, stating:

When you're younger or you have younger kids, you can maybe talk about feelings. But as you get older, it's more about how you're acting . . . for [preschool], kindergarten, first, second. But now when you get to third, fourth, fifth, it's . . . more what are you going to do about how you feel? Yeah. Because this is important and it's important for other people.

The same teacher described her ambivalence about RULER because it was about "feelings" stating:

I'm iffy on the program anyway because it's all about feelings and I want it to be more: "Feelings and what are you going to do about that to change, and put it into action a different thing?" So that to me is something that [also] has to be stressed.

She explained:

I'm one of these people that thinks so you have an obligation to be happy and to not always be down. Because I know as a parent you look at kids' feelings and ask "Why are

you sad? What’s going on?” And then you feed into that a lot, which I don’t think is necessarily the way it is. I think all kids feel that way sometimes, but you’ve got to get them out of it.

Another teacher voiced concern that colleagues perceived RULER as another failed initiative rather than something that would help with student behavior, saying, “But now looking back . . . at the situations that are occurring in our school environment with the children, I can understand why they feel like it’s another thing we’re going to try, and it might not work.” She described her discomfort in presenting RULER to the faculty, saying:

Well, when I was with the group and we would do the presentations for RULER, I felt in reading the room, I felt like the other teachers [saw it as] another thing to do on their plate. And I felt bad. As teachers, we have so much on our plate already. And when we did [the RULER training] we didn’t know about the years that were to come with the pandemic. Yeah, haha [*wry laugh*]. So, I really felt bad that they just felt like it was another thing on their plate. Some people did not seem receptive of it.

Theme 3: RULER Must Be Shared With Parents

An important facet of the RULER approach is the family component. Implementation involves introducing the approach to the school community in stages: First to teachers and educators, second to students, and third to parents and caregivers. The initial timeline created by the RULER implementation team at St. ABC proposed full implementation by fall of 2021. Minutes from an implementation team meeting in October of 2019 stated, “Late Spring of 2020: Meet with parents” to present the RULER approach. The proposed parent presentation ultimately happened over Zoom in early June of 2021. The delay was a result of disruptions to schooling

because of the COVID-19 global pandemic. A presentation to faculty in March of 2021 proposed “Fall 2021 Rollout to students, families. Teachers continue to train on tools/strategies.” Data from teacher and student interviews, and campus walkthroughs, showed an incomplete rollout process. Some parents knew a little about RULER and others knew nothing. Data from three informal conversations with parents during campus walkthroughs indicated they would like to have more information about RULER and how to use it at home. Teacher interviews reinforced the need for parents to have knowledge of the approach. One teacher of young elementary students explained how it would benefit her them if parents had a better idea of what RULER is, saying:

I guess the next step is to really get the parents maybe more on board. It seems like all the parents are like, “Yes, it’s a great idea!” They’re not on board as far as actually completing everything at home is what I’m thinking. They might go, “Oh yeah, [my child] says they’re in the green,” but that’s it. They don’t broaden that part. So maybe suggesting a routine at home, which would be hard.

A veteran teacher expressed in an interview that parents would benefit from more information about RULER, saying:

One thing I do think that would help is if we had just a go-to place for parents on what is the RULER approach . . . maybe little videos how to talk about it at home with your students and things like that. I think unless we do [have that already], and I’m not aware of it, but I think that that would be something that would really help.

This was echoed in an interview with another veteran teacher, who said:

I think just the parents need to know why we're doing this, what it's for. Every teacher is going to look different, but it's under the umbrella of what we're trying to promote and the environment we're trying to create. . . . I think that would be the next step . . . the parents need to know this, and the parents need to know the reason why we're implementing it.

The same teacher expressed concern that what students were learning through RULER at school was not translating to what they were doing at home as parents did not know enough about the approach. She said, "how do they talk about feelings at home? How do they resolve conflict at home with the siblings, and things like that? So, I'm not sure what the kids learn here from RULER translates in their home life." She wondered if parents believed in or bought into what was presented in the RULER approach.

Another veteran elementary-school teacher explained that some of her students plot strong, unpleasant-feeling emotions on the Mood Meter. She believed it was important for parents to know that their child experienced these strong emotions. The tools and language provided in the RULER approach would make it easier for parents and children to talk about these emotions. She described a discussion she had with students who had shared how their parents got upset with them, saying she believed RULER would help parents and students understand each other better. She went on to say:

I think . . . quite frankly, I think I would like to address it with . . . parents. And not to say that they're wrong, because I think that's a typical parent scenario if they were angry and wanted their kid to move on. But the point is you have to understand that the kid is feeling that absolutely a certain way too. And I don't think sometimes [parents] get it.

A teacher expressed that if parents practiced the RULER approach at home, they might have more insight into how the teachers feel when parents “gossip or cause the toxicity.” She said parents must, “understand that the teachers are human too and maybe [parents] need to check in with how they’re behaving with their teachers emotionally, socially.” She said that teachers should also check on how they relate to each other socially and emotionally. I observed recess during a campus walkthrough and overheard parent volunteers describe how they did not always know how to resolve conflicts between students. They spoke about how a plan or script for conflict resolution would be helpful and that it could be shared with parents who volunteer for playground duty. Minutes from parent board meetings point to parents seeking ways to provide more information about SEL to the school by inviting speakers to address faculty, students, and parents. The documents describe a parent-sponsored annual “Caring Community Time” with activities and speakers focused on promoting caring and thoughtfulness among all community members. There was no data, however, to suggest that RULER implementation had been extended to parents and caregivers. The only information they had received was a presentation for parents held on Zoom that explained the RULER approach.

Research Question 1 Conclusion

The teacher participants in this study of a Catholic elementary school implementation of SEL and RULER expressed support for SEL in the school, and believed it is important for student well-being. The teachers interviewed noted the RULER approach offers a framework for teachers as they attempted to implement SEL in their classrooms. They described challenges in implementing the approach, citing not having a clear picture of what was required of them, needing more developmentally appropriate RULER resources, needing additional training in the

approach, and feeling concerned about students' behavior. Teachers were also concerned that it was yet another initiative to be implemented. Teachers also spoke of how families could benefit from knowing more about RULER.

Research Question 2

Given the importance of social-emotional competencies for the well-being of students and teachers in schools, and the difficulties in implementing SEL in schools, I wanted to gain insight into the process of implementing SEL in schools. As such, my second research question was: What are student perceptions of the implementation of SEL with a particular emphasis on the RULER approach? To gain an understanding of student perceptions, I conducted semiformal interviews with five randomly selected students from the elementary school and middle school at St. ABC.

The following themes emerged from the data collected to answer the second research question about student perceptions of the implementation of SEL with a focus on the RULER approach: (a) The School Environment Supported the Development of Students' Social-Emotional Competencies, (b) Students Did Not Have a Clear Understanding of Social-Emotional Learning, (c) Students Were Familiar With Some of the RULER Tools and Why the Tools Were Used, and (d) Students Valued When Teachers Have Behavioral Expectations in Class and Follow Them Consistently.

Theme 1: The School Environment Supports the Development of Students' Social-Emotional Competencies

Data from classroom and campus walkthroughs and the educator survey and teacher interviews evidenced teachers' strong belief that they promoted the social-emotional

development of their students and students felt comfortable talking to faculty and staff about personal problems. The classrooms I visited evidenced trusting teacher–student relationships, with teachers providing clear guidance, where classroom routines promoted student autonomy, and where students were actively engaged with each other.

Positive Relationships With Teachers and Staff

Each of the five students I interviewed expressed how they valued the relationships they had with their teachers and how they appreciated them. Teachers were viewed as a largely positive influence in the students’ school experience. An elementary student explained how he knew his teacher cared for the students. In the interview, he told me, “I kinda love that she’s said this before. . . . I can’t leave until you all go home. I can’t go home until you all go home, until you’re all safe.” When I asked what the teacher meant by that, he told me that “she loves us” and it made him feel “safe, good, joyful.” When his teachers used phrases like “You’ve got this,” it helped him feel “very good inside.”

Another child referred to the relationship between students and teachers and was concerned about how to improve the relationship. He did not refer to grades, test scores, or report cards, but communication between teacher and student, and ultimately, relationship. He offered this comment:

I think . . . it might be helpful for teachers to take some feedback, anonymous feedback on how they might be teaching from their students so that they can respond to that feedback to improve. . . . I think that a lot of those issues are very simple and can be very easily solved. And I think that the teachers just aren’t aware of those issues. And I think that that type of feedback would be helpful to improve that relationship.

In interviews, the students expressed the teachers' role in ensuring a safe learning environment was evident to the students. In several interviews they expressed that a teacher's role was important in supporting students' sense of well-being at school. Their comments indicated they understood the importance of the student–teacher relationship. Students appreciated teachers' positive affirmations, guidance on how to be a supportive classmate, role in providing important instruction, and creation of boundaries and expectations for behavior. A middle-school student described how it was important for students to value the work teachers put into their lessons and to follow rules set out by the teacher, saying:

So, I feel like it's basically just about trust since we're all not as mature now as when we will be in high school. I feel that right now it's about trust and consequences, because if we do [computer] games during a lesson that the teacher put thought into, it's kind of wasting their time. And I find that very sad how that happens.

Another middle schooler explained how important teachers are in developing students' sense of concern for others and helping them build community. He said:

I think that supporting our relationship with classmates would be maybe talking to the class about how being nice is important because I feel like we talk about [how] you need to be nice a lot, but we never really dive into . . . why it's important and how it affects people. I think that that would be helpful for a lot of people.

During class and campus walkthroughs there was evidence of this positive relationship between teachers and students. In the four classes I observed, students and teachers interacted with warmth and respect. One class was excited because they were going to have a competition with another class, and the teacher shared in their excitement and sense of fun, by exclaiming, “The

game is on . . . bring it on [other class]!!” In a walkthrough of the middle school, I overheard a conversation between students and their teacher about the school dance that had just occurred. The students felt comfortable explaining the positive and negative experiences of the evening.

Students’ Sense of Well-Being at School

All the students interviewed felt they belonged and had friends. The youngest students in lower elementary grades described their friendships in terms of how their friends made them feel. One girl told me she had “very good friends,” and explained:

I get along with my friends and get to know other people at school because I see them playing in nice games and then I play with them for a little bit and then I go to the next person, the next person, and then I know everyone’s name and who they are. And then I get to play with everyone at school.

Similarly, another boy of the same age told me his friends at school made him feel happy and they played kickball and soccer together. Older elementary and middle school students also described feeling happy at school with a sense of belonging. A middle-schooler explained to me:

I think that a lot of people can relate through sports and . . . academics . . . me and my friends, we like to play kickball at . . . lunch and then at recess, we’ll play chess in the library. So, I think that we can have a lot of fun doing that and relate to each other like that.

However, most participants acknowledged that some students were excluded and expressed concern about this. Some spoke about ways that they or classmates have tried to include others. This was more evident with the students from third grade and higher. A middle schooler explained how they believed there was “always going to be exclusion in schools. It’s

just a thing.” However, they felt it was important that everyone in the school had at least one friend, which they believed was the case at the school. The interviewee felt that “maybe . . . everyone can be more open-minded and accepting.” Another middle schooler also expressed concern that some classmates were excluded saying, “People sit alone at the lunch tables. Of course, [there] are some very nice people who will sit with them. And I find that maybe that the excluding people is kind of a big part of the problem.” The student went on to describe how they see a lot of exclusion and groups at St. ABC, and “sometimes people aren’t in any of those.” They said they felt sad about it but did try to be friends with a lot of other people and not just those in their social group.

Theme 2: Students Do Not Have a Clear Understanding of What the Term Social-Emotional Learning Means

SEL is the process through which young people and adults develop skills, knowledge, and attitudes to develop healthy identities; manage emotions, achieve personal and collective goals; feel and show empathy for others; establish and maintain supportive relationship;, and make responsible and caring decisions (Ramirez et al., 2021; Zinsser & Dusenbury, 2015). I asked the middle-school participants specifically about their understanding of the term SEL. One said, “Well, I don’t know much about it. I just know that it’s been like well . . . I don’t actually really know much!” Another student told me, “Well, I believe [SEL] is about how the teachers at my school try and help with our emotional and social state. Cause they try to provide maybe . . . comfort for us. And so that we don’t feel worried and that we can talk to them if something’s going on in [our] life.”

I knew that the younger, elementary-school students had not discussed the specific term SEL. So, rather than asking them to define SEL, I asked about why we talk about feelings at home or at school. One student told me that it “helps calm you down, relax and hang out and cool down.” He told me how speaking with certain friends about his feelings is sometimes helpful, but not with other friends, stating, “Because some friends are—I don’t know how to describe a word—not good [and make me feel] anger, upset.” Another young child explained why it is important to talk about feelings, saying:

Because it kinda feels like someone under really understands how, if you tell them your feelings, then they could actually help you with your feelings to make them better. . . . If you’re sad, they could help you make them feel better. If you talk about your feelings, it can make you feel happy and joyful and make you fit in.

One young participant told me he did not really talk to anyone about his feelings other than to a parent. However, as the conversation progressed, he explained how he and a friend plotted their emotions on the Mood Meter after an incident during a soccer game at recess. The incident had left both children angry and upset and once they returned to class, they used the Mood Meter independent of the teacher and placed their painted pebbles in the red section of the Mood Meter basket.

Theme 3: Students Are Familiar With Some of the RULER Tools and Their Purpose

All student participants were aware of the Mood Meter and described how it was used in their classrooms. Some students were familiar with the Charter, and only one with the Blueprint. No students were familiar with the Meta-Moment. The Blueprint offers a structure for students and teachers to use when interpersonal conflicts arise, with the aim of building empathy and

perspective between the parties. The Meta-Moment is a tool that guides people to respond to emotional triggers in effective ways and encourages them to envision their “best self” as they respond to emotions.

Mood Meter

The students interviewed had all used the Mood Meter in some form and said it was a helpful tool. They explained how it made them more aware of their moods or emotions in different settings and that this was helpful. A middle-school participant said the Mood Meter was effective for them as it allowed them to focus on how they were feeling that day. It also helped to calm them down a bit and understand why they were feeling bad that day and then how their mood could improve, which would help them to learn better and have a better time at school. Each morning the students engaged in class prayer where they have the chance to offer intentions for family members or themselves. The student explained how the Mood Meter allowed classmates to understand what each other was experiencing, as it reinforced any emotions shared during intentions. The middle-school student said it was helpful for the class as it would “help make people more aware to what might be going on, especially if someone might be having a problem that they share during the intentions.” The student explained, “Our classmates can respond to that and change their attitude to a certain person, especially to that one person. Or there be multiple people.”

Students described how teachers use the Mood Meter in different ways. The middle-school students used the online tool, and those in the elementary school used a version that allowed students to see each other’s plot and, therefore, their emotion. The middle-school

students agreed the anonymous aspect of the digital Mood Meter had benefits but could also prove less helpful. A middle-schooler explained:

I think that it can generally be helpful, to see how people are . . . feeling and also think that it's important that if one person's feeling sad that day and for some reason they might not want to share, it's also good. I feel like it would be better to help somebody, but also wouldn't keep it as private.

During class observations, I did not see teachers or students using the Mood Meter, but 3 of the 4 rooms had a Mood Meter posted on the wall.

Charter

Three of the five students interviewed told me they did not use the Charter in their classrooms this year, and some were not sure what it was. Their comments were supported by data from classroom and campus observations. In classroom walkthroughs, I did not see teachers or students referring to their Charter, although many rooms had them posted with the majority evidenced in the middle-school building. Asked if they use the Charter an elementary student said no, although data from a campus walkthrough and a teacher interview showed they did refer to it occasionally. Another student remembered the class Charter from the previous year, sharing:

There were times last year we used it a lot. We even made a fifth-grade Charter. . . . how we want to feel, what we want to do. In that grade . . . in Mr. L's class . . . at first, it was fun to participate in it. We want to get good grades and feel safe and welcomed. It didn't get repetitive. This one [was] outside our classroom. . . . and it was fun to just read it at times and I would even check off if I feel this way. Or if I'm getting a [good] grade.

A middle schooler expressed how they used the Charter this year, to limited effect, and it did not impact the class's behavior in a meaningful way. They explained:

We'll look at it again during religion class sometime. 'Cause I know that recently there has been some problem with our class's behavior. And so, during religion class we looked at the Charter again and said, how can we stay faithful to this Charter? So, we talked about that for that period. . . . I think that our behavior improved. . . . in these classes, but only really on that one day. I feel like then it kind of, once again kind of devolved.

Meta-Moment and Blueprint

None of the students discussed Meta-Moment or Blueprint, and when asked about whether they are used in class, all said no. Classroom and campus walkthroughs supported this as there was no evidence of either tool being used in their original format as they appear in RULER. I observed other tools for conflict resolution such as a poster describing the "peace path" in a fifth-grade classroom, and reflection sheets in the classrooms I observed.

Theme 4: Students Appreciate When Teachers Have Behavioral Expectations of Students and Follow Them Consistently

Students spoke of valuing behavioral expectations and boundaries placed on them at school. From the youngest students in lower elementary to the oldest in middle school, they all spoke favorably about teachers' expectations of students, and of being given boundaries and consequences. An early-elementary child described it this way:

[The teachers are] strict. Very strict. And I kinda like strict. Cause if they're strict and you get it wrong, then you learn from that and then the next time you do that you'll get it

right maybe. Aha. And then if they're strict and they say no, that's not how you do it, then you'll actually learn. If they're nice and say no, that's kinda wrong, then you don't really learn from that. But if they're strict and say no, that's not the right answer, look up on the board. And then you say, okay, next time I'll try to get it right. And then next time you might get it right. So, if there's strict, (it) basically it helps you learn.

This appreciation for consistent expectations was evident in the older students' comments. A middle schooler said this about inconsistent rules and expectations:

I feel like [at times] there's no real warning system and . . . that's letting a lot of students get into a situation where they feel kind of do what they want. And that kind of takes away the teacher's authority and stuff.

Another middle-school student believed that the consequences their teacher established in class were generally fair. At time the consequences led to undeserving students receiving a consequence. A friend of hers received a consequence and felt angry because "it wasn't their fault . . . and it [felt] very unfair."

Research Question 2 Conclusion

Themes that emerged from student data: (a) Students Do Not Have a Clear Understanding of Social-Emotional Learning, (b) They Are Familiar With Some of the RULER Tools and Their Purpose, (c) The School Environment Supports the Development of Students' Social-Emotional Competencies, and (d) Students Value When Teachers Have Behavioral Expectations of the Students and Follow Them Consistently. The students did not have a clear understanding of SEL. They did not have much knowledge of the RULER approach but were familiar with some of the tools and why they were helpful to students and teachers. The Mood

Meter was the most frequently used tool. The middle-school students knew of the Charter, and it was used with varying success in these grades. Student responses indicated the school culture supported development of their social-emotional competencies and this was borne out by data collected during classroom- and campus-walkthroughs. Bulletin boards displaying student work indicated teachers focused on developing student competencies and faculty meeting agendas showed concern for student social-emotional growth and well-being. Students appreciated consistent behavioral expectations, boundaries, and consequences. Using the conceptual framework I created for this study, I determined that as of 2023 St. ABC school was between the Installation and Initial Implementation levels of implementation of the RULER approach (see Figure 5).

Figure 5
St. ABC Level of Implementation as of 2023

EXPLORATION	INSTALLATION	INITIAL IMPLEMENTATION	FULL IMPLEMENTATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Completed: St. ABC assessed the needs of the community and determined RULER to be the best program or approach. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Began prior to COVID-19 pandemic in 2019. SEL team created coaching and training plans. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some teachers and staff began to use RULER practices prior to the pandemic. Once on-campus instruction began new faculty and staff needed RULER on-boarding and training. Retraining of veteran staff required due to months of being off-campus and little RULER professional development during this time. Data informed some improvement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> St. ABC was not yet at full implementation as not all staff used the practice.

The chart delineates four discernable stages of implementation of a program or practice: (a) exploration, which involves assessing the needs of the focus population and determining the best program or practice; (b) installation of the program or practice; (c) initial implementation when practitioners begin to use the program or practice, and data informs continuous improvement; and (d) full implementation when staff uses the program or practice successfully, and there is evidence of improved outcomes (NIRN, 2023). Findings indicated the school was between the installation stage and initial implementation stage of implementation as noted in the bolded sections of the chart. Installation of the RULER approach began in August 2019, with a coaching and training plan created by the SEL team. Educators received professional development in classroom implementation. Some teachers and staff began to use the approach in their practice that year. The COVID-19 global pandemic led to changes in the school's professional development focus, and the RULER approach was not prioritized. When on-campus instruction resumed, new staff and faculty joined the school. They received some training in the approach but less than the first cohort of educators. Noting fewer classes were practicing the RULER approach, the SEL committee planned professional development sessions to increase teacher use. The school entered the Initial Implementation phase when practitioners began to use the practice, although some already used the approach. Given the number of new teachers and staff at the school, the SEL team created a revised training and coaching plan placing it in the Installation phase again. The school was not at the full implementation stage, as not all educators used the practice. Anecdotal evidence suggested improved student outcomes, but there was no formal data to evidence these outcomes.

Summary and Conclusion

To answer the two research questions, this chapter presented a summary of the data collected from the coded interviews, educator survey, classroom and campus walkthroughs, and document review. Student and teacher perceptions of the implementation of SEL and RULER were discussed, and several themes emerged. In addition to the perceived benefits of SEL and RULER, challenges to implementation, and facilitators of SEL and the RULER approach, a major finding was that the learning environment was supportive and focused on building relationships and community. I determined that, as of 2023, St. ABC school was between the Installation and Initial Implementation levels of implementation of the RULER approach. In Chapter 5, these data are analyzed to learn more about significant findings and themes. I describe the limitations and delimitations of the study and offer recommendations based on my findings. I also offer suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This mixed-methods study sought to understand teacher and student perceptions of the implementation of social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum in a DK–8 Catholic school with an emphasis on the RULER (i.e., recognizing, understanding, labeling, expressing, and regulating) approach. Schools play a critical role in providing for students’ well-being and have the capacity to help students experience improved social competence, maintain higher attendance rates, experience higher rates of academic achievement, less disruptive classroom behavior, lower rates of suspension, and other forms of discipline (Durlak et al., 2011; Wood & Freeman-Loftis, 2015). Since the 1980s, there has been a growing belief, backed by cognitive neuroscience research, that schools should teach more than just academics to students. Cognitive engagement and meaningful learning are enhanced when students’ socioemotional competence is supported and nurtured in the school environment (Panksepp, 2004; Tyng et al., 2017). Social and emotional competence is the ability to understand, manage, and express the social and emotional aspects of life in ways that enable the successful management of life tasks such as “learning, forming relationships, solving everyday problems, and adapting to the complex demands of growth and development” (Elias, 2004, p. 13). In response to this notion, The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was formed in 1994 to provide schools with SEL programs backed by evidence-based research. The programs aim to develop psychosocial competence through self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills. These help students establish and

maintain positive relationships and demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts (Zinsser & Dusenbury, 2015).

Although the COVID-19 global pandemic crisis is still too recent for research on mental health to be conclusive and more well-designed studies are needed, evidence has supported existing concerns about children and adolescent well-being. Some student populations seemed to have fared better during the pandemic, while others evidenced greater mental health and behavioral issues (Magson et al., 2021; Theberath et al., 2021; Wathelet et al., 2022). Further, the return to on-campus instruction has surfaced other issues. Teachers nationwide report student behavioral skills are developmentally behind students the same age from 2 years ago. They describe students' relationships with each other as increasingly troubled and report more instances of fights, bullying, and opposition since prior to the pandemic. In addition, educators cite more students experiencing self-regulation and relationship-building challenges than students in 2018 (EAB Global, 2023). Young people need behavioral, socioemotional, and mental health support in the months after returning to on-campus instruction. Schools are well-positioned to prioritize this support.

According to CASEL and literature on SEL, implementation is a key factor for success of SEL initiatives in schools (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], n.d.-c; Durlak et al., 2011; Kendziora & Yoder, n.d.). To further students' holistic growth and the school's mission, St. ABC, a pseudonym for the school in this study, implemented a SEL program, specifically focused on RULER, an approach to SEL developed by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence (2022; Brackett et al., 2019). It was important to understand how teachers at St. ABC school perceived SEL implementation as they were

responsible for using SEL and RULER in their practice. Student perceptions offered insights into how SEL impacted them, specifically the RULER approach. Analyzing data gathered from educators and students led to a better understanding of the implementation process of SEL and RULER. The analysis may help school leaders as they plan to implement RULER or any other SEL initiatives in their schools. The two research questions (RQ) guiding this study were:

RQ 1: What are educator perceptions of the implementation of social-emotional learning with a specific focus on the RULER approach?

RQ 2: What are student perceptions of the implementation of social-emotional learning with a specific focus on the RULER approach?

I used a mixed method case-study approach to examine the experiences and perceptions of teachers and students as the school continued to implement SEL and RULER into the curriculum. I collected data for the study through teacher and student one-on-one interviews, an anonymous educator survey, classroom and campus walkthroughs, and document review such as minutes of faculty, advisory board, and parent association meetings, presentations to faculty and parents, principal's newsletters, student work, and teachers' lesson plans. Using inductive and deductive analysis to code the data, I noted the following themes connected to the study's research questions. The themes for Research Question 1 were: (a) Teachers Believe That SEL and RULER Benefit Students; (b) There Are Challenges to RULER Implementation; (c) RULER Should be Shared With Families. The following themes emerged relating to Research Question 2: (a) The School Environment Supports the Development of Students' Social-Emotional Competencies; (b) Students Do not Have a Clear Understanding of What Social-Emotional

Learning Is; (c) Students Are Familiar With Some of the RULER Tools; (d) Students Value When Teachers Have Behavioral Expectations in Class and Follow Them Consistently.

I coded data from the educator survey, participant interviews, classroom and campus walkthroughs, and school documents and reported the findings in Chapter 4. In this chapter, I analyze the data, present my conclusions, discuss limitations and delimitations, and make recommendations for practice and future research.

Summary and Discussion of the Findings

In this section, I summarize the themes within the context of each research question.

Research Question 1

What are educator perceptions of the implementation of social-emotional learning with a specific focus on the RULER approach?

Theme 1: Teachers Believe That Social-Emotional Learning and RULER Are Beneficial for Students

The data showed evidence of school-wide attention to developing students' social and emotional competencies. The strategies and tools used were wide-ranging and reflected the developmental level of the students. Data showed that some teachers used RULER tools and strategies in the school to enhance their classroom practices. The tools facilitated instruction and helped to build socioemotional competencies.

All teacher participants and survey respondents indicated their belief that SEL is an important factor in student well-being and when students are aware of their own and others' emotions it impacts the school environment and how students function at school. St. ABC adopted the RULER approach in 2020, 3-and-a-half years prior to this study and implementation

has been ongoing. While RULER use has been varied in classrooms across the campus, there was evidence that most teachers were intentional about supporting students' emotional well-being. They incorporated a range of strategies in their teaching to develop students' social-emotional competencies. Some strategies included those from the RULER approach.

Since the introduction of RULER to the school, there was an increased focus on SEL. Data indicated that foundational support for SEL was growing. Faculty meetings were devoted to identifying strategies to develop students' social-emotional competencies, teachers having conversations about how to use the RULER tools, and discussions on how to adapt the tools to their practice. Administration included frequent reminders in faculty meetings about using SEL and RULER. The conceptual framework upon which this study was based describes the importance of building of foundational support and planning for SEL, strengthening adult knowledge of SEL, promoting SEL for students, and ensuring that continuous improvement takes place (CASEL, n.d.-a).

Interview participants perceived RULER to be a useful framework to teach about emotions. The level of use varied from teacher to teacher, but all described using at least one RULER tool in their practice. The most frequently used tool was the Mood Meter, followed by the Charter, then the Meta-Moment, and the least used was the Blueprint.

Of the four RULER tools, the Mood Meter is the simplest to use. The colored quadrants are easy to refer to, and students and teachers in all grades can use it. Teachers described how they adapted it to their practice, which included using the individual digital version, a hard copy posted on a classroom wall, or containers that painted the colors of the Mood Meter.

The Charter was perceived to be an effective tool when used regularly. It serves as an agreement between members of a community about how they want to feel and what action steps should happen to achieve these feelings at school. Although teachers had training on how to create and use a Charter, it was not used in many classrooms.

Theme 2: There are Challenges to RULER Implementation

Despite the successes already experienced with RULER and SEL at the school, there were challenges to RULER implementation. The following subthemes emerged from the data: (a) Teachers who use RULER need a clearer picture of what is required of them, (b) There needs to be continued training in the approach, (c) Teachers need more developmentally appropriate RULER resources, and (d) Teachers are not sure how RULER helps manage student behavior.

Teachers Who Use RULER Need a Clearer Picture of What Is Required of Them.

Despite regular RULER professional development sessions in the years prior to the study, the teachers who used RULER were concerned they were not implementing it correctly or their RULER practices were inadequate. This relates to the training teachers received. As chair of the SEL/RULER committee, I encouraged teachers to use a range of strategies to strengthen students' socioemotional competence, and not only RULER tools. RULER provided a helpful framework for teachers, but teachers came to the classroom with their own strategies and skill sets. It was important for me to recognize these strategies and honor the teachers' experience and practice. As such, the training focused not only on RULER but also on other SEL strategies.

The Need for Continued Training in the Approach. St. ABC adopted the RULER approach in 2019, just before the COVID-19 global pandemic necessitated remote instruction. At this stage, the school was in the early stages of RULER implementation. Teachers received

training in the approach and were beginning to implement some of the strategies and use the tools as the school was considering the move to online learning. Once the decision was made to begin remote instruction, teachers, staff, and administrators pivoted within 3 days to teaching via Zoom. Staff and faculty training in the RULER approach did not continue at this time.

When the school returned to on-campus instruction months later, RULER and SEL were topics for professional development. However, the preparation that new faculty and staff received was not as thorough as that of the first cohort of educators. The result was evident in the interview and survey data, which showed four distinct groups of educator involvement. Some used RULER regularly and adapted the tools to their practice, some used it infrequently and expressed uncertainty in adapting the approach, some new to the school and were supportive of SEL but were not trained in RULER, and some trained in RULER but did not use the approach.

Just under half of the survey respondents had worked at the school for 2 years or less. These educators were not present during the initial phase of RULER implementation, and did not receive the same training as those who were at St. ABC during the initial phase of implementation 3 years prior to this study. Subsequent training was minimal, with only one session in the weeks before the school year began in the Fall. Teachers and staff who were new to the school received very little RULER professional development.

It is notable that there were teachers who received training when RULER was first introduced, who went on to use it in their classrooms, but then described being uncertain about how to use the tools. They expressed concern about not using the Mood Meter every day or not having a full grasp of RULER. Despite regular professional development on the approach, there were still gaps in understanding.

The Need for More Developmentally Appropriate RULER Resources. Data from teacher interviews and survey results described teachers wanting developmentally appropriate resources to use in their classrooms. Some RULER tools were not accessible for younger students. Some teachers adapted the RULER tools for their practice, but for many the format of the tools proved a barrier to their use. For more teachers to use RULER in the future, it will be helpful to create a resource of materials for each grade level that teachers can access easily.

Teachers Are Unsure How RULER Helps Manage Student Behavior. Data from teacher and student interviews, the teacher survey, and school documents (e.g., meeting minutes; detention notices; faculty, advisory board, and parent board meetings; principal's newsletters) indicated school-wide concern about student behavior. Teachers and administration noted, since resuming on-campus instruction, students struggled to meet the school's behavioral expectations and reintegrate in the traditional learning environment. There has been early research describing the student experience since schools returned to on-campus instruction (Minkos & Gelbar, 2021; Pisano et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021). This research and anecdotal evidence has described the challenges for students of the extended school closings during the COVID-19 global pandemic and resulting academic and socioemotional difficulties on returning to school. Some teachers perceived RULER focused too much on emotions and not enough on student accountability, and conversely, others believed there should be more discussion about the causes of students' challenging behavior. The foundations of classroom management rely upon positive teacher–student relationships that support student self-regulation, school connectedness, and recognize students' individual characteristics (Alderman et al., 2011; Martin et al., 2016; Rathmann et al., 2018). As an initiative designed to modify classroom social interactions to create a supportive,

engaging climate RULER is well-suited to enhance classroom management strategies (Rivers et al., 2019).

Theme 3: RULER Should be Shared With Families

The final stage of RULER implementation involves including school families and providing strategies for developing all family members' social and emotional competencies outside the school setting. The strength of a schoolwide SEL approach is the shared language used by all members of the school community (Scanfield et al., 2018). Data from teacher interviews and survey results indicated family knowledge of RULER would be beneficial to students and parents. Teachers believed use of the Mood Meter and Charter elicited discussions in class that could be followed-up on at home if parents also had access to these tools.

In summary, adult respondents believed that SEL was an important factor in student well-being. RULER use was evident throughout the school, but the challenges to school- and community-wide implementation rendered it less effective than the developers intended. The next section describes the themes and conclusions as they relate to second research question, which focused on students' perceptions of SEL and the RULER approach at St. ABC.

Research Question 2

What are student perceptions of the implementation of social-emotional learning with a specific focus on the RULER approach?

I conducted semistructured one-on-one interviews with four elementary students and two middle school students. Four key themes emerged from the data on student perceptions of the implementation of SEL with an emphasis on the RULER approach: (a) The School Environment Supports the Development of Students' Social-Emotional Competencies, (b) Students Do Not

Have a Clear Understanding of What Social-Emotional Learning Is, (c) Students Are Familiar With Some of the RULER Tools, and (d) Students Value When Teachers Have Behavioral Expectations in Class and Follow Them Consistently. In the following section, I summarize the findings as they related to student perceptions of SEL and RULER implementation at St. ABC school.

Theme 1: The School Environment Supports the Development of Students' Social-Emotional Competencies

A positive school climate serves to promote students' social-emotional growth (Cohen et al., 2009; Hemmelgarn et al., 2006; Humphrey, 2013; Owens & Valesky, 2022). In interviews students consistently referred to feeling supported and cared-for by teachers at St. ABC and believed they have students' best interests at heart. Students at both the elementary and middle school level expressed their teachers played an important part in their academic and social-emotional development. For a social-emotional program or approach to be successful, the school climate, and the culture of change must support student well-being (Anderson, 1991; Schlund et al., 2020).

Theme 2: Students Do Not Have a Clear Understanding of Social-Emotional Learning

Data from student interviews showed, while students felt supported by teachers and believed that showing respect for others in their school community was important, they did not understand the term SEL. Shared language among all members of the school community enhances collaboration and communication and reinforces the message of SEL by deepening the community's understanding of the goals and expectations around the concept (Scanfield et al., 2018; Thomas & McDonagh, 2013).

Theme 3: Students Are Familiar With Some RULER Tools

Data collected from student interviews and classroom and campus walkthroughs showed evidence of student familiarity with two of the tools: the Mood Meter and the Charter. When asked about Mood Meter use in their classrooms, all students described their teachers using it in class. During a campus walkthrough, I heard a teacher describe a conversation with a student who said they felt “in the Blue” because they were tardy to school. Students were familiar with the Charter as they had input into creating their own class Charters that were on display in classrooms. Of the four RULER tools, the Mood Meter is the most recognizable, and easiest to use. Students may plot their emotions or mood on a digital Mood Meter or refer to one that is posted in their classroom. The Charter was used in some classrooms, but teachers shared it was not as easy to create and continue to use. The students I interviewed were not familiar with the Meta-Moment or the Blueprint as teachers had not used the RULER version of these tools even though they used strategies based on similar concepts. The data indicated training in the use of the tools must be explicit and ongoing to be effective, and St. ABC teachers were not given that level of training (Brackett et al., 2019).

Theme 4: Students Value When Teachers Have Behavioral Expectations of the Students and Follow Them Consistently

Students and teachers acknowledged the benefits of SEL but indicated that structure, boundaries, and fair and just rules and consequences are also important. The data pointed to students wanting clear and consistent expectations from their teachers. An effective learning environment, which allows teachers to focus on relevant teaching material, is characterized by three elements: clear and high expectations, consistency, and strong relationships (Hulac &

Briesch, 2017; Martin et al., 2016; Whitaker et al., 2018). Research has shown the positive effects of effective classroom management on student behavior and academic outcomes (Dobbs-Oates et al., 2011; Hutchings et al., 2013). When teachers incorporate RULER strategies into their routines, the strategies positively impact classroom climate by helping students develop positive relationships and autonomy through sound decision-making skills (Brackett et al., 2019). The data I collected during my classroom walkthroughs did not show explicit use of RULER tools but there was evidence of student autonomy in the activities they chose and tasks they completed. Teacher–student interactions were positive, and teachers were consistently supportive of students by addressing their concerns, offering advice, and explaining their classroom expectations. Campus walkthroughs did not offer evidence of RULER tools in use. I overheard a conversation between two middle school teachers about inconsistent follow-through when school rules were not observed by students.

Discussion

This study sought to determine educator and student perceptions of the implementation of SEL and RULER in a DK–8 school. The study demonstrates that to integrate an evidence-based practice such as a SEL approach into the fabric of a school is a multifaceted procedure. The process requires a clear plan of action and an understanding of the process of implementation. In this section, I discuss the historical context of this study, the theoretical framework underlying the study, and the major themes as they pertain to the research questions.

Historical Context

In January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO, n.d.-a) reported that Chinese authorities determined that an outbreak of pneumonia cases in Wuhan, China, was caused by a

novel coronavirus, later named COVID-19. As the number of confirmed worldwide COVID-19 cases grew, on March 11, 2020, WHO characterized COVID-19 as a pandemic (WHO, n.d.-a). As a result, private and public schools across the United States began to close in response to the spread of COVID-19. This study was conducted in the 2022–2023 school year and although students and staff had returned to on-campus instruction at this stage, the impact of the pandemic was still evident.

St. ABC had begun to implement SEL and the RULER approach in August 2019. Faculty and staff received training on the RULER tools and began to use them in their classroom practice. However, the SEL committee decided to delay further training in the RULER approach as the teachers faced many new demands and challenges as they adjusted to virtual instruction at first, and later, to hybrid instruction. Beginning in January 2021, students at each grade level were placed in cohorts and gradually began to participate in a hybrid schedule being on campus 2 days a week. The document review I conducted included plans and schedules for hybrid instruction. Teachers developed detailed schedules for students at home, with lesson times, Zoom links, links to classwork, homework, enrichment, support, and extra-curricular activities. Teachers also created plans for on-campus lessons, which required different strategies and materials to virtual lessons. Review of faculty meeting minutes showed teachers and staff faced challenges during hybrid instruction that included incorporating new technology, creating new approaches to planning, instruction, and assessment, ensuring student engagement, meeting parent expectations, and concerns for their own health.

By May 2021, all students, faculty, and staff had returned to campus. Although virtual and hybrid instruction had ended, there was evidence from faculty meeting notes and principals’

weekly emails that teaching conditions were not optimal. Reviews of the principal's weekly emails indicated that COVID-19 mitigation policies included social distancing, mask-wearing, plexiglass barriers around teachers' and students' desks, and weekly school-wide on-campus COVID-19 testing. Faculty and staff meetings were conducted virtually.

Successful implementation of initiatives requires ongoing support and focus on the initiative. SEL and RULER had the potential to be of benefit to students, educators, and families during the months of virtual and hybrid instruction. Unfortunately, attention and effort were diverted away from RULER and implementation stalled because of the pressing day-to-day challenges educators faced at this time.

Connection to the Conceptual Framework

The framework supporting this study combined elements of the implementation stages and the indicators of systemic implementation frameworks to create a single framework to determine the level and integration of SEL and RULER practices in the study setting (CASEL, n.d.-a; National Implementation Research Network [NIRN], 2023).

The implementation framework describes four discernable stages of implementation: (a) Exploration, which involves assessing the needs of the focus population and determining the best program or practice; (b) Installation of the program or practice; (c) Initial implementation, when practitioners begin to use the program or practice, and data inform continuous improvement; and (d) Full implementation, when staff use the program or practice successfully and there is evidence of improved outcomes (NIRN, 2023). The adapted indicators of systemic implementation framework examined how four of the indicators manifested in the school, with specific reference to the RULER approach. The indicators are (a) explicit SEL instruction, (b)

SEL integrated with academic instruction, (c) supportive school and classroom climates, and (d) systems for continuous improvement (CASEL, n.d.-a).

Findings indicated the school was between the installation stage and initial implementation stage of implementation as determined by the National Implementation Research Network (NIRN, 2023) implementation stages framework. Two of the four indicators of the systemic implementation framework were well-represented in the school: supportive classroom climate and systems for continuous improvement. Two indicators were present but not strongly represented: explicit SEL instruction and SEL integrated with academic instruction.

After the initial exploration phase, when the SEL committee assessed the needs of the school community to determine which social-emotional program to implement, the school adopted the RULER approach and began to train teachers. This moved implementation into the initial implementation phase, in which teachers began to use the approach. The committee used data from classroom and campus observations and discussions with teachers to increase RULER use in the school.

Data from classroom and campus walkthroughs showed the following indicators were present as evidence of school wide SEL implementation: the school environment and classrooms provided supportive climates, and systems in place for continuous improvement of SEL. The indicators not present were explicit SEL instruction in classrooms; and SEL was not integrated into academic instruction. Teachers did not explicitly teach about SEL in their lessons, nor did they use the term “social-emotional learning.” They did, however, offer strategies to promote socioemotional competencies (e.g., calming techniques) and ways to get along with classmates.

Recommendations

The themes that emerged from my research at St. ABC school supported the findings in the literature on the implementation phases (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Evans et al., 2015; Fixsen et al., 2005; Kress & Elias, 2006; Wandersman et al., 2008; Zins et al., 2007). Successes and challenges in SEL and RULER implementation at St. ABC school connected to four critical prerequisites in the implementation process. In areas where students and teachers perceived SEL and RULER to be useful, it emerged that implementation steps were followed. When perceptions of SEL or RULER were negative, or participants had no opinion, core implementation requirements were not present. What follows in this section are recommendations for public and Catholic school leaders, teachers, and the developers of the RULER approach. The recommendations are based on my research findings at St. ABC school, which are aligned with implementation research. Four actions must occur to facilitate systemic implementation: (a) building of foundational support and planning, (B) strengthening of adult knowledge of social and emotional learning, (c) promotion of SEL for students, and (d) ensuring that continuous improvement takes place (CASEL, n.d.-a).

Recommendations for School Leaders

From the outset, administrators must recognize they act as social change agents by bringing SEL into their schools to create an environment that elevates the voices of teachers, staff, students, and families (Jagers et al., 2019; Shields, 2010). This section provides recommendations for public and Catholic school leaders who seek to bring SEL into their schools, who plan to implement the RULER approach, or who are at the implementation stage of

the approach. The suggestions are also pertinent to the implementation of any behavioral or social-emotional initiative in a school community.

Prior to Implementation

Focus on Foundational Support and Planning. To begin, share the vision for SEL with the leadership group and create buy-in. Implementation of an SEL initiative will only progress with the full support and participation of school administration. Leaders with vision support the process by focusing on the desired outcomes of the initiative. In the case of RULER and SEL implementation, school leaders will help to keep the multistep process of implementing these on track. School policy must incorporate language and procedures around SEL. After leadership buy-in, a representative team should be developed. To foster support for the initiative all stakeholders in the school community must be represented and consulted. The team must explore why implementing an SEL initiative is necessary and bring the findings of the research to the community.

Choose a Program or Approach. The team should investigate potential programs to determine one that reflects the community's collective values, priorities, and climate. Climate refers to total environment in a school building, such as the physical factors, the social dimension, and the organizational and administrative structures of the school (Owens & Valesky, 2022). There are many SEL curricular options from which to choose, as different programs target different skill approaching SEL in a variety of ways. To narrow down program choices, determine the specific needs and interests of the community, who the program will serve, implementation cost, support offered by developers, and options to visit other sites using the initiative. Be aware, however, that to address the reasons for the initiative, a multifaceted

approach may be needed. During implementation other needs may emerge that could require additional initiatives or programs be implemented within the community.

Seek Advice From Those Knowledgeable About Implementation of Educational Initiatives. The team must understand how the implementation process works and that inherent in the process are challenges and pitfalls common to all initiatives. This knowledge and how to manage the challenges will be helpful as implementation enters different stages.

Decide if Additional Team Members Should be Recruited. If so, they should go through an on-boarding process. The resulting team will take the school through initial implementation and so must be strongly representative of all stakeholders.

Consider Creating Specific SEL Coaching Positions in the School. Dedicated coaches would work with teachers and students to support the implementation of the SEL initiative by training teachers and modeling SEL strategies in classrooms.

Create an Implementation Plan. The plan must include a timeline of how the initiative will unfold, steps to monitor implementation and strategies to address challenges or adaptations to the program. With respect to the RULER approach, the team should have a clear understanding of who is expected to use the approach and how to problem solve if this does not happen.

Strengthen Adult Knowledge of Social and Emotional Learning. It is best to build capacity for SEL by providing teacher, staff, and parent training in the theory of SEL. Include how it supports student and adult well-being through collaboration and trust-building, the close relationship between the quality of the learning environment and student academic achievement

and socioemotional health, and how it ties into the school's values, mission statement and philosophy (Bavarian et al., 2013; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2002; Thapa et al., 2013).

During Implementation

Promote SEL for Students. Remind teachers and staff of the value of a schoolwide SEL initiative. With respect to RULER, the Anchor tools are used at every grade level, with some adaptations, and this provides the community with a shared experience and common language. When adults use this language around socioemotional competencies it provides students with meaningful and specific tools for dialogue and builds their conceptual understanding of SEL.

Focus on a Continuous Improvement Cycle. Once the foundational support and planning for SEL have occurred and implementation has begun, the improvement cycle begins.

Expect Setbacks. Explain to stakeholders that implementation is not linear but a continuous open-ended process of adapting to, and learning about, new practices and structures. It can take years to achieve full implementation (By, 2005; Fixsen et al., 2009). Setbacks are normal and to be expected. An organization may go from full implementation of an initiative to initial implementation if there is substantial staff turnover for example. It is possible that schools that initiated new programs just before the COVID-19 global pandemic struck have suffered setbacks in their implementation efforts.

Target Professional Development. From the start of implementation, training should be personalized to support educators' use of RULER. Through training that meets them where they are in their implementation and teaching assignments teachers and staff should learn that RULER is adaptable and relevant to their practice. For example, recently hired faculty and staff will receive different training from those who were part of the initial implementation. Middle-

school teachers should have professional development that targets the specific socioemotional and academic needs of middle-school students. Kindergarten English language arts teachers, for example, would need different strategies from middle-school math teachers and staff.

Use Anchor Tools to Build Classroom Climate. An element of personalizing RULER for teachers is showing them how the tools can be adapted to their own practice. When practitioners see value in SEL and RULER as supporting their practice, they are more likely to implement the strategies (Connelly et al., 2007). The tools can help build a positive climate and support current classroom management techniques. For example, if the Blueprint presented in the RULER materials is not appropriate for helping young children resolve interpersonal conflict, teachers can reword it to meet the students' needs. Or a teacher might consider offering a different form of Mood Meter on a given day, dependent on the subject being taught or the developmental level of the students. Teachers must be encouraged to adapt the tools and use whatever works for their students. When SEL and RULER are woven into the daily routines and instructional practices, classroom management becomes restorative rather than punitive. Students and teachers work together to build trusting relationships and improve their understanding of social interactions (Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018). Far from dismissing behavioral concerns or when harm has occurred, SEL and RULER practices create environments conducive to learning from mistakes, teaching new ways of communicating and creating high expectations.

Identify Your Champions. Recognize the early-adopters, and the practitioners who use SEL and RULER in their regular routines. Publicize their successes and enlist them to train others. Their role will help integrate the initiative at ground-level. Through distributed leadership they act as change agents and help to build the shared vision of SEL in the school (Canterino et

al., 2020; Gronn, 2002). Students may also be change agents and should be offered opportunities to lead SEL activities.

Have SEL and RULER Resources Readily Available. Although teachers and staff might share resources informally with each other, a well-publicized access point should exist for administrators, teachers, staff, students, parents, and caregivers where they can find developmentally appropriate RULER tools and other SEL information. Materials may include teacher-sourced and teacher-created activities. Present materials in a way that is accessible to the community. If the school uses a learning management system, they should dedicate a section to RULER and SEL resources.

Include Parents and Caregivers. Including families in SEL and the RULER approach is crucial to further school-wide implementation. Sharing common language and frameworks with families builds upon the socioemotional competencies developing in the classroom and fosters a school climate of trust and collaboration between community groups.

Monitor Implementation. The SEL/RULER team should be well-versed in the stages of implementation and should use an implementation stages framework to determine next steps in the process. Ongoing dialogue between the team and stakeholder groups will identify strengths and difficulties in implementation. Implementation of any program or approach, including RULER is not a “one-and-done” procedure. Training for educators, students, and families must be ongoing.

Collaborate With Another School Site. In the case of RULER, build a collaborative relationship with another RULER school in the same geographical area and have on-site visits between the schools.

The following recommendations are specifically for leaders in a Catholic school context while the suggestions above apply equally to public, and Catholic school leaders.

Recommendations for Catholic School Leaders

Pope John Paul II described the role of Catholic education as to form Christ in the lives of others, with schools being “for the human person and of human persons” (Congregation for Catholic Education [CCE], 1998, n. 9). As such, Catholic schools are committed to developing the whole child in an environment where students feel safe to learn about themselves, where they learn to make conscious life choices and where they develop a social consciousness to meet the needs of others (CCE, 2007). SEL and RULER provide Catholic school leaders and teachers with tools to facilitate student growth and build community.

Include Catholic Social Teachings in SEL and RULER Implementation

Catholic schools educate the whole child by teaching students to respect and care for others, and to acknowledge the dignity of others, their rights, and to care for creation. The RULER approach is well-suited to enhance these teachings by building upon the socioemotional concepts of self-awareness, self-control, and interpersonal skills that serve the whole child and the community. The Anchor tools adapt easily to include the teachings of the church. If a class decided to include a calming strategy in their Charter, one of those could be prayer. The Mood Meter can be adapted to include words that reflect a prayerful state. When reflecting on their best self while using the Meta-Moment tool, teachers could remind students about what the Bible teaches about using talents.

Include SEL Language in the Mission, Vision, Philosophy, and Schoolwide Learning Expectations

The soft skills that underpin RULER and SEL lend themselves to religion lessons. However, for the approach to be adopted school-wide they should be integrated into all subjects and areas of school life. Religion teachers should not be the sole implementers of the strategies. Therefore, to better integrate SEL and RULER, individuals should incorporate the vocabulary around social-emotional competencies into school documents and policies. This will center SEL and RULER but not diminish the Catholic identity of the school.

Choose an SEL Curriculum Developed for Catholic Schools

RULER is an approach rather than a set curriculum. It may be argued that Catholic schools already have an approach or a framework—their Catholic identity founded upon Gospel values and Catholic social teachings. The church describes Catholic schools as places of “integral education of the human person . . . where Christ is the foundation” (CCE, 1998, n. 4). Implementing a curriculum created specifically for Catholic schools provides leaders a rationale to incorporate SEL into the school day as it is integrated into the philosophy, mission, and vision of Catholic education. This may increase teacher buy-in as SEL is then integral to the Catholic school experience.

Work in Partnership With Other Catholic Schools in the Diocese

Inter-school partnerships, formal or informal, may be an effective avenue to successful implementation of SEL, RULER, or another initiative. The collaborative relationship between schools brings parties together to share expertise, human and material resources, and conversation around successes and challenges of implementation (Atkinson et al., 2007).

Recommendations for RULER Developers

Support Schools' Implementation Teams

Implementation team training at the Yale Center of Emotional Intelligence (2022) creates a path for school implementation of the RULER approach. It trains the trainer who then teach educators at their school. However, the team must receive ongoing, personalized support if it is to overcome challenges to implementation.

Be Transparent About the Strengths and Difficulties of the Initiative

RULER's success depends on the whole school adopting the approach, and the team must be aware of possible challenges to that process. RULER aims to increase the emotional intelligence and build social-emotional competencies of the school community and as such requires supports and structures to be in place to be successful. RULER offers resources that address the implementation process but unless team members understand how important each stage is in the process, they may not use the resources effectively.

Provide Developmentally Appropriate Resources

Teachers may adapt RULER tools to their practice. However, this adds one more task to their already impacted workload and another step in the implementation process. The likelihood that they will use the strategies decreases. Offering a wide range of easily accessible, developmentally appropriate materials to administrators, SEL teams, and teachers to simplifies implementation.

Support RULER Schools

On-the-ground support should be readily available. The Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence (2022) is based on the East Coast of the United States but schools across the country

use RULER. Implementation teams should have an easily accessible network of support in their city or geographical region. RULER implementation experts should be accessible to practitioners and those who use RULER should be part of a RULER school's network. This partnership should be available from the first implementers' training at Yale and should continue throughout all the stages of implementation.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, I interviewed only four teachers and six students at St. ABC school. However, I attempted to triangulate the data by gathering additional data from an educator survey, campus and classroom walkthroughs, and document analysis to validate my findings.

A second limitation was the possibility that educators who chose to participate in the anonymous survey were invested in SEL and RULER use in their practice. Their responses might have skewed the data. By making the survey anonymous, I hoped that more teachers and staff would respond, including those who do not use SEL or RULER.

A third limitation was my positionality in the school. As administrator and chair of the SEL committee, and as someone who helped research and implement the RULER approach, I might have unknowingly influenced participants' responses.

Another limitation was my choice of educator interviewees. I interviewed teachers who had used the RULER approach in previous years to understand their perceptions of how implementation was proceeding at the school. I did not, therefore, obtain a full picture of RULER implementation among the educators at St. ABC elementary school.

Further Research

Additional studies using a larger sample size might offer additional insights to school wide implementation of an SEL initiative. A mixed-methods study would add to the findings of this study as research into the level of implementation of RULER that brings about positive effects on (a) the school climate, (b) student sense of well-being, (c) student academic achievement, and (d) levels of bullying in a school.

Research on the longitudinal effects of RULER on students' school experience over time would offer elementary school leaders and implementation teams insight into the efficacy of the approach before they choose an SEL initiative. This research would also be useful to high school leaders whose students were exposed to RULER in elementary school and the leaders are deciding on an SEL initiative for their school.

Further study is needed on the influence of SEL on students of color and students with diverse learning needs. The field of SEL would benefit from a study that identifies which SEL programs or approaches are culturally relevant and sustaining for minoritized and marginalized students. A comparative study of the level of RULER implementation in schools who adopted the approach in the months just prior to the COVID-19 global pandemic could determine what impact the pandemic had on implementation and what school characteristics facilitated or hindered implementation.

A qualitative study could be developed to understand the effects of out-of-school use of RULER on in-school student socioemotional competencies. Depending on the results, the information could be used by school leaders and teachers to promote out-of-school, and family use of RULER. As an approach rather than a set of scripted lessons, RULER implementation is a

multistep process that requires support from all stakeholders. Further studies might focus on how best to prepare stakeholders, and in particular, teachers and staff, for implementation of RULER. Research comparing the implementation process and program support of different SEL programs may be helpful to school leaders and implementation teams before they decide on adopting an initiative.

This study focused on implementation of SEL and RULER at one Catholic DK-8 school. Future research could explore implementation at other Catholic K-8 schools and Catholic high schools. Of potential interest to Catholic school leaders and teachers would be a qualitative study on the integration of Catholic social teachings and RULER. Additional mixed method studies could investigate the effects of RULER on student engagement in, and carrying out of, Catholic social teachings. In similar vein, a study comparing the impact of a SEL program created specifically for Catholic schools and that of a nonreligious SEL program would be of value to school leaders, implementation teams, and teachers in Catholic schools.

Conclusion

This mixed-methods study set out to understand educator and student perceptions of the implementation of SEL and the RULER approach in a DK–8 Catholic school. The COVID-19 global pandemic impacted how implementation progressed and brought to light several issues that school leaders and implementation teams should consider when embarking on a school-wide initiative that requires support from all stakeholders. These include having a sound understanding of the nature of implementation, the steps needed prior to the start of the initiative, and the capacity of the community to provide the necessary time and resources to continue implementation.

I learned in this study that educators supported the use of SEL in their classrooms and implemented strategies they saw as helpful to students. However, use of RULER tools and strategies by teachers was not consistent for a variety of reasons ranging from a perception the tools were not developmentally appropriate, to teachers not having had sufficient training or not seeing the benefit in their practice. I learned from students that they value the relationships they have with their teachers, and believe their teachers support their academic and socioemotional development. They also value when behavioral expectations are clearly defined and followed equitably. It was evident implementing an initiative on a school-wide level requires ongoing planning, evaluating, and adjusting strategies and goals. It was also evident the COVID-19 global pandemic created additional barriers to implementation by disrupting the lives of every member of the school community.

Despite implementation setbacks during the pandemic, there was evidence that introducing RULER to the school has increased awareness of the benefits of SEL in the community. Moving forward, school leadership and the implementation team should revise the initial implementation plan, consult an implementation framework, and develop an ongoing assessment system to build upon what already exists in their plan.

APPENDIX A

INTRODUCTION TO SURVEY LETTER TO ADMINISTRATION, TEACHERS, AND TEACHING STAFF

October 2022

Hello colleagues,

As some of you might know, I am a doctoral student at Loyola Marymount University. I am conducting a research study to learn more about educator and student experiences and perceptions of social-emotional learning, with a specific focus on the RULER approach. I am also interested in learning what our next steps should be to have SEL implemented school-wide. Schools play such an important role in supporting students' social and emotional development!

I invite you to take this survey so that I can gain a better understanding of your experiences and perceptions of social and emotional learning (SEL) as a staff member.

As a reminder, this is what social and emotional learning is, and also RULER:

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which young people and adults acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.


RULER is one of the ways we teach about social-emotional learning. RULER stands for Recognizing our and others' emotions, Understanding the emotions, Labeling or naming them, Expressing them, and Regulating or controlling our feelings when we need to. One of the tools we use in RULER is the Class Charter which helps us understand how we and others want to feel at school. We also use another tool, the Mood Meter, to help us recognize and label our emotions.

The survey should take approximately 10 minutes. Your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time. Your privacy is very important to me and so your responses will be anonymous. The survey will not collect your email address. Even though the survey is anonymous and participation is voluntary, you still might feel pressure or obligation to participate in the study because of my role as administrator and chair of the SEL committee. I have no way of knowing who has begun the survey, completed it, or who has not opened it. I will not talk about it to anyone on campus and will not refer to it at all. I will never ask anyone if they have taken it. If you begin it, you may stop at any time and choose not to complete it. If you have questions and approach me either in person or by email, I will gladly talk with you, but will never ask you if you have taken the survey or what your responses were.

The demographic data that you are asked to complete at the beginning of the survey will not identify you. It is designed to identify broad categories of teachers and staff. Having said that, if any questions cause you unease or discomfort, you are not obliged to answer them.

Your involvement in the study, data collected and study results will in no way affect your employment status.

The purpose of the survey is to gather information that will provide a general overview of the implementation of SEL and RULER in our school. The data gathered from the survey in conjunction with other information obtained during the study may prove useful for improving SEL and RULER implementation in our school and other Catholic elementary schools.

If you have any questions about the survey, please reach out to me at 

Sincerely,

Dorothy Balfe

APPENDIX B

ADMINISTRATION, TEACHERS, AND TEACHING STAFF SURVEY

School-based Staff Survey on Schoolwide SEL Implementation

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

[Redacted]

[Redacted] (not shared) [Switch account](#) [Draft restored](#)

* Required

What grade level do you teach? *

Elementary (DK through 4th grade)

Middle School (5th grade through 8th grade)

I teach multiple grade levels

How many years have you worked at this school? *

0 - 2 years ▼

Your knowledge of social and emotional learning (SEL) and RULER *

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Not sure
There is a clear vision for academic, social, and emotional learning at my school.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The culture at my school supports SEL.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Teachers participate in a professional learning community (small collaborative groups of educators) to support students' social and emotional competence.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My school provides me with sufficient training to implement SEL	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My school provides me with sufficient training on how to use the RULER approach in my classroom.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have enough time to implement the RULER approach in my classroom.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

My school provides me with sufficient training on how to use the RULER approach in my classroom.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have enough time to implement the RULER approach in my classroom.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Using SEL and RULER in your classroom *

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not sure
Teachers at my school are expected to promote the social and emotional development of all students.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Students feel comfortable talking to adults in the school about personal problems.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel confident in my ability to implement SEL strategies that are not RULER strategies in my classroom.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel confident in my ability to implement the RULER approach in my classroom.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

How often do you use SEL and RULER tools? *

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently
Please indicate how often you use SEL strategies that are not RULER tools and strategies in your classroom.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Please indicate how often you use RULER tools and strategies in your classroom.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

What changes, if any, have you seen at the school because of our work with SEL? *

Your answer

What changes, if any, have you seen at the school because of our work with RULER? *

Your answer

What recommendations do you have for the future integration of SEL in our school? *

Your answer

What recommendations do you have for the future integration of RULER in our school? *

Your answer

Thank you for taking the survey!

APPENDIX C

INVITATION TO TEACHERS TO TAKE PART IN SEMISTRUCTURED ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS

Dear (name of teacher),

As you may know I am a doctoral student at Loyola Marymount University. I am conducting a research study to learn more about educator and student experiences and perceptions of social-emotional learning (SEL), with a specific focus on the RULER approach. I am also interested in learning what our next steps should be to have SEL implemented school wide. Schools play such an important role in supporting students' social and emotional development!

What is Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)?

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is the process of developing self-awareness, self-management, and interpersonal skills that are vital for school, work, and life success. SEL can be a set aside classroom time, a specific curriculum, or an approach that is integrated throughout a school's policies, practices and programs.

What is the RULER approach?

RULER is one of the ways we teach about social-emotional learning. RULER stands for Recognizing our and others' emotions, Understanding the emotions, Labeling or naming them, Expressing them, and Regulating or controlling our feelings when we need to. One of the tools we use in RULER is the Class Charter which helps us understand how we and others want to feel at school. We also use another tool, the Mood Meter, to help us recognize and label our emotions.

I plan to conduct one one-on-one interviews with individual educators and students and would like to invite you to be a participant.

The interview will take no longer than one hour, at a time and place that is convenient to you.

Your participation in this study and interview process is entirely voluntary. You may stop or withdraw at any time. It is important that you know that anything you share in the interview will remain anonymous and you or the school will never be identified in any way in the study. Nothing you say in the interview will be held against you, either personally or professionally. There is no obligation whatsoever to participate in this study, and if you choose not to, there will be no consequences. I acknowledge that you may feel obligated or pressured to participate because I am an administrator at the school, and also chair of our SEL committee but please know that if you decide to participate or if you decline to participate it will have no bearing whatsoever on your professional or personal standing at the school. There is absolutely no

obligation for you to take part. If you choose not to, I will not ask you why, and will never refer to your decision. Your involvement in the study, data collected and study results will in no way affect your employment status.

If you are interested in participating in this study please contact me by (7 days after this letter is shared with potential participant).

[REDACTED]

Sincerely,

Dorothy Balfe

APPENDIX D

LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY INFORMED CONSENT SEMISTRUCTURED ONE-ON-ONE EDUCATOR INTERVIEW

TITLE: Student and Educator Perceptions of the Implementation of a Social-Emotional Learning Approach: A Mixed Methods Study of a Catholic School

INVESTIGATOR: Dorothy Balfe
Educational Leadership for Social Justice Program
School of Education
Loyola Marymount University
[REDACTED]

ADVISOR: (if applicable) Dr. Mary McCullough
Educational Leadership for Social Justice Program
School of Education
Loyola Marymount University
[REDACTED]

PURPOSE: You are being asked to participate in a research project that seeks to learn more about educator and student experiences and perceptions of social-emotional learning (SEL), with a specific focus on the RULER approach. You will be asked to complete one 60-minute one-on-one interview with me. The interview will take place at a time and location that is convenient to you and does not impact your teaching or extra-curricular schedule. During the discussion you will be asked about your experiences around implementing social-emotional learning and the RULER approach at school.

RULER is one of the ways we teach about social-emotional learning. RULER stands for Recognizing our and others' emotions, Understanding the emotions, Labeling or naming them, Expressing them, and Regulating or controlling our feelings when we need to. One of the tools we use in RULER is the Class Charter which helps us understand how we and others want to feel at school. We also use another tool, the Mood Meter, to help us recognize and label our emotions.

RISKS:

There are no known risks associated with this study. No sensitive information is being collected for this study. However, you might experience some discomfort, nervousness, or concerns about judgement given my role as administrator. Your involvement in the study, data collected and study results will in no way affect your employment status.

As a reminder, the purpose of this study is to help educators learn more about how they can successfully implement social-emotional learning and RULER in their school and there are no incorrect answers. None of the information will be shared with anyone.

BENEFITS:

The study will potentially help educators who are seeking to implement social-emotional learning and RULER in their classrooms. Information gathered from teachers and students about their experiences about social emotional learning and the RULER approach will help other educators as they use SEL practices in their schools and classrooms. This study will also contribute to the limited body of research on RULER and SEL implementation in Catholic elementary schools in the United States.

INCENTIVES:

You will receive no incentives for this study. Participation in the project will require no monetary cost to you.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

I will have sole access to the data.

Subjects will not be identifiable by name but I will retain certain identifiers – whether you are a teacher, teacher assistant or administrator, and the level you teach (elementary or middle school).

I will create a single handwritten form of participants' names, their pseudonyms and whether you are a teacher, teacher assistant or administrator, and the level you teach (elementary or middle school).

This form will be kept in a lock box in my residence and only I will have access to it. Once the exam board confirms the results of my dissertation, I will shred the form. Any subsequent data on my computer will only use pseudonyms of participants.

Consent forms will also be stored in a lock-box to which only I have access. For all audio recordings of semi-structured interviews, I will use a portable digital voice recorder and then will upload the audio files to my password-protected laptop computer for transcription. All research materials will remain under lock and key. When the research study ends, any identifying information

will be removed from the data, or it will be destroyed. All of the information you provide will be kept confidential.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW: Your participation in this study is *voluntary*. You may withdraw your consent to participate at any time without penalty. There will be no consequences of any kind if you withdraw from the study.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS: A summary of the results of this research will be supplied to you, at no cost, upon request. Please contact the principal investigator Dorothy Balfe at xxxxx@xxxxx or by phone at XXX-XXX-XXX to request a summary of the results. They will be available in approximately 4 months time, after the data gathering period which scheduled for September to November, 2022.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT: I have read the above statements and understand what is being asked of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, for any reason, without penalty. If the study design or use of the information is changed, I will be informed and my consent reobtained. On these terms, I certify that I am willing to participate in this research project.

I understand that if I have any further questions, comments or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may contact Dr. David Moffet, Chair, Institutional Review Board, Loyola Marymount University, 1 LMU Drive, Los Angeles, CA 90045-2659 or by email at [REDACTED]

Participant's Signature

Date

APPENDIX E

INVITATION TO PARENTS FOR CHILD TO TAKE PART IN SEMISTRUCTURED ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL (GRADES 1–3)

Dear (name of parent/legal guardian),

I am a faculty member of our school, and a doctoral student at Loyola Marymount University. I am conducting a research study to learn more about educator and student experiences and perceptions of social-emotional learning (SEL), with a specific focus on the RULER approach. I am also interested in learning what our next steps should be to have SEL implemented school-wide. Schools play such an important role in supporting students' social and emotional development!

What is Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)?

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is the process of developing self-awareness, self-management, and interpersonal skills that are vital for school, work, and life success. SEL can be a set aside classroom time, a specific curriculum, or an approach that is integrated throughout a school's policies, practices and programs.

RULER is one of the ways we teach about social-emotional learning. RULER stands for Recognizing our and others' emotions, Understanding the emotions, Labeling or naming them, Expressing them, and Regulating or controlling our feelings when we need to. One of the tools we use in RULER is the Class Charter which helps us understand how we and others want to feel at school. We also use another tool, the Mood Meter, to help us recognize and label our emotions.

I plan to conduct one-on-one interviews with individual students and would like to invite your child to be a participant. I chose to randomly select students from classes whose teachers were part of our SEL committee last school year 2021-2022.

The interview would take no longer than thirty minutes, at a time and place that is convenient to you and your child and that will not impact your child's instructional time or extra-curricular activities. The interview will take place off-campus to maintain their confidentiality.

Your child's participation in this study and interview process is voluntary. They may stop at any time and you may at any time withdraw your permission for your child to participate. It is very important that you know that no matter what you or your child decides to do, it will have no impact on your family's standing at the school. If you decide you do not want your child to participate, or if your child would prefer not to take part, there will be no impact or negative consequences for any family members. I am the only person who will know about any decision you make, and it will not impact

your child or family on a personal level or on a school or community level. All information you or your child shares with me will remain anonymous and will not be identifiable in any way.

If you and your child are interested in your child participating in this study please contact me at [REDACTED] or at my Loyola Marymount University email which is [REDACTED]

Sincerely,

Dorothy Balfe

APPENDIX F

INVITATION TO PARENTS FOR CHILD TO TAKE PART IN SEMISTRUCTURED ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS MIDDLE SCHOOL (GRADES 6–8)

Dear (name of parent/caregiver),

I am a faculty member of our school and also a doctoral student at Loyola Marymount University. I am conducting a research study to learn more about educator and student experiences and perceptions of social-emotional learning (SEL), with a specific focus on the RULER approach. I am also interested in learning what our next steps should be to have SEL implemented school-wide. Schools play such an important role in supporting students' social and emotional development!

What is Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)?

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is the process of developing self-awareness, self-management, and interpersonal skills that are vital for school, work, and life success. SEL can be a set aside classroom time, a specific curriculum, or an approach that is integrated throughout a school's policies, practices and programs.

What is RULER?

RULER is one of the ways we teach about social-emotional learning. RULER stands for Recognizing our and others' emotions, Understanding the emotions, Labeling or naming them, Expressing them, and Regulating or controlling our feelings when we need to. One of the tools we use in RULER is the Class Charter which helps us understand how we and others want to feel at school. We also use another tool, the Mood Meter, to help us recognize and label our emotions.

I plan to conduct confidential one-on-one interviews with individual students and would like to invite your child to be a participant. I chose to randomly select students from classes whose teachers were part of our SEL committee last school year 2021-2022. The interview would take no longer than forty-five minutes, at a time and place that is convenient to you and your child and that will not impact your child's instructional time or extra-curricular activities. The interview will take place off-campus to maintain your child's confidentiality.

Your child's participation in this study and interview process is voluntary. They may stop at any time and you may at any time withdraw your permission for your child to participate. It is very important that you know that no matter what you or your child decides to do, it will have no impact on your family's standing at the school. If you decide you do not want your child to participate, or if your child would prefer not to take part, there will be no impact or negative consequences for any family members. I am the only person who will know about any decision you make, and it will not impact

your child or family on a personal level or on a school or community level. All information you or your child shares with me will remain anonymous and will not be identifiable in any way.

If you and your child are interested in your child participating in this study please contact me at [REDACTED] or at my Loyola Marymount University email which is [REDACTED].

Sincerely,

Dorothy Balfe

APPENDIX G

LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY PARENT/GUARDIAN PERMISSION FORM

- TITLE:** Student and Educator Perceptions of the Implementation of a Social-Emotional Learning Approach: A Mixed Methods of a Catholic School
- INVESTIGATOR:** Dorothy Balfe
Educational Leadership for Social Justice Program
School of Education
Loyola Marymount University
[REDACTED]
- ADVISOR: (if applicable)** Dr. Mary McCullough
Educational Leadership for Social Justice Program
School of Education
Loyola Marymount University
[REDACTED]
- PURPOSE:** Your child is being asked to participate in a research project that seeks to learn more about educator and student experiences and perceptions of social-emotional learning (SEL), with a specific focus on the RULER approach.
Your child will be asked to complete one 30 - 45-minute one-on-one interview with me. The interview will take outside of school hours at a time that does not impact your child's academic or extra-curricular activities, and at a location that is convenient for you and your child. During the discussion your child will be asked about their experiences of social-emotional learning and the RULER approach at school.
- Social-emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which young people and adults acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.
- RULER is one of the ways we teach about social-emotional learning. RULER stands for Recognizing our and others' emotions,

Understanding the emotions, Labeling or naming them, Expressing them, and Regulating or controlling our feelings when we need to. One of the tools we use in RULER is the Class Charter which helps us understand how we and others want to feel at school. We also use another tool, the Mood Meter, to help us recognize and label our emotions.

RISKS:

There are no known risks associated with this study. No sensitive information is being collected for this study. However, your child might experience some discomfort, nervousness, or concerns about judgement given my role as administrator. I will remind your child that this study is to help teachers learn more about how they can help students feel happy and safe in school and that none of the information will be shared with anyone, other than their parents if their parents ask. I will assure your child there are no wrong answers to my questions.

BENEFITS:

The study will potentially help educators who are seeking to implement social-emotional learning in their classrooms. Information gathered from teachers and students about their experiences about social emotional learning and the RULER approach will help other educators as they use SEL practices in their schools and classrooms. This study will also contribute to the limited body of research on RULER and SEL implementation in Catholic elementary schools in the United States.

INCENTIVES:

Your child will receive no incentives for this study. Participation in the project will require no monetary cost to you or your child.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

I will have sole access to the data.

Subjects will not be identifiable by name but I will retain information about the age of the student and the general grade level of student (whether they are elementary-school students or middle-school students).

I will create a single handwritten form of participants' names, their pseudonyms, the age of the student and the general grade level of student (early or middle elementary, or middle school). This form will be kept in a lock box in my residence and only I will have access to it. Once the exam board confirms the results of my dissertation, I will shred the form. Any subsequent data on my computer will only use pseudonyms of participants.

Consent and assent forms will also be stored in a lock-box to which only I have access. For all audio recordings of semi-structured interviews, I will use a portable digital voice recorder and then will upload the audio files to my password-protected laptop computer for transcription. All consent and assent forms, audio recordings and transcripts will remain under lock and key until the exam board confirms the results of my dissertation. I will then shred the forms and transcripts, and delete audio recordings from any device on which they are stored.

All of the information you provide will be confidential. However, if we learn your child intends to harm him/herself or others, we must notify the authorities.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW: Your child’s participation in this study is *voluntary*. He or she may choose to withdraw at any time without penalty. You may withdraw your permission for your child to participate in this study. Withdrawal at any point will not influence any other services to which he or she may be otherwise entitled, his/her status in school or grade(s).

VOLUNTARY PERMISSION: I have read the above statements and understand what is being asked of my child. I understand that giving my permission is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my permission at any time, for any reason, without penalty to me or my child. I also understand that my child’s participation is voluntary, and he/she is free to withdraw assent to participate at any time. On these terms, I certify that I give permission for my child to participate in this research project.

_____ My child may participate in a one-on-one interview with Dorothy Balfe.

If you would prefer that there be NO audio recording of the interview, please place an X on below to indicate that you OPT OUT of the audio recording.

_____ I prefer that the interview with my child NOT be audio recorded.

I understand that should I have any concerns, comments or questions about my child’s Participation in this study, I may contact Dr. David Moffet, Chair, Institutional Review Board,

Loyola Marymount University, 1 LMU Drive, Los Angeles, Ca 90045-2659 or by email at



Parent/Guardian Signature

Date

APPENDIX H

LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY CHILD ASSENT FORM STUDENTS GRADES

1-3

Hi! You probably know that my name is Mrs. Balfe. Even though I work at our school, I am also a student at Loyola Marymount University.

I am doing a research study about how teachers can help students feel safe and happy at school. A research study is like a project and it's a way to learn more about something. Your parents have already given their permission for you to be part of this study, and now it's your turn to decide. What it means to be part of the study is that I ask you about 7 questions about some of the ways you feel safe and happy at school, and how your teachers help you and your friends feel this way.

While we are talking, I'll write some notes, and if you say it is fine, I'll also record my questions and your answers on my recording device to help me remember what we spoke about. I will be the only person who will listen to the recording, and when I've finished with the project, I'll delete everything you told me.

I will arrange a time with your parents when you and I can talk, and then I'll ask you those questions. It will take half an hour (about as long as snack time) but it won't happen during school time. You might feel a bit nervous or worried before we talk, or during our conversation, but I want you to know there are no wrong answers and that anything you tell me will be helpful information for me.

When I am finished speaking to people, and gathering all the other information I need, I will write a report about what I learned for my research study. A report is almost like a book. I will not write your name in my study and the only people who will know that it was you who answered my questions are me and your parents. No one will ever know that it is your information.

I will not tell anyone else about anything you say in this study unless I learn that you plan to hurt yourself or someone else.

You don't have to be in this study if you don't want to be. If you have any questions or decide to stop after we begin, that's ok. Just let me know, or your parents. No one will be upset or disappointed, and it won't affect your grades.

Before we begin, do you have any questions for me?

Okay, if you want to be in this study where I ask you some questions please write your name on the line on this page and I will write today's date.

Participant's Signature

Date

You can decide if you want me to record our conversation or not. If you DO NOT want me to record it, put an X on the line below. This will remind me NOT to record our conversation.

_____ I prefer that the interview NOT be recorded.

APPENDIX I

LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY CHILD ASSENT FORM GRADES 6–8

My name is Mrs. Balfe, and even though I work at our school, I am also a student at Loyola Marymount University. I am doing a project or study about how students and teachers feel about social-emotional learning and RULER in our school. Just a reminder in case you are not sure, RULER is one of the ways we teach about social-emotional learning. RULER stands for Recognizing our and others' emotions, Understanding the emotions, Labeling or naming them, Expressing them, and Regulating or controlling our feelings when we need to. One of the tools we use in RULER is the Class Charter which helps us understand how we and others want to feel at school. We also use another tool, the Mood Meter, to help us recognize and label our emotions.

Last year you learned about how to work together as a class. You also shared with your teacher and classmates how you feel at school, and also how you want to feel when you are at school. This is why I would like your help, if you want to participate. If you tell me you would like to answer some or all my questions, I will check with your parents to find a good time for you and me to talk.

It won't be during school time. It will just be you and me talking together and will take about 45 minutes. I will ask you about 7 questions about how your teachers have used social-emotional learning and RULER in your lessons, what you feel about it, and how we at school can do more to help students with their feelings and emotions. The only people who will know your answers are me and your parents, and I'll only tell them if they ask me what you said. I'll take notes as we talk, and with your permission, I'll also make an audio recording of the interview. I will be the only person who will listen to the recording, and when I've finished with the study, I'll delete everything on the recording device and shred all my notes about our conversation.

There is nothing dangerous about taking part in this study. You might feel a bit worried, or bored, or nervous, before we talk, or during our interview. I want you to know there are no wrong answers and anything you tell me will be helpful information for me about how schools can help students more with social-emotional learning and the RULER program.

I will not give you any money or prizes to participate in this study, but what I learn might help me help other teachers as they work with their students on feeling safe and happy at school.

I will write down your age and whether you are in elementary school or middle school when I do this study. I am the only person who will see this information. I will keep it all safely on my computer with a password and any other information will be stored in a locked box at my house. Only I have a key to that box. When I do my project and use the information you gave me, no one will ever know that it is your information. I won't write your name, your grade, your teacher's name, or your school. I will not tell anyone else about anything you say or do in this study unless I learn that you plan to hurt yourself or someone else.

I have your parents' permission for you to talk to me for my study. But you get to decide whether or not you want to be involved. If you decide to participate, you can stop at any time, and no one will be upset with you. You also won't get in trouble with your parents, or me if you decide to stop. Just let one of us know that you do not want to answer any questions and that will be fine.

Do you have any questions?

If you ever want to find out what I learn in this study, you or your parents can contact me at XXX-XXX-XXX or xxxx@xxxxxxx.

If you have any other questions, comments or concerns about the study or this form, you may contact Dr. David Moffet, Chair, Institutional Review Board, 1 LMU Drive, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, CA 90045-2659 [REDACTED]

If you want to be in this study, please sign your name on the line below, and write today's date.

Participant's Signature

Date

If you prefer that I DO NOT make an audio recording of the interview, please place an X on below to indicate that you OPT OUT of the audio recording.

_____ I prefer that the interview NOT be audio recorded.

APPENDIX J

INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS FOR SEMISTRUCTURED INTERVIEWS TEACHERS

I'm interested to find out what your thoughts are on social and emotional learning, what you have learned, and to get an understanding of where you are regarding SEL – I'm interested in two specific areas – the big picture of SEL in our school, and also the RULER approach.

1. Tell me what you know about Social and Emotional Learning.
2. Tell me about the preparation you have had for teaching SEL.
3. Tell me about how you teach about SEL in your classroom, and how often you teach about it.
4. Can tell me about the impact SEL has on your students.
 - a. Follow up: their interactions with you, each other, grades?
5. What do you think we need to do next in terms of promoting students social and emotional learning?
 - a. Follow up: What would you like the school to do next to support you as you teach SEL?
6. Can you tell me what you know about the RULER approach?
7. How comfortable do you feel using the RULER in your classroom?
8. Do you use the Charter, the Mood Meter, the Meta-Moment or the Blueprint in class?
9. What do you think we need to do next in terms of promoting the RULER approach?
 - a. Follow up: What would you like the school to do next to support you as you use RULER?

APPENDIX K

SEMISTRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS (GRADES 1–3)

1. Can you tell me why we talk about our feelings?
2. Can you tell me what you have learned about how to get along with your friends and other people in our school?
3. Tell me about some of the ways your teachers help you and your classmates get along.
4. Do your teachers often ask about how you are feeling?
 - a. Tell me more about how they do that?
5. Do they often help you and your friends when you are not getting along?
 - a. Tell me more about how they help you.
6. Can you think of ways the teachers can help you and other children in the school when you feel sad or down?
7. Do your teachers use the Charter, the Moodmeter, the Meta-Moment or the Blueprint in class?
8. What else can teachers do to make school a place where you feel you can learn and grow?

APPENDIX L

SEMISTRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

(GRADES 6–8)

I'm interested in how we're doing with SEL in our classrooms and our school, and wanted to find out what your experience has been with social and emotional learning in school.

1. Can you tell me what you know about social and emotional learning?
2. Tell me about how your teachers encourage you to think about your feelings, or the feelings of other students?
 - a. Follow up: explain how they do this, and how often it happens.
3. Can you tell me why or why not these lessons or activities have been helpful?
4. Can you tell me how students interact with each other in class and on the yard?
 - a. Follow up: Can you give examples that show this?
5. Tell me about what happens when students don't follow the class or school rules.
 - a. Can you explain why or why not you think the procedure is fair to students.
6. What can the school do to support you socially and emotionally?
7. What can the school do to support you in your relationships with your teachers and classmates.
8. Do your teachers use the Charter, the Moodmeter, the Meta-Moment or the Blueprint in class?

APPENDIX M

DOCUMENT REVIEW TOOL

Document e.g., Lesson Plan, Meeting Minutes	Date	Meaningful Text	Whose Voice Represented?	How Does the Information Fit into the Framework?	Category/Theme	Notes

APPENDIX N

LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY INFORMED CONSENT FORM CLASSROOM WALKTHROUGH

- TITLE:** Student and Educator Perceptions of the Implementation of a Social-Emotional Learning Approach: A Mixed Methods of a Catholic School
- INVESTIGATOR:** Dorothy Balfe
Educational Leadership for Social Justice Program
School of Education
Loyola Marymount University
[REDACTED]
- ADVISOR:** Dr. Mary McCullough
Educational Leadership for Social Justice Program
School of Education
Loyola Marymount University
[REDACTED]
- PURPOSE:** You are being asked to participate in a research project that seeks to learn more about educator and student experiences and perceptions of social-emotional learning (SEL), with a specific focus on the RULER approach. I will observe your classroom for approximately 20 minutes.
- RULER is one of the ways we teach about social-emotional learning. RULER stands for Recognizing our and others' emotions, Understanding the emotions, Labeling or naming them, Expressing them, and Regulating or controlling our feelings when we need to. One of the tools we use in RULER is the Class Charter which helps us understand how we and others want to feel at school. We also use another tool, the Mood Meter, to help us recognize and label our emotions.
- RISKS:** There are no known risks associated with this study. No sensitive information is being collected for this study. However, you might experience some discomfort, nervousness, or concerns about judgement given my role as administrator. The purpose of this study

is to help educators learn more about how they can successfully implement social-emotional learning and RULER in their school and I am not seeking to evaluate you, your teaching or your students in any way. I will be as unobtrusive as possible in your classroom and will not engage with you or the students. None of the information will be shared with anyone. Your involvement in the study, data collected and study results will in no way affect your employment status.

BENEFITS:

The study will potentially help educators who are seeking to implement social-emotional learning and RULER in their schools or classrooms. Information gathered from teachers and students about their experiences about social emotional learning and the RULER approach will help other educators as they use SEL practices in their schools and classrooms. This study will also contribute to the limited body of research on RULER and SEL implementation in Catholic elementary schools in the United States.

INCENTIVES:

You will receive no incentives for this study. Participation in the project will require no monetary cost to you.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

I will have sole access to the data.

Subjects will not be identifiable by name but I will retain certain identifiers – whether you are a teacher, teacher assistant or administrator, and the level you teach (elementary or middle school). I will not take any photos, or make audio recordings in your classroom, and I will not write down yours, your assistant’s or any students’ names.

All observation notes gathered during classroom and school walkthroughs will be stored on a Word document. The only identifying information will be the general grade level of the class observed (early or middle elementary, or middle school), and whether the classroom teacher has any association with the SEL committee, by either once having been a member of the committee, or by being a current member of the committee.

All research materials will remain under lock and key. When the research study ends, any identifying information will be removed from the data, or it will be destroyed. All of the information you provide will be kept confidential.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW: Your participation in this study is *voluntary*. You may withdraw your consent to participate at any time without penalty. There will be no consequences of any kind if you withdraw from the study.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS: A summary of the results of this research will be supplied to you, at no cost, upon request. Please contact the principal investigator Dorothy Balfe at xxxxx@xxxxx.edu or by phone at XXX-XXX-XXXX to request a summary of the results. They will be available in approximately 4 months time, after the data gathering period which scheduled for September to November, 2022.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT: I have read the above statements and understand what is being asked of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, for any reason, without penalty. If the study design or use of the information is changed, I will be informed and my consent reobtained. On these terms, I certify that I am willing to participate in this research project.

I understand that if I have any further questions, comments or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may contact Dr. David Moffet, Chair, Institutional Review Board, Loyola Marymount University, 1 LMU Drive, Los Angeles, CA 90045-2659 or by email at [REDACTED]

Participant's Signature

Date

APPENDIX O

INDICATORS OF SCHOOLWIDE SEL WALKTHROUGH PROTOCOL

Section 1: Classroom Climate and Practices

*This section guides observers in looking for evidence of schoolwide SEL across classroom climate and practices. It is **not** intended to evaluate or assess individual teacher or classrooms. Before beginning the walkthrough, it is helpful to explain to teacher the purpose of the visit and to observe multiple classrooms during different times of the day.*

	4	3	2	1	Not Observed
1. Supportive classroom climate					
Classroom learning environments are supportive, culturally responsive, and focused on building relationships and community.					
1a. Teacher-student relationships Look for/Learn about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Addresses each student by name -Response to student needs -Positive teacher language -Affirming student efforts -Students sharing ideas, perspectives, concerns 	<p>Nearly all students share their ideas, perspectives and concerns with their teacher and their peers.</p> <p>Teacher joins in students' activities, positively communicates and demonstrates warmth and enjoyment with students.</p> <p>Teacher acknowledges students by name and affirms student interests, efforts and accomplishments in the classroom.</p> <p>Teacher demonstrates awareness to and responds to students' needs and demonstrates that they appreciate each student as an individual.</p>	<p>Over half of students share their ideas, perspectives and concerns with their teacher and their peers.</p> <p>Teacher acknowledges students by name and affirms student interests, efforts and accomplishments in the classroom.</p> <p>Teacher demonstrates awareness to and responds to student needs and demonstrates that they appreciate each student as an individual.</p>	<p>Less than half of students share their ideas, perspectives and concerns with their teacher and their peers.</p> <p>Teacher attempts to build a positive relationship with students.</p> <p>Teacher does not seem aware that some students are not participating fully in classroom activities</p>	<p>Students are not yet sharing their ideas, perspectives and concerns with their teacher. Teacher is primarily concerned with conveying content</p> <p>There is not yet evidence that the teacher has established positive relationships with all students.</p>	
1b. Cultural responsiveness Look for/Learn about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Teacher learns about students' cultures, backgrounds, talents, and interests. -Student experiences and identities reflected in classroom materials, curriculum, and/or instruction -Posted student work that reflects their identities, cultures, and/or life experiences -Students of all subgroups actively engaged in classroom activities 	<p>Nearly all students share about their lives and backgrounds.</p> <p>Students of all subgroups (e.g. race, gender) are actively engaged and collaborate with one another and try to understand each other's perspectives.</p> <p>Teacher encourages students to share their stories with one another and to have pride in their history and linguistic and cultural identities.</p>	<p>More than half of students of all subgroups share about their lives and backgrounds.</p> <p>Teacher encourages students to share their stories with one another and to have pride in their history and linguistic and cultural identities</p> <p>Affirming materials, messages and images about students' racial and ethnic identities are present throughout the classroom</p>	<p>Less than half of students share about their lives and backgrounds.</p> <p>The teacher is somewhat using instructional practices that draw upon students' lived experiences.</p> <p>Teacher uses classroom materials and curriculum that are representative of diverse groups.</p>	<p>Students are not yet sharing about their lives and backgrounds.</p> <p>The teacher is not yet using instructional practices that draw upon students' lived experiences.</p> <p>There is no classroom library or other available materials that contain multicultural content that reflect the perspectives of and show appreciation for diverse groups yet.</p>	

	Teacher affirms students' languages and cultural knowledge by integrating it into classroom conversations and using materials incorporating students' racial and ethnic identities.				
<p>1c. Classroom routines and procedures</p> <p>Look for/Learn about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Classroom activities introduced - Predictable routines and procedures - Routines and procedures promote expression of social and emotional competencies. 	<p>Students assume responsibility for routines and procedures and execute them in an orderly, efficient and self-directed manner, requiring little or no direction or narration.</p> <p>Teacher creates predictability in daily classroom routines, cues students for upcoming activities, and provides reminders when needed of classroom procedures.</p> <p>Classroom routines and procedures are not overly restrictive and promote autonomy.</p>	<p>A subset of students assume responsibility for routines and procedures and execute them in an orderly, efficient and self-directed manner, requiring little or no direction or narration.</p> <p>Teacher provides students with clear guidance when introducing classroom activities, such as what is expected, learning objectives, and whether and how they should collaborate with peers.</p> <p>At times, classroom routines and procedures were observed to restrict expression of student social and emotional competencies.</p>	<p>Students engage in familiar routines and procedures with comfort and ease.</p> <p>Teacher is beginning to provide students with guidance when introducing classroom activities, such as what is expected, learning objectives, and whether and how they should collaborate with peers.</p> <p>Classroom routines and procedures tend to be restrictive and limit autonomy.</p>	<p>Students do not appear to be familiar with classroom routines and procedures, requiring teacher direction or narration.</p> <p>Clear routines and procedures are not yet developed.</p>	
<p>1d. Student-centered discipline</p> <p>Look for/Learn about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strategies/tools available for students to problem-solve and self-manage (e.g., reflection posters, reflection sheets, etc.). - Use of verbal and non-verbal cues to communicate and promote expected behaviors. - Reinforce desired behaviors. - Discreet redirection of problem behaviors. 	<p>Students monitor and regulate their behavior and emotions in the classroom.</p> <p>Students use problem-solving strategies and tools to resolve conflicts.</p> <p>Teacher redirects any behavior challenges respectfully and discreetly by encouraging student reflection and use of SEL strategies and does so consistently across all students.</p> <p>Teacher models, teaches and offers specific tools and problem-solving strategies that students can use to resolve conflicts, monitor their own behavior and emotions, repair relationships, and seek help when needed in the classroom.</p>	<p>Students attempt to use problem-solving strategies and tools to resolve conflict.</p> <p>Teacher redirects any behavior challenges respectfully and does so consistently across all students.</p> <p>Teacher is beginning to teach and offer tools and problem-solving strategies that students can use to resolve conflicts and monitor their own behaviors and emotions.</p>	<p>Few students attempt to use problem-solving strategies and tools to resolve conflict.</p> <p>Teacher's responds to behavior challenges respectfully but takes time away from lessons and/or does not effectively resolve the problem.</p> <p>The approach to student discipline in this classroom relies on punitive consequences, such as removing privileges.</p>	<p>Students are not regulating their behavior and emotions in the classroom.</p> <p>Teacher does not yet respond to behavior challenges respectfully or responds to student misbehavior in a way that is not consistent across all students.</p>	
<p>1e. Community-building</p> <p>Look for/Learn about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Opportunities for students to connect with each other (e.g., team talk, circles, morning meetings). - Physical space is set up to foster community (e.g., whole-group meeting spot, desks arranged for collaboration). - Classroom shared agreements posted. 	<p>Nearly all students contribute to class discussions, take an active role in supporting their peers, and there is a strong sense of inclusivity.</p> <p>Teacher models warm and respectful classroom interaction and provides frequent opportunities for students to dialogue, get to know one another, and discuss their social and emotional competencies.</p> <p>Teacher uses shared agreements and classroom routines to help students collaborate and reflect on how they want to treat one another and learn together in the classroom.</p> <p>The classroom is set up in a way that promotes student interaction.</p>	<p>More than half of students contribute to class discussions and participate in activities.</p> <p>Teacher models respectful classroom interaction and provides frequent opportunities for students to dialogue and get to know one another.</p> <p>Shared agreements are present in the classroom but may not be referenced directly.</p> <p>The classroom is set up in a way that promotes student interaction.</p>	<p>Less than half of students contribute to class discussions and participate in activities.</p> <p>Teacher provides some opportunities for students to get to know one another.</p> <p>The classroom is set up in a way that promotes student interaction.</p>	<p>Student are not yet contributing to class discussions and participating in activities.</p> <p>Teacher does not yet use strategies to help students get to know one.</p> <p>The classroom is not yet set up in a way that promotes student interaction.</p>	
<p>2. Explicit SEL instruction Students have consistent opportunities to cultivate, practice, and reflect on social and emotional competencies in ways that are developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive.</p>					
<p>2a. Explicit SEL instruction</p> <p>Look for/Learn about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Evidence of a SEL program (e.g., posters, circles, related student work, student-of-the-day stickers). - Structured SEL lessons. 	<p>Students lead routines or learning activities and regularly connect their perspectives and experiences to instruction.</p> <p>Nearly all students are actively engaged in explicit SEL instruction, reflecting on their own social and emotional competencies, and practicing the skills they are learning with peers</p> <p>Teacher provides developmentally appropriate direct instruction on social and emotional skills.</p> <p>Instruction consistently employs active forms of learning, containing activities that clearly emphasize developing personal and social skills, and targets</p>	<p>More than half of students are actively engaged in explicit SEL instruction, reflecting on their own social and emotional competencies, and practicing the skills they are learning with peers.</p> <p>Teacher provides developmentally appropriate direct instruction on social and emotional skills.</p> <p>Instruction mostly employs active forms of learning, containing activities that emphasize developing personal and social skills, and targets specific social and emotional skills.</p>	<p>Less than half of students are actively engaged in explicit SEL instruction, reflecting on their own social and emotional competencies, and practicing the skills they are learning with peers.</p> <p>Teacher provides some opportunities for students to practice social and emotional skills in ways that are mostly developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive.</p> <p>Instruction targets specific social and emotional skills, but learning is somewhat passive.</p>	<p>Students are not yet participating in explicit SEL instruction.</p> <p>Teacher does not yet provide direct instruction on explicit social and emotional skills.</p> <p>There are little to no opportunities for students to practice social and emotional skills.</p>	

	specific social and emotional skills. Teacher provides time for students to practice what they are learning.				
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3. SEL integrated with academic instruction
SEL content and objectives are integrated into rigorous instruction through interactive and collaborative pedagogies. This enables ongoing practice of SEL skills and strengthens teaching and learning of academic content.

3a. Fostering academic mindsets	Nearly all students are actively engaged in academic tasks and discussions. Students provide constructive feedback to their classmates , share their thinking and discuss different approaches or answers to questions. Teacher sets high expectations and expresses confidence that all students can persevere through challenging material. Teacher facilitates discussions that honor more than one right answer and expresses interest in students' thinking. Teacher provides specific and frequent feedback for improvement and offers students opportunities to fix mistakes .	More than half of students are engaged in academic tasks and discussions. Students share their thinking and discuss different approaches or answers to questions. Teacher sets high expectations for all students and expresses confidence that all students can persevere through challenging material. Teacher expresses interest in student thinking and offers students opportunities to fix mistakes. The teacher provides additional support to guide students through challenges when needed.	Less than half of students are engaged in academic tasks or discussions. Teacher sets high expectations for all students and offers students opportunities to fix mistakes. The teacher provides additional support to guide students but may jump in with the answers rather than allow for productive struggle	Students are not yet engaged in academic tasks or discussions. The teacher does not yet communicate high expectations for all students.	
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3b. Aligning SEL and academic objectives	Nearly all students regularly share their perspectives on how social and emotional competencies connect to what they're learning and initiate reflection on their own social and emotional development. Teacher engages students in meaningful discussions that make connections between SEL and academic content . Teacher provides time and guidance for student reflection on social and emotional competencies. SEL standards and/or learning objectives are specified by the teacher and are embedded into instruction.	Most students share their perspectives on how social and emotional competencies connect to what they're learning and initiate reflection on their own social and emotional development. Teacher engages students in meaningful discussions that connect SEL to academic content. Teacher is starting to facilitate student reflection on social and emotional competencies. SEL standards and/or learning objectives are not yet specified by the teacher.	Some students share their perspectives on how social and emotional competencies connect to what they're learning and initiate reflection on their own social and emotional development. Teacher is beginning to engage students in discussions that connect SEL to academic content. SEL standards and /or learning objectives are not yet specified by the teacher.	Students do not yet reflect on social and emotional competencies and make connections to what they're learning. Teacher does not attempt to engage students in discussion that connects SEL to academic content and does not yet facilitate student reflection on social emotional competencies. There is not yet evidence that SEL standards, goals, or learning objectives /guidelines inform instruction.	
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3c. Interactive pedagogy	Student talk time exceeds teacher talk time during instructional time with more than half of students provide input during group discussions. Nearly all students collaborate effectively with one another to complete learning tasks and monitor their own interactions to ensure input from all group members. Teacher uses cooperative learning activities that encourage all students to apply social and emotional skills to engage with academic content. Teacher provides opportunities for students to discuss and reflect on how they are working together as a group and how they can ensure all ideas are heard.	Student talk is equal to teacher talk during instructional time with half of students providing input during group discussions. Teacher uses lesson activities that engage students in meaningful discussion and collaboration around their learning. Classroom discussions and cooperative learning opportunities are structured to help ensure most students' ideas are heard.	Students do less than half the talking during instructional time with less than half of students provide input during group discussions. Teacher tries to use instructional practices that engage students in discussion and collaboration. Teacher talk, or the voices of a small group of students, may dominate the lesson.	Student talk and interaction is minimal. There is not yet evidence that the teacher uses instructional lessons that engage students in discussion and collaboration. Instruction is largely teacher-driven.	
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Supportive school climate					
The schoolwide learning environment is supportive, culturally responsive, and focused on building relationships and community.					
2a. Sense of community and safety Look for/Learn about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - SEL-focused schoolwide norms are displayed in common areas. - Students and staff model social and emotional competencies. - There are inviting, well-maintained common areas. - A variety of meaningful, creative, and recent student work is prominently displayed. 	Culturally responsive and collaboratively developed schoolwide norms clearly convey how all staff and students agree to interact with each other. Clear routines and procedures are evident and contribute to the safety of students and staff in common areas. Students and staff consistently model schoolwide norms and social and emotional competencies.	Clear schoolwide norms for interactions are evident throughout the school. Routines and procedures are mostly followed. Students and staff can navigate common areas safely. Most students and staff model schoolwide norms and social and emotional competencies.	Norms are present in some areas but not consistently followed or reinforced. Routines and procedures are unclear in some areas, but students and staff can navigate most common areas safely. Some students and staff model norms and social and emotional competencies.	There is no evidence that schoolwide norms have been developed yet. Safety may be a concern for students and staff.	
2b. Staff and student relationships Look for/Learn about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Staff greet students as they arrive at school and at class, and in the halls as appropriate. - Staff demonstrate knowledge of students on a personal level. 	Staff engage regularly in positive and encouraging interactions with students in common areas . At times, students initiate these interactions. Staff demonstrate knowledge of students on a personal level . Feedback around norms for common spaces is shared in a way that respects students' dignity .	Staff have mostly positive interactions with students in common areas. Feedback around norms for common spaces is shared in a way that respects students' dignity.	Staff have mostly neutral interactions with students in common areas. At times, feedback around norms in common spaces is negatively framed.	Staff have limited or frequently negative interactions with students in common areas.	
2c. Staff relationships Look for/Learn about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Staff greet one another in the halls as appropriate. - Staff demonstrate knowledge of one another on a personal level. 	School staff are highly supportive of one another. Interactions are friendly and respectful . Staff seek out collaborative relationships.	School staff are supportive of one another. Interactions are friendly and respectful.	Staff mostly interact professionally with one another but do not show active support for one another.	Staff do not regularly interact with each other or have negative staff relationships.	
2d. Student relationships Look for/Learn about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Student interactions that are respectful, friendly, and inclusive. 	Students seem to genuinely care for one another and hold one another accountable for respectful interactions . There is a sense of inclusivity among all students.	Student interactions are respectful and friendly.	Students are somewhat respectful to peers, but they may have a few conflicts.	Students are routinely disrespectful to one another and/or have frequent conflicts with peers.	

4. Schoolwide supportive discipline					
Schoolwide discipline policies and practices are instructive, restorative, developmentally appropriate, and equitably enforced.					
4a. Supportive discipline Look for/Learn about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A student code of conduct promotes instructive, restorative, and developmentally appropriate discipline policies and practices. - There is evidence of cycles/other restorative practices. 	Schoolwide discipline policies and procedures are well-documented and avoid exclusionary discipline. Staff examine discipline data to ensure equitable outcomes for students. Staff follow documented policies and procedures and are highly effective at using restorative, instructive, and developmentally appropriate behavioral responses .	Schoolwide discipline policies and procedures are well-documented and avoid exclusionary discipline. Staff examine discipline data a few times a year to ensure equitable outcomes for students. Staff mostly follow documented policies and procedures, and most staff use restorative, instructive, and developmentally appropriate behavioral responses.	Schoolwide discipline policies and procedures are documented and mostly avoid exclusionary discipline. Staff examine discipline data a few times a year, but do not effectively use data to ensure equitable outcomes. Staff are inconsistent at following documented policies and procedures. Staff inconsistently use restorative, instructive, and developmentally appropriate behavioral responses.	Schoolwide discipline policies and procedures are punitive, subjective, or not well documented. Staff responses to student behaviors are ineffective, punitive and/or inequitable.	

Continuous Improvement					
	4	3	2	1	Not Observed
8. Systems for continuous improvement					
Implementation and outcome data are consistently collected, used, and communicated to continuously improve all SEL-related systems, practices, and policies with a focus on equity.					
8a. Systems for continuous improvement Look for/Learn about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Staff meet regularly to discuss data and engage in continuous improvement cycles. - There are newsletters, emails, and posted communications about SEL. - School-level data is communicated with stakeholders in an easy to understand way. - Data elevates youth voice by addressing student perceptions of their learning environment, as well as their strengths and needs. 	Roles, responsibilities, and timelines are established and followed for collecting and reflecting on data to improve SEL-related systems, practices and policies. Data includes student perceptions of their learning environment and provides opportunities to examine equity in students' experiences and outcomes. Data on schoolwide SEL is regularly shared and discussed with administrators, teachers, school-site support staff, students, families, and community partners. The SEL team uses a structured process to engage these stakeholders in determining next steps and creating action plans.	Roles, responsibilities, and timelines are established and followed for collecting and reflecting on data to improve SEL-related systems, practices and policies. Data provides opportunities to examine equity in students' experiences and outcomes. Data on schoolwide SEL is regularly shared and discussed with administrators, teachers, school-site support staff, students, families, and community partners.	Roles, responsibilities, and timelines may be inconsistent for collecting and reflecting on data to improve SEL-related systems, practices, and policies. Data on schoolwide SEL is occasionally shared with some stakeholders.	Roles, responsibilities, and timelines are not yet established for collecting and reflecting on data to improve SEL-related systems, practices, and policies.	

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