


Implementing online social-emotional learning programs for K-12 leaders: A focus on professional development for teachers

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the basic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of K-12 online teachers to understand leadership support needed for teachers who are implementing social-emotional learning (SEL) curricula. A basic qualitative study was used for the research design. Participants were recruited through LinkedIn, a social media site, and the target size of the sample size was 15 K-12 online teachers living in the United States. Fifteen participants could not be located using LinkedIn, so snowball sampling was employed. Snowball sampling allowed for recruitment of research participants by asking the current participants to assist in identifying other potential subjects. An open-ended questionnaire was provided to participants who voluntarily participated in the study. A follow-up focus group was conducted with five members who participated in the questionnaire. Focus group participants contextualized the questionnaire responses by expounding on experiences and giving responses in further depth. Findings of the research were shared with teachers, administrators, and other educational stakeholders. In order for SEL to be implemented effectively in an online K-12 setting, professional development is critical.

Keywords: social emotional learning, online learning, implementation, K-12, professional development

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INTRODUCTION

Research Question

The research question below helped guide the study and focus on professional development around online social-emotional learning (SEL) implementation for K-12 educators and what are best practices for school leaders:

What are the perceptions of K-12 online teachers about leadership support received in the implementation of SEL in the online classroom environment?

Theoretical Framework

SEL curriculum implementation requires transformational leadership and viewing of the student as a whole child (Liu, 2021). The whole school, whole community, whole child (WSCC) approach is the framework for the study. WSCC is a school-wide approach and believes each child deserves to be healthy, safe, supported, and challenged (ASCD, 2014). WSCC calls on the community to support students and for schools to collaborate with other stakeholders to meet the needs of all children. Leadership can implement structure and assist with relationship building to create larger change (Allen et al., 2015). Professional development should include the whole-child approach, and coaching for teachers should be ongoing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding how to instruct and convey SEL programming in a distance format was imperative for teachers (Collaborative of Academic, Social and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2023a). One issue that arose post-pandemic is how pre-service, and veteran teachers manage personal well-being while teaching SEL skills. Increasingly, teachers are expected to serve the whole child and address not only academics but also the SEL skills of students (Jez, 2022). Teachers must critically self-reflect and examine professional growth opportunities and self-care while being responsible for the academic and SEL lives of students. Educators are being asked to be aware of and juggle numerous daily short- and long-term duties while making transformational teaching a reality. Some of the unrealistic expectations from administration have unforeseen consequences, including invisible burdens and burnout (Kim et al., 2021). Teachers and administrative staff should be models of SEL for students, and if personal health is not attended to, SEL implementation and modeling for students can suffer (Mahoney et al., 2020).

Teacher educators are key in the development of new teachers' SEL skills and can help to prepare pre-service candidates to attend to complex issues. Donahue-Keegan et al. (2019) found involving faculty

in the revision and feedback process of the SEL implementation at the leadership level is important, and all stakeholders should be open to changes and improvements and bringing the SEL approach into courses. The COVID-19 pandemic caused a serious impact on students (Scott et al., 2021). Scott et al. (2021) discussed how the COVID-19 disruption in schooling might affect adverse childhood experiences and who might be at risk. Students from socially disadvantaged households may be impacted by what occurred throughout the pandemic, and trauma-informed recommendations around SEL are key to supporting students. Educators should design coursework that is relatable and allows students to practice holistic and contextual thinking. Teachers should be trained in and support a trauma-informed lens that offers gentler interpretations. By supporting students with a trauma-informed lens, teachers build trust and relationships to facilitate positive connections (Kim et al., 2021; Scott et al., 2021).

Stickle et al. (2019) examined how coaching can build a teacher's capacity for SEL strategies. In a national survey, more than half of principals desired more professional development for teachers in SEL implementation. Stickle et al. (2019) explained coaching can fill this gap. From the individual professional development perspective, teachers found SEL coaching beneficial for themselves and for the students' emotional growth. Teachers who implemented SEL throughout the year and little by little were most effective compared with teachers who were not consistent in using SEL strategies (Morgan et al., 2021; Stickle et al., 2019). SEL programs should be long term and meaningful, which can be a challenge for schools (Allbright et al., 2019). Morgan et al. (2021) found a need for teachers to be equipped with tools and professional development that assist in the transition to SEL programs that are socially inclusive and diverse. To prepare for active engagement in implementing SEL, teachers benefited from professional development (Morgan et al., 2021).

DATA COLLECTION AND METHODOLOGY

Participants were recruited via LinkedIn groups for K-12 online teachers who live in the United States. Before providing the questionnaire to participants, Institutional Review Board approval was obtained. Interested K-12 online teachers provided an email address for communication. Once 15 participants were identified, the informed consent was completed, and participants were asked to participate anonymously in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was emailed to participants, who were asked to complete it within 2 weeks. The questionnaire took approximately 15-20 minutes to complete and responding to all questions was required. Utilizing a questionnaire is the best fit for gathering robust information on leadership and SEL implementation as questionnaires allow for broader flexibility of responses from participants across the country and data on a complex issue (Barrett & Twycross, 2018).

Following the questionnaire, data were codified and triangulated, and a five-member focus group was selected using purposeful sampling from the 15 questionnaire participants. To choose the focus group participants, the original participant identification numbers from the questionnaire were placed in a random number generator. The number generator chose five participants' numbers. The five participants were contacted to see if they were interested and available to serve as members of the focus group. Once interest was confirmed, the focus group members were contacted via email. The email notified potential

participants that the focus group would take place through Zoom and would last approximately 45 minutes. Participants were asked for availability within a 1-week window. Focus group members were allowed to not participate, and ethical considerations were upheld to the highest standard during this process (University of Texas Medical Branch, n. d.). Once participants agreed to be part of the focus group, the focus group questions were provided before the meeting. All names and identifying information were removed from the data to maintain anonymity, and the focus group Zoom recording and transcript were password protected.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire contained seven questions, and the selected format of the open-ended questionnaire allowed participants to elaborate on their responses. The first three questions in the questionnaire addressed Research Question 1 regarding the resources and community and professional development support needed by the K-12 online teachers to implement SEL. Questions asked teachers whether they felt supported in implementation of SEL curricula and why or why not, if school leadership follows up with resources and professional development, and the perception of how important SEL is at the school as modeled by leadership. The last four questions of the questionnaire addressed the second research question regarding the perceptions of K-12 online teachers and the leadership support received for SEL implementation in the online classroom. Teachers were asked to share their experiences in including a school leadership model, day-to-day work, and leadership support received. Teachers were asked to respond to open-ended questions about professional development for SEL implementation and how the teachers view administration's belief in the importance of SEL for students.

After each questionnaire was received, responses were saved; follow-up communication occurred with participants if necessary. Manual coding occurred during the data analysis portion of the research (McGrath & Nilsson, 2018). The questionnaire was administered through Google Forms, kept confidential, and all data will be stored in a Google Drive for a minimum of 3 years (Protection of Human Subjects, 2018). At the end of the 3-year period, data from Google Drive will be securely destroyed and any paper data shredded. To destroy data from the computer, the hard drive will be erased using commercial software. To secure the data during the 3-year period, two-factor authentication will be used. Google two-factor authentication was used to log into the drive and a password was entered so only the researcher had access to participant data. Following the questionnaire process, coding began, and any changes were noted during the triangulation process (Forero et al., 2018). Participants were contacted via email to follow up with a thank you.

Focus Group

To study the complex research questions further and triangulate data, providing a fuller view of the teachers' perspectives of leadership, a focus group will gather more information about data first received in part one of the study. Focus groups can be useful to examine respondents' attitudes, feelings, and beliefs (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Five questionnaire respondents were chosen from the original questionnaire part of the study to participate in the focus group a week after the questionnaire concludes. The additional focus group following the questionnaire in this study allowed participants to respond more broadly and critically, providing insights into the data gathered. All data

in the focus group part of the study was subject to the same rigor for confidentiality and ethics as during the questionnaire with all data saved in a secure Google Drive, numerical identifications used, and all identifying information removed from the data shared with the focus group before it is shared. Additionally, the Zoom session and recording from the focus group were password protected.

DATA ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis was conducted for the qualitative data using Excel. Coding and analysis were completed manually, and an exact copy of each questionnaire response was carefully recorded, saved, and analyzed. To delve further into the qualitative data of the study, identifying the themes and then coding this information were important. Thematic analysis is one of the most powerful methods when trying to understand a lived experience and a need exists for considering experiences, thoughts, and behaviors in the data. The approach used in the data analysis was the inductive theme analysis approach whereby themes came from the data that were produced. This approach was useful for considering data within a specific finding or research question. Thematic analysis allowed for larger and more complex data to be organized in a meaningful way to discover themes and make sense of the data. The process utilized for coding analysis was Creswell and Poth's (2018) spiral analysis model.

RESEARCH QUESTION: THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The research question was "what are the perceptions of K-12 online teachers about leadership support received in the implementation of SEL in the online classroom environment?" Codes were generated from related phrases obtained from the questionnaire and focus group. The themes that emerged for Research Question after coding were professional development and training and success. Participants' responses focused on the need for ongoing and comprehensive professional development and training and the importance of a successful SEL program and its impact on students.

Theme: Professional Development and Training

Professional development and training was an emergent theme related to the research question. Professional development and training was identified by teachers as important for SEL curriculum implementation. According to eight of the 15 respondents, professional development and training was described as an important resource for teachers to implement SEL. Three teachers noted the importance of leaders providing opportunities for teachers to continue their training. For example, participant 9 said,

Yes, my school has consistently provided training and resources to aid in implementing our new SEL curricula. My school does a great job of rolling out the curriculum with educators first, then after a year, once we feel comfortable with it, we are better able to roll out the curriculum with students.

Three teachers explained the importance of leaders taking the SEL implementation training themselves to understand the importance of SEL in schools. For example, participant 9 stated,

My school's leadership lives many of the SEL values we teach in our curriculum. They take moments to regulate their emotions and step away if need be. They help others to see our students as humans and make the best decisions regarding their behaviors and actions. A majority of the things leadership does and plans daily are rooted in our SEL curricula principles.

Participant 2 described the importance of SEL implementation professional development and training for teachers in the K-12 online environment:

Our leadership provides us with plenty of support, resources, and opportunities to implement SEL in our classrooms. We had one recent PD [professional development] where we were given a list of SEL resources and discussed different ways we could use them. But that takes educating the educators, that take training them to know what SEL truly is, and giving them those techniques and strategies and materials to be able to weave that into an ELA [English language arts] lesson or, you know, I mean, you can tie so much social-emotional into any book you're reading, any social studies lesson, it, it can all be woven in seamlessly where the kids don't even realize that that's what you're doing.

The need for professional development and training using collaborative approaches was noted by participant 167:

I think, for starters, it gets difficult when there's no longer collaboration happening with teachers or even with admin to come together to even become more targeted in our practice, or even in the development of our curriculum. I feel like we are working in isolation, so then it doesn't allow us to implement SEL or, you know, even reach students where they might need, where they might be lacking in a variety of areas. I just feel like there have been so much, so many changes in the administration that there's a breakdown.

IMPLICATIONS AND FINDINGS

The study explored participants' perceptions of leadership in SEL implementation within K-12 online schools, as addressed by the research question. Participants described the importance of professional development and training and success and how both contribute to successfully implementing SEL in a K-12 online environment. According to eight of the 15 respondents, professional development and training were described as essential resources for teachers to implement SEL. Participants explain the need for and value of consistent, ongoing professional development. Online school leaders should create professional development to support teachers with SEL implementation (Kennedy, 2019; Kwan, 2020).

Findings Related to Existing Literature

The theme from the research question addressed the need for professional development and training by online school leaders for online teachers. Participants described feeling supported by school leaders if they received consistent professional development. Through professional development and training, goals should be established for an online SEL program (Geesa et al., 2022). Implementing SEL is an ongoing practice and is effective when adult SEL skills and

competencies are promoted. Professional learning and training for online teachers should occur over time and be implemented using evidence-based practices (Bozkus & Bayrak, 2019; CASEL, 2023c; Willgerodt et al., 2020). Modeling by school leaders as part of training is vital to building SEL skills and mindsets (CASEL, 2023b; Hardy, 2018). During day-to-day interactions, school leaders should model SEL (Elias et al., 2006; Mahoney et al., 2020). To model SEL competencies, online school leaders can conduct brief daily virtual check-ins, conduct one-to-one staff and faculty meetings regularly, share verbal appreciation for time, and be visible with time spent interacting with stakeholders (CASEL, 2023b; Hardy, 2018).

Online school leaders should be creative in approaches to SEL professional development in an online setting. SEL guidance for in-person schools is clearly defined, but as Geesa et al. (2022) noted, it is less clear how online schools should implement SEL. Geesa et al. (2022) suggested professional development for online learning should include the student's perspective and should be immediately transferrable to the online classroom and allow opportunities for feedback, reflection, sharing, and collaboration. Professional development for online teachers should be sequenced and follow the development of competencies, active and focused on helping students develop new skills, focused by guiding teaching to implement curriculum intentionally and explicitly or targeting specific skills (Bailey et al., 2019; Geesa et al., 2022).

When considering a new professional development program to support online teachers for SEL implementation, online school leaders should follow the sequential thinking process from Geesa et al. (2022). First, school leaders should survey teachers about challenges faced when implementing SEL. Next, problems encountered in SEL implementation by teachers are defined and school leaders brainstorm solutions to teacher problems. Finally, after training modules for SEL implementation are developed for online teachers, modules are sent for review before publishing (Geesa et al., 2022).

Approaches that could be used for professional development for SEL implementation include utilizing one morning per week for collaboration between teachers, asynchronous professional development held before a professional development meeting, the freedom for teachers to choose the meeting day and time for professional development or one-on-one meetings between teachers and administration to develop and support individualized needs in SEL implementation (Kennedy, 2019; Raywid, 1993). To create more time for SEL throughout the school day, K-12 online school leaders can train teachers to integrate SEL for short periods, integrating subjects as needed. K-12 online school leaders can virtually model the beginning of the day with an SEL or morning meeting, announcements, and a reminder of expectations (Dorshorst, 2023). Throughout the day, online school leaders should virtually visit classrooms and guide teachers on integrating SEL within teaching, practicing routines, and content learning, encouraging teachers to discuss SEL skills with students (Dorshorst, 2023; Sugishita & Dresser, 2019). Professional development should include the whole-child approach in alignment with the WSCC model. Transformational online school leaders can play a part in the WSCC model and SEL implementation by focusing on ongoing professional development and by helping teachers set data-driven goals for student SEL (Colorado Department of Education Wellness Unit, 2023).

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING RECOMMENDATIONS

Due to the unique environment of an online school, school leaders should be honest about personal and professional shortcomings and act with self-awareness, realizing there may be opportunity for professional or personal development before implementing SEL effectively. By taking advantage of professional development opportunities that assist in developing adult SEL, the improvement intended with SEL implementation outcomes for the school will be realized. Involving an entire instructional team in shared decision-making can also allow for diverse perspectives and help school leaders determine goals and track data (Morgan et al., 2021; New Leaders, 2023).

Setting aside time consistently in a school schedule for professional development and providing training for teachers implementing SEL is essential. Online school leaders should develop robust, engaging, ongoing, relevant, and monitored professional development. Professional development should be a priority for online school leaders, so time should be set aside to plan for professional development at the beginning of each year (Melnick & Martinez, 2019). Online teachers should be surveyed at the beginning of the school year and asked about their desires and needs for professional development. Online teachers should also be given an opportunity provide feedback to school leaders about professional development provided and what sessions were useful and those that were not so online school leaders can adjust offered professional development (Kwan, 2020; Melnick & Martinez, 2019). Professional development should be planned by school leaders with best practices in mind and allow time to collaborate and be engaged in hands-on practice. A process for implementation and a professional development training plan will provide students access to lifelong skills needed to become productive adults and lifelong learners through the acquisition of SEL (Billy & Garriguez, 2021).

Professional development should not be an information exchange but responsive to online teacher needs and should be proactive, engaging, relevant, and something that can be implemented immediately into teacher practice (Bozkus & Bayrak, 2019; Kennedy, 2019). Participants in the study explained professional development supporting SEL implementation was critical and should be collaborative and monitored and measured over time. School councils and school leadership should be aware of obstacles such as insufficient time for SEL implementation and other barriers, as identified by the questionnaire responses. To improve SEL implementation, teachers should have the chance to collaborate and share (ASCD, 2014). **Figure 1** depicts the suggested professional development practices cycle online school leaders can use to implement strong professional development and training for online K-12 SEL implementation.

CONCLUSION

More time, strong communication and leadership, and professional development and training are needed to support K-12 online teachers in SEL implementation. Online school leaders should be provided with opportunities to continue education about how to best support teachers through online professional development. Online professional development provided by school leaders should be robust, engaging, ongoing, relevant, and monitored. Online teachers should have the time



Figure 1. Professional development and training practices cycle (Source: Author)

to collaborate, discuss best practices with leadership, and address feedback and concerns. Additional training for new online teachers should be provided to further understand the specific needs of K-12 online students and how technology can assist in implementing SEL.

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Ethics declaration: To protect the human participants, guidance from *The Belmont Report* was followed. Informed consent was required from participants (Friesen et al., 2017). All participants were confidential and anonymous. Participants had the right to withdraw from the research at any time. Participants were treated confidentially with the use of identification numbers. Participants were entitled to protection through informed consent. The study maintained a commitment to not harm the participants, thus maximizing possible benefits and minimizing possible harm (Friesen et al., 2017). Each participant received equal treatment. Individuals were treated respectfully and provided with informed consent, to include information, comprehension, and voluntariness (Friesen et al., 2017). Finally, the researcher addressed and focused on the benefits of the research with participants.

As supported by *The Belmont Report*, IRB approval was obtained to make sure all human participants remained safe (Friesen et al., 2017). *The Belmont Report* established guidelines for how human subjects are informed and provided consent, how human subjects are chosen, and how human subjects are informed of the study's risks and benefits (Friesen et al., 2017). Informed consent was used to make sure all participants were not coerced and that they consented to participating in the study. Harm to participants was avoided by beneficence, or treating all participants ethically and assuring well-being throughout the study (Adashi et al., 2018; Friesen et al., 2017). Finally, participants were selected without bias through random advertisement of the study and allowing participation for all (Adashi et al., 2018).

Confidentiality was an important part of this study. The use of computer-generated authentic identifiers maintained confidentiality. Data were stored securely and confidentially. Data were stored in a two-factor-authenticated, password-protected Google Drive and no names were associated with the results and analysis portion of the study. The Zoom recording from the focus group was password protected. Responses were stored in a two-factor-authenticated, password-protected Google Drive. The authentication verified identity by using a passcode and verification of a

phone number. The data were stored in Google Drive and any hard copy notes in a locked file cabinet. The data will be maintained for the mandated 3 years after the study and then destroyed.

Declaration of interest: The author declares no competing interest.

Data availability: Data generated or analyzed during this study are available from the author on request.

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