

Chapter 2

Preparing Teachers for SEL Implementation

Hilary Lustick

University of Massachusetts, Lowell, USA

Michael Ota

Texas State University, USA

ABSTRACT

Social and emotional learning research tends to focus on results for K12 students but requires major shifts in mindsets for teachers. Lustick et al. found that teachers who run community circles must negotiate complex questions around their own boundaries and exert a significant amount and novel kind of emotional labor. Sustainable implementation means recognizing, honoring, and supporting this labor; it represents a significant shift compared to traditional notions of teacher professionalism. A literature review uncovered 16 SEL interventions and compared them on the basis of teachers' role. The chapter asked: How are teachers recognized in the literature in terms of design and treatment of integrity? How is the unique labor of SEL—beyond formal instruction—recognized in the literature and in teachers' practice? The authors draw on existing research and interviews with six teachers across elementary, middle, and high school grade levels in one urban district in the US South that was implementing a districtwide SEL program.

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INTRODUCTION

Social and emotional learning (SEL) concerns the non-academic skills students need to grow into happy, healthy, well-rounded individuals. SEL has a long and storied history, beginning in the mid-1990s and gaining momentum, historic growth in implementation, and media attention in the past few years (Weissberg et al., 2015; Yettick, 2018). SEL programs are diverse, representing multiple viewpoints in public policy, advocacy groups, trends in mental health treatment, and geography, national, and cultural norms (CASEL, 2003; Weissberg et al., 2015). However, there is consensus on the definition of SEL. CASEL, the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, defines SEL as the development of emotional recognition and expression, empathy, pro-social and positive relationships, and effective and equitable strategies for challenging situations (CASEL, 2003). The field varies in terms of how to formally teach these skills to developing children; whether to focus on the classroom or the whole school, and what professional development experiences adults need to be prepared (Weissberg et al., 2015).

Research on SEL curriculum is often based on the effectiveness of improving those social-emotional skills identified by CASEL (Farrington et al., 2012; Price, 2018). Some studies have shown a positive association between SEL curriculum and social, emotional, attitudinal, behavioral, and academic indicators (Durlak et al., 2011; Price, 2018). However, the identification of those programs has been sporadic in the research and greatly unknown in practice, including standards, until Price (2018) provided a comprehensive survey. In an attempt to catalog and analyze the SEL programs used in more than 1200 school districts in Texas, the types of SEL curricula and practice were sampled from 10% of the population. His research found that more than 30 programs, most empirically based, were implemented by 83% of the districts surveyed; 17% of the school districts stated no SEL programming at the time of the study. Price (2018) interestingly found that perceived efficacy was directly related to how widespread and systematic the SEL programs were implemented; more SEL programs existed in highly populated school districts than in rural districts; and the more districts spent on education per student reduced the likelihood of SEL program implementation.

While there are curricula associated with SEL, SEL skills are ultimately ones we learn through experience. SEL instruction, beyond formal curriculum, happens in teachable moments, responsive to whatever struggles students experience in their everyday lives. Lustick et al. (2020) found that secondary teachers who run community-building restorative circles, for example, must negotiate complex questions around their own boundaries and professional identities. How can practitioners effectively implement SEL in their classrooms, when for many, it represents a departure from traditional conceptions of the teaching profession? Examining interviews with

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