Examining High School Teachers’ Experiences with Social and Emotional Learning: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

by Meghan K. McCoy

B.A. in Psychology, Long Island University
M.Ed. in School Counseling, Bridgewater State University

A thesis submitted to

The Faculty of the
College of Professional Studies of
Northeastern University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Education

May 13, 2017

Thesis directed by

Karen Reiss Medwed, PhD
Assistant Teaching Professor
Acknowledgements

This work wouldn't be possible without all the amazing people I am surrounded by. First and foremost, to Lauren. There are no words that could describe, or deeds that could repay, your support, guidance, and dedication to me, and my work, throughout this doctoral program. There's no way I could have done this without you, and for that I will be forever grateful. To Chelsea, thank you for being there for me through all of the tough times that life threw at me these past three years. I wouldn't have made it without you. To Mom and Dad. Thank you for instilling in me the work ethic and passion for learning that was vital to my success in this process. Mom, thank you for teaching me to always be true to myself and do what I love, while also loving others. Dad, thank you for teaching me that, whatever doesn't kill you, makes you stronger. Those words were my mantra for the past three years. E, thank you for giving me the flexibility and support in my professional life. This wouldn't have been possible without it. And finally, to all the dedicated Northeastern faculty and staff. Your support, guidance, and challenges along the way pushed me to grow as a scholar and to take my work to the next level. I am forever changed by my time with you all. To all of the above and everyone that I didn't have room to mention, I promise to make my mark on this world and on future generations in a way that would make all of you proud.
Abstract

Despite wide recognition that social and emotional learning (SEL) is correlated with increased emotional intelligence and well-developed social and emotional competencies, few opportunities exist for students at the high school level. This is likely due to the fact that teachers, those most often charged with providing SEL for students, report limited training opportunities, varied levels of support, a focus on academics only education, and a feeling of being unprepared. Unfortunately, these feelings result in fewer SEL opportunities for students and can mediate the positive impact of such opportunities. While much is known about SEL as a whole, there exists little qualitative research examining high school teachers’ experiences with SEL in their daily work. The current study employed interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) in an effort to delve deep into teachers’ experiences, tell their stories, and identify themes across participants. Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2011) theory of andragogy in practice was utilized as a framework through which to gather and interpret results. Research findings revealed individual participants’ experiences with SEL and shed light on the similarities and differences among experiences. Finally, the researcher offered many suggestions for the practical and scholarly implications of her work.

Key words: social and emotional learning, emotional intelligence, adult learners, high school
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................... 2

Abstract ............................................................................................................................ 3

Chapter 1: Introduction ...................................................................................................... 7
   Statement of the Problem ................................................................................................. 7
   Significance of the Problem ............................................................................................. 9
   Positionality Statement .................................................................................................. 14
   Research Questions ......................................................................................................... 16
   Theoretical Framework .................................................................................................. 16

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature .................................................................................... 21
   Introduction ....................................................................................................................... 21
   Defining SEL ................................................................................................................... 24
   Increased Need for SEL .................................................................................................. 26
   Greater Need for Older Students .................................................................................... 28
   Defining Emotional Intelligence ..................................................................................... 30
   Emotional Intelligence and Overall Student Well-being .............................................. 31
   SEL and Positive Outcomes ........................................................................................... 33
   Availability of SEL for Older Students .......................................................................... 35
      Teacher Attitudes .......................................................................................................... 35
      Quality of SEL ............................................................................................................... 36
      Teachers’ Ability to Provide SEL ................................................................................ 37
   Conclusion ...................................................................................................................... 38

Chapter 3: Methodology ..................................................................................................... 41
Paradigm
Methodology
Phenomenology
Hermeneutics
Idiography
Participants, Recruitment, Access
Data Collection
Data Analysis
Data Storage
Protection of Human Subjects
Trustworthiness

Chapter 4: Data Analysis

Narrative Background of Participants
Carly
Tabitha
Troy
Stan
Jake
Gwen
Meg
Participants Collective Experiences
“Collected” Definition of SEL
Theme 1
Chapter 5: Discussion

Interpretation of Findings

In Relation to the Research

In Relation to the Theoretical Framework

Implications for Practice

Implications for Scholarly Work

Researcher’s Next Steps

Reexamining Positionality

Conclusion
Chapter One

Statement of the Problem

High schools across the United States are graduating increasing numbers of students who lack the ability to manage emotions and interact effectively with others, skills associated with emotional intelligence (EI). These students inevitably end up struggling, whether in the college classroom, the workplace, or the world at large. This is of particular concern, as higher education is becoming increasingly important for lifelong personal and professional success. Many students seem ill prepared to face the variety of stressors they face in the transition to college; they struggle making new relationships with a diverse student body, learning new study habits, and figuring out how to function as independent adults (Parker, Summerfeldt, Hogan, & Majeski, 2004). In fact, it seems that a failure to master tasks such as these is one of the major reasons that many students who attend higher education withdraw before graduation (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Keefer, Parker, & Wood, 2012).

In addition to the role that EI plays in the transition to college (see Gerdes et al., 1994; Parker et al., 2004; Keefer et al., 2012), children who lack the skills associated with emotional intelligence may have difficulty learning, can disrupt the educational experience for other students, and become a drain on the energy and resources of school personnel, as their behavior problems require immediate and constant attention (Elias, Zins, Graczyk, & Weissberg, 2003). In fact, some speculate that dealing with emotional problems is one of the biggest challenges facing educators (McCabe, Hernandez, & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Social and emotional problems in children are also associated with higher school dropout rates and increased occurrences of drug use and abuse (Greenberg, Weissberg, O’Brien, Zins, Resnik, & Elias, 2003). Unfortunately,
such problems are not rare; as many as 15 to 22% of young people experience social, emotional, and mental health problems that require treatment (Greenberg, Domotrvic, & Bumbarger, 2001).

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is identified as one vehicle to help foster students’ emotional intelligence and is widely recognized as a critical component in promoting overall well-being for students. SEL is the process by which children learn valuable skills such as recognizing and managing emotions, developing caring and concern for others, establishing positive relationships, making responsible decisions, and handling challenging situations constructively and ethically (CASEL, 2007), competencies broadly defined as EI. Emotional intelligence is further comprised of the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively resolve conflict, make friends, calm oneself when upset or angry, and make ethical and safe choices, among other important inter- and intra- personal skills, all of which enable people to better cope with the demands of daily life (Bar-On, 2003). In fact, many feel that SEL is vital in creating a more positive educational experience for all students and provides students with the crucial skills they need to succeed in a fast-paced, competitive, and global society.

As part of the growing body of research examining the impacts of SEL on children’s personal and academic achievement, researchers have found that the many benefits of SEL are mediated by the fidelity and quality of the programs being provided (see Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Ransford, Greenberg, Domitrovich, Small, & Jacobson, 2009). Teachers are often those at the front lines of SEL delivery (Buchanan, Gueldner, Tran, & Merrell, 2009; Durlak et al., 2011; Ransford et al., 2009) and are largely responsible for how SEL is being implemented, if at all. Unfortunately, even when teachers enjoy high levels of administrative support for SEL, they report implementing low numbers of lessons over time and report a low occurrence of generalizing concepts with students (Ransford et. al., 2009), both of
which are known to be a crucial component of effective SEL (Durlak et al., 2011). This could be
due, in part, to the fact that many teachers report being unsatisfied with their current knowledge
and skill base around SEL; sadly, only one-fifth report that they have received any training about
SEL at all (Buchanan et al., 2009). Given teachers’ vital role in providing SEL to students and
the established correlation between quality of SEL and the benefits to students, there exists a
disturbingly small body of research examining teachers’ perspectives and needs in this area
(Buchanan et al., 2009; Ransford et al., 2009). It follows that a more thorough examination of
teachers’ understandings of SEL and its importance, their professional development (PD)
experiences concerning SEL, and their needs in the area of SEL delivery would be highly
beneficial.

Significance of the Problem

Educational researchers agree that awareness, appraisal, and understanding of emotions
are all critical to creating positive classroom environments for students and teachers alike (Meyer
& Turner, 2006). There is also broad agreement about the importance of graduating students who
can work well with others from diverse backgrounds, practice healthy behaviors, and behave
responsibly and ethically (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2007). In
1991, the US Department of Labor published a report conducted by the Secretary’s Commission
on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS). This report identified the ability to communicate
effectively, work in teams, solve problems creatively, and adapt to changing conditions as more
important than content knowledge and technical expertise in one's field (Huiit, 1999). It is also
appears that success in higher education is highly correlated with EI (Gerdes et al., 1994; Parker
et al., 2004; Keefer et al., 2012).
Given the particular importance of EI in the successful transition to college, it seems especially important that we do not ignore the social and emotional needs of adolescent students. Adolescence is a period of rapid and drastic development and while most children will adjust well to the stresses and changes, others will not. It is estimated that “somewhere between 25% and 50% of all young people in the United States between the ages of 10 and 17 are at risk for curtailed educational, economic, and social opportunities due to their engagement in high-risk behaviors and activities,” (Carnegie Council, 1995, p. 10). This variable adjustment may be partly due to the fact that for most students in middle school and beyond, there are fewer emotional supports available at school. In addition to declining emotional support as students progress through primary and secondary school, many report an increasing lack of connection with their teachers that appears to negatively impact their academic performance, behavior, and overall health (Blum & Libbey, 2004). Unfortunately, for many students these two changes (increased disconnection and decreased support) occur at the same time. Feeling disconnected may help explain why, by high school (HS), as many as 40-60% of students are chronically disengaged (Klem & Connell, 2004). Perhaps this feeling of disconnection is associated with Eaton et al.’s (2008) finding that approximately 30% of high school students engage in multiple high-risk behaviors (e.g. substance use, sex, violence, depression) that interfere with academic performance, and ultimately, their potential for success in life.

As educators struggle to address the mental health concerns of their students, they should continue to explore ways to use SEL as a vehicle for the provision of primary prevention and intervention efforts. It is a fortunate reality that, “unlike IQ, the abilities that comprise “emotional intelligence” can be acquired and/or strengthened,” (Norris, 2003, p. 314). SEL curricula are correlated with increased cognitive performance, improved classroom climate, and
decreased behavior problems (Garner, 2010) as well as significant improvements in academic achievement (Dix, Lee, Lawson, & Keeves, 2012). Other studies report improved peer relations, pro-social behaviors, social competence, better self management, lower levels of aggression, and significant decreases in internalizing behaviors (Caldarella, 2009; Raimundo, Marques-Pinto, & Lima, 2013), along with gains in self efficacy, problem solving, and social emotional competencies (Linares, 2005). It is also important to note that while SEL programs have been found to be successful at all levels, they have been studied least often in high schools (Durlak et al., 2011).

While the benefits of incorporating SEL into the school day seem clear in the research, as it stands now, many view education as a predominantly academic venture instead of a major influence on the growth and development of children. It seems that many educators still consider SEL a competitor to more traditional academic pursuits, rather than a vital and complementary component of the school day. As a result, students’ concerns about their family, friends, the world, and themselves are generally ignored. It is not until these underlying social and emotional concerns spill over into behavior problems, violence, and aggression that educators are forced into a reactive response. It is also an unfortunate reality that changing cultural trends have altered the landscape of childhood forever; adult worries and agendas have become part of the national arena, and children have nowhere to hide (Postman, 1994). They are inundated by the popular media and cannot hide from the adult world as Internet enabled devices become increasingly ubiquitous (Price, 2008).

The increasingly serious concerns facing our children are coupled with two other important changes in modern childhood, the increased use of electronics and the systematic reduction in unstructured play for young children (Miller, 2005; Almon & Miller, 2011). The
reduction in unstructured play has happened both in and out of school. In schools, as the focus moves more and more towards strictly academic pursuits, children have little time to engage with each other socially. For example, many schools across the US have modified (i.e. provided more structure), eliminated, or are considering eliminating recess (often the one time available for unstructured play during school hours). This trend persists despite research that illustrates the importance of unstructured playtime for children’s healthy physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2013).

While the trend towards less unstructured play began well before 2010, it was helped along that year by the adoption in the United States of the Common Core State Standards. These standards were developed to provide a common set of core educational standards for kindergarten through 12th grade students (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA) & Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), 2010). As of this writing, 42 states have adopted the Common Core Standards, however, there does appear to be some resistance, and a few states have outright rejected the Common Core. While the standards address SEL to a limited degree, they also call for kindergarteners to master more than 90 skills related to literacy and math, leaving little time for anything but academics in the classroom.

Broad agreement exists among educators and physicians that this ambitious curriculum is unhealthy for the psychological well-being of students and has increased the incidents of extreme and aggressive behavior (Almon & Miller, 2011).

As students’ social and emotional needs seem to be increasing and opportunities to learn social and emotional skills are disappearing, it is a grave mistake to allow SEL to fall by the wayside in exchange for increased focus on more traditionally academic activities. Regrettably, this appears to be the current state of things in public education and is the result of a variety of
factors. Perhaps most influential is the increased emphasis on using high stakes testing as a tool to define student and district success (Almon & Miller, 2011). In fact, most educators’ days seem to be centered on academic learning with little time allotted for addressing SEL with their students. This is perhaps a direct result of teachers feeling increased pressure for their students to perform academically, especially true at higher grade levels, as testing most often takes place in grades three and above. Teachers report that they have little time for SEL and when they are forced to make the time, they feel unprepared for the task (Ransford, et al., 2009). The good news is, research indicates that teachers are more likely to incorporate SEL into the school day and teach it with confidence when they receive quality training about SEL implementation and delivery (Durlak et. al, 2011); training that is likely to occur during professional development (PD) hours. In fact, PD is the most widely used method to train teachers concerning any curriculum implementation in schools.

While there is a large body of research discussing the components that increase the effectiveness of PD (Bechtel & O’Sullivan, 2006; Borko, 2004; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Guskey, 2009; Hunzicker, 2011; Lester, 2003; Lieberman & Pointer, 2008), there is very little research that specifically examines PD as it relates to SEL (Buchanan, et al., 2009; Garner, 2010; Durlak, et al., 2011; Ransford et al., 2009). Given this paucity, it seems clear that a thorough examination of teachers’ understandings of SEL and its importance, their PD experiences concerning SEL, and their needs in the area of SEL delivery would be of great service. In particular, those seeking to develop PD programming for teachers in this area would find such an understanding to be of great use in their efforts. The proposed research will help teachers be better equipped to address students many social and emotional needs before they
enter college, ultimately resulting in a work force that is more prepared to meet the growing demands of the 21st century.

**Positionality**

Broadly defined, positionality is one’s worldview. It is the sum of personal and professional experiences, encompassing everything from cultural background to gender, and can result in a variety of biases and predispositions (Carlton Parsons, 2008). My interest in emotional intelligence, the social emotional learning (SEL) that serves to develop it, and teachers’ perceptions of SEL and their training needs emerges from my personal and professional experiences. As Jenlink (2005), discusses, the responsible scholar practitioner is one who uses his or her life experience and the reflections of those experiences and feelings to build theories. However, while it is imperative that we embrace our past in order to both identify subject matter that interests us, it is equally important that we recognize any personal biases regarding those subjects. As Machi and McEvoy (2009) warn, “Personal attachment to an interest provides the passion and dedication necessary for conducting good research…Unfortunately, [it] can also carry bias and opinion, causing researchers to jump to premature conclusions,” (p.19). As I have discovered, I feel a deep attachment to this subject, both personally and professionally.

Having achieved much in spite of significant obstacles early on in life, I always wondered why I was “resilient,” one of the “lucky ones” who was able to succeed. Werner (1995) describes resilience as a child’s ability to demonstrate “good developmental outcomes despite high-risk status, sustained competence under stress, and recovery from trauma,” (p. 81). While not explicitly stated, it is clear that EI is conceptually related to resilience. “Resilient children are engaging to other people, adults and peers alike; they have good communication and problem-solving skills…” (p. 83). To all that know me, it is no secret that my ability to overcome
the adversity of my childhood and achieve personal and professional success in life is due, in large part, to the fact that I possess what many would recognize as higher than average EI. Exploring the factors that fortified my own resilience and gaining this understanding of myself has driven my passion for fostering the EI of the students I serve.

In my work with undergraduate students, I have seen firsthand the impacts of low EI. In the classroom, students’ social and emotional challenges can, at times, impede their academic success. This is apparent in my interactions with them, both in person and online; these challenges are evident in students’ group work, their interactions with peers and professors, and in the choices they make. This is particularly true of incoming freshman. In addition to my work in higher education, for the past eight years I have worked with students in K-12 all over the country. I provide workshops, leadership trainings, and large group presentations focused on bullying, cyberbullying, and digital responsibility to students ranging in age from four to eighteen. Students’ struggles with social and emotional challenges are also glaringly obvious in these groups. Students frequently want to explore the value and logistics of friendship, dealing with anger, why people commit suicide, how to stand up for their peers, and other important issues. While on the surface these topics may seem unrelated to academic success, students whose minds are filled with these concerns have little room to focus on math or science.

My interest in helping to develop more effective training opportunities for teachers also comes from the fact that as part of my current position, I train teachers in the area of bullying and cyberbullying prevention. In this role, I have become concerned about the overall quality of PD offered to teachers today. Many educators seem to view PD opportunities as inadequate. In fact, lack of high quality training is identified as one factor impacting the fidelity and quality of SEL delivery (Brophy, 1988; Buchanan, et al., 2009; Ransford et al., 2009). The proposed research
will help ensure that the PD opportunities my center provides meet the needs of professional adult learners. More importantly, my position allows for the quick and efficient dissemination of best practice information to a wide variety of administrators and educators.

**Research Questions**

What are teachers’ perceptions of and experiences with the delivery of SEL to high school students?

What are teachers’ understanding of SEL and its importance?

How do training opportunities meet teachers’ needs as adult learners?

**Theoretical Framework**

The study of teachers’ perceptions, experiences, and needs regarding SEL could be examined through a variety of lenses, but only one allows for the seamless transition from scholarly work to practice. For this reason, Knowles, Holton, & Swanson’s (2011) theory of andragogy in practice was chosen to explore teachers experiences with SEL at the high school level. This theory allows for a thorough examination of teachers experiences and accounts for the individual and situational factors that impact those experiences. Perhaps more importantly, it allows for the information to be gathered in such a way that the results can be easily translated from theoretical understandings to practical applications.

Knowles, Holton, & Swanson’s (2011) theory encompasses three components related to adult learning: the goals and purposes for adult learners, individual and situational differences for adult learners, and andragogy, the six core tenets of adult learning identified in Knowles (1973) original work. These original tenets of andragogy are: It is important that adults are given control of their learning and enjoy involvement in decisions about what, where, when, and how they will learn. They want access to trainings that have immediate utility and provide information and
opportunities that will assist them now, not in the future. Adults want to focus on issues that are of concern to them in their daily practice, in other words, issues that are clearly connected to their everyday lives. They also need opportunities to test their learning and theories as they go, not just at the beginning and end. Adult learners want to see the real world applications of what they are learning and are happy when they can easily anticipate how they will use the lessons they learn. There must be noticeable improvement in performance as a result of their learning. Adults are shrewd and will maximize the resources they possess as adults and use them to make learning successful and relevant. They prefer to learn in collaborative, respectful, and informal climates that allow for dialog and reflection. Finally, adults rely on information that is appropriate and developmentally paced; they need to have a clear understanding in place before they move on to the next step in the learning process (Knowles, 1973).

Interestingly, while the earliest educators were charged with teaching adults and not children, it was only after World War I that a systematic examination of the unique characteristics of adult learners was undertaken in any serious way. While many of the individual components that explain the needs and uniqueness of these learners were identified prior to the 1940’s, they were not integrated into a comprehensive whole until the 1950’s when social scientists became interested in the topic. This study of adult learning can be divided into two streams of inquiry, scientific and artistic. Thorndike first began a scientific inquiry through the use of rigorous investigation techniques. In contrast, Lindeman spearheaded the more artistic inquiry, which was driven by intuition and analysis of his own and others’ experiences. Lindeman’s inquiries in this area identified the following concepts related to adult learners: they are motivated to learn; they want to learn about things that are centered in their lives; the value of
their experiences must be recognized; adults need to be self-directed; and as adults develop, differences increase (Knowles et al., 2011).

The roots of the term andragogy are also important to explore. As mentioned above, little attention was paid to adult learners for a long time, therefore the term pedagogy, literally meaning the art and science of teaching children, seemed to stand alone. Until recently, adults were taught in many cases as if they were children and subjected to what can be described as teacher-directed education. Pedagogy was based on the assumption that learners only need to know what the teacher deems necessary to get promoted in a certain area; learners are dependent on the teacher to learn; they only become ready to learn when the teacher tells them what they need to know; learners are inclined towards learning subject content; and they are extrinsically motivated (Knowles et al., 2011, p. 62). Fortunately, a new way of conceptualizing the act of teaching adults, i.e. andragogy, was officially introduced in the US in 1967.

Upon andragogy’s introduction as a framework for understanding the unique needs of adult learners, its tenets became the standard by which trainings for adults were often evaluated and the ideal for which trainers strove. In fact, exploration of the literature concerning PD for teachers reveals that many of the elements identified as important in ensuring successful and effective learning opportunities are directly related to Knowles et al.’s (2011) theory. Professional development opportunities should support teachers' personal and professional needs. Accounting for individual learning styles and preferences is critical. Ensuring that teachers are intrinsically motivated to learn is also incredibly important (aka “buy in” must be fostered). It should be directly and clearly connected to their work in the classroom as well as integrated into each school day and throughout the school year. In addition it should be centered on both subject area content and how to teach it. Programs should be differentiated to accommodate varying
teaching assignments and career stages as well as the individual needs of teachers as mentioned above. Finally, it should be collaborative and on going (Hunzicker, 2011).

In addition to understanding the elements necessary for effective PD, it is critical that those developing training opportunities pay heed to educators’ perceptions and needs. As it stands, there is a growing body of research on the necessary elements, but there exists a paucity that examines teachers’ concerns and knowledge regarding these issues. However, even in the small body that currently exists, researchers have found that teachers’ needs and concerns fall directly in line with Knowles et al.’s (2011) theory.

Lester (2003) conducted a qualitative study of 93 secondary teachers and nine administrators from eight high school settings. The purpose of the study was to answer the question, “What makes PD effective for secondary educators?” (p. 49). The same PD program was offered in three locations and data was gathered in open-ended question surveys, interviews, focus groups, observations, and a reflective writing activity. Participants reported a preference for sessions where time was given for collaboration. Teachers reported an eagerness to learn (internally motivated and self-directed) and a desire to be heard (bring their own life experiences and knowledge and want to feel respected). In addition, participants reported that they want to be held accountable (goal oriented) (Lester, 2003).

When thinking about teachers’ ability to deliver SEL in the classroom, many of the same needs emerge. While one may not see the direct connection between administrator support and the quality and dosage of SEL, it seems clear that support signals to educators that what they are learning will be of use in their daily practice and is something worth taking the time to implement. It is also vital that teachers are provided opportunities to work through the logistics and practicalities of integrating SEL curricula into their ongoing classroom instruction
throughout the trainings rather than waiting until the end. Also imperative is that trainers find ways to individualize support, acknowledge teachers developmental needs, and move forward with training only when teachers are ready (Ransford, et. al, 2009). Buchanan and colleagues (2009) also found that in regards to SEL as a whole, most teachers believe it to have a practical and useful place in their daily instruction and agree that there is great benefit to their students, but need support from administrators.

Unfortunately, when first introduced, andragogy provided a framework for understanding the needs of adult learners, but it largely ignored the situational and individual factors that might impact the experiences of those learners. It was not until Knowles et al. (2011) introduced their most recent manifestation of adult learning theory that these factors gained recognition as crucial components in the adult learning process. This new framework therefore, offers the best of both worlds; it identifies and discusses the six main tenets of andragogy but also grounds those tenets in the individual and situational context from which they cannot be separated. This is critical as the current research effort seeks to explore teachers’ experiences, perceptions, and training needs around SEL. Without accounting for situational and individual factors, theoretical understandings are not likely to make an easy transition into practical applications.
Chapter Two

Review of the Literature

The purpose of this review of the literature is to examine the existing body of research regarding SEL programming and teachers’ perceptions and needs in this area. Specifically, the author sought to answer the following questions: What is SEL and why is it necessary? What are the barriers that teachers face in their efforts to implement SEL at the high school level? Why is SEL of particular importance to high school students? What are the elements that are recognized as increasing the quality of SEL delivery? The literature in this area is clear; effectively implemented SEL is highly correlated with a variety of positive outcomes for students. In order for such implementation to occur, it is imperative that the needs of those at the front lines of SEL delivery, i.e. teachers, are understood and used to develop high quality training programs. Such programs should be offered on a continuous basis, enjoy high levels of support from administration, focus on content knowledge and generalization of skills, and be provided with the necessary resources. In addition, any training provided to teachers should seek to meet their needs as adult learners, i.e. offer them control over learning content and structure of training programs and be seen as useful and connected to their everyday lives among other things. Given the importance of well-trained teachers, it seems only logical that a better understanding of teachers’ perceptions of SEL and training needs in this area will be of great use to scholars and practitioners alike.

Introduction

More and more students are graduating high school without the ability to manage emotions and interact effectively with others, skills associated with EI. These students inevitably end up struggling, whether in the college classroom, the workplace, or the world at large.
Currently, many students seem ill prepared to face the variety of stressors they feel in the transition to college; they struggle making new relationships with a diverse student body, learning new study habits, and figuring out how to function as independent adults (Parker et al., 2004). In fact, it seems that a failure to master tasks such as these is one of the major reasons that many students who attend higher education withdraw before graduation (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Keefer et al., 2012).

In addition to the role that EI plays in the transition to college (see Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Parker et al., 2004; Keefer et al., 2012), children who lack these associated competencies may have difficulty learning, can disrupt the educational experience for other students, and become a drain on the energy and resources of school personnel, as their behavior problems require immediate and constant attention (Elias, et al., 2003). In fact, some speculate that dealing with emotional problems is one of the biggest challenges facing educators (McCabe, et al., 2000). Unfortunately, such problems are not rare; as many as 15 to 22% of young people experience social, emotional, and mental health problems that require treatment (Greenberg et al., 2001).

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), SEL is the process by which children learn valuable skills such as recognizing and managing emotions, developing caring and concern for others, establishing positive relationships, making responsible decisions, and handling challenging situations constructively and ethically (CASEL, 2007); skills broadly defined as EI. Generally speaking, EI is defined as the capacity to process emotional information accurately and efficiently, including the ability to perceive, assimilate, understand, and manage the emotions of oneself and others (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2000). Possessing EI means that one is able to effectively resolve and manage conflict, calm oneself
when upset or angry, make ethical and safe choices, and recognize the emotional state of self and others, among other important inter- and intra- personal skills, which enable people to better cope with the demands of daily life in an increasingly diverse and interconnected world.

In addition to the importance of EI in the personal lives of students, educational researchers agree that awareness, appraisal, and understanding of emotions are all critical to creating positive classroom environments for students and teachers alike (Meyer & Turner, 2006). As mentioned earlier, it is a fortunate reality that, “unlike IQ, the abilities that comprise “emotional intelligence” can be acquired and/or strengthened,” (Norris, 2003, p. 314). As educators search for ways to enhance the EI of their students, they would be well served to acknowledge that SEL provides a vehicle to do just that. Unfortunately, those at the front lines of SEL implementation in high schools, i.e. teachers, report that they have little time to address these issues and when they are forced to make the time, they feel unprepared for the task, largely due to the lack of high quality training (Ransford et al., 2009).

Social and emotional learning is widely recognized as a critical component in achieving overall well-being for students, providing them with the crucial skills they need to succeed in a fast-paced, competitive, global society. Given that the positive effects of SEL are mediated by the quality and fidelity of program delivery, a thorough examination of teachers’ perceptions and needs regarding SEL, will serve to increase the positive outcomes for students. For these reasons, the current review of the literature will focus on the following: defining SEL and its correlation with EI and positive outcomes for students, examining the particular needs of high school students in this area, exploring the current understanding of teachers needs in this area, and identifying the elements recognized as increasing the quality and quantity of SEL programs.
Defining SEL

As defined by CASEL (2007), SEL is a process to help students obtain the skills, attitudes, and knowledge that provide a foundation for ethically and effectively handling our relationships with others and ourselves in our personal and professional lives. Social and emotional learning is based in the idea that children who possess such skills will achieve more in school, the work place, and society at large. CASEL (2012) has identified five core competency clusters concerning SEL.

Self-awareness is the first cluster and is concerned with the ability to accurately recognize one’s emotions and their impacts on thoughts and behavior. The ability to accurately assess strengths and weaknesses is key and results in a well-grounded sense of confidence and optimism. When one is able to recognize emotions, management of those emotions becomes far easier; self-management is the second competency cluster. This includes the ability to regulate emotions, thoughts, and behaviors regardless of the situation. Managing stress, motivating oneself, controlling impulses, and setting and working towards goals are all included in this cluster.

Understanding oneself is key, but no one lives a truly solitary life, rendering relationship skills as important as those having to do with oneself. In this vein, social awareness is the third competency identified by CASEL. This includes the ability to empathize with and understand the perspective of those from diverse backgrounds and cultures. It also includes the capacity to understand social and ethical norms. Finally, social awareness includes recognition of family, school, and community supports and resources.

Relationship skills are identified as the fourth competency; students should possess the ability to establish and maintain healthy relationships with individuals and groups from diverse
backgrounds. This is possible when they know how to communicate effectively, listen actively, cooperate, negotiate conflicts, resist inappropriate social pressure, and both ask for and offer help when necessary.

Lastly, the ability to make responsible decisions is identified as the fifth competency. Remaining thoughtful of ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms, consequences of actions, and the well being of self and others while making decisions about personal behavior and social interactions is another critical component of social and emotional competency (CASEL, 2012).

Elias et. al (1997) identified 27 values associated with SEL and while the areas are slightly different, they were also classified into five broad categories: self-development, caring, respect, responsibility, and spiritual values. Some of the values these researchers identified were: confidence, creativity, self-discipline, love, helpfulness, honesty, justice, loyalty, service, courtesy, honor, tolerance, peacefulness, reflectiveness, and reverence among others (p. 6).

In later work, Elias (2009) lists some of some of the skills he feels are necessary for citizens to be able to maintain these values. According to this researcher, knowing and managing one’s emotions and recognizing strengths in self and others are critical skills that require children to take others’ perspectives and perceive others’ feeling accurately. Also important is the ability to listen and communicate carefully and accurately. In addition, children should show ethical and social responsibility when interacting with diverse others. The ability to set adaptive goals while solving problems and making decisions effectively is also important. Children’s capabilities when working in and leading teams is also vital and includes the ability to cooperate, negotiate and manage conflicts peacefully, build constructive, mutual, ethical relationships, as well as seek out and offer help (p. 834). Effective SEL curriculum addresses all of these skills in its content.
and works to help students generalize the skills. According to Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan (2013), the short term goals of SEL programs are to, “(1) promote students self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship, and responsible decision making skills; and (2) improve student attitudes and beliefs about self, others, and school,” (p. 11). With SEL programs, children are provided a foundation for better overall adjustment and academic performance, reflected in more positive social behaviors and peer relationships, fewer conduct problems, less emotional distress, and improved grades and test scores (Bridgeland et al., 2013).

The Need for SEL Has Increased

In his 1994 book, The Disappearance of Childhood, Neil Postman explored how changing cultural trends have altered the landscape of childhood forever. Adult worries and agendas have become part of the national arena, and children have nowhere to hide. They are inundated by the popular media and cannot hide from the adult world as Internet enabled devices become increasingly ubiquitous (Price, 2008).

The increasingly serious concerns facing our children are coupled with two other important changes in modern childhood, the increased use of electronics and the systematic reduction in unstructured play for young children (Miller, 2005; Almon & Miller, 2011). Beginning in 2010, a state led movement in the United States has worked toward the adoption of the Common Core State Standards. These standards were developed to provide a common set of core educational standards for kindergarten through 12th grade students (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA) & Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), 2010). At this point 42 states have adopted the Common Core Standards. While on the surface these standards address SEL, they also call for kindergarteners to master more than 90 skills related to literacy and math, leaving little time for anything but academics in the classroom.
Unfortunately, broad agreement exists among educators and physicians that the adoption of such sped up curriculum is unhealthy for the well-being of students and has increased the incidents of extreme and aggressive behavior (Almon & Miller, 2011).

As mentioned earlier, opportunities for unstructured play in childhood have been systematically reduced through the years. This has happened both in and out of school. In schools, as the focus moves more and more towards strictly academic pursuits, children have little time to engage with each other socially. For years, the one place that always afforded this luxury was recess. Unfortunately, many schools across the US have modified (i.e. provided more structure), deleted, or are considering deleting recess. This trend persists even in the face of the research that illustrates the importance of unstructured playtime for children’s healthy physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2013).

One study offered striking evidence regarding the long-term impacts of academics only focused education in early childhood. The Perry Preschool Study was a longitudinal study designed to assess the impacts of academic vs. play-based (PB) preschools on children of a low socioeconomic (SES) class. Children were randomly assigned to either an academically-based (AB) or PB classroom. Outcomes were assessed through age twenty-three. By the end of preschool, children in the academically based class showed greater IQ scores but those advantages were lost by the end of elementary school, when children’s IQ scores and other measures of academic achievement seem to even out. Assessment across other areas highlighted the clear advantages of PB programs in both the academic and personal lives of children. At age twenty-three, 47% of the children in the AB program had utilized special education services, compared to 6% in the PB group; 34% had been convicted of a felony offense, compared to 9% in the PB group; 27% had been suspended from work, none in the PB group had; none of the AB
group were married or living with anyone, 31% in the PB group were; and finally, only 11% in the AB group had done volunteer work, compared to 43% from the PB group (Almon & Miller, 2011, p. 3). It seems clear that a much wiser practice would be to use early childhood education as a time to, “begin building the bridge toward print literacy, not [as a time to] cross that bridge and stand firmly on the other side,” (Almon, 2013, p. 13).

Finally, the increase in the use of electronics among students has exacerbated the problem. Children are afforded less time to engage in unstructured play at school and when they do engage with their friends out of school, many of the interactions occur online (Miller, 2005). The majority of developmental psychologists agree that one of the major tasks of childhood is to master the skills of regulating emotion, solving problems, developing flexibility, and the ability to pay attention, among others. There is little evidence that these skills are learned online, which robs children of yet another opportunity to acquire them (Miller, 2005).

**The Need is Even Greater for Older Students**

It is no secret that adolescence is a period of vast developmental change. Most children in this stage will adjust well to the stresses and changes, but that does not mean that SEL should fall by the wayside as children get older. In fact, given the unique nature of adolescent development, it may be even more vital at this stage. Some of the unique tasks of this stage include developing the ability to make friends, honing skills aimed at social interaction, and in the effort to form a sense of identity, engaging in thorough self-analysis. Children in this stage also begin to resist the influence of adults and attempt to gain a sense of independence, all while developing peer relationships (Manning, 1993). Perhaps this explains claims that, “somewhere between 25% and 50% of all young people in the United States between the ages of 10 and 17 are at risk for curtailed educational, economic, and social opportunities due to their engagement in high-risk
behaviors and activities,” (Carnegie Council, 1995, p. 10). Given this frightening estimate, educators should continue to explore ways to use SEL as a vehicle for the provision of primary prevention and intervention efforts.

Blum and Libbey (2004) looked at how schools can best strengthen personal and academic outcomes for teenagers. In their research, they found a few important trends impacting older students today. For most students in middle school and beyond, there are fewer emotional supports available at school. As students progress K-12 they report feeling a lack of connection with school that appears to negatively impact their academic performance, behavior, and overall health (Blum & Libbey, 2004). Unfortunately, for many students this feeling of disconnection and a lack of support occurs at the same time. It may be the disconnected feeling of students that led to the fact that, by high school, as many as 40-60% of students are chronically disengaged (Klem et al., 2004). Perhaps it can also explain, Eaton et al.’s (2008) finding that approximately 30% of high school students engage in multiple high-risk behaviors (e.g. substance use, sex, violence, depression) that interfere with academic performance, and ultimately, their potential for success in life.

Given all of the particular challenges faced by high school students, it is not surprising that teachers at this level report increased instances of social and emotional problems as one of the biggest challenges they face during the school day (Garner, 2010). While many teachers report feeling overwhelmed by the academic standards their students must meet, they also appear to recognize SEL as an essential part of student learning. While the vast majority of teachers (77%) do report that social and emotional skills are most important for elementary aged students, a sizeable majority (56%) also recognize its importance for high school aged students and feel it should be a priority during the school day (Bridgeland et al., 2013). Most recognize that
implementing SEL in the classroom will increase their workload, but still report feeling an ethical, moral, and professional responsibility to go beyond a narrow focus on academic learning and promote social and emotional well-being (Lasky, 2005). In fact, 93% of teachers agree that is very important or fairly important for schools to promote the development of social and emotional skills at all ages (Bridgeland et al., 2013).

As discussed earlier, high school students are entering higher education lacking the social and emotional skills necessary for success (Parker et. al., 2004). In their examination of the relationship between EI and the academic success of 372 college freshman, Parker et. al. (2004) found evidence that intrapersonal skills, adaptability, and stress management abilities are all correlated with the successful transition to college. More specifically, the ability to distinguish and label feelings and use that information to guide behavior was highly correlated with academic achievement. Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994) conducted a longitudinal study examining the relationship between academic and social and emotional factors and student attrition. These researchers found that not only were social and emotional factors correlated with attrition rates, they predicted attrition as well as, if not better than, academic factors. The evidence seems clear; SEL and the resulting increases in EI can be especially beneficial for older students.

**Defining Emotional Intelligence (EI)**

The definition of EI has gone through many changes over the years. The term was first seen in the academic literature in the mid-1960s but was not widely used until the 1990’s when Salovey and Mayer (1990) offered a more clearly developed definition (Mayer & Cobb, 2000). These researchers defined EI as a purely intellectual ability, focusing on the ability to monitor the emotions and feelings of self and others, to discriminate among those emotions and feelings,
and to use this knowledge to guide one’s thinking and actions. In this theory of EI, there are four broad classes of abilities: perception, integration, understanding, and management of emotion. This includes the capacities for attending to and recognizing feelings, using emotions in thought and communication, reasoning with feelings, and managing feelings appropriately (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). This understanding of EI has given way to a more expanded definition that views EI as a skill or ability comprised of both intellectual and personality factors (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 1999). This mixed model of EI refers more to the full combination of dispositions and self-perceptions that impact our abilities to recognize, process, and use information about emotions in ourselves and others (Ferrando et. al., 2011). Further developing this definition, Elksnin & Elksnin (2003) discuss five domains of EI: knowing one’s emotions; managing one’s emotions; motivating oneself; recognizing the emotions of others; and effectively using social skills when interacting with others.

**Connection Between EI and Overall Student Well-being**

There has been a plethora of research examining the relationship between EI and the academic, personal, and professional success of students. As discussed earlier, many researchers have found that low levels of EI can lead to a variety of behavioral and academic problems. Greenberg et. al. (2003) found that social and emotional problems in children are associated with higher school drop-out rates, increased occurrences of drug use and abuse, higher rates of antisocial behaviors, and lower levels of academic achievement.

Much of the research on the negative outcomes associated with low EI have looked at younger children, but have found that the negative effects persist, even into adulthood. For example, Rydell, Berlin, & Bohlin (2003) used a longitudinal design to look at emotionality, emotional regulation, and behavioral adaptation of five to eight year old children. These
researchers found that high anger emotionality and low regulation of positive emotions predicted low levels of pro-social behaviors and long term behavioral problems. Supporting this research with younger children, Garber, Braafladt, & Weiss (1995) and Silk, Steinberg, & Morris (2003), looked at these issues in older children and adolescents. Both research teams looked at the links between depressive symptoms and emotional regulation. They found that adolescents who are unable to effectively regulate emotion may be at increased risk for depression, show an inability to seek out support from others, and report feeling disengaged from school and the world at large (Garber et. al., 1995; Silk et. al., 2003).

Many researchers have taken a different approach by looking at the benefits of EI. In their 2001 study, Garner and Estep paid particular attention to peer-related behaviors. These researchers found that EI is highly correlated with peer-popularity (as reported by teachers and peers), the ability to initiate social exchanges, positive conceptions of peer experiences, pro-social, and empathetic behaviors. Other researchers have reported similar results when looking at older children (Dunn, 1995). Some even report that higher levels of EI were correlated with being more likeable by peers and having healthier friendships (Eisenberg, Sadovsky, & Spinrad, 2005). Interestingly, this is coupled with research that looks at how pro-social behaviors are essential in forming friendships, widely recognized as a protective factor against a variety of noxious circumstances (Doll & Lyon, 1998). Adams, Santo, and Bukowski (2011) conducted a study to assess how negative experiences were impacted by the presence of a best friend. These researchers provided further proof that having a support network, specifically a best friend, when encountering unpleasant experiences, helped to buffer the negativity of the experience, as demonstrated through cortisol levels and ratings of global self-worth.
Perhaps most important to note are the significant correlations that have been found between EI and academic success. Duckworth & Seligman (2005) conducted a longitudinal study of eighth-grade students to assess the impacts of self-discipline, recognized as a critical component of EI, on academic achievement. Amazingly, they found that self-discipline was a better predictor of academic achievement than IQ. Some of the specific factors they looked at were students’ abilities to set high goals for themselves, motivate themselves, manage their stress, and organize their approach to work. They found that all of these things were correlated with better grades. Ferrando et. al. (2005) found the same positive correlations between EI and academic performance, even when controlling for IQ, personality, and self-concept. Finally, given the current focus on college readiness, it is also important to note that emotional intelligence seems to be correlated with a successful transition to college. As mentioned earlier, intrapersonal skills, adaptability, and stress management, all skills clearly related to emotional intelligence, appear to be important factors in the transition from high school to college (see Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Parker et al., 2004; Keefer et al., 2012).

**Correlation Between SEL and Positive Outcomes**

In a 2011 meta-analysis, Durlak et al. examined at 213 school-based, broad-based SEL programs that involved 270,034 Kindergarten through HS students. Overall they found that SEL programs had significant positive effects on students’ social and emotional competencies and their attitudes about self, others, and school. In addition, taking part in SEL programs was found to increase pro-social behaviors and reduce conduct problems. Perhaps one of the most compelling findings, and the one of most interest to educators, is that students showed an average 11-percentile-point gain in achievement as measured by reading and math scores on the Stanford Achievement Test or the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. A final important point to note is
that Durlak et. al. (2011) found that SEL programs are successful at all levels but point out that they have been studied least often in high schools and rural areas.

Merrell, Juskelis, Tran, & Buchanan (2008) conducted three pilot studies to assess the effectiveness of Strong Kids and Strong Teens. While this study looked at a specific curriculum, it is important because it included three very different populations: general education students in an upper middle class suburban elementary school, general education students in a junior high school located in a working class area, and finally special education students from a large metropolitan high school. Regardless of the population, students who took part in the Strong Kids or Strong Teens curriculum showed significant increases in their knowledge of social and emotional concepts and effective coping strategies. Two of the three populations saw significant decreases in self-reported social and emotional problem symptoms (Merrell et. al., 2008).

When looking at the impacts of specific SEL curriculum on peer relationships and related pro-social behaviors, researchers have continued to find that there is a strong correlation with positive peer relationships. Raimundo, Marques-Pinto, and Lima (2013) looked at the implementation of an SEL curriculum with 213 fourth-grade students and used self and teacher reports to assess gains in social and emotional competencies, specifically peer relations and social competence. The researchers found that the average student improved their relationships with peers and overall social competencies. Boys in the study showed better self-management and lower levels of aggression (Raimundo et al., 2013).

A number of researchers have looked at academic achievement and SEL. Garner (2010) conducted an interdisciplinary review of the literature about the relationship between emotional competencies and learning. In her review, she found many links between EI and overall academic success. Students with a better understanding of emotion show greater language
competence and verbal abilities, are better at focusing and sustaining their attention in the classroom, show superior overall school adjustment, and have higher IQ and achievement test scores. Linares et. al. (2005), looked specifically at the *Unique Minds School Program*. This program was designed to promote cognitive-social-emotional skills, including self-efficacy, problem solving, social-emotional competence, and a positive classroom climate. Another goal of this program was to prevent behavioral problems, thereby promoting academic learning. In addition to the improvements in EI that other research has found, students in the intervention school showed improvement in math grades, and these gains persisted over a two year follow up (Linares et. al., 2005).

In addition to the above-mentioned benefits, SEL also shows great promise for creating safe and supportive environments for student learning. This falls directly in line with the tenets put forth in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001; an act intended to, “build the mind and character of every child, from every background, in every part of America,” (as cited in Kress, Norris, Schoenholz, Elias, & Seigle, 2004, p. 70). Student learning cannot occur effectively when students do not feel safe and supported in school and policy makers seemed to recognize this when drafting this legislation. Classroom management is one component to ensuring student safety and this is greatly improved with effectively implemented SEL. Classrooms that integrate SEL offer opportunities to recognize and manage emotion, use active listening, acknowledge challenges and problems, set goals, generate alternatives, and create plans of action among other things. All skills related to classroom management (Norris, 2003).

**Impacts on the Availability of SEL for Older Students**

**Teacher attitudes about SEL.** While further exploration is needed in this area, research has begun to examine teacher attitudes about SEL. So far, findings are positive. A large-scale
survey of 600 teachers across the nation recently found that 95% of those surveyed believe that social and emotional skills are teachable and that increasing students E1 will benefit all students, regardless of their background. While improving academic achievement and overall student well-being is the short term goal, teachers also felt that SEL would be of great benefit because of positive impacts on workforce and college readiness, attendance and graduation rates, and overall success in life. In this survey eight in ten teachers reported that they believe SEL has major benefits for students’ ability to stay on track for graduation, perform on standardized tests, and perform well academically. In addition, the vast majority (79%) felt that SEL has the ability to improve student behavior. When teachers reported negative school climate as a concern, the majority (80%) identified SEL as a viable solution (Bridgeland et. al, 2013). It is clear that the overwhelming majority of teachers support SEL implementation.

Impacts on the Quality of SEL. Most researchers recognize that implementation quality matters (Ransford et. al., 2009; Garner, 2010; Durlak et. al., 2011; Dix et. al. 2012). It becomes even more important in an age of limited resources, increased time constraints (particularly at the high school level), and competing academic and social and emotional demands, that schools are able to effectively implement SEL programs. As it stands now, much of the SEL being taught is topic specific, i.e. bullying, violence, substance use, etc. While often effective on their own, topic-specific SEL programs face difficulties in addressing the overall social and emotional competencies of children. Ideally, SEL interventions should be provided to the entire student body, be effective under real-world conditions, i.e. in the classroom, and should deliver developmentally and culturally appropriate messages (Durlak et. al., 2011).

In an effort to support this argument, Dix, Slee, Lawson, & Keeves (2012) conducted a longitudinal study to assess how the quality of implementation impacts the academic
achievement of students. After controlling for differences in socioeconomic status (SES), the researchers found a significant positive relationship between implementation quality and academic achievement. Schools were considered “well implemented” if there was fidelity, a large number of lessons taught, and there was quality in the delivery process. Students in these schools showed significantly improved learning outcomes as compared with students in the “poorly implemented” schools. The gains were equivalent to receiving an additional six months of schooling. Teachers’ reports also strengthened the findings; over the two-year evaluations, teachers in the well-implemented school felt that students’ schoolwork improved increased by 14% (Dix et. al., 2012).

**Teachers’ ability to effectively implement SEL.** As it stands now, the majority of SEL programming is being taught by classroom teachers (CASEL, 2007). Regrettably, many researchers (Buchanan et. al., 2009; Ransford et al., 2009; Garner, 2010; & Durlak et. al., 2011) report a paucity of research about teachers’ needs in this area. Such an understanding could work to ensure that teachers are better able to effectively implement SEL. In the little research that has been done, teachers report that they receive very little training about how to most effectively develop the social and emotional skills of students, and more specifically, how to successfully implement SEL programming (Brophy, 1988).

Ransford et. al. (2009) examined the role of teachers’ psychological experiences and perceptions of support on the implementation of SEL. To do this, they looked at the dosage (number of lessons) and quality (effort to generalize lessons for students) of SEL lessons taught by teachers. These researchers found that feelings of efficacy, the conviction of teachers that they can influence how well children learn, were highly correlated with dosage and quality; feelings of burnout were negatively correlated. In addition, they found that positive perceptions of
support and higher levels of preparation due to training were both positively correlated with
dosage and quality of implementation. It is also important to note that despite reporting higher
levels of administrative support at the high school level, exploratory analyses found lower levels
of dosage and quality at this level, which subjects reported was mostly due to the limited amount
of training they received (Ransford et. al., 2009).

Buchanan et al (2009) conducted a study to assess teachers’ knowledge, perceptions, and
practices concerning SEL. They found that 37.5% of the teachers in their study were not satisfied
with their current knowledge and skill base and only one-fifth reported that they had received
any training about SEL. More recent research has also identified this as an area of need. Only a
little over half of teachers (55%) report receiving any sort of SEL training, and the majority of
those teachers (60%) are preschool and elementary school teachers. All of this occurs in the face
of a great desire on the part of teachers to learn about SEL. Eighty-two percent of teachers report
that they are interested in further training opportunities; 61% report that they are “fairly” or
“very” interested in such opportunities (Bridgeland, et. al, 2013). Teachers must feel confident
in their abilities and have the skills and resources necessary to effectively implement SEL
programming. Providing quality training to teachers increases the likelihood that they will feel
certain and as a result, easily and efficiently implement programs and take advantage of
opportunities for improvement.

Conclusion

SEL is gaining momentum in education and research has clearly shown that SEL is a
critical component in achieving overall student well-being (Garner & Estep, 2001; Greenberg et.
al., 2001; Parker et. al., 2004; CASEL, 2012). Providing broad based SEL curriculum to students
results in higher levels of EI (Durlak et. al., 2011). High levels of EI result in the ability of
children to recognize, process, and use information about emotions in themselves and others (Ferrando et. al., 2011), enabling them to better cope with the demands of daily life (Bar-On, 2003). It provides them with the crucial skills they need to succeed in a fast-paced, competitive, global society (Postman, 1994; Bar-On, 2003). The need for SEL seems particularly vital for HS students as they make the transition to higher education (Parker et. al., 2004) or the world of work (Huit, 1999).

While SEL seems to be clearly correlated with overall student well-being, research has also shown that the quality and fidelity of program implementation moderates the positive outcomes for students (Ransford et. al., 2009; Durlak et. al., 2011). Given that the majority of programs are taught in the classroom by teachers (Durlak et. al., 2011), it is important to listen to their experiences and needs in this area. In the limited body of research that does exist, teachers report that even when they receive ample support and programs are available for implementation, they receive little to no training and as a result do not feel confident in their abilities to implement the programs or work with students to generalize skills (Ransford et. al., 2009). This may be why there is a particular scarcity at the high school level (Durlak et. al., 2011). In addition, teachers report academic demands, time constraints, and resources as factors in their inability to provide effective SEL to their students (Bridgeland et al., 2013; Buchanan et. al., 2009; Dix et. al. 2012; Garner, 2010).

Given the many benefits of SEL and the likelihood that it will be taught by classroom teachers, it seems that further examinations of teachers’ experiences, perceptions, and needs regarding SEL, would be of great benefit to the growing body of literature. As researchers continue to explore teachers’ perceptions and experiences with SEL implementation, specifically concerning their current knowledge, skill base, and training needs, administrators, legislators,
program developers, and PD providers will be better able to meet those at the front lines of SEL implementation and therefore the needs of students in K-12 and beyond. Ideally, all of this will occur in the context of lawmakers and Department of Education officials identifying the social and emotional well-being of students as a priority in education.
Chapter 3

Methodology

Social and emotional learning is widely recognized as a tool that can help foster emotional intelligence among students, but unfortunately, in the current education system, SEL is often treated as an afterthought rather than a central component of the school day. In order for SEL to be widely available, it must enjoy policy and administrative support but little attention has been paid to those most often at the front lines of SEL delivery, teachers. The current study addressed this paucity through an exploration of teachers’ perceptions and experiences concerning the delivery of SEL at the high school level. Given the diversity of teachers, students, and the school communities in which they exist, particular attention was paid to the individual and situational factors that inform teachers’ experiences with SEL. A better understanding of teachers’ perceptions of SEL, their experiences in delivering SEL, and their training needs regarding SEL will not only serve to expand the current research body in this area, but perhaps more importantly, lead to the creation of training opportunities that better meet the needs of the teachers they serve.

In this chapter, personal and academic choices for methodology are explored. The reader is introduced to the paradigm lens through which the research questions were examined. A detailed description of participant sampling and recruitment is provided. Data collection and storage is discussed in detail. Data analysis procedures are presented and finally, issues of trustworthiness are considered.

Paradigm

While a deeper understanding of teachers’ experiences is of great use to the research community, the work of a scholar practitioner is intended to create change, in this case, changes
to available training opportunities. For these reasons, the current study was conducted from a functionalist-interpretivist paradigm. Research is of no use unless it can be applied in the field. As Burrell & Morgan (1979) discuss, functionalism is “highly pragmatic in orientation, concerned to understand society in a way which generates knowledge which can be put to use,” (p. 26). The main concern is to provide practical solutions to practical problems. In this paradigm the researcher is responsible for identifying a problem of practice and offering a real solution for that problem. A deep understanding of individual teachers’ experiences with the delivery of SEL is vital in understanding the current problem of practice. For this reason, an interpretivist paradigm was also used. This allowed for the diverse and varied experiences of high school teachers to come to light and left room for a discussion of those experiences. By its very nature, interpretivism seeks to explore the specifics of individual experiences and understand them in a way that honors those individuals multiple realities (Pontottoro, 2005).

**Methodology**

Qualitative research is, by it’s very nature, a subjective experience. Therefore, it is important to choose a methodology based not only on topic, but also with a deep understanding of what the researcher brings to the table from a personal standpoint. The chosen method for the current study was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This methodology was appropriate for the topic and the researcher’s style as a person and researcher. Interpretation of participant meaning calls upon the researcher’s inherent ability to “read” people. The intuitive nature of interpreting interview transcripts (akin to “reading” people) is one reason IPA was a good fit, as one of the major underpinnings of IPA is hermeneutics (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).
The current study examined high school teachers’ experiences while paying close attention to the individual and situational factors that impact those experiences. By its very nature, IPA seeks to understand how participants make personal meaning from experiences, but also how that meaning is impacted or created by the context of the social world in which they live (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011). This fits very well with both the purpose of the current study (to explore teachers experiences with SEL delivery at the high school level) and with the framework being utilized to examine this issue (Andragogy in Practice). In addition, understanding of how people make sense of their experiences is indicative of an IPA methodology, rather than a more traditional phenomenological approach, which seeks to describe the experiences themselves (Smith et al., 2009). The lines between these two approaches can be blurry but as a Northeastern University instructor once said, “It’s about how do they make sense of their experiences [IPA] versus how do they experience [phenomenology],” (personal communication, T. Sanders, February 10, 2015).

**Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

Interpretative phenomenological analysis is a relatively new approach to qualitative research, originating with the work of Jonathan Smith in 1996. Three areas inform this approach: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. Each area is discussed in regards to its major contributions to IPA.

**Phenomenology.** Phenomenology is the study of “what the experience of being human is like,” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 11). The founding principle of phenomenology is that one should look at experience on its own terms and in the way it occurs and in order to do so, one must talk to those experiencing it and attempt to understand it in their words and from their perspectives. This then provides the researcher with a description of the *essence* of the experience (Smith et al.,
One of the major underpinnings of IPA, reflective bracketing of prior experiences, assumptions, ideas, etc. on the part of the researchers, is taken from the ideas of Husserl (Dowling, 2007). Heidegger is another philosopher with important ideas in regards to the phenomenological underpinnings of IPA, but is also important in relation to the hermeneutic foundations, which will be discussed later. Heidegger wondered how any knowledge could exist outside of an interpretative stance (hence his influence on the hermeneutic backings of IPA). He felt that every person, and therefore every person’s descriptions of their experiences, is situated in a world filled with objects, relationships, and language and that our experiences of those things are dependent on perspective, time, and our relationship to that thing (Smith et al., 2009). In other words, he felt that no experience could be understood outside of its context.

**Hermeneutics.** Stated as simply as possible, hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation. It is a body of thought that is concerned with how people interpret the words of others (originally via text, specifically the Bible, and later with spoken word) (Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger is the person who brought this idea into the phenomenological tradition. He felt that it was impossible to truly get to the essence of experience because the only thing we ever really have access to is a person’s *interpretation* of that experience; this is the first hermeneutic circle between participant and experience. IPA is seen to have sort of double hermeneutic circle; the researcher must interpret the participants meaning of their experiences (which have already been interpreted from experience to spoken word in the first circle), the second hermeneutic circle. In fact, a key idea of IPA is that the process of data analysis is iterative; researchers engage in interpretation and analysis in a cyclical, rather than linear fashion (Smith et al., 2009).

**Idiography.** While the aim of research in psychology is often to generalize findings to a population, idiography is concerned with the particular, which cannot be generalized.
Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is dedicated to the particular at two levels. First, IPA is committed to the fine and intricate details of peoples’ experiences in the world, hence the in depth analysis of interview transcripts. Second, IPA seeks to understand how a particular phenomena has been experienced by a particular individual in a particular context, resulting in the use of small, purposeful, homogenous samples (Smith et al., 2009). As such, findings are not meant to be generalized. Any transfer of findings to others is allowed only because of thick, rich description of the participants and their context, allowing for the identification of others who share the same qualities and may therefore be able to understand their experiences in similar ways. In addition, there are some analytic procedures used in IPA, i.e. looking for similarities in themes across participants, that allow for a more general understanding of the meaning of experiences while honoring the individual differences (aided by the identification of differences among participants) (Smith et al., 2009).

**Participants, Recruitment, Access**

This study examined the experiences of seven high school teachers. This was a purposeful sample. In IPA one is looking to explore how individuals experience a particular phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009), in this case, delivery of SEL, and must recruit participants who share those experiences. As a result, this was also be a homogenous sample. While the absence of random sampling is generally viewed as a threat to the validity of a study, using any type of phenomenological methodology requires examination of a population with shared exposure to a specific phenomena and does not allow for random sampling to take place (Creswell, 2013). The sample was also a convenience sample as the researcher’s professional contacts were utilized. Snowball sampling was also be used, as many teachers had colleagues working in similar environments and who fit the sampling criteria.
A small sample size of seven participants was used to help achieve the primary goal of IPA, which is to obtain a rich and detailed account of individuals’ experiences. In particular, it is suggested that students in a professional doctoral program use between four and ten interviews (in case one wants to interview the same participant multiple times) (Smith et al., 2009). In this case, one in-depth, semi structured interview was conducted with each of the seven participants.

Participants were identified and recruited via the use of the researcher’s membership in a public professional organization and were contacted via email. Initially, the researcher sent an email to the public email list. In this initial email, participants were introduced to the research study and the researcher herself. In many cases, participants were already familiar with the organization the researcher works for and sometimes with the researcher personally through group membership, may have helped increase their motivation to take part in the research and inspired feelings of trust early on (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The level of access to experienced and knowledgeable participants enjoyed by the researcher was instrumental in the creation of a diverse subject pool of participants that had extensive experience with the phenomena being studied (Creswell, 2013).

Data Collection

As a methodology IPA seeks to uncover how people experience the world on a very personal level. Therefore, it is suggested that researchers utilize techniques that provide rich, detailed, and first-person accounts of experiences. For this reason, in-depth interviews and diaries are suggested as the best methods for mining this kind of data (Smith et al., 2009). For the purposes of the current study, in-depth, in person, semi-structured interviews were used. This type of interview provides participants, “an opportunity to tell their stories, to speak freely and reflectively, and to develop their ideas and express their concerns at some length,” (Smith et al.,
A semi-structured interview also allowed for dialogue to emerge, and perhaps more importantly, for the researcher to modify initial questions as necessary based on participants’ responses. This was the perfect data collection method; it provided a detailed and in-depth view of how participants understand and experience the delivery of SEL at the high school level.

**Data Analysis**

Given the iterative and interpretative nature of IPA, analysis is a multi-directional process that requires, “fluid description and engagement with the transcript,” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 81). For this very reason, it is difficult to say that IPA follows a specific set of steps, but for novice researchers the following steps of analysis are offered as a guide.

**Reading and re-reading.** Analysis in IPA starts with the act of “immersing oneself in the original data,” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 82). For this reason, analysis began with listening to the audio recordings of the interviews at least once (some parts more often). This allowed the researcher to really hear the voice of participants (Rodham, et al., 2015). Recording of initial thoughts and ideas was done in analytic memos, helping to free the mind of clutter and bracket ideas, observations, and initial thoughts so that the focus remained on the data itself and not the researchers interpretations of it (there will be time to engage in that double hermeneutic later).

**Initial noting.** This step merged with step one and required an exploration of “the semantic content and language use,” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 83). In this phase the researcher noted anything of interest. This initial coding was very close to being a free textual analysis, as anything of importance was noted, and there were no real guidelines about what to take notes on, these initial notes were descriptive in nature. They included comments about the uses of language. Interpretations were offered in the form of conceptual comments, which called for reflection and an awareness of positionality (Smith et al., 2009).
**Developing emergent themes.** This was accomplished through the analysis of exploratory comments and through the honest and in-depth reflection on the data set, which was very familiar at this point in the process. This process brought to light what was important to the participant while also reflecting on the researchers interpretations. The themes reflected both descriptions and interpretations (Smith et al., 2009).

**Searching for connections across emergent themes.** This included charting or mapping how themes fit together. One of the major focuses of IPA is to identify both similarities and differences across data sets, so the researcher looked for overarching themes (abstraction) and for oppositional relationships (polarization) between themes in order to highlight both (Smith et al., 2009).

**Looking for patterns across cases.** The above process was repeated with all other participants’ transcripts. Finally, the researcher identified connections and similarities across interviews (Smith et al., 2009).

**Data Storage**

All digital data was kept in a secure computer and backed up into an external hard drive that only the researcher had access to during the course of the study. All paper files were kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher’s office.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

Given the researcher’s prior relationship with some of the subjects it was important to emphasize that participation is voluntary. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences and without affecting their relationship with the researcher or her organization. Written consent was obtained from all participants; this
included consent to take part in all phases and to have all data provided included in the dissertation and any future publications or presentations.

There were no significant risks posed to the participants at any phase of the research. In fact, given the researcher’s ability to immediately implement changes at her organization, it is likely that participants will benefit from more effective professional development opportunities in their continued partnerships with the researcher’s organization. Names, phone numbers, and emails were collected for the sole purpose of contacting them and setting up interviews. Demographic data was gathered from each participant, but confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms on all write-ups, presentations, or publications. While information gathered did not pose any risk to participants or their positions in their institutions, confidentiality worked to assuage any concerns participants had about sharing information regarding professional development opportunities at their institutions.

**Trustworthiness**

Many perspectives exist regarding how to best ensure that findings of a qualitative study are valid. The proposed research followed the guidelines proposed by Lincoln & Guba (1985), which follow a more naturalistic approach: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. It is this researchers view that these terms speak to what is, and is not, possible to validate when conducting qualitative research. In an effort to maintain the trustworthiness, validity, and credibility of my findings, the following techniques and strategies as proposed in Creswell (2013) were utilized: substantive validation, prolonged engagement, triangulation, clarifying researcher bias, and peer review and debriefing.

**Substantive validation.** Substantive validation is a process that requires the researcher to be an expert in their topic area. They should have a comprehensive understanding of the topic at
hand, in this case PD and SEL, be aware of how others view the topic, and should document this in their written report (Creswell, 2013). The researcher possesses a strong background knowledge in both areas. A comprehensive literature review was conducted in an effort to better understand other researchers’ work in this area. In addition, efforts were made to ensure that this study has value and rings true for those it seeks to benefit, i.e. high school teachers delivering SEL. Examination of the current research base ensured the value of this study by allowing the researcher to identify areas in which there is a paucity of research studies. In this case, there exists few qualitative examinations of teachers experiences regarding SEL delivery.

**Positioning the self.** Given that I have been providing professional development opportunities in my current position, it was important that I disclosed that to participants. My prior experience and background knowledge in this area served as lenses through which I viewed the data collected. Based on prior experience, and because of my theoretical orientation, andragogy in practice (Knowles, et al., 2011), I had ideas about what makes PD effective and what takes away from its effectiveness. Careful attention was paid to this as I interpreted results.

**Rich, thick description.** Given the diversity of the participants in this study (age, gender, years of experience, cultural background, context, etc.) it was imperative that participant demographics and context were described in great detail. While the ability to generalize findings is not of great importance in qualitative research, and is in fact, essentially impossible, it is important that readers have a sense of where these findings can be transferred to (Creswell, 2013). Clear and detailed descriptions of both participants and the context in which they work allows for readers to easily and reliably identify other contexts and participants in which findings can be applied.
**Triangulation.** Triangulation of sources was used. This entails using information gathered from different sources (i.e. participants) to uncover themes or codes across these data sets (Creswell, 2013). In this study, multiple participants from multiple sites were interviewed. Data was examined for emergent codes and themes across participants. It is important to note however that when outlying themes were found, they were not be discarded completely, but simply examined in more detail. They are reported in the analyses of individual interviews as well as being identified as theme outliers.

**In member checking.** Initial analyses of the data was brought back to the participants to provide opportunity for examination of the emerging themes and judgment of the credibility of the researchers findings (Creswell, 2013). This technique has often been described as one of the most powerful validation techniques and is used in many qualitative studies. This checking was accomplished by sending participants preliminary analyses via email for their review. This provided participants the opportunity to reflect on the accuracy of my initial analyses and offer clarifications and make changes where necessary.

**Peer review.** Finally, peer review (sometimes called an external audit) was conducted by one of the researchers colleagues. The chosen colleague is deeply familiar with qualitative methodologies and has vast experience in the qualitative data analysis. Once data was analyzed, she was provided with all materials (including interview transcripts) related to the study for her review. Upon review, she provided the researcher with her analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the study as a whole and a meeting was held to discuss her thoughts on the credibility of data analysis.
Chapter Four

Data Analysis

This chapter provides an overview of the major research findings of this study. In line with the chosen methodology, particular attention is paid to the experience of each individual participant and how they perceive and make sense of the role of SEL in their work with HS students. A detailed description of participants’ experiences working in high schools sheds light on the fact that while participants’ had varied backgrounds and worked in different locations, their perspectives on SEL were very similar. While few differences were uncovered, participants’ stories enable readers to better understand the current state of SEL in each participant’s life and practice.

This chapter begins with the presentation of participants’ stories. Teachers’ experiences are expressed in their own words, using direct quotes as a way to ensure that their voices were heard and their stories were told as they intended them. Initially, the researcher thought there may be a lot of variability in individuals experiences with SEL as a result of their individual and situational characteristics, but this variability wasn’t seen in any significant way. However, it was still important to explore each individuals SEL story as told from their perspective. For that reason, an introduction to each participant and a narrative of their experiences with SEL was provided, in their own words whenever possible. Then the researcher presented and discussed the emerging themes across each interview. Finally, a summary of the major research findings across interviews was presented.

Narrative Background of Participants

Participant 1: Carly “That’s my field and it’s my mission.” Carly is a 62 year old Caucasian woman working as a High School Early Childhood Education teacher at a technical
high school. Carly has worked in a high school for four years. In addition to her work at the secondary level, Carly has worked with preschool and elementary aged students for the past 28 years and also on and off with college aged students for the past 9 years. It was clear throughout the interview that Carly viewed SEL as a vital component in promoting academic and professional success for her students. As she discussed, “the most successful person is not going to be the one that has the highest IQ level, but has the highest probably EQ-level [emotional quotient, a term put forth by Daniel Goldman, a leading researcher in emotional intelligence].” Carly recognized that as a teacher, “you can learn all you want about how to teach reading, how to teach math, how to teach whatever subject it is, but within that teaching, you have to back up and you have to look at the person you're teaching and what's the most successful way to reach them.”

While it was clear that SEL had been a long-standing part of her work, Carly felt that students today have greater needs in this area. As she stated, “I believe that with all of the social media and all of the gaming and everything that goes on, students are losing the social and the emotional parts of themselves, so that they're not reaching out to each other as they would have. They don't have the luxury of going outside and being unstructured, as far as playing goes, or whatever, in relying on each other and trying to figure out issues that way, but instead, it's this one-on-one with the computer or gaming or whatever and social skills and emotional skills would be compromised here. So, I believe as a teacher, you need to infuse it every day in your lesson plans, somehow. Somehow.”

Perhaps the most notable aspect of Carly’s interview is that she stood out as the only participant who, despite a lack of support at the school and administrative level, had no difficulty defining SEL. As she stated, “It’s a way that children learn. It's a way of relating to people. It's a
directional way of knowing yourself and just being smart in the social and emotional realm”. In addition, Carly was able to clearly articulate the SEL practices she was using. These ranged from creating respectful and caring communities through the use of group norms, encouraging students to be self-reflective, modeling, utilizing conflict resolution strategies with students, honoring individual student differences, and infusing multiculturalism and diversity education. It appears that her interest and passion regarding SEL resulted in a knowledge base and skill set that other participants gained only as a result of school wide initiatives.

Carly’s comprehensive understanding of SEL practices result from an extensive background, the existence of mentors who prioritize SEL, and an individual desire to learn more. In fact, she clearly stated, “Yeah, so, it's all the mentoring and research for me and then putting all of that into the hands-on classroom, so people like X, who has written major books on conflict resolution. Y and Z, they were my two supervisors when I was at [my previous job], so I am very lucky to have them as role models, reading the books that they have written, following along with their careers, being part of the research with [names two additional mentors] and the school projects that we would have together… I was very lucky to be in the field to be teaching young children to be having college students from freshman up to doctoral levels come to our lab school and supervise them and then be doing my research and having a research paper published on preschoolers or conflict resolution, so that's my field and it's my mission.”

Carly’s vast experience across age groups led to an acute awareness of the developmental aspects of SEL and the importance of integrating it throughout childhood and adolescence. “I believe that social and emotional learning needs start very early because children come to us with empathy, you know, the little toddler or an infant that crawls all over and hears another child crying, takes the binky from his mouth and sticks it right into the child's mouth or, you
know, just my whole teaching experience has shown me that the children are able to help each
other and would be able to resolve conflicts with the right guidance but somewhere in the
elementary school, or after elementary school, it gets lost.” Unfortunately, even with this
knowledge and with SEL as a clear priority in Carly’s daily practice, she still felt that, “by the
time you get to high school, you know, there really isn't much of anything [SEL] there and
there's certainly no support.”

Carly never intended to teach at the high school level and while not explicitly stated, it
seems that this is due, in part, to the many barriers that exist at this level in implementing SEL.
She is clearly doing her best to incorporate SEL, but she finds it difficult. “I try to expose my
students as much as I could, and the high school level, it's a little tough… When you get to the
high school, it's a little different because you have your framework that you have to make sure
that you are in compliance with.” In addition to the curriculum constraints, Carly identified
another barrier as, “the culture of the high school. There were certain pieces that were expected
of you for example, to see if you follow along the hierarchy of the high school…” Part of the
problem she identifies is the tendency to look at social and emotional problems in high school as
a conduct issue. “They would rather that you see something as a behavioral problem and that it
becomes a conduct disorder as opposed to trying to figure out what is going on socially or
emotionally with the student…they would want you to follow the handbook and you would have
to file a conduct report on them.” This presents a real struggle for Carly as, “it went totally
against what I believed was the correct way and the most successful way to help students in the
social and emotional realm.”

While Carly does not find SEL to be a burden, “it was part of what I love to do anyway,”
she does recognize that, “for a lot of the other teachers around, I think it was double-work;
something that they never thought of before.” As will be discussed later, the idea that SEL feels like an extra burden for teachers was seen repeatedly, but those who were able to incorporate it across the curriculum and infuse it throughout the day, did not report this feeling. Carly was no exception and felt that, “to see it as a separate curriculum would, I think, make a lot of resistance, but if you can infuse it somehow in your – it's like teaching multiculturalism, so, if you're going to be the kind of teacher that does one country a week, or one country a month; well that's like a tourist approach, but if you can infuse multicultural and diversity education into your everyday lesson plan, then it's not extra work. It just becomes part of your second nature and I see that as akin to the social and emotional learning.”

Participant 2: Tabitha “A student will achieve once they find that academic success.” Tabitha is a 59 year old Caucasian woman currently working in an affluent suburban high school. She has taught special education at her current school for six years and previously taught in an urban district at an alternative school for four years and in the public high school for four years. From the moment the interview began, it was clear that Tabitha had very different experiences in her current job and her work in the alternative high school (she did not speak about her work at the regular high school). In the alternative school Tabitha felt that SEL was identified as a priority and through informal and formal professional development, she received a large amount of training. It was her feeling that, “the reason why I think it worked is because we who did work there were invested, felt like it was our niche, and we would talk about the kids…how are his needs being met – oh, what are you doing in your math class? How are you teaching this kid or hey, you know, what do you think about doing it this way. It was incredible and we had a long lunch on Thursdays and what we called a housekeeping meeting, like a faculty meeting, and pretty much we talked about the kids at the faculty meeting.” This was in stark contrast to her
work in the affluent suburban school where she stated, “that does not seem to be the case here.” When asked about formal training, she couldn’t recall any and there was no mention of informal discussions among teachers. It is important to note that Tabitha identified one similarity between the schools, “it's not that we have a social or emotional curriculum here in the high school where I currently am, nor the urban high school where I taught previously.”

Tabitha did seem to have an understanding of SEL, but like some other participants had some difficulty articulating a definition. She stated that, “you have to take into account the whole child.” She had a clear focus on learning about and forming relationships with the child, their family, and their community. Tabitha describes her philosophy as one that, “deals with the whole child and we're talking about the community of that child, so not just the child, but also the parents and the setting of, you know, where that child lives, etcetera, and so I take into account the social-emotional.” This focus is one she credits to her years at the alternative school. She stated, “this [her work at the alternative high school] is where so much of my ability to work with the whole child and the social and emotional aspect is from; what I learned from those four years working with the toughest of the tough.”

Along with relationship building, Tabitha’s SEL practices centered mostly on setting expectations, drawing clear boundaries, and demanding respect for space and learning. She describes one incident, “I even remember there, you know, telling one big, strapping young man, no, you need to go on and enter again because you're not coming in my room correctly. If you do it with humor and then they come and they take you seriously, there's nothing like seeing a person enter a room properly, you know?” Even now, she credits at least some of her success with students to this ability to set, “clear and consistent expectations and use concrete language and that I'm patient and flexible with them.”
This combination of SEL practices resulted in Tabitha building such strong relationships with her students and their families, that when it came time for the students to advance a grade, she advanced with them. So, while Tabitha did not feel a lot of support for SEL as a whole in her current job, she did report that she felt that administrators recognized, and awarded her hard work. It was clear that this decision meant a lot to her and made her feel valued. As she described it, “the other thing that's happening too is I was lucky in that the director of special ed., I must have talked about relationships enough with her and she saw it because at one point I was going to move one of my tenth graders, even a couple of my tenth graders, up to the upper school, like a year ago, and parents are calling. ‘We don't want our kid to leave [Tabitha’s] class!’ …I think from that they didn't want any more phone calls but I also I think they understood the relationship business. As a result, I moved with my caseload.”

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this interview was that like others, Tabitha felt that SEL was vital to academic success, but was the only participant who felt that it came first. With an almost guilty embarrassment and hesitance in her voice, she stated, “I think, and my anecdotal evidence points to it, and I think my personal philosophy of learning also points to this, that a student will achieve once they find that academic success. They will continue to achieve and that will build upon their social-emotional health and that will make them feel better about themselves, socially and emotionally, to even achieve more… when they get the right answer, I have found that that helps him socially and emotionally.”

Participant 3: Troy “There is a major, I would even say critical, need for information and strategies that are specific to high school students.” Troy is a 36 year old white male working in a large suburban high school. He is a self-described career changer who has been working at the high school level for five years. He has worked in classrooms and as an
administrator and has experience at the middle school level in addition to his current work at the high school. The variety in his experiences offered a unique perspective to the participant group. Although education is a new field for him, it was clear throughout the interview that Troy sees great value in addressing the social and emotional needs of the students he works with. Like others, he felt that, “it also really helped me to question them [students] more and to give them more adversity and to give them more challenging things to work with and so I actually found it to be a really useful tool for increasing the rigor in my classroom.” And like others, he did not limit this importance to the academic realm; he recognized the value of social and emotional competency in every area of students’ lives and later in his definition stated, “if you [students] can think about how you think about things and how you feel about things and you can put labels on it; sometimes just having the vocabulary and understanding can change the way that we act in situations.”

Similar to most, Troy possessed no inherent knowledge about SEL; it was obvious that his definition had changed and become more refined over time. This was likely a result of his extensive personal and professional training. When asked what SEL meant to him, he stated, “Originally I thought it was like the warm fuzzy how are you feeling type thing and as I got to learn more about it, I realized it was a lot of the things that I was doing in my classroom without calling it that, but so for me, more than anything, it's giving students the tools to manage anything, really, but to manage adversity in their life and it could be a social conflict, it could be a challenging assignment, it could be a disruption in their life in any way and, for me, the focus has always been on thinking about thinking and thinking about feeling.”

From graduate school on, Troy had many opportunities to learn about SEL and seemed to prioritize it in his daily work. In addition, he currently works in a district that prioritizes SEL
from Kindergarten through twelfth grade. In thinking back to where his interest in SEL began he discussed a class he took in graduate school, “I had this professor, a young guy, really passionate, talking about American secondary schools. The name of the class is The American High School and he was the first person that said if you can spend time talking with the kids about feelings and how they think, that you're really imparting them to take charge of their learning and you're more of a facilitator than a teacher.” He reminisced about how powerful that experience was and reported, “ever since then I kind have always sought things out, read things.” Following graduate school, Troy reported that there were limited opportunities for formal training. Fortunately that all changed recently. While discussing professional development opportunities, he stated, “I went several years without having any kind of formalized instruction in anything that would be considered social and emotional learning really until this past summer when we elected an initiative for the district here and the entire leadership team got first professional development.”

Once SEL became a district priority, Troy had many opportunities for professional development and is currently an active member of the SEL committee at his school. “We had 4 days over the summer, like a little mini-institute, and it was teachers, department heads, school administrators, and we talked about what is SEL, and why is it important, why would we want to use it at the different levels, and then what are we already doing; kind of like an inventory. So, then I became part of the district's SEL committee, started the committee here, and so we've had several professional development probably six or seven with the district committee, and then my school committees have run 2 professional development days here for the staff.” This extensive training and experience resulted in an impressive knowledge as well as an ability to clearly articulate a definition, as discussed earlier, and easily identify his daily practices. He even understood the importance of teaching students how to transfer the skills they learn and building
their confidence to do so. When explaining the importance of SEL for overall well being he stated, “I think that the lessons are pretty applicable to all the areas of their life but to build their ability to see the transferability of it and to be able to take something they learned in your classroom and then apply it outside of the classroom, so giving them that or building that flexibility or their confidence in using those skills is really important as well.”

Troy described a wide variety of daily practices he used from building confidence, to identifying the middle kids and training them as leaders, to using class reading to teach stress management techniques. Until recently, he reported working with administrators who lacked, “the professional vocabulary to identify what I was doing as SEL,” and even felt that, “for one period of time I did not, but I think in general I always did things differently. When I taught, for the first 2 weeks, I didn't teach any content. I was all skills, routines, thinking about thinking, thinking about how we feel.” It is important to note that it was during this discussion that the researcher first mentioned the importance of language to define and identify SEL at the high school level in her analytic memos. While the seeds had been planted prior, it was Troy who articulated this need perfectly, “there is a major, I would even say critical, need for information and strategies that are specific to high school students.”

Interestingly, he even felt that providing the vocabulary and identifying the current practices of teachers that align with SEL could go a long way in reducing the resistance to SEL initiatives among faculty. He stated, “I actually think that just that one shift is really powerful.” In thinking about the resistance among colleagues he recalled many instances where, “they're making connections with kids, they're facilitating connections between kids. They're supporting kids to take risks, but you know, they say they don't have enough time for SEL.” He even discussed one faculty member who described SEL as, “soft cuddly BS” but who is, “really
wonderful and he is Mr. SEL, he just doesn't know it.” In fact he went far in stating that when, “talking about vocabulary, the title matters,” and went on to say that, “if they had come in this year and said, you know what, our initiative or our big focus this year is going to be building emotional skills to enhance rigor, right? I think they would have had much more buy-in from the start.”

Participant 4: Stan “I do whatever I can do; whatever I'm not qualified to do.” Stan is a 38 year old Caucasian male teaching AP chemistry in a high school. He has been teaching at the high school level for 12 years. Similar to other participants, Stan recognizes the importance of SEL because he wants students, “coming to school able to focus on learning, able to focus on building friendships and everything and not having issues, social and emotional issues, that are impeding those things.” He also feels that this sentiment is present among his colleagues and argues, “Teachers aren’t in denial of anything. It's not like there’s a teacher saying like, you know, kids need to suck it up or tough it out or whatever.” Unfortunately, Stan is working in a school where there is no formal curriculum and any SEL work that is being done is in response to acute problems such as, “attendance issues and getting in fights and students with eating disorders and things like that.”

Interestingly enough, while Stan did not report a strong SEL initiative at the high school level and could not clearly identify any work being done outside of the reactive work, his district is recognized as a “model district” in the state and he could easily discuss work being done in his daughter’s preschool in the same district. In describing her school, he reports, “there you can tell the students are involved and this is something that's not just for students who are in crisis or something like that, but it's for every single kid as a way to teach them social and emotional skills and basically good mental health practices.” Unfortunately, at the high school
level Stan reports, “a lack of clarity among the faculty as to what district initiatives are going on and what their end-results are and specifically what they're trying to do with students.” In fact, it had almost become a joke among high school staff and he verbalized their collective sentiments when he stated, “I don't have a sense of really, again, what some of the professionals who work in that role [SEL consultants], specifically in the district, are doing at the high school.”

While Stan is unable to clearly identify his daily SEL practices, it’s apparent throughout the interview that he is indeed using them in his classroom. He works hard to build and maintain relationships with students, starting even before the school year begins. Because he teaches AP chemistry, a difficult subject for most students, he reports, “I talk to these kids in the spring before they formalize their registration for next year, to basically talk about preemptively we're going to be doing stuff that is far, far more difficult than you've experienced and if you want to not sink, you're going to have to do a tremendous amount of extra work compared to what you're used to doing and if you're someone who is prone to anxiety and if you're someone who is prone to giving up when you have, you know, a lot of school pressure, anything like that you need to think about what you're committing to.”

Stan recognizes that kids in his classes have unique needs and as a result most of the SEL he provides focuses on stress management, coping skills, and prioritizing, skills that are directly applicable to his course work. In fact, when asked what kind of training he needs, Stan stated, “just, you know, teaching them, when we talked about preparing for a test or we talked about managing your homework or we talk about if you're having trouble with your lab partner and there's disagreement or you think someone's cheating in the class and you're not sure how to handle that or something like that, because these are issues that are relevant to the class that I teach, and not just the kids at large, but they actually have relevance to the class I teach, and so
things like that would probably be good, too.” With constraints in the curriculum, “I usually am not able to do a lot of that just by virtue of what I teach,” and not enough time in the day, Stan wants techniques and strategies that can be incorporated into his course content. He wants to be able to teach them, “skills and strategies and attitudes that keep a student emotionally healthy, basically, and especially in a school setting, in a way that keeps them able to come to school without baggage.” And finally, he reports, “I would really like being able to find ways to connect with my students more.”

Even with all that he is doing, Stan struggles to clearly articulate the SEL practices he is using and at one point, after describing his preemptive check ins with students he states, “I don't know if I would call that social and emotional learning or just friendly advice.” At points throughout the interview, a lack of confidence was obvious in his words and tone. He seemed to doubt his own ability to meet his students’ needs and states, “I mean, I do whatever I can do; whatever I'm not qualified to do.”

Like other participants working in schools without strong support for SEL, Stan’s knowledge base regarding SEL and his ability to identify his current practices affords room for improvement. Unfortunately, like many educators, Stan already feels like he is inundated with professional development opportunities and because SEL is not an area identified by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education as a requirement nor an area being prioritized at his school, opportunities focused on SEL are often ignored. He states, “we do get a lot of emails with lots of opportunities for PD and things like that, social development, but as much as a lot of people probably enjoy going to those things, you know, people are busy.” The reality of life for Stan is, “I'm on a professional license and so I have to maintain 150 PDP hours
in 5 years and they have to fit into certain categories and so if I'm going to do PD, I'm going to make damn sure that it's going to fit in that category.”

**Participant 5: Jake** “I value this stuff because I was brought up this way.” Jake is a 34 year old Caucasian male who has been teaching high school for 12 years. He currently teaches math as well as an interdisciplinary course for seniors. Jake stood out as the participant with the most extensive background in SEL, a fact that was apparent from the moment he began speaking. He attended a high school that he described as, “a very progressive school... It was the holistic view of things and that's what has emboldened me in who – my value system. You know? And that's why I'm kind of passionate about the various things I'm passionate about.”

There was no doubt that, for Jake, SEL was a passion and he possessed a comprehensive understanding of what it was and how he was incorporating it into his daily practice. He explained it as follows, “I can't say that I do a lot of it as a broad focus. I think my challenge, my entire career, as a math teacher was incorporating into a math classroom...I think I most commonly use social and emotional learning in individual conversations with students.”

It’s important to point out that SEL is only one example of the skills that Jake felt were important. He reported that, “the big thing I'm passionate about is skills that are not traditional skills, ones that are really important in life, which I think social and emotional falls under that category.” He goes on to emphasize the importance of teaching students how to work in groups and explains, “the idea of collaboration is what is considered a 21st Century skill right now, which is something I'm passionate about, but it falls also under social and emotional skills because it's all about socialization and how you interact with people and how you can come to consensus on something and how you can split up work, even the 'how do you handle it', 'oh, your groupmate didn't do the work they're supposed to do' how do you have that conversation.”
When asked to define SEL, Jake offered this inclusive definition, “I'd define social and emotional learning to be students kind of developing skills to understand how to cope with different situations, how to have relationships with different people, how to manage different stresses that occur in their lives, whether that's related to academics or not, whether it's family related, how to understand how to deal with personal issues that are happening, how to communicate about those personal issues.” He explains that even some of the things teachers expect in relation to academics, i.e. self-direction, are social and emotional skills and have more to do with, “how you deal with your own desires and needs and prioritize different things in your lives and when you have setbacks.”

Jake engages in many activities intended to promote social and emotional skill development but seems to put modeling appropriate behaviors and opening up and letting students see his human side at the top of his list. He talks about how important this is for teachers, “I think if teachers would be willing to show their human side, show their personal side a little bit more, I think they'll pull students in and get them – that's modeling.” He describes instances during one on one and large group interactions where he takes ownership of his own feelings, opens up about past experiences, and offers students glimpses into his life. As Jake says, “I think probably part of teaching social and emotional learning to my kids is allowing them to know me a little bit more and trying to relate to them more.”

On top of his extensive background, Jake takes advantage of opportunities provided to him and is currently part of the SEL committee at his school. It’s through that work that he received most of his professional training. In addition, he discusses extensive reading he’s done, “I’ve read almost all of Carol Dweck’s stuff.” He also discusses many online courses he has taken about “motivating students who don't care, differentiating instruction sort of has its
connections with social and emotional learning and then another course, something to do with risk taking – or something with at risk students.” All of this may be why he is considered one of the SEL experts at his school and is looked to as a leader in this area. He recalls a faculty meeting where the formation of the SEL committee was announced and said that immediately everyone looked at him laughing because they all knew it was “his thing”.

While Jake clearly prioritizes SEL and has vast experience, it was easy to sense the frustration he felt at the “pendulum swing” of initiatives in education. He did report that during his 12 years the district has identified three main goals every year and SEL is usually one of them but that the amount of resources spent (time, money, energy) varies widely in response to students’ acute needs. For example, Jake states, “I think that's one of the reason why it was seen as a priority. It was definitely because of the suicides and other stuff going on, it was definitely a push for a while and then things seemed to be on the up-and-up. You know, we talked about the pendulum swing before; things are on the up-and-up; things don't seem to be as big of an issue so it started to become a backburner.”

Jake remains able to keep his focus on SEL despite the pendulum swing but worries about his colleagues for a number of reasons. One of the biggest challenges is that, “teachers don't feel like they're professionals in it.” Jake recognizes that, “teachers feel like they need to be an expert at anything they're supposed to teach their kids at.” In fact, Jake reported that one of the greatest barriers to SEL in high schools was, “the lack of professional development time or available time to provide professional development around them.”

**Participant 6: Gwen** “It's not something that is separate from the rest of school and learning but something that is sort of integrally a part of it.” Gwen is a 38 year old Caucasian woman who has been teaching English Language Arts for 16 years in the same large
suburban high school that Troy works in. Gwen’s passion for the SEL was obvious throughout the interview and it was clear that she has worked hard her entire career to incorporate it into her daily practice. As she said, “social and emotional learning has always been part of my practice and it's never been something that I would separate from any other part of instruction so I think that the purpose of teaching and learning is about helping students to grow and I use the word grow intentionally rather than learn because I think the word grow encompasses both academic learning but also includes social and emotional growth.” While Gwen had always kept SEL at the forefront of her mind and her teaching, it was apparent that until her district started pushing the SEL initiative, she had felt, “for a bunch of years almost like I was going against the trend, against what was expected of me to be even focusing on social or emotional work because there was such a focus on test scores and academic rigor and academic standards and testing teachers and all that.”

Once the initiative was passed, Gwen reported, “I feel just so much more supported as an individual teacher doing this work where, again, in the past, I would feel like when I assigned projects the students that had a more personal or emotional component, it might be perceived as too froofy or just not – straying from the academic standards of the curriculum.” She also recognized that her colleagues were in need of this support. The pleasure in her voice was evident when she discussed, “it's been wonderful to see colleagues who are less familiar and less comfortable with social and emotional learning work come to the table and learn a few strategies and say that they’re going to try some new practices in their classrooms and I’ve become much more of a mentor and I don't know, piloting new initiatives in my own practice.”

Gwen feels strongly that in order for her colleagues to continue to find ways to incorporate SEL throughout their day, they need to be shown ways that things can be tied to their
content. As she said, people often feel like, “everybody teaching a certain course has to do X, Y, Z assignments or have that be in sync.” This leaves people with few options and she describes a conversation with one colleague who reported, “trying some wonderful projects with specific students that were much more creative and social and emotional but he said that he got two weeks behind in the curriculum and that was very hard when they had to give a common final exam.” Gwen reports, “I've spoken to colleagues and other disciplines like science and one barrier that comes up is that – when this work doesn't feel to them as tied into their contact area, it can feel harder to put it in. Is something added on? How can we tie this into something?”

Gwen does recognize that when teaching English, integrating SEL may be an easier task. In fact she discusses a variety of ways that she incorporates it across her curriculum. “Ways to do that in English instruction would be to ask questions about the text but also have kind of a personal part of the question or maybe begin with more of a personal question; ask students to either talk about that or reflect on that in writing…We have plenty of writing assignments that either are personal writing assignments or students are reflecting on their lives or assignments where they are directly tying their lives to the text.” While she appears to have been doing this throughout her career, she reports that the training and support she enjoys as a result of the district initiative has been critical to her ongoing success. “We've been working with this woman who has been very helpful at sort of talking to us about the different levels of SEL work within your classroom, within a certain age group, within a department, within a district, and I think that's been very helpful to sort of think about ways that we can create positive change, small scale, larger scale.”

In addition to tying SEL to course content, Gwen also places a clear emphasis on building relationships with students and like others, feels that opening up about herself is vital to
her success. As she puts it, “When I think about my own experience as a student, I remember all sorts of random personal details about my teachers. I remember when a teacher shared a story about why something was meaningful to him or. I think that's the kind of stuff that kids, particularly teenagers whom I work with, are just so – they're so craving a kind of emotional connection so I do think it helps them learn academic material and it also helps them feel safe and secure when doing so.” Perhaps it’s this understanding that led to her belief that, “transparency is so important for the teachers, so I'm not just sharing my thoughts on things, I'm also sharing my feelings and emotions. I'm not afraid to share vulnerability or fear, weakness, any of that.”

All of this begins the first day of school when she goes to great lengths to learn all the kids names. This is all part of her efforts to, “try to get to know each student as an individual and understand what is each kid passionate about, how is it that, how does this person tick.” It’s this deep knowing of her students that allows her to, “tailor my own response and interactions to each kid so there might be one kid who might get teased and we could sort of joke around and another kid where it's much more quiet and serious but I do think trying to tailor my interactions is very key.” After learning their names, Gwen will even take a quiz in front of the class and feels that, “it puts me on the spot and I do get nervous and they've seen me getting nervous and I think it shows that if I'm going to make them take quizzes and tests all year, I'm going to put myself on the spot… It [learning their names] is something important to me because that's the first step in building a relationship with somebody.”

It wasn’t totally clear if Gwen felt kids today are in greater need than they were 16 years ago, but she definitely recognizes that kids at her school are under a lot of stress and this generation faces unique challenges around social media and pressure to succeed. “I think these
kids are under, at least at my school, quite a bit of stress. Their lives are supersaturated with all the academic, extracurricular, family responsibilities they have and social media, it's just super intense on their lives.” And she knows that academic success is closely tied to emotional wellbeing. As she explains, “people learn better when they feel emotionally nourished and they learn better when they have – like they're emotionally connected to whatever they're learning about.” Luckily for her, Gwen works in a district and among colleagues who recognize these needs and go to great lengths to address them.

Participant 7: Meg “I'm always flying by the seat of my pants.” Meg is a 37 year old Caucasian female currently teaching in an academic support classroom in a technical school. She has been at the high school level for five years and in education for 12. Meg is one of the participants working at a school with no clear SEL initiative but it’s clear that, likely by virtue of the population she works with, she sees great benefit in teaching social and emotional skills and feels strongly that her students need SEL in order to succeed. In discussing the importance of SEL she stated, “I think it just actually affects everything. I think it affects your – physically, mentally I think your emotional wellbeing, it has to come first…it sets the tone I think for everything that you do.” She realizes that when dealing with social and emotional problems, “they [students] could come to a math class and math might be their best subject but if they're dealing with something like that, they're not going to perform to their potential.” Beyond academic performance, Meg identifies an even more critical need in high school because, “you're trying to get them to that point where they can survive because that’s what high school is, it's transitioning to the real word.”

Meg is acutely aware of her students’ needs and works hard to help them succeed and prepare them for life after high school. Much of her focus is on teaching them coping skills and
when asked to define SEL she stated that it’s, “learning what to do when you're feeling overwhelmed in certain situations, whether it be social skills or academically or anything like that, just kind of learning how to cope.” A large part of her work and her success also lies in her ability to build relationships with her students and her efforts at getting to know them. A sense of pride was heard when she spoke about this, “Well, I can tell the second, for most of my students, the second I lay eyes on them, I can kind of gauge where they're at, their emotional level...I can tell right away that that [being stressed or overwhelmed] already sets them up for a bad day.” She works hard to create a safe space for students and describes her room as, “a place where you need 5 minutes, you take your 5 minutes. You know what I mean? You need a snack? You have your snack. You need to have a drink? You need to go for a walk? I want this to be their, let's – talk about life for 5 minutes and take a break.”

Interestingly, while no clear initiative or formal curriculum exists at her school, “it's not a formal curricula. It's nothing – I haven't found a high school yet that has a formal curricular really in place,” Meg spoke highly about her school and her colleagues, “one of the things I love about [my school] is that our staff overall is much more sensitive to those kinds of things.” In fact, Meg talked about the fact that, “I think you have to work at a school that allows you to have that flexibility and be able to think on your feet and be allowed to kind of figure things out and not always worry about did I do the right thing, did I do the wrong thing,” and she clearly felt that her school was one that provided that.

It is important to note that while Meg reported an overall supportive environment, she also spoke at length about the unique challenges faced in a technical school. “So, we have the kids for 90 days in academics and then they're in shop for 90 days, but they're learning the same amount of material that a student who goes to high school in academics for 180 days has to...So
we have push, push, push and I think in a lot of ways, this place is more difficult because it's a lot in a little amount of time.” Because of the split between academics and shop, Meg described the constant struggle, “it's like you get them back for academics and sometimes it feels like you're starting from scratch and you have to re-teach them how to transition, how to cope, remind them of the structure and the schedule and things like that.” Fortunately, Meg reported a lot of freedom in her role and stated that it, “allows me a lot of freedom as far as, if I want to not do – if I want to say, on that day everybody is having a bad day, and I want to do a lesson on – all right, let's stop and think about how we can deal with the situation… So, it is nice in that way that I have that one period a day.”

In thinking broadly about teachers’ needs in this area, Meg talked a lot about the need for flexible strategies and techniques that can be infused throughout the school day. As she said, “I think social and emotional learning at the high school level requires a lot flexibility on the educator's part.” It seems that she’s not the only one who feels as if, “I'm always flying by the seat of my pants because with my kids, you don't know what you're getting – ever.” She also recognizes the need for training, “I think teachers, too, are afraid to do things that they haven't been trained to do.” She knows, “just figuring out the time to learn the strategies,” might be hard but feels there is a huge payoff, “if we just had kind of a bank, even just quick little strategies, that can turn that kid's day from awful to maybe like, okay, I can survive this…That's your goal.”

Like most teachers, the ultimate goal for Meg is to keep kids in the classroom and able to learn, because when social and emotional problems become acute and need tertiary treatment it takes away from precious teaching time. The reality is, even Meg, a staunch SEL supporter, recognizes that when, “she [the school adjustment counselor] has to pull those kids from classes to get their group counseling, to get their individual counseling and it's like, that phone rings and
she's taken those kids out of my math class and I'm like – I know it's not her fault, it has to be done, but at the same time, I'm like, ‘Oh, my god, they just missed a whole math lesson and how the hell am I going to catch them up because it's an uphill battle.’”

Participants’ Collective Experiences with Social and Emotional Learning

During their interviews, participants shared unique experiences and varying perspectives on social and emotional learning. Through hearing their stories the researcher gained a comprehensive understanding of how SEL is incorporated into their daily practice and how participants experience SEL efforts at the high school level. While each participant had a unique story, as told above, there were some clear themes that emerged. This section will provide an analysis of those themes and present evidence, in the participants’ own words. The emerging themes provide the reader with the collective understanding teachers have of their experiences with, and perceptions of, SEL at the high school level.

A “collected” definition of SEL. As will be discussed later, participants varied in their ability to define SEL at the high school level but it’s important to start this section with a definition in the participants’ own words. When asked how she would define SEL, Carly stated, “It’s a way that children learn. It's a way of relating to people. It's a directional way of knowing yourself and just being smart in the social and emotional realm.” Tabitha described her philosophy as one that, “deals with the whole child and we're talking about the community of that child, so not just the child, but also the parents and the setting of, you know, where that child lives, etcetera, and so I take into account the social-emotional.” Troy described the process of SEL as follows, “it's giving students the tools to manage anything, really, but to manage adversity in their life and it could be a social conflict, it could be a challenging assignment, it could be a disruption in their life in any way…thinking about feeling.” While Stan described a
wide variety of SEL practices he was using, he struggled to provide a clear definition but did say that SEL is comprised of, “skills and strategies and attitudes that keep a student emotionally healthy, basically, and especially in a school setting, in a way that keeps them able to come to school without baggage.” Jake, on the other hand, offered this inclusive definition, “I’d define social and emotional learning to be students kind of developing skills to understand how to cope with different situations, how to have relationships with different people, how to manage different stresses that occur in their lives, whether that's related to academics or not, whether it's family related, how to understand how to deal with personal issues that are happening, how to communicate about those personal issues.” Gwen defined SEL as, “a particular attention toward the essential and emotional well-being and growth of students and thinking of it as not something that is separate from the rest of school and learning but something that is sort of integrally a part of it.” Finally, Meg’s definition seemed more focused on her specific population, “learning what to do when you're feeling overwhelmed in certain situations, whether it be social skills or academically or anything like that, just kind of learning how to cope.”

**Theme 1: Even without formal curricula or training, HS teachers feel that SEL is important and are implementing it.** Very little, if any, formal curricula and/or training opportunities exist at the high school level. Despite that, teachers are unanimous in identifying its importance and most, without even knowing it, are incorporating SEL into their daily practice. As teachers told their stories, the researcher, well-versed in SEL, was able to identify a wide variety of practices being used, even when the participants themselves could not. The ability to identify their own practices varied largely, but there were quite a few commonalities regarding the types of SEL practices teachers were using. All the teachers realized that SEL for high school students was very different than that for younger children and as Jake said, “I think that at the
high school age, we understand what emotions mean a little bit more so we kind of try to work out more with – okay, we have these emotions and we understand what they mean, now what do we do with them and how do we control our stresses around those emotions and stuff like that.”

**No formal curriculum exists for HS age students.** Educators at the high school level all seem to feel that one of the biggest problems they face is the lack of formal high school curricula. As Carly explained, while it may exist at the younger ages, “It gets lost by the time you get to high school.” The problem is that while there seems to be a growing focus on SEL for all students, efforts and resources seem limited to the younger ages. One may think, ‘well, why don’t teachers just use those resources for older students?’ but as Jake discussed, “people don’t know how to translate the stuff they learn about for younger kids into the HS classroom.” Troy reported this problem as well and went further to say that it may actually add to the resistance educators feel. “It is much harder to say here is this great article about this SEL concept. Yes it is about stuff happening at the elementary school, but think about how you could do it at the high school. Not having those resources for the HS weakens the credibility of SEL initiatives with those who are resistant.” This is why, as will be discussed in chapter five, one of the pressing needs is for resources specific to high school students that can be infused throughout curriculum and across disciplines. As Meg mentioned, this will require flexibility on the part of educators, “I think social and emotional learning at the high school level requires a lot of flexibility on the educator's part because it's not a formal curricula.”

**The types of SEL they are practicing.**

*Relationship building.* Not all spoke explicitly about building relationships with students but all clearly felt that this was the first step in being able to meet the social and emotional needs of students. Some, like Tabitha, even spoke about building relationships with the families and
communities of students. Carly explained it like this, “You have to back up and you have to look at the person you're teaching and what's the most successful way to reach them.” Teachers seem to understand that knowing students and being able to identify their moods and emotional states was one key to success. Jake explained that part of his success can be attributed to his practice of, “getting to know the students' personal lives a little bit, so I understand what's happening with them, what's they're interested in, what they're passionate about, so that way when they come in and I can see their mood is a little bit different I can reach out and be able to connect with them and say, 'oh, what's going on, talk to me about this' or whatever it is.” Jake seems to feel that understanding their emotional state is just one piece of the academic pie of success. He reports, “I’m getting a pulse for how they are feeling emotionally on any given day and how they're handling that and what does that mean in terms of how they're handling their math curriculum.”

Meg also reported an increased ability to read her students, “for most of my students, the second I lay eyes on them, I can kind of gauge where they're at, their emotional level.”

Teachers reported that this connection helps them to address students’ needs more effectively, confront students about “bad” behavior, and to personalize their interactions with students. As Gwen explained, “I really try to get to know each student as an individual and understand what is each kid passionate about, how is it that, how does this person tick and I do try to tailor my own response and interactions to each kid.” Gwen went on to say, “they're so craving a kind of emotional connection, so I do think it helps them learn academic material and it also helps them feel safe and secure when doing so.” (The idea that social and emotional well being helps advance academic achievement will be discussed further shortly). Participants also described an increased ability to confront students. Tabitha described one incident, “I asked her, ‘do you know why you seem off? Do you know why? Well, how do you feel?’” Without a prior
relationship, this may not have worked. Jake told a story about getting frustrated and confronting a student and felt strongly that it was his relationship that allowed the student to listen and grow rather than shut down and get defensive. In fact, many craved more time to build these relationships. Stan put it best when he said, “So, I think even more than me spending 2 days of AP chemistry every year talking about time management and stuff like that, I think I would really like being able to find ways to connect with my students more.”

*Modeling and “opening up”*. Many of the participants discussed the importance of opening up and showing their human side and modeling in the classroom. They all seemed to understand that these moments are often the ones that are most memorable. As Jake explained, “most students don't remember a specific lesson that you ever did in the classroom – or this content or whatever it is, they remember the moments, the experiences.” While many participants discussed this willingness to open up, Jake seemed most focused on it and it came up at many points in the interview. He discussed being, “willing to make mistakes in front of the class,” and described instances where he took accountability for his mistakes, “I had to step outside and be like, hey, I screwed up.” He made no secret that he wished more teachers would start, “I think if teachers would be willing to show their human side, show their personal side a little bit more, I think they'll pull students in and get them – that's modeling.” Gwen also took this role seriously and shared the sentiment that it was important for everyone, “I think transparency is so important for the teachers, so I'm not just sharing my thoughts on things, I'm also sharing my feelings and emotions. I'm not afraid to share vulnerability or fear, weakness, any of that.”

The weight of their influence sat heavy with some participants. They knew that some kids were coming, as Stan said, “from a home life that has totally affected them in their ability to
come to school and be successful in a very negative way.” Creating a safe space in the classroom and modeling healthy emotional behaviors was at the top of the priority list. Carly explained, “You have to set, I think, the tone for your classroom because students will look to you, sometimes they're not getting really what they need in their home and you have the biggest influence on their lives and so, you know, if you can set the example and live by that example, then hopefully it will come that they take that as modeling.” Meg wants her classroom to be, “a place where you need 5 minutes, you take your 5 minutes.”

Conflict resolution. In a global society increasingly focused on collaboration, the importance of effectively resolving conflict becomes more critical with every graduating class of high school seniors. Perhaps with this in mind, the teachers seemed focused on providing students the necessary skills for communication and conflict resolution. Carly’s focus on conflict resolution allowed her to handle problems in class. “There would be drama in the classroom and I would try and handle it first speaking with the students that were having troubles…fighting in the classroom, well, no, we negotiate. We do conflict resolution.” Tabitha shared the feeling that problems, whenever possible, should be handled in house, “I also like to handle issues in-house.”

In some part, handling conflict rests with the ability to communicate effectively during disagreements. The teachers seemed to understand that these skills were not ones that students would likely possess naturally and they reported taking time to foster them. As Jake explained, “we really work hard at how do you handle conversations when you're working in groups and when you're frustrated by someone else's actions, how do you verbally handle that?” As he said, disagreements are a natural part of life and there is nothing wrong with having them, what’s important is, “how you handle that conversation when you disagree and how do you work through that disagreement to come to a consensus or come to a compromise.” While talking
about some of the things he does in his classroom, Stan talked about helping kids deal with conflict and confrontation in various situations, “we would talk about if you're having trouble with your lab partner and there's disagreement or you think someone's cheating in the class and you're not sure how to handle that or something like that.”

_Strain management._ Many teachers reported kids who were under a lot of stress and as a result, many focused on stress management techniques and coping skills. Some, like Gwen, even discussed coping skills in their general definition of SEL, “learning what to do when you're feeling overwhelmed in certain situations, whether it be social skills or academically or anything like that, just kind of learning how to cope.” Likely a result of the courses he teaches, AP chemistry, Stan paid particular attention to the stress levels of students, even having preemptive discussions, “I tell kids also, you know, at the beginning of the year, if this class is causing you a lot of stress in combination with your other classes, again it's not worth it to be in this class.”

Participants want their students to be able to recognize when they are stressed and actively work to reduce that stress. Stan describes talking to students, “I'll talk about if you are finding that it's 11:00 at night and you haven't done your chemistry homework, my advice is, don't do your chemistry homework and come to school and ask me for help.” Not only are they giving advice, they are also offering practical strategies and tips. Troy even found material to incorporate in his class, “very often the idea of having to do a task that they didn't feel like they were good in produced a lot of stress and anxiety in them and I had read a great article about stress and its effect on the brain and so I actually shared the article with them and we talked a lot about sometimes just knowing in the moment. Saying, ‘okay, I recognize now that I am stressed out or that I'm anxious about this test and I know what that does to my brain, so now I need to stop and try and interrupt the flow.’”
Participants differed in their emphasis. While many similarities were seen among participants and they are all addressing the social and emotional needs of their students in some way, the focus of their efforts differed slightly. Although no participant explicitly discussed where their focus originated from, it is the researchers’ belief that the differences are a result of the student populations they work with and the various hats they have worn in their education careers. For instance, Tabitha worked in an alternative high school in an urban community for four years with, “primarily gang members and the other odd misfit toys.” As a result, her focus was on fostering respect for learning and space and setting clear boundaries and expectations. Conversely, Carly started working with the high school populations after a long career working with very young children. It seems likely that her focus on conflict resolution and creating safe and supportive environments was a result of this work. Troy’s background as an administrator fostered a belief in the importance of meeting the kids in the middle and fostering confidence and leadership skills. He described it like this, “we didn't really have anything for the kids in the middle and these are kids, they have the ability, I mean I believe that they all do, so it's just helping them figure out what it is they want to do with it and giving them the courage to do it.” As a result of teaching AP chemistry, Stan reported a clear focus on stress management and setting priorities. He understands that he’s working with a population that tends to, “overbook themselves, they overextended themselves in terms of their commitment to their classes and extracurriculars…and they are really good kids and well-equipped to handle a lot of things, but a lot of them reach a breaking point.” Jakes’ lifelong background in SEL resulted in an acute awareness of how he models appropriate behaviors. He talked a lot about opening up and setting an example. One touching example he gave was when there was a suicide and he explained to his students, “I had lost a friend in high school and this is how I reacted and I had friends who
reacted this way…and you need to understand everyone acts differently and you need to respect that they act differently.” Gwen’s work as an ELA instructor allows her to do a lot of work on perspective taking and exploring students’ personal stories. She talked a lot about, “writing assignments that either are personal writing assignments or students are reflecting on their lives or assignments where they are directly tying their lives to the text.” Finally, Meg’s work with special needs students caused her to focus more heavily on coping skills and strategies. So, while all participants were doing SEL and many providing the same types of opportunities, they were obviously influenced by the populations they work with and the roles they have had in education.

*Teachers are doing it because they recognize its importance.*

*Students need it now more than ever.* It seem clear that the stressors of everyday life are creeping their way into the lives of younger and younger children. As discussed in the review of the literature, the everyday worries of adults infiltrate their lives as a result of the almost ubiquitous access to technology that children enjoy (Postman, 1994; Price, 2008). Participants in the current study were acutely aware of this fact. As Stan explained, “there's actually fundamental changes in society and communication and social media that affect a lot of these behaviors, so they're becoming more prominent; but whatever the case may be, it's like a real thing and a real concern and it needs to be addressed.” Participants reported an increased number of students facing acute mental health issues. As Gwen discussed, “One thing that we have identified, and the faculty has talked about this very, very openly, in the last several years, there's been an increase in the number of students who are having significant mental health struggles and challenges, a number of students who are out of school for stretches of time for reasons of anxiety, depression, academic stress and so on that sort of extreme end of things we're seeing a real need for more emotional support for students.”
Teachers recognize that students are also under added stress. Stan described his students as ones that are, “all under a lot of pressure for college admissions, for class rank and parental pressure.” As students face more stress in school, they also feel pressure from outside influences. Gwen described it this way, “their lives are supersaturated with all the academic, extracurricular, and family responsibilities they have and social media, it's just super intense on their lives and adds to the stress.” Tabitha also described this, “all of our kids and all the other things going on in their lives, you know now with social medial and ADHD, etcetera, etcetera.” In some cases participants also felt that these outside influences were responsible for problems between students. Carly spoke about this problem, “outside influences, social media, and stuff like that being brought in his classroom and it would affect things like working in cooperative groups or working in pairs.”

*It allows teachers to “advance the academic rigor”*. As was discussed extensively in the review of the literature SEL provides various benefits for students and is associated with a number of positive outcomes. Perhaps most important in the eyes of many is that effective SEL is correlated with increased academic achievement (Durlak et al., 2011). Participants in the current study all discussed this benefit explicitly and felt that without social and emotional well-being students can’t succeed academically. As Meg discussed, “they could come to a math class and math might be their best subject but if they're dealing with something like that [a social and emotional issue], they're not going to perform to their potential.” She recognizes that, “without that social and emotional balance, you can't do the academics and vice versa.” This is similar to Carly’s statement, “If you’re not in a safe social and emotional place, you can’t learn.” Gwen even went as far as to discuss research she knew about, “I also believe and I think there is research to support this that people learn better when they feel emotionally nourished.”
Teachers found SEL to be a useful tool in pushing students further in the classroom. As Troy explained, “I found it also really helped me to question them more and to give them more adversity and to give them more challenging things to work with and so I actually found it to be a really useful tool for increasing the rigor in my classroom.” And as he said, it takes some time upfront but is well worth it in the long run. “For the first 2 weeks, I didn't teach any content. I was all skills, routines, thinking about thinking, thinking about how we feel, and I felt like I could make that time up really quickly, right the lost instructional time.” Jake had a similar stance. “If you're willing to give up that time there, you'll be able to get further, and I'm actually finding that in my math classes, I'm really trying to make improvements and adjustments in how I do things; I'm spending more time on some of these alternate skills that I had never really kind of stepped aside and done and am actually getting through the curriculum faster.”

An interesting finding came from the interview with Tabitha. She agreed that SEL is critical to student success, but was an outlier in that she actually felt that academics have to come first. As she explained, “a student will achieve once they find that academic success. They will continue to achieve and that will build upon their social-emotional health and that will make them feel better about themselves, socially and emotionally, to even achieve more. So, you're to be able to find a way for a child to be successful at their own entry points and levels and if I can use all that educational jargon, but if you can find that and nurture the academic achievement with the praise and just their feeling of fulfillment when they get the right answer, I have found that that helps him social and emotionally.”

**Theme 2:** While no formal training is taking place, teachers are seeking out their own informal training opportunities. Only those participants whose school or district prioritized SEL reported that formal training opportunities existed and even those seemed to be
few and far between. It’s no surprise then, that teachers don’t feel confident in their ability to provide effective SEL. This was voiced by participants and falls in line with the current research body. As Jake explained, “Teachers don't feel like they're professionals in it… I think one of the biggest barriers is the lack of professional development time or available time to provide professional development around them [SEL practices].” Meg echoed this sentiment, “I think teachers, too, are afraid to do things that they haven't been trained to do because teachers are so focused on the training, the professional development, PDPs, you know what I mean, it's like – I think we're all cautious when it comes to thinking outside the box.” Most reported very little time dedicated. Stan described his experience, “There is very little training for staff, I mean, there's very little time dedicated.”

**Formal opportunities that do exist are one-shot, in-house trainings.** Few formal opportunities exist, and those that do tend to be one-shot trainings with little follow through. This may be better than nothing, but research has confirmed these to be the least effective method of professional development (Lauro, 1995). Most of these one-shot trainings are offered in house and are provided by school staff. Troy described the professional development that was offered as a result of the SEL district initiative, “They [the high school SEL committee] put on PD days where teachers came together in small groups to design little mini-lessons and taught very brief, highly engaging, very fun little lessons on different SEL things, like perspective taking, relationship building, embracing failure.” Interestingly, many participants were actually the ones responsible for creating and delivering these trainings. In fact, Jake described his efforts, “I've created with other people professional development we've done in the school around social and emotional learning; how do you start the year in the classroom to develop the norms and the culture; how do you have check-ins with your students; how do you incorporate some of the
skills into your regular teaching without completely removing the curriculum.” Carly reported a similar experience, “The workshop that I gave to my in-service workshops were usually about social and emotional pieces.” Like these participants, Meg, Gwen, and Tabitha reported that trainings had been provided by school nurses and adjustment counselors.

**Despite this paucity of formal training opportunities, participants are taking advantage of informal opportunities, mostly in the form of conversations with colleagues and on the job training.** While many did not have opportunities for formal training, most reported lots of informal training through conversations with colleagues. It seems clear that teachers are talking to each other in the hallways and over coffee. In fact, some even reported that these were the most helpful and also likely to be most effective. Gwen described the power of these conversations, “there's something very powerful about teachers teaching teachers. When people are learning from their colleagues they are less likely come in with that critical lens and air.” This is no surprise as those working in the same environment are likely to be more capable and have more realistic strategies to offer. For example, Meg talks about her work with a specialist on staff, “So, we actually hired a behavior specialist and she's been coming and meeting with me once a month and she's been extremely helpful; working with her has been really helpful, which is nice.” While he did not discuss the usefulness, Stan reported, “Really, the only thing that we've done are really informal, really, really informal conversations with guidance counselors about ways to talk to students, conversations with administrators about ways to talk to students, really nothing.”

This sense of ‘we are in this together’ seemed to result in a feeling of being supported and feeling good about the SEL work participants were doing. As Gwen expressed, “It was just wonderful to be in a like-minded group of colleagues which was grades 5 through 12 who all
were passionate about these issues and to share strategies.” It seems clear that having a sense of community helped. Tabitha displayed a clear sense of nostalgia when discussing her work in the urban school and it seemed that this was due, at least in part, to the informal community of SEL supporters she found herself among. “We would talk about the kids, we'd talk about the kids in the morning, teachers would stop by my room in particular, we would have our coffee, we'd talk about, hey what about this one, hey did you hear about what happened at home here, how come we just, you know, how are his needs being met – oh, what are you doing in your math class? How are you teaching this kid or hey, you know, what do you think about doing it this way. It was incredible.”

**Theme 3: Very few can clearly articulate what they are doing or what SEL means for high school students.** Throughout the interviews it was clear that real disparities existed in participants’ ability to articulate a definition of SEL or the SEL practices they were implementing. As the researcher continued with analysis, she realized that some could provide what might be called a definition, which Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary defines as a statement that describes what something is (“Definition,” 2016), while others could clearly articulate, defined as being able to express ideas clearly and effectively in words or in writing (“Articulate,” 2016). An ability to define resulted in participants who could describe what they were doing in terms of SEL, but who could not necessarily identify them as SEL practices.

Stan was a great example of someone who is using an assortment of SEL practices but when asked for a definition, he hesitated, “I mean I imagine in my mind things like trust falls and team building exercises and stuff like that.” It’s interesting because he went on to describe a wide variety of SEL practices from building relationships, setting priorities, and managing stress to using chemistry topics i.e. impact of nutrition on the brain, our bodies, and our emotions to
teach social and emotional skills. At one point, he discussed checking in with individuals and assessing emotional states but still wasn’t able to identify that as SEL. As he said, “I don’t know if I would call that SEL or just friendly advice.” Tabitha also felt like she and many colleagues were doing SEL but not calling it that, “I think especially in the high school, we often do it without calling it what we're doing.”

Unlike Stan and Tabitha, some were able to identify and label the things they were doing as SEL but most of those participants talked about this as a newly acquired ability. Troy took this one step further and spoke to administrators ability, “I've worked with administrators that, and this isn't a dig or anything, but I don't know if they would have had the professional vocabulary to identify what I was doing as SEL, because even for one period of time I did not.” There was no apparent frustration with administrators, as he freely admitted that his ownability to identify SEL was also new. Gwen seemed to have a similar experience and reported that, “it's something I've always been doing but it's only been recently that I think we're putting this label on it or trying to really pinpoint it.”

A language shift is powerful. Participants were in agreement about the fact that providing teachers with the language to identify their current SEL practices could go a long way in reducing resistance to SEL initiatives and promoting the continued use of SEL. As discussed above, many are doing it without even knowing it, which can, unfortunately lead to resistance when they are asked do more or to talk about their current practices. One story is a perfect example of this. Troy described a faculty meeting where the district SEL initiative was announced. “I have a colleague who's like a grumpy old man but he's great. He's really wonderful and he is Mr. SEL, he just doesn't know it, and when they announced the SEL initiative, he came to see me after, I won't say exactly what he said, but it was like ‘I don't have
time for this soft cuddly BS’. And in my head, I was like, how can you say that; you're Mr. SEL, right? You just don't know it.”

Troy is not the only one experiencing this. Jake talked about faculty at his school, “people pushing back that are doing SEL.” He offered an example of this, “like in English class, they cover it while they're covering the books they're reading and stuff, you know, they have authentic conversations about it because it comes up as part of their reading and that's where we need to highlight those things and talk about, we actually don't need you to really do anything different.” In his eyes it is a simple jump from doing it, to helping students utilize it most effectively, “we just maybe need to come up with that common language or, we're going to talk about regarding this book but also translate to X, Y and Z - you know? Don't just think about it pertaining to this book; think about it pertaining to your life and pertaining to your math class and your history class.”

Both participants felt strongly that a change in wording can have a powerful effect on how people perceive a SEL initiative. In fact, it already seemed to be making a difference in Troy’s school, “I think we're turning a corner right now because as people start to realize, well I do do that in my class, I'm just not necessarily calling it SEL.” Both seemed to think that buy in can be created with a shift in how messages are presented. In talking about the current SEL initiative in his district, Troy felt, “I think if they had come in this year and said, you know what, our initiative or our big focus this year is going to be building emotional skills to enhance rigor, right? I think they would have had much more buy-in from the start. Even if they did the same exact things after that, I think they would have had much more buy-in.” This implies that, not surprisingly, teachers need to see how their efforts will pay off in relation to students’ academic achievement. Going one step further, it appears that if teachers sense that an initiative is going to
detract from their ability to push students in the classroom, they are likely to resist.

Unfortunately, SEL often falls into this category as many, like Mr. SEL in Troy’s school, equate it to ‘soft, cuddly BS’. Jake talked about a program at his school designed to help students deal with stress. “Our principal at the time had a stress reduction program and basically they were trying to eliminate stress and over time we realized that doesn't work. That's not the way you need to think about it. We need to think about how to manage stress. It's not stress reduction. It's stress management and I think that was a barrier. You know? Because people are, like, well we want to be a school that is rigorous and with high academic standards. That's going to create stress. Right? So, I'm not going to not give work to my students just because they're stressed, you know, and so that shift I think helped their [resistant teachers’] mentality a little bit.”

**Theme 4: Teachers want training, skills, and strategies that are specific to high school students.** Throughout the interviews, it was clear that participants suffer from a paucity of SEL practices that are specific to high school students. As discussed above, little, if any formal curricula exist for high school aged students and participants report this as a daunting barrier in their ability to meet the social and emotional needs of their students. As Stan put it, “at the high school, there is no way for us to go to a person and say we want, we're finding this issue or we want to be able to do this. What do you recommend? Or, there is no consistency from teacher to teacher about how things are approached. There is no formalized training of any kind, really, for teachers.”

Participants voiced a genuine desire to learn more about SEL for older students and a critical need for information. As Troy put it, “There is a major, I would even say critical, need for information and strategies that are specific to high school students.” Meg echoed this sentiment almost word for word, “If we just had kind of a bank, even just quick little strategies,
that can turn that kid's day from awful to maybe like, okay, I can survive this.” Gwen reported her pleasure at watching colleagues learn SEL strategies, “It's been wonderful to see colleagues who are less familiar and left comfortable with social and emotional learning work come to the table and learn a few strategies and say that they’re going to try some new practices in their classrooms.”

Participants all seemed to feel that training and a bank of practical strategies would increase teachers’ confidence and therefore increase the likelihood of them implementing SEL. As Jake discussed, “if you don't want to lead someone down the wrong path, you don't want to try to give advice to someone who's struggling and if you don't think you're an expert at giving that kind of advice.” While not explicitly stated, one can infer that the participant means the “kind of advice” that is applicable for high school students. As he said, “teachers don’t feel like they are professionals in it.”

Theme 5: Any SEL for high school needs to be able to be infused throughout the curriculum or else it feels like the extra burden. In discussing the types of SEL that teachers need, it became clear that compartmentalized curricula and efforts, i.e those focused on a specific topic, are of little use in the daily realities of high school education. Participants reported lots of these compartmentalized efforts ranging from English language learning and cultural responsiveness to gang awareness, anti-bullying efforts, and LGBT concerns. The challenge with efforts like these is that they are often done on top of current curriculum, and end up feeling like an extra burden.

Curriculum constraints. Many participants report that, even when they want to incorporate SEL, they and their colleagues feel like they don’t have enough time in the day; they have required course content they must cover. After making the switch from working with young
children to those in high school, Carly, a passionate SEL advocate, felt these constraints acutely. “When you get to the high school, it's a little different because you have your framework that you have to make sure that you are in compliance with.” Part of this is due to the expectation that teachers will teach a common core curriculum. As Gwen describes it, “The common core English standards have moved further way from, I would say social and emotional thinking and work because they're a movement away from fiction; a movement away from personal narrative; movement away from more of a reader response, kind of approach to literature and movement toward information texts and logical argumentation and that kind of thing.” Luckily, she reports that this may be changing, “a barrier that I have felt more in the past than now is the expectation of common curriculum. So then it's everybody teaching a certain course has to do X, Y, Z assignments or have that be in sync.”

Unfortunately, constraints aren’t loosening for everyone. It seems as though some subjects may be more difficult than others for teachers to incorporate SEL. Stan speaks directly to this, “I usually am not able to do a lot of that just by virtue of what I teach [AP chemistry].” Jake also felt this way, “I think my challenge, my entire career, as a math teacher was incorporating it into a math classroom without it feeling completely 'why are we doing this?'.” Troy also echoed this feeling more generally, “It gets lost as it goes up through the high school because things are so structured that you really don't have much of a choice but to teach the subject matter.”

**When it's infused, it stops feeling like an extra burden.** In an already packed school day and an environment focused largely on academic achievement and testing, teachers need easy to incorporate SEL practices to utilize in their daily work. Carly offered a wonderful metaphor, “to see it as a separate curriculum would, I think, make a lot of resistance, but if you can infuse it
somehow in your - it's like teaching multiculturalism, so, if you're going to be the kind of teacher that does one country a week, or one country a month; well that's like a tourist approach, but if you can infuse multicultural and diversity education into your everyday lesson plan, then it's not extra work. It just becomes part of your second nature and I see that as akin to the social and emotional learning.” As this metaphor so poignantly expresses, when SEL is added to the work that already being done, it feels like extra. Tabitha describes this feeling among her colleagues, “For a lot of the other teachers around, I think it was double-work; something that they never thought of before.” Carly had similar experiences at her school, “There was resistance but it was more on, like you say, if there is extra work to be done, then it's too much and they're asking us too much.” As Gwen said, “when this work doesn't feel to them as tied into their contact area, it can feel harder to put it in. Is something added on? How can we tie this into something?”

The problem is, teachers already feel overwhelmed. There’s a lot to do and a lot of students in need, both themes discussed previously, and anything that needs to be added into an already packed school day feels overwhelming. While discussing his colleagues, Jake explained, “it's mostly because teachers are overwhelmed about how much they’re trying to do. And they feel like this [SEL] is an additional thing for them to do.” As he said, “we have so much we're trying to put on our plate as educators.” At Troy’s school there are a lot of other initiatives and organizational challenges so he thinks that when teachers hear about something new, whether or not they think it’s important for students (as many think about SEL), teachers feel like, “we are already doing all this new stuff, we're already using all our meeting time for other things, I can't possibly take on something else.”

Even Gwen, who possesses an impressive ability to infuse SEL into her own daily work, reports sometimes feeling burdened by it. “I always felt that I needed to add the SEL stuff in,
which I did, I needed to add it upon everyone else we were already doing rather than say, hey, I'm going to take out this extra essay in order to do more creative products.” This doesn’t stop her though, “some ways to do to that in English instruction would be to ask questions about the text but also have kind of a personal part of the question or maybe begin with more of a personal question; ask students to either talk about that or reflect on that in writing.” And with these kinds of strategies, she certainly described feeling less burdened than some other participants do, “it's not something that is separate from the rest of school and learning but something that is sort of integrally a part of it.”

**Theme 6: School and district wide initiatives enhance teachers’ ability to identify, discuss, and implement SEL.** In analyzing the data, it became clear that there were 2 camps: one who was much better able to identify and define SEL, who felt confident in their skills, received at least some formal training, and felt supported by the administration (Carly, Troy, Jake, Gwen) and one who had a more difficult time identifying, defining, and implementing SEL (Stan, Tabitha, Meg). With one exception, which will be discussed, it seems that the major difference between these two camps (participants in both had sought training on their own and seemed to be implementing SEL to some extent) was the existence of a school wide or district wide initiative.

**District initiatives result in teachers that feel supported.** Of all the participants, Gwen was most explicit in her description of the support she felt, “I feel just so much more supported as an individual teacher doing this work where, again, in the past, I would feel like when I assigned projects to the students that had a more personal or emotional component, it might be perceived as too froofy or just not – straying from the academic standards of the curriculum.” Troy enjoyed the same recent district initiative and reported that since it was undertaken he has
received training and feels the support, even some minor pressure, from the superintendent. “I went several years after that without having any kind of formalized instruction in anything that would be considered social and emotional learning really until this past summer when we elected an initiative for the district here.” Later, in talking about the committee that was formed, “there's certainly a lot of pressure to be on it. It's a priority for the superintendent. He is at every meeting.”

Pushing SEL to the top of the priority list led to the district hiring a consultant. Gwen described her work with this woman, “we've been working with this woman who has been very helpful at sort of talking to us about the different levels of SEL work within your classroom, within a certain age group, within a department, within a district, and I think that's been very helpful to sort of think about ways that we can create positive change, small scale, larger scale and how they all – the ripple effect of having all of us work together has been I think a very powerful tool for us to think about having her as a guide.”

In listening to their definitions, it was apparent which participants enjoyed district and school support; they were far better able to articulate what SEL was and how they were using it. Jake offered this comprehensive description, “I'd define social and emotional learning to be students kind of developing skills to understand how to cope with different situations, how to have relationships with different people, how to manage different stresses that occur in their lives, whether that's related to academics or not, whether it's family related, how to understand how to deal with personal issues that are happening, how to communicate about those personal issues.”

Troy was also easily able to describe SEL, “it's giving students the tools to manage anything, really, but to manage adversity in their life and it could be a social conflict, it could be a challenging assignment, it could be a disruption in their life in any way…thinking about feeling.”

Gwen defined SEL as, “a particular attention toward the essential and emotional well-being and
growth of students and thinking of it as not something that is separate from the rest of school and 
learning but something that is sort of integrally a part of it.”

_District initiatives lead to more training opportunities._ It was clear throughout the 
interviews that those enjoying district support had more formal training opportunities. In fact, 
aside from compartmentalized efforts, i.e. those focused on bullying, hazing, suicide prevention, 
etc., participants without support rarely had such opportunities. As discussed, Troy spoke openly 
about this, “I went several years after that without having any kind of formalized instruction in 
anything that would be considered social and emotional learning really until this past summer 
when we elected an initiative for the district…Then I became part of the district's SEL committee, 
started the committee here, and so we've had several professional development, probably six or 
seven, with the district committee, and then the committee has run two professional development 
days here for the staff.” Like Troy, Gwen described an increase in PD opportunities, “Over the 
summer, I took a two-day teacher training focused on social and emotional issues in the 
classroom.” She spoke fondly of this experience, “it was just wonderful to be in a like-minded 
group of colleagues which was grades 5 through 12 who all were passionate about these issues 
and to share strategies and we were thinking both practically but also theoretically as we read 
different scholarship about the issue and that was really powerful and then that work has 
continued throughout the school year.” Jake reports a similar experience, “most of the 
professional training I've had was through my work in the SEL Committee.” It’s not just formal 
opportunities either. As Gwen expressed, “there's also a task force that's working districtwide 
that has people from the different building so there's always built-in ways for people to be 
collaborating and sharing experiences and making sure that there's a central common purpose 
and goal.” It’s apparent that both the formal PD opportunities as well as the informal
opportunities, i.e. talking to and learning from colleagues, increased significantly with a district initiative.

**Carly, the outlier.** It’s important to note that while Carly is in the group that could easily define SEL and identify her daily practices, she does not enjoy district or school support. As she said, “I'm lucky enough that I have my own supports for that [SEL].” It seems that her knowledge comes from an extensive background, personal passion for learning about and providing SEL, and relationships with others sharing that passion. As she said, “it's all the mentoring and research for me and then putting all of that into the hands-on classroom.” She goes on to discuss her relationships with graduate school mentors, “so I am very lucky to have them as role models, reading the books that they have written following along with their careers, being part of the research.” These relationships and experiences had a clear role in her career path and she feels lucky, “I had the experience I did in early teaching life.” Carly almost seemed bitter about the lack of support, “I would say that there's a difference between talking the talk and walking the walk. Now, were' all – everybody is worried at the high school level about bullying, about social bullying, because now it's illegal and you have to worry. Were they worried about it before it became a legal issue? Not enough I don't think…If I had to reach out to the administration as a whole – now I'm – there are people one-on-one, deans that I have talked to, school adjustment counselors and I have talked to academic tutors and I have talked to one-on-one but for the most part the majority don't have the same kind of values that I do.” Luckily for her students, Carly feels strongly abut SEL and refuses to follow the trend in her school. As she explains, “I'm going to grassroots start in my classroom and help the students to be understanding and tolerant…that's my approach as opposed to the administration's approach
which is to look at behavior and either right or wrong and a conduct problem; that's where I differed. No, I did not feel supported.”

**Teachers without supports aren’t able to clearly identify SEL practices and don’t have training opportunities.** Those working in districts without initiatives had a harder time defining SEL and identifying the practices they were using. Stan is an excellent example of this. After talking about having one-on-one meetings with students, a clear SEL practice, Stan still questions if this “counts” as SEL, “I don’t know if I would call that SEL or just friendly advice.” Tabitha, rather than offering a clear definition talks about her philosophy, “it deals with the whole child and we're talking about the community of that child, so not just the child, but also the parents and the setting of, you know, where that child lives, etcetera, and so I take into account the social-emotional.” Finally, Meg’s definition seemed more focused on her specific population rather than a general understanding of SEL, “learning what to do when you're feeling overwhelmed in certain situations, whether it be social skills or academically or anything like that, just kind of learning how to cope.”

Training opportunities also seemed scarce for this group. Stan described his school, “There is very little training for staff, I mean, there's very little time dedicated.” Meg had a similar experience and felt that this lack of training leads to teachers that don’t feel confident, “I think teachers, too, are afraid to do things that they haven't been trained to do…it's like – I think we're all cautious when it comes to thinking outside the box.” She goes on to say, “we need to be trained to learn how to deal with it.”

**District initiatives aren’t always enough.**

They need to make it to the high school. Unfortunately, even with a district initiative, SEL doesn’t always make it to the high school as Stan’s experience shows. Stan works in a district
that is held up as a model in Massachusetts. In fact, the researcher, involved in SEL work throughout the state, is intimately aware of this and has a personal relationship with the consultant working there. This came up during the interview and Stan was very open about the fact that this initiative had almost become a joke among staff at the high school. “I would say there is definitely a lack of clarity among the faculty as to what district initiatives are going on and what their end-results are and specifically what they're trying to do with students, if anything, it feels different than what's happening at the elementary school. And I don't really know anything about the middle school. I gather it probably falls somewhere between the high school and the elementary school in terms of implementation and robustness but at the high school, there is no way for us to go to a person and say we want, we're finding this issue or we want to be able to do this. What do you recommend? Or, there is no consistency from teacher to teacher about how things are approached.” When asked about what the consultant does at the high school, Stan explained, “I don't have a sense of really, again, what some of the professionals who work in that role, specifically in the district, are doing at the high school.”

An important note here is also the fact that without initiatives and mandates, even when teachers are provided opportunities for training and they have a desire to learn more, they may not take advantage of them. It’s an unfortunate reality, but one that must be addressed. Teachers are required to do a lot of professional development and while they may want to go above and beyond requirements, there isn’t enough time in the day or the school year. Stan explained, “I don't want to make it sound like the opportunities haven't been there for me to do those things, but they've not been the priority, I guess…I'm on a professional license and so I have to maintain 150 PDP hours in 5 years and they have to fit into certain categories and so if I'm going to do PD,
I'm going to make damn sure that it's going to fit in that category... [There are] about five different categories that I have to do PD for, and that [SEL] is not one of them.”

They have to be implemented in a sustainable way. It is also important that any district or school initiatives implemented are done so in a sustainable and long lasting way. Regardless of what is actually being done in participants’ schools, many reported feeling a sort of “pendulum swing” regarding the focus on SEL efforts. Participants report that there is little follow through. Meg explained, “I also feel like there's not a lot of follow-through. It's like, okay, we have this, now what do we do besides dump them in the adjustment counselor's lap because she is overworked and underpaid. You know what I mean?” Stan seemed to feel that same way and a sense of frustration was heard in his voice when he stated, “There' almost no follow-through on every initiative that happens in our district.”

In the interview with Jake, this “pendulum swing” was talked about explicitly. He discussed the fact that while he is currently enjoying a district focus on SEL, it hasn’t always been that way, “you know, we talked about the pendulum swing before; things were on the up-and-up; things don't seem to be as big of an issue so it [SEL] started to become a backburner.” It didn’t seem like his experience was unique and as he eloquently stated, “They're always trying to innovate change and reform and so you always have things that you have to be working on which prevents you from working on things that are probably more valuable to be working on for our students.” Fortunately, the current trend seems focused on meeting the social and emotional needs of students. Gwen described her experience like this, “For a bunch of years doing SEL it was almost like I was going against the trend, against what was expected of me to be even focusing on social or emotional work because there was such a focus on test scores and academic rigor and academic standards and testing teachers and all that; that seemed to be sort of the
direction that public education was going.” While she does not explicitly discuss the change, it is implied that things are headed in a different direction now.

**Theme 7: Even schools that are doing “good” work face barriers.** It is clear, there are some schools and districts that are doing good work, but the reality is, even they face a lot of barriers (in addition to those already discussed) that prevent them from implementing SEL with the quality and fidelity known to increase positive outcomes for students. Current SEL efforts at the high school level seem to be reactive rather than proactive and tend to treat social and emotional problems as conduct issues.

**Reactive responses to “conduct” issues.** Participants reported that at the high school level SEL initiatives and efforts tend to be in response to acute problems. Stan described one program at his school, “there is one called TSP, it's a therapeutic supportive program, which is specifically for students who don't have any identified learning disabilities, but their social and emotional ill health is pulling them back in school so, things like attendance issues and getting in fights and students with eating disorders and things like that.” It is not only work with individual students that is reactive. Jake describes his district’s current focus on SEL, “our big push in SEL was when we had a bunch of suicides over a short time span.”

It seemed to participants that administrators would rather deal with things as conduct issues. Carly explained this well, “they would rather that you see something as a behavioral problem and that it becomes a conduct issue as opposed to trying to figure out what is going on socially or emotionally with the student.” In the eyes of participants this seems a grave mistake. As Meg explained, “a lot of discipline problems stem from that anxiety and that social and emotional piece that you don't always think about. You just think the kid's being a jerk.” Teachers seemed to feel that a close look at the social and emotional stuff is more effective and
as Tabitha said, “I don't want to send them to assistant principal. No, we're going to figure out what's wrong.”

**The “old school” mentality, ‘it's not our job.’** While this does seem to be changing, there are still vestiges of the old school mentality creating a barrier to SEL. As discussed prior, some teachers don’t want the extra work, but there is another group who simply feel that SEL is not theirs to teach. As Troy explained when talking about how some of his colleagues feel, “I'm here to teach content and, you know, all of my kids get perfect scores on the AP test for the past 10 years and that's what I want and that's what I'm going to do and I don't have time to teach SEL.” This may be due, in part, to what Jake describes as, “the old school mentality, you know the same thing on concussions – this wasn't something we ever focused on and people all survived and did well and so why do we have to focus on this now.”

Maybe teachers feel that these skills should be taught in the family. As Jake describes, “I think some people believe that the social and emotional learning that person gets should come from their family.” Instead, he describes himself as, “from the mindset that it takes a village to raise an individual so people get their social and emotional values and beliefs from everyone they interact with so it's also important they see those same things in their education or in their professional setting, not just in their family life.” Tabitha also sees this at her school when people express resistance about SEL. Rather than think about ways to address SEL in school, they just, “lashed out and blamed the parents.”

**Conclusion**

This chapter presented an overview of the research findings of the current study. Participants’ own words were utilized to tell their stories and provide the reader with a narrative of how they experience and perceive SEL in their daily work with high school students. This
allowed readers to understand deeply how each participant makes meaning of their work in SEL and how their experiences shape their perspectives. In the last part of the chapter the researcher presented an analysis of the major themes that emerged across interviews. Each theme was presented using the participants’ own words in an effort to allow their voices to be heard. The themes that emerged offered a collective story of teachers’ experiences with SEL at the high school level.
Chapter 5

Discussion

The current study sought to examine high school teachers’ experiences with and perceptions of SEL in their daily practice. The participants in this study represented a purposeful sample of teachers engaging with the phenomenon under study, SEL at the high school level. Regardless of their content area, i.e. math, chemistry, English Language Arts, childcare, special education, participants shared experiences trying to incorporate SEL into their daily practice. For this reason, the researcher used a semi-structured interview process to elicit meaning from each participant about his or her experience. Interviews were recorded and transcribed in an effort to capture the participants’ own words. This allowed the researcher to garner meaning as intended by the participants themselves. This meaning was explored and analyzed through inductive analysis in an effort to answer the study’s main research questions: What are teachers’ perceptions of and experiences with the delivery of SEL to high school students? What are teachers’ understanding of SEL and its importance? How do training opportunities meet teachers’ needs as adult learners?

The proposed study was conducted in an attempt to explain high school teachers’ experiences incorporating SEL into their daily practice. Teachers were not screened to assess their prior experiences or understandings of SEL and as a result, participants displayed various levels of familiarity with the topic at hand. This was purposeful and intended to be more representative of the current state of SEL in high schools, i.e. some teachers/schools/districts are well versed while others have only superficial understandings. Participant’s unique experiences and perspectives provided the researcher with large amounts of data in the form of personal stories; stories that spoke to both a collective experience with SEL as well as the individual
experiences of each participant. In order to offer an honest representation of participants’ stories, the researcher used direct quotations. Moreover, the use of direct quotes and personal stories allowed the researcher to employ a true interpretative phenomenological analysis of the gathered data.

The current chapter discusses the findings from the current study. Major findings will be discussed and explored in relation to the current body of literature regarding SEL. Positioning the current findings within this body of research allows for a better understanding of their significance. Following this discussion, results will be examined in relation to the theoretical framework utilized in this study, i.e. adult learning theory in practice (Knowles et al., 2011). This examination allows the researcher to offer suggestions for the improvement of current training opportunities concerning SEL. A discussion of the researcher’s plan for the practical uses of these findings will provide the reader with next steps and practical implications. Scholarly implications will be presented in the form of suggested research areas moving forward. Finally, the researcher provides an overview of how the current study will guide her career path and an examination of how the findings of this study have shifted her positionality.

**In Relation To The Current Research Body**

There is an ever-growing body of research examining the role of SEL in students’ overall wellbeing as well as the role of teachers in providing SEL for their students. Many of the findings from the current study fall directly in line with what is currently known about SEL, but there were also some surprises.

**Confirming prior research.** First and foremost, as indicated by various researchers, teachers agree that SEL and the resulting increases in social and emotional competency are vital to student success. There exists wide agreement among educators that SEL is critical for
elementary aged students; about 77% of teachers agree. Recently, numbers have increased among those working with older students; about 56% report that SEL should be a priority at the high school level as well (Bridgeland et al., 2013). Research has gone so far as to indicate that teachers at all levels report feeling an ethical, moral, and professional responsibility to go beyond a narrow focus on academic learning and promote social and emotional well-being (Lasky, 2005). Findings from the current study confirm this feeling among participants. As Gwen explained, “One thing that we have identified, and the faculty has talked about this very, very openly, in the last several years, there's been an increase in the number of students who are having significant mental health struggles and challenges, a number of students who are out of school for stretches of time for reasons of anxiety, depression, academic stress and so on that sort of extreme end of things we're seeing a real need for more emotional support for students.” It seems that participants agree, students are facing new and unique challenges and stressors that increase their need for social and emotional support (Postman, 1994; Price, 2008). Stan stated this perfectly, “there's actually fundamental changes in society and communication and social media that affect a lot of these behaviors, so they're becoming more prominent.”

In addition to the understanding that students are growing up in an increasingly stressful and challenging world, participants agreed that SEL allows teachers to advance the academic rigor in their classroom and ultimately results in greater academic achievement for students. None were familiar with Durlak et al.’s (2011) finding that SEL resulted in an 11-point gain on standardized tests, but all agreed that students who possess social and emotional competency do better in the classroom. As Meg explained, “they could come to a math class and math might be their best subject but if they're dealing with something like that [a social and emotional issue],
they're not going to perform to their potential.” She recognizes that, “without that social and emotional balance, you can't do the academics and vice versa.”

In thinking about the story told by the research about teachers’ needs in this area, participants in the current study fall in line with what the research already knows. Positive perceptions of support and higher levels of preparation due to training were both positively correlated with dosage and quality of SEL implementation (Ransford et al., 2009). As explored in theme six, teachers working in schools that prioritized SEL were more knowledgeable, had greater ability to define and identify SEL in their current practice, reported more formal and informal training opportunities, and appeared to be implementing SEL at greater rates and with better quality (apparent in their ability to articulate their efforts). The increased training opportunities in these schools seem to lead to more confident teachers, which in turn led to increased willingness of teachers to implement SEL.

The increased need for training identified in the current study is no surprise, as others have also reported it (Durlak et al., 2011). The participants’ stories echoed those told in prior research; teachers who feel confident and prepared are more likely to implement SEL (Brophy, 1988; Buchanan, et al., 2009; Ransford et al., 2009). Meg explained this well, “I think teachers, too, are afraid to do things that they haven't been trained to do because teachers are so focused on the training, the professional development, PDPs, you know what I mean, it's like – I think we're all cautious when it comes to thinking outside the box.” As Jake discussed, “you don't want to lead someone down the wrong path, you don't want to try to give advice to someone who's struggling if you don't think you're an expert at giving that kind of advice.” One can infer that he means the “kind of advice” that is applicable for high school students. Like subjects in Ransford et al.’s (2009) study, Jake reported one of the greatest barriers as, “the lack of professional
development time or available time to provide professional development around them [SEL practices].”

**Identifying gaps in the current research body.** Perhaps because SEL has been least studied in older students (Durlak et al., 2011) there were some unique and interesting findings that have not yet been seen in the research; teachers at the high school level need the language to identify what they are already doing and they need ways to incorporate SEL into their current curriculum, rather than finding time to add it on top of what they are already doing.

**They need the language.** While there was a distinct difference between those enjoying support and training in their school/district and those deprived of it, all teachers either explicitly or implicitly described a need for language to identify what they are already doing in regards to SEL. This theme was seen across interviews and was one of the first to appear in the researcher’s analytic memos. Stan was perhaps the best example. He started by describing SEL in the following way, “I mean I imagine in my mind things like trust falls and team building exercises and stuff like that.” The interesting part is that he went on to describe a wide variety of SEL practices he was using, i.e. building relationships, setting priorities, and managing stress. But, even with all of those daily practices, he states, “I don’t know if I would call that SEL or just friendly advice.”

Participants even went so far as to say that having language to identify what people are already doing could decrease resistance to SEL initiatives. This is an important finding as it implies an easy way to support SEL at the high school level. Teachers simply need the language to identify what is already happening, no new initiatives necessary. Troy described it like this, “I think we're turning a corner right now because as people start to realize, well I do do that in my class, I'm just not necessarily calling it SEL.” He also told the perfect story to highlight this
finding, “I have a colleague who's like a grumpy old man but he's great. He's really wonderful and he is Mr. SEL, he just doesn't know it, and when they announced the SEL initiative, he came to see me after, I won't say exactly what he said, but it was like ‘I don't have time for this soft cuddly BS’. And in my head, I was like, how can you say that; you're Mr. SEL, right? You just don't know it.”

**Needs to be infused, not in place of.** Teachers, especially those at the high school level report that time constraints impede their ability to incorporate SEL into their daily practice (Dix et al., 2012; Durlak et al., 2011). Teachers in this study took that one step further and identified curriculum constraints and the ensuing need for skills and strategies that can be infused into current course curricula. Troy stated this clearly, “it [SEL] gets lost as it goes up through the high school because things are so structured that you really don't have much of a choice but to teach the subject matter.” Meg expressed a need for, “quick little strategies.” It seems likely that if strategies like this are identified and disseminated, it will lessen the feeling of SEL being an extra burden. As Carly so eloquently described, “to see it as a separate curriculum would, I think, make a lot of resistance, but if you can infuse it somehow in your - it's like teaching multiculturalism, so, if you're going to be the kind of teacher that does one country a week, or one country a month; well that's like a tourist approach, but if you can infuse multicultural and diversity education into your everyday lesson plan, then it's not extra work. It just becomes part of your second nature and I see that as akin to the social and emotional learning.”

**In Relation to the Theory of Andragogy in Practice**

The use of a theoretical framework serves many purposes and in reflecting upon the current research study, the researcher identified many ways that the theory of andragogy in practice (Knowles et al., 2011) has shaped her work. First and foremost the understanding and
recognition of teachers’ roles as adult learners created a heightened sensitivity to how SEL initiatives and training were meeting their needs. The researcher was inherently more in tune with teachers’ perspectives. A deeper level of meaning was found in their words, as the researcher possessed the ability to look at what was and wasn't working for them through the lens of the theory of andragogy in practice. This also allowed her to think deeply about how their expressed needs could be further understood by allowing for a thorough examination of their experiences while also accounting for the individual and situational factors that impacted those experiences. Perhaps most importantly, as will be discussed shortly, it allowed for the information to be gathered in such a way that the results will be easily translated from theoretical understandings to practical applications.

**The tenets of andragogy in practice.** While not every tenet was exemplified in participants’ stories, many of the tenets of Knowles (1973) theory of adult learning were expressed.

*They want access to trainings that have immediate utility and provide information and opportunities that will assist them now, not in the future.* Throughout the interviews it was clear that participants longed for trainings that would provide them skills and strategies that were useful in their daily work. As was described by many, compartmentalized trainings focused on specific topics often felt unrelated to their daily practice and were therefore of little use. Participants described trainings about anti-bullying, anti-hazing, gang awareness, recognizing and managing stress and anxiety, and others. Unfortunately, most seemed to feel that these weren’t actually useful in helping them meet the day-to-day social and emotional needs of students. As discussed earlier, participants were clear, they need training on practical strategies that can be utilized in their classrooms. As Meg stated, “If we just had kind of a bank, even just
quick little strategies, that can turn that kid's day from awful to maybe like, okay, I can survive this.”

**Adults want to focus on issues that are of concern to them and their daily practice.**

While many high school teachers in the current study and those in other research (Bridgeland et al., 2013) recognize the importance of SEL for student well being, there does exist some concern that SEL isn’t going to help them on a day-to-day basis. Most in the current study recognize that SEL supports students to achieve more academically, but voiced concern that their colleagues may not feel the same way. It appears that efforts need to be made to help teachers see the vital role that SEL plays in helping them achieve their number one goal for students, academic achievement. This will hopefully lead to SEL becoming a priority for teachers and increase their interest in learning about it. This is important because as it stands now, many feel that SEL is not part of their job or they don’t see the benefits, and therefore don’t want to seek out training opportunities for it. In fact, Stan discusses this explicitly, “they [SEL training opportunities] have not been the priority, I guess…I'm on a professional license and so I have to maintain 150 PDP hours in 5 years and they have to fit into certain categories and so if I'm going to do PD, I'm going to make damn sure that it's going to fit in that category... [There are] about five different categories that I have to do PD for, and that's not one of them.”

**Adults prefer to learn in collaborative, respectful, and informal climates that allow for dialog and reflection.** Throughout the interviews, it became obvious that teachers were seeking out informal training opportunities. While many expressed a desire for formal training opportunities, teachers felt that the informal training they were engaging in with colleagues was effective and useful. In fact, some even felt that these types of trainings could be more effective and suffer less resistance. As Gwen said, “there's something very powerful about teachers
teaching teachers. When people are learning from their colleagues they are less likely come in with that critical lens and air.” This informal type of training seems powerful and as Gwen expressed while describing such a session, “it was just wonderful to be in a like-minded group of colleagues which was grades 5 through 12 who all were passionate about these issues and to share strategies.” Tabitha even expressed a sense of nostalgia in thinking about her former job, as these types of informal opportunities existed there every day, but were not present in her current role.

**Shifting language to foster “buy in”**. As was discussed earlier, a language shift could be powerful when creating “buy in” for SEL. This is an important point as adult learners are more satisfied when they are intrinsically motivated to learn (Hunzicker, 2011). This ties directly to previous discussions, but is important enough to be reiterated here. If teachers are given the language to describe the ways they are already implementing SEL, it will feel like less of a burden. Even more importantly, close attention needs to be paid to how SEL initiatives are presented to staff. One perfect example was given by Troy, “I think if they had come in this year and said, you know what, our initiative or our big focus this year is going to be building emotional skills to enhance rigor, right? I think they would have had much more buy-in from the start. Even if they did the same exact things after that, I think they would have had much more buy-in.”

**Implications for Practice**

Research is of little use unless efforts are made to interpret the meaning of findings in relation to fieldwork. Information then needs to be disseminated to those working in the field. The current study has many implications for practical applications. First and foremost, developing language to identify what teachers are already doing in their daily practice is key as
many teachers don’t realize that they are already incorporating SEL. This leads to a fair amount of resistance. It seems likely that if an awareness of what is already being done can be fostered, teachers will feel less resentful when asked to do more or in some cases to simply “keep up the good work.” When creating a definition, it is essential that our discussion moves away from abstract ideas towards ones that are more concrete, i.e. from managing emotions to stress management.

Once this is accomplished, it would be useful to compile a list of SEL strategies and skills specifically for high school students. Teachers need a sort of “pocket guide” to SEL for older students. Such a guide would be of most benefit if it provides SEL opportunities that can be infused into current curricula, rather than SEL that is in addition to what they are already doing and, as discussed, the SEL strategies need to be very concrete and practical in nature and address the discrete skills students need, rather than rest on abstract ideas. In thinking about the participants’ stories, some of the areas that they feel would benefit students are: stress management, conflict resolution, communication, identifying and utilizing support systems, building relationships, making ethical decisions, and general coping skills.

Changes in practice need to happen at many levels. Ideally, shifts in society towards an understanding EI’s importance will lead to an increased focus on SEL and policy changes at the local, state, and national level. Given the vital role of teachers in the provision of SEL, it may also be important to push changes in the nature of teacher education programs. As it stands, few teacher education programs require students to learn about, let alone become well versed in, SEL techniques and strategies. It is time for that to change. As Stan’s experience exemplified, few teachers, in training or already practicing, are likely to seek out SEL education unless it is
required of them. This will require an overhaul of teacher education program requirements and may also require those teaching in such programs to receive more training in this area.

It is also important to think about the training opportunities available to practicing teachers. As uncovered in the current study, high school teachers have very different needs concerning SEL, dependent on their content area, i.e. math, English, etc., and their prior knowledge base. Given these findings, it may be useful to develop PD opportunities that are tailored to specific content areas. It would also be useful to conduct a needs assessment at the beginning of any training to get an idea of what the teachers already know and what they think would be most useful for their students.

**Implications for Scholarly Work**

In order to advance the practical skills of educators, one must have an understanding of what is already being done in high school classrooms and across disciplines. For this reason, research should be conducted to identify the ways that current teachers across content areas are implementing SEL. Given the inability of some in the current study to identify what types of SEL they are implementing, there may be a need for some observational studies and teacher focus groups. These will allow for the researcher, well versed in SEL, to guide the conversations, pick up on strategies that teachers may mention but not identify as SEL, and see for herself what is being done in the classroom. Utilizing surveys, observations, and focus groups will provide the researchers with a better understanding of what SEL practices look like across disciplines and throughout the school day.

In thinking about future research efforts and continuing to build a concrete definition of SEL at the high school level, it is clear that this will be an iterative process. It will require using findings from the current study, creating a definition, bringing that definition back to teachers in
the field, and incorporating any feedback they offer to further refine the definition. It is likely that this process will happen a few times before a fully saturated definition is developed. The definition utilized at any stage in the process must be written in concrete terms that speak to the specific strategies used by teachers, i.e. asking students about their lives, offering them stress management techniques, working through conflict with students, etc.

One area that has been paid little attention and offers much room for study is college students’ SEL needs. It may be of use to survey college instructors about what social and emotional deficiencies they are seeing in their students. This helps guide their efforts in the college classroom, but also helps high school teachers identify areas of need.

**The Researcher’s Next Steps**

Anytime one engages in original research, they are left with the question, “what next?” The current study is no different. This study has provided a wealth of information regarding high school teachers needs around SEL delivery in their daily practice. Gaps in the literature have been identified and addressed and implications for practice are clear. The researcher plans to continue her efforts and further the research body by designing and executing studies to examine and identify the SEL practices currently being utilized by high school teachers across disciplines. With results from this work, she plans to create the aforementioned “pocket guide” as a quick and easy way to meet the identified need for as Meg described it as a, “kind of a bank, even just quick little strategies.” It is the researcher’s hope that this will meet what Troy pronounced as, “a major, I would even say critical, need for information and strategies that are specific to high school students.”

In thinking about her current role providing trainings related to bullying prevention, the researcher has come to understand that it may be necessary to shift the language away from
“bullying prevention” to something that indicates the daily usefulness of what teachers will learn. For example, changing the title of her presentation to include something about how the training will lead to better managed classrooms, fewer discipline problems, and more time to push academics may decrease the resistance that often appears when teachers see “Bullying Prevention” on the screen.

Re-Examining Positionality

Social and emotional learning has been of great interest to me since I learned what it was and how it could benefit students. While no great shifts have occurred in my passion for the topic, collection and analysis of data for the current study has resulted in a more comprehensive understanding of teachers’ experiences with SEL in their daily practice. The chosen theoretical framework also resulted in an increased knowledge base concerning adult learners.

The work done for the current study has also resulted in enhanced qualitative research skills, which allow me to continue my work and delve deeper into teachers’ experiences. The ability to listen and gather data from the stories of my participants will serve me well moving forward. In addition, I now possess the ability to examine any topic I should find interesting in the future from both a qualitative and quantitative perspective. I am no longer just a researcher, I am now a qualified story teller.

My increased understanding will be of great use in my career as a college instructor and professional development developer and provider. Even before data was analyzed, I found myself becoming more sensitive to how my work was, or was not, meeting the needs of those I serve. Accounting for what I now know about adult learners, PD developed by my center will pay special attention to the language used, the needs of teachers taking part, and the utility of what they are learning in their daily practice. In my work as a college instructor, I am now
positioned to better understand and identify the social and emotional needs of my college students.

Conclusion

The current study sought to examine high school teachers’ experiences with SEL in their daily practice. This study was undertaken as a result of the researcher’s awareness that an increasing number of high school students are graduating without the social and emotional competencies necessary for lifelong personal, academic, and professional success. While there are many stakeholders involved and many ways one could approach this problem, the researcher felt that an area in need of examination was that of teachers’ experiences with SEL. For this reason she chose to employ interpretative phenomenological analysis. The use of IPA allowed participants stories to be understood from their unique perspectives and using their own words. Each told a unique narrative and those narratives were used to examine similarities and differences among participants.

As discussed in detail, findings from this study supported prior research. Sadly, it also reinforced the researcher’s concerns about SEL in high school settings. First, teachers’ experiences confirmed the scarcity of effective SEL for older students. Teachers in the current study spoke of the need for strategies and skills that are specific to older students. Some also spoke of the unfortunate reality that many working with older students don’t even now what SEL looks like for those populations. Is it a separate, topic specific curriculum? Maybe it’s about recognizing and managing emotions in the classroom? Or could it be about managing stress and setting priorities? The reality is, it's all of these things but teachers lack the knowledge base and language to identity and articulate that.
Fortunately, current findings also offered comforting affirmation for the researchers concern that SEL is of particular importance for older students. Throughout the interviews it was clear, most teachers do recognize the importance of SEL in high school. They understand that after high school these students are, in many ways, on their own and need the skills necessary for success in an increasingly global and fast-paced world. They also acknowledge that students’ lives today are saturated with adult worries and concerns, not to mention the increased pressures associated with the use of technology and social media.

Finally, findings support research identifying the link between support and training and teachers’ ability to provide SEL with the fidelity, quality, and generalization of skills known to be associated with the most positive outcomes for students. A clear distinction was seen between those schools and districts who had SEL initiatives and those that did not. Those enjoying support had more training, better language to identify current practices, appeared more confident in their skills, and had more positive feelings overall about their ability to implement SEL. Participants in these schools still faced barriers such as curriculum constraints and the “pendulum swing” of reactive SEL measures, but were better able to meet the social and emotional needs of their students in a proactive and thoughtful manner.

Overall, findings from this study provide researchers and practitioners some real food for thought and fuel for their fires. In the current day and age, it is a grave mistake to allow teens to graduate from high school without the emotional intelligence necessary for success. As political and social tensions increase in our country and the world at large, it seems that teaching students how to better understand the various perspectives indicative of a diverse global community, communicate with a wide range of individuals, recognize and manage their emotions, and conduct themselves in ethical and responsible ways are just some of the key components of
success as global citizens. Social and emotional learning serves as one vehicle to do just that and the current study offers real implications for how to best provide teachers with the training they need to drive that car.
References


doi: [http://dx.doi.org/ezproxy.neu.edu/10.1016/S0191-8869(03)00076-X](http://dx.doi.org/ezproxy.neu.edu/10.1016/S0191-8869(03)00076-X)


