MAKING SENSE OF THE UNDERREPRESENTATION OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN PUBLIC ELEMENTARY CLASSROOMS: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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Danielle C. Dugre

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Abstract

Public elementary school teachers lack supports to deliver explicit social and emotional instruction within their general education (GE) classrooms. The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was to understand how public elementary school teachers perceive their experience teaching social-emotional learning (SEL), in order to directly inform school reform aimed at increasing SEL instruction beyond what is currently offered. The main question this researcher sought to answer was: How do public elementary school teachers think about teaching SEL in their GE classrooms? Data was collected through interviews of five seasoned elementary classroom teachers who shared personal stories about being elementary school students, pre-teacher college students, novice teachers and veteran teachers. Results indicated that teacher training and support for SEL at all levels are insufficient. This demonstrated a primary need to increase required SEL coursework at the pre-teacher college level. In addition, working teachers at all stages in their careers need increased SEL training in order to effectively deliver SEL instruction to their students. Results of this work also indicated that modern stressors placed on our students warrant increased SEL today more than ever, however teachers feel increased pressure by administration to spend more time on academics. They feel conflicted knowing that their students’ success (academically and beyond) is reliant on social and emotional wellness. Finally, results from this work showed that the existing knowledge-base for best SEL curriculum implementation is not clearly understood, so effectiveness and fidelity are impacted. This is despite a plethora of research that is aligned with the firsthand experiences of the participants featured here. This finding demonstrates the need for research to find its way into the hands of decision-makers but also that teachers are more fully
included when decisions about SEL are being made. As frontline practitioners, teachers offer valuable lenses for looking at our students’ SEL needs.

Keywords: Social-emotional learning, critical thinking, critical social thinking
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The hundreds of students who have come in and out of my life are the impetus behind my work. I have listened through their tears and watched them struggle to navigate the social arena, often misunderstood by their peers, teachers, and families. But, I have also shared their joy as they begin to grow their social-emotional skills and succeed at making a new friend.

My work is also driven by my firsthand observations of our public school system and my recognition of its shortcomings in regards to meeting the needs of the whole child. Rather than complain, I wanted to be a part of the solution. I hope my work, in some small way, will accomplish that.

I am grateful for the five teachers who agreed to be interviewed for my work. I learned that time is so precious for these professionals. Yet they agreed to give it to me, a complete stranger. They did so because they are dedicated to their students and passionate about change.

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Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

Statement of the Problem

Public elementary school teachers lack supports to deliver explicit social-emotional learning (SEL) instruction within their classrooms. This is unfortunate given the importance of SEL skills for student success in school and beyond. In addition, greater attention to SEL would waylay challenging student behavior in today’s classrooms which disrupts the learning for everyone.

It is well-documented that a majority of elementary schools adhere to an outdated status quo by focusing on traditional academics, or the three Rs (reading, writing, and arithmetic), while SEL skills are largely neglected within general education (GE) classrooms (Forness & Kavale, 1996; Korinek & Popp, 1997). Currently when SEL instruction is delivered, it is most often the responsibility of school adjustment counselors but to a small percentage of students in a separate setting. This is problematic, as decades of research (e.g. Dewey, 1925) support a more balanced curriculum for meeting the needs of the whole child. Thus, if infused within content matter in GE classrooms, SEL instruction would ensure that all students’ needs are met in this area. Additionally, the GE classroom is the most naturalistic social setting and so it has the potential of making the greatest impact, especially for those who struggle socially (Laugeson, Ellingsen, Sanderson, Tucci, & Bates, 2014). To be clear, counseling outside of the classroom for students with social challenges is an important component of their SEL skill-building programming. However, it is ineffective if it is the only form of instruction (Spence, 2003). Pull-out interventions, like counseling sessions provided in a separate setting, produce only “very low” generalization effects (Bellini, Benner, & Hopf, 2007). Even when pullout interventions meet once or twice a week over the course of an entire school year, they are less effective than
SEL instruction that is coordinated across settings throughout the school day (Elias, Parker, Kash, Weissberg & O’Brien, 2007).

Teachers at every level often lament about challenging behavior in classrooms. Students who exhibit these behaviors lack the skills for finding workable means to deal with everyday conflict (which is inevitable when working with others), and everyone’s learning is impacted. However, not all classroom teachers connect problematic behaviors to lagging SEL skills which they can and should teach within their classrooms for optimum carryover. GE teachers are after all, in the most natural position to proactively teach their students the skills needed to effectively work with others. When students are sent out of the classroom when conflict happens, either to some form of time-out or the principal’s or counselor’s office, the problem is compounded since the students with lagging social skills are further isolated from their peers (Dewey, 1925). Such reactive approaches to problematic behavior fall gravely short in supporting students with SEL needs.

Yet despite research, some teachers resist changing their role to include teaching SEL skills within their GE classrooms. They are hesitant to veer from academics, while at the same time acknowledge that the current system is not working to curb increasing problematic behavior in schools. They feel overwhelmed with classroom management issues but hold fast to their belief that it is wrong to take valuable time from academic instruction in order to deal with it even when evidence correlates healthy classroom culture to improved academic achievement (Forness & Kavale, 1996; Korinek & Popp, 1997). These teachers are often backed by strong collective bargaining and are capable of blocking new initiatives (Hess, 2008) which added to the importance of learning their perspective via the following research.
It is the belief of this researcher that adding SEL instruction to teachers’ crowded plates will in fact be a proactive step toward reducing their workload, as it would curb many problematic behaviors from occurring in the first place. When students collectively learn SEL skills as a community of learners, problematic behaviors which normally usurp teachers’ time and energy will decrease (Korinek & Popp, 1997). If, however, SEL is not more fully addressed in GE classrooms, teachers will continue to miss the opportunity to further all of their students’ academic and social development, and spend more time addressing challenging behavior than necessary (Korinek & Popp, 1997).

This work sought to understand how elementary classroom teachers might be supported to change the status quo. It assumed that most teachers would willingly deliver explicit SEL instruction alongside traditional subject matter in their classrooms, if they both understood its importance in meeting the needs of the whole child and were equipped with the necessary supports to do so. By examining the barriers perceived by teachers that prevent them from teaching SEL within their classrooms, reformists could understand what resources and supports teachers need, such as improved curricula or professional development. Additionally, a goal was to give parents of students who struggle socially, the knowledge to help them advocate for curricular change on their children’s behalves. Those who stood to gain the most from this work, however, are the students with poor SEL skills, as research in this area will lead to changing how SEL instruction is delivered to better meet their social-emotional needs. Ultimately, we all benefit in that our greater community is positively impacted when its citizens have the capacity to live and work peacefully together.
Significance of the Research Question

The rationale for this study was to examine what supports are needed for public elementary school teachers to take on the additional role of teaching SEL alongside content matter within their GE classrooms. It is important at all levels, particularly for the individual student with lagging SEL skills whose needs remain unmet when teachers are unable to provide SEL instruction within the very setting where these skills are most needed for success. In other words, the GE classroom is the most naturalistic setting for learning SEL skills, as it is here where social complications organically occur.

Previous researchers have examined the implications of SEL abilities on students’ futures and agree that those who struggle are in danger of not reaching their potential later in life. Social isolation resulting from social-emotional deficits has been associated with many debilitating mental health problems such as anxiety and depression and it is well documented that SEL deficits and emotional instability are correlated (Bellini, Benner, & Hopf, 2007; Elksnin & Elksnin, 2000; Spence, 2003; White, 2011; Winner, 2002).

Research also supports that students with weak SEL abilities are not likely to simply catch up developmentally as adults. For example, the Fast Track Project which tracked students over decades following their kindergarten teachers’ ratings in the early 1990’s concluded that social-emotional skills like social competency and problem solving are correlated to success in later life (Bornstein, 2015).

The societal implications of maintaining the status quo by continuing to minimize the importance of SEL instruction in GE classrooms also stresses the significance of this research. Bailey and Ballard (2006) reviewed literature about first time offenders in the male juvenile system, finding that youth who lack SEL skills including the ability to solve social problems
well, were quick to react and sought to “solve” social conflict in ways that were delinquent or against the law. In the same vein, in a study of ten major school shootings since 1996, a feature was common to all shooters: a history of problems with peers. Many were described as having inadequate social skills (Harter, Low, & Whitesell, 2003). “There were variables in their profiles, but those [variables] involving paths to and from peer rejection seem to be present in all cases. These boys were the loners, the outcasts, the neglected and rejected” (Harter et al., 2003, p. 9).

A plethora of research supports an association between unchecked social-emotional skills deficits and mental illness (Bellini, Benner, & Hopf, 2007; Elksnin & Elksnin, 2000; Spence, 2003; White, 2011; Winner, 2002), and while it should not be assumed that a majority of students who have underdeveloped SEL skills will suffer from depression, drug abuse, or commit suicide or violent crimes against humanity, it is certain that without proper intervention, inadequate SEL skills will have a negative impact on who these students become, how far they go, and how happy they will be.

This study sought to find out how we might begin to infuse teaching of SEL into mainstream classrooms. How might traditional curricula be restructured so that SEL is more fully addressed in GE classrooms, but mostly, what needs to be done to equip teachers as deliverers of SEL instruction? This was the central goal. A secondary goal was to pave the way for future projects. If teacher mindset surfaced as a major barrier, for example, then a project designed to promote teacher buy-in beginning at the pre-service level might have followed. If teachers’ responses largely indicated that they want to teach SEL skills, but that they lack the capacity or materials to do so, then this research would have pointed in a different direction having to do more with professional development and curriculum reform. It was this researcher’s
hope to make a meaningful contribution in eventual educational reform designed to better support students’ SEL development.

**Research Problem and Research Questions**

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was to understand how public elementary school teachers perceive their experience teaching SEL, in order to directly inform school reform to increase SEL instruction beyond what is currently offered. It was presumed that by examining teachers’ experiences, barriers which impede them from more fully addressing SEL in their classrooms would be illuminated. This served as an important first step for generating solutions to rectify the problem. It was also hoped that findings would create a sense of urgency for teachers, as well as policymakers and administration charged with choosing how and what we teach children. The primary question of the research study was:

1. How do public elementary school teachers think about teaching SEL in their GE classrooms?

**Definitions of Key Terminology**

**Social-emotional learning.** As used throughout this work, SEL refers to the process of helping students acquire the ability to: recognize and manage one’s own emotions stemming from everyday problems, solve those problems effectively, and feel and show empathy for others. The overarching aim of SEL is to grow students’ capacity to establish and maintain positive relationships with others.

**Critical thinking.** This study is framed by infusion theory. This necessitates clarifying the term critical thinking (CT), a key component of the theory which will be described in depth within the theoretical framework to follow. Researchers provide a multitude of definitions for CT, but most are broad and encompass a wide range of skills, so relevant portions of two
scholars’ definitions were used here. Ennis (1993) defines CT as “reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do” (p. 180). Likewise, Elder (1997) states that CT “provides us with the mental tools needed to explicitly understand how reasoning works and how those tools can be used to take command of what we think, feel, desire, and do” (p. 41).

**Critical social thinking.** This term, (synonymous with Social Problem Solving), is important to define here, as students with SEL deficits are often described as having poor critical social thinking abilities. Critical social thinking falls under the umbrella of general critical thinking but is specific to the social arena. For elementary students, the social arena includes the classroom as well as the playground. Necessary wherever other people are present, (virtually everywhere), these skills encompass the important abilities to cope and generate solutions when faced with social conflict.

Apt social thinkers consider the thoughts, feelings, and intentions of others in order to determine how to behave in socially normative ways across settings. These are teachable skills, although figuring out socially expected behavior is a complex process (Winner, 2002). Students with lagging skills are often seen as poorly behaved; they react quickly from frustration without thought to consequence, overreact to small problems, and are generally weak social problem solvers. These tendencies result in poor social standing and social isolation.

Critical social thinking differs from general problem solving in that it involves a “complex interaction of individual, interpersonal, and situational variables that differentiates effective SPS performance from effective problem solving performance on nonsocial tasks” (McClure, Chinsky, & Larcen, 1978, p. 504).
Theoretical Framework

Infusion Theory

Robert Swartz of the University of Massachusetts provided the theoretical framework for this study. His infusion theory framed the entirety of it and provided the lens to conceptualize the problem, as it posits that CT skills are best carried over when infused within subject matter (Swartz, 1987). While the theory speaks to CT instruction in general, it was relevant for this work since SEL prowess is dependent on critical social thinking. Additionally, CT and SEL share an important characteristic: Both are essential skills that pervade everyday life. In other words, they underpin all else and cannot, therefore, be thought about as separate subjects to be taught in isolation. Abrami et al. (2008) posit that thinking critically is a major goal of schooling which is important both within academic subjects and the social arena, especially when considering the everyday challenges we face in an increasingly complex world. However, even if the field of education recognizes the importance of both CT and SEL, the question of how this can best be accomplished remains unanswered. Drawing upon the infusion theory, this work attempted to answer that question focusing on SEL. It assumed that SEL because of its similarities to CT should be taught alongside content matter, and sought to discover supports that classroom teachers require to provide such infused SEL instruction.

This theoretical framework section will proceed with a counterargument. Specifically, it will consider the contrary general-skills approach to teaching CT. Then it will consider an approach that is similar to the infusion approach, the immersion approach, and compare the two before providing the support for infusion as the most effective means to teach CT. It will argue that explicit instruction, an important tenet of the infusion theory, makes it superior especially when considering an elementary school population. A brief discussion of a mixed approach will
be included. A mixed approach supports the combination of the general-skills approach with the approaches that either immerse or infuse CT. After that, the rationale for using the infusion theory and the application of such will follow.

**Critics of the Theory**

**General-skills approach.** Proponents of the general-skills approach to teaching CT support the idea that it should be taught separately from content areas rather than infused within them (Aizikovitsh & Amit, 2010). An example given by Ennis (1989) includes teaching it in the context of dealing with problems in the cafeteria. “The primary purpose is to teach students to think critically in nonschool contexts” (Ennis, 1989, p. 4). Lazzara et al. (2009) posit that authentic CT is needed in everyday situations, and so instruction of skills must include real-world examples for students and that by “focusing on the structure of the problem as opposed to emphasizing content affords for transfer into new contexts” (p. 1379). Likewise, Halpern (1998) believes that by *de-emphasizing* content when teaching CT, students are better able to recall and apply what they have learned when faced with real-life situations. Swartz (1987) disagrees. He argues that it does not make sense to separate CT instruction from other content as if it is its own entity, and that doing so actually impedes transfer of skills. If we want students to develop a realistic sense of where to apply learned CT skills, lessons must be merged rather than split apart into discrete skills (Swartz, 1987). Swartz also argues that transfer is further hindered by the general-skills approach because it lacks the explicit teaching component needed for transfer.

Furthermore, CT cannot be likened to academic skills like reading, writing, or mathematics inasmuch as CT encompasses “fundamental skills that permeate the effective development of the other so-called basic skills” (Swartz, 1987, p. 273). McPeck (1981) also argues against unlinking CT from subject matter reasoning that since CT is not a distinct subject,
it should not be taught as one. This reasoning makes sense for SEL too, given that SEL skills are similarly not used in isolation but across settings wherever other people are present. Therefore, it is illogical to teach CT skills or SEL separately as the general-skills approach would support. It simply makes more sense to embed these skills within content matter.

**Immersion approach.** The immersion approach is similar to the infusion approach in that they both acknowledge CT lessons are more effective when taught concurrently with content matter. Swartz (1987) points out that subjects such as science and history lend themselves to teaching higher level thinking skills given their bases in research. Consider the rich CT instruction that conflicting interpretations of historical events such as the Boston Massacre provide, for example. This history topic would equally offer rich opportunities to teach SEL considering the interpersonal conflict at the heart of it. Research supports infusion over immersion; in a study where 11-12 year-old students were taught CT skills embedded within other subjects such as math, language, and expressive arts, results were highly favorable for improving students’ language of thinking, applying thinking skills, and metacognition (Burke & Williams, 2008).

A distinction between the immersion and infusion theories is important for this research and what this researcher hopes it will ultimately do to for curricular reform. Infusion goes beyond immersion in that it includes *explicit* lessons for CT. Therefore, mastery of skills is not dependent on students making connections on their own (Burke & Williams, 2008). While immersion rightly teaches CT within subject matter, the principles being taught are not made explicit enough (Abrami et al., 2008). Ennis (1989) specifically warns that there is a transfer problem with immersion. This line of reasoning suggests that if students learn SEL within content areas but lessons are not made explicit, students may be unable to apply what they have
learned to everyday life. Swartz (1987) believes that transfer must be viewed as an essential goal of all learning. “One of our goals concerning students as consumers of information should be that we impact on their thinking attitudes, skills, and practices with regard to this stuff of their daily lives” (p. 268). Students must be able to demonstrate CT skills in class but also be able to recognize when to activate them in real life (Aizikovitsh & Amit, 2010). Swartz (1987) uses the example of students needing to be able to transfer the CT ability of scrutinizing when watching a televised news story. In the same way, students must be able to transfer the SEL skills needed to work in cooperative groups like turn-taking and how to respectfully disagree, to the future boardroom table.

Doyle (1983) performed an extensive study in which he compared implicit versus explicit instruction for academic work in general. Results confirmed that the latter is indeed more appropriate, especially when considering low ability and elementary students (Doyle, 1983). Elementary students, who as novice learners lack automaticity in CT, benefit from explicit instruction (Osman & Hannafan, 1992). Again, this also holds true for SEL. Through “systematic and direct instruction in social skills, students who exhibit challenging behaviors can develop the social response patterns necessary for establishing positive relationships while avoiding social rejection and isolation” (Mathur, Kavale, Quinn, Forness, & Rutherford, 1998, p. 193).

**Mixed approach.** Finally, it is important to note that proponents of a yet another approach, the mixed approach, believe that a combination of the general-skills approach and either the immersion or infusion approaches is most effective for teaching CT skills (Ennis, 1997). When considering students with identified SEL deficits, this author does not disagree. These students benefit from both explicit SEL instruction embedded within content matter and
explicit SEL instruction taught in a setting outside of the classroom such as the counselor’s office. However, the purpose of this research is concerned with school reform designed to meet the needs of all students, so the utilization of infusion theory rather than a mixed approach as a framework makes the most sense in this context.

**Rationale**

The rationale behind choosing the infusion theory was threefold. Firstly, research supports infusing CT instruction within content matter for optimum carryover of learned CT skills. Similarly, if SEL is taught in general education classrooms and embedded within content matter, generalization is more likely to occur. Secondly, infusion theory made sense for this study as it supports explicit versus implicit instruction, important for elementary students as novice learners. Finally, and most importantly, when SEL lessons are infused within content matter all students are reached, as content matter is most often delivered in GE classrooms. In sum, infusion theory supports carryover of learned skills by embedding explicit lessons within content matter in GE classrooms where all learners reap the benefits.

**Application of Theory**

The infusion theory applied to this research since it offered an alternative to our current delivery of SEL instruction by counselors to a select group of students. It rather supports the idea that classroom teachers should instead be charged with SEL instruction delivery in their classrooms in order meet the needs of all students. In addition, this theory supports an approach that would not compartmentalize SEL since (like CT), is not a separate subject but rather the pervasive underlying skills needed to succeed across settings. It supports infusing instruction alongside content matter within the most naturalistic social context, the GE classroom. This is
important for the transfer of SEL skills needed to handle everyday conflict which is inevitable wherever other people are present.

**Conclusion**

It is generally accepted that interpersonal relationships are a humanistic need and that SEL skills are imperative for maintaining these relationships. When we are able to work together, we experience greater success in the classroom and in all facets of life. That said, our 21st century schools are slow to change the status quo despite decades of research that tell us that change is needed. Our nation, and indeed the world, are increasingly complex and we struggle to live amicably together. As our world and its problems evolve, so too must our schools and the roles of our classroom teachers to include the delivery of explicit SEL instruction. In doing so, students will experience improved success in school but more importantly, they will gain the long-term advantage of being able to think critically in the social arena and be more apt to solve, rather than create, societal problems as adults. Competent citizenship in adulthood relies on emotional health (Abrami et al., 2015). Beyer (2008) concurs that it is both an important underpinning to academic achievement and requirement for “participating as effective citizens in a democratic society” (p. 224). By not addressing SEL more fully in our nation’s classrooms, we put many students at risk of a myriad of problems including mental health issues, dysfunctional social relationships, high dropout rates, unemployability, and trouble with the law. This work then, aimed to prompt change by learning the provisions that teachers require to successfully embed SEL instruction within subject matter in their GE classrooms, thus ensuring that all students learn and transfer the skills they need to lead happy and productive lives.
Organization of the Thesis

Following this introduction, Chapter II will include a comprehensive literature review on the topic of SEL instruction in public elementary schools. Chapter III provides a description of the research design, a qualitative IPA study designed to examine elementary school teachers’ experiences regarding teaching SEL skills in their classrooms, in order to uncover the barriers that prevent them from more fully addressing SEL. Chapter IV will offer a discussion of key findings. Chapter V will synthesize findings with this study’s theoretical framework and the literature review. Implications, recommendations for practice, and recommendations for further research will be included.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Three main bodies of work were included in this literature review in order to discern what we already know, from what we need to know about the implementation of social-emotional learning (SEL) in public elementary schools. This review stems from the underrepresentation of SEL in our nation’s classrooms despite decades of research that show its importance. The first strand of literature speaks to the importance of SEL in schools, namely the diversity of today’s classrooms coupled with the 21st century problems that face our students. Literature about SEL programming will follow. This second strand will include the evolution of SEL in schools from the days of John Dewey to the present. It will also include both classroom and school-wide programming for SEL. Finally, this second strand will examine research about the barriers that impede SEL programming from moving forward. The third and final strand will summarize literature about teachers’ beliefs and how they play into the implementation of SEL in our schools. This is especially important in that teachers’ beliefs about SEL directly impact their time and effort spent on teaching it.
SEL skills are essential for life beyond school, but the importance of SEL to students while in school will remain the focus here. In addition, while teachers’ perceptions play a central role in this research, their pre-teacher training and subsequent professional development in terms of SEL are not within the scope of this review. At best, information gleaned from this review, as well as this author’s work, may point toward future reform in how we train and prepare teachers. Finally, types of programming are important to this review, but other than mentions of specific programs used in studies, this review is not intended to examine specific SEL programs that are currently on the market.

**Importance of Social-Emotional Learning in Schools**

This section proceeds with a description of today’s classrooms, since the make-up of students who comprise our classrooms across the United States warrant increased attention to SEL. Our classrooms are certainly diverse in terms of race, culture, and families, but student learning needs are also diverse as the importance of including learners with disabilities becomes known. After that, the importance of SEL as an underpinning to academic success will be reviewed.

**Today’s Diverse Classrooms**

The learners in today’s classrooms are a diverse group so increased attention to SEL is essential. They are diverse in terms of family and cultural backgrounds necessitating SEL which teaches mutual respect and promotes awareness of others’ perspectives and experiences (Kominiak, 2018). Research supports that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are particularly in need of SEL as they are more likely to develop problem behaviors (Zins & Elias, 2006).
General education (GE) classrooms are also increasingly including special education students with learning disabilities. This is relevant since evidence has been growing since the 1970’s which support a correlation between learning disabilities and social difficulties (Kavale & Forness, 1996; Korinek & Popp, 1997). Kavale and Forness’s (1996) meta-analysis of 152 studies found that 75% of students with learning disabilities also exhibit social skills deficits. Furthermore, these students are more likely to experience loneliness since they have fewer friends (Carter & Spencer, 2006), so they would benefit from learning the SEL topics of friendship-making skills, (like greeting, listening, and initiating interactions) which are addressed in many SEL programs (Korinek & Popp, 1997). Important here, is data provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (2015): The number of students with disabilities who spend at least 80% of their instructional time in GE classrooms has nearly doubled over the last decade. Thus, it is imperative that SEL designed to teach students the relational skills needed to make and maintain friendships and improve their overall social standing, happen in the GE classrooms where students with social challenges are increasingly spending the majority of their time.

Other special education students who are diagnosed with emotional or behavioral disorders (E/BDs) also make up today’s classrooms. A hallmark characteristic shared by these students are social skills deficits that present as problematic behavior (Elksnin & Elksnin, 2000; Mathur et al., 1998). Without SEL intervention, they are at risk of never becoming socially competent (Mathur et al., 1998). Furthermore, students with E/BDs frequently create chaotic classroom environments which present as a challenge to teachers as well as peers who must learn alongside them (Gresham, 2015). Thus, when we address these students’ vulnerabilities by teaching them the SEL skills they need to behave appropriately, everyone benefits. In his meta-
analytic review, Gresham (2015) found that 65% of students with E/BDs show improvement when social skills interventions are provided.

Students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) also present with social challenges. Laugeson, Ellingsen, Sanderson, Tucci, and Bates (2014) performed a study to examine the effect of UCLA’s Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills (PEERS) on middle school students with ASD. They found that the program was effective in improving the participants’ social functioning supporting the benefits of SEL for this population.

Many students who have not been identified with disabilities require SEL, too. Our classrooms include GE students who are either at-risk or already exhibiting problematic behaviors thereby warranting SEL instruction (Kam, Greenberg, & Kusche, 2004; Korinek & Popp, 1997; Zins & Elias, 2006). Of course, our classrooms also include students who are not in need of SEL remediation but who would benefit nonetheless. These students can further act as role models in the GE classroom (Fenty, Miller, & Lampi, 2008). Therefore, the most effective programming for SEL is aimed at helping all students work together to develop healthy interpersonal skills while at the same time preventing maladaptive behaviors from occurring in the first place (Simonsen et al., 2012; Sugai & Horner, 2008; Zins & Elias, 2006).

Finally, our classrooms are filled with today’s students who are just that – today’s students. They live in a harried world that is very different from the past, necessitating more attention to SEL than ever before. Zins and Elias (2006) in their extensive review of SEL, point out that family values are pressured by today’s hectic sports schedules and popular videogames. Today’s students are also privy to information provided via the internet that is not easily policed by parents, and televised news stories invoke fear and distrust of others with increased reports of terrorism (Zins & Elias, 2006). Individuals who are repeatedly exposed to violence are at risk of
desensitization which can lead to lack of empathy towards others (Fanti, Vanman, Henrich, & Avraamides, 2009). In addition, the news media regularly shares stories about misdoings by politicians and sports heroes, creating confusion amongst our students about how to behave (Zins & Elias, 2006). All of these modern issues have a negative impact on our students’ social-emotional development, requiring schools to pick up the slack. “More than ever, students are faced with uncertainty in their daily lives and in their futures, and many feel a sense of insecurity, disenfranchisement, disillusionment, and even fear” (Zins & Elias, 2006).

**Underpinning to Academic Achievement**

Social-emotional competence and academic success are interwoven, thus when instruction is coordinated, students fare better in school (Banerjee, Weare, & Farr, 2014; Beyer, 2008; Brackett, Reyes, Rivers, Elbertson, & Salovey, 2012; Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Weissberg, & Schellinger, 2011; Espelage, Rose, & Polanin, 2016; Korinek & Popp, 1997; Kress, Norris, Schoenholz, Elias, & Seigle, 2004; Simonsen et al., 2012; Sugai & Horner, 2008; Walker & Henderson, 2012; Zins & Elias, 2006). All learning is, in fact, a process that is inextricably linked to SEL skills and the learning environment (Kress et al., 2004). This is currently well-documented; a meta-analysis of 213 SEL programs involving 270,034 students in kindergarten through high school was completed by Durlak et al. (2011). Their meta-analysis was designed to examine the effect of SEL programming on student behavior and academic achievement, and findings showed an 11-percentile or higher increase for academic standardized test scores for schools with SEL programming when compared to schools without SEL programming.

Research supports the correlation between SEL and academic success for students with identified disabilities, too (Espelage et al., 2016; Kavale & Forness, 1996; Korinek & Popp,
1997). For example, Espelage et al.’s (2016) 3-year study which included 123 middle school students with disabilities across 12 schools, evaluated an SEL program called Second Step – Students Success Through Prevention (SS-SSTP). Findings showed that students fared better after receiving SS-SSTP for three years, evidenced by increased report card grades by half a grade. This makes sense as the curriculum targeted the SEL skill of self-regulation of emotions needed to cope with stressors such as complex academic demands. This study demonstrates the logical connection of SEL to academic success for all students. Indeed, students who are better able to control their feelings such as anxiety or frustration, especially when academic demands are high, are able to get down to the business of solving problems thus optimizing their learning. (Durlak et al., 2011).

Kress et al. (2004) in their literature review, similarly state that by “equipping our children with the social and emotional competencies they need to successfully negotiate their way through these challenging times, SEL helps pave the way for effective academic instruction and the attainment of core curriculum standards” (p. 72). These competencies include being a good listener, knowing how to request assistance, working cooperatively in groups (Simonsen et al., 2012), and interacting effectively with both teachers and peers (Walker & Henderson, 2012). When faced with difficult problems, students with healthy SEL skills can effectively problem solve by persisting and trying out various solutions whether in the social arena or in math class (Ben-Avie et al., 2003).

In their meta-analysis, Durlak et al. (2011) cite the work of a myriad of researchers who offer social-emotional descriptors of students who are more likely to experience academic success: self-aware, confident, persistent, goal-oriented, self-disciplined, motivated, responsible. These characteristics are beneficial when faced with academic challenges but also to carry out
other important tasks related to academic achievement including doing homework and studying for tests (Durlak et al., 2011).

In addition, the sense of school belonging that school-wide SEL programming provides also promotes academic success (Banerjee et al., 2014; Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2000; McMahon, Keys, Berardi, & Crouch, 2011; Simonsen et al., 2012; Sugai & Horner, 2008). Because it includes learning how to show and feel empathy for others, school-wide SEL programming helps students to feel a sense of belonging to their school community thereby supporting academic achievement (Banerjee et al., 2014; McMahon et al., 2011). In the same way that school belonging promotes academic success, when students feel disconnected to school a decline in academic achievement may result, especially as they advance in grades (Durlak et al., 2011). Depression and poor conduct which can result from SEL deficits also undermine academic achievement (Caprara et al., 2000).

**Conclusion**

Our nation’s 21st century classrooms represent a diverse body of learners. They include students from varying family, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds warranting SEL programming that supports respect and appreciation for differences. Today’s classrooms also include increasing numbers of learning disabled students, students with EB/D, and autism; this is relevant since many students with disabilities have social and communication challenges that act as barriers to connecting with others (Espelage et al., 2016; Kavale & Forness, 1996). Additionally, many students from the GE population have underdeveloped social-emotional skills putting their social standing at risk. Even those students with intact SEL skills will benefit from SEL instruction as it seeks to meet the needs of the whole child. Finally, the real stresses
that pervade the lives of all of our students underscore the importance of increasing the role that SEL plays in our schools.

The conceptual overlap of SEL and academics is evidence that SEL is an essential component for true educational reform, and students who have solid cognitive, behavioral and social-emotional skills will experience greater academic success (Kress et al., 2004). GE elementary classrooms where core curriculum content matter is taught, must infuse SEL given the well-documented correlation of SEL to academic success. When coupled with school-wide programming that is essential for creating an emotionally safe environment conducive for learning, explicit SEL instruction in the classroom optimizes academic achievement for everyone.

**Social-Emotional Learning Programming**

In order to more fully understand the sluggish rate at which SEL programming is included in our schools, this section begins with a description of its evolution in schools, before delving into the role that it currently plays. Barriers that impede SEL from playing a greater role will follow, including administrative pressure placed on teachers to increase academic scores. Perceived lack of time also impedes SEL initiatives. Finally, this thread will include an overview of ideal SEL programming. This includes formal explicit SEL lessons taught alongside content matter in GE classrooms in conjunction with school-wide initiatives designed to create supportive communities.

**The Evolution of Social-Emotional Learning in Schools**

Before examining the role that SEL plays in today’s classrooms, it is necessary to look at its evolution in classrooms. SEL is certainly not new; researchers have understood its importance in meeting the needs of the whole child for decades (e.g. Dewey, 1925). In the 1990’s, interest
was sparked as research about prevention and resilience was happening (Zins & Elias, 2006). In 1997, Elias et al. in their book *Promoting Social and Emotional Learning: Guidelines for Educators*, called for a structured, curriculum-based approach for teaching SEL that, (like current academic standards), is guided by benchmarks and student performance expectations for every grade level (Kress et al., 2004). Around the same time, two influential publications, Goleman’s *Emotional Intelligences* and Gardner’s *Multiple Intelligences*, generated interest in SEL (Zins & Elias, 2006).

Legislation to reform our schools soon followed with former President George W. Bush pledging to “build the mind and character” of every student with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Kress et al., 2004). While the legislation recognized that a well-rounded education includes character-building as well as academics, administrators and teachers continued to focus on core academic subjects given the simultaneous pressure to increase standardized test scores in these areas (Kress et al., 2004), a barrier to be further examined later in this thread.

**Current role of social-emotional learning.** Since then, many state standards have been written which support SEL, evidenced by embedded SEL skills within academic standards like: thinking critically about information, effectively communicating, and working collaboratively (Kress et al., 2004). Iowa’s standards, for example, required third graders to draw upon their critical social thinking skills to infer literary characters’ feelings and motives (Kress et al., 2004). Even standardized assessments now require the metacognitive skills provided by SEL such as writing to explain one’s own thinking (Kress et al., 2004).

Interest continues today as more and more research is added to the body of knowledge that supports positive outcomes for school districts that incorporate requirements for SEL.

Research calls for interventions that include academic *and* behavioral consideration (Espelage et
The current growth of SEL is credited to the growing body of educators and the public who advocate for its inclusion in schools (Durlak et al., 2011; Gresham, 2015). SEL guidelines and learning standards are currently being developed in school districts across the United States (Brackett et al., 2012; Gresham, 2015). In addition, current federal legislative efforts that seek to mandate the inclusion of SEL in schools show that policymakers, too, understand its significance (Gresham, 2015). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is a leading organization in the field of SEL. They report the following:

By 2015, all 50 states had preschool competencies for SEL, seven states had PreK-early elementary competencies, and four states had K-12 competencies. By the end of 2017, at least eight states had articulated SEL competencies through 12th grade. Sixteen states had posted guidance related to SEL…at least eight additional states (are) working on plans that will result in policies and guidance to support SEL. Thus, we expect that, by the end of 2019, at least 16 states will have articulated SEL competencies through 12th grade, a sixteen-fold increase since 2011. (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2018).

**Barriers**

While it is true that a number of states and school districts in the United States are moving toward developing SEL requirements (Kress et al., 2004; Zins & Elias, 2006), “the existing scientific knowledge-base for teaching academic content, improving social behavior, and enhancing school climate is not uniformly adopted, accurately implemented, appropriately contextualized, or sustained” (Sugai & Horner, 2008, p. 68). The rate at which schools are moving to implement SEL remains too slow as current legislative efforts continue to focus mostly on academics (Espelage et al., 2016). The enhancement of academic achievement is
indeed a real pressure being placed on today’s schools (Banerjee et al., 2014; Durlak et al., 2011; Kress et al., 2004) and acts as a barrier to SEL programming.

Other related barriers impede SEL programming from being adopted in schools. These commonly cited barriers include fitting it into an already-packed school day (Banerjee et al., 2014; Korinek & Popp, 1997, Kress et al., 2004; Zins & Elias, 2006), and limited resources (Durlak et al., 2011). To the competing demands for time, schools would do well to seek out approaches that provide multiple benefits (Durlak et al., 2011). For example, Zins and Elias (2006) suggest programming that infuses SEL into ongoing activities making it possible to gain significant SEL ground. Kress et al. (2004) similarly recommend that SEL must “be framed in the idiom of the classroom and the often-found focus on standards” (p. 72). It cannot go unmentioned that teachers are partly to blame as many are reluctant to spend time on non-academics despite research (Korinek & Popp, 1997), so much so that teacher mindset will be the primary focus of the next thread in this literature review.

Social-Emotional Learning Programming

One component of SEL programming is explicit instruction delivered within the GE classroom. The GE classroom is ideal, as it is here where complications organically occur (Laugeson et al., 2014) and where most students are reached. Many schools adhere to an alternative SEL delivery system, where these skills are taught in pullout settings by a school adjustment counselor. However, most students are not reached this way, nor does it support transfer of SEL skills. Research shows that when SEL services are provided exclusively in pull-out settings, generalization is less likely (Bellini, et al., 2007; Korinek & Popp, 1997). In the classroom, SEL instruction can be taught as a separate entity or embedded within content matter (Durlak, et al., 2011), but like academic skills, social skills must be explicitly taught (Simonsen
et al., 2012). Simonsen et al. (2012) recommend that structured lesson plans for SEL include the following seven features: operational definition of the skill, learning objective, materials, teaching examples and non-examples, explicit lesson activities, follow-up activities, and plans for measurement. SEL content in the classroom would additionally serve to help students identify their feelings and effectively solve social conflict (that is inevitable when working with others), rather than reacting to conflict badly with maladaptive “solutions” (Kam et al., 2004).

An example of SEL that is embedded in GE content matter is provided by Hagelskamp, Brackett, Rivers, and Salovey (2013) who performed a 2-year trial of the RULER approach to social and emotional learning. For a lesson with a focus on the feeling of alienation, for example, students might be asked to read a story in English Language Arts class and identify the characters’ causes and consequences of feeling alienated. Then, students would discuss their own feelings of alienation with peers before explicitly learning strategies for regulating feelings of alienation (Hagelskamp et al., 2013). Korinek and Popp (1997) provide another example. If the SEL learning goal is to teach conversational skills, students might be instructed to compose a script for two characters in writing class.

**Universal programming.** In addition to classroom delivery of SEL skills, SEL is best supported when the entire school is on board (Banerjee, 2014; Simonsen et al., 2012; Sugai & Horner, 2008). School-wide initiatives promote a safe and supportive school community for learning, and they ideally should result from a collaborative effort by school staff, parents, and community members (Banerjee et al., 2014; Kress et al., 2004; Sugai & Horner, 2008; Zins & Elias, 2006). For school-wide initiatives, supports are “universal” in that they are embedded across all school contexts, from the classroom to the cafeteria to the playground.
Schools that currently have school-wide SEL programming often come from a place of wanting to prevent behavioral problems. Such universal initiatives teach expectations across settings to everyone and help all children learn healthy behaviors while preventing maladaptive behaviors (Durlak et al., 2011; Sugai & Horner, 2008; Zins & Elias, 2006). Supplemental interventions and other treatment services like those provided by a school adjustment counselor, are often provided for students at-risk or with identified problems (Zins & Elias, 2006). Universal programming is supported by the work of Sugai and Horner (2008) who found that when we teach appropriate social behaviors across settings in schools, we prevent problematic behaviors from happening in the first place, thus ensuring a positive learning environment for everyone. Sugai and Horner (2008) advocate for a collection of practices that offer a framework for SEL aimed at reducing problematic behavior through prevention, referred to as school-wide positive behavior support (SWPBS). It bears repeating that positive learning environments not only reduce problematic behavior but promote a sense of belonging that is conducive to academic success (McMahon et al., 2011).

**Conclusion**

For decades, research has supported more fully including SEL in schools. Research and influential books in the 1990’s generated new interest in SEL and legislation followed. Yet, SEL remained underrated, in large part due to high-stakes academic testing that drove schools to deemphasize SEL in order to increase time spent on learning academics. Unfortunately, this is still the case in many of our nation’s schools. It is promising that the pace to adopt SEL standards at both the state and federal levels has recently picked up, however there is still a far way to go.
Ideal programming for SEL has two levels. The first is formal, explicit SEL lessons delivered within the GE classroom, the most naturalistic setting for learning these skills. Lessons should be infused within content matter for generalization of skills. A secondary advantage to infusion is that it makes the best use of limited time. The second level of programming is schoolwide, meaning that empathy and expected behavior across school contexts is learned as a schoolwide community. Schoolwide SEL programming both enhances learning and dissuades disruptive student behavior from happening in the first place. When schools implement universal SEL programming, they set the social context for an all-school environment that is conducive for learning and safe for everyone.

**Teachers and Social-Emotional Learning**

This final thread focuses on teachers and what research has already learned about teachers and SEL; this is especially important since as frontline practitioners, their beliefs directly impact the extent to which SEL happens in their classrooms. This thread begins with their beliefs surrounding how competent they feel as deliverers of SEL instruction. Then, teachers’ beliefs about where SEL ought to fit in, given today’s climate to increase academic scores. Finally, this thread considers the impact of teacher capacity for SEL delivery.

**Teachers’ Beliefs**

The topic of teachers cannot be overlooked, since their beliefs surrounding SEL have a direct correlation to the extent they are willing to implement it (Brackett et al., 2012; Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012; Collie, Shapka, Perry, & Martin, 2015; Kress et al., 2004; Zinsser, Denham, Curby, & Shewark, 2015). For example, if a teacher does not believe she is competent in teaching SEL, her ability to teach it with fidelity is negatively impacted, or if a teacher believes that SEL is not important, she will not be motivated to teach it at all (Brackett et al.,
2012; Collie et al., 2012; Kress et al., 2004). Similarly, teachers who perceive that SEL is irrelevant to their work will not be motivated to spend time teaching it (Banerjee et al., 2014). Even if a teacher understands its importance but believes that formal SEL instruction in school is incapable of developing her students’ SEL skills, she will not likely “buy in” to her school’s efforts to implement SEL programming (Brackett et al., 2012); this teacher may not adhere to the idea that SEL skills are teachable and that individuals move along a developmental continuum that can be addressed with explicit SEL instruction. Rather, as Kress and Elias (2006) put it, some teachers believe that “social and emotional skills are part of a student’s immutable genetic makeup” (p. 600).

Kress et al. (2004) who have trained teachers to promote SEL in their classrooms found that some teachers perceive a focus on academics deemphasizes the importance of SEL and are therefore less motivated to teach it. These teachers see SEL as an obstacle to meeting their rigorous state standards for which they are accountable, despite their intuitive belief that SEL is important for success in life beyond school (Kress et al., 2004).

We have often observed that the need for infused comprehensive classroom focus on building SEL skills, combined with the ongoing demands of the general curriculum, have the potential to create a situation in which teachers view SEL and curriculum content as competing for space in a zero-sum game (Kress et al., 2004, p. 71).

And still, there are many other teachers who understand the importance of SEL and have no doubt that their students require far more than reading, writing, and arithmetic to succeed. They want their students to be motivated, have positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and avoid risk-taking behaviors (Payton et al., 2000). However, even these teachers
often succumb to the pressure to show academic gain, so they minimize SEL and are left feeling conflicted (Kress et al., 2004).

The United States is not alone in this quandary. Banerjee et al. (2014) of the United Kingdom analyzed 49 schools’ implementation of an English SEL program, Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL), for the purpose of finding associations between SEAL and participants’ views on school climate and academic achievement. These researchers speak to the current pressure put on schools in their country to raise test scores:

Against this backdrop, spending time on social and emotional learning can sometimes seem like a gamble. But this may be missing the point: the real investment required may not be concentrated in a given ‘programme’ or ‘curriculum’ per se but rather in a sustainable commitment to the underlying principles (Banerjee et al., 2014, p. 739).

Here in the United States, Kress et al. (2004) concurs that this does not have to be the case pointing out that “the issue of SEL-academic conflict is one of perception rather than reality” (p. 81). That said, teacher concerns must be validated if their mindset is to shift from believing that SEL takes time away from learning, to believing that SEL supports academic success (Kress et al., 2004).

Beliefs differ amongst educators likely due to level of experience, training, and how supportive a particular culture is, and these factors drive how teachers feel about SEL (Collie et al., 2015). Those with positive beliefs about SEL feel more confident about their ability to deliver SEL instruction and so they are more committed to implementing SEL programming (Brackett et al., 2012). They are also more committed, evidenced by willingness to participate in professional development about SEL in order to build their own skills (Brackett et al., 2012). These teachers are more likely to implement SEL programming with fidelity and act as role
models to their students (Brackett et al., 2012). Committed teachers teach it both formally and informally when they interact with their students, contrary to those who do not “buy in” (Collie et al., 2015). In terms of teachers’ beliefs, it is positive that we appear to be moving in the right direction as a growing number of teachers are recognizing the positive correlation of academics and SEL (Banerjee et al., 2014; Durlak et al., 2011; Zins & Elias, 2006) however the shift is described by Brackett et al. (2012) as “subtle.”

Brackett et al. (2012) performed a 2-phase study involving 935 kindergarten through eighth grade teachers with most participants being Catholic school teachers. First, they developed a scale to measure teachers’ beliefs about SEL via a survey. Then, they used a subsample of teachers to validate their scale. Upon analyzing survey responses, the researchers were able to develop three independent scales for measuring SEL: comfort (confidence in their ability to teach SEL), commitment (desire to both receive training and teach SEL), and culture (how supported they feel by their school). Their measure provided important information regarding teacher readiness for teaching SEL. If a teacher fell into the comfortable category, meaning that she believed in her ability to teach SEL, she was more likely to seamlessly infuse SEL into her academic content matter. The “uncomfortable” teacher might be less enthusiastic about SEL training and less likely to deliver SEL lessons within her classroom’s core curriculum effectively (Brackett et al., 2012).

In a similar study, Collie et al. (2015) examined 1267 Canadian teachers’ beliefs about SEL before placing them in one of three categories, the SEL-thriver, the SEL-advocate, and the SEL-striver. They used questionnaires to profile teachers according to their responses in three areas having to do with SEL: 1.) how comfortable they felt about teaching SEL, 2) their commitment to teaching it, and 3.) how supportive of SEL they perceived their schools to be.
The researchers found that 77% of participants scored themselves high in all three areas, placing them in the SEL-thriver category. Since the majority of respondents felt confident, committed, and supported, this study suggested a link to the growing attention that SEL is receiving in Canada. Teachers who scored themselves low in areas of comfort level, or who scored their schools’ cultures as low, were placed in the other categories. While 77% is a relatively healthy percentage, it shows that work still needs to be done if one considers the 23% of teachers who perceive a lack of support having to do with either their schools’ cultures or the development of their own skill-set.

The context of Collie et al.’s (2015) study is important to note however, in that its findings cannot be assumed to be representative of teachers outside of Canada. That said, they are important for raising questions about barriers that might be explored in further research within the United States, namely teachers’ perceived inabilities to teach SEL well and school cultures that are not supportive.

While the contexts and goals of Brackett et al.’s (2012) and Collie et al.’s (2015) work were different, both studies confirmed that teacher beliefs about SEL are an important consideration for schools wanting to implement SEL programming. Put simply, teachers’ beliefs can “make or break” an SEL initiative. These studies and others underscore the need for more research that seeks to understand teacher perception as well as teacher misperception. We need to carefully examine how teachers who are uncomfortable or uncommitted to SEL think, and from where their ideas about SEL come. Gaining this knowledge through research will be a first step in generating solutions aimed at changing teacher mindsets for those who serve as barriers to furthering SEL in schools.
Teacher Capacity

In their study which examined teachers’ comfort level with implementing SEL, Collie et al. (2012) found that teachers’ SEL competence may be related to how well they are able to promote teacher-student relationships, manage their classrooms, create a healthy classroom environment, and implement effective SEL programming. However, teachers who do not have the social and emotional competence needed to understand their students SEL needs cannot be placed totally at fault, as SEL is downplayed in teacher certification standards (Gomez, Allen, & Clinton, 2004). They mistakenly perceive SEL as an addition to their workload, rather than a viable means to help their students perform better academically (Collie et al., 2012). Teachers feel legislative pressure to improve the academic success of their students but may not realize that an 11-percentile gain in academics may be possible with SEL intervention (Durlak et al, 2011).

Finally, to capacity, Durlak et al. (2011) in their meta-analysis questioned whether or not it was even feasible for SEL interventions to be taught by classroom teachers within routine educational practices. They found that teachers could, and that effective SEL instruction does not require outside personnel for delivery. While it is promising to know that teachers can be effective deliverers of SEL, the fact remains that “we do not know enough about how to influence teachers” (Zins & Elias, 2006). The importance of a study that focuses on teachers is therefore underscored.

Conclusion

Teachers’ beliefs about SEL in schools vary; there are those who discredit the idea that social-emotional skills can be taught and others who know they are important but believe schools should not be where they are learned. In either case, they are not motivated to teach SEL. Then
there are teachers who do understand the relevance of SEL in schools but are not comfortable with their own skills in carrying out SEL. What all of these teachers seem to have in common, is the pressure to increase their students’ test scores, and even those who support SEL find themselves bowing to the pressure; they are swept up in the widely held misconception that SEL takes precious time away from teaching academics. This is unfortunate given the surfeit of research that shows a correlation between healthy SEL skills and academic success. Finally, the literature reviewed in this thread considered teacher capacity to teach SEL. If a teacher does not exhibit emotional intelligence, it is unreasonable to expect that she can effectively deliver SEL instruction to her students.

**Summary**

We have known for some time that SEL will benefit all of our students socially and academically. As our schools become increasingly diverse the call for SEL grows louder, as SEL helps students develop empathy, cooperation, and mutual respect. Many students who are marginalized for their learning differences or special needs are particularly in need of SEL skills that help them regulate their emotions and navigate the social arena. Schools today also serve students who come from a wide range of family, socioeconomic, racial, and cultural backgrounds. These differences warrant SEL for all students, in that SEL promotes understanding others’ perspectives and appreciation for differences. Additionally, our world is ever-changing and students today are privy to R-rated information via television and computers that serves to cloud their perceptions and undermine the values we hold close.

Schools are under tremendous pressure to improve academic test scores and time is limited. Many teachers use this as a reason to de-emphasize SEL when in fact, SEL supports academic success. Therefore, time on SEL is time well spent. In addition, SEL programming
leads to supportive schools and classroom communities, allowing teachers to spend less time dealing with misbehavior. Schoolwide SEL programming, coupled with explicit SEL lessons that are embedded within content matter in the GE classroom, will ultimately benefit teachers in terms of time and student outcome.

Research tells us that students who have well-developed SEL skills perform better academically in part because they cope better under pressure, use problem solving skills, and persist. This academic-social connection is well-documented, yet schools have been tremendously slow to make changes through the decades. That said, there has been progress of late. SEL standards have recently been developed at the preschool level for all fifty states, and the number of states working to create SEL standards for all grades is growing. However, standards or even federal mandates are just not enough. If teachers are not committed to SEL because they do not fully understand its value or because they have insecurities stemming from their perceived inability to deliver SEL instruction, even the best of standards will be ineffective in increasing the role that SEL currently plays in schools. Teachers are just too critical to the success of any SEL programming.

SEL is by no means a novel concept. The body of knowledge that supports its essentialness in meeting the needs of the whole child is longstanding. There is burgeoning research about the correlation of SEL to academic success, too. Literature suggests that these topics are already well-researched. Research falls short, however, in terms of what is needed to get teachers on board. It needs to address the supports that teachers feel are currently lacking. We know that some teachers lack capacity in that they do not truly understand the conceptual overlap of SEL and academics. So, how do we get current research into their hands in a way that is meaningful? In sum, the challenge lies in knowing the supports and then figuring out how to
actually implement them in order to operationalize SEL more fully in our public elementary schools. It is this author’s opinion that the answer lies in the minds of teachers.

Chapter Three: Research Design

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is underrepresented in our nation’s classrooms despite a large body of knowledge justifying it for decades, since SEL is essential for academic success and life beyond school. The trajectory of schools that are recognizing this is moving in the right direction, however the rate is hardly fast enough, especially given the myriad of problems our world presents to today’s students. Furthermore, the quality of SEL instruction is somewhat questionable. This study set out to gain insight into this phenomenon by learning teachers’ perceptions behind the sluggish rate at which teachers include quality SEL within their classrooms. It was this researcher’s belief that teachers, as frontline practitioners, held valuable information.

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was to make sense of how teachers perceive their experience with teaching SEL in their classrooms. That way, school districts and reformists might provide supports for teachers in order to increase time spent on SEL within their classrooms.

Heeding Smith, Flowers, and Larkin’s (2009) recommendation to refrain from a too-ambitious research question but rather look ahead to the principal outcome, the following research question provided the focus of this study:

1. How do public elementary school teachers think about teaching SEL in their general education (GE) classrooms?
The remainder of this chapter will explain the general qualitative research approach, the constructive-interpretive paradigm, and the specific IPA methodology that was employed as this study’s strategy of inquiry into the problem. Next, this chapter will discuss the study’s participants and procedure including data collection and analyzation. Finally, the criteria for ensuring quality qualitative research will be discussed including ethical considerations, credibility, transferability, internal audit trail, self-reflexivity and transferability, and limitations.

**Qualitative Research Approach**

A shift from positivist and postpositivist paradigms associated with quantitative research, to a more balanced view that makes room for a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm associated with qualitative research, is increasingly underway (Merriam, 1991; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Ponterotto, 2005). This is fortunate as a qualitative research approach allowed this researcher to make detailed meaning from individual teachers’ experiences. The qualitative researcher spends extensive time probing individuals within their contexts to “understand” a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013), and then actively selects relevant material for interpretation. These are tenets of qualitative research. Descriptions of the people and their experiences that result from these interpersonal engagements, as well as the interpretation of what it all means, are core contributions of qualitative research (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

Not unlike quantitative methods, qualitative research methods are empirical since they collect, analyze, and interpret data (Ponterotto, 2005). Where they differ is in how they do these things. For example, a positivist begins with a hypothesis before carrying out a tightly controlled experimental study, whereas the qualitative researcher builds rather than tests theories or hypotheses. Quantitative data look like numbers such as how many occurrences and large datasets so phenomena is reduced to numerical values (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Statistics
are used to test hypotheses which ultimately leads to explanation and predictions (Ponterotto, 2005). While the postpositivist recognizes reality is imperfect, he also seeks to make generalizations (Ponterotto, 2005). In contrast, data collected by the qualitative researcher often look like words and experiences (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, where data are measured by quantitative researchers, it is interpreted by qualitative researchers as they seek to find meaning (Merriam, 1991; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). For this reason, the questions asked by the qualitative researcher in the first place, as well as the methods for answering them, are vastly different than those of quantitative researchers.

This researcher’s qualitative study employed the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, the foundation for qualitative research. This paradigm accepts that reality is ever-changing, subjective, and constructed in the mind of an individual (Merriam, 1991; Ponterotto, 2005). The fluidity of findings is not problematic to the constructivist-interpretivist but rather important as it prompts new questions which allow the body of knowledge to continue growing (Merriam, 1991). The constructivist-interpretivist’s data are collected from a much smaller group of individuals thereby allowing the researcher to form a close relationship with each participant, and these interactions between researcher and participant result in co-constructed meaning. For these reasons, the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm made the most sense for this researcher’s work, as a deep understanding of teachers’ beliefs about the delivery of SEL in today’s classrooms was desired.

**Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)**

Phenomenology, having originated as a philosophy that focuses on the individual’s experience, is regarded today as both a philosophy and research method (Connelly, 2010). It is therefore, both idiographic, (or applying to the individual), and emic referring to each one’s
uniqueness beyond behaviors that transcend all humans (Ponterotto, 2005). Unlike the earlier positivist philosophy that knowledge is measured by objectivity without interpersonal interactions, phenomenological philosophy regards these interactions as key to knowledge. Furthermore, reality is viewed as dynamic rather than fixed to the phenomenologist (Reiners, 2012). Phenomenological research originated some 80 years ago from the ideas of Edmund Husserl who rejected experimental science over the importance of lived experience for making sense of the world (Fade, 2004). It seeks to consider the values of a person’s experience and believes that knowledge is achieved through interactions between the researcher and the individual (Reiners, 2012). Because phenomenology values and seeks to understand the whole person (Balls, 2009), it is commonly used in education research (Connelly, 2010) like this researcher’s work.

Specifically, this researcher employed interpretative phenomenology, a variant rooted in critical realism, which accepts that differences in reality are possible because every individual’s experiences are unique (Fade, 2004). While interpretative phenomenology stems from the ideas of existential philosopher Martin Heidegger, IPA became known as a research method following Jonathan Smith’s 1996 article in Psychology in Health calling for experiential research centered in psychology (Smith et al., 2009). It has since become popular in other fields such as education. The value in this increasingly popular approach was threefold for this researcher. First, the thick data produced by IPA studies provide insight about phenomena that is not clearly understood (Ivey, 2013), like the longstanding underrepresentation of SEL in classrooms despite research. Second, when participants have experienced change, IPA is suitable. In her IPA that examined how teachers’ self-understanding is altered following a career transition from mainstream teaching to special education, Farouk (2014) states that IPA is “particularly suitable to analyze
periods of transition” (p. 30). Similarly, many veteran teachers in today’s classrooms are experiencing change in their roles as it widens to include SEL alongside academics. Third, that the participants clearly have a stake in the subject further warrants IPA as a research methodology (Smith et al., 2009). Teachers are major stakeholders. Who better to co-construct meaning with than these frontline practitioners? Reid, Flowers, and Larkins (2005) who conducted a literature review of 65 peer-reviewed IPA studies, found that IPA participants “were recruited on the basis that they could understand the principles of their involvement in the research process, give consent, engage with the interviewer and show a willingness to express their experiences and opinions” (p. 21-22).

Interpretative rather than descriptive phenomenology made the most sense for this research as the latter focuses on descriptions of experiences instead of participants’ perceptions of their experiences (Reiners, 2012). Interpretative phenomenology was a better fit given the research question that asked for participants’ meaning of the phenomenon that SEL is slow to be included in GE classrooms despite our knowing that it is essential in meeting both the academic and social needs of the whole child. In other words, teachers were guided to interpret rather than merely describe their experiences teaching SEL. Additionally, descriptive phenomenology for this work was not suitable given its requirement that researchers bracket their biases (Connelly, 2010; Reiners, 2012). Reiners (2012) questions, “Do you believe that your preconceived notions should be kept at abeyance or allowed to embrace the depth and breadth of the analysis of the subject under study?” (p. 3). This researcher’s answer was to fully embrace it. Regardless of the phenomenological variant, the phenomenologist holds that, “any knowledge produced is contingent, proportional, emergent, and subject to alternative interpretations” (Finlay, 2009).
The theory having to do with how individuals interpret experiences, or hermeneutics, is what sets IPA methodology apart from other inquiries and is central to it (Smith et al., 2009). Double hermeneutics refers the dual interpretation process of the participant making meaning of her own experiences while the researcher attempts to make sense of how the participant is doing so (Smith et al., 2009). Since human speech and behavior reflect how an individual makes sense of his experiences (Fade, 2004), interview data is most common for IPA studies. Adolfsson (2010) aptly states that “an experience is invisible and cannot be seen, but the words and language of the one who has the experience can give others understanding of the experience” (p. 77). Furthermore, interviews allow for more depth than other types of data collection such as surveys (Connelly, 2010).

Another distinguishing characteristic of IPA is its small number of participants, necessary since thick data is sought. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) note that IPA studies have been published with one to fifteen participants, (although single participants are infrequent), but no rule has been established. Participants are encouraged to reflect, and speak freely and at length, thus a smaller sample size is beneficial to such detailed engagement (Smith et al., 2009). For this IPA, in-depth and lengthy interactions between the researcher and teachers invited them to share their stories, thoughts, and feelings with intimacy about the inclusion of SEL in their classrooms.

**Participants**

The phenomenon that a small group of teachers’ participation sought to explain, is the slow rate at which SEL is included within GE classrooms, since longstanding research shows its positive impact on academic success. Reid et al. (2005) write that participants are typically recruited for IPA studies because they are considered experts in the phenomenon being explored. This held true for this researcher’s work. “As they are personally involved in the craft of
teaching it is not possible to consider how pedagogy may be improved without also taking into account teachers’ perceptions of themselves in relation to their work” (Farouk, 2012, p. 20).

Participants were currently employed as teachers for grades two through five. Their classrooms were inclusion classrooms meaning that they comprised students with and without disabilities. Special educators, specialists, and substitute teachers were not included. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) state that IPA researchers aim for fairly homogeneous samples. This was the case for this work; the five participants were all veteran classroom teachers having taught for at least 11 years. This was important since veteran teachers were more likely to have experienced the shift in how schools approach SEL. Gender and ethnicity were not factors in choosing participants but in the end, participants were four white females and one white male. Finally, all participants taught in the Northeast for practical purposes.

Participants were not known to this researcher, important since this researcher’s well-known advocacy for increasing the role that SEL currently plays in classrooms might have impeded those known to her from honestly sharing their thoughts and feelings surrounding the phenomenon. Teachers from other school districts were recruited through references.

The inclusion of five participants assured that there was enough opportunity to compare and contrast cases but also allowed for depth of analysis. Several similar IPA studies provided the rationale for determining this small sample size of teachers. For example, Klockare, Gustafsson and Nordin-Bates (2011) felt that six dance teachers comprised a suitable sample size. They reported that this number “yields a reasonable amount of data and does not allow for generalizations” (2011, p. 279). The purpose of their IPA was to examine how dance teachers use psychological skills with their students. This study was of particular interest because participants were teachers in their own right, but also because the dance teachers strove to build
group cohesion and build self-confidence and anxiety management techniques in their students. SEL in schools is similarly supported by a supportive community and managing one’s anxiety is just one of many important SEL skills that directly impact how well students perform academically.

For her IPA study, Farouk (2012) interviewed just three teachers as the emphasis was on individuals’ experiences rather than learning what a large pool of participants had in common. She writes, “Clearly, based on such a small sample, a study cannot yield findings that can be generalised by statistical analysis. Instead, the aim of IPA is to understand how a set of individuals experience a particular event in order to provide insights for other persons working and/or living in similar circumstances” (p. 22). Shahbazi and Salinitri (2016) also used a small sample size; four principals were interviewed in order to investigate how they perceived their leadership role. Their IPA study is aligned with this researcher’s work given the elementary school context and the study’s overarching purpose of understanding how the participants perceived their roles.

Finally, Da Silva Cintra and Bittencourt (2015) interviewed five problem-based learning (PBL) teachers for their IPA study in order to learn the essence of being a teacher of this student-centered active-learning approach that seeks to build students’ abilities to generate multiple solutions for open-ended problems. They rationalized choosing just five teachers in the following way: “We used Smith’s IPA protocol of interviewing between five and seven individuals. Phenomenological research requires long and deep interviews, valuing more quality and depth than quantity and breadth” (Da Silva Cintra & Bittencourt, 2015, p. 3).

In sum, the IPA studies mentioned here were similar to this researcher’s work in that they have connections to teachers or schools. Their samples sizes were small ranging from three to six
subjects. It made sense then, that this researcher recruited a similar sample size of teachers. Based on this researcher’s experience, it was expected that teachers would have considerable stories, opinions, concerns, and reflections about the hot topic of SEL. This was indeed the case. The five participants spoke at length allowing this researcher to achieve deep understanding of their experiences. A larger sample ran the risk of data overload thus clouding valuable ideographic detail.

**Participant Profiles**

The five participants used for this study are currently employed classroom teachers. They work in five different public elementary schools across the Northeast. Their collective experience is vast, spanning from 11 to 31 years in the classroom. Names have been changed for anonymity.

**Dharma.** Dharma is a veteran teacher in a Connecticut public elementary school. She has been teaching for 22 years although teaching was not her first career. Dharma worked in her husband’s stores while raising two of her four children. She stated that she always wanted to be a teacher but her life took a different direction. Dharma’s dream of becoming a teacher surfaced again while working in the store where she met a young worker who could not read or spell. Dharma set out to teach him. This experience prompted Dharma to return to school, taking nearly ten years to finish as she juggled the responsibilities of higher education and parenting young children.

Dharma’s last group of students included 22 fourth graders in an inclusion classroom. Students with behavioral needs, who Dharma lovingly refers to as “rascals,” are frequently placed in her classroom. While Dharma recognizes that her school’s demographics are changing,
she described the students she serves as “mostly middle-class,” and the town as small at nine square miles. The students in her town attend one of three elementary schools for grades Pre-K through five before funneling into one middle school. Dharma enjoys her job but is looking forward to retiring soon.

Sonya. Sonya, the youngest of the participants in her early thirties, is certified in both regular and special education. She has been a teacher for eleven years in the same Rhode Island district. She was a special educator at the middle school level for the first ten years of her career but when her district suffered budgetary cuts, she was at-risk of being “pink-slipped.” Sonya accepted a transfer to the elementary school as a GE fourth-grade classroom teacher. Her most recent class was inclusion with 26 students, including three students from the school’s behavioral program. Sonya loved her own elementary school experience in a parochial school. She credits it with her decision to be a teacher.

Inez. Inez has been teaching elementary school in the same Massachusetts town for 24 years. Currently, she is a fifth-grade teacher. Her most recent class was inclusion. Inez’s school is the only elementary school in its district serving students in Pre-K through grade five. All of the town’s students in sixth through twelfth grade attend a combined middle and high school. Inez shared that she went into teaching because she loves children, teaching, and learning. She shared that she tries to instill the belief that learning is fun to her students every day. Inez said, “You need to foster that love of learning…I know people lose their enthusiasm [for teaching], but I haven’t.”

Peter. Peter has been teaching for 31 years in various Massachusetts districts. Currently, he is a fifth-grade teacher in a small city. His school serves students in Pre-K through fifth grade. Peter’s most recent classroom was inclusion with 18 students. Some of the special education
students were fully included in general education while others received services in substantially separate settings for part of their school day. Peter is married to a school counselor and many of his family members including his parents were teachers. He said, “It’s sort of in the blood.” Peter knew he wanted to teach since the fifth grade.

**Patricia.** Patricia has been teaching for 18 years. She currently teaches second grade in a suburban Massachusetts district but has previously taught third grade in two other districts, one rural and the other urban. Her school services students in Pre-K to second grade and her last class was inclusion. Eight of her 22 students received services through special education.

Patricia wanted to be a teacher since childhood. She recalled enjoying school as a child but shared that second grade was “the worst year of my educational life” because her teacher was so unkind. Patricia remembered feeling “stupid all the time.” She credits this negative schooling experience with wanting to become a teacher who would instead make a positive difference in the lives of children.

**Procedures**

After receiving Northeastern University’s approval to begin this study, this researcher began the participant recruitment phase using an email communication to potential volunteers (Appendix A). Networking was utilized in that names and personal email addresses of potential participants were provided to the researcher. Teachers from this researcher’s school and teachers otherwise known to this researcher were not included. To compensate for the possibility that one or two participants would drop out of the study, a minimum of six teachers were recruited.

Once participants were chosen, each one was contacted by phone call for briefing, and to schedule times and settings for interviews. During the briefing conversations, participants were
informed that they would be audiotaped and that transcripts would be provided to them for alterations and/or additions if needed. Participants were also assured that their names would be changed for anonymity. Consent forms were obtained (Appendix B).

Open-ended interview questions were prepared and shaped by the infusion theory in an attempt to uncover new information about the underrepresentation of SEL in elementary schools. Questions and interviewer responses to participants’ answers were framed so that most of the talking was done by the participant while the researcher actively listened (Smith et al., 2009).

The interpretive process begins with data. As such, data was collected via in-depth interviews of the participating teachers. These semi-structured interviews were recorded for later transcription. After establishing rapport via small talk, each participant was individually interviewed and sessions lasted between 90-120 minutes. In order to collect the richest data possible, this researcher was prepared to listen thoughtfully and ask appropriate follow-up questions that were not scripted. Encouragement and guidance to elicit stories, thoughts, and feelings were important (Smith et al., 2009).

During the interview process thorough notes were taken by this researcher, as participant body language such as facial expressions and gestures provided additional data that was meaningful. A researcher notebook was kept through the entirety of this IPA study as well. Thus, data collection was thick for investigation. Finally, audiotapes were transcribed using gotranscript.com and further edited by the researcher. Analyzation of the participants’ responses coupled with the notes taken by the researcher during the interviews followed.
Data Analysis

Miles et al. (2012) emphasize that data analysis includes “selecting, condensing, and transforming data; displaying these data in an organized way; and drawing and verifying conclusions from the condensed, displayed data” (p. 325). The work of Rubin and Rubin (2012) assisted this researcher in her attempt to do this. They propose seven general steps as a guideline for analyzing interview data of which this researcher performed the following five: transcribed and summarized each interview; coded relevant excerpts; sorted data across cases by theme and summarized; compared between subgroups and summarized; and weighed different versions before integrating data to create a complete picture.

After transcribing but before summarizing each interview, it was necessary to listen to the audiotapes and read the verbatim transcripts many times in order to extract meaningful words and phrases of all sizes. Deep analyses of these words were needed to gain insight about the speakers’ thoughts and emotions. It was clear that the amount of time spent with the data correlated to the depth of understanding the participants’ experiences. These clusters of information from words to paragraphs were coded, or assigned symbolic meaning, in order to find and categorize similar data sets (Miles et al., 2012; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Direct quotes of participants that supported the themes were chosen and preserved in order to help the audience comprehend the participants’ experiences.

For IPA studies, it is important to first analyze cases independently of one another (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Smith et al., 2009) before closely looking for similarities and differences in participants’ responses (Farouk, 2014). The goal is to hear individual participant voice as well as find “fine-grained accounts of patterns of meaning for participants reflecting upon shared experience” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 38). After finding themes, the IPA researcher
must return to the individual giving thought to how these shared themes play out for each one, as
Smith (2011) submits that the best IPAs are “concerned with the balance of convergence and
divergence within the sample, not only presenting both shared themes but also pointing to the
particular way in which these themes play out for individuals” (p. 10).

While this researcher gave thoughtful consideration to her biases up front, she fully
understood Smith et al.’s (2009) claim that some researcher biases remain unknown until the
analyzation process is underway.

Criteria for Quality Qualitative Research

Quality research must seek to achieve the highest level of integrity. The remaining
section will therefore address the following criteria that address integrity: ethical consideration,
researcher credibility, transferability, self-reflexivity and transparency, and an internal audit trail.
Potential limitations to this researcher’s work will follow.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics are particularly vital when people are the subjects of research (Creswell, 2013).
Furthermore, according to Guba and Lincoln (1994), “ethics is intrinsic to this [constructivism]
paradigm…because of the inclusion of participant values in the inquiry” (p. 115). With this in
mind, this researcher took utmost care to follow all guidelines established by Northeastern
University (including the obtainment of signed consent paperwork before beginning research),
and to maintain the security of documents and participants’ identities throughout the research
process and beyond. She provided the participants with a clear picture of the study’s intent in
advance and informed them of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. No participant
withdrew. Real names of participants are known only to this researcher. Other than this
researcher’s advisors, transcription services, and colleagues charged with assisting in the analyzation process, no persons had access to the raw data which was stored in either this researcher’s password-protected computer or locked file cabinet. After publication, recordings will be destroyed.

Additionally, this researcher recognizes her expertise in SEL and preconceived ideas about how to best deliver SEL in schools but understands it would have been ethically inappropriate to pose leading questions to participants for the sake of supporting her ideals. Rather, she strove to enter into interviews with an open mind. “Sometimes we can identify our preconceptions in advance; sometimes they will emerge during the process of engaging with the new object presented. Either way, this requires a spirit of openness” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 26-27). Finally, this researcher is a counselor. It was important, however, to maintain the role of researcher and not revert to a counseling role during the interview process.

Credibility

IPA study procedures were closely adhered to ensure credibility especially in terms of the interview structure. Drawing from the work of Seidman (2006), interview sessions were loosely divided into three parts with opportunities for reflection built in. In this way, data were made trustworthy. The first part focused on participants’ past histories including childhood memories up until the present, in order to elicit narratives about SEL topics such as early school experiences. The second part prompted teachers to talk about the details of their present experiences as classroom teachers including how and where SEL fits into their day. The third part elicited reflections from teachers connecting their early life experiences with their present attitudes, values, and beliefs about SEL in their classrooms.
This structure was important for credibility as the goal was to “have the participant reconstruct his or her experience within the topic of study” (Seidman, 2006, p. 15) and make meaning. This interview concept also draws from Heidegger philosophy. According to Adolfsson (2010), “Heidegger maintains that being is influenced by the past, the present, and the future and he further maintains that these three distinct time frames are connected. Time has an important influence in the interpretation of the lived experience” (p. 76). Prompts then, were framed as such: “Tell me what classroom learning looked like when you were a child,” and “Tell me about how and to what extent you deliver SEL instruction within your classroom today” and “Tell me what looks different about SEL when you were a student compared to now.”

Transferability

A goal for this IPA study was to attain thick data via lengthy interviews designed to invoke deep and intimate storytelling by the participants, (public elementary school teachers), that relate to SEL. In this way, valuable insight was provided in order to achieve transferability to other contexts, (public elementary schools). That said, the nature of IPA as a research methodology assumes an idiographic focus that does not seek to generalize or make steadfast predictions for large groups of people; rather, it embraces findings that can draw conclusions while at the same time recognizing that all findings are dynamic. Smith and Osborn (2007) describe this idiographic course as one that “is committed to the painstaking analysis of cases rather than jumping to generalizations” (p. 56) allowing the researcher to make statements about the individual for the purpose of adding to the current body of knowledge but not intended to make general claims about larger populations.
Internal Audit Trail

The completed work along with the process for getting there must be able to uphold an audit that checks for accuracy. The “trail” left for the auditor to follow, includes all of this researcher’s notes including the proposal and research questions. The interview transcripts with this researcher’s annotations are preserved, as is the researcher’s journal used to record thoughts about participants’ gestures and body language during interviews. A qualitative codebook was kept along with the coding tables used to identify themes.

Self-reflexivity and Transparency

A school adjustment counselor, this researcher feels strongly that SEL is underplayed in our nation’s classrooms. Her profession as well as her problem of practice were made known to the participants for transparency, important for establishing credibility with participants. However, in the spirit of open-mindedness, this researcher approached interviews with caution to ensure that her bias did not play into participants’ responses.

This researcher is an expert in the area of SEL given her psychology schooling and vast professional experience. It is important, however, that the researcher’s expertise did not act as a communication barrier since a tenet of IPA study is intimate dialogue that leads to co-constructed meaning. This researcher took care to be approachable and non-judgmental. She entered into this study with utmost respect for teachers recognizing that while their training is different from her own, they have much to offer.

Limitations

The sample size for this IPA study was intentionally and necessarily small, in order to collect data that was thick enough to provide meaningful insight. However, this presented a
limitation of this study in that findings can only reflect the experiences of five teachers and therefore cannot claim to solve the problem definitively. It rather added to what we know and pointed to further research that might succeed at making generalizations.

Data collection via semi-structured interviews might also be seen as a limitation. The researcher took care however, to achieve a balance between allowing participants to go off on tangents of their own making and staying in control of the study by gently circling back to the research at hand. Since veteran teachers were utilized for this study, it is possible that memories of their experiences associated with schooling as children, pre-teacher college, and beginning stages in their careers were faded with time.

This researcher is confident that despite these limitations, her work provides meaningful insight to the phenomenon discussed throughout the entirety of this paper. It remains this researcher’s ultimate goal to make a difference by constructing a narrative that might expedite the inclusion of SEL in GE classrooms everywhere. “The construction of meaningful narratives is central to teachers’ understanding of their past experiences and as such it informs their current beliefs and approaches to teaching” (Farouk, 2014, p. 20).

Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the ways in which public elementary teachers experience social-emotional learning (SEL) instruction in their general education (GE) classrooms. It was hoped that a better understanding of how some elementary schools might facilitate the SEL needs of its students would result, by revealing the supports that teachers need to carryout SEL instruction within their GE classrooms. A specific goal of this research was to inform public school reform resulting in increased SEL in elementary schools.
The experiences of five veteran elementary classroom teachers were explored via an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) research method. The teachers represented five different school districts in the Northeast. Infusion theory guided the structure of the questions for the semi-structured interviews in an attempt to answer the research question: *How do public elementary school teachers think about teaching SEL in their GE classrooms?*

Deep analysis of the five participants’ interviews resulted in the emergence of four superordinate themes: 1) teacher training and support for delivering SEL instruction, 2) today’s students, 3) the SEL and academics imbalance, and 4) curriculum. Within the first of these superordinate themes regarding teacher training, the following three subthemes emerged: 1a) pre-teacher college, 1b) new teacher support, and 1c) professional development for veteran teachers. Within the second theme about today’s students, the following two subthemes emerged: 2a) decreased social and emotional competence and 2b) modern stressors. Nested within the third theme about the roles that SEL and academics currently play in our schools were the following two subthemes: 3a) the essentialness of SEL and 3b) academic schedules that usurp teachers’ time. Finally, two subthemes developed within the fourth superordinate theme regarding curriculum: 4a) wide variation of SEL delivery across schools and 4b) lack of SEL curriculum fidelity.

The superordinate themes and subthemes emerged are listed in Table 1 below. The four themes captured the experiences of the five participants throughout their careers as frontline deliverers of SEL instruction.
### Table 1

**Superordinate Themes and Subthemes**

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Themes and Subthemes</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher Training and Support for Teaching SEL</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Pre-teacher college</td>
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<td>- New teacher support</td>
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<td>- Professional development for veteran teachers</td>
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<td><strong>Today’s Students</strong></td>
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<td>- Decreased social and emotional competence</td>
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<td>- Modern stressors</td>
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<td><strong>The SEL and Academics Imbalance</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- The essentialness of SEL</td>
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<td>- Teachers’ academic schedules usurp all their time</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Curriculum</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Wide variation of SEL delivery models across schools</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Lack of SEL curriculum fidelity</td>
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**Superordinate Theme 1: Teacher Training and Support for Teaching SEL**

The first superordinate theme that emerged in this research was teacher preparation and support for teaching SEL. Participants reflected easily and freely about their perceptions of how well-prepared they felt to teach SEL at various stages in their careers. As novice teachers, three of the five shared that they were overwhelmed in general, either due to inadequate training at the
college level or because little support was provided by their new schools. As the participants became experienced teachers, most found professional development inadequate in one way or another. For example, participants shared stories of being left out of SEL trainings forcing them to figure out new programming on their own. Other criticisms named were that professional development did not provide teachers with what they needed or that it lacked depth. It was perceived as unhelpful by one participant and ineffective in making lasting programmatic change by another. Overall, participants drew from their own experiences and learned on the job to develop their expertise as teachers of SEL. This section proceeds with analyses of the three subthemes that comprise the overall superordinate theme regarding teaching training and support. Each subtheme represents a level of training or support: pre-teacher college, new teacher support, and professional development for veteran teachers.

**Pre-teacher College**

Participants were asked to reflect about their college coursework in the area of SEL. Sonya studied both regular and special education at her private Rhode Island college thus earning dual certification upon graduation 11 years ago. Even so, she shared that she did not learn very much about SEL. She recalls coursework about classroom management and learning differences that only touched on SEL. Additionally, Sonya remembered taking the classroom management course as a freshman. She questioned her college’s logic, believing it would have been more relevant at the end of her degree program. Minimally, Sonya felt a “refresher” about behavior would have been helpful before embarking on her career.

Peter received his teacher training at a private college in Connecticut in the early 1980’s. He chuckled when he shared that his classwork did not prepare him to know about the SEL needs of students but rather adhered to the philosophy that if you “make the curriculum
engaging, you won’t have management problems.” As a student teacher at the end of his college career, Peter was surprised to find out that his “vision of what a fifth-grade teacher did totally changed… [I thought] it was going to be like when I was a kid. And it really wasn’t. It wasn’t at all and it changed dramatically.” He shared this memory from his student teaching experience in a fifth-grade classroom over thirty years ago. He said,

I really remember distinctly in the middle of student teaching going, ‘This is not what I pictured,’ and then having to sort of say to myself, ‘Does that mean I don’t want to do this? Or, do I go ahead?’ I decided to go ahead.

When asked if she was trained to teach SEL in pre-teacher college, Patricia quickly replied, “Absolutely not.” She was equally adamant that her subsequent Master’s program was insufficient saying, “I learned absolutely nothing that would help me to be a better teacher. Not one thing.” She credited her learning not to her formal education but to experience learned on the job from a mentor teacher.

Like Patricia, Dharma also felt that her formal education did not prepare her for her first job as a long-term substitute in a first-grade inclusion classroom. She said, “I didn’t have that background in special ed when you have to take a couple classes.” She remembered having to rely on her experience learned from previous jobs and “as a person and a mom.” Dharma had run a home daycare and worked in her husband’s stores prior to teaching.

Of all the participants, Inez felt the most well-prepared to begin her career, crediting her New York college for requiring more classes about classroom management than her peers who attended colleges in other states. Upon further reflection however, Inez recognized her growth as
a teacher in terms of the increased role that SEL now plays in her classroom compared to her first year. She recalled,

My first year I was definitely focused more on the academics and the classroom management, but with the idea of classroom management being more of behavior than the understanding that behavior sort of comes from what motivates you - and the classroom culture, like I didn’t use that word as much.

**New Teacher Support**

Participants were asked to reflect back to when they were novice teachers and how prepared they felt to teach SEL. Dharma recalled her first year in the classroom twenty-two years ago. Her goal was simply “to keep my head above water.” She remembered having no SEL training from her district even though at least two of her 24 students that year had special needs that she now believes were probably ADHD and “on the spectrum.” (She could not be certain as diagnoses were not talked about openly at that time, according to Dharma.) She only remembered that she was given a substantial file for one of her special education students describing it as “four or five inches deep and the kid was only in first grade.” Dharma admittedly did not even open the file before meeting her new student, lamenting that she was hired three days before school had started allowing her little time to set up her new classroom. Eventually she read the file. Dharma said, “I tried as best as I could to disseminate what was in there. At that point in my career, I didn’t know much.” She recalled asking the occupational therapist for advice and was given a Temple Grandin book to read about autism. After reading it she thought, “Oh my God – that is [the student’s name]!” Dharma also sought out her school’s physical therapist for her “busy” student and was given a TheraBand for his chair.
When asked about specifically teaching SEL as a novice teacher, Dharma said that she did not teach explicit lessons but she taught them “maybe as a mother, and like my own intuition… nothing like we do now.” She said SEL lessons were sometimes embedded organically within content matter like learning about empathy via characters in books.

Sonya also felt overwhelmed 11 years ago when she was hired as a special educator for a sixth-grade inclusion classroom, noting her age as just ten years older than her new students among her challenges. Sonya was partnered with a veteran classroom teacher who had many years of experience but in the second grade. Sonya described their collaboration as “the blind leading the blind and I was doing the leading.” Sonya and the veteran teacher’s philosophies about behavioral management were very different evidenced by her response:

We definitely had different views of what was acceptable for behavior within the classroom and our level of tolerance, like just understanding of the students’ needs. Like kids behave in different ways because of what they bring into the classroom…She was much more old-school, like you know, she was older than my parents. So how we handled things was different. And often times as a special ed teacher, I was the softer one, like the one that was kind of getting to the root of the problem.

Sonya clarified that she believes unacceptable behavior should be addressed but that it is important to find out why it is happening. That her co-teacher did not share Sonya’s philosophy is relevant in that it added to Sonya’s challenge of being a 21-year-old novice teacher. Sonya laughed when she thought about her first year teaching and said, “What was I doing?...I worked really hard. But from what I know now -- Oh my gosh.”
Patricia also laughed as she described her first experience in the classroom 18 years ago. “It was terrifying like, the scariest thing I’ve ever done.” Like Sonya, Patricia taught with a co-teacher at the onset of her career, only Patricia’s collaborative experience was more positive. She claimed to have learned everything she knows from that experience. In terms of SEL, Patricia said, “You learn on your feet, doing the job.”

When Peter was a new teacher, he was charged with handling the SEL needs of his students but without a curriculum. He remembered using “a sort of a stop-and-let’s-problem-solve-our-way-through-these-things” type of approach for teaching SEL. He felt unprepared to teach an inclusion class at that time partly because “it was a pretty new concept… the acts that created SPED were sort of coming along.” Like Patricia, Peter credited his expertise in the classroom to experience which he called “rubber on the road.”

While Inez felt comfortable with her abilities even as a new teacher, she credited her own outside experiences for her skills. (This response was similar to Dharma’s.) A mother of a child with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, Inez learned much from parenting her son. She learned from both his counselor and through her own reading, for example.

**Professional Development for Veteran Teachers**

Inadequate professional development was revealed in the following responses from participants. For example, Dharma recalled being charged with teaching the SEL curriculum Second Step but with no formal training. Similarly, Sonya related that at one time her school adopted the SEL program Open Circle. However, because she was a special educator and not a classroom teacher at the time, she was not included in the Open Circle training. Sonya recalled figuring it out by training herself.
When Sonya transferred from the middle school to the elementary school within her district, she experienced a similar gap in training, this time for the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS), a schoolwide framework that the elementary school was using but Sonya was unfamiliar with. A tenet of MTSS is supporting students by establishing schoolwide behavioral expectations, so it was essential that Sonya was on board. Yet she was not. Sonya’s experiences suggest that her district may not have a plan for making sure working teachers are all on the same page in terms of training or that they are provided with the training they need when transferred among buildings, a common practice in education.

Even with her dual certification and 11 years of experience, Sonya admittedly does not feel equipped to handle all of her students’ SEL challenges. She explained that she knows “basic calming techniques” to help students in crisis. In addition, (like Dharma and Inez), Sonya is able to use her own life experience to help students deal with challenges like the death of a pet or a sick grandparent. However, when faced with students whose experiences are nothing like her own, as with her recent student in foster care, Sonya feels inadequate and uncertain. She did not know how to help this student “aside from listening to her [and] giving her a safe place.” Sonya’s concerns suggest that professional development for working teachers may not provide them with the skills they need to support their students’ social and emotional development.

Like Sonya, Peter experienced a gap in training. Peter changed districts mid-career so by the time he began working at his new school, the training for Responsive Classroom, a schoolwide SEL framework, had already passed. He said, “I came in after they did a couple of years on intense training. I was given a certain amount of literature and we did a little bit of maintenance, but we didn’t do a lot.”
Even when SEL training is provided to working teachers, teachers may not find it especially useful. To some of the general training received after he was a working teacher, Peter said, “I didn’t feel as if I knew a hell of a lot more after I was finished than I had already sort of believed.”

Inez on the other hand, has found some of her professional development about SEL to be excellent. Her criticism was that the programming associated with trainings does not stay around for very long, like one she attended that she thought might have been called Spectrum. Inez remembered somewhat irritably that she “bought into what was prescribed” only to have it fade away. Inez shared how her school “invested some serious money” to provide three full days of training at a hotel for her district’s entire staff. Her tone throughout her retelling of this training suggested that she was unhappy prompting this researcher to ask a follow up question. Specifically, Inez was asked if the program had fallen by the wayside. She nodded while replying resolutely (not once but twice for emphasis), “Yup. Yup.”

Inez’s frustration with SEL training emerged again later in her interview. This time she felt insufficient depth was provided. She said,

Like this year we finally had two professional developments. We had one on child in crisis, like what does that look like. But of course, it was [only] like three hours. It was absolutely fabulous. One of the best professional developments I’ve been to and then that was it.

Inez described a second professional development class taught by an outside counselor about anxiety and de-escalation. Again, she thought it was excellent but just not enough.
Conclusions. This theme is significant in that it revealed the participants’ shared sense of insufficient training and support for meeting their students’ social and emotional needs throughout their careers. Upon completing college, the participants began their careers with varying levels of perceived preparedness but as a whole lacked the skills they needed to teach SEL rather learning as they went. From the time they began their careers to the present, these participants largely relied on their own life experiences. They also learned on their own, taking initiative to fill in their own learning gaps since their schools did not provide adequate support for SEL. These participants presented as confident and intelligent professionals, yet their responses surfaced longstanding frustration associated with a general feeling of unpreparedness in the area of SEL. They also recognize that their students’ SEL needs are increasing with time, as a result of our changing world which will be explored in the following theme.

Superordinate Theme 2: Today’s Students

The participants represented towns and cities of various sizes and demographic profiles in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island. Yet, all five were quick to recognize that students have changed and indeed are always changing, notably in how they manage social and emotional issues. In these participants’ collective experience, challenging student behavior resulting from decreased social and emotional competence is on the rise. They shared differences in how students behave today versus how students behaved when they were young. They also spoke to the significant changes they have seen in students’ SEL skills from the time they started teaching until now. This section will proceed with the first subtheme regarding this downward trend of students’ social and emotional competence over time. It will highlight the participants’ responses that speak to these changes. After that, the second subtheme will provide the participants’
thoughts about modern stressors, or what they believe the contributing factors are to today’s students’ social and emotional challenges.

**Decreased Social and Emotional Competence**

Dharma, Patricia, Inez, and Peter were elementary school students some 35 to 45 years ago. All easily reflected back to their childhoods when “double recesses” were a thing. They noted the stark differences between today’s students’ abilities to handle social conflict versus their own. They also recalled that social conflict existed but that it seemed less prevalent. Dharma said when faced with social conflict, her generation worked it out by themselves. She said, “You didn’t, back in those days, go in from recess and say somebody wouldn’t let you go on the swing…You just went in and you went back to your work.” Similarly, Inez said that asking the teacher for support, such as after a recess conflict, was just not something students did. Patricia said that seeking support from a teacher would have been considered whining or tattling. Finally, Peter said, “In terms of social-emotional stuff, we were kind of addressing it ourselves.” These responses are significant in that they support a notion that today’s students’ social and emotional skills are lagging when compared to their predecessors. Thus, SEL in schools must be increased to meet the needs of the students in front of us.

The youngest participant in her early thirties is Sonya. She grew up in a different generation than the other participants but similarly held that students today are different than students when she was young, stating that more students come to school needing SEL skills that used to be taught at home. She said:

They don’t come in knowing that stuff, which is kind of sad, like even ‘please’ or ‘thank you’…that isn’t how it was. It certainly wasn’t how it was when I was in school. So
while it’s something that, you know, you hope would be kind of instilled at home, it’s not for all kids.

Sonya also commented on the change in student behavior that she has observed from the time she started teaching just 11 years ago. She said that the intensity has increased in that “the kids who were behavior problems my first year probably wouldn’t even raise a red flag now.” Sonya noted that she had recently observed a student who would stand on chairs in the hallway and get restrained daily. “That never happened the first couple of years,” she said.

According to the participants featured here, today’s students are different than the participants’ younger selves in that they require teacher support for managing social conflict -- and it is getting worse. Peter first noted the change in students when he was a student teacher in the early 1980’s. He thought that the fifth-grade students were faced with social conflict that he had not experienced until later in his development. He called the difference “dramatic” and gave his reasoning. “Pre-adolescent and adolescent stuff was much – it sort of moved down the line a little bit. There was a lot more social-emotional needs. There were a lot more things that they were going through.”

Today, Inez said she is “putting out fires 100 times more than my first years teaching, 100 times more. Just coming back from recess is a disaster.” Patricia, a second-grade teacher, chuckled while speaking of her most recent classroom of second graders saying, “Last year was a really challenging group of kids. Great kids but just lots of needs. And I mean like, coming at you one after another.” Peter also said, “I am mediating a lot of the time with kids like when they come in from recess.”
In these extracts, the participants illuminate how vastly schools have changed through the decades but also how students have changed suggesting a correlation. It bears questioning if schools ought to bring back double recesses, for example.

**Modern Stressors**

The participants’ offered many thoughts about why students have greater SEL deficits than in the past. The most commonly cited factor was technology, from television to computers. For example, Patricia blamed “screens” and observed that her students today are only quiet and listening when watching videos. She said, “When I try to be a dynamic teacher, they’re like staring at me … They have no idea what I’m talking about. It’s so scary to me. So that is the biggest difference, that they’re too involved in screens.”

Dharma also feels that technology coupled with inattentive parents, play a role in her students’ lagging social and emotional development. Specifically, Dharma voiced concerned about television programming. She said,

And what’s on the TV if no one’s watching what’s on the TV? Sometimes you’re flipping through the channels like, ‘this is unbelievable.’ And if nobody was watching a child -- The kid who needs to be watched isn’t being watched.

Inez, too, said that she worries about technology, specifically its negative impact on social interaction. She cited social media as the culprit. When students have conflict due to communication issues, Inez must intervene and scaffold how to talk to one another. She encourages them to apologize and asks what they could have done differently, for example. Inez complained that “nobody interacts with words anymore.” In these extracts, the participants are again supporting the need for increased SEL in schools. They highlight the detriment of
technology in terms of thwarting interpersonal skills such as verbal communication and active listening to others.

Factors other than technology impact our students’ SEL development too, according to the participants. For example, Inez recognized today’s students as having greater SEL needs due to poverty, family dynamics, and mental health issues like anxiety. She also noted more movement of families today which she believes negatively impacts students’ sense of belonging. There are “shifts of kids coming in and coming out” unlike when she was an elementary school student. Inez believes that when she was a child, SEL was better supported by the community that was formed as a result of growing up with the same people. She said, “I can name for you pretty much the kids that I had in my classroom from the time I went to kindergarten to eighth grade.” She remembered fondly that the teachers lived nearby and that “sometimes they would come outside and play basketball with you.” Patricia also recalled the strong sense of community that her own neighborhood school experience created. “You knew all the teachers and it was all the neighborhood kids,” she said. The picture these participants collectively paint is significant, in that it shows how today’s students need us to actively build safe communities in our schools to compensate for familial transiency.

Dharma added dysfunctional family life to the list of factors that contribute to today’s students’ lagging SEL skills. She believes her students are coming from more challenging family situations than in the past, such as two students from her last classroom. Both students’ mothers were drug addicts. One of the students was living with grandparents who “didn’t have common sense, like parenting skills,” according to Dharma. The other lived with his uncle. Dharma revealed that both students suffered emotionally in that they had “huge anger issues.”
Like Dharma, Sonya worried about the social and emotional challenges that her students from dysfunctional families face. She told of one student who had been adopted but suffered emotionally from “a lot of stuff that happened to her [before she was adopted].” Another student’s parents’ rights were terminated and just as she was to be adopted by a new family, the pre-adoptive family opted out. Consequently, the student remains in a group home. Sonya believes that previous generations never had to deal with as many outside factors like this and fears a further decline in student behavior over the next 11 years of her career.

**Conclusions.** The participants’ responses are significant because they provide a lens into today’s classrooms that only frontline practitioners can provide. They see firsthand the intensity of problematic behavior getting worse, as well as the alarming rate at which behavior is changing in schools. Their responses are important so that others will “see,” namely those in a position to affect change. This theme reveals the essentialness of providing more SEL in schools to meet the complicated needs of the current students who comprise our classrooms.

This theme also says that in addition to adding more SEL to the curriculum, students’ social and emotional needs must be supported via the building of positive schoolwide communities that provide students with an essential sense of belonging. This is especially important for students who move frequently. Communities support empathy and respect for differences among its members, so important as modern families present as more and more diverse.

In sum, these extracts demand that the role of SEL be increased. However, schools continue to focus on academics to the detriment of SEL. Therefore, the SEL and academic imbalance in today’s schools presents as a third theme to follow.
Superordinate Theme 3: The SEL and Academic Imbalance

The insufficient amount of time dedicated to SEL versus academics emerged as a theme. As a whole, the participants feel that more SEL is warranted given the needs of today’s students. They also understand SEL to be an essential underpinning to academic success. However, at the same time, over-scheduling of academics leaves them little time to address it. This section will proceed with discussion about the participants’ beliefs surrounding the essentialness of SEL with a focus on its importance to academic success. After that, the second subtheme will address how too-tight academic scheduling acts as a barrier to the delivery of much-needed SEL instruction.

SEL is Essential

All of the participants shared that SEL instruction is an integral component in the education of the whole child. When asked how important she felt SEL was, Dharma responded, “It’s huge, huge --especially in today’s day and age. They’re like inundated with so much.” Peter said, “There is value in some real explicit instruction about those sort of [social] scenarios kids get into.”

Patricia spoke specifically about the importance of SEL for academic success. She said:

I tell other teachers, you know younger teachers who are struggling [saying] ‘the kids aren’t behaving.’ And I’m like, you know, ‘Listen, you’ve got to think about what’s more important. If they’re not getting it at home, they have to get it from you or they’re not going to be available for learning. So you have to think about what’s more important. You can try to teach them anything you want, but if they are going through some traumatic experience or stressed out, they’re not gonna hear a thing you say.’
Patricia also said, “People don’t realize the social-emotional aspect of being a teacher. It’s really the most important part. I think – really think curriculum takes a backseat to that other responsibility.” She continued, “I can’t say it enough that that’s more important than academics – teaching them to find ways to deal with emotional stuff, problem-solving, conflicts, speaking up for themselves.” Patricia’s response provides the significance of this theme. “People” largely do not realize how significant SEL is. Teachers like the participants featured here, however, do. The importance of SEL as understood by teachers is illuminated by this theme’s extracts.

Like Patricia, Inez understands the correlation of SEL and academic success. She said “a child’s brain – to learn, it has to be in the right place.” The following analogy shared by Inez demonstrates her belief:

The best knowledge ever given to me was, you take a glass of water and you put some sand at the bottom. You let it settle and you look through that clearly. You see everything. You stir that up a little bit and can you see anymore? Can you do anything? I think that’s the way with social-emotional. You take a child. Shake that. No matter what you teach, no matter how good of a teacher you are, they’re not seeing anything at that moment. Nothing at all.

When Sonya was asked how important she felt SEL was, she replied, “extremely important.” Like the other participants, Sonya believes that SEL should play a greater role in classrooms and stated that it may be even more important than academics because “kids aren’t emotionally able to regulate themselves … and accessing the curriculum is going to be a challenge anyway.” The extracts featured in this theme clearly show that teachers understand the significance of SEL to student success. It is imperative that decision-makers charged with curriculum know the same.
Teachers’ Academic Schedules Usurp Their Time

Participants’ responses were rife with complaints that academic scheduling done by administration is too tight and acts as a barrier to addressing students’ SEL needs. Peter dislikes what he referred to as the trend to centralize educational goals and believes that teachers like himself struggle because they are “the last line of that.” He complained that there are goals at all levels including national, state, and district. To his changing role Peter said:

It’s changed a lot. It’s changed a lot and the biggest thing curriculum-wise, is when we went to standards-based things. We are much more focused on content and delivering content at a certain time… So when I had more autonomy over my curriculum, I could design it in such a way to engage the group in front of me and I could adjust the pace. And I could do some things that were more accommodating to kids, at least within the framework of instruction. They were engaged and I wasn’t dealing as much with social-emotional. Now there’s sort of a prescribed set of things that have to be taught.

Peter said he is most challenged by “the what-to-teach-when business” noting that he is evaluated on academic content delivery. When asked how he would feel if charged with teaching more SEL than he currently does, Peter indicated that he would not be in favor but only because of time constraints. He said, “We’re in charge of every curricular area so I’m instructing math, reading, writing, social studies. And so any new material is more. First of all, it has to fit in. But also has to be mastered, looked at, and checked.” Time is too tight according to Peter. He said, “I would bet that the number of hours they expect you teach math a day, writing a day – it’s more than the roughly five hours a day we have to do it.” When Peter talked about mandate-driven academic scheduling, his frustration was apparent. He stated, “You have to decide, what do the kids need, but also what do I need to do to comply with all of these different new folk’s.” Peter
clearly knows that SEL is needed today more than ever, but feels administrative pressure to
deepestimize it in order to spend more time on academics. Peter’s responses are important as
they illustrate the conflict he is faced with.

Sonya also felt conflicted sharing that SEL currently takes a backseat to academics. She
said she wants to increase her time spent on SEL instruction but, like Peter, she does not have the
time or the autonomy to change the schedule “because to take half an hour, 45 minutes to teach a
[SEL] lesson, something else has to go away. So, somebody’s got to tell me it’s okay not to teach
math.”

Patricia and Inez also feel crunched for time. Patricia shared that literacy, math, and “so
much” social-emotional support are important for her primary school students but “we really
need to have more time.” Inez said administration needs to understand that SEL must be
prioritized. She said, “It’s mostly academics but with our changing clients, I mean with our
changing world, and the number of kids that have had some form of trauma...” When asked how
she would feel if charged with teaching SEL, Inez was uncertain. Like the others, she questioned
how it would fit in since she must dedicate “a specific block for English, math, and social studies
and science.” She said it would not work with her fifth grade’s current schedule if it was
compartmentalized. However, if SEL lessons were embedded within the academics it would
work and she would welcome the opportunity to teach them.

**Conclusions.** The participants’ responses highlight the need for more SEL in schools by
showing how weak SEL skills negatively impact academic learning. In addition, the responses
suggest that academic success will be enhanced if students’ SEL needs are addressed more fully
in response to the modern stressors placed on them. Yet, the participants’ responses also show
that SEL is actually underplayed in schools, due to current administrative pressure to increase
time spent on academics. This is important as it shows that those in charge of curriculum may not understand the correlation of SEL and academic success.

Perhaps more importantly, these excerpts show the frustration felt by the participants as a result of the SEL and academic imbalance. They are frustrated because their students need more social and emotional support than they are able to provide and conflicted about spending too much time on academics for the sake of evaluations. This is significant. Teachers’ feelings of frustration must be acknowledged lest we risk them leaving the profession altogether.

**Superordinate Theme 4: SEL Curriculum**

The previous theme found that SEL currently plays a backseat to academics creating an imbalance. Nonetheless all participants experienced some form of explicit SEL programming in their schools. Therefore, the topic of SEL curriculum emerged as a fourth superordinate theme. Two subthemes became apparent within this superordinate theme. One, there is a wide variation of SEL delivery models in terms of the curriculum used, how often explicit SEL lessons were taught and by whom. The second subtheme that emerged within curriculum was lack of fidelity.

**Wide Variation of SEL Delivery Across Schools**

Sonya shared that the guidance counselor and the nurse alternate in providing health class to her homeroom once every three weeks. When the guidance counselor leads, explicit lessons include SEL topics like acceptance and bullying. At the end of the school year, the counselor explicitly taught students how to say goodbye to friends and transition to a new school, for example.

Peter, Patricia, and Dharma all reported the current use of Second Step by their schools. In Peter’s district, classroom teachers like Peter are charged with delivering the content.
According to Peter, lessons are “compartmentalized to a time period” and teachers are instructed to take the time out of their social studies block. Patricia’s district charges social workers for delivering the Second Step lessons. Her second-grade class received SEL lessons once a week for the second half of the school year. (Patricia was not certain, but believed other grades received lessons for the first half of the school year.) Dharma reported that her school adopted Second Step a few years ago. Initially the school psychologist taught the lessons to classrooms on a rotation but then the role was passed on to the classroom teachers.

Currently, Inez’s district does not have a formal SEL program but are looking at Choose Love. However, the guidance counselor is charged with providing SEL lessons as a weekly special. Inez shared that the SEL curriculum that her district used previously had explicit lessons that were delivered by classroom teachers during a designated time period on a weekly basis. Some attributes of the program according to Inez included the formation of advisor groups and SEL content that “was sort of built more into the classroom and school schedule.” She liked the lessons including SEL topics like empathy and talking to others during times of grief. All of these excerpts speak to the variations of SEL programming. They are significant in that they show how districts are not in agreement about best SEL practices just yet.

**Fidelity**

As mentioned, Inez’s students currently attend a weekly guidance class as part of their specials schedule but “it comes and goes.” She said, “Like it’s important at the beginning of the year, but when the guidance counselors start to get busy… guidance class disappears.” Inez blamed administration who pull the counselors to handle other issues. Sonya similarly remembered her district using a community-building curriculum called Open Circle several years
ago. Teachers were charged with its delivery but Sonya remembered “it wasn’t always consistent.”

Dharma’s district, which currently uses Second Step, charges classroom teachers with teaching SEL lessons. Dharma admittedly “didn’t teach it as much as I should have this year… because I do it naturally.” Peter’s district also uses Second Step, but he modifies its lessons rather than follow the prescribed scope and sequence with fidelity because he believes that “there’s at least a third – two thirds of the kids who are sort of saying that it’s heavy-handed and goofy.” He said he resolves it this way:

So what I’ve done is, I’ve tried to take the objectives and the explicit lessons in it and integrate it into particularly reading and writing. So we do narrative fiction to start and I talk about creating characters. We create characters and put them in scenarios but also in various sort of social-emotional challenges. And we brainstorm… I create four characters that we work on over time. We can circle back. And so I give a scenario and then say, ‘Choose one of those characters and write out how they might respond.’ So for instance, in a cafeteria where a kid trips and falls and their food falls all over the place.

Peter noted that modifying his district’s SEL curriculum in this way is “a lot of work,” but his students respond better. Peter takes the time to look at Second Step, to figure out what they are emphasizing before “trying to analyze, of what value is that to this group that’s in front of me.” He wants his lessons to be “useful” and rejects the idea of “someone coming in and saying, ‘So have you done lesson five?’” Peter trusts in his own ability to look at a curriculum and weigh, “This is what I can use, this is what I’m gonna modify.” The responses extracted for this subtheme show that even when schools commit to SEL programming, they cannot ensure that the lessons are being delivered with fidelity -- or at all, as in Dharma’s case.
**Conclusions.** These participants’ experiences exposed a theme of inconsistent SEL practices across schools. SEL program delivery models were widely varied suggesting that the existing knowledge base is unclear about best practices in terms of how often SEL lessons should be delivered and by whom. In addition, programs fell by the wayside in some schools when those charged with teaching the lessons became unavailable as in Inez’s school, or just “didn’t get to it” as in Dharma’s case. For better or worse, Peter modified the lessons provided by his district’s chosen SEL curriculum raising the concern of fidelity. Together, these differences in how participants’ schools “do” SEL are significant. They show that districts have not figured out best practices yet. Research exists, but clearly it is not finding its way into the hands of decision-makers.

**Summary**

The participants’ perceived levels of general preparedness provided by their colleges varied, however all shared that SEL did not play a significant role in their pre-teacher training, if at all. The consensus among the group was that they learned how to be effective teachers of SEL by drawing upon common sense and personal life experiences such as parenting. These experiences, coupled with time spent on the job, prepared them more than formal education. Perceptions about professional development in the area of SEL also varied, but most participants clearly saw room for improvement. Collectively, this group is accustomed to training themselves or seeking out resources on their own as needed. They did this willingly but not without frustration.

Students today are clearly different than students from previous generations in terms of their social and emotional development. They are different from even a decade ago. But as these participants pointed out, it is not the students’ faults. Their SEL challenges stem from their own
experiences as students in diverse classrooms, members of changing families, and beings in a technologically-advancing world. That said, this groups’ collective opinion is that SEL should play a greater role in our schools which will support their students academically and beyond. However, they all feel crunched for time. What stands out here is the irony -- that schools are increasing time spent on academics in order to enhance academic success, forcing SEL to take a backseat even though SEL is necessary to enhance academic success!

There was a wide variation in SEL programming presented by participants. Differences existed in the programs adopted by the participants’ schools as well in the staff persons charged with carrying out the SEL curricula and the frequency of lessons. Finally, issues of fidelity, (or lack thereof), emerged. For example, participants experienced programming that came and went as well as false starts. When charged with delivering explicit SEL instruction, one of the participants reported modifying the content to meet the needs of the students in front of him. Another admittedly did not get to the lessons as frequently as she should have.

**Conclusion**

Collectively, these themes are significant in a number of ways. Firstly, they reveal a shared sense of insufficient training and support for teaching SEL throughout the participants’ careers. This provides an essential starting point for improving how schools approach SEL. We simply cannot expect teachers to effectively teach SEL if they feel unequipped to do so. The themes also demand we act quickly as they reveal how our modern world is rife with stressors that contribute to increasingly problematic behavior exhibited by today’s students. They tell us at the same time however, that SEL is underplayed in schools due to current administrative pressure to increase time spent on academics. This is particularly important because it suggests that those in charge of making decisions about curriculum may not understand the correlation of
SEL to academic success and beyond. Finally, these participants’ experiences exposed a theme of inconsistent SEL practices. SEL program delivery models were widely varied amongst schools suggesting that the existing knowledge base is unclear about how to best implement SEL in our schools.

Chapter Five: Discussion of Research Findings and Implications for Practice

The purpose of this research was to explore how five public elementary school teachers experienced teaching social-emotional learning (SEL) within their classrooms. SEL is an important underpinning to academic success as well as success beyond the classroom. As such, it is vital that decision-makers respond to the call for improving how we support teachers in supporting our students socially and emotionally.

Using an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodological approach, the primary research question explored was: How do public elementary school teachers think about teaching SEL in their GE classrooms? A semi-structured interview format was utilized which sought to understand the participants’ attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions about teaching SEL in order to make sense of the underrepresentation of SEL in elementary schools. This study was framed by infusion theory which provided an understanding of how SEL content might be delivered to optimally meet the changing needs of our classroom’s dynamic learners. By guiding the interview questions, the infusion theory provided a lens through which this researcher looked to study the experience of elementary school teachers and SEL.

As prescribed by IPA research, themes and patterns were identified via deep analyses of participants’ responses. Four superordinate themes emerged: 1) teacher training and support for delivering SEL instruction, 2) today’s students, 3) the SEL and academics imbalance, and 4) curriculum. The themes directly informed the findings which are: Inadequate teacher training
and support for teaching SEL exist at all levels; Modern stressors negatively impact today’s students’ social and emotional competence warranting increased SEL; Teachers know that SEL underpins academic success, but administrative pressure to enhance academic skills leaves too-little time for it and; the existing knowledge-base for best SEL curriculum implementation is not clearly understood impacting fidelity. Together, these findings represent a significant problem of educational practice and create a sense of urgency for reformists to improve how our schools address SEL.

This chapter will proceed with an examination of the four findings provided by this research and a summative conclusion. Accounts will include discussion about where the findings fit into the already-established body of knowledge about SEL in schools. Recommendations for practice, recommendations for future research, and implications will follow. Next, limitations of the findings will be considered. Finally, the central research question as viewed through the lens of the infusion theory will be discussed before concluding this chapter.

**Finding 1: Teacher Training and Support at All Levels are Insufficient**

Collectively, the participants perceived they were not provided with the formal training or support needed to teach SEL during at least one stage in their careers. This theme drove the first finding of this research, that teacher training and support at all levels are insufficient. The emergent subthemes, in this case the three career levels from pre-teacher college to new teacher to veteran teacher, elucidate the wide reach of this problem.

College coursework included little if any SEL content according to four of the five participants. Then, formal support for teaching skills beyond academics was largely lacking for them as new teachers, so this group rather drew on their own life skills and common sense as
they began their careers. They reported seeking out information on their own, such as from reading books, in order to perform their roles beyond teaching academic content. The participants featured in this study went to college and began their teaching careers between 11 and 31 years ago, but little has changed. According to a recent study, described by its authors as a first-ever “scan” aimed at examining the extent to which SEL coursework is incorporated into pre-teacher college programming in the United States, few colleges and universities currently offer pre-teachers sufficient coursework needed to enhance their future students’ SEL needs, (Schonert-Reichl, Kitil, & Hanson-Peterson, 2017).

If pre-college coursework for SEL is insufficient, the importance of strong compensatory professional development in the area of SEL for working teachers is underscored. Unfortunately, professional development in the area of SEL was not characterized as strong by these participants. Sometimes it was not even made available to them, again forcing participants to train themselves. Clearly, these participants’ initiative to learn must be lauded, but research tells us that their efforts are not enough. Comprehensive training of teachers for SEL programming is necessary for efficacy; when it is not provided, programs are less successful (Durlak, et al., 2011). Participants also noted that when professional development in the area of SEL was provided, it either lacked depth or was unhelpful. Sometimes, professional development supported SEL programming that soon fell by the wayside. For one participant, seeing programs come and go over her lengthy career left her feeling frustrated and wary of new SEL initiatives. As little current research exists regarding formal teacher training and support for SEL, this study’s first finding is an important addition to the body of knowledge. It also underpins the entirety of this problem of practice, in that an increase of SEL programming in schools cannot succeed if the frontline deliverers are unqualified to carry it out.
Finding 2: Modern Stressors Negatively Impact Today’s Students’ Social and Emotional Competence Warranting Increased SEL

The five veteran teachers featured in this study reported that problematic behavior resulting from social and emotional deficits is indeed on the rise, thus increased SEL in today’s elementary classrooms is warranted. Among the behaviors noted were yelling, tipping chairs when frustrated, and general social conflict spilling over from recess. The frequency of incidents is greater than in the past. So, too, is the intensity of incidents. These participants’ firsthand observations align with a well-established and growing body of current research. Kant and March (2004), for example, state that disruptive behavior in classrooms is on the rise and cite school discipline as one of the most significant problems currently facing our nation’s public schools.

Participants offered their thoughts on why challenging behavior is increasing and again, their theories align with well-established research. Each of the following factors was provided by at least one participant: frequent moving, poverty, changing family dynamics, drug use by parents, abuse, bullying, children being separated from their parents, general modern stressors that induce anxiety, and even technology including television and the internet. Simonsen, Sugai, and Negron (2008) recognize that many teachers are indeed feeling more and more frustrated with the impact of increased challenging student behavior on their schools.

The participants’ theories regarding why students are presenting with social and emotional deficits align with the work of Zins and Elias (2006) cited in this work’s literature review. These researchers faulted videogames, the internet, and R-rated television with creating our stressful modern context and undermining our values. Zins and Elias (2006) also studied poverty and its impact on behavior noting that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds
are more likely to develop problem behaviors. Fanti, et al., (2009) add that frequent exposure to violence can lead to desensitization and lack of empathy. Diversity of cultures and family backgrounds also necessitates SEL since students need to learn how to respect the differences of others (Kominiak, 2018).

It is well-established that today’s students reside in a world that challenges their social and emotional development in significant ways. Thus, this finding augments the existing body of knowledge; it confirms what we already know but adds that problematic behavior continues to get worse. And, it underscores the need for schools to adapt by increasing the role that SEL plays in today’s classrooms.

**Finding 3: Teachers Know that SEL Underpins Academic Success, but Administrative Pressure to Enhance Academics Leaves Too-little Time**

The participants for this study know firsthand that healthy social and emotional underpinnings are needed for academic success. An extensive amount of research has been performed that confirm this important correlation between academic success and SEL, so much so that an entire thread of this work’s literature review is dedicated to it. Perhaps the most impressive research is Durlak et al.’s (2011) meta-analysis that examined the effect of SEL on academic success. They found that schools with SEL programming showed a tremendous 11-percentile gain on test scores when compared to schools without.

Participants also felt that teaching SEL fell within the realm of their roles. When asked hypothetically if they would welcome the opportunity to explicitly teach SEL in their classrooms, the participants were mostly agreeable. This was not surprising given their responses about the importance of SEL to their students’ success, but participants were quick to add the
assumption that changes would firstly have to happen to their schedules. In other words, they would have to be “allowed” to take the time away from other subject matter. Four of the participants specifically named academic time constraints placed on them by administration as barriers.

These participants’ share the experience that SEL is underrepresented in an age when it is needed more than ever, due to academic mandates that usurp their time. This finding was the least unexpected in that a surfeit of literature already exists. Research tells us that teachers are not provided the time to teach outside the realm of academics as pressures to enhance their students’ academic skills are real, while at the same time they understand that SEL is an important underpinning to academic success. (Banerjee et al., 2014; Durlak et al., 2011; Kress et al., 2004). This problem is longstanding; Forness and Kavale (1996) performed a meta-analysis over twenty years ago about the treatment of students with social skills deficits finding that schools over-emphasis academics to the detriment of SEL.

These participants’ support of increased SEL in their classrooms was somewhat of an unexpected turn, common to IPA research, in that existing research correlates teacher buy-in of SEL programming to its implementation (Brackett et al., 2012; Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012; Collie, Shapka, Perry, & Martin, 2015; Kress et al., 2004; Zinsser, Denham, Curby, & Shewark, 2015). According to research, teachers themselves can act as a barrier due to lack of understanding that SEL is important to academic success or belief that SEL was not their job. None of the participants here appeared to share these beliefs. In fact, they all rather understood SEL to be an essential underpinning to academic success. Additionally, this group of participants exhibited willingness to teach SEL if provided with tools, training, time, and the permission from administration to take a step back from academics.
This third finding also suggests that teacher mindset may be changing in that the participants featured here do not act as barriers to SEL program implementation in their schools as current research suggests. However, the participant group is small and the nature of IPA does not allow for such generalization. This finding then points to further research to determine current teacher mindset in regards to SEL. This third finding thickens what we know about SEL and academics. It is well-established that schools are “trying to close an ever-widening achievement gap and ensure that all students, including students with diverse academic abilities, make adequate yearly progress” (Simonsen, et al., 2008, p. 33) but in doing so, the role of SEL is decreased. This is a conundrum to be certain, as research tells us that SEL actually enhances academic success.

**Finding 4: The Existing Knowledge-Base for Best SEL Curriculum Implementation is Not Clearly Understood Impacting Fidelity**

In terms of formal SEL curricula aimed at providing explicit SEL lessons, all participants’ experiences included one formal curriculum or another, adopted by their schools at some point in their career. What became fascinating here was the wide variation of delivery models across the participants’ schools in terms of curricula, delivery time, and staffing. In addition, formal SEL curricula were seldom implemented with fidelity. The lack of consensus and fidelity suggests that we have not figured out how to best implement SEL just yet. The following attempts to illustrate this lack of clarity that surfaced in regards to SEL curriculum.

A social worker provided SEL lessons to one participant’s students at one block per week for half of the school year, different from another’s who were provided a weekly SEL lesson as a special called guidance class taught by a counselor. However in that case, the counselor who taught the lessons often became unavailable when unexpected crises in the school required her
attention instead. Still another participant’s class received “health class” every three weeks but SEL content delivered by the guidance counselor was limited, since the school nurse was also charged with delivering lessons about how to care for your body during this time.

Two participants’ schools used the SEL curriculum Second Step. In one, the school psychologist taught the lessons initially, but then classroom teachers were directed to take over. When this happened, the participant admitted that she did not always get to it. The other participant whose school utilized Second Step was also charged with delivering its lessons. This participant was instructed to take the time from his social studies block. However, he felt it made more sense to integrate the lessons into his reading and writing blocks. He also modified the program by designing his own lessons to match the SEL objectives from Second Step. While he did not use Second Step with fidelity, this participant believes his experience and knowledge of the students in front of him allows him to make decisions about which SEL lessons he should teach in any given year.

Also notable was the number of false programmatic starts adding to this picture of confusion. Participants shared that SEL curricula were adopted only to fall by the wayside or not delivered with consistency. One participant complained that she had seen quality SEL programs come and go at great expense to her district, but that currently they do not even have one and are “looking into” new ones yet again. Extensive research done by Durlak et al. (2011) confirms that the picture drawn here extends beyond this study, noting lack of steady SEL program implementation in schools as problematic. Likewise, Sugai and Horner (2008) acknowledge that the existing body of knowledge in regards to improving social behavior is not consistently implemented with fidelity in our schools.
This finding adds an important current layer to the body of knowledge. It adds that schools may be beginning to recognize the need for explicit SEL instruction but curriculum implementation is still in its fledgling stage. As such, confusion about best practices exists, at least in these participants’ schools. This finding then becomes an apt segue for this work’s theoretical framework, the infusion theory. The theory when combined with these participants’ SEL experiences offer a better way to deliver much-needed SEL to today’s students.

**Conclusion**

This research set out to learn how public elementary school teachers think about teaching SEL in their GE classrooms. When looked at as a whole, the five participants’ responses succeeded in telling us this. Their shared experiences however present a somewhat negative visual. Together, they paint a picture of increasingly stressed-out students engaged in social conflict or emotional breakdowns. We imagine teachers who are equally stressed out as a result of their students’ behaviors. The participants featured here believe in their heart of hearts that they should adapt how and what they teach students to meet their students’ changing needs, but they do not feel amply trained to deliver SEL instruction. The participants used in this study comprise a group of five knowledgeable educators who understand SEL to be a foundational skill and direct correlate to academic success. However, decision-makers instill mandates that pressure even the best teachers to plod along against their better judgments in order to adhere to tight academic schedules. The conflict felt by the participants was apparent. Peter said, “You have to decide, what do the kids need, but also what do I need to do to comply with all of these different new folks.” Similarly, Sonya stated simply, “I do the best I can.” Research supports. Kress et al. (2004) posit that many teachers feel conflicted by bowing to pressure in order to show academic gain.
It bears repeating that the alignment of these participants’ experiences to research is close, forcing the question: If research and these teachers agree that student behavior is increasingly problematic warranting increased SEL in our schools, then why isn’t more being done to make it happen? It stands to reason that the researchers nor the teachers are represented to the extent that they should be when decisions are made in regards to SEL, leaving this researcher to frankly wonder why not.

**Recommendations for Practice**

As stated, this research implies that teacher voice may be lacking when planning SEL in schools. The collective voice of Dharma, Sonya, Inez, Peter, and Patricia is heard in the recommendations that follow. It speaks to educational reformists and decision-makers in schools. It is hoped that this researcher’s work will, in some small way, prompt conversations that will lead to change in schools for the betterment of our students’ social and emotional development.

- Pre-college coursework needs revision so that our future teachers feel prepared to teach SEL. An improved communication bridge between elementary schools and institutes of higher education is needed for implementation however. The individuals charged with choosing pre-teacher coursework need to spend time observing modern elementary school classrooms and listening to frontline practitioners.

- New teachers require increased support in order to meet their students SEL needs. Mentoring programming where school adjustment counselors or other SEL experts guide novice teachers might be enhanced in elementary schools. Implementation would require administration to carve out time for mentors and mentees to meet regularly about SEL.

- Districts must create plans to ensure that veteran teachers including in-district transfers and new hires are caught up to speed in terms of SEL programming in their schools.
Creative scheduling might allow teachers to meet in weekly or monthly cohorts led by SEL experts like counselors during the school day. Additionally, counselors might spend more time in classrooms to assist teachers in carrying out SEL lessons.

- Schools must correct the current imbalance of SEL and academics by increasing the role of SEL. For this to happen, administrators must add SEL to schedules even if it means decreasing time spent on academics. However, implementation relies on administrative support. Planning time, teacher-friendly curriculum, and support personnel like additional counselors must be provided. Schoolwide communities of respect must be adopted that support SEL. Implementation of such might be furthered by the formation of school culture teams.

- Schools might widen their circle of influence and help families learn how to support their children’s social and emotional development by working harder to develop relationships with them. Communication via electronic newsletters and information nights held in the evenings so busy parents can attend should be considered. Topics might include the impact of technology on children’s social and emotional development, for example.

Again, in order to make the best-informed decisions in regards to SEL in our schools, educational reformists and school administration would do well to invite more classroom teachers to all decision-making tables. In the same vein, decision-makers at all levels must build their own knowledge base by staying current on scholarly research about SEL topics, such as its essentialness to academic success and beyond.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The following recommendations are niches that might be explored by scholars interested in increasing the role that SEL plays in elementary schools.
• Research is needed to explore the current level of SEL training and support for pre-teachers and novice teachers. Other than one very recent scan performed last year, research is lacking that examines current pre-teacher college coursework requirements for SEL. Likewise, the topic of mentoring programs for novice teachers that focus specifically on SEL is limited.

• More research involving a greater number of participants is needed to know where most teachers currently stand in terms of buy-in to SEL programming and mindset about its importance. The participants featured for this work appear to “get it” in regards to SEL in schools. This is promising, but the question of how representative they are of the general population of teachers must be raised. They are just five in number and as such, generalization outside of this study cannot be assumed.

• While insufficient school SEL staffing (i.e., school psychologists and counselors) was mentioned by two participants, responses did not rise to the level of an emergent theme. Research aimed at determining whether teachers are adequately supported by SEL staffing may be warranted.

• Given the seemingly lack of clarity in terms of best SEL program implementation, research designed to examine specific schools with exemplary SEL programming (evidenced by data) would be helpful.

**Implications**

This work implies a major shortfall in how we think about SEL in elementary schools: The classroom teacher lens may be lacking when important decisions about SEL are being made. When looked at collectively, the findings reveal that the participants featured here are closely aligned with scholarly research in regards to SEL in schools. Decision-makers, namely those
who choose how to prepare teachers and those who over-schedule academics in a misguided attempt to enhance academic achievement, appear to be less so. This suggests a secondary implication then, that scholars have not done enough to get research in the hands of those in charge.

As frontline practitioners, classroom teachers have valuable lenses, ones that quite literally are focused on the students in front of them. And, it is likely that teachers would want to be a part of decision-making given its direct impact on their lives. Sonya shared that next year she is looking forward to being a part of her school’s leadership team which is looking at new SEL curricula for her district. She said, “It’s nice because I’m part of those conversations.” Dharma also enjoys being heard. She says of her school, “I really like my school. Most of our staff is open-minded and ready to do new things. And because it’s small, we get to be a part of a lot of what they do.”

Limitations of Findings

This study set out to advance what we know about elementary classroom teachers’ experiences with SEL via an in-depth phenomenological study and this scholarly goal was achieved. IPA as a research method supports the use of a small group of participants for deep analysis, however, so this hallmark limitation of IPA research must be acknowledged (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Similarly, the scope of the area from which these participants hailed was small out of necessity; all were teachers in the Northeast. In addition, while one teacher taught in a small city, no teachers from urban settings were featured in this study.

A second limitation inherent to IPA research is that findings cannot be generalized (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) and so the teachers’ experiences for this study can only be
added to the existing body of knowledge with the assumption that they do not speak for all elementary classroom teachers. They do, however, provide direction for future research that employs different methodology.

A third significant limitation was that all of the participants featured in this study were veteran teachers. This was necessary for finding common themes having to do with trends noted in classrooms over many years, however in choosing such a homogeneous group, the lens was made narrow. Choosing veteran teachers also ran the risk of unreliable memories in that some of the participants were asked to reflect over 45 years to when they were elementary school students.

**Infusion Theory**

Infusion theory, with its emphasis on infusing critical thinking skills within content matter proved to be an excellent frame for gathering valuable insights about SEL in schools from this work’s participants, five elementary classroom teachers. Briefly, this theory promotes infusing general critical thinking skills within content matter for optimum carryover. The idea that infusion of SEL (given that like critical thinking, SEL skills pervade everyday life) may also promote carryover was supported by the participants featured in this study. Thus, the theoretical lens combined with these participants’ collective lens, reveal a viable solution – that schools might infuse or embed SEL within content matter and throughout the school day to enhance carryover of skills that are essential to academic success and beyond. A secondary benefit is that infusion makes the best use of limited time. This very sentiment was shared by Inez who indicated that she would welcome the opportunity to increase the role of SEL instruction within her classroom if embedded within the academics.
As established, these participants understand that explicit, well-planned lessons are needed for teaching SEL to their elementary school audience. We have known for some time that explicit lessons are needed when working with novice learners (Doyle, 1983; Osman & Hannafan, 1992). Or, as Sonya put it, “They’re ten -- like if nobody points it out to them, they don’t know.” But these participants also believe that SEL must happen outside of formal SEL curricula delivered during compartmentalized blocks of time. If infused throughout the school day in other ways, such as within content matter and in the creation of schoolwide and classroom cultures of respect that include teacher modeling, SEL will be enhanced.

Peter shared that the most useful SEL support in schools is the development of a strong school culture. Similarly, Patricia posited that SEL is best supported by setting up a classroom that instills empathy, kindness, and respect. Within these settings, teachers must model exemplary social and emotional skills according to these participants. For example, Inez shared that students will emulate their teacher’s reaction to difficult children. Dharma shared how she would send a challenging student out of the room so that she could appeal to her other students to follow her lead in supporting him.

In the same vein, Sonya’s district believes that SEL is supported when a schoolwide plan is in place. She related that her school has established schoolwide behavioral expectations that reinforce “being safe, respectful, and responsible.” This philosophy aligns with a long list of researchers who posit that SEL instruction is most effective when coordinated across settings (Banerjee et al., 2014; Elias, et al., 2007; Simonsen et al., 2012; Sugai & Horner, 2008). McMahon et al. (2011) adds that schoolwide SEL programming helps students to feel a sense of belonging. Sonya’s school employs a social-emotional screener twice a year which helps their data team identify students who have SEL issues. The team then develops intervention plans for
teachers to use. Sonya’s insight of a school infusing behavioral expectations that support its students’ social and emotional development throughout the day was a highpoint for this researcher.

Additionally, SEL lessons are infused “in the moment” as natural opportunities arise by these participants. In this way, lessons become meaningful. Peter mediates when his students return from recess. Patricia similarly states, “There’s nothing wrong with dropping everything you’re doing if you notice that there’s an issue that needs to be addressed and all kids can learn from it.”

Participants also shared how SEL lessons should be purposely infused within academics. Before starting academic lessons, for example, Peter considers the SEL skills his students will need to succeed beyond learning the academic content and lays the groundwork in advance. To illustrate, Peter shared that cooperative learning groups can be tricky and that academic content aside, students must know how to work collaboratively with one another to succeed. Even a student’s reaction to being placed in a group requires social awareness, so when making cooperative learning groups, Peter teaches his students the difference between working relationships and friendships. Before announcing the names of students for each group he reminds them of his social expectations which is to keep negative comments as well as celebrations to themselves.

Peter also infuses SEL into the content matter itself. For example, in writing class he prompts his students to circle back to characters they created when writing narratives. Then he asks them to infer how their characters might respond to social challenges that he provides, such as dropping your lunch tray in the cafeteria. Sonya also shared an example of embedding SEL within academics. When the students in her class were not getting along well, she chose *I'm Out*
of My Mind and Wonder as read-alouds because of their themes about acceptance. Swartz (1984), whose work provides the infusion theory, would likely be impressed with Peter and Sonya’s lessons, as he holds that embedded lessons help our students to develop a realistic sense of when to apply what they learned. What all of the participants for this study appear to know intuitively, is what research supports; that the classroom is the most naturalistic social setting and therefore has the greatest impact on students’ social and emotional development (Laugeson, et al., 2014).

Summary

The five participants featured in this study shared many of the same experiences and beliefs in regards to teaching SEL in their elementary school classrooms. These commonalities drove findings in the areas of teacher training, today’s students, the SEL and academic imbalance, and SEL curricula implementation.

Participants generally found formal training for teaching SEL insufficient at all levels from pre-teacher college to the present. They relied on common sense and life experience when starting out. Participants also sought out resources, trained themselves and learned along the way. Professional development was provided for SEL but is in need of improvement for a number of reasons including lack of usefulness or insufficient depth. Durability was also problematic in that new SEL programs often fell by the wayside. In addition, durability was impacted when teachers who were either new hires or building transfers were not “caught up to speed” by being provided with training that they missed.

As frontline practitioners, these five participants experienced firsthand what research confirms about “kids nowadays.” There exists an alarming negative trend in how our students behave. These problematic behaviors stemming from weak social and emotional skills are more
frequent and intensive than in the past according to all participants. The participants and
researchers alike credit today’s students’ lagging social and emotional development to modern
day factors like social media and dysfunctional family lives. Research is replete with findings,
including those associated with this study, which support more SEL in today’s classrooms given
today’s stressors on students. It makes no sense that the opposite appears to be happening.

SEL is underrepresented in part due to increased academic scheduling. Administration,
answering to the call of recent mandates to enhance academic success for all students, has placed
strict demands on teachers to increase time spent on academics according to these participants.
Research concurs. According to Espelage et al. (2016) current legislative efforts which focus on
academics are the reason behind slow SEL implementation. The participants featured here
clearly understand the correlation of SEL to their students’ academic success. Again,
longstanding research supports what these teachers know intuitively. Yet change is slow. It
simply makes no sense that SEL will enhance students’ academic success, but SEL is forced to
take a backseat in order to spend more time on academics in order to enhance their students’
academic success. Administrators and others who contribute to the current imbalance of SEL and
academics by pressuring teachers to adhere to strict academic schedules, are seemingly out of the
loop.

Finally, when SEL programming is adopted by schools, it lacks conviction according to
the collective picture painted by these participants. The picture was one of confusion created by
false starts and weak commitments to SEL curricula. It was unclear who should be charged with
teaching the lessons and when to fit it into the schedule. Curriculum fidelity or lack thereof, is
associated to this finding in that teachers shared stories of districts adopting programs that soon
went away. For better or worse, teachers also called out their own lack of fidelity for adhering to
curricula, justifying their decisions for the sake of the students in front of them or because they simply lacked the time.
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Appendix A

Dear ___________,

Your name has been given to me by ____________ as a potential participant for a research study that I am completing for my doctoral program at Northeastern University. My interest lies in increasing Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) at the elementary school level in classrooms like your own. Specifically, I hope to learn what supports classroom teachers need to make this happen. I am choosing classroom teachers rather than administrators because I feel strongly that as frontline practitioners, your experience will offer the most valuable input.

What I mean by SEL are those skills needed by children to have positive relationships with others such as how to manage their emotions in everyday situations. It means helping them to solve the problems that created those emotions. It also means teaching students how to feel empathy for one another.

As a participant, you would agree to an interview that would last between 60-90 minutes at a place of your choosing. It will be audio recorded and transcribed. Know that if you volunteer to participate, your name and school district or any other identifiers will not be revealed. In addition, transcripts of your responses will be made available to you for your approval. You may choose to add, omit, or clarify responses. Finally, even if you consent to participate, you may withdraw from this study at any time.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. I do not have specific permission from any school district to recruit, which is why you are being contacted only at your personal email address. If you do work at my school district, I cannot interview you as I do not have permission to recruit from my district.

I appreciate the tight schedules that teachers keep but hope that you will consider participating! I believe that participants will feel renewed by the opportunity to reflect at such length about their personal journeys as educators. In addition, I believe that your participation will ultimately make a meaningful difference to how we support teachers and serve children.

If you are willing to participate or have questions about my research before agreeing, please contact me via email at dugre.d@husky.neu.edu email address only or via my personal cell number, 413-563-4835. Per Northeastern University IRB, if you email me at any other email address, I must delete it with no response.

Thank you,

Danielle Dugre
Appendix B

Informed Consent Document

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

Name of Investigator: Dr. Kim Nolan, Danielle Dugre

Title of Project: Making Sense of the Underrepresentation of Social Emotional Learning in Public Elementary School Classrooms: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but Ms. Dugre will explain it to you first. You may ask Ms. Dugre any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell Ms. Dugre if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, Ms. Dugre will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

We are asking you to be in this study because you are a general education classroom teacher currently employed in a public elementary school.

Why is this research being done?

The purpose of this research is to find out what supports classroom teachers need in order increase the role of social-emotional learning (SEL) in their classrooms.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, you will be interviewed by Ms. Dugre who will ask you to share both your early and current experiences teaching SEL. The interview, which will be audiotaped, will last approximately 60 minutes. After the interview is transcribed, Ms. Dugre will hand deliver a copy to you and you may edit if needed. You may clarify, add, or omit any statements that you choose. Your name and any identifiers such as your work place, will be changed. Remember, you may withdraw from this study at any time.

Where will this take place and how much time will it take?
Ms. Dugre will contact you to about where you would like the interview to take place. Options include a quiet space within a local library of your choice or your home. Your interview will take between 60-90 minutes. Additional time will be needed by you to review the transcripts of the interview; the amount of time you spend reviewing the transcripts is up to you. Ms. Dugre will contact you via telephone to ask if you wish the transcripts to be edited in any way. In total, your participation will take between one to two hours.

**Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?**

There is no foreseeable risk or discomfort to you.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**

There is no direct benefit to you by taking part in this study. However, the information learned from this study may help classroom teachers get the supports they need to increase the role of SEL in schools.

**Who will see the information about me?**

Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers for this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way. Your name and identifiers such as your work place will be changed. Audiotapes and all documents that name your identity will be stored in a locked location throughout the process and be destroyed as soon as they are no longer needed for this work. This consent form will be maintained for the required 3-year period however. Other than Ms. Dugre, her advisors, and transcription services, no one will have access to the raw data and the raw data will only be used for this study. Findings from this study may be used in subsequent studies, however no future researcher will ever have access to the raw data.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information only to ensure that the research was done properly. Only organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board would be permitted to see this information.

**What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**

No research-related injury (i.e., physical, psychological, social, financial or otherwise) is foreseeable for this study.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**

Your participation is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**
If you have questions about this study, please feel to contact Danielle Dugre at 413-563-4835. You can also contact the principal investigator, Dr. Kim Nolan at k.nolan@northeastern.edu.

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, Mail Stop: 560-177, 360 Huntington Avenue, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**

There will be no compensation to participate.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**

There will be no cost for your participation.

I agree to take part in this research.

____________________________________________  __________________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part    Date

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above

____________________________________________  __________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to    Date
the participant above and obtained consent

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above