Early Childhood Teachers' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Their Elementary School's Approach to Social Emotional Learning: A Mixed Methods Study

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Abstract

The promotion of Social emotional learning (SEL) in elementary schools has increased; however, little is known about early childhood teachers' perceptions about the effectiveness of their elementary school's approach to SEL. The present study used mixed methods methodology to explore the perceptions of 1154 preschool through second grade teachers working in elementary schools regarding the effectiveness of their school's SEL approach. Study findings revealed that early childhood teachers overall viewed their classroom and school SEL approaches as effective. Eight themes emerged regarding key elements of effective SEL approaches. Participating teachers expressed specific concerns about SEL implementation when their unique early childhood classroom context was not considered or included in their school's SEL approach. Findings are interpreted in the context of relevant literature and implications for practice are discussed.

Keywords Social emotional learning · Early childhood · Elementary schools · Implementation

Social emotional learning (SEL) is the development of knowledge, attitudes, and social emotional skills that support positive outcomes for children in school and beyond. SEL includes competence building in the areas of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2003). Strong social emotional skills provide the groundwork for better school adjustment, more prosocial behaviors and peer relationships, and improved academic performance (e.g., Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2003).

In addition to short-term social and academic outcomes, children who are provided systematic support for SEL early in their school experience demonstrate long-term positive outcomes (e.g., Zins et al., 2007). A recent study found a statistically significant relationship between measurements of kindergarten SEL skills and later positive outcomes in education, employment, and mental health and decreased rates of criminal activity and substance use (Jones et al., 2015).

Further, a meta-analysis of follow-up effects for children who had participated in school-based SEL in early childhood found significant benefits in terms of long-term academic outcomes such as graduation and indicators of well-being such as decreased drug use (Taylor et al., 2017).

SEL in Schools

Schools are logical places to provide SEL instruction, as they are by definition a primary context for children to learn and develop (Greenberg, 2010). While schools have historically been focused on supporting students' academic development, there is increasing pressure on schools to explicitly promote students' SEL competencies. In order to explicitly provide SEL instruction in a school, a school should adopt a clear SEL approach, provide initial and ongoing support to all instructional and related service personnel in the school using the approach, and delegate sufficient time in the school schedule for SEL instruction (Lawson et al., 2019). A school-wide approach is useful wherein opportunities to practice SEL competencies are embedded throughout teachers' schedules and other school activities, such as recess, lunchroom, hallways (Greenberg et al., 2003). Additional school factors can influence the effectiveness of a school's

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SEL approach, including consistent and clear rules, a positive, supportive, and caring school climate, and family and community partnerships (Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

Teachers' Perceptions of SEL

Research demonstrates that, overall, early childhood teachers working in preschool and early elementary classrooms support teaching SEL (e.g., Denham et al., 2012). A large study that included early childhood teachers found that the majority of educators believed that SEL skills are teachable and that teaching SEL skills leads to positive outcomes, such as improved school attendance and academic performance (Bridgeland et al., 2013). Early childhood teachers view supporting children's social emotional development a key component of their teaching role, in addition to families playing an important role in promoting children's social emotional competence at home (Humphries et al., 2018; Zinsser et al., 2014). Teachers who are highly supportive of SEL incorporate it more into their teaching (Zinsser et al., 2014).

While most early childhood teachers endorse the importance of supporting young children's SEL, research indicates that early educators may not be knowledgeable about specific frameworks related to promoting a positive school culture, such as social emotional Multi-tiered systems of supports (MTSS) or Positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), that are available in their elementary school (e.g., Stormont et al., 2011; Tillery et al., 2010). Early educators recognize the limitations of their prior training and that they need support, such as materials and professional development, to implement SEL effectively (e.g., Humphries et al., 2018). Early childhood teachers see the need for other school personnel to help, such as school psychologists, who they view as responsible for supporting children with intensive mental health needs (Reinke et al., 2011).

Understanding early childhood teachers' perspectives about their role in teaching and supporting children's SEL is important as teachers' attitudes about SEL programming influences implementation and effectiveness (e.g., Buchanan et al., 2009). There is limited research on early childhood teachers' perceptions about the effectiveness of the SEL approaches used in their elementary schools. The preschool and early elementary years represent important developmental periods for developing friendship, problem solving, and self-regulation skills and for providing early intervention if children demonstrate social emotional difficulties. Educators who focus on teaching young children, especially those who teach preschool and kindergarten, have different preparation and use divergent curricular approaches than their upper elementary counterparts (Desimone et al., 2004). Differences in educational philosophies, such as a focus on developmentally appropriate practices (DAP; NAEYC, 2020) and

different classroom routines may result in unique perspectives about SEL for early childhood teachers who teach in elementary schools (Steed & Shapland, 2020).

Current Study

The current study sought to understand how early childhood teachers in preschool through second grade classrooms in the U.S. viewed their elementary school's SEL approach. The following research questions guided quantitative and qualitative analyses:

(1) Did early childhood teachers perceive that their elementary school and their classroom SEL approaches were effective?
(2) What did early childhood teachers perceive as effective and ineffective features of their school's SEL approach?

Methods

Participants

An online survey link was sent to all publicly available emails (n = 7869) on school websites for teachers of preschool through second grade teaching in public and private schools in a Western state in the U.S. Participants were asked to voluntarily participate in the survey if they taught preschool through second grade and taught in a classroom that was attached to or connected to an elementary school. Following three reminder emails, 1313 individuals responded to the survey, resulting in a 17% response rate. Of the 1313 respondents, 1154 respondents answered affirmatively that they were a preschool, prekindergarten, kindergarten, first, or second grade teacher in a classroom attached to or affiliated with an elementary school; these participants were included in analyses.

Of the 1154 total participants, most were White (n = 988, 78.04%) and female (n = 1113, 97.45%). Participant sociodemographic characteristics are presented in Table 1. Of the total sample, 192 (15.14%) taught preschool (3 to 4-year-olds), 184 (14.51%) taught prekindergarten (4 to 5-year-olds), 395 (31.15%) taught kindergarten, 272 (21.45%) taught first grade, and 225 (17.74%) taught second grade. Collectively, early childhood teachers had taught for an average of 13.22 years (SD = 8.33) and had taught at their current school for an average of 8.08 years (SD = 6.55). The majority of early childhood teachers taught in public elementary schools (n = 1079, 92.30%). Early childhood teachers' school characteristics are noted in Table 2.

Table 1 Sociodemographic characteristics of early childhood teachers (N = 1154)

Characteristic	n	%
Race/Ethnicity		
Asian	26	2.05
Black or African American	23	1.82
Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish origin	150	11.85
White	988	78.04
Native American or Indigenous	23	1.82
Middle Eastern or Northern African	12	.95
Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian	4	.32
Other	9	.71
Prefer not to answer	31	2.45
Gender		
Female	1113	96.45
Male	33	2.86
Nonbinary	3	.26
Prefer not to answer	5	.43

Participants could select more than one race/ethnicity response option

Table 2 Early childhood teachers' school characteristics (N = 1154)

Characteristic	n	%
Community type		
Suburban	619	50.99
Urban	230	18.95
Rural	197	16.23
Mountains	125	10.30
Plains	43	3.54
Type of school		
Public elementary	1079	92.30
Charter elementary	46	3.93
Magnet elementary	14	1.20
Private elementary	21	1.80
Parochial or religious elementary	5	.43
Other	4	.34
Size of school		
Very small (less than 25 students)	50	4.33
Small (25–400 students)	486	42.11
Medium (400–800 students)	574	49.74
Large (more than 800 students)	44	3.81
How long children attend each day		
Half day	145	12.31
Full day	1001	84.97
Other	32	2.72

Survey

This study analyzed survey questions from a larger survey project; the survey included 41 questions, incorporating both closed and open-ended questions. The survey was designed based on Buchanan and colleagues' (2009) survey of kindergarten through eighth grade teachers' knowledge, perceptions, and practices related to social emotional learning; it was modified to include language and practices specific to early childhood teachers. The survey was administered through Qualtrics and took approximately 12–18 min to complete. Prior to survey distribution, a pilot version of the survey was sent to four early childhood teachers to test the survey language, formatting, and time to complete. Minor revisions were made based on their feedback, such as changing the wording on a question or adding a response option.

The survey began with demographic questions regarding the participants' teaching position, school, and personal information (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, years working in early childhood education). Then, survey questions asked participants about their agreement with several statements about social emotional strategies used in their schools, the frequency of their use of particular social emotional strategies, social emotional curricula, their use of various responses to students' challenging behavior, and the barriers and helpful supports for implementing social emotional teaching strategies. Open-ended questions asked participants to provide additional details about these aspects of SEL in their classrooms and school.

The survey questions utilized in this study included three questions that pertained to teachers' perceptions about the effectiveness of their school and classroom SEL approach. The first two of these questions asked participants to respond to the statements: (Q20) My school's approach to supporting students' Social emotional learning (SEL) is effective and (Q26) The approach I use in my classroom to support students' social emotional learning is effective; these questions had five Likert-scale options from strongly agree to strongly disagree. An open-ended question asked participants to: (Q21) Please explain how your school's approach to SEL is effective or not effective.

The study was approved by the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Personal information was not collected, and informed consent was collected electronically at the outset of initiating the survey. At the conclusion of the survey, participants had the option to complete a separate survey link to be entered into a raffle for one of two $50 electronic gift cards.

Data Analysis

A convergent parallel mixed methods design (Creswell & Creswell, 2003) was used to analyze 1154 early childhood teachers' responses to closed and open-ended survey questions. The survey was designed intentionally to yield both quantitative and qualitative data to understand teacher's perceptions of their school's SEL approach. Quantitative
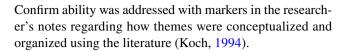
and qualitative analyses of responses to select closed and open-ended survey questions were conducted individually and at the same time. To answer the first research question, descriptive statistics were calculated for participants' agreement regarding the effectiveness of their school and classroom's SEL approach. A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of their school's approach and their own classroom SEL approach.

To answer the second research question, the first author analyzed the participants' responses to an open-ended survey question using a six-phase process of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was used in order to understand patterns in the quantitative and qualitative data and to interpret both types of data to fully make sense of participants' perspectives about the effectiveness of their school's SEL approach. The first three phases of the thematic analysis included an initial review of the data and an open coding process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) that resulted in preliminary codes, development of emergent codes from phrases in participant statements, and initial candidate themes for further analysis. In phase four of the process, components of effective SEL approaches from the literature base (e.g., Jones et al., 2017) supported the development of a guiding framework to organize participant responses, identify themes to group codes, and note missing codes for the responses to Q21 about the effectiveness of the school's approach to SEL. For responses to Q27 about the effectiveness of the teacher's approach to SEL in their classroom, phase four of the thematic analysis involved the use of a thematic network to diagram codes and possible themes (Stirling, 2001). During phase five of data analysis, ongoing analysis of the qualitative participant responses informed additional changes to the themes and codes, resulting in eight final themes that were named. The sixth phase of thematic analysis involved extracting example participant quotes as examples for each theme and producing a scholarly report of the analysis. A full description of all steps carried out during the six-phase thematic analysis process is included in Table S1 in the supplemental materials available online.

Trustworthiness

Various aspects of trustworthiness as defined by Guba and Lincoln (1989) were utilized during the study's data analysis and interpretation process. First credibility was addressed through the researchers' engagement in prolonged engagement with the data through iterative cycles of reviewing data, reviewing the literature, and re-reviewing data, and data triangulation of both quantitative and qualitative data. Dependability was addressed through outlining the steps of data analysis (Table S1) and keeping an audit of all notes.

Confirm ability was addressed with markers in the researcher's notes regarding how themes were conceptualized and organized using the literature (Koch, 1994).

Results

RQ #1: Did Early Childhood Teachers Perceive That Their Elementary School and Their Classroom SEL Approaches were Effective?

Regarding their school's approach to SEL, most early childhood teachers either strongly agreed (21.64%) or agreed (52.48%) that their school's SEL approach was effective (Table 3). More early childhood teachers strongly agreed (39.87%) or agreed (52.32%) that their own classroom approach to SEL was effective. Results of the Pearson correlation indicated that teachers' perceptions about the effectiveness of their school's SEL approach and their classroom's approach were found to be strongly correlated, $r(972) = 0.42$, $p < 0.000$.

RQ #2: What Did Early Childhood Teachers Perceive as Effective and Ineffective Features of Their School's SEL Approach?

Analyses of early childhood teachers' statements yielded eight themes related to perceived effective and ineffective features of their school's SEL approach (Table 4); the eight features included: (a) SEL program, (b) SEL staff, (c) SEL team, (d) SEL instruction, (e) SEL training, (f) clear expectations and discipline, (g) family partnerships, and (h) administrative support.

SEL Program

Effective SEL Program The use of a SEL program was noted as a key component of a school's effective SEL approach. Early childhood teachers communicated the programs their schools had adopted. For example, participant 280 shared,

Table 3 Percentage of teachers who agreed that their school or classroom SEL approach was effective (N = 1154)

	School SEL approach		Classroom SEL approach	
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*
Strongly agree	240	21.64	439	39.87
Agree	582	52.48	576	52.32
Neutral	128	11.54	59	5.39
Disagree	113	10.19	24	2.18
Strongly disagree	46	4.15	3	.27

Table 4 Supporting quotations by theme for teachers' perceptions of effective and ineffective features of their school's SEL approach

SEL component (n = 8 themes)	Supportive quotations for effective features	Supportive quotations for ineffective features
1. SEL program	"PK-grade 5 are actively involved in PBIS, MTSS, Capturing Kids Hearts, and Camp Timber (an online social/emotional program)."	"My school does not have a specific approach to social emotional learning. It is left up to the classroom teacher to include SEL in our teaching." "They change the SEL programs too often for them to work." "Our school does not support SEL in developmentally appropriate ways. My teaching team (four kindergarten teachers) created our own SEL curriculum and have had success with that within our grade level."
2. SEL personnel	"Our SEL specialist comes to observe, makes notes and provides feedback in strategies to try specific to student and classroom need."	"My school has 234 students…there is not a full time counselor, and all mental health support goes to the middle school."
3. SEL team	"We have three people on the SEL team who are available to push into our classrooms when we call for support."	"I don't think our school team feels comfortable with preschool, and often is not very helpful."
4. SEL instruction	"All classrooms have advisory time daily where teachers teach social emotional behaviors or discuss them."	"There is not enough time to teach and practice SEL. We have some resources, but academics are the focus, even in ECE classrooms." "I feel the classroom teachers in the lower grades are explicit with their SEL instruction. As the students get in the older grades it wanes and loses effectiveness."
5. SEL training	"My school has been doing professional development for all teachers in the area of SEL. We learn about best practices and streamline how we can all be consistent with our adaptation in our classrooms."	"Teachers are given a kit to teach the Second Step curriculum however they are not given training or support. I wish my school provided us with PD and texts to support the curriculum as well."
6. Clear expectations and discipline	"I believe that most teachers use similar language when talking to students about behavior expectations, which makes this program effective."	"The discipline system isn't effective. The rules are vague and not consistently held."
7. Family partnerships	"We use the Pyramid approach so there are common supports for the entire class and we work closely with families."	"We live and breathe social and emotional learning. However, I don't always think our approach works either because of lack of parent participation (or those not agreeing with the supports set up)."
8. Administrative support	"We truly work as a team. We have admin and team support."	"Not everyone is on the same page and not all team members work together collaboratively." "My administrators' knowledge in ECE is very limited, so it is hard for them to create and implement strategies that better fit small students."

"PK-grade 5 are actively involved in PBIS, MTSS, Capturing Kids Hearts, and Camp Timber (an online social/emotional program)." Participant 851 said:

> Our entire school teaches Second Step lessons that are centered on SEL. We do teach a unit on Bully Proofing School wide. We are also a PBIS school and have procedures and practices in place. In my classroom I have many books to model SEL and hold class meetings/restorative justice circles once a week to handle topics that naturally pop up in our classroom culture.

Ineffective SEL Program Teachers described a lack of a school-wide SEL program as related to a school's ineffective SEL approach, such as participant 69 who said, "My school does not have a specific approach to social emotional learning. It is left up to the classroom teacher to include SEL in our teaching." Participant 733 added:

> I do not believe our school is effective because we do not have a curriculum to help teach social emotional skills. I teach them based on my past experience with curricula, however new teachers do not have this experience and therefore struggle.

Another issue with ineffective SEL programs was a lack of consistent implementation. Participant 273 said, "We use the second step program, but it is not consistently used." Participant 98 further explained that "most staff members have been trained but not all staff follow the protocol. Some choose not to teach SEL curriculum with fidelity or spend adequate time with follow through."

Several teachers noted that their school kept changing their SEL program, preventing it from being effective. Participant 743 said, "They change the SEL programs too often for it to work." Participant 798 said their approach wasn't effective because it is a "new program every year like a new football coach every year….how is that going to help?… Veteran teachers know how things work in school…new stuff every year."

Other participants noted that an ineffective feature of their school's SEL program was that it did not cover all aspects of SEL. Participant 172 noted their school's approach lacked an emphasis on problem solving and emotions: "The Leader in Me is our sole approach to social/emotional/behavioral skills and it does not teach meaningful, practical strategies for problem solving or understanding and coping with emotions." Participant 587 explained:

> My school is a Random Acts of Kindness school. We have grown significantly in areas of teamwork and the importance of being kind and treating others the way you wish to be treated. However, specific focus on identifying and dealing with feelings is not explicitly taught or addressed as a school.

Some teachers noted that their school's SEL program was not appropriate for early childhood classrooms. Participant 852 said, "The preschool incorporates PATHS which is a social-emotional curriculum. I do still feel like there is a push-down of expectations for children that is not developmentally appropriate, particularly starting in Kindergarten." Participant 411 stated, "Our school does not support SEL in developmentally appropriate ways. My teaching team (four kindergarten teachers) created our own SEL curriculum and have had success with that within our grade level." Participant 491 described that their school's SEL program, "is geared toward the upper grades and isn't very kindergarten friendly. The concepts and tools we are given to use are not appropriate for 5-year-olds."

SEL Personnel

Another component of a school's SEL approach was the use of counselors, school psychologists, social workers, or other personnel to provide SEL lessons to students.

Effective SEL Personnel When schools had highly trained personnel to provide SEL lessons to students, it was noted as an effective feature of the school's approach to SEL. For example, participant 724 shared:

> This year we have a counselor who is for all students. She is currently giving my students 20-min lessons on emotions and how they can address their feelings. We've never had that before and it certainly is a great use of her time. I can then use her techniques in the classroom when the need arises.

Participant 779 explained that they had additional SEL specific support this year, which freed up their school psychologist and social worker for other services:

> This year, our district added an SEL teacher position to every elementary school. Now, we have someone that can come in once a week and teach SEL lessons. I think it is effective because there is someone who can explicitly teach AND they're teaching from an adopted SEL curriculum. Having this position also means that there is someone who can help support teachers *other than* a school psychologist/social worker who should be working with students specifically receiving services on their IEP.

Ineffective SEL Personnel While some teachers noted that they had trained professionals to support students' SEL, others said their school did not have sufficient personnel for an effective SEL approach. Participant 150 described, "We have a mindfulness program which is very effective but there are lots of students with more intense needs and

not enough staff to support them." Participant 497 said they had "little to no social work support, or counseling support due to lack of funding for these positions and money to get these positions filled. Teachers were hired to teach not to be clinical psychologists." Participant 97 noted, "The problem we have is that we do not have the resources for our students to get professional help from a counselor because we are in a small town." Participant 726 said, "My school has 234 students…there is not a full-time counselor, and all mental health support goes to the middle school."

In some cases, there were extra personnel, but they were overworked. For example, participant 75 explained, "Our social worker and psychologist are the best! They are spread so thin that [they] cannot always be as effective as they could be. They need the time to do their jobs well. The district does not provide enough staffing for them to truly do their jobs."

SEL Team

A third component of a school's SEL approach was having a SEL team that supported teachers' implementation of SEL in their classrooms.

Effective SEL Team Some early childhood teachers mentioned the use of a SEL team as part of their school's effective SEL approach. Participant 672 explained that "There is a SEL team at the elementary school that pulls small counseling groups. They are supporting teachers every day. It is very effective in our Title I school." Participant 325 described the SEL team's function in their school: "We have three people on the SEL team who are available to push into our classrooms when we call for support. They take time to meet with teachers to check in, and will give resources to help in the classroom." Participant 785 noted:

> We have an entire team in place to support social emotional learning. We have a regulation room where students have multitiered supports and a behavior coach that supports classroom teachers by observing and recommending interventions. Every classroom is required to have social emotional lessons weekly (K-6). We also have a Collaborative Action Team that is currently implementing restorative based practices across the school.

Ineffective SEL Team Other early childhood teachers noted the absence of a SEL team or that their SEL team was not effective. Some teachers noted that their school's SEL team did not seem knowledgeable or comfortable providing support to early childhood classrooms. For example, participant 631 shared, "I don't think our school team feels comfortable with preschool, and often is not very helpful."

SEL Instruction

A fourth theme related to a school's SEL approach was teachers' intentional SEL instruction in their classrooms.

Effective SEL Instruction One aspect of teachers' descriptions of effective SEL programs was their teaching of SEL skills to their students. Participant 70 described that "all classrooms have advisory time daily where teachers teach social emotional behaviors or discuss them." Participant 49 said, "We teach our preschoolers social skills from the beginning of the year and throughout the year. We role play, chart, sign our feelings in every day, and send home "Toolboxes" with 'tools to help children with self-regulation." Participant 34 shared, "I talk about SEL every day in my lessons and how we can solve problems and help friends."

Ineffective SEL Instruction Some teachers noted wanting to teach SEL skills but not having time built into the schedule or sufficient time to do so. Participant 691 explained, "There is not enough time to teach and practice SEL. We have some resources, but academics are the focus- even in ECE classrooms." Participant 684 stated, "We currently use the Second Step curriculum in lower elementary as our SEL approach. However, teachers and students are so bogged down by the jam-packed content in the day and pressure on academics that no one ever really teaches from the curriculum." Another teacher, participant 637, shared they had a SEL program but no time to teach it, "We have a program In Focus, but we are having a hard time in our day finding time to teach it." Another issue with SEL instruction was inconsistent or infrequent implementation, especially in the upper elementary grades. For example, participant 629 said, "I feel the classroom teachers in the lower grades are explicit with their SEL instruction. As the students get in the older grades it wanes and loses effectiveness."

SEL Training

A fifth component of a school's SEL approach was training in SEL.

Effective SEL Training Effective schools supported teachers to competently implement SEL curricula and practices through training and professional development. Participant 170 said, "My school has been doing professional development for all teachers in the area of SEL. We learn about best practices and streamline how we can all be consistent with our adaptation in our classrooms." Participant 499 noted that "all staff are trained in SEL strategies" and participant five

explained that their SEL program was, "effective because our counselor is on board and participates in SEL training for staff."

Ineffective SEL Training Teachers noted when training was not conducted and the negative impact it had on the effectiveness of their SEL approach. Participant 871 shared, "We have systemic structures in place school wide. However, we have received minimal training on how to implement PBIS practices. As a school, we struggle with consistent interpretation of expectations and protocol." Participant 835 explained that "teachers are given a kit to teach the Second Step curriculum however they are not given training or support. I wish my school provided us with PD and texts to support the curriculum as well." Participant 839 said, "Teachers are to provide their own SEL without much professional development or coaching. There is not an effective way to support students who struggle."

Clear Expectations and Discipline

Participants made statements about their school's discipline approach that related either to their school's effective or ineffective SEL approach.

Effective Discipline An effective and positive approach to discipline was a feature of an effective school-wide SEL program; however, there were few statements in participant responses regarding effective discipline. The few that mentioned positive discipline referenced the use of clear expectations, such as participant 565 who said, "I believe that most teachers use similar language when talking to students about behavior expectations, which makes this program effective." Participant 706 stated, "We have easy to understand and apply expectations: we keep ourselves safe; we keep our friends safe; we keep our materials safe."

Ineffective Discipline When discipline was mentioned in participant responses, it was most likely to regard ineffective discipline, such as unclear rules, inconsistent accountability, the use of color charts, and removal to the office and rewards following disruptive behavior. Participant 715 said, "The discipline system isn't effective. The rules are vague and not consistently held." Participant 968 described,

> While our school uses PBIS program and Open Circle SEL curriculum, many teachers still use a color chart system where students can clip up or down. There is after school "refocus" that is detention, they just changed the name last year, but the program has not changed. Many students who need a break from the classroom are sent to the main office or the dean's office where they are allowed to play and get treats but

often no one talks to them about why they are there and then they are sent back to class 10 minutes later.

Several teachers expressed the perception that school consequences were not strict or severe enough to be effective. Participant 727 explained that their school "approach allows students to think that they can get away with their behavior because there are no firm consequences." Participant 93 further noted a lack of sufficient consequences in saying, "I think repetitive problem solvers get a slap on the wrist and parents get a free pass to excuse the behavior. I am tired as a teacher…having students stay in classroom who physically and verbally abuse teachers and other students."

Several teachers described their school's ineffective discipline approach as reactive rather than proactive. Participant 621 explained: "Our approach is generally to react to social emotional disruption instead of being proactive and teaching skills and behaviors that equip students with the ability to navigate social emotional situations." Other examples included participant 853 who said, "My school's approach is more of a "put out the fire" mentality rather than plan for a possible fire."

Family Partnerships

Participants noted that family partnerships were another key component of a school's SEL approach.

Effective Family Partnerships Teachers who described effective school-wide approaches often noted partnerships with families as part of their overall approach to support children and build positive relationships with children and families. Participant 711 shared, "We use the Pyramid approach so there are common supports for the entire class and we work closely with families." Participant 708 explained:

> SEL is incorporated in everything we do. Establishing a climate of belonging in our classrooms is the foundation for true learning to occur. Kids need to feel loved and appreciated…this happens as a result of the emphasis we put on building positive interpersonal relationships with our students and their parents. It is embedded in the way we communicate with our students and individualize their learning. We are very lucky, however, to have smaller class sizes that allow us to establish these relationships more easily. As a school, we focus on kindness, acceptance, and collaboration.

Ineffective Family Partnerships Other teachers noted an absence of partnerships with families around SEL. Participant 754 described, "We live and breathe social and emotional learning. However, I don't always think our approach

works either because of lack of parent participation (or those not agreeing with the supports set up)." Participant 829 provided an example of teachers that suggested that families were not on board or needed to do more to support children's SEL skills at home:

> Overall, I think schools should hold a responsibility to teach kiddos SEL skills. However, we are seeing MANY students not coming in with these skills. This needs to start at home!! Parents are not teaching their children manners, coping skills, to be kind and respectful human beings, and that failure is a GOOD thing! Schools cannot continue to take on all of these life skills. We have to work more on strengthening the home to school connection and set higher expectations for parents in being more supportive and active teachers of SEL skills at home.

Administrative Support

The last theme encompassed various early educator statements that referenced administrative supports that either bolstered or impeded an effective school SEL approach.

Effective Administrative Support Participants noted that their school's SEL approach was effective when their administration supported SEL and positive relationships within the school. For example, participant 914 noted, "We have a fabulous principal, dean, and psychologist that offer incredible support when a kid needs some redirection, and they do so from a place of love and understanding instead of punishment." Participant 655 said, "We truly work as a team. We have admin and team support."

Ineffective Administrative Support Various participant statements referenced leadership issues that negatively impacted the school culture and contributed to an ineffective SEL approach. Participant 599 explained, "We have horribly inconsistent leadership. Mixed messages. Teachers are penalized for poor student behavior. There is no follow through with behavioral issues." Participant 14 shared:

> They do not do anything. The amount of turnover our preschool has is disgusting! We lost eight teachers last year and four teachers so far this school year. They all have one common factor contributing to them all leaving (Preschool Director), but the administration team and HR watch it happen. Our director has created a hostile work environment for not only her employees but also the children and families in the program.

Some teachers noted particular challenges with administrators not understanding or including preschool or other early childhood classrooms in the school's SEL approach. For example, participant 806 described "We do not get any help from our administrators. Our local BOCES is not much help either. Every social emotional program our school adopts does not include preschool." Participant 793 explained, "My administrators' knowledge in ECE is very limited, so it is hard for them to create and implement strategies that better fit small students."

Discussion

Teachers' Perceptions of SEL Effectiveness

Study findings indicated that most early childhood teachers perceived their classroom and elementary school SEL approaches to be effective, with slightly higher ratings for classroom strategies over the school's approach. Early educators who rated their classroom as effective were more likely to also rate their school's approach as effective. These results corroborate other research findings that early childhood teacher view SEL programs as effective (e.g., Buchanan et al., 2009).

Features Associated with SEL Effectiveness

Participating teachers reported that particular features of their schools' SEL approach influenced their positive or negative perceptions of effectiveness. Of note is that early educators talked about social emotional MTSS, PBIS, and specific SEL programs interchangeably when describing their school's adoption of a SEL approach. It appears that teachers were more likely to perceive their school as effectively implementing SEL if they had chosen a framework or SEL curriculum. Other research confirms that early educators are interested in their school adopting comprehensive SEL approaches; for example, early childhood teachers are in favor of schools purchasing and using SEL curricula, as long as the program is easy to understand and implement in the context of a busy classroom and that it does not change from year to year (Humphries et al., 2018). In this study, early childhood teachers noted that their school's SEL program was not always developmentally appropriate for the young students in their classroom. In these cases, early childhood teachers developed their own SEL program with other grade-level teachers or modified their SEL program to work for their young students.

Early childhood teachers also shared that they would like to use a comprehensive SEL program that does not address just social skills, but also how to understand and regulate emotions and problem solve. Most published and evidence-based SEL curricula include all of the recommended social and emotional components, such as social skills, identifying
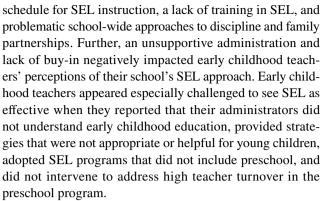
feelings, and behavioral coping skills (Lawson et al., 2019). However, it is possible that participating early childhood teachers noted incomplete SEL curricula because their school had not adopted an evidence-based SEL curriculum. This suggests that districts and elementary schools should strongly consider comprehensive, developmentally appropriate, and evidence-based SEL curricula when choosing SEL programs that will be used in early childhood classrooms. Schools should adopt simple tools or data that are already collected to identify their SEL needs, make decisions about SEL programs, and monitor implementation of the program over time (Jones et al., 2017).

Other characteristics of a school were highlighted when early childhood teachers noted effective SEL approaches, including having sufficient personnel, a SEL team that met regularly, and the ability and time for teachers to provide SEL instruction. Support from personnel trained in SEL and consultation, such as school psychologists, can reinforce SEL implementation and promote organizational support for SEL in the school (e.g., Meyers et al., 2019). On the flip side, insufficient time for SEL, often with a focus on academics, can impede teachers' implementation of SEL (e.g., Buchanan et al., 2009). Further, teachers in this study linked ineffective discipline to ineffective SEL in their school, consistent with other research that teachers who experience more disruptive behavior report feeling less efficacious (Reinke et al., 2013). This study extends previous research findings by noting challenging elements of a school's SEL approach, particularly for early childhood teachers, including the use of highly trained SEL personnel who were utilized for older students rather than preschool through second grade students and the need, in some cases, for preschool or other early grades to have their own SEL team. Early childhood teachers explained that some professionals or administrators on the SEL team did not understand the context of early childhood and were not helpful to them. The implications of these findings for practice are for elementary and early childhood district leaders to implement key elements needed for SEL success and to include the unique perspectives of early childhood teachers and their students into SEL planning and implementation.

Barriers to SEL Implementation

The results of this study mirrored other research that has shown that early childhood teachers are eager to incorporate SEL into their practices but may lack a supportive system to effectively do so (e.g., Bridgeland et al., 2013; Humphries et al., 2018; Meyers et al., 2019). Many of the elements that teachers noted as leading to an ineffective SEL approach in their school were systems-level issues outside of their control, such as a lack of personnel to support students with social emotional difficulties, not enough time in their

schedule for SEL instruction, a lack of training in SEL, and problematic school-wide approaches to discipline and family partnerships. Further, an unsupportive administration and lack of buy-in negatively impacted early childhood teachers' perceptions of their school's SEL approach. Early childhood teachers appeared especially challenged to see SEL as effective when they reported that their administrators did not understand early childhood education, provided strategies that were not appropriate or helpful for young children, adopted SEL programs that did not include preschool, and did not intervene to address high teacher turnover in the preschool program.

Without administrator support and enough staff buy-in, SEL implementation is challenging, especially long-term (Lawson et al., 2019). Teachers may perceive SEL programs, particularly those that are structured, as "top-down," leading to them lose interest and trust in the school's overall SEL approach (Jones et al., 2017). This may especially be the case for early childhood teachers that may view the SEL program as a poor fit for the young children in their classrooms, their educational philosophy, or for their classroom routines. The implication for practice is to obtain buy-in, including early childhood teacher input, when choosing SEL programming in order for SEL practices to be adopted and regularly used across all classrooms in an elementary school; it may be necessary to have a separate early childhood SEL program that is used in preschool and kindergarten classrooms (Murano et al., 2020).

Adequate training and resources are also needed in order for SEL approaches to gain traction and be used effectively in schools (Oberle et al., 2016). Unfortunately, pre-service training for early educators does not adequately cover SEL beyond basic behavior management strategies, and in-service professional development does not often cover SEL topics or use effective adult learning approaches such as coaching and mentoring (Jones et al., 2017). Early childhood teachers need pre-service and in-service training focused on promoting the range of social emotional skills young children need to manage relationships, conflict, and understand and regulate their emotions. In order to successfully teach these skills to children, early educators also need support in developing their own social emotional competence (McClelland et al., 2017). Participating early childhood teachers did not specifically note issues not already covered in other research about the importance of SEL training; however, it is important that SEL training in an elementary school include all teachers, including preschool through second grade teachers.

Many of the participants' comments about challenging partnerships with families that compromised their SEL approach pointed to low parent participation and families not doing their part at home to foster children's social emotional competence. The finding that teachers viewed families as not doing enough to support children's SEL skills at home

were mirrored in Humphries and colleagues (2018) qualitative study of preschool through second grade teachers' perceptions of SEL approaches in urban schools. It appeared that some early childhood teachers taught in schools with strong family-school partnerships and more positive views of families, while others struggled with the partnerships and their views of families. Some SEL curricula involve family partnerships, helping bridge the support for children's development of social emotional skills across home and school settings (McClelland et al., 2017). The use of SEL approaches with a family component in elementary schools may promote teachers' use of collaborative communication strategies with families.

Limitations

This study has several methodological limitations. First, the survey was based on an existing measure (Buchanan et al., 2009) and adapted to focus specifically on early childhood contexts; there are no existing data regarding the reliability or validity of survey items. We mitigated this limitation by piloting the survey and obtaining and integrating feedback received prior to disseminating the survey. Second, survey participants included only those early childhood teachers who had publicly available school email addresses and who responded to the email they received from the researchers. The perspectives of some early childhood teachers may not have been captured. Black teachers were particularly underrepresented in the sample and there were few responses from teachers working in charter and private elementary schools. Future research should include a more representative sample and pursue a possible relationship between teachers' educational training (i.e., in early childhood education or in elementary education) and their use of SEL approaches. The third limitation concerns the potential lack of generalizability of the results to other states. There may be differences in states' SEL policies and funding that could influence teachers' perceptions of SEL program effectiveness. Future work should extend the current research findings to other states.

Conclusion

Teachers are frequently asked to use curricula and programs but receive little support to do so. School structures, such as a SEL team, time for SEL instruction, administrative support, and SEL training are key to teachers feeling like their use of a SEL program will be effective. This study contributed to the literature regarding early childhood teachers' perspectives of the key elements needed for SEL approaches to be effective in elementary schools. Specifically, preschool through second grade early childhood teachers expressed

particular needs regarding administrator knowledge of early childhood, consideration of their students' developmental needs, and intentional inclusion in their school's SEL programming. School administrators should attend to the unique concerns and contexts of early childhood classrooms when implementing SEL approaches in elementary schools.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-021-01248-4.

Declarations

Conflict of interest We have no known conflicts of interest to disclose.

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