

TEACHERS' AND SCHOOL LEADERS' PERCEPTIONS OF SEL PROGRAMMING ACROSS THE GLOBE—A FOCUS GROUP STUDY

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Successful Social Emotional Learning programming in schools is dependent upon the priorities of and capacity of school leaders to guide this work. This qualitative study explored the global perspectives of teachers and school leaders about the role of school leadership in the acceptance and implementation of transformative social emotional learning in school programming and practices. Participants were 10 teachers and 10 school leaders from multiple countries working with elementary school students. Data were collected using a focus group methodology and a constructivist grounded theory design was employed. Comments were fairly consistent across countries and indicated that both teachers and school leaders shared a positive view about the importance of social emotional learning for their work within and beyond the classroom. Participants' narratives also reflected perceptions of themselves as underprepared to address social emotional learning and identified social, political, and cultural barriers to this effort. Although limited by its qualitative design, concepts from this study may lead to theory-building, future empirical research, and innovative practice that can be applied globally to increase equitable access to social emotional learning training for educators and programming for students worldwide.

Keywords: social emotional learning, school leaders, focus groups, grounded theory

1. Introduction

Variations exist in how social emotional learning (SEL) is conceptualized (Brush et al., 2022). Some researchers define it as a process of human development concerned with the acquisition of skills, knowledge, and attitudes concerning the recognition and management of emotions, social problem-solving skills, empathy-related responsiveness, and relationship-building skills. Conversely, others frame it as a broad educational approach based in policy, processes, and practices (Osher et al., 2008; Payton et al., 2000; Torrente et al., 2015). As the standard (Lawson et al., 2019), the widely-used theoretical model advanced by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), which organizes SEL into five core areas, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills (CASEL, 2020; Jones & Bouffard, 2012). SEL researchers and practitioners most often focus on improving students' SEL. Research in this area has shown that, in addition to being

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associated with students' academic performance in numerous content areas, children's SEL competencies are associated positively with the quality of their peer relationships, self-concept, classroom behavior, and school attendance (Cook et al., 2015; Daunic et al., 2021; Denham et al., 2014; Xia et al., 2022). Children's SEL skills are also associated with their endorsement of a growth mind-set (Zeng et al., 2016) and students' high in SEL competencies also tend to perceive their schools as affirming, engaging, respectful, and inclusive spaces for learning (Tubbs Dolan et al., 2022).

Beyond students, teachers and school administrators also have a stake in the development, planning, and implementation of SEL programs in schools (Meyers et al., 2015). Indeed, studies that center teachers' SEL competencies and skills and consider how they operate in schools are on the rise (Garner, 2010; Poulou & Garner, 2023; Valiente et al., 2020). These studies have shown that positive SEL beliefs and practices among teachers are related negatively to teacher stress and associated positively with their job satisfaction and performance, mindfulness, and overall emotional competence (Garner et al., 2018, 2019; Kim et al., 2021; Weissberg et al., 2015). This work also points to the potential beneficial effects of SEL training for improving the quality of teacher-student relationships and teachers' classroom practices and behaviors, findings that hold across nations (Brackett et al., 2011; Poulou, 2017; Stipp, 2019; see also Coelho et al., 2021). In addition, the promotion of a SEL culture and experience implementing SEL classroom practices predict teachers' professional and organizational commitment (Coelho et al., 2023; Collie et al., 2011) and positive student outcomes.

School leadership is also an influential school-level factor that is associated with student learning (Waters et al., 2004), the quality of teachers' instructional practices and reflective capacity, and the overall success of schools (Coelli & Green, 2012; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Hilton et al., 2015; Hoy & Miskel, 2007; Waters et al., 2004). Hence, educational innovations such as SEL programming should be supported at the administrative level (Ho et al., 2021). That is, teacher training in SEL should integrate culturally-and community-relevant skills and be supported by school leaders who are committed to cultivating a school community where teachers feel comfortable using evidence-based SEL practices in their classrooms (Ramirez et al., 2021; Stefanovic et al., 2021). Unfortunately, training in SEL and how it operates to improve teaching and learning is rarely included as part of preparation and professional development for school administrators, even though SEL programming is a significant responsibility of school leaders in many nations (Sánchez-Nuñez et al., 2015; Waajid et al., 2013). Moreover, a lack of SEL skills is offered as a primary reason for the shortage of individuals interested in becoming educational leaders across societies (Heffernan et al., 2022).

Leadership is an evolving process that emerges from interactions and actions of diverse individuals within a community ecological system (Wielkiewicz & Stelzner, 2005). School leaders' empowerment practices can motivate teachers in ways that positively impact their classroom practices (Lee & Nie, 2017). Therefore, investigating SEL among school leaders is important for several reasons. First, school leaders are responsible for promoting the school's vision of student learning, decision-making around the disbursement of funds for school programming, and building school social capital through relationships with internal and external stakeholders (Tan et al., 2022; Kennedy, 2019). Second, a lack of SEL skills among school leaders can adversely impact their well-being and detract from their capacity to positively impact teachers' instructional quality and student learning and contribute to their own emotional dysregulation

(Bailey & Weiner, 2022). Third, there is a divide between leaders' commitment to SEL programming and their understanding of whether and how it can be implemented in the schools they manage (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015), even though school leaders are frequently tasked with applying SEL theory to practice (Patti et al., 2015). Fourth, greater school-level SEL guidance has positive implications for addressing teachers' social-emotional needs (Zieher et al., 2021) and improving their satisfaction and performance in the classroom (Gómez-Leal et al., 2022). Finally, socially and emotionally competent school leaders tend to adopt a proactive leadership style and recognize how their values, beliefs, and emotions affect the school climate (Mahfouz & Gordon, 2021).

As noted earlier, SEL is regarded as foundational to student learning and development across countries. However, the research base on school leaders and SEL centers North American and European samples (Hayashi et al., 2022; Humphrey, 2018). Furthermore, many global SEL programs are rooted in power structures and colonial/western/Eurocentric worldviews as to the conceptualization and measurement of SEL (see Bhatia & Priya, 2021). A coloniality of power perspective should be attentive to inequitable, racialized, politicized, economic, and socio-cultural hierarchical narratives of education (Leonardo & Singh, 2017). Promoting critical and equitable educational programming involves identifying and respecting cultural/community standards, insights that tend to be undervalued in SEL research and practice. Thus, SEL programs should not operate from a single conceptualization of social-emotional competence because best practices for these initiatives should involve engagement with ideological, political, and cultural and community norms (Hoffman, 2009). To that end, the present research investigates beliefs about school leaders' role in SEL in schools among educators living and working in multiple regions of the world, including the Middle East, countries in northern, southern, and west Africa, parts of South Asia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and other understudied areas of Europe. Our work is guided by the tri-theories of the transformative SEL conceptual framework, transformative leadership theory, and precepts of ecological leadership theory. CASEL's transformative SEL framework considers SEL within the context of sociocultural identities, agency, connectedness to and engagement with community stakeholders, and commitment to self- and other-understanding (Jagers et al., 2019; Williams & Jagers, 2022). Similarly, transformative leadership theory centers inclusion, equity, and social justice and posits that communities are strengthened when school leaders consider the public good and citizenship as part of their role (Shields & Hesbol, 2020). Finally, as applied to schools, ecological leadership frameworks recognize the significance of community characteristics and broader societal culture and norms, and global trends with respect to school leadership and management practices (Holochwost et al., 2023; Toh et al., 2014).

2. Study design and methodology

Consistent with grounded theory methodology, this study emerged from focus group conversations with teachers and school leaders and semi-structured interviews with school leaders, which took place after the focus groups. Focus group meetings were three hours in length and included appropriate breaks and a brief meditative breathing exercise. Once the focus

group discussions and interviews were completed, the authors systematically identified and analyzed the narratives from both and included them as part of the entire corpus of the transcripts. We chose to address our research aims using a focus group methodology because it is a culturally-attuned qualitative approach that provides a safe space to reflect upon one's own knowledge, beliefs, and lived experiences while simultaneously listening to and considering others' perspectives (Hughes & DuMont, 2002). Focus groups also allow for candid conversations, allow for multiple points of view, and offer researchers the opportunity to collect large amounts of data from a small number of participants in a brief period of time (Gundumogula, 2020). To offer additional meaningful insights to the focus group comments, we conducted group-level semi-structured interviews with school leaders because doing so allowed us to further probe the focus group responses and opinions, which centered school leaders. This methodological addition was informed by research that shows that group discussions tend to add depth and richness to the data as compared to individual interviews (Parker & Tritter, 2006). They also allow information and questions unknown to the researcher(s) to emerge through direct conversations and collective sensemaking among participants (Fern, 2001), and the construction of collective views (Nyumba et al., 2018; Wilkinson, 1998), which was at the heart of our work.

2.1 Participants

After receiving Institutional Review Board approval (Protocol# 1987175-1), participants were recruited via the moderators' professional networks and through social media platforms focused on SEL programming. Participants provided informed consent and provided demographic information when scheduling the focus group and interview sessions. Participants were 10 teachers and 10 school leaders (8 of whom were school principals, one who was the director of a private school, and another who was responsible for developing an SEL program in her United States-based school). Teachers and school leaders participated together in the focus group sessions, which allowed for a rich and deep discussion because the two groups of participants could gain insights from one another's comments (Krueger & Casey, 2014). None of the teachers worked in the same school or school district and the researchers emphasized that all points of view were valid and valued and reminded participants that it was possible that they may hear perspectives with which they disagreed (Krueger & Casey, 2014). This approach addressed the issue of power differential between teachers and school leaders and ensured that all participants were able to openly and honestly communicate their perspectives without fear of reprisal and that hierarchical discrepancies did not detract from the creation of an environment that allowed for a full exchange of experiences and ideas.

Participants were female with the exception of one male school leader. With respect to cultural backgrounds and nationalities, three participants were from Pakistan, two were from India, two were from the western and southwestern United States (1 White and 1 Latina) and worked in schools with a small enrollment of Native American students, and two others were from the United Kingdom. One participant each was from Azerbaijan, Ghana, Indonesia, Lebanon, Libya, Nigeria, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Romania, Spain, and Zambia. The educational backgrounds of participants were varied. All of the participants had a minimum of a bachelor's degree and all school leaders had a graduate degree. Years of work experience ranged from less than one year to over twenty years and participants were employed in public and private schools.

All of them noted that they had some experience with SEL concepts, but none reported being familiar with a specific SEL curriculum. Participants were assured that identifying information would not be associated with their responses. Additional note-takers transcribed focus group conversations using methodology described by Agar and MacDonald (1995). Researchers worked collaboratively to review initial transcriptions by listening to recordings while reading transcriptions.

2.2. Data collection and transcription

The two focus group sessions followed the same general format, which consisted of initial engagement questions to establish the topic of discussion (i.e., “What is SEL?”, “What is the impact of SEL for educators?”). Next, the team followed up with exploration questions. Specifically, following Thierry et al. (2022) and using a semi-structured discussion guide, we included broad framing questions such as, “What are your specific strengths as it pertains to SEL?”, “What are some of the current challenges you face as part of your work?”, “How could an SEL program build upon your strengths and help you address the identified challenges?”, “What is your perception of the greatest leadership needs for support for SEL programming in the school(s) in which you work/lead”? and “How can you gain support for SEL from your school leader?” This question applied to teachers as well as school leaders who also must seek support from educational administrators outside of the school building. Participants were encouraged to comment, with moderators steering conversation. Furthermore, interactions among focus group participants were encouraged and a discussion of similarities and differences in approaches and perspectives were permitted. Given the nature of the sample, focus group sessions were conducted online. Online focus groups and group-level interviews are as rigorous as face-to-face sessions (Morgan & Lobe, 2011) and provide opportunities for full and equal participation of individuals from different parts of the world and those who face barriers to having their voices represented in research (Lathen & Laestadiu, 2021; Poliandri et al., 2023).

2.3 Data analysis

Participants’ verbatim quotes were interpreted through a qualitative analysis, which was supplemented by researchers’ pencil and paper notations. Researchers coded all transcriptions using open coding, a process in which each response in the data is labeled with as many categories. That is, narratives were studied to identify emerging categories using unrestricted coding until theoretical saturation was reached, such that unique themes no longer emerged from the data (Guest et al., 2006). Coders did not consult the scholarly literature on SEL and school leaders during the coding process to avoid the influence of pre-existing theory and research. The literature on SEL and school leaders is small, particularly as it concerns educators working in non-western countries. Once this first round of coding was complete, researchers reviewed the literature and returned to the transcripts to explore the intersection of different codes for more precise coding and to better label the categories. For the final round of coding, the coders further collaborated to review codes and to merge them into similar categories by developing concepts, searching for themes, and integrating them into a coherent theory using an

across-case analysis strategy (Ayres et al., 2003) to lend confidence to our interpretation of the data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2006).

Author Characteristics. Qualitative methodology requires that demographic backgrounds of the researchers also be presented so that readers can situate the study as to the possible influence of researchers on analyses and the resulting conclusions and interpretations of the data (Bhattacharya, 2017). We compiled a diverse research team in terms of research expertise and cultural, racial, and religious backgrounds. Both authors are citizens of the United States. The first author is a Black woman and academic researcher born in the United States. She examines SEL competencies and beliefs among teachers and their associations with student outcomes. The second author is a White female born in Russia. She conducts evidence-based SEL programming for elementary school students and teachers. Although her primary job is that of a practitioner rather than as a university researcher, she has published papers on the topic and the two authors engaged in equitable decision-making about the research. The first author served as the master coder. However, both authors were involved in the conceptualization of the study, initial code development, and manuscript preparation. As well, the research team operated consensually and met regularly to engage in reflexive practices and talk through the questions, coding, and issues related to patterns that were emerging in participants' responses, all of which eliminated the possibility of a power differential between the authors.

To establish trust and confidence in the data, all participant responses were included in the data set. In keeping with grounded theory methodology, the primary researcher consulted experts in SEL to discuss the transcriptions (and resulting themes) as a check on the analyses and resulting data interpretations to ensure that alternative possibilities were considered (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Cutcliffe, 2000). We also sought agreement among the coders and the participants themselves (Campbell et al., 2013) by having two researchers independently code responses into categories. Analysis of the responses yielded three themes regarding teachers' and school leaders' conceptions about SEL programming in schools: Beliefs about the Value of SEL in Schools, Lack of Preparedness for SEL Practice and Programming, and Social, Political and Cultural Factors. The Lack of Preparedness for SEL theme centers around the lack of an in-depth understanding of the SEL construct and insufficient preparedness and confidence to teach or use SEL practices in the classroom. The Social, Political, and Cultural Barriers to SEL theme comprises comments concerning the recognition that SEL is experienced differently across contexts.

The *Beliefs about the Value of SEL in Schools* theme has to do with the belief that SEL is a valuable part of the educational process. Although a few participants expressed concerns that SEL adds to the workload of teachers and school leaders, most perceived these programs and practices as beneficial for student learning and viewed them as contributing positively to teachers' instructional practices, classroom experiences, and the overall climate of the school community and as an opportunity for collaborations between and among teachers and other school staff. As an example, a teacher from Spain commented that "SEL can provide teachers with tips about how to do their jobs better" At the same time, participant accounts of the potential value of SEL programming and practice in schools reflected a contradiction, with some participants expressing the sentiment that their inclusion in the school curricula adds additional work and stress for school staff. Specifically, one school leader based in the United States commented that:

“One of the problems is that we work with teachers and students on SEL and then students leave our school and encounter classrooms in other schools that do not support SEL and it unravels any progress that we have made, making me wonder if it really worth it.”

The *Lack of Preparedness for SEL Practice* theme describes comments that explain participants’ concerns about the absence of credible and evidence-based training at the preservice and in-service levels for teachers and school leaders about how to use SEL concepts and content in their work. Comments fell on a spectrum, ranging from a focus on the need for a better understanding of the definition of SEL to a call for evidence-based SEL training. A sample comment from another school leader was:

“As a leader, I really believe that teachers do not want to be ineffective; they just need adequate training and support in an environment that is improvement-oriented” and

“Some school leaders think that everything falls into SEL, so there is very little attention to evidence-based learning about SEL.” (School Leader based in the United States)

The *Social, Political and Cultural Factors Related to SEL* theme expressed participants’ attitudes about social, cultural, and political barriers to SEL school programming. Participants described SEL triumphs and challenges, such as inclusivity around cultural, economic, and learning differences, parental attitudes in favor of and against SEL in schools, lack of a specified budget for these efforts, and misunderstanding about what the term “SEL” means culturally and politically. Interestingly, comments encapsulating this theme reflected perceptions of SEL outside of the United States. For example, a School Leader from India commented that:

“I want to better understand how to establish the right connections and how to figure out how much of this programming is too much.”

Including the quotes in table form allowed us to report the full range of illustrative quotes for each theme (see Table 1).

Table 1. Quotes Illustrative of Each Theme

Theme	Quotes
Importance of SEL in Schools	<p>“SEL is important nowadays, especially after COVID.” (Pakistani Teacher)</p> <p>“SEL is important for team-building between teachers and school leadership.</p> <p>“Emotional intelligence is important for teaching.” (Libyan teaching)</p> <p>“SEL will help me help students during the teenage years.” (Pakistani Teacher)</p> <p>“SEL increases students’ motivation to do their work.” (Pakistani Teacher)</p> <p>“SEL can help school leaders learn about the needs of teachers.” (Teacher from the United Kingdom)</p> <p>“SEL is good for classroom behavioral issues and behavior management.” (Azerbaijani School Leader)</p>

	<p>“SEL can help with resilience-building.” (Teacher from India)</p> <p>“It is not our responsibility as teachers and school leaders to resolve student-to-student conflicts. Students should have responsibility to communicate their own problems to each other first and then come to us for support.” (School Leader based in the United States)</p> <p>“One of the problems is that we work with teachers and students on SEL and then students leave our school and encounter classrooms in other schools that do not support SEL and it unravels any progress that we have made, making me wonder if it really worth it.” (School Leader based in the United States)</p> <p>“I want to understand how to integrate SEL into a school setting because teachers are suffering.” (Lebanese School Leader)</p> <p>“I want to increase my knowledge of SEL. It will improve my teaching” (Nigerian Teacher)</p> <p>“I am looking forward to learning new strategies to improve my students’ behavior toward academics.” (Teacher from India)</p> <p>“SEL can provide teachers with tips about how to do their jobs better.” (Teacher from Spain)</p> <p>“SEL training helps with classroom management.” (Puerto Rican School Leader)</p>
<p>Lack of Preparedness for SEL</p>	<p>“As a leader, I really believe that teachers do not want to be ineffective; they just need adequate training and support in an environment that is improvement-oriented.” (School Leader based in the United States)</p> <p>“Some school leaders think that everything falls into SEL, so there is very little attention to evidence-based learning about SEL.” (School Leader based in the United States)</p> <p>“I would like to know more about the structure of SEL curricula” (Indonesian School Leader)</p> <p>“Some teachers get trained in SEL concepts, but leaders tend to get no training at all, which limits their buy-in for this type of programming.” (School Leader Based in the United States)</p> <p>“There should be professional development classes to give teachers and school leaders proven tips to become more competent at addressing students’ classroom behavioral issues through SEL.” (Teacher from India)</p>
<p>Social, Political, and Cultural Issues</p>	<p>“The political climate regarding what SEL is and how it overlaps with social injustice leads me to believe that this an area that I should avoid as a school leader. I think it’s the reason I haven’t been promoted.” (School Leader based in the United States)</p> <p>“I am concerned about how to reach out ‘different learners’ and the kids in different financial situations.” (Ghanaian School Leader)</p> <p>“Parents do not understand the term SEL, so we need to figure out a better way to communicate it beyond the school building.” (Ghanaian School Leader)</p> <p>“SEL programming represents insightful inclusive pedagogy, although not everyone knows that.” (Ghanaian School Leader)</p> <p>“Teachers must understand the background of students and have a growth mindset.” (School Leader based in the United Kingdom)</p> <p>“I think SEL overlaps with neurolinguistic programming.” (Teacher from India)</p> <p>“In private schools, half of the parents have the attitude that we pay the school to teach SEL to our children and the other half accept it as part of their parental role.” (School Leader based in the United States)</p> <p>“I want to better understand how to establish the right connections and how to figure out how much of this programming is too much.” (School Leader from India)</p> <p>“There should be meaningful and respectful conversations between teachers, students, and parents, which are sometimes difficult, to make sure students are getting consistent messages about SEL.” (School Leader based in the United States)</p> <p>“How to communicate with school leaders about how we can innovate schools through SEL” (Teacher from Spain)</p>

“Not all teachers and school leaders are comfortable talking about emotions because of their own family experiences.” (School Leader based in the United States)

“There are so many issues to address in schools and incorporating SEL is just another add-on for teachers and school leaders.” (School Leader based in the United States)

“The tolerance for emotions is different across families and cultures and that makes it difficult to execute any school program.” (Teacher based in the United Kingdom)

“Emotions are private and discussing them in schools can cause divisions.” (Pakistani Teacher)

“In the private and religiously conservative school environment in which I work, talking about SEL is political and could negatively impact our enrollment and my ability to be promoted.” (School Leader based in the United States)

“Convincing parents and the community how SEL can innovate schools” (Teacher from Spain)

“There are multiple ethnic groups, which can lead to stress in the classroom.” (Ghanaian School Leader)

“There is a minimal or really a nonexistent or competing budget for SEL programming so we are able to only piecemeal what we do.” (School Leader based in the United States)

“There is sometimes the belief that students should not receive extra SEL training unless they have a specific Individual Educational Plan that highlights their specific needs.” (School Leader based in the United States)

Note. We integrated teacher and school leader data to provide a more comprehensive description of participants responses about the perceived role of school leaders in SEL programming.

3. Discussion

With proven social and economic benefits, SEL has become an important K-12 school initiative (Belfield et al., 2015) and is regarded as an essential educational goal (e.g., Williamson, 2021). Though evidence-based SEL programs have been implemented in various cultures and with diverse populations, it is not clear whether prior findings apply across different cultures (Barlas et al., 2022). In this qualitative study, we integrated CASEL’s transformative SEL framework and transformative and ecological leadership theories to explore global perspectives of teachers and school administrators about the role of school leadership in SEL programming and practice. This is an important area of study for several reasons. First, there is evidence of the worldwide relevance of SEL to policy development and educational practice. Second, the knowledge base for SEL programming across the globe has been largely amassed in western and affluent countries based on samples of primarily White participants (Bailey et al., 2021). In recent years, researchers have begun to advocate for the decolonization of psychological research that is informed by diverse voices and cultural and societal norms in the creation of the SEL programming and policy development (see Denston et al., 2022).

Educational and developmental scholars have increasingly recognized the substantial beneficial outcomes of SEL for students, teachers, and other school staff. Successful SEL programming is dependent upon the priorities and capacity of school leaders to guide this work. An inspection of the narratives in the current study indicated that educators from Azerbaijan, Lebanon, Nigeria, Pakistan, Spain, the United Kingdom, and school leaders working in schools in the United States perceive SEL programming as having promise for improving educators’ experiences in the classroom and in their leadership roles. However, with the exception of the United Kingdom, which has launched a national initiative for school-wide SEL programming for

students and building-level staff (Humphrey et al., 2013), SEL interventions in these countries primarily target students (e.g., Clinton et al., 2015). Still, researchers have begun to make significant inroads into effective SEL programming for teachers in Spain (Castillo et al., 2013). To our knowledge, high-quality programs that target the SEL needs and competencies among Lebanese teachers as it relates to issues of equity do not exist. This is unfortunate as these teachers are often tasked with instructing a significant number of refugee learners who, by virtue of displacement from their native countries, have unique academic, linguistic, and social-emotional needs (Kim et al., 2020) that expose them to potential bias and discrimination in schools (Mendenhall et al., 2017). SEL programming in Lebanese schools is also constrained by a lack of local resources and social, economic, and political pressures (Abdul-Hamid & Yassine, 2020). Similarly, the Nigerian teacher in our study perceived exposure to SEL as an avenue towards high-quality teaching, a belief supported by previous research (Akomolafe & Popoola, 2011). Our findings, nonetheless, are inconclusive as to whether these programs are effective, particularly in conflict-laden regions of the country. However, research that has considered this topic among Nigerian and Pakistani educators indicate that they strongly express the conviction that professional development in SEL should be foundational to teacher training (Bello et al., 2017).

We also found that statements suggesting that participants perceived efforts to implement SEL programs and practices in their classroom and schools as limited by a lack of preparedness and training. Comments to this effect came primarily from school leaders who remarked that SEL training is typically offered to students and/or teachers. SEL intervention programs that begin with activities aimed at building school leaders' and teachers' SEL skills as a precursor to programming with students may be particularly efficacious (Maurer & Brackett, 2004). The school leaders we examined also indicated a desire for training for themselves, a finding supported by previous research (Jones & Cater, 2020). One of the school leaders from Nigeria commented that SEL training may also be helpful to district-level school leaders as it relates to issues of equitable resourcing, accountability, budgeting, and addressing students' behavioral issues. School board members in the United States report being concerned about the social-emotional health of students, staff and that of their families. Yet, almost 20% of them have negative perceptions of SEL and report believing that the social-emotional challenges of students are due to "poor" home lives. Interestingly, some school leaders regard SEL as a tool to achieve equity in classrooms and for modeling acceptance, although a very small majority also perceive SEL as culturally divisive (Roegman et al., 2022). The belief that emotions should not be discussed at school was also prevalent, sentiments that were reflected in the comments of educators based in Pakistan and the United States.

4. Conclusions

Community psychologists regard SEL as foundational to cultural competence (Cherniss, 2001), particularly as it concerns contextual influences that could improve or challenge the success of these programs. Our findings suggest that the creation and implementation of culturally-attuned SEL programs require a consideration of the perspectives of the community where the

implementation will occur. As an example, an international focus on SEL programming and practice and a consideration of the environment can result in measurable social-emotional indicators that directly translate into improved socioeconomic outcomes and contribute to a globalized policy agenda (McCall et al., 2023; Williamson, 2021). All in all, the comments from the focus groups and interviews in the present research aligned with the transformative SEL and leadership frameworks described in the Introduction. Overall, participants suggested that effective SEL programming requires a community approach (Ferreira et al., 2020; Gimbert et al., 2023). Participants also identified barriers to SEL initiatives, including unfamiliarity with intervention and prevention programs and their potential benefits, inadequate funding and training for educators, and an absence of buy-in from important stakeholders (Barlas et al., 2022; Reed & Sheridan, 2021). Comments of teachers and school leaders from the multiple nations represented in our sample also highlighted their beliefs about the empowering role of SEL for addressing challenging student behavior, motivating students' academic achievement, and improving the teachers' well-being and classroom practices. Still, the lack of SEL programming and practice should not be used as a shield for the academic, social and behavioral challenges that students experience at school that are due to marginalization, villainization, and bias (Horton-Williams, 2020; Mayes et al., 2022; Simmons, 2021; Stickle et al., 2019).

It is also important that our results be understood in light of the limitations of the study sample and the design. First, the focus groups and interviews were conducted in English. The perspectives of non-English-speaking educators living in the countries not represented in our sample could differ from what we report. Likewise, English may not have been the first language of some of the participants, which could have impacted their responses and/or made it more challenging for researchers to interpret them. There is also the possibility that the participants in the research were most familiar with English-driven SEL content, which means that their perspectives may have been shaped by the colonized power structures discussed earlier. Future research on this topic should include the perspectives of non-English speaking educators to ensure an inclusive global SEL perspective. Another study limitation is that, in some of the countries we sampled, teachers experience the same social and economic challenges as their students, which could impact their SEL teaching beliefs and practices (Obiagu, 2020). Investments in SEL programming could be an important strategy for disrupting systemic bias globally, but only if the social and economic forces that adversely impact the well-being of the entire school community are addressed (Allbright et al., 2019; Camangian & Cariaga, 2021; Forman et al., 2021; Garner et al., 2014; Mayes et al., 2022; Miller et al., 2022). Although none of the participants mentioned it as a factor, religion is also regarded as a major factor in SEL competency in some regions of the world (Giraldo-Garcia & Roy, 2018) and, therefore, future research should consider the role of faith on SEL programming and practice.

Despite these limitations, the results of this qualitative study illuminate the perspectives of educators across the globe about the possible role of societal histories and circumstances and school leadership in SEL programming and practice (Horton-Williams, 2020; Stickle et al., 2019; Tubbs Dolan et al., 2022). Participant perspectives in this research also point to the need for access to formal training in SEL for school leaders across the globe through international collaborations that offer opportunities to share experiences, data, methods, and curricula (see Freshwater et al., 2006). This is important because school leaders who participate in leadership training that incorporates SEL content report increases in SEL competencies directly related to

their leadership practices two years later (Sánchez-Nuñez et al., 2015). Therefore, SEL-framed school leadership could improve the capacity of school communities to provide culturally- and community-attuned evidence-based SEL training that supports students and educators around the world. At the same time, a global understanding of SEL should be mindful of the tensions between academic learning and SEL in many parts of the world (Balfanz & Whitehurst, 2019). There are also expectational differences for emotion-related behavior between home and school across cultures. Still, evidence-based and culturally-attuned SEL programming and practice may prevent or disrupt marginalization of communities and improve school climates across cultures and, therefore, should be a global priority (e.g., Craig, 2007; Ecclestone & Hayes, 2008).

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