Social Emotional Learning in the Classroom: A Qualitative Case Study

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A Partners in Scholarship Research Project
Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... 5

Social Emotional Learning in the Classroom .............................................................................. 6

Figure 1 ............................................................................................................................................. 7

Methodology ..................................................................................................................................... 8

Participants ....................................................................................................................................... 8

Figure 2: ............................................................................................................................................ 8

Table 1: ............................................................................................................................................. 9

Procedures ......................................................................................................................................... 10

Research questions .......................................................................................................................... 10

Interview Questions ......................................................................................................................... 10

Institutional Review Board (IRB) Process ....................................................................................... 11

Figure 3: ............................................................................................................................................ 12

Definition of Key Terms .................................................................................................................. 13

Brief Literature Review .................................................................................................................... 15

Social and Emotional Learning ....................................................................................................... 15

Zones of Regulation .......................................................................................................................... 16

Circle Time ....................................................................................................................................... 17

Morning Meetings ............................................................................................................................. 17

Class Size ......................................................................................................................................... 18
Research Design ......................................................................................................................... 19

Data Analysis .............................................................................................................................. 20

Figure 4: ........................................................................................................................................ 20

Table 2: .......................................................................................................................................... 21

Discussion ...................................................................................................................................... 22

Common SEL Methods and their Effect on Students – Research Question 1 .................. 22

Zones of Regulation (ZOR) ......................................................................................................... 22

Morning Meetings ....................................................................................................................... 23

Family/Community Groups ......................................................................................................... 23

Findings ........................................................................................................................................ 24

Recurring Themes on the Effect of SEL – Research Question 1 ........................................... 24

Building Relationships and Community ................................................................................... 25

Communication and Problem Solving ....................................................................................... 26

Relationship to Class Size – Research Question 2 ................................................................. 27

Limitations .................................................................................................................................... 28

Conclusion and Recommendations ............................................................................................ 29

References ..................................................................................................................................... 30

Appendix A: IRB Application for Research Project ................................................................. 32

Appendix B: Consent Form for Research Project ..................................................................... 34

Appendix C: Letter of IRB Approval ........................................................................................ 36
Appendix D. Letter Sent to Participants

*Note: Appendices E - S: Interview Transcripts are excluded for confidentiality reasons.
Abstract

A Partners in Scholarship research program offered by a small, liberal arts college, provided an opportunity for a teacher education student to collaborate with the education department, and expand on the data of alumni teaching in Kansas by exploring Social Emotional Learning experiences of classroom teachers and the effect on students. A sample of 14 educators from various schools and districts in Kansas participated in this qualitative case study and were interviewed on their perceptions of Social Emotional Learning, effects on students, their class size and contacts with students, and the SEL methods used in their classrooms or schools. The collaborative research project took a year and a half to conduct, and involved the researcher giving presentations to the education advisory committee, and community and college groups.

The findings were that Social Emotional Learning had a positive impact on students, which benefited their social skills and learning. Recurring themes were identified that connected SEL methods to students’ ability to build relationships, find belonging through community, and develop communication skills and self awareness, which increased an optimal environment for learning and understanding others. The research showed there was a wide range of school and class sizes in which SEL was implemented, yet there was no apparent relationship between group size and the use of SEL methods. Participants indicated that SEL positively impacted students’ overall growth, and also made the teachers feel more satisfied with their teaching. Recommendations for college teaching programs are to implement or expand on SEL methods in preservice teacher education, and to recognize the value that SEL has among college students.

Keywords: Social Emotional Learning, qualitative case, preservice teacher education
Social Emotional Learning in the Classroom: A Qualitative Case Study

During the spring semester of my freshman year, I was approached by an education professor and asked if I would like to participate in the college’s Partners in Scholarship research program to collaborate on a scholarly topic that would be mutually rewarding. The Education Department was interested in knowing more about Social Emotional Learning including ways to embed it in the teacher education program. This presented me with an opportunity to further explore Social Emotional Learning and expand on the research. Social Emotional Learning is viewed as a high priority in Kansas (Kansas Vision for Education, 2020). Furthermore, SEL can purposefully shape a classroom through a “systemic approach that intentionally cultivates a caring, participatory, and equitable learning environment” (Casel, 2019).

Through this study, I was allowed to dig into Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and discover how it was used in classrooms. I was also curious to find out if there was a relationship between the different sizes of schools and classes in Kansas and SEL. The purpose of the study was to examine teachers’ perceptions of how SEL affects students, and to explore teachers’ perceptions of the relationship between SEL and class size. Two research questions were developed: “What are teacher perceptions of how SEL affects students?” and “What are teacher perceptions of the relationship between SEL and class size?”

The Education Department had been connecting with its former teaching graduates through the social media page Bethany Teaching Graduates, which acknowledged achievements of teachers and welcomed insights, especially on current topics in education. A post in spring of 2018 asked if there were any teachers who wanted to participate in a potential research project on SEL, which generated enthusiastic responses. The education professor suggested this might be a
good starting point to add to my knowledge of SEL by interviewing teachers in the field who displayed an interest in SEL, and in sharing their classroom experiences.

The fall semester of 2018 was spent organizing the study, and centering on the two research questions, while learning how to go through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process since it involved conducting interviews. We developed a plan of how to select participants that would represent a range of different school districts across Kansas and have SEL experiences. A purposive sample was drawn from teachers who showed an interest on the social media post, and then matched with the department’s survey data on information on alumni teaching in Kansas: https://www.bethanylb.edu/academics/areas-of-study/education/

Figure 1: Researcher viewing Kansas map of school districts and number of alumni teachers

As the researcher, I found it helpful to display a map of Kansas school districts from the KSDE website to mark the location of districts spread across Kansas. The numbers of the college’s former graduates teaching in these areas were noted from the department survey data. These included local districts that the college frequently partnered with for its field and clinical experiences in the teacher education program.
Methodology

Participants

There were 14 participants selected from the purposive sample of educators identified from the Education Department’s survey data on alumni who were currently teaching in Kansas. The participants served in various roles in teaching and administration. Together, they taught elementary, middle, and secondary levels in various disciplines, and had been in education from 1 to 25 years. On Figure 2, below, the study’s 14 participants are denoted as P1 through P14 and labeled on the Kansas map by their district. By collecting data from participants spread out throughout Kansas, a representative scope of the SEL methods being used could be examined.

Figure 2: Kansas School Districts and Study Participants
The participants who agreed to be interviewed in this study, and who incorporated SEL within their classroom instruction or educational role, provided information on their class size, the number of students they saw daily, and the number of students in their school district (Table 1).

**Table 1: Participants, School Districts, Numbers of Students**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant #</th>
<th>School district</th>
<th># Students in School</th>
<th>Average class size</th>
<th># Students seen daily</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>usd 418</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>usd 480</td>
<td>520</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>usd 271</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>usd 262</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>usd 290</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>usd 210</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7</td>
<td>usd 305</td>
<td>1100</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P8</td>
<td>usd 210</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P9</td>
<td>usd 305</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P10</td>
<td>usd 305</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P11</td>
<td>usd 305</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P12</td>
<td>usd 497</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P13</td>
<td>usd 263</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P14</td>
<td>usd 400</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the 14 participants, the smallest sized school was 140 students, and the largest sized school was around 1,100 students. The participants reported having between 4 to 23 students, on average, in their classes, depending on the disciplinary area in which they taught. Participants 1, 6, and 12 saw the most students on a daily basis of 120 or more. Participants 4, 5, and 8 met with the fewest number of students, daily - between 6 and 17 on average. The overall, average class size was around 20 students. All of the participants reported using SEL in their classrooms or schools, whether it was part of the established curriculum of the school or district, or adjusted by individual teachers or classroom preferences, or part of a redesign school initiative.
Procedures

The college education professor and I began the Fall 2018 semester by setting goals for the first couple of months as we envisioned what the whole study might look like. Initially, there were two education students invited to collaborate in the study, considering the challenge of what we wanted to accomplish, but one individual left the college. We brainstormed about what I already knew about SEL, and what I wanted to examine further. The education professor talked about the Social Emotional Initiatives of the department, and how these might tie into the study as well. She shared the resources and data from education surveys, and information from the teaching graduate social media page. After several weeks of discussion, I developed the two research questions which would guide the study.

Research questions

Q1. How does SEL affect students?

Q2. What are teacher perceptions of the relationship between SEL and class size?

These questions were designed to determine if there was a connection between the various sizes of school in districts where the college’s teaching graduates were currently teaching in Kansas, and the effect on students and Social Emotional Learning. We developed questions to related to the two Research Questions that would be asked of the 14 participants. The majority of the interviews were conducted through email; however, a few interviews were face to face.

Interview Questions

1. How long have you been teaching?

2. How big is your school?

3. How big are your class sizes, and how many students do you see on average a day?
4. Are the methods of SEL chosen by the school or are they a personal choice?

5. How do you implement SEL into your classroom?

6. Do you feel as if SEL has made an impact on the students in your classroom?

7. Do you feel as if SEL has been effective or ineffective in your classroom, and why do you feel that it has or has not been effective?

**Institutional Review Board (IRB) Process**

Before the survey could be sent out to seek participants’ approval, I had my first experience of participating in the college’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) process. There was an application to complete that described the study and its purpose (Appendix A). In addition to the application was a required consent form describing how the participants would be involved and conditions of the study (Appendix B). While I was waiting for IRB confirmation, the interviews were delayed a bit, but it was a productive time for gathering and organizing the email contact information for each participant and plotting their teaching locations and districts on the visual map of Kansas. After we received the official IRB Confirmation Letter (Appendix C), signifying that the project was approved and the project could progress, participants were contacted by email to ask if they still wanted to participate in an education department study, and be interviewed on their social emotional learning experiences. The potential participants were emailed a letter that explained my research objectives with an attached consent form if they agreed (Appendix D). The 14 consenting participants were next sent the survey questions (Appendix E) by email and either responded by email, or I contacted them through another preferred communication format. Some interviews were conducted in person, such as when I accompanied my education professor to a school where she was observing a student teacher in an elementary classroom that had implemented SEL methods.
During the time that interviews were just starting, much of the semester of 2019 was dedicated to researching SEL and developing the literature review. I was also invited to give a presentation to a community organization and the Teacher Education Advisory Council on what I had learned about SEL. In the fall, I attended an SEL professional workshop on a teacher in-service day, which was of benefit to this study. These experiences helped build my knowledge of SEL methods as my research developed.

**Figure 3:** Researcher’s Presentation for a Community Organization

After gathering data on a few of the different SEL methods, I began to summarize key SEL terms and information on specific SEL methods from my own experiences and research in addition to what I discovered through the interviews.
Definition of Key Terms

The following key terms were significant to understanding SEL and drawn from research. Several terms were concepts that came from the interviews and participants’ experiences.

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Theory developed by Abraham Maslow that illustrates that physiological needs, safety, belonging, and self-esteem must be met first in order to reach the highest level of self-actualization.

Social Emotional Learning. “The process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show positive empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (Casel, 2019).

Social emotional learning method/curriculum. The way in which SEL is taught or included in a classroom setting.

Class size: The number of students in the classroom.

Mercury 7. The Kansas Can School Redesign Project in which seven school districts were selected and redesigned.

ACT “Tessera” Test. A test that students take to assign students into workshop groups to work on soft skills.

Community Groups/Family Groups. Groups of students of varied ages and grades that are paired with an educator that help foster a sense of community and belonging.

Capturing Kids Hearts. An SEL program created by the Flippen group that helps establish a positive classroom environment.
Crisis Prevention Intervention. This method focuses on de-escalating conflicting situations that may arise.

First 10. A method that allows the first 10 minutes of the school day as a transition period where students can prepare themselves for the day.

Morning Meetings. An SEL method focused on communicating with others and beginning the day with positivity.

Boys Town Model. A method that focuses on teaching soft skills and providing remediation for students that need more support for their soft skills.

Circles. An SEL method focused on listening and communicating with others.

Unplugged. An SEL method in which students and teachers go without technology for a designated time, around 20-25 minutes, and focus on building relationships with one another.

Zones of Regulation. An SEL method that focuses on self-regulation by the self-selection of colors that represent the individual’s mood or emotional state.

Peace Corner. An area of the classroom designated for students to self-regulate and re-center themselves.
Brief Literature Review

Social and Emotional Learning

Social Emotional learning and its curriculum are somewhat of a hot topic in education. SEL has been defined as “the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show positive empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (Casel, 2019). The intent of SEL is not only to aid in building relationships and in creating a more positive learning environment for students, but also to work on soft skills with students. SEL curriculum allows for the development of social skills and academic skills to work together, hand in hand.

” The Room 241 Team” (2018) addressed why social emotional learning is needed now to support the components of SEL outlined by Casel’s competencies wheel of five main categories that are helpful to students: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and reasonable decision-making. The “SEL Impact” study gave a broad overview over how social and emotional learning impacts and benefits students (Casel, 2019).

The Kansas Can Vision for Education advocates for SEL, and the Kansas State Board of Education has established Social Emotional Growth (SEG) as a high priority for educators and learners (Kansas Vision for Education, 2020). Skills in SEG include “intrapersonal and interpersonal abilities, such as self-awareness, social awareness, problem solving, and decision making”…“ foundational to student success in school and life, and important for schools to
measure the social-emotional development of students, just as academic development is measured.” (Kansas Vision for Education, 2020)

**Zones of Regulation**

Sources such as “Social Thinking and the Zones of Regulation: The Journey Continues!” by Leah Kuypers and Michelle Garcia, and the Zones of Regulation website detail the SEL method created by Kuypers in 2009. This method is about teaching students to self-regulate and recognize their different emotional states. It breaks down emotions into four different “zones”: red, yellow, green, and blue and helps students develop different strategies that help them maintain or return to an emotion that is optimal for learning.

Cindy Blasi, an elementary school social worker/counselor spoke on topics about student self-regulation and social-emotional skill issues for elementary level programs. The workshop was held in the community’s local elementary school and was offered as a professional learning opportunity for the college’s elementary education students. The presenter spoke about how Zones of Regulation can help students identify their emotional status by selecting a color that reflects their mood. Teachers can be aware of the child’s emotional state and talk to the child or respond appropriately and sensitively. There are many methods of using the Zones with a class, as a whole, or doing so privately. The presenter shared ideas on having a calming down spot or ‘peace corner’ as a means for children to learn how self-regulate. (C. Blasi, personal communication, October 7, 2019)
Circle Time

Circle time is a social emotional method implemented by a variety of schools and preschools. In this method students and their teachers gather together to listen to one another. Kaplan, in their article “Using Circle Time to Support Social and Emotional Learning”, details how using books during circle time can aid students in identifying emotions. By using books with which students can relate to the character’s emotional state it “will allow them to learn how to better express/describe their own emotions” (Kaplan Early Learning Company, 2019). Kaplan also discusses how Circle time may be used to aid in the reinforcement of social skills.

In “Social Emotional Learning: The Magic of Circle Talk” the SEL method of Circles is discussed as an effective communication tool that supports problem solving skills (Gunn, 2018). There are different types of Circles that have helped students with SEL needs in some of the schools that have implemented them. Circles serve a variety of purposes; they can facilitate discussions between students, teachers, and parents, and aid not only in building relationships, but also in dealing with conflict resolution. Circle time can be used as a tool to raise emotional awareness, and to reinforce social skills among students (Gunn, 2018).

Morning Meetings

Another example of a social emotional learning method is morning meetings. Morning meetings are explained in depth on the website responsive classroom.org. It details the uses and benefits of a morning meeting in addition to giving prompts on how to lead one. It also gives examples spread across different grade levels so that it can be applicable and suitable for any
grade level. In the article, “4 Reasons to Start the School Day with Morning Meetings” include key component of a greeting, a time for students to share, teamwork activities and, a morning message (Rosen, 2019). By structuring morning meetings consistently helps to “strengthen the teacher-student connection; reduce bullying, absences, and behavior incidents; and improve school culture” (Rosen, 2019).

Class Size

When examining class size and the impact it has on students and their learning, the article “The Effectiveness of Class Size Reduction” discussed the positive impact that a lower class size can have on students. Mathis described the Tennessee STAR experiment and how it tracked students of various class sizes from grades K-3 and monitored their test scores (Mathis, 2017). Mathis noted that “The smaller classes performed substantially better by the end of 2nd grade in test scores, grades, and fewer disciplinary referrals” (Mathis, 2017). With a smaller class size the teacher is presented with more of an opportunity to address individual questions and needs than if they had a larger class size. One interesting outcome of smaller class size that Mathis described is that “The students assigned to smaller classes were more likely to graduate in four years, to go to college, and get a degree in a STEM field. The positive effect was twice as large for poor and minority students” (2017).
Research Design

For this research, a qualitative case study was chosen to better understand the perspectives of the participants through their own accounts of their experiences. The sample of participants was the ‘case’ that was central to the research. Qualitative research methods include using primary data sources such as interviews, personal observations, and the interpretation of the data and documents (Yin, 2011). A potential list of participants was compiled from interested individuals who responded to the social media post and matched to Education Department data on alums teaching in Kansas (Bethany Education website, 2018). These individuals were contacted and asked if they would like to be a part of a study on social emotional learning. There were 14 participants who agreed to participate in the study; they were emailed about the study and being interviewed and sent a consent form with questions to follow. The survey, along with the research proposal, had to first be approved through the college’s I.R.B. program as an ethical procedure. To be eligible for this study, participants had to be over 18 years of age and currently teaching in a classroom. The majority of the participants were Bethany alums, and they were asked the following questions that had been approved in the IRB proposal for use in the survey:

1. How long have you been teaching?
2. How big is your school?
3. How big are your class sizes and how many students do you see on average a day?
4. Are the methods of SEL chosen by the school or are they a personal choice?
5. How do you implement SEL into your classroom?
6. Do you feel as if SEL has made an impact on the students in your classroom?
7. Do you feel as if SEL has been effective or ineffective in your classroom, and why do you feel that it has or has not been effective?
Data Analysis

The participants’ responses on the interview questions were the primary data source used in the qualitative study. As the main researcher, I took the time to carefully transcribe the answers to each participant’s interview. I kept each participant’s corresponding district and information in my notes, confidentially, and coded them as P1, P2, etc. to represent each participant. It helped to review these interview notes and re-read the responses to think about common patterns in the data and document the preferred SEL methods and other similar experiences and examples.

My partnering education professor served as a co-investigator. She taught me about the method of cross-comparison analysis that uses color coding to identify themes, line by line (Fram, 2013). This method is useful in connecting the responses back to the research questions of how SEL affects students, and perceptions of the relationship between SEL and class size.

Figure 4: Partner researchers use the color-coding method with cross-comparison analysis
Since the surveys did not all come back at the same time, it was a slow process to go through each participants’ questions, transcribe, and color-code common themes appearing throughout their responses. In addition to color-coding, I also kept observation notes, as I compared what participants were saying, and analyzed how this answered the study’s research questions.

The next step was using the constant comparison analysis method where I learned how to watch for new patterns and themes to emerge by comparing the documents (Fram, 2013). The researcher should start with major categories that can be broken down into sub-categories that are similar or different (Fram, 2013). The education professor and I collaborated on the cross-comparison analysis to ensure that we had found all the patterns and emerging themes in the interviews (Yin, 2011) which provided a triangulation of data that supported the research.

The participants reported the types of SEL used in their classroom, school, or district.

**Table 2: Social Emotional Learning Methods used by Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant #</th>
<th>SEL Method</th>
<th>Implemented by school</th>
<th>Personal choice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>ACT, CKH</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>CKH</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>F10, CG, ZOR</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>STM, ZOR</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>BT, MM, ZOR, CPI</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>Unplugged</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7</td>
<td>Circles</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P8</td>
<td>Unplugged</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P9</td>
<td>FG</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P10</td>
<td>FG, MM</td>
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<td>P11</td>
<td>FG, MM</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P12</td>
<td>ZOR</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P13</td>
<td>MM</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P14</td>
<td>Circles</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The complete terms and definitions of these acronyms are described on the Definitions of Key Terms section on pages 12-13. The most common or preferred SEL methods were Zones of
Regulation (ZOR) which was mentioned by four participants in their interviews - all from different districts of various sizes. The second most common method, which is tied with Zones of Regulation (ZOR), was Morning Meetings (MM) - as reported by participants from the same district and same size. The third most common method was Family Groups (FG).

**Discussion**

**Common SEL Methods and their Effect on Students – Research Question 1**

Some of the participants shared that SEL had been implemented at a building level, and others indicated they had the freedom to develop and use SEL to fit their needs. All found value in SEL whether it was required or not as stated by P2: “I also have implemented a great amount of my own SEL lessons within my classroom because I saw a high need for it.” A key theme that surfaced from the interviews was that SEL did impact learning. P12 stated, “The social emotional learning is something that is more prevalent and I feel it needs to be there before kids can get to the “actual learning.” The most repeated SEL methods emerging from this research were Zones of Regulation, Morning Meetings, and Family/Community Groups. These SEL methods are further described to answer **Research Question 1: How does SEL affect students?**

**Zones of Regulation (ZOR)**

For students experiencing a ZOR environment, P3 stated that “Students understand when they are becoming dysregulated and they are exploring the way they best move back to being regulated. They are more vocal with what Zone of Regulation they are in, and they understand the importance of being in the green zone.” Components of ZOR can be adjusted to fit the class as P12 explained “I have a safe spot for kids to use whenever they feel like they need somewhere to go to regulate. I have the Zones of Regulation posted in my room and also in my hallway..."
leading into my room. I am open with my kids with what zone I’m in and why I’m in that zone. I do mindfulness activities if they’re exhibiting that they need a breather.”

P4 stated, “The Zones Framework provides strategies to teach students to become more aware of and independent in controlling their emotions and impulses, manage their sensory needs, and improve their ability to solve conflicts.” P12 noted that “It has given the adults and kids a common language to share and build relationships and trust. I think that it has helped the adults remember that these kids have feelings, and feel them, and need to be validated.”

**Morning Meetings**

Another SEL strategy that brings consistency and a routine into the learning environment also involves students as P5 explained, “We have a morning meeting that requires us to have a mini-lesson on that social skill. I can also do planned teaching with that social skill with a student that is needing more practice with that skill.” P11 stated, “It has an impact especially for this generation. Morning Meetings gives them time to explore who they are.” P13 acknowledged that “Students feel safe in my classroom. I know when something is off and I can adjust my teaching or space to benefit their needs/supports for effective instruction and learning. I feel we can be honest with each other, and feel I have a strong relationship with all my students because of SEL.” Participants perceived that SEL methods were not only helpful to students, but aided them as well in their own teaching, and had a positive effect on the classroom environment.

**Family/Community Groups**

When groups of students of varied ages and grades are paired with an educator, it fosters a sense of community and belonging. P10 said that in their district “Family is schoolwide and morning meeting is personalized and tailored to the students.” Participants shared variations on the family group method that they found to be effective. P5 described their school family group
as using ‘Unplugged’ for 25 minutes each day to work on various activities. “Teachers are assigned a group of students who stick with them the whole year and everyone UnPlugs...our students are realizing that everyone is going through the same feelings and emotions that they are. They are realizing that everyone has chips on their shoulders and a cross to bear. Our students are becoming more loving, empathetic and overall happier.” By implementing family groups, P3 noted how it impacted students being able to focus on their learning better: “Students are seeing the ties in regular education classrooms during my math and science classes without having to be reminded. They are recognizing their Habits of Mind, touchstones, zones, etc., and not just during their SEL instruction time (communities, mentoring, counselor sessions).” P9 also agreed that “It has made an impact on focus and behavior.”

Findings

Recurring Themes on the Effect of SEL – Research Question 1

A recurring theme in each interview was that each school devoted time to educating their students on how to implement social skills such as building relationships, belonging to communities, communicating, and helping each individual recognize that they are important. All participants viewed SEL methods as being effective to students and overall learning in some way. Pieces of different SEL strategies were used to support each of these themes. P8 said they were working on “building relationships and connections that we feel is important to be a well rounded person. Many of those are soft skills, healthy living habits, and real life experiences.” This addresses the first research question: **Q1. How does SEL affect students?**

SEL positively affects students by helping them build up social and soft skills, which allow them to feel as if they are a part of a community. P1 believed that SEL was effective saying that, “I have the proper tools to address students with dignity and respect when we have issues,
and students really respond to that - especially if you have taken the time to build a relationship of trust and respect.” As students develop these skills, they are more receptive to learning, and teachers can better prepare them for life inside and outside of school. P2 shared these thoughts: “I am so extremely passionate about SEL. If kids, students, adults do not have high social and emotional skills they will not be as successful in their learning and careers later in life.”

**Building Relationships and Community**

Social Emotional Learning methods help foster a sense of community not only within schools but within the classrooms as well. Many schools have begun using terminology conducive to community building by using words such as “family”, “buddy group”, “community groups”, and even the term “circle” to help paint a picture of unity and togetherness. The techniques for building a community begin with the teacher having a greater understanding of how to nurture these relationships with their students. Some teachers such as P1 and P2 addressed how they individually greet each of their students as they walk into the classroom with a “high-five handshake or a hug and a warm welcome” (P1). This helps set the tone for the class that day because the teacher begins it with a “positive physical touch” (P1).

Other teachers foster community in their classroom by having a time in which students can share something going on in their life and feelings that they might have. This allows students to not only develop their own skills with sharing emotions, but they also become more empathetic by listening to the emotions of others. This helps to validate each student in the classroom by providing them with a safe place to share their thoughts. P3 stated that “I am starting to see a change in behaviors and ways students are handling stress... focus on building better relationships with our students. These relationships have allowed our students to be more open with the conversations we have with them, and they’re more willing to explore how they
learn best.” P13 concluded that SEL “...is a crucial part of student-teacher connection and overall student buy in to learning.”

**Communication and Problem Solving**

As the old adage goes, communication is key. This is true even of SEL. By establishing a common language among students and teachers it aids with understanding and establishing a baseline that everyone can refer to (i.e. teacher to teacher when discussing common students such as in an IEP meeting, or teacher to student when discussing classroom expectations, and student to student with conflict resolution and problem solving.) This aids in problem solving situations that might have arisen from miscommunication. The social emotional learning aspect of communication helps students articulate how they feel in an appropriate manner.

P5 described how the Boys Town model was implemented within their school they note that the “Boys Town social skills and language have made a great impact on our students here” and then further elaborates that “With ALL staff using the same language the consistency has helped tremendously” (P5). Likewise, P10 and P11 mentioned the importance of having the students also use the same SEL language, which helped with consistency. Moreover, building habits of thinking and problem solving was a goal of P2 for the students to be more “independent and better problem solvers. It has made an impact in my class because I no longer have so many questions on how to solve their problems and they are able to take more control themselves.”

Other SEL methods that focus on communication are Zones of Regulation and Circles. Zones of Regulation gives students the tools that they need to identify their emotional state and communicate how they are feeling. Circles helps to facilitate communication not only with peers but with teachers too. P7 discussed that for some students “that is the only opportunity they have to speak with an adult who cares” and that “by doing circles, students know that at least one
adult and 16 (or so) other kids are listening to them.” P14 found it was important “to make individual contact with each student that I work with. There are times, if there is a lot of tension in my classroom, I will circle students up and have a "Circle talk."

**Belonging and Self Worth**

The positive benefits of using SEL in the classroom have manifested in a variety of ways. Each of these methods act as a stepping stone for the teacher to validate the students, which then allows them to build up their confidence in their own ability to succeed. P1 noted there were “several ways we help each hold each other accountable to the behaviors we agreed were important. We are also focusing on positive peer interactions and giving meaningful affirmations to each other.” P10 mentioned the important link between SEL and Maslow's Hierarchy to develop self-esteem and a sense of belonging. Teachers show support of SEL by providing students with a mantra of positive messages that help them tune out the negativity that they may encounter in society or even at home. P1 explained, “It's definitely a learning process to teach everyone to consider other people's SEL needs, but we would be doing a great disservice to our students if we didn't make the process a learning opportunity.”

**Relationship to Class Size – Research Question 2**

All participants utilized SEL strategies in their various classrooms, schools, and districts, which ranged in size from 140 to 1,100 students per building, and saw between 4 to 23 students on average per class (Table 1). In addition to Research Question 1, the study addresses this question: **Q2. What are teacher perceptions of the relationship between SEL and class size?**

Conclusions can be drawn from the data that class size had no connection with the implementation or effects of SEL. Out of the 14 participants interviewed, two participants (P2 and P5) answered this question on size as they discussed how they implemented their SEL
methods in their classrooms, and how it could be effective with an individual student or with the class as a whole. Both participants addressed how SEL could be used not only with a full classroom of students but also with their students one on one. While describing the versatility of SEL in the classroom P2 stated that, “Sometimes we need to have a one on one discussion of how to set goals for ourselves and push to achieve it, and other times we need to sit down as a class and talk about character building.” Likewise, P5 addressed working with individual students by saying that they “can also do planned teaching with that social skill with a student that is needing more practice with that skill.” Although research shows that there is a relationship to smaller class size and increased academic achievement, this study shows that SEL strategies can be equally effective and beneficial for individual learners, and groups of any size. For instructors working with large groups of students, implementing SEL methods may bridge the gap in encouraging learners and enhancing learning in a variety of settings.

Limitations

This study timeline was delayed for a couple of months due to waiting on the IRB approval for moving forward with conducting interviews. The literature review could have gone into more depth by including additional perspectives and sources; however, the interview data were rich and provided many examples, which answered the research questions. The initial proposal for the Partners in Scholarship project was for two education students to carry the load and collaborate on the research and interviewing process. Only one student maintained her commitment to the challenging but rewarding task and accomplished what she set out to do. Because of the quantity of interviews, and data analysis, the Partners in Scholarship project was extended by one semester, until late December 2019, instead of being completed in one year.
Conclusion and Recommendations

The results of this qualitative case study showed that Social Emotional Learning had a positive impact on students and their development of social skills from the perspectives of 14 participants and educators teaching in Kansas. The study revealed recurring themes that connected SEL methods to students’ ability to build relationships and belonging through community, to develop communication skills, and gain a sense of self worth and self regulation. SEL methods impacted students’ ability to learn by increasing an optimal environment for learning and understanding others. Other findings were although there was a wide range of school and district sizes implementing SEL, there was no apparent relationship between school or class size and the use of SEL methods. Research shows that lower class size impacts learning the most; whereas, this study found that social emotional learning, often interpreted as non-academic strategies or ‘soft skills’ were not dependent on class size to be powerful and beneficial for students to learn. Participants indicated that SEL not only positively impacted students’ overall growth, but it also made the teachers feel more satisfied with their teaching.

Recommendations for college teaching programs are to continue to implement and expand SEL education and training with preservice teachers, and also recognize the value of SEL among college students. One recommendation is to develop a Teacher Education Organization to build a sense of belonging and community among future teachers, and to use that as a way to build connections not only with one another but with current educators as well. By doing this it would allow future educators to develop their knowledge of what SEL methods are currently being used in schools where they may one day be teachers. By familiarizing themselves with these methods, these future educators will be able to better incorporate them into their classrooms to best fit the needs of their future students.
References

Bethany Department of Education. (2020). Retrieved from https://www.bethanylb.edu/academics/areas-of-study/education/


Appendix A: IRB Application for Research Project

Bethany College
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB)
APPLICATION FOR APPROVAL TO USE HUMAN SUBJECTS IN RESEARCH

1. Project Title: Social emotional learning research project

INVESTIGATOR INFORMATION

2. Investigator: Sydney Walker
   Department: Education-Student
   Phone: 412-213-5101
   Email: Walkersm@bethanyw.edu

3. Co-Investigator (if any): Dr. Gretchen Norland
   Department: Education
   Phone: 785-227-3380 #8300
   Email: norlandg@bethanyw.edu

4. Status (check one): ☑ Faculty ☐ Staff ☐ Student ☐ Other (please explain) ________________

FACULTY ADVISOR INFORMATION

NOTE: If you are a student, please provide information about your advisor. Your advisor is not usually considered a co-investigator.

5. Faculty Research Advisor: Pros. Michelle Barriono
   Department: Education
   Phone: 8457
   Email: barriirom@bethanyw.edu

BASIC INFORMATION ABOUT STUDY

6. Does your study involve the collection of data from a vulnerable population?
   (If yes, please specify type of population.)
   ☑ Yes ☐ No
   ☐ Children/Minors
   ☐ Prisoners
   ☐ Fetuses
   ☐ Pregnant Women
   ☐ Cognitively Impaired Persons
   ☐ Other ________________

7. Does this study involve deception (research in which the subject is purposely led to have false beliefs or assumptions)?
   ☑ Yes ☐ No

8. If the study involves risk to subjects, is the risk greater than that incurred in ordinary life or tasks?
   ☑ Yes ☐ No
9. Has this study ever been previously approved by this IRB? Yes ☒ No ☐

10. Is this proposal new or revised in response to previous IRB review? ☑ New ☐ Revised

11. Is funding being sought for this study? If yes, through what sponsoring agency? ☐ Yes ☒ No

   Agency: ____________________________

ATTACHMENTS

A) Study description: Please answer the following questions on a separate sheet.

1. State the purpose of the research. Include major hypotheses and research design. Please keep in mind that the IRB is composed of individuals from many disciplines and thus the description of your research should be written in terms readily comprehensible by non-experts.

2. Describe the source(s) of subjects and the selection criteria. Selection of subjects must be equitable and, in the case of protected populations such as children, prisoners, pregnant women, the mentally disabled, etc., should address their special needs. Include the number of subjects. The text of any advertisement, letter, flyer, oral script or brochure used to solicit potential subjects must be attached.

3. Provide a description of the procedures to be followed. If available, include copies of questionnaires and/or interview protocol, or a sufficiently detailed description of the measures to allow the IRB to understand the nature of subjects’ involvement.

4. Describe any potential harms or benefits to be derived by subjects, with a discussion of the risk/benefit ratio. For approval of any study with more than minimal risk, the benefits must clearly be shown to outweigh the risk. Describe how the study may expose participants to stress, physical, psychological or interpersonal hazard, including the possibility of pain, injury, disease, discomfort, embarrassment, worry or anxiety.

5. Describe the specific methods by which confidentiality and anonymity will be protected, including the use of data coding systems, how and where data will be stored and who will have access to it, and what will happen to data after the study has been completed.

6. If applicable, provide the following: 1) a description of the debriefing procedures to be used in cases where deception has occurred; 2) a statement describing what actions you will take should the research reveal the possibility of a medical or other potentially troubling condition.

B) Consent form: Please attach the consent form you will have participants sign. See instructions and sample consent forms on the IRB website for what this form should contain.

C) Other: If applicable, documents from A2 (advertisements for potential participants) and A3 (questionnaires, interview protocol, etc.) above should also be attached.

SIGNATURE and CERTIFICATION
I agree to use procedures with respect to safeguarding human subjects in this activity that conform to college policy. If significant change in investigative procedure involving human subjects is called for during the activity covered by this application, I shall seek prior approval for such change from the IRB and agree to follow the advice of the IRB. The faculty sponsor’s signature indicates that s/he has reviewed this application and accepts the responsibility of insuring that the procedures approved by the IRB are followed.

Signed:

Investigator ________________________ Date 9-19-18
Co-Investigator _____________________ Date 10-04-18
Faculty Advisor _____________________ Date 10-04-18

(required for student research)
Appendix B: Consent Form for Research Project

Consent Form for Social and Emotional Research Project

Introduction:

Hi. My name is Sydney Walker I am currently a college sophomore and an Elementary Education major at Bethany College. Dr. Norland, Chair of the Education Department, is assisting in this research through the Partners in Scholarship program for the 2018-2019 college year. We are conducting a study on how Social Emotional Learning affects students, and I will be examining the relationship between Social Emotional Learning and class size and other factors.

Activities:

If you choose to participate in this project you will be sent a short questionnaire and will be potentially interviewed. These interviews may be conducted over the phone, email, or in person. All participation in this study is voluntary and you may choose to leave the study at any time.

Eligibility:

You are eligible to participate in this study if:

1. You are over 18 years old.
2. You are currently teaching.

Risks:

You may change your mind about participating, and end your participation at any time. There are no monetary costs or any risks involved with participation in the study.
Benefits:

If you decide to participate in the study there are no personal benefits; however, your input may also benefit Bethany College’s Teaching Program.

Confidentiality: The information that you provide in the interviews will be kept confidential. Your identity will not be connected to you. Participants will be referred to as numbers in the paper and in the results. The only people who will have access to your information are myself and Dr. Norland.

If you have any questions about the study or your rights as a participant, contact Dr. Gretchen Norland, Chair of the Bethany Education Department at 785-227-3800, Ext. #8300, or by email at norlandg@bethanylb.edu. You may also contact Dr. Jay. Nolan, IRB chairperson, at 785-227-3380, Ext. #8251, or by email at nolanjb@bethanylb.edu

By signing this form the person agrees voluntarily to participate in the interview

Signature: ___________________________ Date: ____________

(Print full name below line):

_____ I do not wish for my responses to be used in this research study.

Sign: ________________________________
Appendix C: Letter of IRB Approval

Bethany College

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
(IRB)
RESPONSE TO APPLICATIONS

Date: __10/21/18________________

Project Title: ___Social Emotional Learning in the Classroom____________________

Project Investigator(s): __Sydney Walker, Dr. Gretchen Norland____

To the investigators: Please contact the IRB chairperson (Dr. James Nolan, nolan
nolanjb@bethanylib.edu, 785-227-3380 x8251) with questions about this response, or
for help with any requested revisions.

Response:
X Approved/Exempt (with no revisions)
☐ Approved/Exempt pending minor revisions
☐ Resubmit application after major revisions
☐ Not approved

For minor and major revisions; these aspects of your application need to be revised and
resubmitted:
☐ Study description
☐ Consent form
☐ Attached documents such as advertisements, questionnaires, etc.
☐ Other

Comments:
Appendix D. Letter Sent to Participants

Hello,

I’m Sydney Walker, the student researcher from Bethany College for the research project on social and emotional learning. Thank you for indicating your interest in participating in this project. I have attached to this email the consent form required for the interview. If you could please sign it and send it back to me by November 15th, or send a sentence saying that you agree to the terms of the consent form, that would be much appreciated. We can do these interviews in person, over the phone, or by email, depending on your preference. I have attached the questions below: please either reply to this email with your responses to these questions or let me know your preferred method to conduct this interview by November 15th.

Interview Questions:

1. How long have you been teaching?
2. How big is your school?
3. How big are your class sizes and how many students do you see on average a day?
4. Are the methods of SEL chosen by the school or are they a personal choice?
5. How do you implement SEL into your classroom?
6. Do you feel as if SEL has made an impact on the students in your classroom?
7. Do you feel as if SEL has been effective or ineffective in your classroom, and why do you feel that it has or has not been effective?

Thank you so much for your participation.

Respectfully yours, Sydney Walker