6-27-2024

Early Childhood Teachers' Perspectives of Differentiating Social and Emotional Learning

Anya Kayne
Walden University

Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Anya Z. Kayne

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

Review Committee
Dr. Terri Edwards, Committee Chairperson, Education Faculty
Dr. Heather Caldwell, Committee Member, Education Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University
2024

Abstract

Early Childhood Teachers' Perspectives of Differentiating Social and Emotional

Learning

by

Anya Z. Kayne

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Education

Walden University

August 2024

Abstract

Teachers face challenges in differentiating social emotional learning (SEL) to meet the diverse needs of their students. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives of strategies and challenges to differentiating SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs using the theory of social constructivism. The research questions focused on teachers' perspectives of strategies they use and challenges they face when differentiating SEL curriculum. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 11 participants with 3 or more years of teaching experience in kindergarten through third grade in the United States. Interview transcripts were thematically analyzed, resulting in five themes: (a) teachers use a variety of strategies to differentiate SEL, (b) teachers are challenged by a lack of support, (c) teachers are challenged by a lack of knowledge, (d) teachers are challenged by a lack of flexibility, and (e) students' challenging behaviors make differentiating SEL more difficult. The results of this study may contribute to positive social change by providing information that administrators, teacher preparatory programs, and professional development programs can use to support early childhood teachers in differentiating SEL curricula to improve outcomes for students.

Early Childhood Teachers' Perspectives of Differentiating Social and Emotional

Learning

by

Anya Z. Kayne

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Education

Walden University

August 2024

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my family. To my dad, who exemplified dedication to improving the lives of children. You taught me at the dinner table what it means to be a true advocate. I carry your example with me in all that I do. To my mom, who exemplifies lifelong learning and reminds me constantly by her actions to keep growing and embracing new challenges. Thank you for your constant encouragement and your conviction that I can do whatever I set my mind and heart to. To my sister, who helps me see myself with great clarity and has lifted me up in my darkest hours these past two years. I am so grateful to have you in my life. To my husband, the family that I chose. Thank you for being my best friend, for walking beside me in strength, and for your unwavering support in all that I do. And to my amazing two children. Thank you for saying, "Go for it!" when I discussed getting my doctorate four years ago with you at the dinner table. Thank you for being my greatest joy.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my wonderful dissertation chair, Dr. Terri Edwards, whose continuous support, wisdom, and relentless conviction that I would complete this process, spurred me onward. Thank you also to my second committee chair, Dr. Heather Caldwell, who offered insightful feedback throughout this process, helping me to strengthen my thinking and writing. Thank you to my dear friends who always asked me how my dissertation was going and listened with open hearts. Finally, thank you to my colleagues who encouraged me to return to school. You inspire me with your unwavering dedication to young children.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Students with high levels of social emotional competence are more likely to succeed academically, build positive relationships with others, and exhibit fewer conduct problems (Calhoun et al., 2020). Until about 30 years ago, social emotional learning (SEL) was not well understood, and SEL curricula was rarely included in schools (Cenovic, 2022). In 1994, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL; 2023b) was founded with the goal to work with schools to support children's social and emotional needs. The founders of CASEL used evidence-based research to develop a framework that includes five key SEL competencies: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (Lawson et al., 2019). Since CASEL was founded, most schools in the United States have adopted SEL curricula (Schwartz et al., 2022). While some students demonstrate significant gains after participating in SEL curricula, other students have minimal or no improvement in their social and emotional competence (Morgan et al., 2022; Nesbitt & Farran, 2021). Differentiating SEL curricula has been recommended as a pedagogical practice to support diverse learners and create more equitable SEL opportunities (Mahoney et al., 2021). Kennedy (2019) found that SEL curricula rarely includes differentiation strategies. Early childhood teachers have reported that they need additional training to differentiate SEL curricula compared to traditional academic curricula that often includes differentiation strategies (Haslip & Terry, 2022). SEL curricula is used in most schools, but early childhood teachers face challenges in differentiating SEL curricula to meet the needs of diverse learners.

Few studies have focused on early childhood teachers' perspectives of strategies and challenges when differentiating SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs (Fitzgerald, 2020; Mahoney et al., 2021). Exploring the perspectives of early childhood teachers on differentiating SEL curricula may provide information that can be used to improve SEL instruction. The results of this study may contribute to positive social change by providing educational leaders with information that can be used to support early childhood teachers in differentiating SEL to meet diverse student needs.

In this chapter, I summarize relevant information from the literature related to teachers differentiating SEL curricula to meet the diverse needs of their students. I also describe the conceptual framework that was used to ground the study's purpose and the research questions. Additionally, information is provided about relevant key terms, assumptions, delimitations, limitations, and the significance of the study.

Background

Strong social emotional skills are associated with numerous benefits including better academic outcomes, fewer behavioral problems, and more positive relationships with others (Thayer et al., 2019; Todd et al., 2022). Teachers generally view SEL as foundational to students' future learning and critical for students' well-being (Jomaa et al., 2023). Most schools in the United States recognize the importance of social emotional skills and have adopted SEL curricula (Schwartz et al., 2022). Most curricula include five broad areas of SEL as defined by CASEL (2023d): self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. Researchers have established the benefits of strong SEL, and most U.S. schools include SEL curricula.

Although many schools have adopted SEL curricula, early childhood teachers face challenges in implementing the curricula. Early childhood teachers reported a lack of training in SEL curricula and a lack of instructional time for SEL (Flushman et al., 2021; Mischenko et al., 2022). Additionally, students have diverse responses to SEL depending on demographic factors, students' academic skills, and students' social and emotional competence (McCormick et al., 2021; Morgan et al., 2022). Researchers have suggested that differentiating instruction to meet students' diverse needs is a sound instructional strategy that supports increased student engagement and improved learning outcomes (Ginja & Chen, 2020; Goddard et al., 2019). Recommendations have been made to differentiate SEL curricula, allowing teachers to support students differently based on their individual SEL competence and needs (Mahoney et al., 2021; Sanders et al., 2023). Differentiating SEL curricula may allow teachers to better meet the diverse needs of their students.

Despite a significant body of research supporting the benefits of SEL and additional research that supports differentiation as a sound pedagogical practice to meet the needs of diverse learners, the literature includes little information on early childhood teachers' perspectives on differentiating SEL curricula to meet the diverse needs of their students. Professional developers may use the current study findings to provide training and curricula that assists teachers with differentiating SEL. Administrators may also use the study findings when creating policies to support teachers in differentiating SEL.

Problem Statement

Early childhood teachers face challenges in differentiating SEL curricula to meet the diverse needs of their students (Hunter et al., 2022; Kennedy, 2019). Teachers are challenged in delivering SEL curricula because of minimal training in SEL and a lack of instructional time for SEL in the school day (Flushman et al., 2021; Mischenko et al., 2022). Teachers struggle with differentiating academic curricula; these challenges include a lack of training and a lack of resources (Hersi & Bal; 2021; Unal et al., 2022). Differentiating SEL curricula can be more challenging than differentiating academic curricula because SEL curricula tends to take a one-size-fits-all approach and rarely include suggestions for meeting the needs of diverse learners (Kennedy, 2019). Despite researchers suggesting that differentiation promotes stronger SEL outcomes and that differentiation is needed to support diverse students, teachers are challenged in differentiating SEL curricula (DeMink-Carthew et al., 2020; Mahoney et al., 2021).

Exploring early childhood teachers' perspectives of differentiating SEL curricula is necessary to determine the strategies used to meet diverse learners' needs and to identify the challenges that early childhood teachers encounter in differentiating SEL curricula. Because strong social and emotional skills are associated with numerous academic and behavioral benefits, meeting students' diverse SEL needs in early childhood increases equitable learning opportunities for all students (Mackintosh & Rowe, 2021). When students struggle with SEL skills, such as emotional regulation and navigating social situations, they are also more likely to struggle with academic performance (Taylor & Lein, 2023). McCall et al. (2022) found that when diverse

students engage with and see themselves reflected in SEL curricula, the school community becomes more equitable. Differentiating SEL curricula is critical in providing equitable educational opportunities for diverse students.

Researchers have identified both benefits to SEL and challenges when implementing SEL (Flushman et al., 2021; Mischenko et al., 2022; Thayer et al., 2019; Todd et al., 2022). Researchers have also presented the benefits of differentiation and common challenges to differentiation (Ginja & Chen, 2020; Goddard et al., 2019; Hersi & Bal; 2021; Unal et al., 2022). However, there is a gap in the research on teachers' perspectives of differentiating SEL curricula to meet the diverse needs of their students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives of strategies and challenges to differentiating SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs. The information gained from this study may provide insights into effective instructional strategies that can better support students' diverse SEL needs and the challenges teachers face in differentiating SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs.

Research Questions

The study addressed the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives of strategies used to differentiate SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs?

RQ2: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives of challenges to differentiating SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that grounded this study is Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism. As a social constructivist, Vygotsky emphasized the importance of social-emotional development, noting that skills, such as self-regulation and self-control, are connected to cognitive development. Vygotsky also noted the importance of children beginning to learn social-emotional skills during early childhood from adults and more competent peers. In addition to recognizing the importance of SEL, Vygotsky theorized that children's learning is optimized when they work within their zone of proximal development (ZPD) and the material is accessible to them (Silalahi, 2019; Smolucha & Smolucha, 2021; Vygotsky & Kozulin, 2011). Vygotsky's ZPD has been used to support the pedagogical practice of differentiation in which teachers adapt curricula to meet the needs of diverse learners (Tzouriadou, 2021). Further exploration of Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism is provided in Chapter 2.

The framework was appropriate to the current study because it was used to guide the study's approach and research questions. Vygotsky (1962) posited that through reflection and language, individuals create meaning out of their lived experiences. I used open-ended interview questions within a basic qualitative design to explore teachers' perspectives. Making meaning out of lived experiences allows for thoughts to move into consciousness, which supports learning and change (Prawat, 1999; Vygotsky, 1962). I designed the qualitative interview questions using the constructs of this framework to focus on teachers' experiences with social-emotional development and their experiences with making SEL accessible for diverse learners.

Nature of the Study

In this study, I used a basic qualitative design and conducted semistructured interviews to collect data from 11 early childhood teachers. Participants were required to have 3 or more years of teaching experience in kindergarten through third grade in the United States. I recruited qualifying teachers from the Walden University Participant Pool and teachers' social media groups. The phenomenon investigated was early childhood teachers' perspectives of differentiating SEL curricula. Individual interviews were an appropriate data collection tool because they are used for exploration of participants' lived experiences, and the follow-up questions in the interviews promoted rich descriptions of these experiences (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The interview transcripts were thematically analyzed to identify emergent themes.

Definitions

The following terms are defined for the purpose of this study:

Curricula: Materials intended to change classroom process to facilitate the development of specific skills (Nesbitt & Farran, 2021).

Differentiation: An instructional practice teachers use to adjust classroom content, process, and products based on students' readiness, interests, and prior experiences (Kenney et al., 2023).

Diverse learners: Students differ in terms of their interests, prior experiences, readiness, and learning profile (Altun & Nayman, 2022).

Perspectives: Views and beliefs regarding knowledge, skills, and competence that affect decisions about teaching (Denston et al., 2022).

SEL: A process through which people gain the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (CASEL, 2023a).

Assumptions

My first assumption was that all participants would respond honestly in the interviews. I made this assumption based on my assurances to protect their confidentiality and privacy. I also assumed that the responses from the participants would reflect their true perspectives of their experiences. Another assumption was that the interview questions that I created would elicit responses from participants that would capture their experiences with differentiating SEL in their classrooms. The questions were based on the supporting literature and conceptual framework. An additional assumption was that early childhood teachers would be willing to participate without compensation. I assumed this to be true because there was no monetary incentive for participating in the study. My final assumption was that I would have no professional or personal relationships with any of the participants or with their schools. I assumed this to be true because I did not choose any participants that I work with or know personally.

Scopes and Delimitations

The scope of this study encompassed teachers with at least 3 years of experience teaching kindergarten through third grade in the United States. This specific focus was chosen because there was a gap in the literature on early childhood teachers' perspectives of differentiating SEL curriculum for diverse learners. Delimitations of this study

included the criteria for participation. I only explored the perspectives of teachers who had at least 3 years of experience teaching kindergarten through third grade in the United States. Preschool teachers were excluded from this study because preschool SEL standards and curricula are different from SEL curricula for kindergarten through third grade (see CASEL, 2023c). Teachers with fewer than 3 years of experience were excluded from this study because their challenges with SEL curricula may be different from teachers with more experience (see McCaw, 2021).

The use of purposeful sampling and inclusion criteria supported transferability of findings for use by early childhood professionals in kindergarten through third grade. I included detailed descriptions of the data collection and data analysis processes to ensure potential transferability. The detailed descriptions allow readers and other researchers to apply aspects of the study design to other contexts while taking into consideration unique contextual factors.

Limitations

One potential limitation is that early childhood teachers were hesitant to participate in the study due to the heavy workload placed on many teachers. To mitigate this limitation, I used the Walden University Participant Pool, early childhood social media groups, and snowball sampling to reach as many potential participants as possible. I also accommodated teachers' schedules by offering interviews on days and times most convenient to them. An additional limitation was that participants had concerns about sharing sensitive information. I mitigated this limitation by ensuring confidentiality. Another limitation was my bias as a former early childhood teacher who differentiated

SEL curricula and my status as an instructor who teaches courses on SEL for undergraduate students. I used a reflective journal to raise my awareness of potential bias and address other limitations as I carried out the study.

Significance

This study may be significant because it filled a gap in the literature on early childhood teachers' perspectives of differentiating SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs. Exploring teachers' perspectives is important when considering additional training and support that teachers may need to differentiate SEL curricula. Exploring early childhood teachers' perspectives may contribute to positive social change by providing information that teachers may use to support students' diverse SEL needs. The study may provide information about what materials can be included in teacher training programs and professional development programs to better prepare early childhood teachers to support students' diverse SEL needs through differentiation. Administrators may use findings from this study to better understand the challenges that teachers face in differentiating SEL and provide support for their teachers with differentiating SEL. If early childhood teachers are more effectively supported in differentiating SEL curricula, SEL outcomes may improve for students.

Summary

In Chapter 1, I identified the problem of early childhood teachers being challenged when differentiating SEL curricula to meet the diverse needs of their students. I connected the importance of social emotional competence to better academic outcomes and stronger relationships with others. Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism

provided the conceptual framework for this study. I used the framework when choosing a basic qualitative study design with semi interviews to explore teachers' perspectives. In the chapter, I also explained that early childhood teachers' perspectives of differentiating SEL are limited in the literature and exploring these perspectives may help to support teachers, administrators, and students.

In Chapter 2, I will provide an overview of recent literature related to the research problem. I will describe research strategies used to become familiar with the topic and Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism as the conceptual framework for the study. The chapter will also contain a discussion of current research, including studies documenting the benefits of quality SEL, the challenges of SEL, diverse responses to SEL, the challenges of differentiation, and the importance of including teachers' perspectives in research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives of strategies and challenges related to differentiating SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs. The problem is that early childhood teachers face challenges in differentiating SEL curricula to meet their students' diverse needs (Hunter et al., 2022; Kennedy, 2019). In this chapter, I review existing literature on SEL. I begin by describing the search strategies used to conduct this literature review and social constructivism, the conceptual framework that grounded the study. The review includes a discussion of aspects of SEL, including its history, benefits, and identified barriers; the attributes of high-quality SEL; and the diverse ways that learners respond to SEL. I also provide a review of literature on the benefits of differentiation and barriers to differentiation. Teachers' perspectives of SEL and differentiation are included. I conclude the chapter with a summary of key points and the gap in the research regarding early childhood teachers' perspectives on strategies and challenges to differentiating SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs.

Literature Search Strategy

For this literature review, I searched scholarly, peer-reviewed journals published within the last 5 years to investigate early childhood educators' perspectives on differentiating SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs. Through the Walden University Library, I searched the following databases: ERIC, SAGE Journals, ScienceDirect, Education Source, and Taylor and Francis Online. I also used the search engine, Google Scholar, to find books and peer-reviewed articles. The following key words were used in my searches: *social emotional learning*, *social emotional*

development, social emotional competence, SEL, *elementary school*, *early childhood education*, *teacher perspectives*, *teacher perceptions*, *social constructivism, differentiation*, *differentiated instruction*, *individualized instruction*, *diverse learners*, and *individual differences.*

The literature review consists of qualitative and quantitative studies that address early childhood teachers' perspectives on SEL. The conceptual framework used for this study is Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism, and the literature review includes the key concepts of the history of SEL, quality SEL, benefits of SEL, challenges in teaching SEL, diverse learners, differentiation, and teacher perspectives. The gap in the literature was the limited research on early childhood teachers' perspectives on strategies and challenges to differentiating SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism. As a social constructivist, Vygotsky (1978) posited that children's interactions and dialogue with adults supports children's social-emotional development. Vygotsky emphasized that social interactions, both at home and at school, help children to develop key cognitive and social-emotional skills (Niu & Niemi, 2020). Vygotsky (2021) recognized that development and learning take place gradually, emphasizing that it is important to focus on social-emotional skills during early childhood because cognitive development relies on social-emotional development, including the specific skills of attention, self-control, and self-regulation (Gredler, 2009). The terms that Vygotsky used to describe psychological development nearly 100 years ago overlap with

the competencies used to describe SEL today, including self-awareness and self-management (DeMink-Carthew et al., 2020). Vygotsky argued that schools are an important place for children to develop their social emotional skills. For Vygotsky, these skills provide a critical foundation for cognitive development and allow children to successfully resolve future emotional challenges (Colliver & Veraska; 2021; Manriquez; 2021). Vygotsky's work provides support for the importance of SEL within schools.

Vygotsky (1978) also suggested that responsive teaching occurs when a teacher allows a child to work within their ZPD, assuring that the material can be accessed through scaffolding. In a constructivist environment, the teacher makes learning accessible to all students by differentiating curricula and connecting new concepts to children's prior experiences. Vygotsky and Kozulin (2011) argued that working within the ZPD assures an optimal gap between curricular demands and the child's individual capabilities.

Other researchers have drawn from Vygotsky's work to emphasize that children learn differently based on their prior experiences; because of these differences, optimal learning requires differentiation and scaffolding so that each child is working within their ZPD. For instance, Tomlinson et al. (2003) used Vygotsky's theory as the conceptual framework for their study on differentiation, finding that the most effective learning occurs when children are working within their ZPD, wherein the material is accessible and engaging. Martinez and Plevyak (2020) suggested that when teachers use differentiated instruction to allow students to work within their ZPD, students demonstrated stronger understandings of academic standards. Roiha and Polso (2021)

noted that Vygotsky's ZPD allows students to engage with material that is accessible to

them and that this accessibility is central to the process of differentiation. In one of the

few studies directly connecting SEL, differentiation, and Vygotsky, Ribeiro Piske and

Stoltz (2021) suggested that teachers should use Vygotsky's work to inform themselves

of the importance of addressing SEL in schools when working with diverse learners.

Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism has also been used as a framework to

explore the social nature of development (Jamero, 2019). ZPD has been used to explore

how teachers can ensure inclusive practices in early childhood education by adjusting

learning opportunities to reach the needs of diverse learners (Bipath et al., 2022;

Robinson-Hill, 2022). Social constructivist theory relates to the current study's approach

because it provides a conceptual framework for examining differentiation of SEL in early

childhood education.

Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism was also used in this study's

methodology. As a social constructivist, Vygotsky (2004) recognized that learning and

growth stem from making meaning out of lived experiences. Although the experience is

valuable, conveying the experience to others through language and reflection allows

individuals to create new understandings (Vygotsky, 1962). For Vygotsky, these concepts

apply not only to children but also to adults. As teachers in this study used the concepts

of collective dialogue in the semistructured interviews to reflect on lived experiences, this

collaborative conversation supported learning and professional growth. I created the two

RQs that focused on the strategies that early childhood teachers use and the challenges

that they experience in differentiating SEL curricula for diverse learners using

Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism. Social constructivism supported the focus on teachers' perspectives and provided a foundation for making meaning out of teachers' perspectives through dialogue and reflection.

Literature Related to Key Concepts

History of SEL

SEL has a long history, with some experts in the field of early childhood education tracing the roots of SEL back to the Age of Enlightenment when personal character and emotional resilience were emphasized (Moreno et al., 2019). In the late 19th century, Dewey recognized that active learning relies on the social and emotional factors within each child (Tienken, 2021). Although the history of SEL is lengthy, there has been an increased focus on SEL in schools in the United States since 1994, when CASEL was founded (DeMink-Carthew et al., 2020). SEL is defined broadly as "the process by which each student develops their capacity to integrate thought, emotion, and behavior to achieve and accomplish important social tasks" (Ferreira et al., 2020, p. 22). The CASEL framework divided SEL skills into five broader competencies: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Lawson et al., 2019). The U.S. Department of Education (2021) recommended the establishment of an integrated framework to support the social, emotional, and behavioral health of all youth. SEL is primarily implemented based on state standards, and as of 2024, 27 states have adopted K–12 SEL competencies (CASEL, 2023c). In the 2021–2022 school year, 76% of principals and 53% of teachers nationwide

reported using an SEL curriculum or program in their schools (Schwartz et al., 2022).

Over the last 30 years, SEL curricula has become prevalent in most U.S. schools.

Benefits of SEL

Children who possess strong social and emotional skills experience many

benefits. High levels of social-emotional competence are associated with stronger

academic outcomes (Stickle et al., 2019; Thayer et al., 2019). Social-emotional skills

affect how children are viewed by their teachers. In one study, kindergarteners who had

high levels of self-regulation were more likely to be rated highly by their teachers in

terms of their SEL 2 years later (Cameron et al., 2022). Children who received instruction

in SEL during early childhood had higher levels of resilience, stronger self-regulatory

skills, and reduced emotional and behavioral challenges (Calhoun et al., 2020; Rosenberg

et al., 2022). When students struggled with SEL skills, including emotional regulation

and navigating social situations, they were more likely to also struggle with academic

performance, while students with stronger SEL skills demonstrated more substantial

academic progress (Taylor & Lein, 2023). This research demonstrates that strong social-

emotional competence provides both behavioral and academic benefits for children.

Strong social and emotional skills in childhood are also associated with benefits

that last into adulthood. Children ranked higher in social and emotional skills during early

childhood were more likely to attend college, experience higher rates of career success,

have better mental health outcomes, and have stronger positive relationships as adults

(Kamei & Harriott, 2021; Todd et al., 2022). Thayer et al. (2019) found that the inverse

was also true; children with social and emotional deficits in early childhood were more

likely to disengage academically and engage in high-risk activities, including substance abuse. Developing strong social emotional competence during early childhood may have long-term physical, academic, and emotional benefits.

In addition to benefits to students, implementation of SEL curricula may also improve the school environment. In examining factors that contribute to a positive school climate, Charlton et al. (2021) found that when school leaders implemented SEL programs, teachers and students reported feeling safer and identified less bullying school wide. Other researchers found that students viewed the school environment as more caring and the schools had lower rates of suspensions once SEL programs were implemented (Özgünlü et al., 2022). McCall et al. (2022) reported that the school community is viewed as more equitable and more inclusive when diverse students can engage with and see themselves reflected in SEL curricula. These findings indicate that SEL programs can contribute to a more positive school climate for students and teachers.

SEL Challenges

Several challenges to SEL consistently emerged throughout the literature. One of teachers' most common concerns about SEL was how to fit SEL curricula into a full schedule when the academic demands for early childhood education are already so high (Jomaa et al., 2023; Kaspar & Massey, 2022; Mishenko et al., 2022). Hunter et al. (2022) found that time constraints affected the delivery of SEL curricula for the majority of U.S. first- and second-grade teachers in their study. The participants often reported needing to catch up on mandatory academic curricula, leading them to shorten or skip SEL lessons, which many of the teachers in the study viewed as optional. One study found that to

include SEL curricula into the school day, teachers had to deliver SEL curricula instead of physical education curricula (Mishenko et al., 2022). Kaspar and Massey (2022) noted that fitting one more piece of curriculum into the school day can feel overwhelming for teachers, and because SEL is not included on standardized tests, it may not be given the same priority as other subjects. Dyson et al. (2023) reported that time was the most common constraint cited by teachers, with some participants noting that because SEL growth was a slow and gradual process, other subject areas with immediate identifiable growth were often given priority over SEL. Parker and Hodgson (2020) focused on students who had experienced trauma, discovering that time was an essential factor in supporting students' SEL. The researchers noted that teachers valued time that could be used flexibly to adjust their SEL lessons based on individual student needs, with the recognition that SEL growth occurs slowly. Finding time within the school day to include SEL curricula is a barrier to implementation.

An additional barrier to SEL is a lack of teacher training, both in preservice teacher preparatory programs and in ongoing professional development (Flushman et al., 2021; Morgan et al., 2022). In an examination of over 300 teacher preparation programs in the United States, Francis et al. (2019) found that only a few programs included all five SEL competencies, with about one fifth of the programs addressing one or two of the key competencies, and most of the programs not including SEL competencies at all. As of 2020, 35 states required some type of social and emotional learning to earn a teaching credential or maintain licensure (Education Commission of the States, 2020). However, the majority of the states' requirements focused on teaching standards or in-service

opportunities once in the profession; only three states required SEL in teacher preparation programs. Similarly, Flushman et al. (2021) discovered that when teacher training programs nationwide did include SEL, the programs provided only a very basic overview of SEL. Education officials in some states, such as West Virginia, recognized this lack of training in SEL and recommended changes to their teacher preparation programs to better prepare future teachers to support their students' SEL (Saunders, 2021). Overall, few U.S. teacher training programs require SEL preparation, and the programs that do address SEL generally do so with a limited scope.

Once credentialed, many teachers receive some training or professional development in the SEL program that their district has adopted. In a survey of over 1,200 teachers who used SEL programs in schools, Hunter et al. (2020) found that more than 90% of participants reported the need for more training in SEL. Similarly, in a study by Steed (2022), many teacher participants reported receiving only minimal training on how to implement SEL curricula. The participants shared that they were often given an SEL kit, with little training or coaching on how to use the kit. In another study, teacher participants reported that the SEL training and professional development in their schools did not adequately prepare them to implement SEL curricula in their classrooms (Morgan et al., 2022). The participants cited the lack of stronger training as a key barrier to successfully implementing SEL. As this research highlights, when schools provide professional development in SEL to credentialed teachers, the training is often insufficient to prepare teachers to deliver SEL curricula.

Another potential barrier to delivering SEL in schools is student and parent perceptions of the curricula. Jomaa et al. (2023) found that some parents were resistant to SEL curricula in the classroom, particularly when the curricula were initially introduced. The researchers wrote that SEL curricula often involved families so that students could learn similar strategies at home and at school. Teachers in the study reported frustration about the families' lack of participation in the home-based components of the SEL program. Mischenko et al. (2022) described that teachers stated it was more challenging to teach SEL curricula when that curricula did not align with the families' values or practices. Families are important for the success of SEL, and effective SEL implementation includes teachers, students, and families who have a shared understanding of the goals of SEL (Mahoney et al., 2021). Although SEL programs are often positively received by students, Medin and Jutengren (2020) noted that some students in Grades 1–9 were less open to SEL curricula, particularly when they viewed the program as a critique of their behavior or when they felt pressured to share private topics with their classmates. Although less prevalent in the literature compared to a lack of instructional time and adequate training, negative parent and student perceptions of SEL were identified as challenges in SEL instruction.

In addition to parent and students' negative perspectives, there is a lack of broad stakeholder support that can impede SEL. Kaspar and Massey (2022) noted that there has been recent disagreement about SEL's role in the schools, which has affected policy and politics. Legislation that would have provided hundreds of millions of dollars in funding for SEL nationwide did not pass, with dissenting politicians suggesting that it would

detract from a focus on traditional academic subjects (Brennan, 2023). Elias et al. (2019) stressed that funding for SEL is based on individual decisions at the school, district, county, state, and federal levels, and this model means that some schools prioritize funds for SEL curricula, while others do not, leading to significant inequities in access to SEL.

Administrators can also affect implementation of SEL curricula. Jones and Cater (2020) noted that although the principals in their study generally supported SEL, none of the principals had a clear understanding of SEL and that this lack of knowledge of SEL contributed to inconsistent implementation of SEL curricula across schools. Chance et al. (2023) stated that school counselors' implementation of SEL curricula varied significantly across schools and districts, but when counselors taught SEL lessons weekly in third-grade classrooms for 5 weeks, the students experienced increased self-awareness, self-management, and social-emotional competence. Public sentiment and knowledge of SEL can help create policies that can lead to differential support, funding, and implementation of SEL in schools.

Students may experience greater SEL challenges since the COVID-19 pandemic. Students that returned to face-to-face learning after online learning exhibited higher rates of social challenges, discipline referrals, and motivation difficulties (Gülmez & Ordu, 2022). Simonton et al. (2024) explained that children who had experienced isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic struggled with social and emotional competencies, particularly in understanding their own emotions. Signorelli et al. (2021) suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the social and emotional wellbeing of children in unprecedented ways, necessitating the need for more flexibility in SEL delivery with

opportunities to embed SEL into children's learning activities throughout the school day. These findings suggest that children may come to school with more extensive SEL needs than before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Individual teacher attitudes and qualities were an additional challenge to delivering SEL curricula. Thierry et al. (2022) noted that teachers' sense of self-efficacy in supporting students' behavior was associated with their fidelity in implementing SEL curricula; teachers who rated themselves higher in social and emotional skills were more likely to closely follow SEL curricula. Liesch et al. (2022) discovered that both beginning and veteran early childhood teachers who placed a higher value on SEL had more quality interactions with students during SEL lessons; teachers who did not perceive a strong need for SEL or were less comfortable with SEL, were less likely to deliver effective curricula. Additionally, teachers with fewer years of teaching experience were less likely to maintain fidelity with SEL curricula (Thierry et al., 2022). Novice teachers and teachers who either struggled with SEL competence or placed a lower value on SEL skills faced challenges in delivering SEL curricula to their students.

Quality SEL

Not all SEL programs had the same positive outcomes and research suggested that quality SEL depends upon multiple factors, including coaching. Ongoing professional development in SEL correlated with delivering higher quality SEL (Kaspar & Massey, 2022). Specifically, coaching for teachers emerged in the literature as a critical component of effective SEL programs (Stickle et al., 2019). Coaching typically included ongoing observation and one-on-one support with an individual who possessed

significant SEL experience. Stickle et al. (2019) noted that teachers who had a quality

coaching relationship were more motivated to use SEL curricula in their classrooms and

felt more confident in their abilities. Similarly, Blewitt et al. (2020) discovered that

coaching helped early childhood teachers integrate SEL practices throughout the school

day, by strengthening the teachers' knowledge and awareness of these skills. Hunter et al.

(2022) also found that when teachers felt supported at school through professional

development and coaching, they implemented the SEL curricula with higher fidelity.

Coaching may support teachers' motivation to use SEL curricula with higher fidelity and

may help teachers to deepen their own understandings of SEL.

Research suggested that quality SEL depended not just on coaching, but also on

pre-teacher training programs that included an extensive exploration of SEL. D'Emidio-

Caston et al. (2019) noted that when teacher candidates were trained in SEL, particularly

on conflict resolution and the importance of creating caring communities, they were more

likely to use these pedagogical approaches once they graduated and entered the

classrooms as teachers. Similarly, Munk et al. (2022) discovered that preservice teachers

who learned about SEL in their credential program, specifically mindfulness, valued SEL

more highly and indicated a stronger commitment to teaching SEL skills in their future

classrooms, compared to preservice teachers who did not receive the training. Wood

(2020) found that without training in SEL, teachers misinterpreted SEL curricula,

sometimes leading to inequitable and biased approaches. To avoid potential

misinterpretation of SEL curricula, Wood suggested that preteacher training programs

should focus on the theory behind SEL and on preparing teachers to reflect on their own

emotional responses to students' behavior. Receiving focused training on SEL theory and SEL strategies during preteacher training programs may support quality SEL delivery once the candidates become classroom teachers.

In addition to coaching and preteacher training, quality SEL depended on individual teacher competencies. In a study that included over 150,000 children, Loeb et al. (2019) found significant between-school variance in students' SEL growth, even when all schools used the same SEL program and the teachers received similar levels of training; the researchers hypothesized that this variance could be attributed to individual teacher qualities. Teachers' awareness of their own social and emotional skills correlated with their ability to teach SEL to students; the researchers proposed that teachers need training in recognizing their own emotions and developing strong relationship-building skills (Gregory & Fergus, 2019). Bouffard (2022) discovered that when teachers were given tools to manage their own emotions with the goal of modeling self-regulation strategies to their students, the teachers not only reported lower rates of burnout, but the teachers implemented SEL curricula with higher fidelity in their classrooms. Hemi and Kasperski (2023) noted that most SEL programs focus on student outcomes; the researchers suggested that teachers' own competencies in SEL need assessment because robust SEL skills in teachers correlated with stronger SEL teacher practices. Supporting teachers' own social and emotional development may allow teachers to implement SEL curricula more effectively.

Researchers suggested that the developmental period of early childhood represents a unique opportunity for learning social and emotional skills, in part because

young children's brains are more malleable during early childhood compared to middle

childhood or adolescence (Houseman et al., 2023; Mackintosh & Rowe, 2021). Housman

et al. (2023) suggested that the neural development that takes place during early

childhood makes it an ideal period for learning the self-regulatory skills and executive

function that are key aspects of SEL. Voith et al. (2020) examined growth for children in

grades one through six who participated in a schoolwide SEL program; they found that

the youngest students in first grade demonstrated more growth in SEL skills than any

other grade level, most notably in decreased rates of aggression. Mackintosh and Rowe

(2021) found that young children who had stronger social skills learned early math skills

more quickly than children who struggled with social skills; the researchers suggested

that teaching SEL during early childhood is important in supporting equitable academic

learning opportunities for all children. Other researchers discovered that students in early

childhood who participated in SEL programs demonstrated improved social emotional

competence compared to their peers who did not participate in the programs. Students in

the SEL program had an improved understanding of emotions, increased levels of

empathy, and demonstrated more prosocial behavior (Arda Tuncdemir et al., 2022;

Soliman et al., 2021). Tilhou (2020) noted that morning meetings or circle time were

conducive spaces in early childhood classrooms to practice SEL skills, such as active

listening, respect, and empathy. Sanders et al. (2020) found that participating in SEL

programs in early childhood may have positive effects that last into adolescence,

potentially moderating the effects of early adverse childhood experiences. Children who

received SEL education in early childhood demonstrated higher levels of resilience and a

higher commitment to attending school during adolescence, compared to their peers who did not participate in the SEL program during early childhood (Sanders et al., 2020). In addition to teacher training and teacher competencies contributing to the quality of SEL, early childhood is an ideal developmental period for SEL.

Diverse Learners and SEL

Significant differences exist in how children learn; this diversity applies to how children learn social and emotional skills. Children who struggled with social and emotional competencies often had more difficulty successfully participating in SEL curricula in their classrooms (Calhoun et al., 2020, Mischenko et al., 2022; Morgan et al., 2022). Teachers expressed concerns that students who lacked a strong SEL foundation struggled to engage with the SEL curricula; the most significant challenge students experienced was in reflecting on their own SEL skills and growth (Morgan et al., 2022). Mischenko et al. (2022) found that some SEL curricula elicited extreme negative behaviors from certain students, particularly when the SEL program included a mindfulness component; the researchers hypothesized that the introspection of the mindfulness program may have triggered previous trauma for the students. Calhoun et al. (2020) noted that despite initial gains after participating in a SEL curricula, children with higher rates of reactivity at the start of the program were less likely to maintain an improvement in SEL skills over time. Elliott et al. (2020) found that between 10% and 20% of students had difficulty applying the CASEL skills most often included in SEL curricula; the researchers cautioned that SEL programs may not be appropriate for addressing some emotional behavioral concerns and warned that concerns such as anxiety

and depression must be properly identified and addressed. Although most researchers found that children with lower competencies in SEL had more difficulty participating in SEL curricula, Carroll et al. (2020) found that students with the most significant behavioral challenges, as identified by their teachers, demonstrated greater social and emotional growth than students who were rated average in behavioral challenges at the start of the SEL program. Low et al. (2019) also noted that children with more severe social-emotional needs initially demonstrated the most significant improvement; however, those students' SEL gains were the most likely to disappear over summer break. Although most researchers noted a differential response to SEL curricula based on children's competence in SEL skills, Haslip and Terry (2022) found no association between children's SEL competence and their progress in SEL curriculum; instead, they noted that the quality of a teachers' SEL lessons correlated strongly with student growth. Variance in students' SEL competence may affect how they respond to SEL curricula; however, the research is not conclusive on how these differences in SEL competencies affect students' experiences with SEL curricula.

Some students may respond to SEL curricula differently depending on their cognitive, language, and academic skills. McCormick et al. (2021) identified a correlation between students' academic skills and students' long-term SEL growth; students with higher math and language skills in kindergarten demonstrated stronger SEL skills in sixth grade. The authors suggested that the SEL program in the schools demanded complex cognitive skills, making the program more accessible for students with stronger academic skills (McCormick et al., 2021). English language learners, including refugees, are

another significant group in early childhood classrooms. Cho et al. (2019) examined teachers' perspectives on presenting SEL curricula to English language learner and refugee students; most teachers in the study had negative perceptions about teaching these students SEL and were particularly concerned about communicating with families. Similarly, Rosenberg et al. (2021) noted that SEL curricula can be difficult for refugee students, in large part because of language, cultural, and socioeconomic barriers. Students' academic skills, language, and culture may affect their experience with SEL curricula.

Students' disability status may also affect how they respond to SEL curricula. In a meta-analysis of studies examining school based SEL curricula, Cipriano et al. (2023) discovered that many studies excluded data from students with disabilities and when the studies did include students with disabilities in the data, the researchers generally grouped all disabilities into a single category. The authors expressed concern that this method of reporting data did not support a meaningful understanding of how students with different types of disabilities experienced SEL curricula (Cipriano et al., 2023). Hagarty and Morgan (2020) noted that students with intellectual disabilities may respond positively to play-based SEL curricula but cautioned that more research is needed in this area. More research is needed to examine how students with disabilities may respond differently to SEL curricula.

Demographic factors also may affect children's experiences with SEL curricula. Mondi and Reynolds (2021) found that children living in poverty were rated significantly lower in SEL skills when starting kindergarten; the researchers suggested that they may

benefit from more intensive SEL curricula. Other researchers also found that gender was associated with SEL growth, with boys improving significantly more in conduct and peer problems, compared to girls (Low et al., 2019). In measuring over 4,000 children's SEL, McKown (2019) noted that children's ethnicity affected how they responded to SEL assessments; the author cautioned that SEL assessments may not reflect an accurate view of SEL growth across ethnic groups. Gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status may affect how children respond to SEL.

Differentiation

Differentiation recognizes that students learn differently and is grounded in the premise that teachers must adapt instruction to meet students' diverse needs (Jager et al., 2022). According to Martinez and Plevyak (2020), differentiation is integrally connected to Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism because it allows students to work within their ZPD, supporting stronger learning outcomes. In a review of literature, Eikland and Ohna (2022) highlighted four broad perspectives on differentiation: individualization, adapting curricula to specific groups, adapting curricula to diverse classrooms, and differentiation as a systems perspective with a focus on equity. Ginja and Chen (2020) described Tomlinson's model of differentiation which suggests that teachers can reach diverse learners by differentiating the content, the process, the product, or the environment. Although there are a variety of approaches to differentiating curricula, the overriding goal of differentiation is to make curricula more accessible to diverse learners.

Differentiating curricula is associated with many benefits to students. Differentiating curricula correlates with increased student engagement, increased

academic performance, and improved relationships between teachers and students (Ginja & Chen, 2020; Goddard et al., 2019). Teachers also reported that differentiation supports more joyful and more permanent learning, compared to nondifferentiated instruction (Altun & Nayman, 2022). Teachers overwhelmingly valued differentiation and stated that it helped students to become increasingly independent learners (Hersi & Bal, 2021). Differentiating curricula provides benefits to both students and teachers.

Although the research supports the benefits of differentiation, teachers experienced challenges when differentiating curricula. Unal et al. (2022) noted that although early childhood teachers value differentiation, the teachers also reported a variety of difficulties when differentiating, including a lack of training, large class sizes, a lack of resources, and very diverse learners in their classrooms. Similarly, researchers stated that although teachers valued differentiation, these practices were often not reflected in their teaching, even when teachers believed they were differentiating curricula (Hersi & Bal, 2021; Kenney et al., 2023). Researchers found that published curricula often did not include strategies for differentiation, requiring the teachers to create their own lessons if they chose to differentiate curricula (van Geel et al., 2022). Pereira et al. (2019) noted that when teachers had to create their own differentiated lessons, the teachers reported the process was laborious and did not fit into their limited planning time. Most teachers stated that they would benefit from more differentiation strategies in published curricula and more ongoing support from differentiation experts (Johnsen et al., 2020). Despite valuing differentiation, teachers experienced challenges in differentiating curricula in their classrooms.

Differentiating academic curricula is challenging but differentiating SEL curricula may be even more challenging. Although differentiation strategies were sometimes included in academic curricula, most SEL curricula tended to take a one-size-fit-all approach, with minimal or no suggestions for meeting the needs of diverse learners (Kennedy, 2019). Haslip and Terry (2022) found that teachers needed more training and practice to differentiate SEL curricula, compared to academic curricula. DeMink-Carthew et al. (2020) suggested that differentiation could promote stronger SEL, particularly in terms of self-awareness. Mahoney et al. (2021) argued that SEL programs are effective when the curricula is personalized, and teachers recognize that different supports are needed for different students. Lin et al. (2023) suggested that it is difficult for teachers to differentiate SEL curricula because the authors of SEL curricula often assume that all children can learn the five main CASEL skills similarly. Hayashi et al. (2022) noted that SEL curricula rarely reflects families' cultural values and suggested that family members should be included in differentiating SEL curriculum to better reflect shared practices. Although differentiation may strengthen SEL programs, teachers face challenges in differentiating SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs.

Importance of Teachers' Perspectives

Teacher perspectives on SEL affect how they implement SEL curricula (Steed et al., 2022). Researchers found that the majority of teachers value SEL and want to include SEL curricula in their classrooms; however, most teachers expressed the need for more training and knowledge of SEL (Daniel et al., 2022; Menzies et al., 2022). Other researchers suggested that teachers' perceptions of teaching SEL are complex and that

implementation strategies depend on teachers' perceptions of their students' needs, additional classroom demands, and the level of school-wide support for SEL (Hunter et al., 2022). When teachers perceived SEL as more valuable, they were more likely to engage meaningfully with students during SEL curricula (Liesch et al., 2022). Teachers' perspectives of SEL may affect how teachers deliver SEL curricula to their students.

Teachers' perspectives of differentiation may also affect how they differentiate curricula. Unal et al. (2022) found that teachers are generally more comfortable differentiating the product of a lesson than the process; the authors noted that Vygotsky emphasized that the process is more critical to learning than the completed product. Other researchers reported that early childhood teachers have a narrow perspective on differentiation and generally report that placing students into small groups is their primary strategy for differentiating curricula (McNeill & Polly, 2023). Moosa and Shareefa (2019) found a significant correlation between teachers' knowledge of differentiation and their ability to differentiate; the researchers also noted a significant relationship between teachers' sense of self-efficacy in differentiation and how often they differentiated curricula. Early childhood teachers' beliefs and knowledge about differentiation affects how they differentiate curricula in their classrooms.

Although researchers have examined teachers' perspectives on SEL and teachers' perspectives on differentiation, the literature includes few studies on teachers' perspectives of differentiating SEL curricula. In one study, Blewitt et al. (2021) noted that Australian teachers viewed embedding SEL curricula into everyday interactions with students as a promising strategy for meeting the diverse needs of their students. In the

United States, teachers' perspectives on differentiating SEL curricula remains largely unresearched. Fitzgerald (2020) stated that despite increasing expectations for teachers to differentiate SEL curricula to reach diverse learners, the decisions that teachers make in differentiating SEL curricula have not been explored. Barnes and McCallops (2019) shared that there is minimal research examining teachers' perspectives on SEL and no studies that focused on how teachers meet students' diverse needs through SEL. Allen et al. (2020) noted that although teachers' perspectives on the benefits of SEL and challenges to SEL have been explored, more research is needed to explore teachers' perspectives of SEL with diverse student populations. Hunter et al. (2022) and Morgan et al. (2022) suggested that research is needed to examine the pedagogical decisions that teachers make with SEL curricula in their classrooms, particularly once SEL training and professional development has ended. Although researchers have established the value of SEL and differentiation, missing from the research are early childhood teachers' perspectives of strategies and challenges to differentiating SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs.

Summary and Conclusions

In Chapter 2, I reviewed literature related to SEL, differentiation, the conceptual framework that grounds the study, and teachers' perspectives on SEL and differentiation. The literature provided support for a variety of academic and behavioral benefits of SEL for students, teachers, and schools (Calhoun et al., 2020; Charlton et al., 2021; Stickle et al., 2019; Thayer et al., 2019). With increased awareness of the benefits of SEL, there has been an expansion of SEL, and SEL curricula is now used in the majority of U.S. schools

(Schwartz et al., 2022). Several challenges to SEL emerged in the literature, including a lack of teacher training and a lack of time in the school day for SEL (Flushman et al., 2021; Kaspar & Massey, 2022; Mishenko et al., 2022; Morgan et al., 2022). Although many students benefited from SEL, students had diverse responses to SEL, depending on their academic skills, language skills, culture, social-emotional competence, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and disability status (Cipriano et al., 2023; McCormick et al., 2021; Mondi & Reynolds, 2021; Rosenberg et al., 2021). Additionally, teachers' perspectives on SEL affected how they approached SEL in their classrooms (Steed et al., 2022). With an understanding of the benefits of SEL, SEL has expanded across the U.S.; however, teachers experienced challenges in presenting SEL curricula and students had diverse responses to the SEL curricula.

The findings in the literature provided support for differentiation as a high-quality pedagogical practice, with varied academic and social benefits to students when teachers differentiate curricula (Altun & Nayman, 2022; Ginja & Chen, 2020; Goddard et al., 2019). Although the majority of teachers valued differentiation, teachers faced significant challenges when differentiating curricula, including a lack of training and a lack of differentiation strategies within the curricula (Johnsen et al., 2020; Unal et al., 2022). Teachers' perspectives on differentiation affected how they used differentiation in their classrooms.

Although researchers have examined teachers' perspectives of SEL and teachers' perspectives of differentiation, the literature included little information on early childhood teachers' perspectives on differentiating SEL curricula. The purpose of this

study was to address this gap by examining early childhood teachers' perspectives of strategies and challenges to differentiating SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs. The knowledge gained from this study may help administrators, teacher-preparation programs, and SEL curricula designers to develop resources to provide relevant training to early childhood teachers to better support the diverse SEL needs of students.

In Chapter 3, I will provide insight into the methodology I used for this study. The chapter will include the research design and rationale for the study. In Chapter 3, I will also address participant selection, data collection, and data analysis. I will discuss my role as the researcher, the trustworthiness of the study, and the ethical procedures used to protect the participants.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives of strategies and challenges to differentiating SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs. In this chapter, I discuss the research methods for the study, including the participant selection process, instrumentation, procedures for recruitment, and the plan for data analysis. This chapter also includes a description of the issues of trustworthiness and ethical procedures.

Research Design and Rationale

The study addressed the following RQs:

RQ1: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives of strategies used to differentiate SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs?

RQ2: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives of challenges to differentiating SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs?

I employed a basic qualitative design and semistructured interviews to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives of strategies and challenges to differentiating SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs. A basic qualitative research design was appropriate for this study because it is used to explore participants' perspectives on a phenomenon (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Researchers employing a basic qualitative approach also strive to make meaning out of participants' experiences and gain practical knowledge from participants' perspectives (Elo et al., 2014). The semistructured individual interviews that were used for data collection in this study align with a basic qualitative research design because interviews provide an opportunity to gain a deep

understanding of participants' lived experiences (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The basic qualitative approach was an appropriate methodological choice for this study because it aligns with the purpose of this study.

Role of the Researcher

My role as a researcher was to design the study; collect, analyze, and evaluate the data; and present the findings. As the interviewer in a qualitative study, I was responsible for preparing the interview questions, scheduling the interviews, and helping the participants to feel comfortable and safe throughout the interviews (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

As the researcher, I mitigated power relationships by excluding any participants that I knew professionally or personally. Participants were recruited through the Walden University Participant Pool and through social media groups. I also employed snowball sampling to obtain more participants who met the inclusion criteria. As a practitioner-researcher, I disclosed my role as an early childhood instructor in higher education. I strived to allay potential researcher bias by conducting this study separate from my work environment and avoiding the use of participant incentives (see Patton, 2015). To minimize potential bias, I employed reflexivity by maintaining a journal throughout the study.

Methodology

Participant Selection

The participants in this study were a purposeful sample of 11 early childhood teachers in the United States who met the criteria of teaching a minimum of 3 years in

kindergarten through third grade. Hennink and Kaiser (2022) suggested that nine to 17

participants is an acceptable number to gain understanding of their experiences through

interviews and reach data saturation. I recruited the participants from the Walden

University Participant Pool and through posting an invitation to participate in the study in

early childhood teachers' social media groups. After seeing the invitation, teachers who

were interested in participating in the study reached out to me by email. I then sent them

the consent form to review. After reading the consent form, if they agreed to participate

in the study, they replied to me via email with the phrase, "I consent." Purposeful

sampling ensured that those participating in the study could provide in-depth data on the

research questions specific to the study (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Since the initial

recruitment process resulted in too few participants, I also used snowball sampling,

allowing participants to identify other potential participants who met the criteria for the

study (see Patton, 2015). The final number of 11 participants was chosen because this

was when data saturation was reached.

Instrumentation

For this basic qualitative study, I asked semistructured interview questions

(Appendix A) that were based on the research questions, literature review, and conceptual

framework. Conducting interviews allowed me to collect authentic data that provided in-

depth information on teachers' perspectives (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Semistructured,

one-on-one interviews allowed all participants to receive the same basic questions, with

additional follow-up probes (see Patton, 2015). I also created an interview protocol guide

(Appendix B) to support the data collection process by informing potential participants

about the purpose of the study, reviewing procedures, reminding them that participation was voluntary, and explaining how confidentiality and privacy would be assured. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed to assure the accuracy of data collection.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Before recruiting participants, the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and approved this study to protect the safety of the participants. Upon receiving approval from the IRB, I began recruiting 11 early childhood teachers who had a minimum of 3 years of experience teaching kindergarten through third grade in the United States through the Walden University Participant Pool and early childhood teachers' social media groups. I also contacted the teachers who agreed to participate and recruited more participants through snowball sampling.

Once individuals indicated an interest in participating in the study, I sent a consent form to the potential participant that explained the purpose of the study, outlined what to expect, stressed that participation was voluntary, and described how confidentiality would be addressed. Once I received the participant's consent, I scheduled one-on-one phone or Zoom interviews. The interviews lasted between 35 and 55 minutes and were audio recorded for later transcription purposes. At the start of each interview, I reminded the participant that their responses would remain confidential, as described in the consent form. I also reminded them of the purpose for the study and asked if they had any questions or concerns before we began.

Data Analysis Plan

For this basic qualitative study, I used Saldaña's (2021) analysis methods to identify patterns and themes that emerged from the data. The data from each semistructured interview were analyzed individually and then analyzed along with the data from other interviews to identify key concepts and ideas.

Each interview was audio recorded and then transcribed. The transcriptions were saved in a password-protected online account. I began the data analysis process by reading each transcription a minimum of three times. Key terms and phrases that stood out in the transcripts were coded (see Saldaña, 2021). Different color highlighters were used to distinguish the open codes. In the next round of coding, I focused on how the data connected to the research questions. The open codes were used to organize the data into manageable units, with each unit being given a label. These units helped me identify key ideas and concepts.

After establishing open codes, I used axial coding to identify emerging categories across the codes. The key terms and patterns that were identified during open coding were organized in a Microsoft Excel table, which helped me in identifying categories. Categorical organization allowed me to identify emerging themes across the data. I used Saldaña's (2021) method of thematic analysis to identify and analyze the emerging themes that related to the research questions. I continued to collect and analyze data until saturation was reached and no new themes emerged. The data analysis process supported identification of key themes related to early childhood teachers' perspectives on

differentiating SEL to meet students' diverse needs. Discrepant cases that emerged in the results were included and discussed.

Issues of Trustworthiness

The validity of a qualitative study refers to the rigor of the data collection and analysis processes that are used to assure that the results accurately reflect the participants' perspectives (Patton, 2015). In qualitative research, trustworthiness depends upon the researcher ensuring a high level of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in the study (Burkholder et al., 2016). Meeting the four criteria of trustworthiness supported the validity of the current study.

Credibility is established through using multiple methods for data collection, which ensures rigor in the findings (Burkholder et al., 2016). I used audio recordings and took notes during the interviews to record details that did not emerge in the recordings. Credibility was also established in the current study by spending a significant amount of time reviewing the transcripts. I provided a summary of my findings to the participants to review and all them to ask questions if they had any (see Patton, 2015).

Transferability determines whether the study is generalizable to other settings (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In this study, I ensured transferability with detailed descriptions of the methodology and data collection process, allowing others to replicate these techniques in different settings. I also strengthened transferability by recruiting participants from diverse geographic areas for the study. Participants were recruited through the Walden University Participant Pool, early childhood teachers' social media groups, and snowball sampling. By providing detailed descriptions, readers may make

comparisons to other contexts based on as much information as possible. This process allows readers, educators, researchers, and study participants to transfer findings of the study to other settings.

Dependability determines if the data would remain consistent if the study was replicated (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I sought dependability by following the research methodology consistently with every participant (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Additionally, participants were notified that participation in the study was completely voluntary and that they could choose to withdraw from the study at any point. I also kept a reflective journal to capture my own experiences with data collection and analysis. Using a journal supported dependability by creating an audit trail of the data collection and analysis processes.

Confirmability describes whether the data would be interpreted similarly by other researchers (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I used a journal to reflect on my research process and help bring awareness to any potential assumptions or bias. Systematic documentation of the analysis process and in-depth reflection supported rigor and confirmability by bringing awareness to the analysis process and addressing potential bias or assumptions (see Patton, 2015).

Ethical Procedures

There are unique ethical issues in qualitative research in which data are collected through interviews that address sensitive topics, including privacy, sensitivity, and minimizing potential harm (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To ensure ethical compliance, I did not collect any data for this study until receiving IRB approval to do so. After receiving

IRB permission, I took several steps to assure the ethical recruitment of participants. Once potential participants received my invitation in the Walden University Participant Pool, through early childhood teachers' social media groups, or through snowball sampling, they reached out to me, and I sent them a consent form. This consent form outlined that participation was voluntary; explained how their privacy would be protected; and described any potential harm, including the discomfort of discussing challenges in teaching. When potential participants contacted me, I also made sure that I did not have any personal or professional affiliations with the other potential participants.

Once the data collection process began, I emphasized to participants that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point. Efforts were taken to help participants feel comfortable during the interview, including scheduling the interview at the participant's preferred time of day and verbally checking for comfort during the interview. To maintain privacy, identifying information of the participants was not shared with anyone. I used identification numbers for each participant when sharing their responses. Any written notes taken during the audio recordings of the interviews and any hard copies of printed data were stored in a locked file cabinet within my home office. The data from the study will be stored on a password-protected computer in my home office for 5 years. Five years after the completion of the study, the electronic data will be deleted and any paper data will be shredded.

Summary

In this chapter, I explained the methodology used in this study. I discussed my role as the researcher and my rationale for selecting a basic qualitative research design.

The chapter also contained descriptions of the data collection and data analysis processes as well as criteria for recruiting and selecting participants. Information was provided on strategies that were used to improve the trustworthiness of the study. I described the ethical procedures that were followed to protect the data and the participants. In Chapter 4, I will share the results of the study, including discussions of data collection, data analysis, and evidence of trustworthiness.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives of strategies and challenges to differentiating SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs. The RQs that guided this study were:

RQ1: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives of strategies used to differentiate SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs?

RQ2: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives of challenges to differentiating SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs?

In this chapter, I discuss the setting, participant demographics, and data collection and analysis processes. The inductive open coding, axial categorization, and thematic analysis processes are described in detail. Throughout the chapter, I provide specific examples of participant responses to support the results. I also explain the trustworthiness techniques implemented throughout the study.

Settings

For this basic qualitative study, I used semistructured interviews to explore the perspectives of 11 K–3 early childhood teachers. The Walden University Participant Pool, teacher social media groups, and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants. Participants were given the choice between a Zoom interview or a phone interview. Nine participants opted for a Zoom interview, while two participants chose a phone interview. I assigned each teacher a participant number to ensure confidentiality. In Table 1, I summarize the participants' years of teaching experience and current grade levels.

Table 1

Research Participants

Research participants	Years of teaching experience	Current grade level
P1	26	2
P2	4	2
P3	9	K
P4	25	2
P5	4	1
P6	8	2
P7	14	3
P8	12	2
P9	19	K
P10	10	3
P11	24	3

Data Collection

I began data collection after receiving approval from Walden University's IRB (IRB Approval No. 2-07-23-1061993). To recruit participants, I posted the study invitation on the Walden University Participant Pool and various teacher social media groups. Snowball sampling was used to find additional participants. When someone expressed interest in participating in the study by contacting me from their school email account, I emailed them a copy of the consent form to review. After reading the consent form, participants were asked to reply with the phrase, "I consent," if they agreed to participate in the study. Participants were also asked if they preferred a Zoom or phone interview and to provide a few preferred times and dates. I responded with a Zoom link for an interview at one of their preferred days and times or with my phone number and a confirmed date and time for a phone interview. One day before the scheduled interview, I emailed them a reminder.

At the beginning of each interview, I used the interview protocol (see Appendix B) to explain the purpose of the interview, emphasize confidentiality measures, and invite any questions or concerns that they may have had. Participants were reminded that they could ask questions, stop the interview, or withdraw from participating at any point. After receiving verbal consent from the participants to do so, the interviews were audio recorded. The length of each interview ranged from 35–55 minutes. I maintained a reflective journal for each interview where I documented my thoughts and managed potential bias.

Each interview began with several demographic questions to establish that the participant was currently teaching in K–3 and establish how many years that they had taught K-3. I then asked the participants the same 10 questions in the same order to ensure the reliability of the data. Different follow-up probes were asked to participants throughout the interviews that were designed to clarify participants' responses or deepen their responses by eliciting examples. After each interview was complete, I thanked the participant for sharing their perspectives and invited them to ask any questions. I informed them that they would receive a two-page summary of the findings once the study was complete. Participants were reminded that they could reach out to me via email if any questions or concerns emerged.

I continued to recruit participants until I had interviewed 11 teachers. My invitation to participate remained posted in the Walden University Participant Pool, and I reposted invitations to participate on teacher social media groups every 2–3 weeks. After

interviewing the 10th and 11th participants, no new codes emerged. The data collection process took 10 weeks to complete.

For the nine interviews that took place on Zoom, I used the audio transcripts produced by Zoom for analysis. The two interviews that took place on the phone were transcribed using Kaltura. I read each transcription multiple times and compared them to the audio recording of the interview. Amendments were made to the transcripts to ensure accuracy and correct punctuation. All audio recordings and transcripts were stored on a password-protected drive. After 5 years, the collected data will be destroyed. I intentionally followed the data collection plan outlined in Chapter 3, and no unexpected circumstances affected the data collection process.

<div align="center">**Data Analysis**</div>

For this basic qualitative study, I explored early childhood teachers' perspectives of strategies and challenges in differentiating SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs. Using semistructured interviews, I asked each of the 11 participants the same 10 questions. After reviewing the accuracy of the transcriptions, I began the data analysis process, which consisted of familiarizing myself with the data, open and axial coding, and theme generation. Saldaña's (2021) analysis methods were used to identify the patterns and themes that emerged from the data.

Step 1: Data Familiarization

I assigned all participants an identification number to maintain confidentiality. After assuring the accuracy of the transcription, each transcript was read a minimum of three times before any coding began. I also reviewed the notes that I took during the

interview and reviewed my reflective journal. I made additional notes in the journal as I read and re-read the transcripts.

Step 2: Generating Open Codes

The first cycle of coding began by generating open codes. I read each transcript line-by-line and highlighted key excerpts. I created a Microsoft Excel document and pasted key excerpts from each interview into Column A, noting their participant identification number in Column B. The open code associated with each excerpt was included in Column C. To distinguish between the two RQs, separate Excel sheets were designated for RQ1 and RQ2. As new codes emerged, more rows were added to the Excel sheets. I identified a total of 97 open codes during the first cycle of data analysis. An example of the open codes, participant identifiers, and corresponding excerpts from the data are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Examples of Open Codes

Codes	Participants	Excerpts
Embedded throughout day	P3	"It is embedded throughout our day… I'm finding now to have it be more organic within our day is more effective."
	P7	"SEL is just baked into my classroom in every nook and cranny, and I feel fortunate about that."
Self-regulation	P6	"I just let him take a break when he gets upset. Then, 'Okay, come back. Let's talk about it. What's frustrating about this?'"
	P7	"I say, 'Take 5' and there's all these choices in my classroom. You can go to a chair and take 5 deep breaths. You can go to a spot on a wall and do 5 wall pushups. You can go to your water bottle and drink 5 sips."
Administrative support	P3	"I'm really fortunate to have an administrator who's been really advocating for the idea that it's about kids come first and their social emotional development comes first."
	P9	"We need flexibility from the principal to stop academic curriculum when needed to attend to SEL needs."
Peer modeling	P1	"They all talk, and the children model the correct behavior without their knowledge, to the child who may have difficulty."
	P8	"But we have so many students that just have kind of taken him under their wing. And they'll even tell him, 'Take Five,' or, 'It's okay. Calm down.'"
Self-educated	P10	"I didn't know how I was going to survive that year. And it was kind of in doing all that research that I sort of stumbled onto SEL."
	P11	"I've done most of the learning about SEL on my own. I could probably teach other teachers how to do it by now."
Lack of training	P3	"They kind of dumped it on us. We didn't get any training for that curriculum. So that's been like, 'here, just look through it and figure it out.' That's been a little challenging."
	P6	"We had so many professional developments over the years, but no social emotional training."
Limited time	P5	"It does take time out of the day and I do have to play catch up."
	P6	"If I could carve out even more time just to talk to my students about SEL and slow down a little bit, that would be so nice."

Step 3: Axial Coding

When I finished open coding, I began axial coding by sorting and grouping similar codes together into categories. In the Excel worksheet, I highlighted codes with similar content in the same color. Several codes that were similar were consolidated and two additional codes were added. A total of 17 categories emerged during the axial coding process. Table 3 represents a sample of the categories that emerged during axial coding, the corresponding open codes, participant identifiers, and excerpts of participant responses.

Table 3

Examples of Open Codes and Categories

Category	Codes	Participant	Excerpt
Counselor support	School counselor School philosophy Outside resources	P7	"We don't really have anybody who takes the front line on SEL."
		P10	"I wish we had more counselors to help. I know that previously we had two, but now we only have one."
Relevant to prior experiences	Teacher-student relationships Anticipate personal connection	P1	"I just take clues from how they share their daily experiences with me."
		P9	"I try to keep track of when and why things are happening and try to put things in place to be proactive instead of reactive."
		P2	"They think it's silly at times, the curriculum. But then, once they actually hear the message, I think that they can relate. Then, I'll build in discussion questions for the students that they can relate to."
Inadequate training	Need modeling No training Irrelevant training	P4	"The counselor would rather just do a quick dip and then go. I wish she would be able to come into the classroom and actually teach lessons, so, we could see a full lesson implemented."
		P3	"They kind of dumped it on us. We didn't get any training for that curriculum. It's been like, 'here, just look through it and figure it out.' That's been a little challenging."
Rigid curriculum	Developmentally inappropriate Lack of agency Highly scripted	P2	"They're just like, 'Oh, this is like a baby stuff.' So, it doesn't really hit where it needs to be for them. So, they're just not wanting to pay attention anymore."
		P8	"The curriculum was chosen by our district. We had no input."
Time	Limited time Competing demands Morning meetings	P5	"It does take time out of the day and I do have to play catch up."
		P1	"This program would be wonderful for the counselors. But as a teacher we…we've got a lot of other things we have to do."
		P11	"We have to dedicate an amount of time and a daily practice of SEL for these students."

Step 4: Theme Identification and Review

After completing axial coding, I reviewed all the categories to identify patterns, trends, and recurring narratives across the data set. The categories were grouped based on similar meanings and characteristics, and each of these groupings became a potential theme. I returned to my RQs and examined whether the potential themes addressed them. After reviewed the themes again, one theme was collapsed into another and their wording was improved to reflect the data more accurately. Five themes emerged from the data that represented the participants' perspectives. Theme 1 addresses RQ1, while Themes 2, 3, 4, and 5 address RQ2. The five themes were:

- Theme 1: Teachers use a variety of strategies to differentiate SEL.

- Theme 2: Teachers are challenged by a lack of support.

- Theme 3: Teachers are challenged by a lack of knowledge.

- Theme 4: Teachers are challenged by a lack of flexibility.

- Theme 5: Students' challenging behaviors make differentiating SEL more difficult.

The themes were finalized at this point, and no additional changes were made. Table 4 represents the 17 categories and the five themes derived from the data analysis process.

Table 4

Themes and Categories

RQ1: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives of strategies used to differentiate SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs?	
Themes	Categories
Theme 1: Teachers use a variety of strategies to differentiate SEL.	Interactive modeling Relevant Developmentally appropriate Embed SEL

RQ2: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives of challenges to differentiating SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs?	
Themes	Categories
Theme 2: Teachers are challenged by a lack of support	Counselor support Administrative support Family support
Theme 3: Teachers are challenged by a lack of knowledge	Inadequate training Inconsistent understandings of SEL Self-driven learning Discomfort
Theme 4: Teachers are challenged by a lack of flexibility	Time Rigid curriculum Accountability
Theme 5: Students' challenging behaviors make differentiating SEL more difficult.	Increasing SEL needs Specific behavioral challenges

Step 5: Report Production

Excerpts from the data were carefully chosen to provide logical evidence in support of the results. I compiled and shared a two-page summary of my findings with each participant and provided them with time to review the results. Discrepant cases emerged in Theme 2, and they are discussed in the Results section. The five themes addressed the two research questions and were used to organize my description of the results.

Results

I explored K–3 teachers' perspectives of strategies and challenges to differentiating SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs. In this section, I share the results of the data gathered from the 11 participant interviews. The interview questions (see Appendix A) aligned with the research questions and allowed the participants to describe their experiences differentiating SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs.

RQ1 focused on early childhood teachers' perspectives of strategies used to differentiate SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs. Interview questions 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 addressed RQ1. One theme emerged that addressed the first research question: (a) teachers use a variety of strategies to differentiate SEL.

RQ2 focused on early childhood teachers' perspectives of challenges to differentiating SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs. Interview questions 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 addressed RQ2. Four themes emerged that addressed the second research question. The themes were: (b) teachers are challenged by a lack of support, (c) teachers are challenged by a lack of knowledge, (d) teachers are challenged by a lack of

flexibility, and (e) students' challenging behaviors make differentiating SEL more difficult.

Theme 1: Teachers Use a Variety of Strategies to Differentiate SEL

When asked about their perspectives on strategies used to differentiate SEL to meet the needs of diverse learners, teachers shared a variety of differentiation strategies. These strategies included: making the curricula more interactive, modeling SEL skills, adapting the curricula to make it more relevant to students' life experiences, adjusting curricula to make it more developmentally appropriate, and embedding SEL curricula throughout the school day.

Interactive Strategies

Many of these strategies focused on relationship-based instruction wherein the teachers differentiated SEL curriculum to make it more interactive. P6 shared that she adjusts the SEL curriculum to "make it super engaging and interactive with hand signals." Some of the interactive activities that teachers inserted into the curriculum emphasized students listening to each other's diverse perspectives. P2 differentiated the curriculum by "building in discussion questions for the students. So, it'll be a lot of collaboration with 'Turn and Talks' with other students, so they can hear their opinions." Similarly, P9 emphasized the importance of students sharing ideas with one another: "We also talk a lot about different strategies to use for situations that require SEL skills. I give the students time to talk to each other every day. Sometimes they're more insightful than me in coming up with strategies." P4 added that interaction had to be added because without it the curriculum "is a little dry, not as engaging." P6, added to her curriculum by

creating a SEL-based question each day: "I pose a question to them, and then they turn and talk, and then we have five kids share out." Several of the teachers made a concerted effort to make SEL interactive and playful; P6 added a dance-party each day to conclude her SEL lessons, while P7 had her students walk around the classroom each day to an upbeat song after the SEL lesson and before she begins traditional academic content. Participants included a variety of strategies to increase student interactions throughout SEL curricula.

Modeling Strategies

Differentiation strategies included using peer and adult role models to support students with greater SEL needs. Several teachers intentionally placed a student who was struggling with a SEL skill with students who were more competent in this skill to learn from peer role models. P1 shared the benefits of this strategy: "They all talk, and the children model the correct behavior without their knowledge, to the child who may have difficulty." P4's grade level divided up students for one hour a week into small groups, based on SEL needs. She found this strategy very effective in supporting students with more extensive SEL needs: "We put students in the group that could use the extra support, then we put other students in that were great role models…we did see a huge improvement because it was a small group and it was intense." Sometimes peer role models emerged more naturally, without teacher guidance. P8 described a child who struggled with self-regulation in her room: "But we have so many students that just have kind of taken him under their wing. And they'll even tell him, 'Take 5,' or you know, 'It's okay. Calm down.' And that really helps." P7 discussed that peers and adults have the

opportunity to model and teach empathy, a key component of SEL in her classroom: "It helps them to develop a culture of empathy. We want to have me and others, showing in the moment how to be supportive and kind versus impatient or unkind to someone who's having a hard time." Participants intentionally used both peers and adults to model SEL skills for students.

Relevance Strategies

Teachers also differentiated the SEL curricula by learning about their students' life experiences and adjusted the curricula to make it more relevant to their students' experiences. Sometimes, teachers omitted parts of the SEL curriculum because the teacher felt it would not make sense to the students, based on students' life experiences. P3 described this process: "But I think that there are tools in the curriculum they don't completely understand, because they haven't had the life experiences to be able to properly use those tools yet. So, it doesn't make sense to explicitly teach them." Other teachers adjusted the curriculum in response to the wide variety of experiences in their classroom. P5 described an SEL lesson that compared emotions to being on an airplane. She then differentiated the lesson by telling her students:

> "Well, maybe you haven't been on an airplane, but have you seen an airplane?" I
> try to connect it like that. Because some of the experiences some kids do have and
> others don't, just trying to find a middle ground for the whole class.

For P1, getting to know her students and learning that many students did not live with a biological parent led her to adjust the language of the SEL curriculum to better reflect the life experiences of her students. P1 did this by "altering the way I presented it. I just felt I

should present it in a wider say, so I didn't use the words mother and father. I used, you know, family member or trusted adult." Several teachers described the importance of learning about their students' life experiences every day so they could adjust the curriculum appropriately. P1 described this process simply as: "I just take clues from how they share their daily experience with me all the time." Participants indicated that learning about their students' life experiences allowed the participants to adjust the SEL curricula to make it more relevant to their students.

Developmentally Appropriate Strategies

The participants also described differentiating the SEL curriculum based on the developmental needs of their students. A common strategy that teachers used was adjusting the pacing of the curriculum by building breaks into the day, that were based on students' developmental needs. Sometimes these adjustments were made whole class as P7 described: "I do universal brain breaks every 30 to 45 minutes for everyone… Sometimes you need energy up, sometimes you need energy down." P7 discussed that while not all of her students may need a break at that exact time; by building breaks into her routine, it benefitted the students who needed it most without stigmatizing them. Other times, the support was given more individually as P6 shared, "I just let him take a break when he gets upset. 'Okay, come back. Let's talk about it. What's frustrating about this?' It actually happened today. I just give him extra time." Several of the teachers discussed the rigor of the day and that appropriate pacing was very important to meet the developmental needs of young children. P8 described this as "we need to try to focus on their social emotional needs and age, and not try to advance them too quickly."

Another way that teachers differentiated SEL to meet the developmental needs of their students was by focusing more on the individual skills that students needed. P3 described getting to know her students and then focusing on the developmental needs of her current student population: "Each year it just depends on what the need is for each kid as to what I focus more on." A number of teachers mentioned that students who are in their classes currently need extra support with friendship skills. While this may be a small part of the SEL curriculum, the teachers shared that they were spending more time on this skill because developmentally, it was what their students needed. P5 described this as:

> The past years that I've noticed, these kids are really struggling with their empathy or sharing and just making friends…. by doing some of these strategies more in the classroom, the students are able to make connections and find friends.

For P6, her students were struggling when making mistakes so she differentiated her curriculum to model that skill:

> We're really working on, "Hey, it's okay. We know you're smart. But it's okay if you have to think about it for a few minutes and not know the answer. It's okay to make mistakes." For my students this year, I make sure to often ask them, "What mistake did you make?" I try to model that it's okay to share those mistakes and we celebrate that we were brave enough to share mistakes and now we can all learn from that.

P9 noticed that many of her students need to talk about their emotions more frequently than once a day, so she differentiated her SEL curriculum to allow for that: "I know some of my kids need more frequent emotional check-ins, so I make sure to allow time for that.

This year, I built a lot of check-ins into my schedule." Participants differentiated SEL curricula based on their students' developmental needs.

Embedding SEL Throughout the Day

Six of the participants described embedding SEL throughout the school day as an important strategy when differentiating SEL. One way that this was done was by integrating SEL into reading and writing curricula. For several teachers, this involved choosing specific stories that related to challenges their students were experiencing. P10 shared:

> If the character in the story has lost a parent, I think "well, that's great, because we have a couple of kids who are struggling with that" …those choices I make for literature come from what kids in my room are going through.

P9 not only chooses literature based on student SEL experiences but combines the stories with language arts activities to deepen the SEL learning. She shared an example: "If some friends are feeling left out, I'll read a book about feeling left out, talk about the feelings of everyone in the story, then have the kids write about how they can make sure their friends feel included." P11 described different opportunities for writing about SEL topics: "I also integrate SEL into my curriculum. The writing they're doing right now…we're working on making a class book about how to take care of yourself." P3 shared that she sees read-alouds as an opportunity to address SEL needs: "There's so much that can come from books that can help with those SEL tools."

Five of the participants remarked that practicing SEL skills repeatedly throughout the school day was important for the students to internalize the skills. Four teachers

discussed introducing an SEL skill with a video, followed by a discussion. After the

discussion, P8 shared: "Then they need practice. Lots of dive deeper activities so that it

scaffolds and builds on that SEL skill for the week." For P3, developmentally appropriate

opportunities to practice SEL skills often arose naturally through play. P3 practiced the

SEL skills through play: "They all have a half an hour of purposeful play at the end of the

day…and that in and of itself is the kind of time that is perfect for exercising those SEL

tools." P5 noted that students with more significant SEL needs may need to practice the

SEL skills outside of the classroom in small groups before practicing the skills more in

the classroom. P5 stated:

> We do try and practice those things and give them opportunities to resolve
>
> themselves or learn and do. But I do think it was a big help putting them into that
>
> small group and really focusing on those SEL skills so that they could come
>
> back into the classroom and practice those skills that they talked about in the
>
> group.

Three of the teachers, P3, P7, and P9, emphasized that they embed SEL all day,

throughout the day. None of these three teachers viewed the morning meeting as the only

or most important time of the day for SEL; instead, as P9 stated, "SEL is not something

we set aside time for…it's something we do all the time." Similarly, P3 commented that

while she used to set aside a time of day for SEL, she no longer does this. P3 remarked:

"It's such an integral part of what we do, it is embedded throughout our day. I don't have

a specific time necessarily blocked. I'm finding now to have it be more organic within our

day is more effective." P7 also embedded SEL throughout her school day:

I have the desire to embed SEL in everything I do...I do things all day long that

are related to SEL. So SEL is just baked into my classroom in every nook and

cranny, and I feel fortunate about that.

P7 indicated that when she makes her lesson plans for the week, she begins with the SEL

goals and then adds the academic content into it. She stated, "SEL is the base layer of my

planning for the week. I think it's also differentiating support, it's good universal design

to begin with the SEL." The participants who embedded SEL throughout the school day

felt strongly that embedding SEL into other curricula was an essential strategy for

differentiating SEL.

Theme 2: Teachers are Challenged by a Lack of Support

When asked about their perspectives on challenges to differentiating SEL to meet

the needs of diverse learners, the participants described a lack of support. Participants

discussed the need for more support from school counselors, from administrators, and

from students' families.

Counselor Support

While some of the teachers felt supported at their school site, the majority of the

teachers shared that minimal support made differentiating SEL more challenging. Most of

the teachers that discussed a lack of support focused on the role of school counselors. For

some teachers, they shared that they wished the counselors would take a more active role

in the SEL curricula. P4 reflected: "She'd rather just do a quick, quick dip, and then

leave. I wish she would be able to come into the classroom and actually teach a SEL

lesson." Similarly, P5 described how infrequently the school counselor comes into her

classroom to model a SEL lesson: "She is trying. I know. She comes in the classrooms and she has a lesson that she teaches, but I think it's only every other month." Several teachers shared that there is limited communication and planning between teachers and the school counselor. P7 described this as, "He's the one who kind of owns the curriculum, so he decides what we focus on, like our value of the month is honesty or kindness or whatever. It doesn't matter what the kids need." Similarly, P5 described the relationship between the teachers and the counselor: "It's really pretty separate, the teachers and counselor. We did get a new counselor this year. I feel like last year we communicated more, and she really knew our needs. But this year…well, she's trying." For some teachers, not having enough counselors or support at the schools made meeting their students' diverse SEL needs more difficult. P2 described this phenomenon:

> I wish we had more counselors. I know in the past we had two, but now we only have one. So, it's harder for them to be able to meet all the students' needs like previously. I think if we just had a few more, they might be able to aid the students with a little bit more flexibility, to be able to meet with them.

Similarly, P10 shared that the school psychologist position was recently eliminated at their school, which put more challenge on the teachers:

> We unfortunately used to have a school psychologist that would come in that would really be that point person for therapy and insurance…so in lieu of that, I now have to try to sort of figure out who knows how to make those connections for the families and kids.

Three discrepant cases emerged related to counselor support. While most of the participants discussed needing more support from the school counselor, two participants noted that the school counselor did provide important support by pulling higher-need students out of the classroom and into small groups. P5 shared, "We can use our counselor as a resource. She'll pull them and really focus on some of those bigger needs that we're seeing." Similarly, P6's counselor targeted specific student needs with a small-group pull-out program: "I'm actually getting him into a counseling group. The counselor is forming a group at school, just for whoever in the grade level needs it, to focus on anxiety or making friends." P8 was the only participant who indicated that she felt supported by her school counselor in her classroom SEL. She shared, "Each week she'll send us the scope and sequence of the skills, so we know what lessons we're teaching. Our counselor will email every single teacher. So, I just feel like there's a lot of support from the counselor." While two participants felt support from the school counselor when they pulled higher-need students out of the classroom for small SEL groups and one participant felt supported by the school counselor in implementing the SEL curriculum in her classroom, the majority of the participants felt challenged by a lack of counselor support.

Administrative Support

Several teachers described a lack of leadership from the principal and a lack of consistency in SEL across the school. For P5 and P10, getting a new principal made focusing on SEL more difficult. P5 described this as, "We did get a new principal. I heard he is big on SEL, but it's not something that he's put into our schedule, into our day, or

given us any resources for." P10 described a difficult transition to a new principal: "We need administrative support and buy-in. Even if it is teachers doing their own thing. Right now, we're in between principals. And so, we don't really have anybody who takes the front line on SEL." P10 indicated that this lack of school-wide SEL leadership has contributed to inconsistencies in how SEL is addressed across the school which creates challenges:

> There's a disconnect between the way kids know we handle things in my room and what they're being told by other adults at school, out on the playground and in the halls. That disconnect is confusing for the kids. It sort of messes things up.

P1 wished that her principal would support opportunities for her to go into other teachers' rooms to observe an SEL lesson: "It's always helpful to watch someone else teach it. It gives you ideas for how to deal with things. But we don't do observations like that. We are all on our own with the curriculum."

There was one discrepant case regarding administrative support. P3 was the only participant who shared that she felt very supported by her administrator: "I'm really fortunate to have an administrator who has really been advocating for the idea that it's about kids come first and their social emotional development comes first." P3 went on to discuss that this administrative support allowed teachers at her school to comfortably embed SEL throughout the school day, and really "focus on the social emotional elements in the teachable moments." While P3 felt supported by her principal, most participants in the study noted that a lack of administrative support made differentiating SEL more challenging.

Family Support

The majority of the participants in the study discussed that a lack of family

support contributed to making it more challenging to teach and differentiate SEL. P9

shared that, "Getting families involved in SEL has been a challenge." P3 indicated that

when families are not involved in the SEL program, it can make it more difficult for the

children to grasp the SEL skills. P3 described this as, "If the language isn't being used at

home and the tools aren't being used at home, then it makes it more challenging for it to

be something that the kids can hold on to."

Several teachers shared that differing behavioral expectations at school and home

contribute to challenges in teaching SEL. P5 discussed that for some of her students,

sharing during the SEL lessons is initially difficult because they are not used to sharing at

home:

> I just think sometimes at home it can be different. I mean, not to say in a bad
>
> way, but they might have other siblings and they fall in the background a little
>
> bit. They're used to *not* sharing and then I ask them to share.

P7 discussed that some of the SEL behaviors that she is trying to instill in the classroom,

may be quite different from what is practiced at home. She described this:

> Some of my kids are very argumentative. I will say one thing, and they'll yell at
>
> me, or they'll say, "Are you happy now?" Like, literally scream it across the
>
> classroom. So, I realize, there might be a lot of yelling going on at home.

P4 discussed that some parents have not been comfortable with the SEL program

because they are concerned it may conflict with their family's values. She shared her

experiences with one family: "It is a very cultural and sensitive curriculum, and also like a LGBTQ pro-curriculum. We've actually had parents that have pulled their kids from the school because they found out that we were going to be using the curriculum." P10 shared that sometimes families who may not understand the SEL curriculum become upset about the SEL assignments that their students receive. P10 described this experience:

> Parents ask, "How come their homework is to write about a time that they let somebody down? What kind of homework is that?" And then they almost get offended. If you address it and say, well, you know, "we're trying to strengthen the kids' peer conflict resolution skills," or whatever it is, they almost are offended.

A number of teachers indicated that more communication is needed with families about SEL. The majority of the teachers shared that either they or the school send a newsletter about the SEL curriculum home at the beginning of the year, but there is often minimal communication about SEL throughout the year. P4 described this communication process as, "We do send something home about SEL at the beginning of the year, but there isn't something that typically goes home every month or anything like that. But that would be interesting to have." P10 emphasized that parents need to understand the importance of SEL and why it is being taught: "I think if we brought the parents in more and said, 'This is just as important as the academic subjects that we're tackling, and it's all going be done in tandem because that's what's best for them.' P7 was the only teacher in the study who indicated that she communicated regularly with her

students' families about SEL: "I do an online newsletter with my families, and I just tell them the SEL things that we're working on each day."

Teachers also indicated that getting the families SEL resources can be challenging. P10 discussed this,

> The families need a lot of resources. Unfortunately, we used to have a school psychologist that would come in that would really be that point person and be like, "Okay, you know, you guys need therapy. Let's find a free resource." We used to have that and we don't now, so in lieu of that, I try to sort of figure out how to make those connections and find those resources.

P3 indicated that while families may need resources, they may not always be open to the resources that she shares with them: "The SEL program has some really great family resources with ideas like, at home you can do this, but the families haven't used those much. There's only so much that we can push back on them." Participants valued family support, but were challenged by how to build school-family partnerships around SEL.

Theme 3: Teachers are Challenged by a Lack of Knowledge

The third theme focused on challenges that teachers experienced related to a lack of knowledge. Teachers described inadequate SEL training, inconsistent understandings of SEL, self-driven learning, and discomfort with SEL.

Inadequate Training

Nine of the 11 teachers discussed that a lack of training in SEL contributed to challenges in differentiating SEL curricula. Most of the teachers received no training or minimal training in SEL curricula before they were asked to use it. P3 felt that this was

the case with most curricula: "And with any kind of curriculum, they kind of dump the curriculum on you." P6 felt that she had plenty of training in other curricular areas, but a lack of training in SEL: "We had so many professional development trainings I would say over the years, just with overall student academic needs. But not necessarily any social emotional training that I can think of." P9 emphasized the connection between training and SEL differentiation: "Aside from time, teachers need more training if they are going to differentiate SEL. Most of the teachers at my school have no training at all in SEL. It's super important." Several of the teachers described the school counselor as the one who chooses the SEL curriculum and provides the teachers with the curriculum; however, there was often no formal training that accompanied the SEL curriculum. P8 described this process: "We really didn't have any professional development. Our school counselor just introduced it to us and said we are going to use this program now."

For the three teachers who indicated that they did receive some training in SEL curricula, they shared that the training often felt irrelevant. P3 described SEL training as: "They give you the same training over and over and over, and we're like, 'we already know how to do that'…the people just talk at us." Similarly, P4 felt the training that she received in SEL was not helpful for teachers with experience, such as herself: "The woman went through the program on Zoom in a very basic way. We've been teaching for so long. We didn't need it spelled out like what she did." P10 also felt like the training that she received on SEL curriculum was not meaningful and she wished for a deeper-level training with more specific strategies:

The training is not nearly enough. It's just surface stuff, you know what I mean?

So, they might have a PD on the morning meeting or building relationships. But it

really doesn't give you like: Here are the strategies. Or an 'if then' mentality: If

you've got a kid who's doing this, then you should do this. That, I think, is what

we've all been hoping for. But that kind of training hasn't made it to us yet.

Four teachers specifically focused on modeling as a type of training that would be

helpful for them. These teachers felt that watching someone implement a SEL lesson

would strengthen their skills in teaching and differentiating SEL. Some of the teachers

saw the counselor as the expert on SEL and wanted to watch them implement a lesson.

P1 described this as: "I would love to watch a trained counselor do some things that

would be appropriate for me to address in the classroom. I would love to see them, you

know, model it for me." For P2, she also wished for more modeling of SEL from the

school counselor: "Our counselors came in at the beginning of last year and did a quick

little lesson about the SEL, what it was, but that was about it. It would be great to see

more from them." P4 commented that they get to see modeling of academic lessons, but

not SEL lessons:

It would be easier to use the program if they came in to teach it, so we could have

seen a full lesson implemented. I mean we do that for other curriculum, for math

and reading, but I don't think we've ever done it for SEL.

The participants received no SEL training or inadequate SEL training. Almost every

participant described this lack of training as contributing to challenges in differentiating

SEL curricula.

Inconsistent Understandings of SEL

Teachers in the study had very different levels of knowledge of SEL. One way that this was evident was in how they defined SEL. P5, P9, and P11 focused on it as a time for students to feel safe and loved within a community. P11 shared her thoughts on the benefits of this, "One of the results of this focus on SEL is that they feel safe and connected to their little community. If you don't feel safe, you're not going to learn." P5 also emphasized the importance of the children feeling loved in her classroom: "They're getting that interaction with me and with their classmates. And before they go home, just knowing that they're loved." P9 also defined SEL as building a classroom where students feel safe and loved:

> SEL in the classroom to me, is an environment where the students feel safe, comfortable, loved, valued, heard. They know it's okay to make mistakes, know it's safe to take risks. They feel supported by their peers and by adults; they know they can speak freely without any judgment.

P1, P6 and P8 defined SEL as curriculum that helps the classroom to run more smoothly with an emphasis on behavior management. P1 shared, "They are improving in their lack of interruption with each other, how they share, and then wait and listen to a story. There are fewer problems." P6 defined SEL as a shared understanding of expectations: "It's just established norms in the classroom. We have a mission statement. That helps everyone." P8 also described a focus on classroom expectations as a key part of SEL, "In our class it's about self-control and using the strategies. Things like not

interrupting and just the everyday expectations. The way our class is structured with SEL, we have routines and expectations in place that really help them."

P2, P3, P7 and P10 defined SEL with a focus on the elements in the CASEL (2023b) framework. P3 highlighted the benefits of practicing specific language in SEL lessons: "It gives the kids the tools with language of being able to express their emotions." P2 emphasized collaboration and perspective taking: "I see SEL making a difference with collaboration. Just for them to be able to hear the other viewpoint of their classmate allows them to feel like more comfortable explaining how they feel." P7 was the only teacher in the study who specifically mentioned the CASEL framework and all five competencies:

> SEL, it's a process where people, adults and children are constantly building their skills so that they can navigate life's moments and be successful human beings. And make good decisions and have positive relationships. I go back to the five core competencies: self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making.

Participants possessed varied understandings of SEL and defined SEL differently based on these understandings. In defining SEL, participants emphasized community, classroom management, or the skills in the CASEL framework.

Self-Driven Learning

Many of the teachers in the study attributed high or low levels of SEL knowledge to individual teachers' interest in SEL and their willingness to educate themselves. P3 described this variation in teachers' knowledge of SEL as, "some of it is out of interest

and who finds SEL important. And so, I do think there's not quite as much equity in that because it depends on the teacher." P7, who described herself as a "practical expert on SEL" based on her own self-driven learning, mentioned that no other teachers at her school actively differentiate SEL. She believed that a lack of training in SEL in teacher preparation programs contributes to inconsistent understandings of SEL. P7 shared:

> Everyone agrees on, SEL, it's so important. I still find that there's like a lot of variability in how people understand it. A big part of that is it's not uniformly addressed in Ed Prep programs. So, you've got new teachers coming in without the skills and knowledge. And you've got experienced teachers that have really varying levels of confidence and competence and even curiosity around SEL sometimes. Because if they don't have to teach it, they're not going to.

For the teachers in the study that felt they had a strong understanding of SEL, they attributed these understandings to their own, independent research on SEL. P3 shared that she pushed her administrator to allow her to go to a conference on SEL, "When I went to the conference, I was one of the very few teachers there. It was really meant for administrators, but it should have been for teachers." Several teachers educated themselves on SEL by reading, such as P9: "I've read so many books about SEL; they have really made me a better teacher." Similarly, P7 discussed that once she became interested in SEL she wanted to learn about it as much as possible: "I just constantly read, go on webinars, you know, learn as much as I can…I just got really good at finding SEL resources. It was really self-driven." Finally, P10 shared that behavioral challenges led her to conduct her own research on SEL:

I didn't know how I was going to survive that year. And it was kind of in doing all

that research that I sort of stumbled onto it…now I know so much about SEL but

I'm the only one at my school who teaches it with fidelity.

For P5, who did not see herself as an expert on SEL and received minimal training and

support at her school, she shared that she finds helpful resources online, "I'll kind of see a

need in my classroom and then find an online resource for ideas. Just good little activities

for learning how to share, how to be kind, just using something like that." Other teachers

relied solely on the SEL curriculum that their school provided them with, and some

teachers shared that they were less certain about what differentiating SEL looked like. P1

asked twice in the interview, "I guess you could call that differentiating SEL; is that what

it is?" Participants that wanted to learn more about SEL did so through self-driven,

independent research on SEL.

Discomfort

Five teachers expressed discomfort about teaching SEL; these five teachers had

minimal or no training in SEL and had not learned about SEL independently. These five

teachers discussed concerns about what their students might share during SEL, and this

affected how they approached SEL. P1 discussed her hesitation to teach SEL in small

groups and mentioned that she focuses on SEL only as a whole class because, "I think

that students are less likely to share their deepest pain in a whole group. It's more on the

superficial, lighter end of things…you're not going to get too deep in such a group." P2

also described limiting the possibility of students sharing personal information: "They

will share things and I will say, 'Okay, you can't talk about that. You can tell me in

private.' Just so they learn, like a buffer, because sometimes they want to tell all of their parents' business." P5 discussed that she tries to limit what her students say in the whole group and described these challenges as developmental: "With the younger kids, things can really get off track. So, when it gets personal, we are more pulling them off to the side to talk privately now instead of sharing whole group."

Other teachers described the importance of staying more neutral during SEL lessons, so that nothing is discussed that conflicts with family values or may upset a child. P4 described her hesitation: "It's been a challenge during SEL because you don't know how involved you want to get in the conversation because you don't know how people are feeling at home about the issue." P1 also shared that she wanted SEL time to be enjoyable for her students and tries to protect them from anything difficult that might arise: "I'd rather not lead a student ever in an emotional direction… I just help them along that path, to find comfort or information or peace." Some participants expressed discomfort about topics that may arise in SEL; this discomfort affected how the participants delivered SEL curricula.

Theme 4: Teachers are Challenged by a Lack of Flexibility

Teachers were challenged by a lack of flexibility. They experienced a lack of flexibility in how time was allotted at their school for SEL and in the rigidity of the SEL curricula.

Time

Nearly every teacher in the study discussed that a lack of time in the school day makes teaching and differentiating SEL more challenging. Many participants shared that

if they could change one thing about how they teach SEL, it would be to have more

flexibility in how they used time for SEL. For some teachers, they wanted more time that

was set aside specifically for SEL in the school day. P5 shared, "It would be nice to know,

okay, I get to do this every day and don't have to rush through it, just having those set

minutes." P2 discussed what happened at her previous school when there was no

designated time for SEL: "We didn't have dedicated time for SEL lessons. So those

lessons kind of went on the back burner." Several teachers shared that they often felt

rushed trying to fit SEL into the school day. P6 shared, "if I could carve out even more

time just to talk to my students and slow down a little bit, that would be so nice."

In addition to wanting more time for SEL, many of the teachers discussed that

rigorous academic demands make it more challenging to include and differentiate SEL

curriculum each day. Several teachers described difficult decisions they had to make

about how to fit SEL into the day. P5 described these competing demands for time:

> On Mondays, I also do something called 'High Low Buffalo' where they get
>
> to share about their weekends …it does take a little bit out of our day. I know we
>
> have to play catch up the rest of the week, which is hard. But I do think it's
>
> important to hear, if they want to share.

For other teachers, having so many academic demands meant having little time to focus

on SEL. P1 described liking the SEL curriculum, but using it minimally: "This program

would be wonderful for the counselors. But as teachers, we've got a lot of other things we

have to do." While most teachers focused on SEL during the morning meeting, P6 wished

she had time for an afternoon meeting: "I wish I actually had time at the end of the day to

do a second meeting, just to share 'glows and grows' of the day. That would be so good for the students." Even though P4's school mandated a morning meeting with SEL, she shared that other programs often took precedence over SEL curriculum: "Most of us do it first thing in the morning ...but some grade levels, like when they have push-in intervention, they can't do it first thing, and I'm not sure when they get to it." Several teachers emphasized that SEL is covered in the morning meeting, and they don't have the flexibility or the time to allow it to extend beyond that part of the schedule. While a few teachers embedded SEL throughout the school day, the majority of the teachers focused on SEL only during the morning meeting. Morning meeting time dedicated to SEL ranged from 5 minutes a day (P8) to 30 minutes each morning (P10). P6 shared, "We're required to do our morning meeting every single day for 10 minutes, so that's when they get the SEL. That's the only time for it." Several veteran teachers reflected on having more time and flexibility for SEL earlier in their career, such as P1:

> I know if I had the time to implement it, I could do a lot more. But I don't have that kind of flexibility anymore. We are so scheduled to the second in every other area…I no longer have the flexibility that I may have had in the 90s or the early 2000s to say, 'You know what? Instead of social studies today, we're going to talk about this SEL concept today.'

Time was the most commonly cited challenge by participants; almost every teacher wanted more time to flexibly address SEL throughout the school day.

Rigid Curricula

About one third of the teachers discussed that the highly scripted nature of their SEL curriculum made it more challenging to differentiate the curriculum. When P8 was asked about how she differentiates the SEL curriculum to meet her students' differing needs, she stated, "We basically follow the curriculum. We have to." P1 shared this challenge in more depth:

> They want to know, are you doing the program the way it's written? I would love to be able to do what they asked me to do, but in addition to that, choose things that I would need at the moment. That my students need. But there's no time to do that.

Several of the teachers who described a highly scripted curriculum also described the stringent oversight from their district in making sure the curriculum is used with fidelity. This involved tracking how much time the teachers spent on the SEL program each day and how many of the slides they covered from the curriculum. P8 described an increase in monitoring by the school district:

> Last year the school district was tracking how much time we were spending on it, and if we were using the SEL resources. So, then they would do walkthroughs, just to make sure we were, you know, implementing the lessons. But this year, they said, they're really cracking down and making sure that you are… that teachers are doing them and doing them with fidelity. It has to have a certain amount of clicks in the program each day.

P2 had a similar experience and said that she had to follow the SEL program very closely, with minimal differentiation, as she felt she was being watched by the district. She shared:

> Each week there's like four or five different components that we have to reach. And I guess they can tell if you go into that far enough point in the program or something with your students. Yeah, I think they monitor to see how many teachers are doing it.

For P4, following the program closely with minimal differentiation was done simply because, "it's a mandate. We don't really have a choice." P2 described that she also does not have a choice of what SEL skill is addressed each week. "The curriculum gives a topic, a social skill, and a domain. Let's say it's friendship, then the domain would be respect or something. And then you have to discuss that topic that week, no matter what." P7 described her frustration with highly scripted programs that address SEL only during one part of the day. Notably, she was the sole teacher at her school who did not follow the scripted SEL curriculum during morning meetings; instead, she chose to embed SEL throughout her school day. P7 shared:

> And all the curricula are the same. I'm like, "why are we teaching teachers how to teach SEL the same way we were 25 years ago?" Really, we know interdisciplinary things work, you know, very social things work. Why haven't we moved past this one set time in the morning for SEL?

While several participants flexibly integrated SEL curricula throughout the school day, the majority of the participants noted that the scripted nature of the SEL curricula and

focus on teaching the program with fidelity made it more challenging to differentiate SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs.

Theme 5: Students' Challenging Behaviors Make Differentiating SEL More Difficult

Participants discussed that challenging student behaviors contributed to difficulties in differentiating SEL. The teachers described recent increases in challenging behaviors and specific behavioral challenges that were difficult to address.

Increases in Challenging Behaviors

Nine participants indicated that challenging student behaviors have increased over the last few years. P10 described this increase in challenging behavior:

Over the last couple of years these kids have no attention span, no self-regulation skills. There have been more meltdowns, more crying. It seems like everything's gone to the extreme… And I feel like, no one's saying, "okay, these kids are suffering a lot more than they used to be."

Six of the teachers specifically cited Covid as contributing to more significant challenging behaviors, and they suggested that more SEL is needed since COVID. P9 shared, "Post COVID the need for SEL in the classroom has dramatically increased. A lot of students are coming in lacking skills that need to be taught and practiced." P8 echoed this sentiment, stating, "After COVID, obviously students needed more emotional support." P7 was more specific, suggesting that COVID had contributed to academic and social delays: "Most kids are academically and socially behind one to two years, due to

the pandemic." P4 discussed that not only are more students struggling with behavior

challenges, but the behaviors themselves are more significant:

> After COVID, we have noticed that kids are severe, they are a lot needier, they're
>
> coming in with a lot of behaviors that we haven't seen before and a lot more of
>
> them. We call them 'OTC' or Off the Charts.

> While most of the participants cited COVID as contributing to an increase in

challenging behaviors, P3 and P10 shared that challenging behaviors are increasing, but

noted that they don't attribute these changes in behavior challenges to COVID. P10

stated, "Everybody wants to blame COVID right? But I noticed it even before then. And I

have got to tell you and this is takes us off into a whole other direction…I attribute a lot

of the behavior problems to the screen time." P3 also noticed an increase in challenging

behaviors, but was concerned about the focus on COVID, stating: "At some point we

have to stop blaming COVID for the things that we see in our children." While

participants disagreed on the cause of increases in challenging behaviors, almost every

participant agreed that there has been an increase in challenging student behaviors.

Specific Challenging Behaviors

> Participants focused on a number of specific behavioral challenges that were

difficult to address within the SEL curriculum. Six different challenging behaviors were

highlighted by multiple participants; these included: defiance, aggression, anger,

dysregulation, difficulty in navigating social situations, and anxiety. The most commonly

discussed behavioral challenges were aggression and dysregulation. P10 described the

behavioral challenges as most significant at the beginning of the school year:

We've had issues with aggression, self-regulation. So, at the beginning of the year

we had some furniture being thrown, and things of that nature that you think

about when you think about really heated responses from kids.

P4 shared that the she is struggling to get students with aggression the support that they

need:

It's hard trying to figure out what's going on and get them the appropriate support

that they need. Yeah, behaviors like full-on throwing fits, throwing themselves on

the ground, destroying classrooms, pulling things off the walls, throwing

furniture.

Other teachers described how quickly their students could become angry or frustrated and

cited these behaviors as very challenging to address. P7 described this as: "Some of my

students have a very, very quick trigger to anger or dysregulation." P8 described one

particular student who she was struggling to support through the SEL curriculum: "He

has a very difficult time controlling his emotions. He gets easily frustrated, and just, has

lots of unexpected behaviors in the classroom." Participants highlighted specific

behavioral challenges; aggression and dysregulation were emphasized by multiple

participants as especially challenging behaviors to address within the SEL curricula.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness depends upon the researcher ensuring a

high level of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in the study

(Burkholder et al., 2016). I employed credibility, dependability, transferability, and

confirmability strategies to meet evidence of trustworthiness. Data collection was carried

out using semistructured interviews and maintaining an audit trail as the study

progressed.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the measure of confidence in research findings based on the

plausibility of the data (Burkholder et al., 2016). Credibility was established by using

multiple methods for data collection which ensures rigor in the findings. I used a

semistructured interview format, with follow-up probes as necessary to reach data

saturation (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I also built rapport with study participants to help

participants feel comfortable sharing complete and accurate descriptions. To establish

rapport, I remained friendly, open, engaged, and professional during all preinterview

communication and throughout the interview. I continued to interview participants until

data saturation was reached. I followed up all interviews with a thank you email and

invitation to reach out to me if there was anything else they wanted to share or amend. I

did not receive any follow-up questions or comments, so no further action was needed.

Credibility was also established by reviewing each transcript many times to ensure that I

was properly interpreting the participants' statements.

Transferability

Transferability determines whether the study is generalizable by readers to other

settings (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I strengthened transferability by recruiting participants

from diverse geographic areas across the United States. Participants taught in seven

different states, including the northeast, south, and west. Geographic diversity supports

transferability to diverse settings. I provided an extensive description of the data and the

context. This rich description allows readers to determine the appropriateness of transferring my findings to other research and to other contexts.

Dependability

Dependability determines if the data would remain consistent if the study was replicated (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To address dependability, I used an interview guide to assure that all participants were asked the same questions in the same order. Participants were notified that participation was completely voluntary and that they could choose to withdraw from the study at any point. Data saturation was established when no new codes, categories, or themes were generated from data analysis. I also used discrepant case analysis to enhance validity and included any discrepant data. Utilizing my reflective journal throughout the data collection and data analysis processes supported dependability by creating an audit trail.

Confirmability

Confirmability determines whether other researchers would similarly interpret the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I used a journal to reflect on my research process. This journal also helped me to bring awareness to any potential assumptions or biases. Systematic documentation of the analysis process and in-depth reflection supported rigor and confirmability by bringing awareness to the analysis process and by addressing potential bias or assumptions (see Patton, 2015). Including the exact wording of participant responses from the transcripts supported confirmability by ensuring that my assumptions and bias did not affect interpretation of the data.

Summary

In Chapter 4, I described the data analysis process and shared the findings of the study. The study was designed to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives of strategies and challenges to differentiating SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs. Semistructured interviews were used to collect data from the 11 participants. Saldaña's (2021) analysis methods were used to identify patterns and themes that emerged from the data. A total of five themes were identified: (a) teachers use a variety of strategies to differentiate SEL curricula, (b) teachers are challenged by a lack of support, (c) teachers are challenged by a lack of knowledge, (d) teachers are challenged by a lack of flexibility, and (e) students' challenging behaviors make differentiating SEL more difficult. Theme 1 answered RQ1, while Themes 2, 3, 4, and 5 answered RQ2.

The first theme was teachers use a variety of strategies to differentiate SEL. Teachers taught and differentiated SEL by encouraging relationships and interactions between students that allowed the students to practice SEL skills. Some teachers used peer modeling of SEL skills to support students who struggled with specific SEL skills. Teachers also learned about their students' life experiences, which helped the teachers to differentiate SEL curriculum to make it more relevant to student experiences and developmental needs. Some teachers indicated that embedding SEL throughout the school day, especially in reading and writing, helped them to differentiate SEL.

The second theme was teachers are challenged by a lack of support. Teachers expressed a need for more support within the school, especially from counselors and their administrator. Many teachers identified a need for more support from families and

stronger partnerships with families. Teachers in the study felt that a lack of communication with families about SEL and differing SEL expectations at home and school contributed to making it more difficult for teachers to differentiate SEL effectively.

The third theme was a lack of knowledge makes differentiating SEL more challenging. Teachers consistently shared that they received no formal training in SEL or the training they received was inadequate. They wanted more modeling of lessons from counselors and more in-depth training with strategies for supporting students with specific challenges. Teachers had varying levels of knowledge related to SEL and some teachers had a lack of knowledge of SEL. Some participants defined SEL as a focus on love and community, others emphasized classroom management, and other teachers focused on developing the self-management, social awareness, and responsible decision-making skills that are included in CASEL's (2023d) framework. The teachers who identified themselves as experts in SEL had conducted their own, independent research on SEL. Some teachers expressed discomfort about what students may share in a SEL lesson and adjusted SEL lessons to try to minimize what students might share.

The fourth theme was a lack of flexibility makes differentiating SEL curricula more challenging. The majority of teachers in the study indicated that not having enough time in the school day to flexibly address SEL created significant challenges and made it difficult for them to meet their students' diverse needs. Additionally, teachers indicated that highly scripted SEL curricula coupled with stringent oversight from administrators to use the curricula with fidelity made it more difficult to differentiate the SEL curricula.

The fifth theme was that students' challenging behaviors make differentiating SEL more difficult. Nearly every teacher in the study discussed a recent increase in the number of students with challenging behaviors and an increase in the severity of those behaviors. Teachers discussed various challenging behaviors that they struggle to address through differentiated SEL; the most commonly cited behaviors included dysregulation and physical aggression. Most of the teachers in the study felt ill-equipped to address the SEL needs of their students with the most challenging behaviors.

In this chapter, I provided an explanation of the steps taken to ensure the trustworthiness of this study by addressing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in this study. Trustworthiness was addressed through various methods, including maintaining a reflective journal, achieving data saturation, using semistructured interview format, and utilizing interview quotes.

In Chapter 5, I will interpret the study's findings. An analysis of the results for each theme will be provided, highlighting their alignment with the relevant peer-reviewed literature in Chapter 2. The chapter will also include a discussion of the study's limitations and recommendations for addressing them. I will outline potential areas for future research, opportunities for social change, and the study's broader implications.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives of strategies and challenges to differentiating SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs. The data for this study were collected through strinterviews using Zoom and the telephone. The 11 participants were K–3 teachers in the United States with between 4 and 26 years of teaching experience. Five themes emerged from data analysis: (a) teachers use a variety of strategies to differentiate SEL, (b) teachers are challenged by a lack of support, (c) teachers are challenged by a lack of knowledge, (d) teachers are challenged by a lack of flexibility, and (e) students' challenging behaviors make differentiating SEL more difficult.

In this chapter, I interpret the findings of the study and explore how the results provide an understanding of effective strategies and challenges in differentiating SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs. I compare the research findings with current literature and the conceptual framework of Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism. The chapter also includes a description of the limitations of the study, my recommendations for future research, and a discussion of the implications of the study.

Interpretation of the Findings

After obtaining approval from the Walden University IRB, I began data collection. Using purposeful sampling, I recruited 11 participants for one-on-one, semistructured interviews. For data analysis, Saldaña's (2021) methods were used to identify patterns and themes that emerged from the data. My interpretation of the findings was grounded in the literature review and the conceptual framework of Vygotsky's

(1978) theory of social constructivism. In this section, I describe the four themes based on their corresponding RQs. Theme 1 addressed RQ1: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives of strategies used to differentiate SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs? Themes 2, 3, 4, and 5 addressed RQ2: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives of challenges to differentiating SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs?

Theme 1: Teachers Use a Variety of Strategies to Differentiate SEL Curricula

Vygotsky (1978) emphasized the importance of social interactions to support children in developing social-emotional skills. The majority of participants in this study differentiated SEL by building more social interactions into their curriculum. Ginja and Chen (2020) described Tomlinson's model of differentiation, suggesting that teachers can reach diverse learners by differentiating the content, the process, the product, or the environment. Many participants in the current study differentiated the SEL process by prioritizing relationship-based instruction. P9 discussed her commitment to social interaction by saying, "We talk a lot about feelings and how we can support each other during happy or sad times. I give students time each day to talk to each other." More than half of the teachers in the study discussed using peers to model the SEL skills that they are trying to teach. P4 described intentionally building groups around peer role models, stating, "We put students in that could use the extra support…we put other students in that were great role models…we saw huge improvement because it was a small group, and it was intense and purposeful." The participants in this study often described the

social interactions that they built into SEL as joyful for their students. P6 described some of the strategies she used to build relationships in her SEL lessons by saying,

> I pose a question, they turn and talk, and then we have five kids share out. Then we have a minidance party every day… It just sets the tone for the day. It really gets us all connected and it's fun.

Altun and Nayman (2022) found that differentiation, including interactions between students, supports more joyful and more permanent learning compared to nondifferentiated instruction. P2 described how differentiating instruction to include more student interactions in her SEL lessons is enjoyable:

> I add in a lot of collaboration with "Turn and Talks" with other students, so they can hear each other's opinions as well. So, I think with that part added into the curriculum, it's been fun, for the students and for me.

> Participants in this study also adjusted SEL curriculum to make it more relevant based on the developmental needs and prior experiences of their students. This type of differentiation connects to Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism because it allows students to work within their ZPD, supporting stronger learning outcomes (see Martinez & Plevyak, 2020; Roiha & Polso, 2021). Additionally, by learning about students' experiences, teachers can connect new concepts to students' prior learning, scaffold, and make curricula more accessible (Bipath et al., 2022; Robinson-Hill, 2022; Vygotsky & Kozulin, 2011). P3 described limiting the SEL tools that she explicitly teaches to better align the curriculum with her students' life experiences, stating: "They haven't had the life experiences to be able to properly use those tools yet." Differentiating SEL based on

students' developmental needs is supported by the research of Mahoney et al. (2021) who suggested that SEL programs are most effective when the curricula is personalized and teachers recognize that different supports are needed for different students.

The participants in the current study who felt they were most skilled in teaching SEL embedded SEL throughout the school day. While there was little research on embedding SEL in the United States, Blewitt et al. (2021) found that Australian teachers viewed embedding SEL curricula into everyday interactions with students as a promising strategy for meeting the diverse needs of their students. P7 shared her commitment to embedding SEL throughout her school day, responding that "I have the desire to embed SEL in everything I do…I do things all day long that are related to SEL." While only four participants in this study embedded SEL curricula throughout the school day, all four of these participants felt strongly that embedding SEL was essential for meeting the diverse needs of their students. P3 described her own development in moving away from teaching SEL at a set time of the day and moving towards embedding it throughout her school day, remarking,

> I used to try and build SEL in as a portion of the day. But now, as with a lot of other things, because it's such an integral part of what we do, it is embedded throughout our day… to have it be more organic within our day is more effective.

The four teachers who embedded SEL curriculum throughout the day (i.e., P3, P7, P9 and P11) were four of the more experienced teachers in this study, with between 9 and 24 years of teaching experience. Thierry et al. (2022) found that teachers with fewer years of experience were less likely to maintain fidelity with SEL curricula. However, Liesch et

al. (2022) reported that there were no meaningful differences between beginning and veteran teachers in their commitment and comfort with SEL. In the current study, the teachers with the fewest years of experience tended to deliver SEL curricula only during the morning meeting, while teachers with more experience tended to embed SEL curricula throughout the school day.

Theme 2: Teachers are Challenged by a Lack of Support

Participants in this study discussed that a lack of support from counselors and administrators contributed to challenges in differentiating SEL curricula. Jones and Cater (2020) discovered that although the principals in their study generally supported SEL, none of the principals had a clear or consistent understanding of SEL. Several participants in the current study discussed their principal's lack of leadership and understanding related to SEL. P10 shared, "It would be easier to communicate about SEL with the parents, with administrative buy-in and support." The stakeholder that most of teachers in the current study mentioned as needing support from were school counselors. Chance et al. (2023) found that when counselors came into classrooms and taught full SEL lessons, modeling these lessons for teachers, the students experienced increased self-awareness, self-management, and social/emotional competence. Seven of the participants in this study discussed wanting more support from their school counselors. For some participants, they felt that having more than one counselor at their school would support SEL implementation. Other participants wanted the counselors to come into their classroom, such as P4 who stated, "I wish she would be able to come into the classroom and actually teach SEL lessons. That would help us a lot." While the participants did not

use the word coaching, many of them wanted more guidance and modeling from school counselors. This type of support was defined in the literature as coaching and was emphasized as a critical form of support for teachers in SEL delivery (Blewitt et al., 2020; Hunter et al., 2022; Stickle et al., 2019). Stickle et al. (2019) found that teachers who had a quality coaching relationship felt more confident in their abilities to use SEL curricula in their classroom. Similarly, Blewitt et al. (2020) stated that coaching helped early childhood teachers integrate SEL practices throughout the school day. In the current study, none of the participants experienced coaching related to SEL.

Participants in the current study expressed the need for stronger SEL support from families, and many discussed challenges in forming supportive partnerships with families. P10 described this need, saying, "We need to increase that sense of community with the families. So that they know what our SEL curriculum is, so they know that we're trying to address these issues." The literature suggested that teachers often experience challenges in building SEL partnership with families (Cho et al., 2019; Mischenko et al., 2022). Researchers reported that building SEL partnerships with families could be difficult, with some parents resisting SEL curricula in the classroom, most often when it was initially introduced (Jomaa et al., 2023). These researchers also discovered that teachers were often frustrated by families' lack of participation in the home-based components of the SEL program. While most participants in the current study focused on the school-based components of the SEL curriculum, P3 did discuss her frustration about inconsistencies between the SEL program at school and what was happening at home, stating, "If the language isn't being used at home and the SEL tools aren't being used at

home, then it makes it more challenging for it to be something that the kids can hold on to." Mahoney et al., (2021) found that the most effective SEL included families who not only supported the curriculum, but the families also had a shared understanding of the goals of SEL; when families had that shared understanding, they were more likely to practice and model the SEL skills at home. To build a SEL partnership between schools and families, Hayashi et al. (2022) suggested that families should be included in creating the SEL curriculum, differentiating it to reflect family practices and culture. While participants in the current study expressed the need for more family-school partnerships related to SEL, none discussed including families in the curriculum. However, several participants did express a desire to build partnerships around SEL, such as P10 who said, "I think if we brought the parents in more and said, 'This is just as important as the academic subjects that we're tackling, and it's all going be done in tandem because that's what's best for the kids.'" Most of the participants discussed wanting stronger SEL family-school partnerships but seemed unsure of how to build those partnerships. P4 described her attempts to increase support from families related to SEL, saying, "We do send something home at the beginning of the year about SEL. But there isn't something that goes home every month. But that would be interesting too to have, perhaps that would help with the families?"

Theme 3: Teachers are Challenged by a Lack of Knowledge

Participants emphasized the need for more training in SEL, including preservice training and professional development. The literature strongly supported the importance of preservice teacher training and ongoing professional development in SEL (D'Emidio-

Caston et al., 2019; Haslip & Terry, 2022; Munk et al., 2022; Wood, 2020). Hunter et al. (2020) reported that 90% of the teachers in their study indicated that they needed more training in SEL. Other researchers noted that a lack of adequate training was a key barrier to successfully implementing SEL (Morgan et al., 2022). Almost all the participants in the current study felt that they received inadequate training in SEL from their schools or in their preservice training. Most of the participants described a lack of training in SEL, such as P8, who stated: "We really didn't have any professional development on SEL. Our school counselor just handed it to us." This experience was supported by Steed (2022) who reported that many teacher participants indicated that they were often given an SEL kit, with little training or coaching on how to use the curriculum.

Flushman et al. (2021) found that teacher training programs rarely addressed SEL and when they did, it was addressed in a very basic manner. After examining SEL in teacher preparation programs, Saunders (2021) recommended that changes need to be made to these programs to better prepare teachers to support their students in SEL. P7 echoed this sentiment, stating, "To implement SEL and really reach diverse students, teachers need to learn about SEL in prep, before they start teaching. They need to learn about what it is and why it's important."

Loeb et al. (2019) found that even when teachers received the same training in the same program, significant differences existed across classrooms and across schools in students' SEL growth. The researchers hypothesized that the variance could be attributed to individual teacher qualities. Knowledge of SEL and individual teachers' qualities differed for the participants in the current study significantly. These differences in

understandings of SEL were attributable in part to some teachers independently choosing to learn about SEL, while other teachers did not. P3 described these differences in teachers' knowledge of SEL, stating, "It is out of interest and who finds it important. And so, I do think there's a little bit of… not quite as much equity." Liesch et al. (2022) discovered that early childhood teachers who placed a higher value on SEL were more likely to deliver effective curricula. While the effectiveness of curricula was not examined in the current study, the four participants who shared that they had conducted extensive research on SEL based on their personal interest also discussed extensive SEL successes in their classrooms. The other participants, who had not conducted independent research on SEL, discussed more challenges in implementing SEL. Researchers stated that knowledge of SEL also related to teachers' understandings of their own SEL competencies (Hemi & Kasperski, 2023).

Several of the participants in the current study who engaged in self-driven learning about SEL for their students reflected on how they applied these SEL strategies to themselves in the classroom. P7 shared how she used SEL to remain calm and patient with her students in challenging moments: "Sometimes I have to stand there like this for like 1 minute. And, let me tell you, it takes all my self-awareness and self-management to do it. But I'm their model."

For some teachers in the current study, discomfort with SEL made differentiating the curriculum more challenging. While teacher discomfort with SEL emerged in the literature minimally, Liesch et al. (2022) did find a relationship between teachers' comfort with SEL and the commitment to teaching it. Researchers also found that

teachers' sense of self-efficacy in supporting students' behavior was associated with their fidelity in implementing SEL curricula (Thierry et al., 2022). The five participants in the current study who expressed discomfort with teaching SEL were all teachers who had limited or no training in SEL. These teachers were concerned about what students might share during SEL lessons, as P2 described, "I was like, 'OK, OK, let's not share anything else about it…you can tell me privately, but not in front of the whole class.'" The teachers who expressed discomfort with SEL sometimes seemed unsure of what differentiation was and why their school was using the SEL program in a particular way. P1 expressed this by saying,

> I guess you could call that differentiation, maybe? The school counselor comes into one classroom at a time on whatever SEL issue they choose. I guess that's differentiation. So, I don't know why they choose that lesson but I'm assuming that these might be a reaction to an uptick in a certain behavior, maybe?

This lack of clarity on differentiation aligns with research conducted by McNeill and Polly (2023) who reported that early childhood teachers often possess a limited understanding of differentiation.

Theme 4: Teachers are Challenged by a Lack of Flexibility

The most common challenge cited by participants in this study was finding enough time to flexibly include SEL curricula. Participants indicated that if they could change one thing about how they teach SEL, it would be more flexibility in time to address SEL. This challenge was strongly supported by the literature (Dyson et al., 2023, Hunter et al., 2022; Kaspar & Massey, 2022). Hunter et al. (2022) found that a lack of

time for SEL delivery was the most commonly cited constraint by teachers. Similarly, Kaspar and Massey (2022) reported that teachers felt stressed trying to fit another piece of curriculum into an already full school day. Finding enough time in the school day for SEL was a challenge noted by nearly every participant in the current study. P5 shared this common sentiment, stating, "It would be nice to know, okay, I get to do this every day and I don't have to rush through it."

Participants in the study devoted time to SEL in two main ways: focusing on SEL during morning meetings and embedding SEL throughout the school day. Participants with less flexibility in their school day and with less personal knowledge of SEL tended to focus on SEL only during the morning meeting. Tilhou (2020) found that morning meetings were a common time in the school day for early childhood teachers to devote to SEL. In this study, the amount of time dedicated solely to SEL in the morning meetings differed significantly across participants, ranging from 5 minutes daily for P8 to 30 minutes each day for P10. Parker and Hodgson (2020) discovered that time was essential when supporting students' SEL, but that teachers also needed to use time flexibly based on individual student needs, with the recognition that students internalize SEL skills gradually, over time. The majority of the participants in this study discussed the importance of using time flexibly throughout the day, with opportunities to address SEL based on student needs at that moment. P9 was one of the few participants in the study who felt that she had the flexibility to address SEL throughout the school day:

> We need to be allowed to do class SEL lessons as situations arise, not just in the
>
> morning meeting. For example, if some friends are feeling left out, I'll read a

book about feeling left out, talk about the feelings of everyone in the story, then

have the kids write or draw about it.

The majority of the participants stated that they did not have enough time or the flexibility in the daily schedule to address SEL outside of the morning meeting.

An additional challenge that teachers in the study discussed was highly scripted curricula; the teachers felt that the lack of flexibility in the curricula made it more difficult to differentiate SEL to meet their students' diverse needs. Lin et al. (2023) found that the authors of most SEL curricula design the curricula with the assumption that all children can learn SEL in the same way. Similarly, Kennedy et al. (2019) found that SEL curricula takes a standardized, one-size-fits all approach to learning with few or no suggestions for differentiation. Pereira et al. (2019) discovered that when curricula does not include materials for differentiation and teachers have to create their own, this rarely happens because of time constraints. P1 described the challenges in differentiating a highly scripted curriculum that has strong oversight from her district: "We don't have the ability to pick and choose what we teach or how we teach it…they want to see, are you doing the program the way it's written?" Inflexibility, in time and in curricula, contributed to challenges in differentiating SEL curricula.

Theme 5: Students' Challenging Behaviors Make Differentiating SEL More Difficult

Almost every participant in the study discussed recent increases in challenging behaviors which have contributed to the need for more effective SEL in schools. Many of the participants in this study directly attributed the increases in challenging behavior to

COVID; P9 stated: "Post-COVID, the need for SEL in the classroom has dramatically increased." Signorelli et al. (2021) reported that students need more extensive SEL since COVID. Similarly, Simonton et al. (2024) stated that for children who were isolated during the COVID-19 pandemic, they were more likely to struggle with social and emotional competencies in school. Many of the specific behavioral challenges the participants in this study cited focused on social and emotional competencies, such as difficulty in reading social cues. P7 described this, "Recess is terrible, because the kids can't navigate social situations very well now, after COVID." Similarly, Gülmez and Ordu (2022) found that post-COVID, students' social challenges, discipline issues, and motivation difficulties increased. P4 described the increase in challenging behaviors: "After COVID, we have noticed that kids are severe, they are a lot needier, they're coming in with a lot of behaviors that we haven't seen before and a lot more of them." Nearly every teacher in this study discussed an increase in challenging behaviors.

Researchers found that students with very challenging behaviors may struggle with traditional SEL curricula (Elliott et al., 2020). These researchers expressed concern that SEL curricula may not be appropriate or helpful for students with severe emotional behavioral concerns. This research echoed P9's perspective: "There are students who are Tier 3 with really extreme behavioral needs. The SEL strategies we use for Tier 1 or 2 in the classroom do not work. It's hard to get support for those students, if at all." Calhoun et al. (2020) suggested that students with severe behavioral challenges, especially higher rates of reactivity, may not maintain gains from traditional SEL curricula over time. Additionally, Morgan et al. (2022) found that teachers in their study expressed concerns

about students who came to school with weak SEL skills, noting that these students had difficulty engaging in the SEL curriculum, particularly in reflecting on their own social and emotional competencies.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations of this study included a small sample size, researcher bias, and the self-disclosure nature of the qualitative interviews. The 11 participants were recruited through the Walden University Participant Pool, early childhood social media groups, and through snowball sampling. Several of the participants shared that they had responded to the listing because they were passionate about SEL; this interest in SEL may not be representative of a larger sample. I addressed the limitations of the small sample size by including robust descriptions of the data and assuring that data saturation was achieved. By recruiting participants from across the United States, the findings may be transferable to diverse contexts.

A second possible limitation was the potential for researcher bias. I was aware of this limitation as a researcher investigating a topic that I am passionate about. To help to minimize bias and assumptions, I did not include any participants who I currently work with or worked with previously, nor teachers that I have a personal relationship with. Additionally, I utilized a reflective journal throughout my study; by recording my perspectives in this journal, I was able to bring awareness to potential bias and ensure that I accurately interpreted participant perspectives.

A third limitation was the self-disclosure nature of the interviews; participants may have provided answers that they deemed more desirable, or they may have been

hesitant to share their honest perspectives. To address this limitation, I was welcoming and friendly throughout the interviews, striving to help participants to feel comfortable. I explained the purpose of each interview clearly and emphasized the confidential nature of the interview. When I asked follow-up questions, I made sure to ask them in an open-ended, neutral manner, assuring that I was not leading participants toward a particular response.

Recommendations

Based on participants' perspectives on strategies and challenges to differentiating SEL curricula, I recommend additional research to examine the specific challenges that teachers are experiencing. Time was a common challenge identified by the majority of the teachers in this study and supported in the literature (Hunter et al., 2022). There was a significant divide among the participants between those that taught SEL throughout the school day and those that only used the morning meeting to focus on SEL curricula. Additional research is needed to examine effective organizational models for teaching SEL curricula in the school day and to examine SEL outcomes for students who receive SEL curricula in a morning meeting compared to those that receive SEL curricula flexibly throughout the school day.

The majority of teachers in this study discussed inadequate training in SEL. More research is needed to evaluate effective models for training teachers in differentiating SEL to meet diverse student needs. The literature supported coaching as a promising technique for supporting teachers in effective SEL delivery (Stickle et al., 2019). More research is needed to examine how coaching may support teachers in differentiating SEL.

Additionally, research is needed to examine how counselors can provide ongoing support and training to teachers who deliver SEL curricula. Many teachers in this study wanted more support from their school counselor but were less clear on what this support would include. Specific counselor support strategies need to be explored in more depth.

Teachers in this study possessed varying levels of comfort in teaching SEL and varying levels of knowledge about SEL. The research suggests that these attitudes and levels of knowledge may affect how teachers use SEL in their classrooms (Liesch et al., 2022). More research is needed to examine how different types of training in SEL can support teachers' understandings of SEL and comfort in teaching SEL. This research should also address how teachers' attitudes and knowledge of SEL may affect student learning outcomes.

Teachers in this study discussed the need for more supportive partnerships with families. Most of the teachers in this study were unsure of how to build these family partnerships. Further research is needed to examine effective models for building effective SEL school-family partnerships.

The majority of teachers in this study felt unprepared to address students' most challenging behaviors through SEL curricula. Further research is needed to examine how to support teachers in meeting these students' significant SEL needs. This research should include an examination of specific differentiation strategies that may provide support for students with significant challenging behaviors and additional resources that could benefit students and teachers.

Implications

The results of this study have implications for early childhood teachers, students, teacher-preparation programs, SEL curricula developers, school administrators, school counselors, and families. Teachers may use the findings of the study to reflect on and prioritize relationship-based and developmentally appropriate practices that can be utilized when differentiating SEL curricula. According to Vygotsky (1978), prioritizing social interactions can support SEL and help students to work within their ZPD; Altun and Nayman (2022) discovered that these social interactions support both differentiation and more permanent learning. Teachers may also use the study findings to reflect on their own attitudes about SEL, their comfort in teaching it, and their knowledge of differentiating SEL to meet diverse learners' needs. Miulescu and Tacea (2023) found that teachers who regularly reflect on their practices were more likely to incorporate new teaching strategies, create a more positive learning climate, and improve student outcomes.

This study may contribute to positive social change related to policy decisions for teacher training programs and ongoing professional development. The participants emphasized the importance of high-quality, relevant, and extensive training in SEL. Receiving more training in SEL may provide more consistent and equitable curricula to students across classrooms, schools, and districts. These policy changes in training would include school administrators and counselors; participants in this study indicated that these stakeholder groups need more training in SEL curricula and in how to effectively support teachers in SEL differentiation. Preliminary findings from this study suggest that

embedding SEL curricula into the school day may be an effective strategy for differentiating SEL curricula. Flexibility in the school day and training in cross-curricular integration would be needed for teachers to consistently embed SEL curricula throughout the school day.

Based on the findings of this study, SEL curricula may need to be expanded to include more effective strategies for building family-school partnerships. Redesigning SEL curricula to include resources for building these partnerships may support families and students in practicing SEL skills outside of the classroom and help to create more consistent SEL modeling across student environments. Teachers in this study emphasized that their students are experiencing increased SEL challenges; this finding suggests that more resources are needed within schools, families, and communities to support children's SEL.

Conclusion

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives of strategies and challenges to differentiating SEL curricula to meet students' diverse needs. Related to Theme 1, participants shared their perspectives on specific strategies that support effective differentiation of SEL curricula. Specifically, teachers differentiated SEL curricula by emphasizing student relationships and interactions, adjusted curricula to make it more relevant and developmentally appropriate, and integrated SEL curricula into other subject areas throughout the school day.

In Themes 2, 3, 4, and 5, participants shared their perspectives on challenges to differentiating SEL curricula. Nearly every participant discussed the need for more

effective training in SEL. The participants in the study who felt competent in teaching and differentiating SEL chose to learn about SEL independently by reading books, finding resources, and attending trainings. The participants who were more knowledgeable about SEL also indicated a greater comfort in teaching and differentiating SEL. Some of the participants with less training in SEL expressed discomfort with teaching SEL or shared that they were uncertain about how to differentiate the curricula to meet students' diverse needs. Participants valued support from families, but were unsure of how to build family-school partnerships around SEL. While some participants had sufficient time and support at their school site, the majority of the participants discussed needing more support from counselors and administrators, more time in the school day to flexibly address SEL, and more flexibility in implementing SEL curricula. Participants discussed concerns about increases in students' challenging behaviors and how to appropriately support these students' SEL needs.

The study findings provide insights into early childhood teachers' experiences concerning both successes and challenges in differentiating SEL curricula. The findings of this study may provide early childhood teachers, professional development designers, SEL curricula developers, and educational leaders with information that can be used when making decisions about supporting early childhood teachers in differentiating SEL curricula to meet the needs of diverse learners.

References

Allen, K., Hansford, L., Hayes, R., Allwood, M., Byford, S., Longdon, B., Price, A., &
Ford, T. (2020). Teachers' perceptions of the impact of the Incredible Years
Teacher Classroom Management programme on their practice and on the social
and emotional development of their pupils. *The British Journal of Educational
Psychology*, *90*(Suppl 1), 75–90. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12306

Altun, S., & Nayman, H. (2022). Differentiated instruction: A study on teachers'
experiences and opinions. *International Online Journal of Educational
Sciences*, *14*(2), 374–386. https://doi.org/10.15345/iojes.2022.02.007

Arda Tuncdemir, T. B., Burroughs, M. D., & Moore, G. (2022). Effects of philosophical
ethics in early childhood on preschool children's social–emotional competence
and theory of mind. *International Journal of Child Care & Education
Policy, 16*(1), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40723-022-00098-w

Barnes, T. N., & McCallops, K. (2019). Perceptions of culturally responsive pedagogy in
teaching SEL. *Journal for Multicultural Education*, *13*(1), 70–81.
https://doi.org/10.1108/JME-07-2017-0044

Bipath, K., Muthivhi, A. E., & Bhoola, S. (2022). Parents' understandings and practices
regarding play and learning. *European Early Childhood Education Research
Journal, 30*(4), 515–528. https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2022.2070648

Blewitt, O'Connor, A., Morris, H., Mousa, A., Bergmeier, H., Nolan, A., Jackson, K.,
Barrett, H., & Skouteris, H. (2020). Do curriculum-based social and emotional
learning programs in early childhood education and care strengthen teacher

outcomes? A systematic literature review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *17*(3), 1-33. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17031049

Blewitt, O'Connor, A., Morris, H., Nolan, A., Mousa, A., Green, R., Ifanti, A., Jackson, K., & Skouteris, H. (2021). "It's embedded in what we do for every child": A qualitative exploration of early childhood educators' perspectives on supporting children's social and emotional learning. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 18*(4), 1-16. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18041530

Bouffard, S. (2022). Educators value social and emotional skills. Here's how to build them. *Learning Professional, 43*(5), 46–50. https://learningforward.org/journal/teaching-in-turbulent-times/educators-value-social-and-emotional-skills-heres-how-to-build-them/

Brennan, K. (2023, July 18). *House republicans propose a 15% cut in funding for Department of Education.* EdPrepMatters. https://edprepmatters.net/2023/07/house-republicans-propose-a-15-cut-in-funding-for-department-of-education/

Burkholder, G. J., Cox, K. A., & Crawford, L. M. (2016). *The scholar-practitioner's guide to research design.* Laureate Publishing, Inc.

Calhoun, B., Williams, J., Greenberg, M., Domitrovich, C., Russell, M. A., & Fishbein, D. H. (2020). Social emotional learning program boosts early social and behavioral skills in low-income urban children. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*, 1-14. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.561196

Cameron, C. E., Kim, H., & Doromal, J. B. (2022). Among underserved children,

behavioral self-regulation most consistently predicts early elementary teachers'

ratings of overall social–emotional learning. *Frontiers in Education*, *7*, 1-15.

https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.937869

Carroll, A., Houghton, S., Forrest, K., McCarthy, M., & Sanders-O'Connor, E. (2020).

Who benefits most? Predicting the effectiveness of a social and emotional

learning intervention according to children's emotional and behavioural

difficulties. *School Psychology International, 41*(3), 197–

217. https://doi.org/10.1177/0143034319898741

Cenovic, J. (2022, August 25). Social-emotional learning: Both facts and feelings.

Harvard Political Review. https://harvardpolitics.com/social-emotional-learning/

Chance, E., Villares, E., Brigman, G., & Mariani, M. (2023). The effects of the ready for

success classroom program on third-grade students' social/emotional skills and

competence. *Professional School Counseling, 27*(1).

https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X231182134

Charlton, C. T., Moulton, S., Sabey, C. V., & West, R. (2021). A systematic review of the

effects of schoolwide intervention programs on student and teacher perceptions of

school climate. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions, 23*(3), 185–200.

https://doi.org/10.1177/1098300720940168

Cho, H., Wang, X. C., & Christ, T. (2019). Social-emotional learning of refugee English

language learners in early elementary grades: Teachers' perspectives. *Journal of*

Research in Childhood Education, 33(1), 40-55.

https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2018.1531449

Cipriano, C., Naples, L. H., Eveleigh, A., Cook, A., Funaro, M., Cassidy, C., McCarthy, M. F., & Rappolt-Schlichtmann, G. (2023). A systematic review of student disability and race representation in universal school-based social and emotional learning interventions for elementary school students. *Review of Educational Research, 93*(1), 73–102. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543221094079

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (2023a). *Fundamentals of SEL.* https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (2023b). *Our history.* https://casel.org/about-us/our-history/

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (2023c). *SEL policy at the state level.* https://casel.org/systemic-implementation/sel-policy-at-the-state-level/#CA

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (2023d). *What is the CASEL framework?* https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-is-the-casel-framework/

Colliver, Y., & Veraksa, N. (2021). Vygotsky's contributions to understandings of emotional development through early childhood play. *Early Child Development and Care, 191*(7–8), 1026–1040. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2021.1887166

Daniel, M. C., Burgin, X. D., & Coli, S. (2022). Examining the SEL understandings of teachers from an urban United States school district. *International Journal of Diverse Identities, 22*(1), 11–25. https://doi.org/10.18848/2327-7866/CGP/v22i01/11-25

D'Emidio-Caston, M. (2019). Addressing social, emotional development, and resilience

    at the heart of teacher education. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, *46*(4), 116–149.

DeMink-Carthew, J., Netcoh, S., & Farber, K. (2020). Exploring the potential for

    students to develop self-awareness through personalized learning. *Journal of*

    Educational Research, 113(3), 165–176.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/00220671.2020.1764467

Denston, A., Martin, R., Fickel, L., & O'Toole, V. (2022). Teachers' perspectives of

    social-emotional learning: Informing the development of a linguistically and

    culturally responsive framework for social-emotional wellbeing in Aotearoa New

    Zealand. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 117,* 1-9.

    https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2022.103813

Dyson, B., Shen, Y., Howley, D., & Baek, S. (2023). Social emotional learning matters:

    Interpreting educators' perspectives at a high-needs rural elementary

    school. *Frontiers in Education, 8,* 1-10.

    https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2023.1100667

Education Commission of the States. (2020). *What are the pre-service preparation and*

    certification, and in-service professional development requirements, for social

    and emotional learning? 50-state comparison: State K-3 policies.

Eikeland, & Ohna, S. E. (2022). Differentiation in education: a configurative

    review. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*, *8*(3), 157–170.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/20020317.2022.2039351

Elias, M. J. (2019). What if the doors of every schoolhouse opened to social-emotional

learning tomorrow: Reflections on how to feasibly scale up high-quality SEL. *Educational Psychologist*, *54*(3), 233–245. https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2019.1636655

Elliott, S. N., Lei, P.-W., Anthony, C. J., & DiPerna, J. C. (2023). Screening the whole social-emotional child: Expanding a brief SEL assessment to include emotional behavior concerns. *School Psychology Review, 52*(1), 15–29. https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2020.1857659

Elo, M. K., Kanste, O., Pölkki, T., Utriainen, K., & Kyngäs, H. (2014). Qualitative content analysis: A focus on trustworthiness. *SAGE Open*, *4*(1), https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244014522633

Ferreira, M., Martinsone, B., & Talic, S. (2020). Promoting sustainable social emotional learning at school through relationship-centered learning environment, teaching methods and formative assessment. *Journal of Teacher Education for Sustainability, 22*(1), 21–36. https://doi.org/10.2478/jtes-2020-0003

Fitzgerald, M. S. (2020). Overlapping opportunities for social-emotional and literacy learning in elementary-grade project-based instruction. *American Journal of Education*, *126*(4), 573–601. https://doi.org/10.1086/709545

Flushman, T., Guise, M., & Hegg, S. (2021). Partnership to support the social and emotional learning of teachers: A new teacher learning community. *Teacher Education Quarterly, 48*(3), 80–105.

Francis, D. C., Liu, J., Bharaj, P. K., & Eker, A. (2019). Integrating social-emotional and academic development in teachers' approaches to educating students. *Policy*

Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 6(2), 138–146.

https://doi.org/10.1177/2372732219864375

Ginja, T. G., & Chen, X. (2020). Teacher educators' perspectives and experiences towards differentiated instruction. *International Journal of Instruction, 13*(4), 781–798. https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.2020.13448a

Goddard, Y. L., Goddard, R. D., Bailes, L. P., & Nichols, R. (2019). From school leadership to differentiated instruction: A pathway to student learning in schools. *Elementary School Journal*, *120*(2), 197–219.

https://doi.org/10.1086/705827

Gredler, M. E. (2009). Hiding in plain sight: The stages of mastery/self-regulation in Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory. *Educational Psychologist, 44*(1), 1-19.

https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520802616259

Gregory, A., & Fergus, E. (2019). Social and emotional learning and equity in school discipline. *The Future of Children, 27*(1), 117–136.

https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.2017.0006

Gülmez, D., & Ordu, A. (2022). Back to the classroom: Teachers' views on classroom management after COVID-19. *International Journal of Modern Education Studies*, *6*(2), 257–286.

Hagarty, I., & Morgan, G. (2020). Social-emotional learning for children with learning disabilities: A systematic review. *Educational Psychology in Practice, 36*(2), 208–222. https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2020.1742096

Haslip, M. J., & Terry, N. (2022). A mixed methods study of the relationship between

individualized lesson planning and social-emotional outcomes in young children. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *51*(5), 875-888. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-022-01347-w

Hayashi, A., Liew, J., Aguilar, S. D., Nyanamba, J. M., & Zhao, Y. (2022). Embodied and social-emotional learning (SEL) in early childhood: Situating culturally relevant SEL in Asian, African, and North American contexts. *Early Education & Development*, *33*(5), 746–763. https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2021.2024062

Hemi, M. E., & Kasperski, R. (2023). Development and validation of "EduSEL": Educators' socio-emotional learning questionnaire. *Personality & Individual Differences, 201,* 1-13. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2022.111926

Hennink, M., & Kaiser, N. (2022). Sample sizes for saturation in qualitative research: A systematic review of empirical tests. *Social Sciences and Medicine, 292,* 1-10. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114523

Hersi, A. A., & Bal, I. A. (2021). Planning for differentiation: Understanding Maryland teachers' desired and actual use of differentiated instruction. *Educational Planning*, *28*(1), 55–71.

Housman, D. K., Cabral, H., Aniskovich, K., & Denham, S. A. (2023). The impact of begin to ECSEL on children's self-regulation, executive functions and learning. *Early Child Development & Care, 193*(2), 159–173. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2022.2071869

Hunter, L. J., DiPerna, J. C., Hart, S. C., Neugebauer, S., & Lei, P. (2022). Examining teacher approaches to implementation of a classwide SEL program. *School*

Psychology, *37*(4), 285–297. https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000502

Jager, L., Denessen, E., Cillessen, A., & Meijer, P. C. (2022). Capturing instructional

differentiation in educational research: Investigating opportunities and

challenges. *Educational Research, 64*(2), 224–241.

https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2022.2063751

Jamero, J. L. F. (2019). Social constructivism and play of children with autism for

inclusive early childhood. *International Journal of Early Childhood Special*

Education, *11*(2), 154–167. https://doi.org/10.20489/intjecse.670475

Johnsen, S. K., Fearon-Drake, D., & Wisely, L. W. (2020). A formative evaluation of

differentiation practices in elementary cluster classrooms. *Roeper Review*, *42*(3),

206–218. https://doi.org/10.1080/02783193.2020.1765921

Jomaa, H., Duquette, C., & Whitley, J. (2023). Elementary teachers' perceptions and

experiences regarding social-emotional learning in Ontario. *Brock Education: A*

Journal of Educational Research and Practice, *32*(1).

https://doi.org/10.26522/brocked.v32i1.948

Jones, K., & Cater, M. (2020). An investigation of principals' social and emotional

learning beliefs and attitudes. *The Qualitative Report, 25*(9), 3204–3223.

https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2020.3575

Kamei, A., & Harriott, W. (2021). Social emotional learning in virtual settings:

Intervention strategies. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary*

Education, 13(3), 365–371. https://doi.org/10.26822/iejee.2021.196

Kaspar, K. & Massey, S. L. (2022). Implementing social-emotional learning in the

elementary classroom. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 51(4), 1–10.

https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-022-01324-3

Kennedy, K. (2019). Centering equity and caring in leadership for social-emotional

learning: Toward a conceptual framework for diverse learners. *Journal of School

Leadership*, *29*(6), 473–492. https://doi.org/10.1177/1052684619867469

Kenney, A. W., Dulong Langley, S., Hemmler, V., Callahan, C. M., Gubbins, E. J., &

Siegle, D. (2023). Different or differentiated? Recoupling policy and practice in

an era of accountability. *Educational Policy*, *1*.

https://doi.org/10.1177/08959048231153612

Lawson, G. M., McKenzie, M. E., Becker, K. D., Selby, L., & Hoover, S. A. (2019). The

core components of evidence-based social emotional learning

programs. *Prevention Science: The Official Journal of the Society for Prevention

Research*, *20*(4), 457–467. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-018-0953-y

Liesch, H. P., Morrison, K., & Giles, R. M. (2022). Pre-kindergarten teachers'

perceptions of social and emotional learning. *International Journal of the Whole

Child, 7*(1), 8–21.

Lin, M., Olsen, S., Simmons, D.N., Miller, M., & Tominey, S. L. (2023). "Not try to save

them or ask them to breathe through their oppression": Educator perceptions and

the need for a human-centered, liberatory approach to social and emotional

learning. *Frontiers in Education, 7,* 1-16.

https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.1044730

Loeb, S., Christian, M. S., Hough, H., Meyer, R. H., Rice, A. B., & West, M. R. (2019).

School differences in social-emotional learning gains: Findings from the first large-scale panel survey of students. *Journal of Educational and Behavioral Statistics, 44*(5), 507–542. https://doi.org/10.3102/1076998619845162

Low, S., Smolkowski, K., Cook, C., & Desfosses, D. (2019). Two-year impact of a universal social-emotional learning curriculum: Group differences from developmentally sensitive trends over time. *Developmental Psychology, 55*(2), 415–433. https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000621.supp

Mackintosh, B. B., & Rowe, M. (2021). Baseline inequalities: Social skills at preschool entry moderate math development. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education, 35*(1), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2020.1728446

Mahoney, J. L., Weissberg, R. P., Greenberg, M. T., Dusenbury, L., Jagers, R. J., Niemi, K., Schlinger, M., Schlund, J., Shriver, T. P., VanAusdal, K., & Yoder, N. (2021). Systemic social and emotional learning: Promoting educational success for all preschool to high school students. *American Psychologist, 76*(7), 1128–1142. https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000701

Manriquez, A. A. B. (2021). The Vygotskian theory of affects in the face of emotional capitalism at school. *Interdisciplinaria, 38*(1), 85–100. https://doi.org/10.16888/interd.2021.38.1.6

Martinez, K., & Plevyak, L. (2020). Small versus whole group reading instruction in an elementary reading classroom. *Humanising Language Teaching, 22*(1), 36. https://www.hltmag.co.uk/feb2020/small-versus-whole-group-reading

McCall, C. S., Romero, M. E., Yang, W., & Weigand, T. (2023). A call for equity-

focused social-emotional learning. *School Psychology Review, 52*(5), 586–607.

https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2022.2093125

McCaw, C. T. (2021). Liminality and the beginning teacher: strangers, frauds and

dancing in the disequilibrium. *Cambridge Journal of Education, 51*(3), 395–409.

https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2020.1844150

McCormick, M. P., Neuhaus, R., O'Connor, E. E., White, H. I., Horn, E. P., Harding, S.,

Cappella, E., & McClowry, S. (2021). Long-term effects of social-emotional

learning on academic skills: Evidence from a randomized trial of

INSIGHTS. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness, 14*(1), 1–27.

https://doi.org/10.1080/19345747.2020.1831117

McKown, C. (2019). Reliability, factor structure, and measurement invariance of a web-

based assessment of children's social-emotional comprehension. *Journal of

Psychoeducational Assessment, 37*(4), 435–449.

https://doi.org/10.1177/0734282917749682

McNeill, H., & Polly, D. (2023). Exploring primary grades teachers' perceptions of their

students' mathematics self-efficacy and how they differentiate instruction. *Early

Childhood Education Journal, 51*(1), 79–88. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-021-
01281-3

Medin, E., & Jutengren, G. (2020). Children's perspectives on a school-based social and

emotional learning program. *Children & Schools, 42*(2), 121–130.

https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdaa007

Menzies, H. M., Oakes, W. P., Lane, K. L., Royer, D. J., Cantwell, E. D., Common, E.

A., & Buckman, M. (2021). Elementary teachers' perceptions of a

    comprehensive, integrated, three-tiered model of prevention. *Remedial & Special*

    Education, 42(4), 207–219. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932519896860

Mischenko, P. P., Nicholas-Hoff, P., Schussler, D. L., Iwu, J., & Jennings, P. A. (2022).

    Implementation barriers and facilitators of a mindfulness-based social emotional

    learning program and the role of relational trust: A qualitative study. *Psychology*

    in the Schools, 59(8), 1643–1671. https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22724

Miulescu, M. L., & Tacea, A. F. (2023). What Is the value of reflection for teachers? A

    study on primary school teachers. *Revista de Pedagogie*, *71*(1), 131–

    148. https://doi.org/10.26755/RevPed/2023.1/131

Mondi, C. F., & Reynolds, A. J. (2021). Socio-emotional learning among low-income

    prekindergarteners: The roles of individual factors and early intervention. *Early*

    Education and Development, 32(3), 360–384.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2020.1778989

Moosa, V., & Shareefa, M. (2019). Implementation of differentiated instruction: Conjoint

    effect of teachers' sense of efficacy, perception and knowledge. *Anatolian*

    Journal of Education, *4*(1), 23–38. https://doi.org/10.29333/aje.2019.413a

Moreno, A. J., Nagasawa, M. K., & Schwartz, T. (2019). Social and emotional learning

    and early childhood education: Redundant terms? *Contemporary Issues in Early*

    Childhood, 20(3), 221–235. https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949118768040

Morgan, L., Close, S., Siller, M., Kushner, E., & Brasher, S. (2022). Teachers'

    experiences: Social emotional engagement -- knowledge and skills. *Educational*

Research, 64(1), 41–59. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2021.1988865

Munk, K., Rosenblum, R., Blackburn, S., & Donahue, E. (2022). The impact of education and implementation tools on pre-service teachers' attitudes about classroom-based mindfulness. *The Journal of School Nursing, 38*(6), 547–557. https://doi.org/10.1177/10598405211059189

Nesbitt, K. T., & Farran, D. C. (2021). Effects of prekindergarten curricula: Tools of the mind as a case study. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, 86*(1), 7–119. https://doi.org/10.1111/mono.12425

Niu, S. J., & Niemi, H. (2020). Teachers support of students' social-emotional and self-management skills using a solution-focused skillful-class method. *The European Journal of Social & Behavioural Sciences, 27*(1), 54–73. https://doi.org/10.15405/ejsbs.269

Özgünlü, M., Erbil, F., & Göl-Güven, M. (2022). Social and emotional learning (SEL): How it finds a place in an early childhood education curriculum in Turkey. *Journal of Childhood, Education & Society*, *3*(2), 139–150. https://doi.org/10.37291/2717638X.202232180

Parker, R., & Hodgson, D. (2020). "One size does not fit all": Engaging students who have experienced trauma. *Issues in Educational Research, 30*(1), 245–259. https://doi.org/https://www.iier.org.au/iier30/parker.pdf

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). Sage.

Pereira, N., Tay, J., Maeda, Y., & Gentry, M. (2019). Differentiation as measured by the

Classroom Practices Survey: A validity study updating the original

instrument. *Learning Environments Research*, *22*(3), 443–460.

https://doi.org/10.1007/s10984-019-09284-z

Prawat, R. S. (1999). Social constructivism and the process-content distinction as viewed

by Vygotsky and the pragmatists. *Mind, Culture & Activity, 6*(4), 255.

https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039909524731

Ravitch, S. M., & Carl, N. M. (2021). *Qualitative research: Bridging the conceptual,*

theoretical, and methodological. Sage Publications.

Ribeiro Piske, F. H., & Stoltz, T. (2021). Meeting the socio-emotional dimension of

gifted students based on Vygotsky. *Culture & Psychology*, *27*(3), 473–497.

https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X20936929

Robinson-Hill, R. M. (2022). The journey of a science teacher: Preparing female students

in the training future scientists after-school program. *Cultural Studies of Science*

Education, *17*(1), 99–132. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11422-022-10112-9

Roiha, A., & Polso, J. (2021). The 5-dimensional model: A tangible framework for

differentiation. *Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation*, *26*(20), 1-17.

https://doi.org/10.7275/22037164

Rosenberg, J., Ryan, P. M., O'Brien, C., Ganjavi, F., & Sharifi, M. (2022). Pilot wellness

program with adapted social-emotional learning and COVID-19 curriculum for

refugee youth. *Health Education & Behavior, 49*(1), 17–25.

https://doi.org/10.1177/10901981211048830

Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2012). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data* (3rd

ed.). Sage Publications.

Saldaña, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (4th ed.). Sage

Publications.

Sanders, M. T., Welsh, J. A., Bierman, K. L., & Heinrichs, B. S. (2020). Promoting

resilience: A preschool intervention enhances the adolescent adjustment of

children exposed to early adversity. *School Psychology, 35*(5), 285–298.

https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000406.supp

Sanders, S., Rollins, L. H., & McFall, A. (2023). Aiming high: Applying goal setting to

social and emotional learning skills in the elementary classroom. *Beyond

Behavior, 32*(1), 4–14. https://doi.org/10.1177/10742956221145692

Saunders, R. (2021). *Preparing West Virginia's teachers: Opportunities in teacher

licensure and program approval*. Learning Policy Institute.

Schwartz, H. L., Bongard, M., Bogan, E.D., Boyle, A.E., Meyers, D.C., & Jagers, R.J.

(2022). *Social and emotional learning in schools nationally and in the

collaborating districts initiative: Selected findings from the American Teacher

Panel and American School Leader Panel Surveys.* RAND Corporation.

https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1822-1.html.

Shareefa, M. (2021). Using differentiated instruction in multigrade classes: A case of a

small school. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education, 41*(1), 167–181.

https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2020.1749559

Signorelli, A., Morganti, A., & Pascoletti, S. (2021). Boosting emotional intelligence in

the post-Covid. Flexible approaches in teaching social and emotional

skills. *Formare*, *21*(3). https://doi.org/10.36253/form-12127

Silalahi, R. M. (2019). Understanding Vygotsky's zone of proximal development for

    learning. *Polyglot: Jurnal Ilmiah, 15*(2), 169–186.

    https://doi.org/10.19166/pji.v15i2.1544

Simonton, K. L., Shiver, V. N., Gray, A., Juarez, K., & Simonton, A. (2024). Targeting

    social-emotional learning and activity attitudes during after-school programming

    post COVID-19 restrictions. *Journal of Youth Development*, *19*(1), 46–56.

    https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/jyd/vol19/iss1/5

Smolucha, L., & Smolucha, F. (2021). Vygotsky's theory in-play: Early childhood

    education. *Early Child Development & Care, 191*(7–8), 1041–1055.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2020.1843451

Soliman, D., Frydenberg, E., Liang, R., & Deans, J. (2021). Enhancing empathy in

    preschoolers: A comparison of social and emotional learning approaches. *The*

    Educational and Developmental Psychologist, 38(1), 64–76.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/20590776.2020.1839883

Steed, E. A., Shapland, D., & Leech, N. (2022). Early childhood teachers' perceptions of

    the effectiveness of their elementary school's approach to social emotional

    learning: A mixed methods study. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *50*(7),

    1121–1132. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-021-01248-4

Stickle, L., Bailey, R., Brion-Meisels, G., & S. M. (2019). Toolbox for SEL: Coaching

    builds teachers' social and emotional strategies. *Learning Professional*, *40*(6), 41–

    44. https://learningforward.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/toolbox-for-sel.pdf

Taylor, A. J., & Lein, A. E. (2023). Integrating social and emotional learning (SEL) into academic content: A path for education preparation programs. *Kentucky Journal of Excellence in College Teaching & Learning, 19*, 38–55.

Thayer, A. J., Campa, D. M., Weeks, M. R., Buntain-Ricklefs, J., Low, S., Larson, M., & Cook, C. R. (2019). Examining the differential effects of a universal SEL curriculum on student functioning through the dual continua model of mental health. *Journal of Primary Prevention, 40*(4), 405–427.

https://doi.org/10.1007/s10935-019-00557-0

Thierry, K. L., Vincent, R. L., & Norris, K. (2022). Teacher-level predictors of the fidelity of implementation of a social-emotional learning curriculum. *Early Education and Development, 33*(1), 92–106.

https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2020.1849896

Tienken, C. H. (2021). Social and emotional learning: Then and now. *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, *57*(1), 4–5. https://doi.org/10.1080/00228958.2021.1851579

Tilhou, R. C. (2020). The morning meeting: Fostering a participatory democracy begins with youth in public education. *Democracy & Education*, *28*(2), 1–11.

https://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol28/iss2/5

Todd, C., Smothers, M., & Colson, T. (2022). Implementing SEL in the classroom: A practitioner perspective. *Clearing House*, *95*(1), 18–25.

https://doi.org/10.1080/00098655.2021.2016566

Tomlinson, C. A., Brighton, C., & Hertberg, H. (2003). Differentiating instruction in response to student readiness, interest, and learning profile in academically

diverse classrooms: A review of literature. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted, 27*(2/3), 119–145. https://doi.org/10.1177/01623532030270020

Tzouriadou, M. (2021). Vygotsky's approach to typical and "impeded" development. *Psychology: The Journal of the Hellenic Psychological Society, 26*(1), 152–159. https://doi.org/10.12681/psy_hps.26232

Unal, A., Unal, Z., & Bodur, Y. (2022). Differentiated instruction and kindergarten through 5th grade teachers. *Georgia Educational Researcher, 19*(2). https://doi.org/10.20429/ger.2022.190202

U.S. Department of Education. (2021). *Supporting child and student social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health needs.* https://www2.ed.gov/documents/students/supporting-child-student-social-emotional-behavioral-mental-health.pdf

van Geel, M., Keuning, T., & Safar, I. (2022). How teachers develop skills for implementing differentiated instruction: Helpful and hindering factors. *Teaching and Teacher Education: Leadership and Professional Development, 1*, 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tatelp.2022.100007

Voith, L.A., Yoon, S., Topitzes, J., & Brondino, M. J. (2020). A feasibility study of a school-based social emotional learning program: Informing program development and evaluation. *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal*, *37*(3), 329–342. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-019-00634-7

Vygotsky, L. S. (1962). An experimental study of concept formation. In E. Hanfmann & G. Vakar (Eds.), *Thought and language* (pp. 52–81). MIT Press.

https://doi.org/10.1037/11193-005

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher mental processes* (E. Rice, Ed. & Trans.). Harvard University Press. http://ouleft.org/wp-content/uploads/Vygotsky-Mind-in-Society.pdf

Vygotsky, L. S. (2004). Imagination and creativity in childhood. *Journal of Russian & East European Psychology, 42*(1), 7–97. https://doi.org/10.1080/10610405.2004.11059210

Vygotsky, L. S. (2021). Lecture three. Phenotypic and genotypic in psychological processes. *Cultural-Historical Psychology, 7*(3), 6–14. https://doi.org/10.17759/chp.2021170303

Vygotsky, L. S., & Kozulin, A. (2011). The dynamics of the schoolchild's mental development in relation to teaching and learning. *Journal of Cognitive Education and Psychology, 10*(2), 198–211. https://doi.org/10.1891/1945-8959.10.2.198

Wood, P. (2020). Emotional intelligence and social and emotional learning: (Mis)interpretation of theory and its influence on practice. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, *34*(1), 153–166. https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2019.1692104

Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What is your definition of social and emotional learning in the classroom?

2. How would you explain the SEL learning curriculum that you use in the classroom?

3. How do students' social and emotional learning needs differ from one another?

4. How do you adjust or differentiate SEL curricula to meet your students' diverse needs?

5. What are examples of the most effective strategies you use when differentiating social and emotional skills for students?

6. What challenges have you experienced when differentiating social and emotional learning curricula to meet students' diverse needs?

7. What do you do when you are unable to differentiate social and emotional learning for students' diverse needs?

8. What specific professional development opportunities have you participated in that support differentiating social and emotional skills for students?

9. What do you believe you need to improve your ability to differentiate social and emotional learning to meet students' diverse needs?

10. Is there any additional information that you would like to share?

Possible Follow-Up Probes:

1. What did you mean by…...?

2. Tell me more about….

3. You mentioned…. Tell me more.

4. Can you expand more on …...?

Appendix B: Interview Protocol Guide

Date of the interview: _____

Begin Time: _____ End time: _____

Interviewee: _____ Method of interview recording: _____

Pre-Interview Script:
Thank you very much for participating in my study. I want take a moment before we begin to let you know a little bit about the study and the interview procedures. The purpose of this interview is for you to share your perspective on your experiences with social emotional learning. This interview should last 45-60 minutes. As you read in the consent form, I will not identify you in my documents and no one will be able to identify you, so everything you say is confidential. You can choose to stop this interview at any time. I also need to let you know that the interview will be recorded for transcription purposes.
Do I have your permission to record this interview?
Do you have any questions before we begin?

Demographic Questions
I would like to begin by asking you a few background questions to get to know you a little better.

1. How long have you been teaching?
2. What grades have you taught?

Interview Questions

Now I would like to ask you a few questions about your experiences with social emotional learning or SEL curricula.
1. What is your definition of social and emotional learning in the classroom?
2. How would you explain the social and emotional learning curriculum that you use in the classroom?
3. How do students' social and emotional learning needs differ from one another?
4. How do you adjust or differentiate social and emotional learning curricula to meet your students' diverse needs?
5. What are examples of the most effective strategies you use when differentiating social and emotional skills for students?
6. What challenges have you experienced when differentiating social and emotional learning curricula to meet students' diverse needs?

7. What do you do when you are unable to differentiate social and emotional learning for students' diverse needs?
8. What specific professional development opportunities have you participated in that support differentiating social and emotional skills for students?
9. What do you believe you need to improve your ability to differentiate social and emotional learning to meet students' diverse needs?
10. Is there any additional information that you would like to share regarding differentiating social and emotional skills for students?

Post-Interview Script
Thank you so much for taking the time to participate in this interview. I am grateful that you shared your perspective. I will share a summary of my findings with you after I complete more interviews. Before ending our interview, I would like to know if you have any questions. Thank you again for participating.