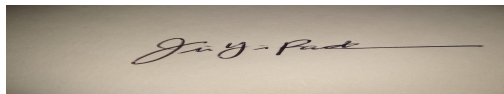


Understanding Teacher Experiences with Implementing a Social Emotional Learning Curriculum

**Praxis Project Thesis: Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts — as part of the Community, Youth,
and Education Studies Major at Clark University**

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Jacob Dibbert

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Abstract

In this study, I investigate the experiences of educators implementing a Social Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum in an independent school. My study emphasizes how important teacher pedagogy is to promoting successful SEL instruction and influencing favourable student outcomes. Additionally, my study outlines critical elements that support the effective integration of SEL throughout a school community by referencing both original research and previously published works. In particular, I emphasize how crucial it is for administrators and teachers to communicate openly and honestly to promote coherent strategies for SEL implementation. I also look at the difficulties of SEL implementation, as identified by the participating teachers, including restricted instructional time. Finally, my study highlights the increased interest among teachers in creating a more immersive SEL environment—one that permeates everyday interactions and school culture in addition to scheduled sessions. Through examining the topics mentioned above, I hope to offer perspectives and suggestions for enhancing SEL procedures, encouraging a school-wide dedication to kids' social and emotional growth.

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process. I cannot thank her enough for everything she has done for me, whether it was telling me that everything was going to be okay when I got so overwhelmed by praxis, letting me stay at her house during the last semester, or nagging me (relentlessly and lovingly) about getting to the library during the last month so I could “have a praxis I am proud of.” Without Fiona, my praxis would surely be lacking.

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Introduction

I still remember reading that first survey response—it was late, I had just settled in with my laptop, excited to finally see what teachers had to say. And then I saw it: “*The curriculum is fine but...*” Just those six words, and immediately my mind started spinning.

Fine? What does that even mean? Why just fine? Is that a polite way of saying it’s not working? Do teachers use the curriculum exactly as it’s written, or do they tweak it? Are they into SEL, or just doing it because they have to? I couldn’t stop thinking about it. That line, so short and casual, made me question everything.

If someone who’s actually using the curriculum doesn’t seem excited about it—doesn’t see it as powerful or transformative, then what does that mean for the project? For the work I’ve been doing? For SEL more broadly? It kind of threw me, honestly. I started second-guessing: What am I really trying to uncover here? Am I asking the right questions?

At the same time, it was a moment that grounded me. It reminded me that teacher perspectives aren’t always going to be neat or enthusiastic, and that’s part of the story too. That simple sentence pushed me to look deeper, not just at what teachers say, but at *how* they say it, and what might be underneath. That response, even though it was just the first one I read, shaped the way I looked at all the data after that.

My research took place at an independent school in Worcester, Massachusetts, where they had recently decided to implement an SEL curriculum in grades pre-K through 12th grade. For my project, I decided to look at the teachers' experiences with, and perspectives on, this implementation, both in the lower and middle schools (pre-k through 8th). Through an anonymous survey as well as teacher interviews, I tried to understand how the teachers at *Riverside (all names are pseudonyms) feel about the new curriculum they were being asked to teach as well as how they feel about the support or lack thereof that they have been given throughout the implementation process so far.

I collected data through an anonymous survey and interviews with teachers from both the Lower and Middle Schools. Due to time constraints, I did not have enough time to complete my action before writing this paper, however, I was able to make an action plan, and intend on sharing that with Riverside administration at a later date that works for all parties. For my action, I have compiled a list of recommendations with outlined action steps that I will share with the administration. I then want to encourage the administration to share the information with their teachers and hopefully come to a decision together.

I feel this is the best course of action for this project because it allows for multiple viewpoints to be seen and heard. This also provides a space for teachers and administration to begin conversations about the SEL curriculum that they otherwise wouldn't have had the space or time for.

As I started above, I have a few lenses that I am going into the project with: my personal experience, the research that I have read, and my research questions, which are as follows:

1. 1. What are Riverside teachers' experiences with implementing their SEL curriculum?
2. What are some challenges with implementing their SEL curriculum at Riverside?

3. What has helped the Riverside teachers implement SEL in their classrooms?
4. In what ways is the curriculum lacking or limiting, according to Riverside teachers?

My goal with these questions was to highlight the many underlying factors that may be positively or negatively impacting teachers' and students' experiences with SEL. If teachers have proper support when teaching SEL, the lessons will be more well-rounded and beneficial for their students, and for Riverside as a whole.

This project feels important to me because, at its core, it's about how teaching, the way we *actually* show up in the classroom, shapes the emotional and social lives of students. So much of SEL is tied to teacher pedagogy. It's not just about following a curriculum or teaching a set of skills, it's about how teachers create space, build relationships, and respond to what students bring into the room. When teachers are grounded in their own values and supported in their practice, SEL can become something that's lived, not just delivered. I've seen through this work that when teachers feel confident and connected to the way they teach, that energy trickles down into their classroom culture. It creates space for students to feel safe, seen, and ready to learn. I hope that the findings from this project will offer real, honest insights, not just for Riverside, but for any school thinking about what meaningful SEL can look like. If we want SEL to stick, we have to start with the people teaching it. That means supporting teachers, honoring their voices, and thinking about pedagogy not just as a method, but as a foundation for emotional and academic growth.

Main Concepts/ Theoretical Frameworks

Several core concepts are integral to my Praxis and to understanding the dynamics of teaching, learning, and emotional development in educational settings. These concepts include Social Emotional Learning (SEL), the curriculum, educators' pedagogies which include their

philosophies of teaching, and the Responsive Classroom approach. Two theoretical frameworks guide this inquiry: Social Emotional Learning Theory and Teacher Pedagogy Theory. These frameworks are deeply intertwined, as SEL focuses on the teaching and learning of emotions and social skills in the classroom (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2020), while an educator's teaching philosophy shapes the classroom practices, culture, and educational outcomes in significant ways (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019).

Social Emotional Learning

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) has emerged as a cornerstone of effective educational practice. The growing recognition of SEL as essential for student development is reflected in recent surveys, such as one conducted by McGraw-Hill Education (2021), where 93% of teachers agreed that SEL should be explicitly taught in schools. Among those educators who identified student behavior as a major challenge, 78% viewed SEL as a key strategy to address these concerns, and 79% acknowledged its positive impact on student performance. According to CASEL (2020), successful SEL implementation demands thorough professional development for educators, the integration of SEL skills into everyday classroom instruction, and continuous opportunities for students to practice these skills. Empirical evidence supports this approach: a meta-analysis by Durlak et al. (2011) found that students who participated in well-implemented SEL programs showed an 11 percentile-point increase in academic achievement compared to their peers, highlighting the significant academic benefits of SEL.

Incorporating SEL into education also plays a crucial role in fostering emotional intelligence, which is essential for students to navigate interpersonal relationships and overcome the challenges of the modern world. This process not only improves emotional regulation but

also enhances problem-solving, empathy, and resilience—skills that are increasingly demanded in both academic and real-life contexts.

Teacher Social Emotional Competence (SEC) Theory

Teacher Social Emotional Competence (SEC) Theory posits that teachers cannot effectively teach Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) if their own emotions are not well-regulated (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Teachers play a pivotal role in SEL, as their own social-emotional competencies—including self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision-making, self-management, and relationship management—shape their effectiveness in fostering SEL among students (Brackett et al., 2010). Educators with strong SEC are better equipped to build meaningful relationships with students, manage classrooms effectively, and implement SEL programs successfully (Jennings & Frank, 2015). However, teacher stress and burnout, often stemming from the high demands of the profession, can significantly impair their ability to deliver SEL (Greenberg et al., 2016). Addressing teacher well-being through mindfulness-based interventions, emotional intelligence training, and supportive school environments can enhance teacher resilience and performance (Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

Programs such as CARE (Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education) and SMART-in-Education (Stress Management and Resiliency Training) aim to support teachers by promoting mindfulness and emotional regulation (Jennings et al., 2013; Roeser et al., 2013). Teachers with high SEC can model self-awareness, use their emotions constructively to inspire students, and foster empathetic, culturally aware relationships in the classroom (Cipriano et al., 2024). When SEL becomes a school-wide focus, research shows improvements in

teacher-student relationships, classroom management, instructional quality, and overall teacher well-being (Greenberg et al., 2017).

To successfully implement SEL, educators must commit to modeling positive behaviors, fostering healthy relationships, and engaging in continuous self-reflection. Guiding principles for educators include practicing self-awareness, managing stress, demonstrating empathy, and making deliberate, ethical decisions (CASEL, 2020). A collaborative, culturally humble approach among educators and leaders helps create safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environments where SEL can truly thrive (Lozano-Peña et al., 2021).

Curriculum

The curriculum is the framework through which both SEL and pedagogy are enacted in the classroom. As the medium through which teaching and learning occur, the curriculum is vital in shaping students' academic and emotional experiences. An effective curriculum integrates elements of collaborative learning, cultural responsiveness, inquiry-based projects, and emotional literacy, which collectively enhance both academic and SEL outcomes. According to Darling-Hammond et al. (2019), curriculum design should reflect the pedagogical philosophy of the educator and align with the goals of SEL, as these elements are inextricably linked. A curriculum that fosters inquiry, critical thinking, and emotional growth not only supports the academic development of students but also ensures that they develop the social and emotional skills needed to navigate an increasingly complex world.

Curriculum plays a pivotal role in bridging the gap between theory and practice, providing a structured approach to integrating SEL principles into day-to-day instruction. Teachers who design and implement curricula that reflect their own pedagogical values, while

also incorporating SEL objectives, can create a dynamic learning environment that supports the holistic development of students.

Figuring out What Theory Worked for Me.

Starting this project, Maile and I knew we wanted to use SEL theory as a framework for our research, because it has a clear relation to the focus of our project. Trying to name our second theory proved more difficult. Due to the many differing lenses that Maile and I were working through, finding a theory that focused on competencies in SEL and teachers' experience was difficult, which led us to find Teacher SEC. The fact that Teacher SEC focuses on emotional competency (something Maile is passionate about) and teacher voice (something I am passionate about) seemed like a perfect theory for us to use. Maile and I utilized the principles and ideas of Teacher SEC and SEL theories to shape our research. We curated our questions for both our anonymous survey and the confidential interviews with the hope of gaining an understanding of what was in place to support the teachers' SEC while implementing the new SEL curriculum.

Maile and I both started this project wanting to center the curriculum in our research. I went into this thinking that all schools should have equal access to the same SEL curriculum across the board, and that would be enough. I had not considered any of the pitfalls of a plug-and-play curriculum until I began my research. Throughout our interviews and as survey responses began coming in, I started to notice that teachers, while grateful for the ability to implement SEL into their classrooms, felt that the curriculum was lacking in many ways and had taken it upon themselves to enhance it with their previous knowledge and skills. While this was a very interesting observation throughout my data, I could not seem to connect it to any of my theories, no matter how hard I tried.

In my original data analysis, using my original theories, my most robust data seemed to be falling flat; there seemed to be a disconnect between my data and what I was trying to shine light on. I began to catch myself trying to bend my data to fit my theory, and that is when I decided to take a step back and reevaluate. I set my previous themes to the side and decided to look at my raw data, without any predetermined lenses, besides my positionality. Looking at my data without a predetermined lens allowed my data to speak for itself and highlighted a new theme that I had been blind to: teacher philosophies at Riverside. The more I dug into my data, the more this theme became a new lens for me to dissect the data through. Eventually, it became evident that teachers' philosophies were a driving factor in the majority of educators at Riverside. This idea began showing up as more than just a theme present in my data, but as a theory of change within the school climate and myself. Once I came to this realization, I knew I had to make a shift in my theories for this study; it was clear that my struggle with honoring my data and highlighting my theories was due to a major disconnect between the two. I had to decide which was more important to me, honoring my data or my theories. I felt it was much more important to honor my data and the voices of my participants than it was to dig my heels in about a theory. I began looking for a new theory that better supported my rich findings, and that is when I found Teacher Pedagogy Theory.

Teacher's Pedagogy

An educator's pedagogy, or their fundamental beliefs and philosophies about teaching and learning, significantly influences all aspects of classroom life. Teacher pedagogy shapes instructional strategies, classroom management techniques, and ultimately, the emotional and social climate within the classroom (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019). For example, teachers who embrace a student-centered approach, emphasizing active learning and fostering an inclusive

classroom environment, are more likely to integrate SEL into their daily practices. Research by Gay (2018) suggests that educators who prioritize culturally responsive teaching approaches are also more likely to create spaces where students can develop emotional and social competencies. This link between pedagogy and SEL highlights the reciprocal relationship between the teacher's approach to education and the emotional and academic growth of their students.

Pedagogical approaches that foster collaboration, respect for diverse learning styles, and deep student engagement are foundational for the effective delivery of SEL. These approaches underscore the importance of a learning environment that is supportive, inclusive, and conducive to emotional well-being, thus reinforcing the connection between academic success and emotional growth.

Pedagogy as a Tool for Agency

Teacher Pedagogy is an aspect of teaching that often gets overlooked, but is a vital piece of what makes good educators. Pedagogy is not merely a set of methods, but a reflection of how teachers understand their role, their students, their teaching context, and the learning process. When educators are supported in developing and enacting their own pedagogical beliefs, they are more likely to exercise professional judgment, make autonomous decisions, and adapt practices to meet the unique needs of their classrooms. This capacity to act intentionally and purposefully within one's professional sphere is the essence of teacher agency.

Pedagogical freedom gives teachers the ability to move beyond scripted curricula, allowing them to integrate their own experiences, cultural knowledge, and instructional innovations into their teaching. For instance, a teacher with a constructivist pedagogy may prioritize hands-on learning and student inquiry, shaping their classroom environment in ways

that foster collaboration and curiosity. This is a form of agency: the power to make meaningful choices grounded in one's educational philosophy.

Moreover, teacher agency is reinforced when schools create cultures of trust, value teacher voice, and offer professional development that aligns with diverse pedagogical approaches. Research by Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson (2015) emphasizes that agency is not simply an individual trait but is shaped by the structures, cultures, and policies within which teachers work. Thus, teacher pedagogy and teacher agency exist in a reciprocal relationship: strong pedagogical foundations empower teacher agency, and opportunities for agency further deepen pedagogical growth.

Responsive Classroom

The Responsive Classroom approach is a well-researched, evidence-based framework designed to create a classroom environment that supports both SEL and academic achievement (Elliott, 1993). This approach emphasizes creating a classroom that is safe, engaging, challenging, and inclusive. It incorporates core practices such as Morning Meetings, interactive modeling, and logical consequences, all of which are grounded in SEL competencies. These practices help build a strong sense of community among students and encourage them to develop emotional and social skills alongside their academic knowledge. According to Rimm-Kaufman and Chiu (2007), the Responsive Classroom approach fosters a classroom culture where students feel valued, respected, and motivated to learn.

Research supports the effectiveness of the Responsive Classroom approach. Studies by Rimm-Kaufman et al. (2014) have shown that schools implementing this approach experience improvements in not only student achievement but also teacher effectiveness and overall school

climate. This comprehensive model underscores the importance of integrating SEL practices into academic learning to promote both emotional well-being and intellectual development.

Diving Deeper

The goal of a researcher is not to copy what has been done before; it is to complicate, challenge, and add to it. Throughout my research, I was able to utilize my theories, but I also fought against them for many reasons. Like any good researcher, I struggled with agreeing with the theory as a whole. This struggle became extremely evident while analyzing my data. I wanted my findings to ‘prove’ my theories, and at first, I tried to force my findings to do so. Eventually, I had to let myself look at the data raw with no governing theoretical lenses, and that is when the true story of my findings came through. I eventually found that my Teacher SEC theory was not aligning with my data, but instead, there was a rich story of teacher pedagogy at play. In this section, I am going to walk you through that journey and set up the lenses of my findings.

CASEL

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) as defined by Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), is the process through which individuals acquire and apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2020). CASEL is the leading organization in promoting SEL in education. Since its founding in 1994, it has played a pivotal role in advancing SEL nationwide, providing a widely accepted framework used in education and policy (CASEL 2020). CASEL’s theory of SEL is that it is foundational to human development and learning;

their framework outlines five ‘core competencies’ —self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. CASEL believes these are what is critical to success in school and life.

While I can appreciate that CASEL plays a large role in the rollout of SEL and provides a robust framework for SEL, I do have some issues with said framework. My biggest issue with CASEL’s framework is that there is little to no culturally responsive SEL included in their curricula. While CASEL has made recent strides in trying to address the issue of equity and inclusion within its frameworks, its core values remain the same. CASEL has always framed SEL as a culturally neutral or colorblind framework; this, to me, raises many concerns.

Not only does this not account for the fact that students' identities highly impact their learning, but it also disregards a major aspect of what makes our students unique. An impactful teacher will go beyond the given frameworks and insert their ideas and philosophies to create a more meaningful and well-rounded lesson

Literature Review

When I started diving into the literature around Social Emotional Learning (SEL), I relied mostly on Google Scholar, searching for keywords like *CASEL*, *SEL*, and *teacher pedagogy*. I also talked to colleagues who are really invested in this work and got some great recommendations from them. What I found was a wide and sometimes conflicting range of perspectives—some offering solid frameworks and evidence of success, others pointing out major blind spots, especially when it comes to culture and the role of teachers.

CASEL’s framework has become the dominant voice in the SEL conversation. According to their definition (CASEL, 2020), SEL is the process by which students learn to manage

emotions, build healthy relationships, show empathy, and make good decisions. It's a clean and clear model, with five core competencies that are easy to communicate and implement in schools. That simplicity, paired with a strong research base, is a big reason why it's so widely used. A key study by Durlak and colleagues (2011) reviewed 213 school-based SEL programs and found that students in these programs improved not only in social and emotional skills but also saw academic gains—on average, about 11 percentile points. That kind of data makes a strong case for SEL as a way to support students holistically.

But even with all that evidence, it didn't take long before I started to see some critical perspectives emerging in the literature—ones that really resonated with me. One of the big concerns is that frameworks like CASEL often assume SEL can be taught in a culturally neutral way. That's a problem. Scholars like Gloria Ladson-Billings, Geneva Gay (2018), and Django Paris and H. Samy Alim (2017) argue that teaching, especially when it comes to emotions and relationships, has to be rooted in students' cultural experiences. Gay talks about *culturally responsive teaching*, where teachers draw on students' cultural backgrounds to make learning more relevant. Paris and Alim push even further, calling for *culturally sustaining pedagogy*, a way of teaching that not only respects students' identities but actively supports them in maintaining and growing their cultural knowledge. From this lens, CASEL's approach feels too surface-level. Equity is often treated as an optional add-on, not as something central to SEL's core design (Cipriano et al., 2024).

Another gap I noticed in the literature, and one that showed up in my own research, was how little attention is given to teachers' beliefs and their professional agency. Darling-Hammond et al. (2019) argue that SEL is most effective when it's not something separate from academic learning but deeply woven into it. That only happens when teachers are supported as

professionals who make thoughtful, daily decisions about how to teach. Their review of the learning sciences makes it clear: trusting relationships, supportive environments, and systems that let teachers adapt the material to their students' needs are what make SEL work, not just following a script.

That idea connects to another line of thinking that really shaped my perspective: teachers as knowledge-makers. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) write about “inquiry as stance,” a way of understanding teachers not as people who just deliver someone else’s ideas, but as reflective practitioners who generate their own knowledge from lived experience. For me, this view was especially helpful in making sense of what I was seeing at Riverside. Teachers there weren’t just using the SEL curriculum; they were adapting it, questioning it, and reshaping it in real time based on what they knew about their students and themselves.

A related concept that came up a lot in the literature is *Teacher Social Emotional Competence* (SEC). Jennings and Greenberg (2009) introduced this framework to emphasize that teachers' own emotional awareness and regulation have a huge impact on their ability to teach SEL effectively. Later studies by Brackett et al. (2010) and Jennings and Frank (2015) added to this, showing that emotionally competent teachers are more likely to build strong relationships, manage classrooms calmly, and create positive learning environments. Programs like CARE (Jennings et al., 2013) and SMART-in-Education (Roeser et al., 2013) were designed to help teachers build these skills, mainly through mindfulness and stress-reduction.

Still, as helpful as SEC is in framing the emotional demands of teaching, I started to feel like something was missing. SEC helps explain teacher well-being, but it doesn’t fully capture how teachers shape curriculum or make pedagogical choices. That’s where *Teacher Pedagogy Theory*

came in. I found the work of Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson (2015) really helpful here. They define teacher agency not as a personality trait, but as something that emerges from teachers' beliefs, experiences, and the environment they work in. That framing clicked with what I was seeing at Riverside. Teachers weren't just being given permission to make SEL their own—they were being encouraged to do so by school leadership.

All of this led me to question the common idea that successful SEL is about implementing a program “with fidelity.” At Riverside, that wasn't really the goal. Teachers were modifying lessons, mixing in tools like Zones of Regulation and Responsive Classroom, and finding ways to make SEL more meaningful for their students. This kind of curriculum-shaping isn't often acknowledged in policy or professional development, but as Cipriano et al. (2024) point out, it's essential, especially when working with marginalized or culturally diverse student populations.

In the end, the literature helped me realize that SEL is not something you just roll out in a classroom. It's a living, breathing practice that depends heavily on who's teaching it, how it's being taught, and what kind of school culture supports it. When we center teacher beliefs, emotional well-being, and professional judgment, SEL has the potential to be transformative. But when those pieces are missing, even the best-designed programs are unlikely to stick.

Positionality

When considering one's outlook on the world, it's essential to acknowledge the many positionalities that inevitably cloud one's ability to perceive things objectively. Our perspectives are shaped not only by conscious beliefs but also by subconscious influences. From personal experience, I know that various aspects of one's identity can significantly shape their outlook on

life. Factors such as race, sex, gender, religion, geographical background, and many more play critical roles in shaping how individuals interact with the world around them.

Growing up in southern Maine, one of the whitest states in the country, my understanding of race was profoundly shaped by my environment. I have never experienced discrimination based on the color of my skin, nor did I witness much of it among my peers, as 99% of my school population was also white. This homogeneity shaped my worldview in ways I didn't fully recognize at the time. I grew up having dinners with the local police and being taught by teachers who all looked like me. It wasn't until high school that I began to understand this wasn't a universal experience. My privileged position allowed me to "ignore" race as a defining factor of identity. I didn't have to think about how others perceived me based on my race because I was part of the majority.

However, my perspective changed drastically during my first semester at Clark. While I had been aware of racial injustices across the country, especially highlighted by the murder of George Floyd, I hadn't realized how deeply embedded racism is in our society. My positionality as a white person from a predominantly white state had allowed me to remain blind to the injustices happening all around me.

Another important aspect of my identity that shapes how I view the world is my experience as a cisgender woman. Growing up, the world has always perceived me in alignment with how I identify. I've never experienced misgendering or hate based on my gender identity, unlike many individuals who do not identify as cisgender. That said, I have faced bigotry and discrimination rooted in my identity as a woman.

Throughout my life, male figures have told me I was "overly emotional" or needed to "toughen up." I was often overlooked when help was needed for tasks involving physical labor,

and on several occasions, I've been told that my destiny is "in the kitchen." I've experienced men reducing me to an object rather than acknowledging my personhood, and I've faced biases based on my size or physical stature. My experiences as a woman have shown me that I often have to work three times as hard to earn the same respect that men receive effortlessly in professional spaces. Furthermore, I've witnessed my basic rights being debated by individuals who have no personal stake in the issues they seek to control.

My positionalities significantly influence not only how I view the world but also how I navigate it. They shape my interactions with people and my approach to various situations, including my role as a student and a future educator. Teaching has always been my dream, and I recognize that educators often model their teaching styles after the environments in which they were taught. I am committed to breaking that cycle every time I step into a classroom.

Moments from my own schooling live in my head daily and play a pivotal role in how I intend to be as a future educator. There is one story in particular that stays with me and is central to my teaching philosophy:

It was a warm spring day in my third-grade year. My class and I were picking up from working on our claymation projects and lining up to go to lunch. In the corner of my eye, I saw a young boy in my class sneak into our cubby area and pull something from his bag. The next few minutes went in slow motion, I went from giggling with my friends about our pickle claymation to crying in the corner of the hallway with the young boy holding a knife to my face, screaming at me. I was terrified, frozen in fear. Finally, my teacher noticed and managed to get the knife away from the student and had us get back in line for lunch, not acknowledging what had just taken place. For the remainder of the year, my entire class was on edge, everyone was walking

on eggshells around this student, and no one felt safe enough with our teacher, nor had the words to explain how we were all feeling.

This experience molded me into the person and educator I am today, not only because I want to be able to support students like myself in understanding their emotions and handling traumatic events like this one, but also to support students like the young boy who brought the knife to school. I was not the only student who was failed by a poorly trained teacher; my classmate, the young boy, was also. There were many warning signs that the little boy showed before this incident that he needed extra support, and they were all missed because my teachers weren't trained, nor did they push themselves to learn them. I don't want any other child to be put in a situation like this, in either role.

Since starting my research at Riverside, I can already sense the change in my outlook on education. While I will continue to have my identities present in my mind while I teach, I have started to understand that asking for help/ guidance in areas that I don't relate to and/or don't have experience in, doesn't make me a bad teacher, if anything it makes me a better one because I am going into my classroom space knowing that I don't know everything and I can always learn more. I hope that by doing so, I create a welcoming and safe environment for others to do the same.

My goal as an educator is to create a space where all students, regardless of their identities, feel included, safe, and challenged in their learning. It's my responsibility to hold myself accountable and ensure that my biases, shaped by my positionalities, do not negatively impact the lives of my students.

Context

My main collaborator for this project was Maile Marguleas. We collected all the data together, but analyzed it separately based on our theoretical frameworks and research questions. Our research took place at Riverside Independent (all names have been given pseudonyms for confidentiality purposes), an independent school located in Worcester, Massachusetts. We conducted our research through observations, an anonymous survey, and confidential teacher interviews.

We also worked closely with the heads of both the Lower and Middle Schools at Riverside. We first brought our research to Riverside in June of 2024, after we began experiencing communication and scheduling issues with our original site. After our initial meeting with Riverside, the focus of our project shifted a little bit; we changed from wanting to implement a brand new Social Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum to wanting to analyze one that already exists and the implementation process that went along with it.

Riverside serves students from over 63 cities and towns throughout central Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island. It offers instructions for Pre-K through 12th-grade students. Within the last year, Riverside implemented a new SEL curriculum school-wide. Maile's and my goal was to find out how the implementation of this new curriculum had been going from the teachers' perspectives and to try and highlight potential ways that the Administration at Riverside could better support their staff throughout the process.

Our data collection focused on the Lower and Middle Schools at Riverside, making our participant pool roughly 50 teachers. The research included both an anonymous survey and semi-structured interviews, targeting teachers who instruct students in Grades Pre-K through 8th.

For the anonymous survey, we sent the teachers the link to our survey and told them to fill it out on their own time if they so choose.

Our anonymous survey was a Qualtrics survey, meaning the data is automatically sorted as soon as it is submitted. We analyzed the data ourselves to find any patterns that may not have been picked up by Qualtrics. We had the Heads of Schools send that out to the teachers in the beginning of November, and sent out a reminder email at the beginning of the second semester. We began interviewing teachers in November as well, and finished up our interviews in early December.

Pseudonym	About Them
Ms. Anderson	Lower School Teacher, 25th year teaching, 6th year at Riverside, mixed background of public and independent schools.
Ms. Kollins	Lower School Teacher, 6th year teaching, 3 years as a special education teacher in a public school, 3rd year at Riverside.
Mrs. Charles	Middle School Teacher, 15th year teaching, 5th year at Riverside, worked at a private boarding school prior.
Mrs. Guerard	Lower School Teacher, 29th year teaching, 3rd year at Riverside, past experience in public, private, and a laboratory school.
Ms. Kelsey	Lower School Teacher, 1st year teacher at Riverside.
Ms. Starkey	Lower School Teacher, 24th year teaching, Background in public school, first year in an independent school
Riverside Independent	Independent School in Worcester, MA, Serves Pre-K - 12th grade
Dawson Leery	Head of Lower School, previous classroom teacher, used to teach at schools abroad

Jesse Palmer	Head of Middle School
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Methodology

For our approach to data collection, Mai and I tried to think about what would make the most sense for our desired outcome. We knew we wanted to do a short anonymous survey because we know people are more likely to respond and respond honestly if they know there will be no way of tracing that response back to them, so we were hoping we would get more honest data than if we had solely depended on interviews with the teachers. At Riverside, there is an atmosphere of trust, so while many teachers would probably be happy to talk about their thoughts and feelings around SEL openly, there are inherent power dynamics that would be present in any school when teachers are talking about an action their administration has taken. Our goal is to give those who may feel less comfortable an opportunity to share their ideas.

However, we still wanted to do some teacher interviews because we knew that some things cannot be expressed via survey response; you can't get people's true emotions without talking with them face to face, and since our project is focused on social-emotional learning, we figured it was important for our data to reflect people's emotions. We received six responses on our anonymous survey and conducted six interviews.

Our response level for our survey was a little disappointing, but not necessarily surprising. We knew getting responses back would be tricky because we are asking the teachers to add yet another thing to their already extremely busy plates. While our survey would have only taken a maximum of 10 minutes, that is 10 minutes out of their prep periods, or something they have to remember to do when they get home and shut their 'school brain' off. However, the

data we did receive was fruitful. Below is the list of the survey questions that the teachers answered.

Anonymous Survey

1. How prepared do you feel you are to teach SEL?
2. On a scale from 1-10, how well do you feel your administration has supported you throughout the transition of implementing SEL?
 - a. Explain your thinking for the previous question.
3. On a scale from 1-10, how much do you think the SEL curriculum is benefiting your students?
 - a. Explain your thinking for the previous question.
4. What would you have changed about the implementation process?
5. Do you think the SEL curriculum/lessons are multicultural/culturally relevant?

As I stated, we completed six interviews, all lasting roughly 30-45 minutes. There was a list of 16 questions that we tried to ask all of the interviewees, although oftentimes they answered several questions after we had asked one, which was a spectacular way of leaving time for follow-ups that arose based on what they answered. While we did go into the interviews with specific questions, we tried to cultivate a conversation-based environment with the teachers. Our biggest goal was to learn more about the teachers' thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Below are the questions we asked all of the teachers in their interviews.

Interview Questions

1. How long have you been teaching here at Bancroft?
2. Can you share your past experiences with teaching SEL?

3. What are your opinions and philosophies on SEL and how it impacts the classroom?
 - a. How does this way of thinking affect how you teach SEL?
4. It's our understanding that all of the lower school uses the Second Step SEL curriculum. Can you describe your approach to implementing it? Do you have specific times dedicated to SEL? Is it just slowly transitioned in?
5. What tools or resources have helped implement SEL?
6. What types of support/resources have you received during this transition?
7. What types of support/resources are you lacking?
8. What part of the SEL curriculum do you like? Dislikes?
9. What is challenging within the curriculum?
10. What is something that is going well, and what is something that could be improved within your SEL time?
11. What areas of SEL do you feel your students need the most help with?
12. What areas of SEL do you feel your students are confident in?
13. Do you think your students will benefit from this SEL curriculum?
14. Do your lessons explore SEL through multicultural lenses (language, culture, race, religion, etc.)?
 - a. If yes, please give an example.
 - b. If not, why do you think that is? Is culture not as present in SEL?
15. How do you handle the influence of culture that may come up while teaching SEL?
16. Do you account for students' cultural backgrounds when planning your SEL lessons?
 - a. In your view, how can SEL instruction be more culturally relevant or responsive?

Overall, I feel positive about my data, even with some of the challenges I've faced along the way. The interviews were especially insightful, and I've seen interesting patterns emerge. While the survey response rate was been lower than I hoped, the data we received from those six is extremely rich and insightful as well.

Data Analysis

Throughout my time visiting the school, doing observations before collecting any data, the teachers I spoke to seemed extremely excited about my project and eager to help in any way they could. However, once we began the actual recruitment process, the earlier enthusiasm seemed to be less present. I ended up getting 6 responses on my survey and 6 interviews out of roughly 50+ teachers across both the lower and middle schools. While I received some very rich data from these 12 points, I do want to acknowledge that my findings may not speak for both schools as a whole. I also want to acknowledge that while most of my findings will address both the lower and middle school as a whole, there are a few findings that may correlate directly to the lower school, as 5 of the 6 interviews I did were from the lower school.

Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is “a qualitative research method that examines language in its social context, exploring how meaning is constructed and how language shapes social realities”(Emerald Publishing, n.d). There are 3 main lenses of discourse analysis: 1) intersecting social identities, 2) what work is the person doing through the language, and 3) cultural models. Discourse analysis allows researchers to examine how language functions in any given situation. It allows us to consider context while examining our data. I used discourse analysis to analyze my data. Using this lens allowed me to honor my participants' language while formatting themes from shared experiences of Riverside teachers.

My Data's Story

Although Maile and I conducted our research together, we each analyzed it separately. My journey of data analysis was far from linear. I began using the lens of SEL and Teacher SEC

and trying to code my data; however, after many unsatisfying attempts, I decided to switch my method of data analysis. Once I switched to discourse analysis, I was able to make more sense of my data and began pulling out themes.

My first set of findings was lacking. There was no clear line of connection between the themes, and I could tell that something was not quite working. Eventually, I concluded that my theory of Teacher SEC was not strongly supported by my data, and while it was helpful during the data collection process, I needed to shift to a new theory for my analysis.

My shift from Teacher SEC to Teacher Pedagogy opened my eyes to a whole new, much stronger set of findings. This process was much easier to dive deeply into, and allowed the data to speak for itself

My Step by Step.

My Analysis journey was far from linear; I tried analyzing my data in several different ways several different times before I landed on the combination that worked for me. In my first attempt at data analysis, I tried to use coding. I took all of my transcriptions and printed them out, and began to code. Halfway through my first transcript (of six), I was already at 150 codes, and I began to panic. I realized that my grain size was too small, so I tried again. This time, I got to the end of the first transcript and only had 30 codes; clearly, my grain size was too big this time.

After this, I decided I would try using discourse analysis, since the majority of my data was from interview transcripts anyway, I thought this would work better for me. For a while, this new method seemed to be working great, until I tried to tie my findings back to my theory and realized there was a major disconnect between the two, and that no matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't get my findings and Teacher SEC theory to line up. I had to go back to the literal

drawing board, a whiteboard in the library, and see if I could pull anything from my data that would show me a new theory. After many hours of combing through data, I discovered what was hiding in plain sight the whole time: Teacher Pedagogy.

Once I finalized my analysis method and my theories, the real work began. To start my new analysis, I pulled quotes that explicitly talked about teachers' pedagogy or philosophy into a separate document. I then began to write down noticings of commonalities between the quotes in my notebook. After several rounds of this, I came up with my themes. Once I had my themes, the fun part began. I went back through my quotes and began color-coding them by theme, and the pieces fell into place from there.

Findings

Although the number of survey responses and interviews that we were able to collect was not as large as we had hoped (only 6 of roughly 50+ teachers between the two schools), the data that we were able to collect are extremely rich. Through focusing on teacher talk and the many phrases and metaphors that appear throughout much of the data, I saw how teachers' identities, beliefs, and previous knowledge influence their thoughts and ideas around SEL and how they present it in their teachings.

Throughout my analysis, four key themes became evident. (1) What are teachers doing beyond the curriculum? (2) What knowledge or experiences are they bringing with them? (3) How are they currently using the curriculum? and (4) What needs to be in place to really make SEL work in Riverside?

Philosophies and Education that Guide Teachers in SEL

Throughout all of the data collected, it is clear that the educators we interviewed feel very strongly about the importance of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and its need to be integrated more meaningfully into students' daily experiences rather than relegated to a once-a-rotation block as it currently is at Riverside. Many teachers expressed frustration with the current structure, emphasizing that limiting SEL to isolated sessions is fundamentally misaligned with their educational philosophies and teaching practices.

Teacher Philosophies

Ms. Anderson, a teacher in the Lower School at Riverside shared her thoughts stating, “[..]to me [it] is like foundational and in my opinion, it goes beyond just like a curriculum. It's kind of interwoven into everything that I try to do in the classroom...” (Interview, 12/2024). The word *foundational* stands out in that quote because it implies that SEL is the scaffolding for all learning done in or out of a school, and that effective education cannot happen without weaving SEL principles into all teaching. This theme of SEL as an essential, ongoing part of education appeared several times across many interviews. Another teacher in the lower school, Ms. Kelsey, says: “Yeah, because my philosophy is like, well, if you don't have SEL, if you don't have the social emotional learning going on, then it's really not [effective] learning happening” (interview, 12/2024). Learning, in this view, is not just about absorbing information; it is about developing the emotional resilience, social skills, and self-awareness that allow students to engage deeply with their education.

It is clear that Anderson and Kelsey are not alone in this way of thinking. Additionally, it is clear that the teachers at Riverside go above and beyond when implementing SEL within their classrooms. Ms. Kollins, a teacher in the lower school, shared, “I take scripted teaching as a

suggestion, I use it as a slight guide, but I base a lot of [my lessons] off my students' needs" (interview, 12/2024). Kollins prided herself in taking control over SEL in her classroom, her main priority is ensuring that her students get the lessons they need based on where they are, instead of where the curriculum says they should be. She went on to say that she and her fellow grade teacher "[...] kind of went off of second step and we taught different lessons that we knew our kids needed. So we started the year talking about kind of like zones of regulation." The demand for SEL to be comprehensive and align with students' needs is what pushes educators at Riverside forward in their teaching.

"Um, I would say like [pause] a good percentage of my work is [pause] it's academic, but it's -it's also like the SEL, like it's both. It's not, it's not something I do on the side, it's more of like a lens that I work through. [...] yeah, I just want them to be good citizens.

Like informed, critical thinking, kind, those types of things." (interview, 11/2024).

In the quote above, Mrs.Charles, a teacher in the Middle school at Riverview, states that she just wants her students to be good citizens. Similarly to her colleagues in the lower school, Charles believes that SEL is imperative for her students to be good humans.

SEL Across Curriculum

The correlation between the teacher's philosophies and how they carry out SEL in their classrooms is very apparent. In several of the interviews the teachers expressed a deep belief in the idea of SEL needing to be a integrated element of learning and not isolated to a singular block or class.

"Like, for example, if we're doing a math lesson and I hear the kids say like, I can't do this. I don't want to do this, but that actually relates to one of the lessons we had done a couple of weeks before. We took a list of the things that we were saying, and then we

were like, how can we change these fixed comments into like a growth mindset?”

(interview, 12/2024)

This quote from Ms. Kelsey in the lower school is an excellent example of an integrated SEL classroom environment. Kelsey does an excellent job of casually referring back to the concepts from the SEL lesson they had completed earlier, to relate the concept to a real life dilemma. This is a common line of thinking, especially in the lower school. Ms. Anderson explained her approach to of fusing aspects of SEL throughout her teaching.

“I think like being really open and affirming and like recognizing that we have differences and like acknowledging that and making sure that we talk a lot about like windows and mirrors And making sure that like in everything that I'm doing, whether it's like SEL or math or anything that like kids are experiencing like both like windows into other cultures, other people's lived experiences, and also like having their experiences reflected back to them.” (interview 12/2024).

When I heard her make the connection between SEL and cultural awareness, I got excited because, as I mentioned, that is something that is often overlooked in SEL curriculum and throughout the main theories/ frameworks that are used. Anderson is joined in this thinking by middle school teacher, Mrs. Charles, who says, “I choose the books that we read based on like the theme. I mean, most of it's about identity, but it's also about like perspective taking” (Interview 11/2024). The importance of perspective taking within SEL is often overlooked when SEL is being discussed. This is, in my opinion, an essential aspect of SEL, and the fact that teachers at Riverside are acknowledging that without explicit guidance is a testament to the type of educator that Riverside employs.

What prior knowledge are teachers drawing on?

An additional demonstration of the measure of teacher that Riverside has is the wealth of prior knowledge that they bring into their teaching. This background plays a major role in how they approach SEL in their classrooms. Riverside teachers come from a diverse range of experiences, trainings, and experiences which help them create a unique learning environment for their students. The teacher's deep understanding of SEL is not something that is used every once in a while, it is pervasive in the entirety of their teaching.

Responsive Classroom

One of, if not the most prevalent previous pieces of training that shows up in classrooms at Riverside is the Responsive Classroom. Responsive Classroom is a leading framework in Social and Emotional Competencies within a classroom setting. When asked about previous experience with SEL, elementary teacher, Ms. Anderson responded, “Yes, lots of experience, but nothing like a formal curriculum. [...] I had done multiple trainings. At most of the schools I was at, including like what I was initially trained in, they used a lot of the Responsive Classroom.” (Interview, 12/2024). The majority of Anderson’s experience had some tie to Responsive Classroom, she went on to say “[...] so I draw on that when I feel I need to.” This is an extremely interesting point because it shows that Anderson feels that the provided SEL curriculum is lacking often enough that she is relying on her previous training, and she is not alone. Mrs. Guerard expressed similar thinking, stating:

“It's a responsive classroom. [...] So it's all about how you have to have like eye connection and connection with each child right as the day starts, so that they say they realize, like you see me, you know, I'm here. You can tell whether I'm up here or down here today. And so there are multiple levels to it. Like, there's somewhere you can say to

the kids, What color are you today? And they might be green, red, yellow, you know what I mean? Depending on their emotions” (Interview, 12/2024).

This references the 3rd and 5th practices of the Responsive Classroom, which state, “3rd: Great cognitive growth occurs through social interaction. 5th: What we know and believe about our students—individually, culturally, developmentally—informs our expectations, reactions, and attitudes about those students.” (Responsive Classroom, n.d.). Guerard makes a conscious effort to get to know her students and uses what she learns about them to determine how she can best support them during that day.

The goal of Responsive Classroom is to a) guide a child in their emotional development, and, more importantly, b) personalize interactions with students to help them feel seen, heard, and respected. Teachers who utilize their training and belief in Responsive Classroom will be able to create a better, more personalized classroom for their students each year, and in doing so, continuously improve themselves as practitioners.

Regulating Needs

While Responsive Classroom was the most repeated training for teachers prior to them teaching at Riverside, it is not the only example of background knowledge that teachers are bringing. Various other curricula and social practices were mentioned throughout interviews, including zones of regulation, Cool Tools, restorative justice, and broader psychological theories like Maslow's hierarchy of needs. This diverse list of experiences impacts how teachers approach their teaching, often blending multiple styles or theories to meet the multiple dynamics within their classrooms. “I think, along with SEL like in the public school, we use[d] like zones of regulation when kids are feeling dysregulated,” explained Ms. Starkey, a teacher in the lower school at Riverside. Starkey’s comment highlights how she uses her previous experiences in a

public school to influence her current teaching style. Rather than relying on a singular approach, Riverside teachers utilize a multitude of resources from their past.

“So in [my old school], we had a really cool curriculum. It was called Cool Tools. And Cool Tools was designed by a woman named Ava De La Sota. [...] And what's really great about Ava is that she felt like kids needed the language around managing social situations. And understanding themselves. She felt like just telling them, Oh, if a relationship isn't healthy, to leave it. Or if you're playing with someone and they're not in line to go do something else. [...] wasn't enough without the language.” (interview, 12/2024)

Mrs. Guerard utilizes her knowledge in SEL that she learned from her previous school to influence how she approaches her teaching today. The last line in the quote, *it wasn't enough without language*, highlights the importance of merging the old with the new. In Guerard's previous school, the curriculum that they used contained extremely important concepts, but it was difficult for the concepts to translate from class to class because there was no shared language. Due to this experience, Guerard can appreciate the shared language in the curriculum that Riverside uses.

In addition to her experience with the Responsive Classroom, Ms. Anderson also feels strongly about restorative justice, stating, “You know, this is our community, we do like restorative circles, and like, what do we do if there's a problem? How can we talk about it? I've had some training in restorative justice, so I bring that in.” (interview, 12/2024). Similar to Mrs. Guerard, Anderson acknowledges that often, only having one of the teaching emotions for your students may not be the most effective, and they can lean on her previous training to adjust their teaching to their students' needs.

The needs of students in the main focus for Ms. Kollins, another lower school teacher at Riverside. Her previous experiences in the classroom have shaped who she is as a teacher in many ways, including her main psychological theories.

“Oh, the hierarchy of needs, yes, Maslow. [...] yeah. Like when I'm thinking about like our academic stuff, like right now we're learning about the COVID infections, like that's up here [*makes a hand gesture to the top of a pyramid*], that's important. Before students can fully learn this, we have to address these [*motions to where the bottom of the pyramid would be*] needs. And that to me is where SEL fits in,” (Interview, 12/2024).

Kollins clearly articulates how she feels that Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and SEL work hand in hand. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs is the theory that students need their basic needs met first before they can effectively engage in their learning. Kollins is claiming that SEL helps students' basic needs be met. Her knowledge of how her students’ brains work allows her to become a stronger educator for them.

What are teachers doing with the curriculum?

While the ways that teachers are enhancing the given curriculum are invaluable, it is equally important to recognize how teachers are working with the curriculum provided to them. Their thoughtful use and adaptation of these resources significantly impact student experiences and outcomes. Although the teachers may not love every aspect of the curriculum they’ve been provided, they have found ways to utilize it in ways that work well for their students.

Win-at-Social

The Middle school at Riverside recently adopted an online SEL program called Win-at-Social. Through both my interviews and survey data, I could see that this particular side

of the provided SEL was beneficial for their students. Mrs. Charles relies on her own SEL lessons for the majority of what she covers with her students, however, she can appreciate the aforementioned aspects of the given curriculum as well.

“We have Win-at-Social, which is an online platform [...] it basically curates, like they curate lessons and have like different hurdles, which are like times for the kids to talk, and it pulls new articles and relevant topics and news stuff. Um, and it’s kinda like a plug and play, like I don’t need to like make anything up, like I just go there, I find a topic that I want and it has like a breakdown like [...]if students are struggling with engaging positively with each other, like you could find that specific thread and find something that’s related to that. Um, or like digital literacy and that kind of like texting, groupchat kind of issues, like that kind of thing,” (Interview, 11/2024).

The *plug-and-play* aspect of Win-at-Social seems to be a positive for Mrs. Charles; the stress that can arise from having to plan a lesson for students based on a specific social dilemma, every time something comes up, would be unbearable. With Win-at-Social, that stress is alleviated from teachers like Mrs. Charles, who now only have to know their students well enough to know what problems they are facing. Knowing your students well is a practice of the Responsive Classroom that Charles' colleagues in the lower school mentioned several times in interviews. There was also a teacher in the middle school who mentioned both these practices in their survey response.

In response to the question: How prepared do you feel to teach SEL? This teacher responded, “My school has a curriculum (Win-at-Social). We also do a circle practice in the Responsive Classroom style. However, we do not have Advisory very often, only once in a 5-day rotation.” This was an interesting finding because it is a middle school teacher, but they are

referencing a similar background to the lower school teachers, meaning there is more consistency between the two schools than was indicated by my earlier findings.

How the Teachers Interpret the Positive Effects of SEL

Teachers also described how they feel the SEL curriculum is positively affecting their students. Three main takeaways emerged for me: the developmental alignment and providing students and teachers with explicit tools and language.

Ms. Kelsey, a teacher in the lower school, describes how she feels the SEL lessons align with her students' needs throughout the year, saying,

“I tend to like the lessons, they feel like they fall at exactly the right time of year, developmentally. [...] Like the first lesson we did was on mistakes, and it's like, yes, we should totally be talking about that right now. And if I don't think the lesson matches where my students are in the year, I can always switch it up, so I like the autonomy.”

(Interview, 12/2024).

In this quote, Kelsey expresses gratitude for the lower school SEL curriculum for understanding the developmental stages of her students, while also allowing her to customize the lessons to fit her students' needs when necessary. Kelsey's colleague, Ms. Anderson, also expressed appreciation for the lower school's curriculum, saying, “I really like the lessons, I think [the]lessons that it gives us, like the tools and the language, like very explicitly to the kids” (Interview, 12/2024). The idea of a shared language has come up several times throughout my data, in every interview that took place in the lower school, the love for a shared language was mentioned.

An additional mention of language appeared in the survey responses, with several sharing sentiments with this teacher who said, “Students are able to engage in conversations around a

wide variety of topics. They engage with each other with respect.” in response to the question, How do you think SEL is benefiting your students? This suggests that teachers feel that the integration of SEL is not only fostering emotional growth in students, but also enhancing students' ability to communicate within their community. These responses highlight that when SEL programs are thoughtfully aligned with developmental needs and offer the right language and tools, they empower both students and teachers to build stronger, more empathetic communities.

What needs to be in place for the curriculum to be effective?

The final theme that is prominent in my data is the need for stronger supports throughout the school when it comes to implementing and maintaining effective SEL. The need for more Professional Development (PD), having explicit trainings beyond the curriculum itself, and utilizing resources already in the school, were the main ideas that all participants kept circling back to.

Professional Development (PD)

The overwhelming desire for more Professional Development was the most commonly mentioned change throughout my entire data. In both surveys and interviews, the teachers expressed that they did not receive very much PD and wished they had more time for it. Ms. Anderson expressed her feelings about PD, saying,

“I think more professional development, or like modeling of the lessons, might be useful, and that might be on me, too. It might be like on the website or something like that, but like we haven't had the...like been provided time to like do that” (Interview, 12/2024).

Mrs. Guerard expressed similar sentiments, saying, “A PD deep dive would be so helpful to really like, dig into the materials with each other” (Interview, 12/2024). Both Guerard and Anderson have vast backgrounds in SEL and similar ideologies, and they even express a desire for more PD. To me, this is an indicator that more PD is a universal want at Riverside; this idea was backed up in survey answers as well.

When asked the question: What would you have changed about the implementation process? In regard to SEL, the teachers responded with the following:

“While I don't feel I needed more support given my experience with this at previous schools, it does feel like other faculty are hesitant because they are unsure of how to have these conversations.”

“I would provide more time for teachers to talk through problematic behavior, practice lessons together, etc. I would also have more time for Advisory classes.”

“More PD.”

What stood out to me about these responses is the fact that while not all of the educators explicitly said they themselves needed the support, there was still the understanding that it would benefit the majority of people if more PD was provided.

Explicit Training

While PD was the most commonly named form of training that the teachers asked for, there were several other trainings that the educators asked for including, explicit training in Zones of Regulation, how to make SEL more of a long term/ less of a band-aid solution, seeing others teach, and how SEL looks from a non-white washed lens.

Ms. Starkey, a teacher in the lower school, expressed a desire for explicit training, saying, “I’m not sure if they do, but I think all teachers need training in [Zones of Regulation] here at

Riverside.” (Interview 12/2024). This was an interesting comment because there have been several mentions of Zones of Regulation throughout my data, and yet there seems to be little to no connection between the teachers who are actively using it. It seems to me that many teachers at Riverside have a desire to share the knowledge that they hold about certain subjects with their colleagues, but lack the opportunity to do so.

This is a sentiment I saw in a survey response as well to the question: How do you feel your administration has supported the implementation [of SEL]? One teacher responded by saying, “They've provided resources like WinAtSocial, but there's been no actual training about how to do it or provided models/run-throughs of moderating mock conversations with students or teachers.” This quote highlights the same want as before, that teachers at Riverside have the tools and knowledge themselves, but they haven't been provided a time or space to share that with each other, leading to a potential disconnect between grades and schools.

In response to the survey question How prepared do you feel to teach SEL? A teacher at Riverside responded with: “There are aspects of SEL that I feel are ‘band-aid’ practices, and I would like to learn more about strategies that will help students long term.”

This response caught my attention because, as I mentioned in my introduction, I encountered a similar sentiment during an interview with another educator. As soon as I heard this phrase, “band-aid practices,” it immediately sparked something in my mind. It seems to reflect a common frustration among teachers—a recognition that while Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is a vital component of student development, certain methods might only provide temporary relief rather than lasting, meaningful change. The concept of “band-aid practices” suggests that some of the interventions may address immediate concerns, like

behavioral issues or short-term emotional struggles, but don't necessarily equip students with the skills and mindset for long-term success in managing their emotions and relationships.

This observation made me reflect on the broader conversation surrounding SEL in schools. The fact that so many educators recognize the importance of SEL but also express concerns about its depth and long-term effectiveness is intriguing. It highlights a crucial gap in professional development opportunities for teachers—while SEL is widely acknowledged as an essential part of the curriculum, there may be insufficient training or resources to fully equip educators with the tools they need to make SEL practices sustainable and meaningful for students over time.

Utilizing Resources Already Available

The final noticing that I had about what needs to be in place for SEL to be effective is that teachers may not know exactly what resources are available for them within the school. Ms. Starkey states, “I have taken advantage of the library for resources [...] I think there should be more open dialogue between the teachers and [the librarian]” (Interview, 12/2024). The phrase that stands out to me in this statement is *more open dialogue*. This seems to be a common denominator in many of my findings. There are many resources available within Riverside to help teachers in general and with SEL, and yet not many teachers that I spoke to, both formally and informally, mentioned knowing or utilizing these resources.

Another resource that seems not to be discussed between Riverside teachers is each other: “If I have questions, I usually just talk to Mr. Guerard[...]” (Interview, 12/2024). Ms. Kollins explained she utilizes her colleague Mrs. Guerard, who has an extremely expansive background in SEL and similar practices, yet Kollins is one of the only educators at Riverside who I heard

mention utilizing her colleagues' knowledge as well as her own. I think this goes into the lack of dialogue that seems to happen at Riverside.

This is an interesting finding to me, because during my observations at Riverside, there was an atmosphere of open communication between colleagues, so I am wondering where the gap is coming from with SEL.

Thinking Deeper and Honoring Teacher Voices

While the data I collected tells a powerful story on its own, there's also something deeper happening, something you only catch when you slow down and really listen to how teachers are talking. The specific words, phrases, and metaphors they use offer insight into what they believe, how they feel, and how they're making sense of SEL in their day-to-day work. These small language choices, whether intentional or not, give us a window into the way teachers are holding and shaping this work in their own classrooms. It's in these moments that we start to see the bigger picture of how SEL is lived, not just taught.

Foundational vs. Lens

Anderson and Charles both talk about how central SEL is to their teaching, but the way they describe it reveals a subtle but important difference. Anderson calls SEL “foundational,” which suggests that it's part of the base she builds everything else on, something steady, something always there. Charles, on the other hand, describes it as “a lens that I work through,” which frames it as more of a way of seeing and making sense of what's happening in the classroom. Both metaphors speak to how deeply embedded SEL is in their practice, but one positions it as the ground floor, and the other as a guiding perspective. That difference might seem small, but it shows how teachers think differently about where SEL lives in their teaching.

Related to Curriculum vs. Embedded

Kelsey and Anderson also offer two distinct ways of weaving SEL into academic subjects. Kelsey gives a clear example of using an SEL lesson on a growth mindset during a math block when students were struggling. She pulled it in, in the moment, because it felt relevant and useful. Anderson, meanwhile, talks about SEL not as something you pull in when needed, but as something that's always present—woven into every subject and every interaction. She talks about her students getting “windows and mirrors,” meaning opportunities to both see themselves and understand others. Where Kelsey is showing how SEL lessons can resurface in real time, Anderson is showing how SEL can shape the overall tone, environment, and goals of every lesson. Both approaches are powerful, and together they show the flexibility of what SEL can look like in practice.

Autonomy vs. Provided Structure

Kelsey and Anderson also reflect on how they use the SEL curriculum, and again, their answers highlight different but equally valuable perspectives. Kelsey appreciates being able to adapt lessons based on where her students are at. She sees autonomy as necessary, teachers know their kids best, and they need space to make changes when things don't feel like a good fit. Anderson focuses more on the strengths of the curriculum itself. She likes that it gives students clear language and tools for navigating tricky emotions and social situations. It's not an either/or. What's clear from both perspectives is that good SEL work happens when teachers feel trusted to use their professional judgment *and* when students are given consistent, structured language to anchor their learning. There's room for both, and that balance can be what makes SEL stick.

Thinking Beyond Themselves

Something that really stood out in the data was how often teachers spoke about professional development with their colleagues in mind, not just themselves. Guerard, for example, talked about wanting a “PD deep dive” so that teachers could really explore the materials *together*. Starkey said that all teachers could benefit from training on Zones of Regulation, not as a critique, but as a way of lifting each other up. Even teachers who felt confident in their own experience still named a need for more support for their peers. These weren’t comments about who’s doing what wrong. They were about care. There’s a real sense that teachers want to grow together, that when one of them learns, it helps the whole community move forward. PD, when done well, isn’t just about building skills. It’s about building trust, connection, and a shared commitment to students.

Communication

One pattern I kept noticing was how little structured communication there seems to be across the two schools at Riverside, especially around SEL. Teachers in both buildings are using the same frameworks, like Responsive Classroom, and speaking really passionately about it. But there’s no indication that they know others down the hall—or in the other building—are doing the same. That disconnect feels important. Again and again, teachers expressed a desire to talk with each other more intentionally. One teacher said they’d love more time to “talk through problematic behavior [and] practice lessons together.” While there’s some informal communication happening within each school, what’s missing is dedicated time and space for teachers to sit down, share what’s working, and wrestle with challenges together.

This lack of structured communication isn't just about scheduling, it shapes how SEL is (or isn't) sustained across the school. Without built-in time for collaboration, ideas stay isolated, and the full potential of the work gets lost. What's clear is that teachers *want* to connect. They want to share, support each other, and grow together. But right now, that work is happening on the margins—when and if there's time. For SEL to really take root at Riverside, those conversations can't be optional. They need to be part of the structure. Because when teachers are given the space to collaborate, SEL becomes more than a set of lessons; it becomes a culture.

Discussion: Let's Complicate It

My findings are rich and full of critical insights into both the culture of Riverside and the implementation of its Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum. These findings not only highlight key themes that emerged from teacher interviews and survey responses, but they also reveal the deeper tensions, beliefs, and values that shape the way SEL is interpreted and practiced within the school. While the findings are certainly revealing, they are also nuanced and multifaceted, reflecting the complex realities of teaching and learning.

My goal was to illuminate these complexities by analyzing how teachers navigate and make meaning of SEL through their own pedagogical lenses. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) argue that teacher pedagogy is not merely a set of techniques, but a form of professional knowledge and inquiry rooted in teachers' lived experiences and reflective practices. At Riverside, this is evident in how educators adapt, extend, and even critique the SEL curriculum based on their ever-evolving understandings of students' emotional and social needs. Teacher pedagogy, in this sense, operates as both an interpretive and agentive act, one that empowers teachers to shape and reimagine curricular tools in alignment with their values, philosophies, and

classroom realities. I also hope to unpack some of the noticings I discovered around the main frameworks of SEL, like CASEL.

Making sense of my findings

My findings helped me develop a more nuanced understanding of the theoretical frameworks guiding my research and the ways they intersect. Initially, I approached my data analysis and findings with a strong commitment to both Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and Teacher Pedagogy, recognizing them as central to the educational experience at Riverside. However, I found myself grappling with how these two frameworks interacted in practice. It wasn't until I revisited my data and began mapping where each theory appeared most prominently that the connections became clear. What emerged was a realization that at Riverside, SEL and pedagogy are not isolated or sequential components; they are deeply entangled. Teachers are not merely implementing a curriculum at one moment and reflecting on their teaching philosophy the next. Instead, they are constantly engaging in both simultaneously.

SEL is not just a set of lessons to be delivered; it is a lens through which teachers make decisions about instruction, relationships, and classroom culture. This deeper understanding shifted my focus from analyzing the curriculum alone to examining how teachers are evolving as practitioners. They are actively integrating SEL into their teaching practices in ways that are rooted in their pedagogical beliefs, values, and identities.

The Importance of Teacher Perspective

Research that is done in schools often focuses on either the students or the administrative perspectives, and while those perspectives are important, I feel that there is a major group that is being left out, which has extremely powerful insights: teachers. Going into my project, I knew I

wanted to center teacher voices, however, teacher perspective has become an even larger part of my project than I had originally intended.

Throughout my findings, it became clear that the teachers at Riverside possess a deep and intimate understanding of their students, the curriculum, and the day-to-day realities of classroom life. Their reflections demonstrated not only technical knowledge of SEL strategies but also emotional and relational insights that cannot be captured through top-down mandates alone. For example, when Ms. Anderson shared that SEL is “foundational” to everything she does in her classroom, it revealed how deeply embedded these practices are in her pedagogy—not as a discrete lesson block, but as part of an ongoing relationship with students. Honoring teacher voice means acknowledging that the most meaningful insights often come from those doing the work every day. This aligns with the principles of participatory research and teacher inquiry, which emphasize that teachers are not simply implementers of policy, but critical thinkers and co-constructors of knowledge in the educational process (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

Teachers consistently voiced concerns about how SEL is scheduled, implemented, and perceived, concerns that reflect systemic challenges rather than individual shortcomings. As one teacher noted, SEL being confined to a “once-a-rotation” block is fundamentally misaligned with the needs of both students and teachers. Teachers are the pulse of the school; their voices illuminate patterns of support, disconnection, and adaptation that affect the emotional and academic well-being of students.

My findings underscore the central role that teachers at Riverside play in shaping the implementation and success of SEL. Teachers are not just delivering content—they are nurturing relationships, creating safe learning environments, and continuously responding to the needs of

their students. This emotional labor, coupled with instructional demands, highlights the critical importance of respecting teachers as professionals with valuable expertise. Teachers at Riverside are already doing extensive work beyond the curriculum to integrate SEL into their pedagogy, often without sufficient time, training, or institutional support. As one teacher shared, “one lesson is not going to be enough to cover a whole social skill,” emphasizing the ongoing, embedded nature of SEL in effective teaching.

Teacher Agency Related to Context

Throughout my time at Riverside, both during classroom observations and through the collection and analysis of my data, it became increasingly evident that the teachers at Riverside possess a significant degree of agency over their teaching. This sense of professional freedom was not merely stated; it was demonstrated through the way teachers actively connected their instructional choices to their personal pedagogical beliefs and teaching philosophies. Rather than following a rigid curriculum script, Riverside educators exercised autonomy to adapt and reshape lessons in ways that aligned with their students' needs and their own values. This was not a passive expression of preference, but an intentional and thoughtful practice rooted in deeply held beliefs about what meaningful teaching and learning should look like.

This culture of teacher agency is a defining feature of Riverside. Many educators I spoke with described feeling empowered to make instructional decisions and adapt curriculum materials to best serve their students. As one teacher shared, “I tend to like the lessons, they feel like they fall at exactly the right time of year developmentally... and if I don't think the lesson matches where my students are in the year, I can always switch it up, so I like the autonomy.” This quote reveals how the school's structure not only permits flexibility but also encourages it as a form of responsive teaching. At Riverside, teachers are not merely implementing

curriculum; they are co-constructing it with their students in real time. This level of agency is reflective of a broader pedagogical orientation—one that values the professional expertise of teachers and centers students' immediate and contextual learning needs.

This practice of teacher autonomy also speaks volumes about Riverside's school culture, especially when compared to more standardized or top-down educational environments. In many schools, curriculum implementation is often prescriptive, with little room for deviation or personalization. However, Riverside stands in contrast to that model. The prevailing culture here is one of trust—trust in teachers as professionals, in their capacity to know their students well, and in their ability to make informed pedagogical choices. This cultural norm of trust and autonomy is rare and not to be taken for granted. As Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) argue, empowering teachers to act as knowledge-generators, rather than passive recipients of policy, is essential for fostering sustainable and context-responsive education.

The relationship between curriculum and autonomy at Riverside offers a compelling example of what it looks like when schools strike a balance between providing structure and allowing flexibility. While Riverside uses a set curriculum, teachers are not bound by it; instead, they are encouraged to supplement and modify lessons as they see fit. This approach differs significantly from schools where curriculum fidelity is prioritized over adaptability, often to the detriment of student engagement and teacher morale. At Riverside, however, curriculum serves as a foundation, not a ceiling. Teachers build upon it with creativity and intentionality, allowing them to better meet the diverse and dynamic needs of their students.

These practices also reveal important insights about the school's administration. Rather than exerting rigid control, Riverside administrators appear to cultivate a culture of professional

respect and collaborative leadership. This is seen in how teachers talk about their ability to innovate and lead within their classrooms. By fostering an environment where teachers feel trusted and supported, the administration is reinforcing the conditions necessary for authentic SEL and pedagogical integrity. As Darling-Hammond et al. (2019) note, when teachers feel respected and empowered, they are more likely to remain committed to their schools, grow in their practice, and contribute to positive student outcomes.

The level of teacher agency at Riverside is not only a testament to the professionalism of its educators but also to the vision and values of the school as a whole. It reflects a model where curriculum and pedagogy are not at odds, but in conversation, where teacher voice is honored, and where students ultimately benefit from instruction that is both principled and personalized.

Problematize CASEL as a Framework

As I have stated several times, CASEL is a leading framework for SEL. CASEL has been instrumental in the roll-out of SEL as a concept and many of the popular SEL curricula, and played a major role in getting SEL into schools. CASEL and SEL as concepts are still relatively new, with the founding of CASEL being just over 30 years ago (CASEL, 2020). Due to the newness of the concepts and frameworks, there are gaps in both that are often overlooked, I certainly overlooked them when I started this project.

At the beginning of this process, I believed in the CASEL framework wholeheartedly. I thought it needed to be in every school, everywhere, and that it was the best and only ‘right’ way to teach SEL. Through my data collection and conversations I had with educators at Riverside, I have come to realize that while CASEL is ONE way to think about and teach SEL, it is not THE ONLY way. In fact, I find myself now disagreeing with my previous self. I don’t think that the

CASEL framework should be in every school. I think SEL in some capacity should be, but CASEL is not a one-size-fits-all framework.

CASEL and its supporting curricula do a good job of giving a shared language to teachers to use, and naming explicit learning goals: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. While this is an extremely useful tool that CASEL provides, because it can help everyone in a school or district be on the same page, it is missing an element that, in my opinion, is equally as important: teacher pedagogy.

Teacher pedagogy is not mentioned once in any of CASEL's frameworks, nor is there any mention of how to effectively implement SEL into your school. The on-the-ground piece is one of the major elements that is missing from CASEL's frameworks. As I have stated several times throughout this paper, a lesson or curriculum is never enough by itself; there has to be an educator actively engaging with the material and adding their own pedagogical idea into the lessons, otherwise it will fall flat.

I believe that for SEL to become an effective, everlasting element of schooling, teachers must be encouraged to engage with the material authentically, and not just be given a curriculum to plug-and-play into their classroom.

Recommendations and Actions

Now that Maile and I have both analyzed our data, each using our theories and lenses, we are faced with the task of putting together a list of recommendations and potential actions to go along with them, to then present to the administration at Riverside. At the beginning of this project, Maile and I met with the Heads of the Lower and Middle Schools, Dawson Leary, and Jesse Palmer, to discuss what we all wanted to have the outcome of this project to be. As a

collective, we agreed that the best course of action was to use our findings to develop a tangible plan that we could implement together to drive positive change.

While Maile and I collected all our data together, we analyzed it separately, leading to different findings. I will be talking about what recommendations I have for Riverside based on my findings. Maile and I plan on comparing and combining recommendations before presenting them to Riverside. Through my data, I was able to pinpoint the following five specific actions that I think will help Riverside improve teacher experiences with SEL in the school.

Formalize and Share Teacher Pedagogical Knowledge

My first recommendation for Riverside is to develop structured opportunities for teachers to share their pedagogical practices related to SEL, such as Responsive Classroom, Zones of Regulation, and Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Teachers bring rich, diverse pedagogical experience that informs their SEL practices, but currently, this expertise is only shared informally (e.g., "I usually just talk to Mr. Guerard..."), if at all. I think that the Riverside teachers could greatly benefit from having a specific place and time to explicitly share their expertise. There are a few ways to go about creating this, the first being holding a monthly meeting for teachers to share their teaching pedagogies called "Pedagogies of Practice". While in these meetings, teachers would be able to share specific pedagogical practices that they use in their classrooms, this could be through sample lesson plans, modifications they've made to the current curriculum, or simply a story of something from their classrooms. This initiative honors teacher agency, promotes equity in practice, and allows all staff, especially new or less confident educators, to benefit from the collective pedagogical wisdom within Riverside.

Leverage Internal Experts as Mentors

An action related to the one mentioned above is that Riverside needs to utilize the vast knowledge of its teachers to help those who may be struggling. If the administration identifies and supports internal SEL leaders at Riverside, educators with demonstrated knowledge, passion, and experience in SEL-related practices, to serve as peer mentors, instructional models, or informal coaches. These teacher-leaders can guide others in effectively implementing SEL in ways that are responsive to students' needs. Teachers like Ms. Starkey bring skills and tools from her previous teaching experiences and feel passionate about wanting their colleagues to gain the same experience, "I think, along with SEL...we used like zones of regulation when kids are feeling dysregulated. [...] I think all teachers need training in [Zones of Regulation] here at Riverside" (Starkey, Interview, 12/2024). This action could take many forms, from designated SEL 'lead' teachers, creating a mentorship program, or using a rotating 'highlight teacher' system.

Having specific 'lead' SEL teachers in both the Lower and Middle Schools could be used in several ways; it could be done through 1:1 or small group learning, for teachers interested in learning from their colleagues. It could be done through the creation of a mentorship program for new teachers or teachers who are not as familiar with SEL as some of their colleagues. With this, the duo would have flexibility around meeting time and what is discussed, but it could be useful for those who may want to have someone specific to go to when they are struggling. The idea of having a rotation of highlighted teachers would be to take pressure off of specific teachers who may possess a lot of knowledge but may not feel comfortable committing to a long-term leadership role. This process would happen during PD, staff meetings, or another time decided by the highlighted teacher. During these times, the teacher(s) of the week would lead the group

through either a mock lesson or share their knowledge in any way they could think of. This could be beneficial because it is less of a time commitment and allows for more voices to be heard throughout the year.

Riverside will cultivate a collaborative space for teaching, learning, and exploration of SEL among their teachers by empowering and encouraging them to utilize and share the wealth of knowledge they all possess.

Expand and Personalize Professional Development (PD)

Riverside teachers believe strongly in SEL's importance but feel under-supported in its implementation. Despite their passion and foundational experience, teachers are seeking more time, depth, and guidance to do SEL well. They are not only asking for PD, they are naming specific kinds of training that would help them deliver SEL in meaningful and sustainable ways.

This request echoes the action above about teachers having a collective desire to build shared capacity, create inclusive environments, and move away from the plug-and play curriculum they have been provided with.

Ms. Anderson articulates the want for different kinds of PD to showcase the many ways SEL could be implemented, saying, "I think more professional development or like modeling of the lessons might be useful... but like we haven't had the...like been provided time to like do that," (interview, 12/2024). Like my previous recommendations, this PD could look many ways, and I think the potential of offering PD in differing ways could help meet teachers' wants and needs.

The first course of action for PD that I would suggest would be to move away from the one-off PD sessions to a more cohesive and ongoing PD style, where each session would build on another to enhance learning and understanding. Additionally, Riverside could offer

differentiated PD tracks based on teachers' prior knowledge and area of desired focus, ie. trauma-informed SEL, SEL specifically for neurodiverse students, restorative practices, etc.).

The second point of action for Professional Development would be to focus on Equity in SEL. As I mentioned earlier in my thesis, the leading frameworks for SEL are often lacking in DEIB, and looking at SEL through multiple lenses, I think it could be wildly beneficial to focus PD specifically on anti-bias and culturally responsive SEL to highlight the many backgrounds of teachers and students alike at Riverside.

Finally, many teachers expressed a desire for built-in PD time, saying that it can be difficult to focus when it is after school or on a weekend. I think having dedicated SEL PD days could be wildly beneficial since it allows teachers specific time they were already going to allot to PD, to focus on SEL without the distraction of a school day prior.

A robust, equity-informed PD structure will increase teacher confidence and cohesion, reduce implementation gaps, and ensure that SEL is not just a program, but a sustainable, values-driven part of Riverside's school culture. It also validates teachers' desire to go deeper, adapt more thoughtfully, and build long-term skills in students that extend beyond short-term behavior management.

Strengthen Collaboration Vertically and Horizontally

The final action step that I can see based on my findings is the need for more vertical and horizontal collaboration among teachers, administration, and between schools. This will help Riverside ensure that SEL instruction is consistent between grades and schools, and that understanding of what is happening in the classrooms is understood by everyone at Riverside. While the findings reflect a shared belief in the importance of SEL across Riverside, implementation varies significantly between classrooms and schools. This fragmentation creates

missed opportunities for peer learning, vertical alignment, and the development of a unified SEL culture.

The first action I would suggest to combat the multitude of variations in implementing SEL would be to create a team specifically to focus on SEL across schools. This team would be made up of at least one teacher from every grade in both the Middle and Lower School (and Upper if they felt inclined), who would come up with clear expectations and guidelines for SEL. The goal of this is not to take away teacher agency that Riverside allows for, but rather to support that agency through a shared vocabulary, important SEL themes, and various other ideas. This team would also serve as a liaison between teachers and administration, hopefully encouraging more open conversation around what is needed to help the staff and students succeed.

I also think there is an opportunity for the administration to facilitate school-wide SEL roundtables, which could take place during the scheduled PD days, or any other time that works for the staff. The goal would be similar to the SEL team goal, but it would open the conversations up to all staff, not just those who decide they want to be on the committee. This could also take a piece of my earlier suggestions, and have a ‘teacher spotlight’ or highlight a specific teacher at the round table to lead the conversation that time, as an effort to let all voices be heard.

Conclusions

Summary

Social Emotional Learning is an emerging idea in schools, and because of this, the theories and ideas around it are continuously evolving. I started this project with the hope of

better understanding teacher experiences with implementing a SEL curriculum, focusing on these four questions:

1. What are Riverside teachers' experiences with implementing their SEL curriculum?
2. What are some challenges with implementing their SEL curriculum at Riverside?
3. What has helped the Riverside teachers implement SEL in their classrooms?
4. In what ways is the curriculum lacking or limiting, according to Riverside teachers?

My main focus at the beginning of this project was to emphasize the importance of the curriculum as a tool for successful SEL. I strongly believed that with an effective implementation process and a good curriculum, SEL would be effective no matter what. Through my research, this assumption was proven wrong time and time again.

While I still feel that my research questions align with my data, my original line of thinking does not. When Maile and I created those questions, we assumed the answers would be along the lines of more SEL time as a whole, or wanting to be able to use more curriculum-based things for SEL. What I found instead was the overflowing amount of expertise and passion among teachers to share their pedagogy not only with Maile and me, but with each other as well.

Theoretical Implications

SEL still feels so new in a lot of ways, and because of that, the theories around it are still growing and changing. It's not a fully settled field, and that shows when you look at how differently people approach it. What I keep finding myself wanting is a theory that actually connects to what teachers are doing every day. I want something that brings together learning goals and teacher pedagogy—something that understands SEL isn't separate from academic learning or how we structure our classrooms. A lot of the existing frameworks are helpful, but they don't always reflect the reality of how SEL plays out in practice. For me, SEL should be

tied to how teachers think, plan, and teach—not just how we manage behavior or talk about emotions. There’s space for something more honest and connected to the work teachers are already doing.

Implications of Practice

I know without a doubt that the way I will teach has shifted because of the data I collected. Listening to other teachers talk so honestly about their beliefs, their struggles, and their hopes around SEL pushed me to think differently about my own practice. It’s one thing to believe in SEL as a concept, but hearing how others are actually living it in their classrooms made me reconsider how I create space for connection, reflection, and emotional growth with my students. My hope is that this data doesn’t just stay with me. I want it to reach other educators—both current teachers and those still preparing to enter the field, so they can think more deeply about what classroom culture really means and how SEL can be part of it in an authentic, lasting way. It’s not about adding something extra to their plates, it’s about reimagining how we approach teaching and learning in a way that centers humanity.

Limitations

Sample Sizes

An obvious limitation of my study is the number of interviews and survey responses I got. Receiving six out of 50 possible responses made for a much smaller sample size than I had originally hoped for. While it is a small sample size, I still feel I was able to gain extremely valuable insights into Riverside as a school and its teachers’ experiences with implementing SEL.

After visiting Riverside for observations and to get to know the community, Maile and I were extremely hopeful about our participation rates. Based on conversations we had with teachers in both the Lower and Middle Schools, it seemed like most teachers were excited that our research was happening and eager to join the cause, so to speak. So we were a little surprised when our sample size was so small. While there is no way to know for sure why people ended up not participating, one can make assumptions about time constraints and overloaded schedules of teachers, which may have something to do with it.

If I could go back, I might redo the way we sent out the actual survey and interview sign-up. We had the heads of school send out the information for us, and while that was a great introduction, I think I would've sent a few follow-up emails as reminders about the survey and interviews. I think this would've helped because the teachers get so much information from their heads of schools on a daily basis that the original email could've easily gotten lost in the usual messages, but if it had come from Maile or myself, it would've been information from a new source and therefore stood out more.

Blind Spots/ What I Wish I Knew

Going into this project, I knew I would be carrying some biases with me, and looking through specific lenses based on my positionality and lived experiences. Even with my being aware of all of these things, I still had blind spots that affected my research. My biggest blind spot was my unrelenting faith in CASEL.

My blind faith in CASEL and its framework impacted the type of data I was able to collect and how I conducted my interviews to collect said data. Even in the very beginning stages, the CASEL framework impacted my research. Maile and I came up with our research, survey, and interview questions based on the CASEL framework. Going into the interviews, I

had a CASEL cloud over my head, so all of the information I was receiving was being compared and filtered through that way of thinking. This impacted how I asked follow-ups, what I asked follow-ups on, and how I allowed myself to process what was being said.

If I could go back and reposition myself in my research, I would try and ask more probing questions about areas of SEL that seemed to be lacking, as I now know there are. I would ask teachers what they thought of the CASEL framework, what they liked, and what they would add or change. All in all, I would reposition myself to be more outside of my research, and not let my own misguided conceptions of what was right get in my way.

Final Thoughts

While this project may not have been exactly what Maile and I originally planned, I'm really proud of the work we've done and the light we've been able to shine on topics—and people—that often get overlooked. Throughout this process, we've been able to dig into some really meaningful conversations around teaching, not just SEL but all subjects, in ways that are emotionally aware and responsive. I've learned that emotional competence isn't something separate from the academic work we do—it's actually woven into everything. When we teach with that awareness, it changes the energy in the room. It shifts how students feel, how teachers show up, and how the school functions as a whole. My hope is that our work adds to the growing conversation around what it really means to create school cultures where everyone feels seen, heard, and supported.

I hope that the readers of this work have come to appreciate not only SEL but the educators who implement it. I hope they have taken away an understanding of the importance of teacher pedagogy and the agency that goes with it. Lastly, I hope they remember that “The

curriculum is fine[...]" (Survey response), but it is the teachers and how they use their pedagogical knowledge and philosophies that make a curriculum effective.

Appendix

- **What are teachers doing beyond the curriculum?**
- **What are teachers carrying over? What prior knowledge are they drawing on?**
- **What do teachers currently do with the curriculum?**
- **What needs to be in place for the curriculum to be effective?**
- **Teachers are relying on each other. (discussion or theme?)**

Interview Quotes:

"Yes, lots of experience, but nothing was like a formal curriculum. Like I had done multiple trainings. At most of the schools I was at, including like what I was initially trained in, they used a lot of the Responsive Classroom."- Anderson

"I think we explored it. I think we had time like to just explore it and just see, yeah, and we had some people on staff who had used it before, like Mrs. Guerard used it, and Dawson Leery had used it before. So I think they were kind of like great resources. I feel like I still haven't explored it fully, like I know there's a whole mindfulness component we haven't done yet, um, so... I think more professional development or like modeling of the lessons might be useful, and that might be on me too. It might be like on the website or something like that, but like we haven't had the...like been provided time to like do that."- Anderson

"I found a book called the Lemon Tree, um, the young readers version, which is about Israel and Palestine. Um so, I like brought it to [another teacher] and was like hey we should do this but the first half is like heavy history, and like i'm not [inaudible] for that um so he did it with them and then after Thanksgiving I'm taking it over and that's like a topic that is super heavy considering what's going on, but like important, and a perfect discussion with this book for perspectives. They both- both feel- both sides feel that they've been wronged, that they have a right to the land. Um, but like what do we do?"- Charles

"We have win at social, which is an online platform that the middle school adopted last year halfway through the year. Um, and it [pause] it basically curates, like they curate lessons and have like different hurdles which are like times for the kids to talk and it pulls new articles and relevant topics and news stuff. um, and it's kinda like a plug and play, like I don't need to like make anything up, like I just go there, I find a topic that I want and it has like a breakdown like of all the different topics that you could have. Like if you're looking for like drama with friendships, I mean it's not called that, but you know what I mean like if students are struggling with engaging positively with each other (giggle), like you could find that specific

thread and find something that's related to that. Um, or like digital literacy and that kind of like texting, groupchat kind of issues, like that kind of thing.” -Charles

“A PD deep dive would be so helpful to really like, dig into the materials with each other” -Guerard

“So in [my old school], we had a really cool curriculum. It was called Cool Tools. And Cool Tools was designed by a woman named Ava De La Sota. [...] And what's really great about Ava is that she felt like kids needed the language around managing social situations. and understanding themselves. She felt like just telling them, oh, you if a relationship isn't healthy, to leave it. Or if you're playing with someone and they're not in line to go do something else. [...] wasn't enough without the language.” -Guerard

“So sometimes we notice that, like some of the lessons like this could have like a really good like art activity or this could have a really good matching activity. So we'll make like a supplement because they do this group is very hands on, and there isn't always like a hands-on aspect or like a worksheet, which these guys love worksheets.” -Kelsey

“I take scripted teaching as a suggestion, I use it as a slight guide, but I base a lot of [my lessons] off my students' needs” -Kollins

“I think, along with SEL in the public school, we use[d] like zones of regulation when kids are feeling dysregulated.” - Starkey

“I'm not sure if they do, but I think all teachers need training in [zones of regulation] here at Riverside.” -Starkey

“I have taken advantage of the library for resources [...] I think there should be more open dialogue between the teachers and [the librarian].” -Starkey

“I tend to like the lessons, they feel like they fall at exactly the right time of year, developmentally. [...] Like the first lesson we did was on mistakes and its like, yes, we should totally be talking about that right now. And if I dont think the lesson matches where my students are in the year I can always switch it up, so I like the autonomy.” -Kelsey

“I was initially trained in, they used a lot of the Responsive Classroom [...] So like reading those books, doing trainings [...]” -Anderson.

“So in my opinion, a student's belonging really comes first like it's crucial to all learning like i feel like a student who needs to feel safe and a sense of belonging to feel like school is a place where they can really thrive and really access the curriculum of the academic curriculum so Social-emotional learning to me is like foundational and in my opinion, it goes beyond just like a curriculum. It's kind of interwoven into everything that I try to do in the classroom, from like the opening weeks of school like my focus is all basically like social emotional learning

like to to um have the students get to know one another to form our community, to set goals. all of that is like I feel like the time that we spend building our like social kind of community social like what allows them then to be able to like thrive academically throughout the year. So I see it as like very foundational in a classroom.” - Anderson

“I really like the lessons i think lessons that it gives us like the tools and the language like very explicitly to the kids but I think...one of like a few lessons is not going to be enough to like cover a whole social skill so like i think it's kind of on the teacher to like refer back to it, to reinforce it, to make sure it's like more interwoven [...]” -Anderson

“ I don't think it's enough alone” -Anderson

“It's just hard because we do so much outside of the programs, it's hard for me to like, just from like the almost like the systems in the room like like for example we work really hard to make like It's like their classroom, their community like um like from like the beginning of school where they like make their agreements for like what they want the classroom to feel like what they um You know, this is our community we do like restorative circles and like What do we do if there's a problem? How can we talk about it? I've had some training in restorative justice, so I bring that in.”- Anderson

“I think like being really open and affirming and like recognizing that we have differences and like acknowledging that and making sure that we talk a lot about like windows and mirrors And making sure that like in everything that I'm doing, whether it's like SEL or math or anything that like kids are experiencing like both like windows into other cultures, other people's lived experiences, and also like having their experiences reflected back to them.” -Anderson

“Um, I would say like [pause] a good percentage of my work is [pause] it's academic, but it's -it's also like the SEL, like it's both. It's not, it's not something I do on the side, it's more of like a lens that I work through. And like I choose the books that we read based on like the theme. I mean, most of it's about identity, but it's also about like perspective taking and um yeah I just want them to be good citizens. Like informed, critical thinking (Nani chuckles), kind, those types of things.” -Charles

“Ummm, but like I specifically- that's one of my goals, I think [inaudible] ah, I specifically chose texts like based on perspectives- so that I had a variety of different like authors- genders, race, [inaudible] like all the backgrounds. Um, and then like the topic for the unit had like- connected to SEL things too, like it wasn't just- like the short story unit that we did in the beginning was all about tradition. One was an indigenous tradition, and one was the Lottery, which is like a classic American story. Um, and the other one was a Nigerian story. Um, and we talked about what tradition meant in each of those stories, and some were positive and some were negative, and then we talked about, like, what's a tradition that you celebrate that's really important to you, they wrote a personal narrative about that. And then we talked about the idea that, like tradition, can be a good thing unless you're doing something blindly and there's no reason behind it, and it hurts other people.” -Charles

“You don't want to only make it like SEL, like right here, right now. You want it to be like for your life” -Guerard

“Like it gives them a chance to like have more knowledge about emotions and more knowledge about themselves instead of waiting until they're older to figure that out.” -Guerard

“It's a responsive classroom. I can't remember who does that, but I can send you the link to that one too. So it's all about how you have to have like eye connection and connection with each child right as the day starts, so that they say they realize, like you see me, you know, I'm here. You can tell whether I'm up here or down here today. And so there are multiple levels to it. Like there's some where you can say to the kids, What color are you today? And they might be green, red, yellow, you know what I mean? Depending on their emotions.” -Guerard

“So my viewpoint is that SEL is like, that's like our whole child teaching it's not. What can be tricky is when it's isolated to just one block. So that's like our current set up as we teach SEL once a rotation, which is kind of...my philosophy on it, because I would think it would be like in time everywhere. So that's like the tricky part. Because of me. Oh, the hierarchy of needs yes, Maslow. Maslow. Yeah, yeah. Like when I'm thinking about like our academic stuff like right now we're learning about the COVID infections, like that's up here, that's important before students can fully learn this, we have to address these needs. And that to me is where SEL fits in.” -Kollins

“The like, panic when things get a little bit hard. That is so pervasive in this cohort. A lot of shutting down, a lot of crying. So like. We kind of went off of second step and we taught different lessons that we knew our kids needed. So we started the year talking about kind of like zones of regulation.” -Kollins

“Yeah, because my philosophy is like, well, if you don't have SEL, if you don't have the social emotional learning going on, then it's really not [effective]learning happening. [...] Like, for example, if we're doing a math lesson and I hear the kids say like, I can't do this. I don't want to do this, but that actually relates to one of the lessons we had done a couple of weeks before. We took a list of the things that we were saying, and then we were like, how can we change these fixed comments into like a growth mindset?” -Kelsey

Survey Quotes:

Question: How prepared do you feel to teach SEL?

“There are aspects of SEL that I feel are ‘band-aid’ practices, and I would like to learn more about strategies that will help students long term. I refer to Alex Shevrin Venet and their books on that respect.”

“My school has a curriculum (Win at Social). We also do a circle practice in the Responsive Classroom style. However, we do not have Advisory very often, only once in a 5-day rotation.”

Question: How do you feel your administration has supported the implementation?

“They've provided resources like WinAtSocial, but there's been no actual training about how to do it or provided models/run-throughs of moderating mock conversations with students.”

“I think this school is excellent at providing lessons in SEL. I would like to see more as it applies specifically to kids of color and kids with neurodivergence. The SEL lessons seem generic and tailored more towards white students learning about racism, rather than how to make everyone feel included while still acknowledging that racism and certain aspects exist for kids of color in traditionally "white" spaces.”

“I feel like I have had some great PD, collegial collaboration, and individual work. At the same time, I still feel I'm on a journey and need to keep improving.”

Question: What would you have changed about the implementation process?

“While I don't feel I needed more support given my experience with this at previous schools, it does feel like other faculty are hesitant because they are unsure of how to have these conversations.”

“I would provide more time for teachers to talk through problematic behavior, practice lessons together, etc. I would also have more time for Advisory classes.”

“More PD.”

Question: How do you think SEL is benefiting your students?

“Students are able to engage in conversations around a wide variety of topics. They engage with each other with respect.”

Question: Would you say your SEL lessons are culturally relevant?

“Our circles are culturally responsive and are related to current events, cultural events, or holidays. However, the Win at Social lessons are more related to mental health, friendships, etc.”

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