Social-Emotional Learning: Setting Children up for Success by Teaching them how to Recognize and Manage Their Emotions

By

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A research paper submitted in conformity with the requirements
For the degree of Master of Teaching
Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

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Abstract

Although mental health and well-being are becoming more recognized and supported in schools, the main goal of many schools remains achieving high mathematics and literacy scores. Social-emotional learning (SEL) is a preventative practice put in place to help students foster and develop their social and emotional competency, which in turn has proven to increase academic success. SEL aims to teach children to be self-aware, how to be resilient, how to recognize and manage their emotions with appropriate tools and strategies, how to be empathetic and aware of others, and how to work collaboratively and solve problems with their peers. Although research has found that SEL has a direct affect on students’ academic achievement, research suggests that there is less awareness of the importance of SEL within the school community. In this research, I interviewed four educators working with students from the primary level, up to the senior level, about their experiences fostering social-emotional learning. My findings report that although SEL has been proven to not only increase students’ mental health and well-being, but also increase academic achievement, the little research being presented to school boards and administration, and the lack of teacher training is causing resistance when attempting to implement SEL programs within schools.

Key Words: Social-emotional learning, mental health, preventative programs, academic achievement, resiliency
Acknowledgements

The past two years I have spent researching social-emotional learning and writing my research paper have not only been two of the most challenging years of my life, they have also been the most exciting. During this process, not only have a developed a strong understanding of social-emotional learning and how to better my teaching practice, I have learned more about myself and how to better myself as a person and teacher. First and foremost, I want to thank my research advisor, Dr. Angela MacDonald-Vemic for her unlimited support and guidance during this process. Angela has challenged me to dig deeper into my research, in turn allowing me to get more out of this experience than I thought possible. To all of my research participants, I am so thankful for the insights and knowledge you shared with me. Your practices are inspiring, and I only hope that I will be able to implement the programs and offer the support that your students have been lucky enough to receive from you.

To my PJ 251 family, there were times over these past two years when I would not have been able to push through without your support. Thank you to my rocks, Zenia Tarapore, Valerie Fan, Stephanie Delorme, Victoria Blom, and Alana Sajatovic. You ladies were my inspiration, and your unconditional love and support have truly made me a better person. Last but not least, thank you to my friends and family who have believed in and supported me, even when the endless researching, interviewing, and writing put my sanity to the test. I love you all, and could not have done it without you.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction to the Research Study

There have been many researchers and educators in recent years that have contributed to the definition of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), however, many have a very similar underlying belief of what SEL is. Social-Emotional Learning may be looked at as preventative programs put in place to educate and nurture the ‘whole child’ (Aviles, Anderson, & Davila, 2006). Social-Emotional Learning aims to teach children about self-control, motivation, and empathy. Schools and classrooms are being called to go beyond measurable standards and performance indicators, become more engaged in the “real world” and help in the formation of not only academically literate students, but also socially, and emotionally literate young people as well (Cefai, Cooper, 2009, p.16). Today many children are growing up in environments that put them at risk for developing problems such as delinquency, violence, substance abuse, and school dropout (McLachlan, Burgos, Honeycutt, Linam, Moneymaker & Rathke, 2009). Research has shown that more educators believe that social and emotional development and learning is the foundation for students’ success, both in the classroom and life (Pasi, 2001). Research has noted that there are many known benefits of social-emotional learning, many that go far beyond just academic success, in that they believe that by teaching children how to deal with their emotions, the better equipped they will be to face the challenges of everyday life, as they will have the pro-social skills needed to be self aware, communicate, and solve problems constructively with others (Aviles et al., 2006).
With one in five children and adolescents being affected by mental health issues, and approximately only one third of those children receiving the proper support (National Mental Health Association, 2005), it is imperative that educators contribute to children's well-being and healthy mental state early on in life. When young people have the tools to manage the range of issues they are facing in their lives, they are more likely to produce positive academic, and behavioural results (Pasi, 2001). This, in turn, can help prevent negative mental health conditions later on in life. This paper presents an overview of past and current social-emotional learning programs, their importance for children and adolescents in the 21st century, and how to integrate social-emotional learning programs into educational settings.

1.1 Research Problem

As the demands of educators to support an inclusive classroom and teach children with a range of abilities are on the rise, the resources required to meet these demands are diminishing. For example, the Toronto District School Board has recently announced that they will be cutting over 100 teaching positions, the majority coming from elementary schools (Toronto Star, March 9, 2016). On top of that, Lisa Gretzky, the New Democratic Party (NDP) education critic states that in Ontario, 38 boards have seen cuts of over $22.5 million to special education resources (Toronto Sun, June 27, 2015). Without sufficient support, children requiring specialized care and/or programs will be suffering. With the limited support schools are provided with, the harder it becomes to implement new programs, specifically those that are aimed at supporting students social and emotional needs in contexts that place pressure on achieving higher academic
achievement (Cefai & Cooper, 2009). The problem at large here is that many individuals are unaware and/or dismissive of not only the positive impact that social-emotional learning has not only on children's social behaviour (Barbarin 2002, as cited in Aviles et al., 2006), but the positive effects it has on students’ academic achievements as well (Birnbaum, Lytle, Hannan, Murray, Perry, & Forester, 2003).

Despite the efforts put in place by advocates and researchers to implement educational and prevention programs that address not only academic success, but physical and mental health as well, many of these efforts remain ineffective, for a variety of reasons, specifically due to the short term program implication most schools are seeing (McLachlan, Burgos, Honeycutt, Linam, Moneymaker, & Rathke, 2009). A recent study found that in order for youth to receive effective mental health services, schools must begin to provide consistent programs, multiple intervention strategies, and focus on the integration of mental health lessons into the general classroom curriculum (Aviles, Anderson & Davila, 2006). That being said, with many of the social-emotional learning programs being implemented in a series of “short-term, fragmented initiatives”, these programs are often reported as ‘disruptive’ more so than helpful (Greenberg, Weissber, O’Brien, Zins, Fredericks, Resnik, Elias, 2003).

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine social-emotional learning (SEL) programs that are in place within the educational system, with a specific focus on the primary and junior years. Through a review of the literature, this study aimed to look at the most effective programs that target educating the “whole child”, the supports required to implement these strategies as a cross-curricular practice, and the specific benefits that
social-emotional learning has on young children. The study also involved 4 semi-structured interviews with educators aimed at learning how they foster social-emotional learning for students, and what outcomes they observe from students as a result. These findings can further inform the practice of educators who are less familiar with social-emotional learning.

1.3 Research Questions

The question guiding this research study was: How is a sample of teachers fostering social-emotional learning through their teaching practice, and what outcomes do they observe from their students? Subsidiary questions include:

- How do educators conceptualize social-emotional learning?
- What does social-emotional learning look like in the classroom/school?
- What, if any, benefits have these teachers observed from their implementation of social-emotional learning in the classroom/school?
- What are the biggest challenges these teachers face when implementing, or trying to implement social-emotional learning?
- What resources and factors support these teachers in fostering social-emotional learning?

1.4 Background of the Researcher

My interest surrounding the topic of mental health has stemmed from both my personal and professional life experiences. My entire life my father has suffered on and off from manic-depressive disorder, or more commonly known as bipolar disorder. It was confusing to watch him suffer from this disease, because it seemed like there were no steps being taken to address his needs. When I was 18 years old, he was hospitalized for the first time. Although it was hard not seeing him everyday, I was hopeful that he would
finally be receiving the support he needed to help manage his state of mind. However, my father rejected all forms of therapy, insisting they “didn’t work” or it was “too late for him.” When he said it was “too late for him”, it made me wonder what could have been done to address his mental health issues earlier on in life, and why was nothing ever put in place to support him?

I believe that growing up with a father who suffered from poor mental health has made me more conscious of the feelings of those around me, specifically in a professional manner when I am working with children. Because I studied Early Childhood Education in my undergraduate degree, I have taken, and thrived, in many courses on mental health and therapeutic interventions. For my eighth practicum field experience I was placed in a very high-needs, inner-city school, where the majority of the students showed severe aggressive behaviours, poor impulse control, little to no empathy for others, and were unable to identify their emotions and how their actions may affect others. Although I knew this would serve as a challenge for me, I jumped at the opportunity to implement strategies that would target some of these “problem behaviours”, and help these children be able to identify and manage their emotions in constructive ways.

I had initially planned on writing this research paper about inclusion in the mainstream classroom, however, this past teaching experience changed not only my research plan, but also the way I teach. Once I started doing research on how I was going to support these children, I came across the field of “Social-Emotional Learning” (SEL). I was shocked that in my four years of studying education for my undergraduate degree I had never heard of this term before. It occurred to me that SEL could have benefits not
only for students who suffer from mental health issues, but also those whose family members do.

1.5 Overview

Chapter 1 includes the introduction and purpose of the study, the research question, and my background experiences that have led me to my interest in this topic. Chapter 2 contains a literature review in which I examine previous research on the implementation of social-emotional learning practices schools and classrooms have done in the past, and what about these practices have led to the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of these social-emotional learning in the school and/or classroom. Chapter 3 describes the methodology and research design I used in my study. In Chapter 4 I report the research findings and discuss the implications in light of the literature. In Chapter 5 I make recommendations for practice and identify areas for research. References and a list of appendixes follow at the end.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Overview

In Chapter two I begin by defining the common terms and vocabulary that are used when examining social-emotional learning (SEL). I then move on to look at mental health statistics of young children. From there, I discuss the benefits and challenges of integrating social-emotional learning into the curriculum. Next, I review what social-emotional learning looks like in the classroom, and investigate programs and studies that have implemented social-emotional learning in the past. I conclude the chapter by summarizing key learnings and locating this study within the existing research landscape.

2.1 Vocabulary

2.1.1 Defining social-emotional learning

Social-emotional learning was first introduced by the Fetzer Group in 1994, and was described as a “conceptual framework to address the needs of young people… and the response of schools to those needs” (Elias et al., 1997, as cited in Greenberg, Weissberg, O’Brien, Zins, Fredericks, Resnik, Elias, 2003, p. 467). The needs that were initially being identified by the Fetzer Group were: social-emotional competence promotion (to be defined later in this chapter); violence prevention; character education; and school-family-community partnerships (Greenberg et al., 2003). Since then, researchers have added a number of additional goals for social-emotional learning, such as, but not limited to: how to set positive goals; how to behave ethically and responsibly; how to increase motivation; how to reduce/prevent violent outbursts; how to manage challenging situations in a constructive manner, and; how to build positive relationships with peers and adults (Cohen, 2001; Desai, Karahalios, Peruad, & Reker, 2014;

The most recent study done by The Collaborative for Social Emotional Learning describes five core competencies of social-emotional learning (SEL) programming in schools: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decisions-making (Desai et al., 2014). All five of these mentioned competencies allow students to not only thrive in school academically, but their mental health and well-being will in turn be nurtured, allowing students to be more socially and emotionally competent.

2.1.2 Defining social-emotional competence

The concept of social-emotional learning includes a number of mental health terms that professionals refer to when looking at child development. Several terms commonly referred to when talking about social-emotional learning are: social-emotional competence, emotional intelligence, and serious emotional disturbance.

Squires (2002), defines social-emotional competence as “cooperative and pro-social behaviour, initiation and maintenance of peer friendship and adult relationships, management of aggression and conflict, development of a sense of mastery and self-worth, and emotional regulations and reactivity” (as cited in Aviles, Anderson & Davila, 2006, p 33). What Squires (2002) is saying here is that in order to be socially competent, children need to be able to obtain and maintain healthy relationships in order thrive and develop a healthy sense of self, which in turn is the goal of social-emotional learning.
2.1.3 Defining emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence (EI) is a component of social-emotional learning that was initially defined by Daniel Goleman (1995) as “the ability to identify, assess, and control one’s own emotions, the emotions of others, and those of groups” (Pasi, 2001, p. 2). Emotions are known to alter our thinking and actions in many ways, and emotional intelligence promotes qualities such as self-control, motivation, and empathy (Salovey & Sluyter, 1997, as cited in Pasi, 2001). Programs that promote EI are essential, as these qualities become the “master aptitudes” that determine how individuals use their acquired academic intellect (Goleman, 1995, as cited in Pasi, 2001). Social-emotional learning practices in schools/classrooms will promote students’ emotional intelligence and development by teaching children how to identify and respond appropriately to different situations.

2.2.4 Defining serious emotional disturbance

Serious emotional disturbance (SED) is an important term to define when exploring social-emotional learning, as it is a major contributing factor to why educators need to be taking a social-emotional learning approach in schools and classrooms. Aviles et al. (2006), define serious emotional disturbance as one or more of the following characteristics that affects academic performance: an inability to learn that cannot be explained by an intellectual factor; an inability to build/maintain relationships; inappropriate behaviours under normal circumstances, and; a general mood of unhappiness or depression. This definition was developed in order to identify students in need of mental health care interventions, and provide them with the services they need in order to be successful in school. Children exposed to violence will not only exhibit
behavioural problems, they are also more likely to demonstrate deficits in standardized test scores and lower grades (Delaney-Black et al., 2002, as cited in Aviles et al., 2006). Students demonstrating “problem behaviours” are recorded as having a more difficult time persevering through challenging situations, such as testing (Aviles at al., 2006).

2.2 Children's Mental Health Statistics

One in five students in Canadian public schools suffers from a diagnosable mental health issue (York Region School Board), while only one in three of those youths are receiving the proper support to address their mental health needs (Aviles et al., 2006). With statistics like these, it is clear that supports need to be provided in the early years to help prevent more serious issues in the future. Social-emotional learning is used as a preventative measure to not only promote positive mental health, but also attempt to prevent problems before they begin to appear.

2.3 Why Use Social-Emotional Learning?

2.3.1 Academic achievement

Researchers have found that prosocial behaviours in the classroom are linked with positive intellectual outcomes, and are predictive of performance on standardized achievement tests (DiPerna & Elliott, 1999; Malecki & Elliot, 2002; Pasi, 2001; Welsh, Park, Widaman, & O’Neil, 2001; Wentzel, 1993, as cited in Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg 2004). Research has also established that antisocial behaviour is often linked with poor academic performance (Hawkins, Farrington, & Catalano, 1998, as cited in Zins et al., 2004).

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, students suffering from serious emotional disturbance have been reported to have difficulties with their academic performance in
school. The Chesapeake Institute for the US Department of Education (1994), Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services Office of Special Education Programs, issued a National Agenda for Achieving Better Results for Children and Youth with Serious Emotional Disturbance. This group found that students with serious emotional disturbance receive lower grades than any other group of students with disabilities (Aviles et al., 2006). Students with serious emotional disturbance often have difficulty in school, as they tend to have behavioural problems, which often leads to violent outbursts and disruptions in their learning process. They also reported that only 42% of youth with SED earn a high school diploma, while 48% of students suffering from SED drop out of high school. By implementing preventative social-emotional learning programs in elementary school, researchers suggest that these statistics would not be as drastic (Aviles et al., 2006).

Barbarin (2002, as cited in Aviles et al., 2006) states that social-emotional functioning and academic performance are interrelated. Children who do not develop a healthy social-emotional competence are at a greater risk of falling behind in school, and are more likely to show signs of behavioural, emotional, academic, and social developmental problems. A student who is well equipped to recognize and work through his or her emotions is more likely to persevere when they are faced with challenges in (and outside of) the classroom.

The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2007) indicates, “the emotional well-being and social competence of a child provides a strong foundation for brain development and emerging cognitive abilities” (Mindess, Chen & Brenner, 2008, p. 56). The council also addresses language and literacy learning, and how it is not solely
based on being able to identify different sounds, and link meaning to words, but language
development is highly dependant on the ability to communicate with others. Social-
emotional learning has a large focus on social interaction, thus allowing the students to
develop a stronger vocabulary (Mindess et al., 2008).

Zins, Weissberg, Wang, and Walberg (2004), made a compelling conceptual and
empirical case for linking social-emotional programming to improved school attitudes,
behaviour, and performance. They stated that:

Students’ social-emotional competence fosters better academic performance in a variety of ways. For example, they reported that students who become more self-aware and confident about their learning abilities try harder, and that students who motivate themselves, set goals, manage their stress, and organize their approach to work perform better. Additionally, students who make responsible decisions about studying and completing their homework and use problem solving and relationship skills to overcome obstacles achieve more (p. 470).

When students are able to identify, and manage their emotions in a constructive
manner, the easier it will be to overcome academic challenges. Over the past two
decades, educators and researchers have discovered that successful social-emotional
learning programs improve students’ academic performance, social emotional behavior,
and peer relations, while also preventing problems such as aggression and other forms of
antisocial and destructive behaviours (Cohen, 2001), which brings us to the benefits that
SEL has on violence prevention in schools.

2.3.2 Violence prevention

Social-emotional learning incorporates the ability to be able to recognize, and
manage your emotions in a positive and constructive manner. Students who suffer from
serious emotional disturbance (SED) often have an underlying issue of poor anger management skills, which may result in the child becoming verbally or physically aggressive. This in turn may lead to suspension, or perhaps expulsion, which will have a direct affect on their academic achievement if they are missing school days (Aviles et al., 2006).

Not only have students with serious emotional disturbance been reported to score lower on the academic scale, they are often described as “demonstrating aggressive behaviours, and lacking age appropriate social skills. These behaviours frequently (mis)place them in special education classes, further alienating them from normal developmental peer involvement” (Aviles et al., 2006, p. 35). Not only are these students exhibiting violent behaviours at school, The Chesapeake Institute for the US Department of Education (1994) has also reported that 22% of students with SED are arrested before graduating high school, while 58% of youth with SED are arrested within 5 years of graduating from high school. The Chesapeake Institute findings speak to the importance to identify children with social-emotional problems early in their school career in order to provide services that will support their academic success and reinforce pro-social behavior (Aviles et al., 2006).

As previously mentioned, children exposed to violence will not only show signs of behavioural “problems”, but they are also more likely to receive lower grades on standardized testing. Birnbaum, Lytle, Hannan, Murray, Perry, & Forester (2003), explain that students who have been exposed to violence often have trouble regulating emotions, managing anger, and may become easily agitated when trying to learn new
concepts/skills, leading them to give up. Again, this shows how violence, and exposure to violence, has a direct effect on academic success.

The Medford Public Schools in Massachusetts adopted a violence prevention program called “Second Step: A Violence Prevention Curriculum”, which integrated social-emotional learning into their regular academic curriculum. Pre- and post assessments show that after the Second Step program was implemented, more children demonstrated skills that helped them to think before impulsively reacting to a situation (Mindess et al., 2008).

2.4 Social-Emotional Learning Programs

Although educators have accepted the fact that expectations are high as they are told they need to be supporting inclusive classrooms and teaching students of all abilities, it is unreasonable for them to be able to fulfill the role of a mental health professional. That being said, there are measures that educators can take to aid in the formation of mentally healthy young people. Over the past two decades, schools have been incorporating programs that promote social-emotional competencies, while attempting to prevent social, emotional, and mental health “problems”. These programs tend to focus on, but are not limited to: character education; delinquency prevention; violence prevention, and; lessons on life outside of school. The lessons provided by these programs aim to teach children how to “communicate more effectively, cooperate, resolve conflicts creatively and adaptively, reflect on personal experiences, control impulsivity, and make more thoughtful and collaborative social decisions” (Cohen, 1999, p. 13).
2.4.1 The New Haven Social Development Program

Among the more successful social-emotional learning (SEL) programs that have been developed is the New Haven Social Development Program in Connecticut (add country). This program was developed over a six-year period with the goal to “build a K-12 curriculum that would nurture the development of each child’s learning, responsibility, and caring potential” (Cohen, 1999, p. 46). The lengthiness of the program added to its success, as research has shown that many of the short-term SEL programs are ineffective (Greenberg, et al., 2003).

The New Haven Social Development Program created a committee that specifically focused on the prevention of behavior problems, ultimately leading to a new department, similar to Math and English departments, called the “Department of Social Development”. The three successful areas of focus created by this department were: Self-Management; Problem Solving and Decision Making, and; Communication (Cohen, 1999). To ensure success of these areas of focus, the school board created a curriculum that solely focused on social-emotional development, and teachers were required to have 10 hours of training on how to successfully teach this new curriculum. Not only did the New Haven Development Program focus on steps to be taken within the classroom, schools also offered many recreational and health promotion activities outside of the classroom which offered students the opportunity to practice positive and pro-social social-emotional skills. Lastly, this social development program provided a strong mental health team within the school, which unfortunately many schools do not have. Their mental health professional team consisted of additional school administrators, psychologists, and social workers. With the improved/modified curriculum, teacher
training, and mental health team in place, the New Haven Social Development Program has proven to aid in the improvements of attitudes, behaviours, and social-emotional development of young people in the Connecticut school district (Cohen, 1999).

2.4.2 Social Decision Making and Social Problem Solving

Social Decision Making and Social Problem Solving (SDM/SPS) is an approach to teaching that was initially developed in collaboration between Rutgers University, University of Medicine of New Jersey-Community Mental Health Center, and schools, particularly in the New Jersey area (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). Through the close alliance of teachers, administrators, and parents, a new curriculum was developed, along with new instructional practices that became essential in the linkage to SDM/SPS, and increased academic achievement of children (Elias, 1993; Elias, Bruene-Butler, Blum, & Schuyler, 2000; Elias & Clabby, 1989, as cited in Zins et al., 2004).

In order for the new social decision making and social problem solving curricula to be effective, skills linked with self-control, social awareness and group participation, and critical thinking were organized into three domains; 1) readiness for decision making, 2) instructional phase, and 3) application. The first domain, readiness for decision making, focuses on providing children with the necessary skills for effective social decision-making and behaviour in and outside of the classroom. The second domain, instructional phase, focuses on teaching children about “self-talk”, and strategies they can use to help them think through a problem they may be encountering. The final domain, application, focuses on providing students with opportunities to focus on specific everyday problems they may face, and the application of skills they have learned of how to deal with these issues in constructive ways (Zins et al., 2004).
The effectiveness of the SDM/SPS curricula is due in part to its integration into academic work. One of the main subject areas that saw integration of SDM/SPS was the language arts curriculum. As the majority of books focus on characters encountering and overcoming conflicts (physical and/or emotional), this provides students with the opportunity to recognize the issues portrayed in the book, and use skills they have been taught to identify possible solutions to those problems. This activity is referred to as “book-talk” (Zins et al., 2004). Not only does this allow children to practice making inferences, it allows for the expansion of emotional vocabulary.

Another subject that has seen integration of SDM/SPS is the Social Studies curriculum, however, this is seen mainly in the older junior grades. A main focus here becomes examining decisions that have been made in the past, or decisions being made about current events, and discussing how strong feelings may have affected these decisions, other possible decisions that may have been more effective, consequences of these decisions, and the implications these decisions may have on our future (Zins et al., 2004).

As previously stated by many authors, researchers, and educators, children's social-emotional competencies have a great effect on children's life skills and academic achievement (Cohen, 2001; Cobb, 1972; DiPerna & Elliott, 1999; Feshbach & Feshbach, 1987; Haynes, et al., 2003; Malecki & Elliot, 2002; Pasi, 2001; Welsh et al., 1993, as cited in Zins et al., 2004). Social decision-making and social problem solving skills are two big components to children's positive mental state, as well as their success in their every day lives—both in, and outside of the school environment.
2.4.3 The Child Development Project

Similar to the New Haven Social Development Program and the Social Decision Making and Social Problem Solving programs, The Child Development Project (CDP) aims to foster children's social, emotional, and intellectual development by creating a curriculum that focuses on social-emotional learning. This program focuses on four key goals to aid in the development of socially and emotionally healthy children. The goals are as follows: building supportive relationships; teaching humane values; fostering children's intrinsic motivation, and teaching for understanding (Cohen, 2001).

In order to develop a successful program, educators focused on creating ‘caring communities for learners’. The goal of ‘caring communities’ is to make children feel valued within the school and classroom community, in turn making the children value their school community. Students’ attachment to school not only stems from skill, but will as well (Cohen, 2001). In order to create a positive classroom community, the Child Development Program outlines four major components contributing to its success. The first, Classroom Community Building, aims to teach children how to set and meet goals and challenges they have set for themselves, and how to respect and communicate appropriately with others (Cohen, 2001).

The Child Development Project’s second component to a successful program is Literature-Based Reading. As previously mentioned, the social decision making and social problem solving program integrated many of its lessons through the language arts curriculum. Cohen (2001) states that through reading and discussing books, children not only become better readers and writers, they are also better able to understand human relationships while learning about the different values of their diverse community.
identifying conflicts they read about in books, children are given the opportunity to create possible solutions to the conflicts described, allowing their social-emotional competencies to expand.

The third component to The Child Development Project is *Developmental Discipline*. Developmental discipline is not about obedience or punishment for wrongdoings, rather it focuses on qualities that “enable children to sustain a caring society” by using skills learned to take “a sense of responsibility for problems that threaten the common good, and by taking initiative to solve these problems collaboratively” (Cohen, 2001, p. 95). These skills are learned by building trusting relationships with students, allowing students to be a part of creating classroom rules, and adopting a teaching approach to discipline that works for both the teacher and the students (Cohen, 2001).

The final component used to aid in the success of the Child Development Project is *Cooperative Learning*. This component consists of choosing meaningful activities for students that enhance their intrinsic motivation to perform well academically. It also emphasizes the importance of working together while practicing respect, responsibility, and helpfulness. The last focus is on getting students to reflect on their experiences with working with other students. This allows them to gain a better understanding on the impacts and benefits of working cooperatively as a community (Cohen, 2001).

Another major focus of the school the Child Development Project that takes place outside of school is *Homeside Activities*. This refers to including families in the children's learning and development. By sending home activities with children that encourage them to develop meaningful conversations with their families or other significant individuals in
their lives, their families learn about what they are being taught at school, which in turn may lead to activities that foster social-emotional development at home. Children are also acting as the teacher through homeside activities, therefore giving them additional opportunities to practice their social skills (Cohen, 2001).

Through observations, questionnaires, and interview assessments of teachers and students, the Child Development Project has proven to be effective in showing positive changes in attitudes, feelings, and behaviours of students, ultimately increasing academic achievement (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995; Battistich, Solomon, Watson, Solomon, & Schaps, 1989; Solomon, Watson, Battistich, Schaps, & Delucchi, 1996, as cited in Cohen, 2001). Overall, The Child Development Project has proven to be another successful program that introduces social-emotional learning to enhance academic success.

2.4.4 Second Step: A Violence Prevention Program

The Second Step Violence Prevention Program was created by the Committee for Children (2002), and implemented in Massachusetts Medford Public Schools. The program integrates social-emotional and academic learning, while specifically targeting empathy, impulse control, problem solving, and anger/emotion management (Mindess, Chen, & Brenner, 2008). The program based its approach on research grounded in cognitive behaviour therapy showing that “thoughts affect people’s social interactions” (Mindess et al., 2008, p. 57).

The Second Step Violence Prevention Program used methods such as introducing pictures of different scenarios and having children identify emotions that individuals may be feeling through appropriate use of vocabulary. In order to promote deeper thinking,
students were asked to create short stories about the photograph, and discussion questions were provided. Sessions concluded with role-playing activities, and “wrap up” activities in which children had to draw and write about a particular time in which they experienced a specific emotion (Mindess et al., 2008). During the implementation of this program, letters and resources were sent home to encourage families to work on social-emotional learning at home. Since the program has been implemented, teachers and families have reported improvements in children’s behaviour (Mindess et al., 2008).

2.4.5 Emotion Locomotion

The Emotion Locomotion Program was a 9-week program in which the college of nursing in Texas, United States, paired up with inner-city schoolteachers that expressed concern with their students’ ability to express and identify emotions. The target age group of this program was students’ aged 6-8. Five nursing students provided an in-service for the school as they did not have a school nurse, and the student population demonstrated a need for mental health education. The student nurses used a “train” metaphor to describe this program to the students, explaining that the engine of the train represented the individual child, and the train cars represented different emotions. The multiple cars of different emotions on the “train” showed to students that people may carry many different emotions with them at all times (McLachlan, Burgos, Honeycutt, Linam, Moneymaker, & Rathke, 2009, p. 373).

During this program, lessons were designed to help students identify, deal with, and express emotions in a healthy way. One of the pre-tests that were conducted revealed the need to use multiple teaching strategies in order for the program to be effective for all students. Using auditory, visual, and kinesthetic teaching techniques, the nursing team
implemented lessons that targeted cognitive, affective, and psychomotor skill development. The program evaluated students' ability to identify emotions through realistic photographs, recognize appropriate vocabulary to describe varying emotions, verbalize both appropriate and inappropriate responses to emotions presented during picture book activities, and the ability to role play behaviours to assigned emotion during puppet show activities (McLachlan et al., 2009).

Program evaluation proved through pre- and posttest performances that student performance on identifying, dealing with, and expressing emotions in health ways increased. For example, test results showed only 20% of the students were able to identify appropriate emotion vocabulary before the program began, and 95% of students were successful in appropriate word recognition activities when the program was complete (McLachlan et al., 2009). The nursing students credit some of the success to the collaboration with students’ families. At the beginning of the program families were informed and encouraged to support this learning program at home. Between the use of multiple teaching strategies, collaboration with students’ home lives, cross-curricular activity implementation, and the long-term program delivery, the Emotion Locomotion proved to be a successful program in the delivery of social-emotional learning.

2.5 Problems with Social-Emotional Learning

Although research has proven that social-emotional learning not only benefits children’s social and emotional development, but also positively effects students academic achievements as well (Cohen, 2001; DiPerna & Elliott, 1999; Feshbach & Feshbach, 1987; Malecki & Elliot, 2002; Pasi, 2001; Welsh et al., 1993; Zins et al., 2004), there have been some problems/limitations recorded that impede on the success of
some SEL practices. Many researchers and educators have stated that SEL programs aid in children’s academic learning, as the programs provided teach children how to deal with challenging situations in constructive ways (DiPerna & Elliott, 1999; Feshbach & Feshbach, 1987; Malecki & Elliot, 2002; Pasi, 2001; Welsh et al., 1993; Zins et al., 2004), however, Cohen (2001) states that social-emotional learning can at times undermine academic learning, as teachers lower expectations to promote the inclusion of all students.

The Child Development Program that was discussed earlier in this chapter led to results of “strengthened student’s sense of community within the school, which, in turn, fostered academic motivation… social and emotional learning, and avoidance of problem behaviours” (Zins et al., 2004 p. 202). Although there were clear social and emotional benefits, academic achievement was not consistent in the research findings, due in part to the lowered expectations set by teachers. This led to lower results on standardized testing of students’ academic performance (Zins et al., 2004). As the pressures to show achievement gains are rapidly increasing, so are the expectations on educators to create caring communities within schools. Although specific goals are being set on how to increase expectations of all students and promote important, challenging, and meaningful learning experiences for all children, research on the most effective strategies and programs is still lacking due in part to the limited programs being implemented within school settings (Zins et al., 2004).

Although many interventions have been put in place to support general mental health promotion in young children, many have not been developed or tested within the school context, which limits our knowledge of which programs prove to be successful
within the school environment (Aviles et al., 2006). With research on effective mental health promotion programs within schools lacking, teacher education on how to support social-emotional learning is not as developed as it should be. Loades & Mastroyanopoulou (2010), state “teachers could benefit from further training in terms of their ability to identify and act upon children’s mental health problems in a timely manner, thus minimizing the need for future intervention” (Loades & Mastroyanopoulou, 2010, p. 154). As research is still developing on mental health programs, such as SEL in schools, teacher education on how to support mental health promotion has not reached its highest potential.

Along with the lack of teacher education, there is also a shortage of support for mental health promotion from professionals such as psychologists and psychiatrists seen in schools. An awareness of the academic difficulties due to the poor mental health displayed by young people needs to be put forward so the intervention process can begin before any serious problems arise (Aviles et al., 2006). The lack of support is not only due to the limited awareness of the direct effect poor mental health has on academic achievement, but funding to support teacher education and provide in-services within the school setting is also limited. Desai, Karahalios, Peruad, & Reker (2014) state that the “high cost of evidence-based SEL programs limits access to effective curricula and brings into question whether or not SEL programs are aiming to support the needs of all individuals, or just the students who can afford this type of early intervention” (Desai et al., 2014, p.14).

As previously mentioned, low-income schools don’t often receive adequate support for costly social-emotional learning programs, when in fact, it is these schools
where the programs are most desperately needed. However, not only does the socioeconomic status of individuals impact their access to effective SEL programs, so does the culture and/or race of the individual (Desai et al., 2014). “Although the content of SEL programs have aimed to provide a focus on culture and diversity, it still remains broad, and remains the same regardless of the school population” (Desai et al., 2014, p. 15). Advances in programming need to be made to address the specific needs of the individuals that are being exposed to SEL.

2.6 Future Directions of Social-Emotional Learning

In order to address the problems/limitations of social-emotional learning, there are several steps that need to be taken. First and foremost, a greater emphasis needs to be placed on the importance of social-emotional learning and its effects on students’ ability to succeed in, and outside of school by convincing individuals of its efficacy, and looking more closely at the connection between mentally healthy students and academic achievement. It is imperative that we push the policies and programs that are in place to support the mental health promotion of young people. Another important issue that needs to be resolved is that of the insufficient funding made available to providing professional mental health support in schools, and teacher education to address mental health of students to aid in the development of the “whole child” (Aviles et al., 2006). In order for educators to implement effective programs that promote positive mental health, research and teacher training in how to implement mental health programs in the school need to develop.

Successful implementation of social-emotional learning programs in schools also requires administrative support, sound scheduling, and continuous instruction (Cohen,
1999; Greenberg et al., 2003). In order for schools to run successful SEL programs, superintendents, principals, and school board members must be committed to implementing changes in the schools to meet the needs of the new SEL instruction. For example, many of the previously mentioned SEL programs already in place have either adapted their curriculum, or created a new curriculum to focus on SEL. School administration also needs to manage time and scheduling to allow for the implementation of new programs that are supporting SEL. Teachers should be creating cross-curricular lesson and unit plans to support SEL, as there are many cases in which there will be no allotted time to focus solely on SEL programs. A recent study found that in order for youth to receive effective mental health services, schools must begin to provide consistent program implementation that lasts for a minimum of one year, and teachers should always be integrating mental health lessons into the general classroom curriculum (Ringelsen, Henderson, & Hoagwood, 2003, as cited in Aviles et al., 2006).

2.7 Conclusion

In conducting my literature review on social-emotional learning, I learned about successful programs and strategies that have been, or are being implemented in schools that have used social-emotional learning to support students’ academic achievement while reducing problem behaviours. The majority of the program studies focused on the improved performance in language arts after the implementation of activities that focused on emotion recognition through the use of appropriate vocabulary. Previous research has taught me that the use of multiple teaching strategies to target different learning styles is imperative in the success of SEL programs, as all students learn differently. Although SEL programs use culturally diverse instruction, programs need to be modified to fit the
specific needs of the population that is being taught in order to make the learning meaningful to the students. I also learned that collaboration between school, health care professionals, and families are essential in the success of SEL programs.

This research study will contribute to the existing literature in its focus on learning from educators about the social-emotional learning strategies they implement within the classroom and/or school setting, and how they believe that influences students academic performances. The main goal of my research was to identify successful social-emotional learning practices and how a sample of educators have implemented them into their teaching to enhance student achievement and to aid in the development of academically, socially, and emotionally competent children.
CHAPTER 3 – RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter I describe the methodology I used to conduct my research. I begin by reviewing research approaches and procedures, along with instruments used to collect my data. I then move on to discuss the participants, focusing on the sampling criteria and procedures, followed by the backgrounds of the selected participants. As this chapter develops, I explain data analysis procedures that I used to collect, organize, and analyze my data, while reviewing the ethical considerations that were factored in during this study. This chapter concludes with identifying the methodological strengths and limitations of my study, followed by a summary and rationale of the key methodological approaches used throughout the study, based on the research purpose and questions.

3.1 Research Approach & Procedures

This research study was conducted using a qualitative approach, which involves a review of relevant research, and semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with participants who are knowledgeable on the subject of social-emotional learning. The literature review is a relevant component to my research approach as it outlines current knowledge on the topic of social-emotional learning, and provides me with background knowledge, which will be crucial to my interview process.

As previously mentioned, I conducted my interviews using a qualitative approach in which semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted. It is important to follow a qualitative research approach for this study as qualitative research is used to study problems that affect individual humans, or society as a whole (Creswell, 2013). Both qualitative research and interviews allow the researcher to take on the role of
an active learner, which is especially important for graduate students. Semi-structured interviews prove to be a good method while conducting a qualitative study, as it allows the researcher to gain a better understanding of the individuals being interviewed, while allowing for the conversation to expand using probing methods.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

The primary instrument for data collection for this study was a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix B). By using a semi-structured interview process, I was able to keep control over the line of questioning, while being able to dig deeper into the views and opinions from the participants as semi-structured interviews allow for elaboration through probing by the interviewer (Creswell, 2003). Qualitative research tends to focus on collecting data on emotions, experiences and feelings, and by using semi-structured interviews for this process it allows the researcher to further explore the emotions, feelings, and experiences of the participants, rather than simply have them recorded with “a word or two” (Denscombe, 1998, p. 111). Semi-structured interviews allow for elaboration and expansion of the set questions by the researcher.

3.3 Participants

The participants I chose to interview needed to be knowledgeable and experienced with social-emotional learning programs in schools and classrooms. I used purposeful sampling to select my participants, as my research requires specific background knowledge that will inform the research questions that are guiding my study (Creswell, 2013). The following sections will outline the sampling criteria for participants, how participants were recruited, and background information on the participants.
3.3.1 Sampling Criteria

I have compiled a list of set criteria that I used when recruiting participants for my study. They are as follows:

1. Participants must be qualified and have experience working in the school system, preferably within Canada, and preferably with primary/junior students.

2. Participants must have demonstrated commitment to social-emotional learning (e.g. initiated programs in their schools or communities, contributed to curriculum development in this area, led professional development seminars on social-emotional learning/programming etc.).

3. Participants must have at least one year of experience working in the educational system full time.

As my research focuses on social-emotional learning in the primary/junior years, participants who have experience working with this age group have a deeper understanding on child development, as well as program planning for this age group. Similarly, having implemented or witnessed social-emotional learning programs better informed my research, as participants were able to speak from first hand knowledge, in turn making the information gathered more valid. My reasoning for not choosing to require teachers to have extensive teaching experience is that research on social-emotional learning, although not a new topic, is continuously expanding, and beginning teachers may have more current knowledge of the programs in place today.
3.3.2 Sampling procedures

To recruit participants, I actively searched for educators with social-emotional learning experience. In order to do this, I used convenience sampling by reaching out to existing contacts (principals and teachers) and networks I have made during the five years in which I have been studying education and experienced a range of student teacher placements in the public school system. As previously mentioned, I used purposive sampling, as my criterion has strict limitations to requiring participants to have experience with social-emotional learning. Creswell (2003), states that purposive sampling allows the researcher to “hand-pick” participants while keeping in mind who would best help inform my research, and to shed light on the topic at hand (Denscombe, 1998). After having brief discussions with several individuals who have experience with social-emotional learning, I choose four participants who I believed would have the most to contribute to this study.

3.3.3 Participant Bios

3.3.3.1 Valerie

At the time of the research, Valerie was a high school teacher who had been teaching at the secondary level for 15 years. She was currently working at an all girls’ Catholic high school for the Toronto Catholic District School Board. Valerie was the student success lead teacher, and also taught a grade 9 learning strategies class, and the grade 11 leadership and peer support class. Aside from classroom responsibilities, Valerie was also a volleyball coach, moderated the schools student mentor program, and was part of a team at her school that is introducing mindfulness without boarders. Valerie ran a grade 9 camp called Camp Confidence, where the grade 9 students go on a trip for a
week with Valerie and her “PAL’s”, which stands for peer advocate and listener. The PAL’s were “leaders” or “mentors” that consist of other students from across grades 10, 11, and 12. Camp Confidence provides students the opportunity to interact and get to know each other outside of the school environment where they can focus on getting to know each other and practicing pro-social behaviours. Valerie also used to work in the guidance department at her school, and although she was not in guidance anymore, she was still at times called upon to assist with guidance work in her school. Valerie’s vast experience implementing social-emotional learning programs, specifically Camp Confidence, made her an excellent candidate who could add unique insights into SEL in the school/classroom environment.

3.3.3.2Stephanie

At the time of the research Stephanie was a Special Education Resource Teacher (SERT) for the Durham District School Board. Stephanie worked with all three divisions of students in her school- primary, junior, and intermediate. Stephanie had been working in the school system for 12 years. She began as an Educational Assistant (EA) for 7 years before getting into classroom teaching. Stephanie taught for 3 years as a classroom teacher in both typical classrooms and special education classrooms before starting her position as a SERT. Before entering the field of education, Stephanie worked in adult and children group homes for an agency that worked primarily with adults with developmental disabilities. Stephanie said that although her primary role was now a special education resource teacher, counseling and guidance seem to be naturally attached to this role. On top of these responsibilities, Stephanie also coached volleyball and basketball. As a SERT, Stephanie’s main focus was on the students who are struggling
with academics or struggling with managing behaviour, so her work is more one-on-one rather than whole group instruction. However, Stephanie consulted with other classroom teachers on how they can implement strategies and lessons that foster social-emotional learning for all students. Stephanie’s experience working in many different roles made her an idea participant as she had seen the implementation of SEL from many different standpoints.

3.3.3.3 Alana

Alana was a junior/intermediate teacher working for the York Region District School Board. Alana had been teaching for 25 years, and taught all subjects excluding math and French. Alana believed that social-emotional learning needs to be woven throughout everything that is done at school to help teach students how to be resilient. Alana worked closely with the schools Child and Youth Worker (CYW), and together they put plans in place to help support students, specifically students with learning disabilities. Another focus of Alana’s because she worked with junior and intermediate students, was providing support for students in difficult transition stages. Alana’s experience working with junior students offered a different perspective of SEL as much of the SEL work she does with students is about the preparation for transitions made her a valuable participant as she could speak to how SEL looked different in the junior/intermediate years.

3.3.3.4 Zenia

Zenia was a Child and Youth Worker (CYW) working in an elementary school in the York Region District School Board. Zenia had worked as a CYW for 28 years in many different capacities, but for the past 11 years had been working with students in
grades 1-8, with a primary focus on students with learning disabilities. Zenia tended to work with the students directly in their classroom, and worked as a team with the classroom teacher. Although Zenias’s main focus was on identified students in the classroom, she also provided counseling and other types of supports to additional students who required behavioural assistance in the classroom. Zenia’s background experience included working with the Children’s Aid Society, as well as providing child and family services within group homes. Zenia’s CYW background made for a strong participant as she was able to offer information about working one-on-one with students through the collaboration with other teachers. This was important as it related to the literature stating the importance of collaboration among staff.

3.4 Data Analysis

I conducted 4 semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, all of which were tape-recorded with the consent of the participant, and then transcribed by myself, the researcher. I also took field notes during the interview process to record any thoughts or important notes I wanted to remember. This was useful while noting the null data. Creswell (2003), and Denscombe (1998), list six steps similar steps to data analysis and interpretation that I used to analyze the data I collected during my interviews. The six steps are as follows:

1. **Organize and prepare all of the data.** This step involves transcribing my interviews, typing up field notes, and organizing any relevant material obtained during interviews. I began the initial stage of coding, or ‘open coding’ (Denscombe, 1998) to name and categorize information.
2. **Reflections on the early coding and categories.** During this step I re-read all of the notes and materials I acquired during my interviews. I recorded any new insights or general thoughts during this stage.

3. **Coding.** The coding process is where I began to divide my data into chunks by looking for common themes and interconnections. I then broke down my findings and categorized them. Each category was labeled with a term, often a key term or word used by the participants in my study.

4. **Description.** Here I developed a set of generalizations that explain the themes identified in the data, which will be outlined in chapter 4.

5. **Representing data.** This step involves putting together data to be presented in a visual format using the form of a table.

6. **Interpretation.** Finally, I interpreted and made meaning of all the anecdotal data collected during my interviews by comparing it to the research I reviewed in my literature review.

### 3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

Although there are no known risks to participating in this study, there are several ethical issues to consider before, during, and after the interview process. A consent letter (see Appendix A) was signed by all participants and participants also received the interview protocol (see Appendix B), where they could find a list of questions that were asked during the interview. Participants were given the questions shortly before the interview begins, as I didn’t want them to over think or script their responses. This allowed participants to review the questions beforehand, hopefully making them feel less pressure during the interview. Participants were informed that they have the right to
withdraw at any time during the interview process, and have the right to pass on any questions asked by myself, the researcher. Participants were assigned a pseudonym to protect their privacy. This data was stored on my password-protected computer and the only people who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor Dr. Angela MacDonald-Vemic. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to participation. Participants were informed at the beginning of the interview that everything that is said will be “on the record” unless they have requested otherwise. Making the participant feel comfortable and well informed of the process beforehand enhanced the chances of having a successful and meaningful interview (Creswell, 1998; Denscombe, 1998).

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

Qualitative research proves to have both strengths and weaknesses or limitations to its process. Using interviews to collect data for qualitative research added to both the strengths and limitations of my study. Interviews can be time-consuming to prepare beforehand, as interviews are “end-loaded” rather than “pre-coded” data collection methods such as questionnaires (Denscombe, 1998). The transcribing and coding that takes place after the interviews also proved to be an extremely time-consuming process. The interviewer effect may also impact the validity and reliability of the data collected through interviews, as participants may modify answers based on the identity of the interviewer (Denscombe, 1998). Another limitation to my study is the fact that we were limited to interviewing teachers. I believe if I had the opportunity to speak with students
and/or parents, I would be able to gain a better insight to how social-emotional programs impact the children. As I was limited to a single research method (interviews), I may have missed out on important information that I could gain from observations, as I would be able to see the practices being implemented first hand, rather than just relying on participants’ views.

Although interviews can prove to add limitations to qualitative research, there are also many advantages of interviews. Advantages of conducting interviews to collect data include *depth of information gathered* (semi-structures interviews allow for expansion on posed questions), *flexibility of interview process*–*Informants priorities* (interviews are a good method for producing data based on informants’ priorities, opinions and ideas) (Denscombe, 1998, p. 137). Informants also have the opportunity to expand on their insights, explain their personal views of what they see as the most crucial factors on the subject area (Denscombe, 1998). When participants’ have the opportunity to expand on their responses, researchers can gain more insightful information, possibly leading to an entire new line of questioning.

### 3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I described the methodology I used to conduct my research. For my qualitative research I used semi-structured face-to-face interviews with educators that I found by using the connections and networks I have made while studying education in my undergraduate degree. I laid out the criteria for participants, and explained that I will used purposeful and convenience sampling in order to collect participants that were familiar with my research topic, in turn being able to add to my study. I move on to explain how I analyzed the data I collected using several steps to transcribe, organize,
explain, and interpret my findings. Finally, I move on to discuss the ethical
considerations of my research. I explain how I assured participants their identity will
remain private, and made sure they were prepared and felt comfortable for the interview
by providing my participants with a consent form. Next, in chapter 4, I report my
research findings.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

4.0 Introduction

In this chapter I report and discuss my findings from the four interviews I conducted with educators who have experience with social-emotional learning (SEL). This data responds to my main research question: How is a sample of educators fostering social-emotional learning through their teaching practice, and what outcomes do they observe from their students? I have organized my data into 9 main themes: 1) Teachers understand SEL to mean teaching and learning about being aware of yourself, your feelings and the feelings of others, and then providing the tools they need to respond to everyday situations in constructive ways; 2) Teachers require a multitude of programs, lessons, strategies and resources to implement successful social-emotional learning Programs in their classroom/school; 3) Participants believe social-emotional learning should be supported and reinforced through daily routines, collaboration with team members, and integrating it into the classroom curriculum in order to ensure its effectiveness; 4) Participants believe that students’ ability to transfer social and emotional skills requires support from their life outside the classroom/school; 5) Participants reported Social-Emotional Learning is important for students’ development, and provides many benefits that aid in students’ abilities to succeed academically and in the real world; 6) Participants observed that it is the students that are visibly struggling academically and/or behaviourally that are receiving specialized support for social-emotional learning; 7) Participants observed that all students respond positively to social-emotional programming; 8) The challenges that teachers encounter when implementing SEL programming involve a range of stakeholder in students’ lives; 9) Core priorities of SEL
programming that participants identified included knowing your students, collaborating with colleagues, adapting a whole school approach, and implementing programming in a pro-active manner. I have used many sub-themes to help further organize my data.

4.1 Teachers understand SEL to mean teaching and learning about being aware of yourself, your feelings and the feelings of others, and then providing the tools they need to respond to everyday situations in constructive ways

As there is still not one set definition for Social-Emotional Learning, I found it important to first understand how each of my participants conceptualized SEL, as this would be the basis for how they approach and implement SEL in their schools/classrooms.

4.1.1 What skills do SEL programs teach students?

All four participants had very similar ideas of what SEL is, and the skills it teaches. Both Valerie and Alana spoke to the importance of teaching the “whole” child. Alana stated that as educators, we are responsible for teaching students about more than just academics, and she felt that it was part of her job to teach them how to be “resilient” and “get along with others”. Valerie also explained her passion for teaching the “whole learner” and argued that we need to:

Appreciate that you have to take care of the person and understanding their motivations and them being emotionally secure and that a lot of what happens in school where you thrive and grow is not through the curriculum but rather through the experiences and how you cope with peers and teachers and opportunities.
The Collaborative for Social Emotional Learning describes five core competencies of social-emotional learning (SEL) programming in schools that include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decisions-making (Desai et al., 2014). I found that between my four participants, there were also five very similar competencies/skills that were consistently brought up when discussing what SEL is and what it teaches. I found all four participants spoke to: Social skills, self-regulation, self-awareness, interpersonal skills, and thinking/regulation strategies to help us respond to situations in constructive ways. The skills that are identified for the Collaborative for Social-Emotional Learning, and the skills that were identified by my participants line up well, as the majority of skills focus on how to be aware of ourselves, our emotions, and the emotions of others. There is also common theme of being about being able to make responsible decisions in how we respond to certain situations. Stephanie, in particular, emphasized that not only is SEL that self-awareness piece and being able to identify emotions and their triggers, but it is also the strategies that students can use to manage their emotions.

The literature states that SEL aims to teach children how to “communicate more effectively, cooperate, resolve conflicts creatively and adaptively, reflect on personal experiences, control impulsivity, and make more thoughtful and collaborative social decisions” (Cohen, 1999, p. 13). Although all four participants seemed to be focused on these same desired outcomes, it may appear slightly different when being taught to primary students, intermediate students, and senior students. Participants that have experience working with both primary and intermediate students state that in primary grades, SEL is easier to integrate into all areas of the curriculum, whereas in the
intermediate grades their focus is more on preparing students for the transition into high school rather than focusing on social and emotional competence. Valerie, the high school teacher I interviewed spoke to the issues faced when trying to implement SEL into the high school curriculum, as each subject is very topic based and not all classes leave much room to integrate SEL.

4.1.2 What does SEL look like in the primary & junior grades?

When students start school at age 4, they should be coming into kindergarten with previously learned skills that teachers will foster and expand on throughout the year. Although Zenia was a child and youth worker (CYW) and did not typically teach whole classes, she had seen teachers introduce it to their students in different ways. She has seen very direct lessons about setting goals with the students, and others more informal where they have class discussions about how they should be working and the expectations etc. Primary students tend to have more simple and short-term goals such as getting their agendas signed by their parents. Zenia stated that there is lots of discussion about books, and role-playing certain situations and personal or pretend experiences in the primary years. Alana was very passionate that role play is an affective strategy in the intermediate and senior school years, however, it may not be as prominent or animated as the role play seem in the primary and possibly the junior school years.

4.1.3 What does SEL look like in the junior, intermediate & senior grades?

Zenia worked with students up to grade 8, where they begin to prepare for the transition to high school. Zenia explained that a major focus in the Intermediate grades is teaching learning skills that will be evaluated on their report cards in high school. Often students will lose supports/resources such as the CYW once they transition into high
school. Zenia spoke to the importance of having certain learning skills in place, touching on how behaviour guided students’ ability to succeed in school. In her words:

> So we’re trying to constantly give them, we focus a lot on the learning skills and talk to them about those so that they can understand that those learning skills if they can get all those things in place, the academics come but if you don’t have these, you know, the self-regulation, the responsibility, the initiative etc then you’re going to struggle. Its part of life.

Alana, the teacher who had taught primary, junior, and intermediate grades also touched on high school preparation, and beginning to teach and evaluate students “learning skills”:

> We are supposed to be teaching the learning skills on the report card, and if you look at that, that’s all SE development and learning. So you have to teach and assess those, so I think that works well. Um, I think sometimes when I’m working with the kids in the older grades like 7 and 8, its really trying to prepare them for high school so that they're ready.

The high school teacher I interviewed, Valerie, went into more detail about the learning skills that students are evaluated on in high school, and how teachers like herself try to fit it into their classroom curriculum. Valerie spoke to one school in particular where the grade 9 students are required to take a *Learning Strategies* class, where they focus on 4 main competencies: Organization, Self-Regulation, Independence, and Collaboration. Alana and Valerie both elaborated on how teachers are required to evaluate these skills on the report card, but that not all teachers, especially in high school, are given the time to properly address these
issues, as classes are very “topic” focused, and there isn’t as much integration as we are beginning to see in primary schools.

4.2 Teachers require a multitude of programs, lessons, strategies and resources to implement successful Social-Emotional Learning Programs in their classroom/school.

All four of my participants spoke to different programs, lessons, and resources they use or have seen be used in the classroom/school to support SEL. My participants stressed the fact that because there is so much literature and a vast amount of resources available, it is important for educators to pick and choose from the variety of resources available, to not only meet the students’ individual needs, but to also make sure that as a teacher you are comfortable with what you are implementing/teaching in your school/classroom.

Although there was a range of programs discussed among my participants, none of these programs were identified in the literature review, which could be due to fact, as mentioned earlier, that much of the research I reported on came from the United States. However, even though the programs discussed in my literature and my findings are not the same, many of the programs are based on very similar philosophies and concepts.

4.2.1 Programs supporting Social-Emotional Learning

4.2.1.1 Zones of Regulation

Three out of four of my participants brought up the Zones of Regulation (ZOR) program, saying they find this program one of the most useful. Stephanie described the ZOR as:
A program that takes you through the emotional identification piece first, and then links it with the strategy piece. I find a lot of other programs that I don’t know as well, either do one or the other. They either give strategies and tools, or they build that self-awareness and identifying emotions piece, but I just find the zones of regulation links them together really nicely and its also very accessible for teachers. It’s a great one for grab and go ok here’s your sequence of lessons, here’s your focus, here are your tools, here are your visuals, it’s a lot easier to implement in the classroom than some of the other ones ive seen.

Stephanie, Alana, and Zenia all referred to the ZOR as one of their favorite programs that is available as it has all the tools teachers need. The ZOR allows teachers to pick and choose what they want to teach, which in turn helps teachers who may be more uncomfortable addressing the mental health piece in the classroom. The lessons provided are easily adaptable for all students. The main focus of the ZOR program is on the use and power of common language. If everyone is using the same vocabulary to express themselves and communicate with others, students are more likely to understand their peers, and help them problem solve or regulate.

Although the Zones of Regulation did not come up in the literature review, the program was similar to the Social Decision Making and Social Problem Solving (SDM/SPS) (Zins et al., 2004) approach to teaching that was first implemented in the New Jersey, United States area. SMD/SPS is similar to the ZOR program as both practices focus on both self-awareness, and the skills/tools needed to deal with specific everyday problems or situations they may encounter. Stephanie stated that the ZOR
links the identification piece with the skills/tools piece, whereas most other programs focus on one or the other.

4.2.1.2 Mindfulness without borders

Valerie, the high school teacher that I interviewed explained the mindfulness without borders program that she had been implementing not only with the students, but with the staff members as well. Valerie explained that the “emphasis is on actually learning just how to breath, and by breathing you’re listening to yourself and your mind and calming your mind and that’s really building self-awareness”. Valerie explained that the school staff are now required to participate in two minutes of mindfulness before staff meetings so they can clear their minds and stay focused on what is important, which is exactly what Valerie did with her students as well throughout the day. Valerie made a point to say that even if someone does not need that time to calm their mind, part of SEL is understanding the needs of others, and in those minutes of mindfulness we need to respect those who do need that time to calm their minds and prepare for the upcoming task.

Mindfulness can be a powerful tool when exposing students to SEL, as it allows students the time to regulate themselves, which is a huge component of SEL. Although the programs discussed in my literature review do not mention mindfulness, the Second Step: A Violence Prevention Program speaks about the research grounded in cognitive behaviour therapy, which shows that “thoughts affect people’s social interactions” (Mindess et al., 2008, p. 57). Mindfulness allows the opportunity to clear ones mind of any overwhelming thoughts in order to be able to focus on the task at hand, which is a tool that students who suffer from lack of regulation skills are in great need of.
4.2.1.3 Developmental assets framework

Valerie has also implemented the developmental assets framework into her school, which she described as a “framework, a language to help measure internal and external assets that students have to thrive.” Valerie also talked about the “asset mornings” they have at her school which encourage and allow students to work on many of the social-emotional and skills we are teaching them, specifically pro-social behaviour and the ability to understand, appreciate, and support each other. The asset mornings are student led, and at a whole school level. The students who are leading the assemblies talk about what we need to grow within ourselves, and talk about all of the internal and external assets we have and can grow on to succeed in the real world.

Although the Developmental Assets Framework is not mentioned in the literature review, its purpose can be related to that of the Child Development Program. The Child Development Program focuses on students’ ability to feel valued within the school community, in turn fostering intrinsic motivation to want to succeed in the school/classroom. Valerie states that when the students are provided with opportunities to be a leader or a mentor, it not only builds their confidence, but allows them the opportunity to not only verbalize their own goals and motivations, allowing them to become more self-aware, but allows others to be intrinsically inspired as well, which is a main goal of the Child Development Program.

4.2.1.4 Camp Confidence

Camp Confidence is a program that one of my participants, Valerie, the high school teacher, created and implemented into her whole school. She described it this way:

Camp Confidence is that when you give students the opportunities to understand each other, to see each other
without the stress or expectation of achieving academically, you see a different person. You can challenge them and take risks without again the cloud of grades or expectations. Also key for SEL but in terms of dynamics is that students see teachers not as a robot, but you know as people. Its all social-emotional, like what are you made of? What do you care about? How do you interact with people? And that outside of the curriculum domain I think it affects kids personalities and learning it in that safe space of how to be nice, what were looking for, and each group had a PAL (peer advocate and listener) that was modeling pro-social behaviour and addressing that, like ‘hey, this is how we act at school and in the community, and this is how we treat people’. So that common language as well, so it’s reinforced. And what is unique about that is being outside of the school and its just focuses on I’m worth something, how do I work with others?

Many of the skills students and staff focus on at Camp Confidence aligns with what both my participants and the literature stated that SEL is about, which is teaching children to be self-aware, resilient, and competent problem solvers (Desai et al., 2014; Greenberg et al., 2003; Raimundo et al., 2012).

Camp Confidence is not one of the programs discussed in the literature review, but aligns closely with the New Haven Development Program, as both find importance in promoting activities outside of the classroom where students can practice pro-social behaviours with their peers without the stresses of the school/classroom environment (Cohen, 1999).

4.2.2 Individualized lessons for students to support SEL

Zenia, the CYW, and Stephanie, the special education resource teacher (SERT), insisted that in order to run successful SEL programs, teachers and support workers must
be able to individualize the programs they are introducing to the kids, and make sure they are student focused. Many students struggle with different things, meaning they require focuses on certain some skills more than others. A strategy that teachers and support workers need to focus on is being able to make sure each program is student focused and caters to their individual needs. The Zones of Regulation program is a good resource for teachers to provide individualized lessons, as Stephanie states that there is lots of room in the lessons/unit plans for teachers to make adjustments.

4.2.3 Human resources to support Social-Emotional Development

When asked if there are any resources that are particularly helpful/useful for implementing SEL into the school/classroom, all four participants believed that human resources were some of the most important. Alana explained that:

The best resources are human resources… I think the role of the CYW is so important and… we want kids to become independent and more than just academically successful to be able to lead their lives independently and making good choices.

Two big challenges that were identified by all four of my participants, as well as in the literature was lack of resources and time (Cohen, 1999; Greenberg et al., 2003). Teachers have a vast amount of curriculum to teach, and Alana states that by having access to human resources, the student has the opportunity to get the individual attention they need to keep up and succeed in the classroom.

4.2.3.1 Child and Youth Worker (CYW)

One of the participants I interviewed, Zenia, had been a CYW for 28 years, and had worked with students from kindergarten to grade 8. As a CYW, Zenia worked
primarily with the learning disabled students directly in their classrooms, while also providing counseling and behavioural assistance outside of the classroom to students who may be struggling in the classroom. Although Zenia’s focus was on students who were identified as needing extra assistance, she also spent some time in the classroom and provided SEL opportunities for all students at the whole school level. Valerie, the high school teacher that I interviewed, also touched on the important role the CYW at their school holds. Valerie explained that the CYW runs a group at the school that offers routine and consistency, and emphasized the importance of common language being used throughout the school. CYW’s have many different roles, and offer support in different ways, but their overall goal is to support students in succeeding in school.

4.2.3.2 Special Education Resource Teacher (SERT)

I had the opportunity to interview Stephanie, a special education resource teacher (SERT), and who also focused a lot of her time with individuals who appear to require counseling and extra support.

The counseling part seems to just come naturally, and that kind of ranges through the staff as well, but a lot of the counseling type that I do here with every grade seems to still center around those same areas like being able to identify that you’re feeling a certain way, why you might be feeling like that, and here are my options for either removing myself from that setting, or kind of handling the situation or that kind of things. So regardless for what they come to me with, and it is a whole range, I’ve realized over the years that it is kind of the same skills that were trying to build.

Stephanie’s role as a SERT revolved around supporting the skills that were identified earlier when discussing what SEL is, and what skills it is imparting onto students, such as; social skills; self-regulation; self-
awareness; interpersonal skills; and thinking/regulation strategies to help us respond to situations in constructive ways. When Stephanie is working to support individual students she tends to use the zones of regulation (ZOR) to reinforce identifying emotions/trigger, while also identifying strategies of how to appropriately respond to certain situations.

4.2.3.3 Students as Mentors: Peer Advocate and Listener (PAL)

As previously mentioned, one of my participants, Valerie, the high school teacher, started a program called Camp Confidence. The camp was for grade 9 students, where they would go to spend time with other older “mentor” students, or “Peer advocate and listeners” (PALS). The PALS acted as human resources to the students at the camp by offering compassion, listening without judgment, and offering support to each other, Valerie stated that “growth comes from opportunities and experiences with peers and teachers,” so students have the opportunity to lean on each other for support. The importance of having human resources in this kind of setting is because you are working collaboratively with each other, and having real discussion about how each student is doing, and where exactly they can offer them more support. In this sense, we are again speaking to the importance of individualized programs and support.

4.2.3.4 Reading Buddies

Alana, the junior teacher that I interviewed, talked about the importance and benefits of having reading buddies. She said that not only is having a reading buddy beneficial for the younger students, but it can teach the older students a lot too about being empathetic and getting along with others. Alana talks about a specific occasion in which she paired up a boy who struggled behaviourally with a younger student with
Down syndrome. When the older boy complained and asked why he had to be paired with this other boy Alana said:

I picked you because I thought you would have empathy for him, and he goes, oh, and he said, well he sure is special. And I said so were you when you were little. And we made sure you had an empathetic reading buddy. And, I didn’t know how this was going to go over with him and he was the best reading buddy from that forward

Alana noticed that another benefit from this particular pairing was that the older boy, who also had low social-emotional skills, was able to practice some of the skills that were being taught with him in this real life experience.

A large part of SEL is learning to communicate and work with others. Human resources are important in helping foster SEL because they focus on the relational element. Not only does learning how to interact with others help develop social-emotional skills to succeed in the real world, it also reinforces language and vocabulary development (Mindess et al., 2008).

4.3 Participants believed Social-Emotional Learning should be supported and reinforced through daily routines, collaboration with team members, and integrating it into the classroom curriculum in order to ensure its effectiveness

4.3.1 SEL can be supported in the classroom by weaving it throughout your daily practice, and using it as the framework for you classroom community/classroom management
Stephanie stated that SEL should be woven throughout everything we do in the classroom. When teachers are able to integrate SEL into their everyday natural practice, it is not something extra being asked of the children. Stephanie, the SERT that I interviewed, had the same belief that SEL should just be how your classroom is run. She explained:

I always suggest or help support them in the fact that these programs can be your entire building of your classroom community, it can revolve around these sorts of programs and this sort of learning, especially, and I mean it goes through the year, but especially in the early weeks of September, and again, back from the break, it’s a real teaching opportunity to build your classroom community through these learning tools for sure. And it builds in them an awareness of each other as well. You know, like I’ve had the classes here that have taken it on as a whole class project and I’ve heard the kids say oh “I think you’re in the yellow zone right now I think I need to leave you be” that sort of thing, so common language, and when it’s just part of the classroom community they also acknowledge each others differences and the different needs, so like I think that should def be a school wide focus, but also a focus in the classroom community.

Stephanie also spoke to the importance of students having those social-emotional skills to know what’s expected of them, and to understand how they can achieve those goals. When this is achieved, she explained, classroom management takes care of itself.

The three participants I interviewed that have experience working with primary/junior students stated that there is room everywhere in the curriculum for the integration of SEL. Research has proven that this is not only true, but one of the best methods to support SEL. For example, three of the more successful social-emotional learning programs that have been put in place are ones where they have modified an existing curriculum, or created an entirely new one to ensure the integration of social and
emotional learning. The Child Development Program, the New Haven Social Development Program, and the Social Decision Making and Social Problem Solving are three programs that created a curriculum that focuses on social-emotional learning (Cohen, 2001; Zins et al, 2004; Cohen, 1999).

4.3.2 SEL works best as a school wide initiative and the teaching and learning of SE practices is consistent

When asked how we can best support successful SEL programs into the schools, all four of my participants raised the point of importance of having these programs as a whole school initiative. Participants believed that by reinforcing consistency and common language used throughout the entire school would help students conceptualize the idea of SEL better. Stephanie says that:

SEL programs work best when they are whole school initiatives…Not that is has to be one tool, but that we establish a common language so that, because I think we often underestimate how much children do transfer that language into less structured times or when were not around, if everyone is using the same terms, they consolidate it a lot better.

Alana, a teacher currently working with junior and intermediate students, has seen how well the implementation of the zones of regulation has gone in some of the primary classes, and her goal is to pick it up in her junior and intermediate classes and hope that other teachers in the grades in between will pick it up as well. Alana says “it would be really powerful if it was done through their whole schooling. Because then you could combat the effects at home. Cause we have them for 8 hours a day. But if it is only being done in one class, how effective could it be?” The literature on the
Child Development Programs *Homeside Activities* supports Alana’s statement, as a large focus on this program, and what made it successful, was sending home activities with students to encourage social-emotional learning and development to occur at home (Cohen, 2001).

### 4.3.3 Integrating SEL into the curriculum ensures consistency

When asked where teachers can fit SEL into their curriculum, Stephanie, the SERT, said that there is room for SEL everywhere in the curriculum (although math is a bit harder as it is typically quantity based). The three subject areas that my interviewees spoke to were The Arts, Language, and Social Studies. When it comes to the Arts, Alana says “you can actually do a lot through drama as well. You know acting out somebody in a bad mood and how can you support them? They can develop that empathy for other people as well.” Participants were in agreement that by using role-play to reflect and explore situations that they have experienced or worry about, help engage students more, and offer more meaningful teachable moments. Zenia, the CYW, has the students’ role play different situations that make the students feel uncomfortable, or that may trigger certain reactions. She will have the students identify how they feel, and what they can do to make that feeling stop. The idea of not only being able to identify your feelings and what triggered them, but also identify tools to help the students overcome that, reflects the focus of the zones of regulations.

The Language Arts curriculum provides many opportunities for SEL to be integrated into the units/lessons. Stephanie explains that when she is teaching teachers how to implement SEL into their classrooms, she links it closely to the curriculum so
they can see how easily it can be. She believes the language curriculum has the richest opportunities to explore SEL. Stephanie says:

That self-reflection, setting goals, identifying strengths and needs, that is all right in the curriculum. But also in choosing topics to write about, that could be linked to reflecting on their emotions or how they handled things. But if we focus on the process expectations, so the ones that focus more on critical thinking and communicating, and applying skills and things like that, they can all be taught through self-regulation programs or discussion on this type of learning. I think when we try to implement it into a classroom that’s kind of the direction that I take with teachers. This is not an add on, this is just kind of where you’re steering them.

Stephanie emphasized throughout her interview that SEL should not be an add on in the classroom, it should be present at all times in order for students to get the consistency and reinforcement of the social-emotional skills that we are teaching them to develop.

4.4 Participants have noted students’ ability to transfer social and emotional skills requires support from their life outside the classroom/school.

4.4.1 Support at home is crucial for students’ social and emotional development

As teachers, it is our responsibility to teach the whole child, and make sure they have the necessary skills to succeed in the real world, but when they come to school, teachers should be building on skills that have already been introduced at home. Zenia, the CYW, talks about teaching students character traits. She says “I still believe that character traits are something that should be instilled, values and morals should be instilled at home, and then we should be building on it when they get to school.” If these skills are being introduced at home, and built upon and fostered at school, this makes
students ability to conceptualize and internalize SEL much easier and natural. As previously mentioned, one of the successful SEL programs discussed in the literature review, The Child Development Program, places a major focus on children taking activities home, providing them with opportunities to develop conversations around social-emotional learning, allowing them additional opportunities to practice social skills (Cohen, 2001).

4.4.2 Educated households and parents tend to be able to better support their children’s social and emotional development

As previously mentioned, support at home is imperative for students to be able to transfer pro-social skills they are being taught at school. Stephanie, who has worked in schools with much opposite demographics, says that she finds some parents are able to support SEL at home better than others:

I’m sure a variety of reasons, parents in the higher SES/more privileged families seem to be able to apply it better at home. I think it’s that piece, whether its formal education or whatever, there just seems to be a clearer understanding of how they could compliment that at home.

Stephanie goes on to talk about although students from differing SES families internalize SEL the same way, their ability to transfer the skills from school to their home lives is quite different. I will go more into these findings later in this chapter.

4.5 Participants reported Social-Emotional Learning is important for students’ development, and provides many benefits that aid in students’ abilities to succeed academically and in the real world.
When looking at the literature, Zins, Weissberg, Wang, and Walberg (2004), made a compelling conceptual and empirical case for linking social-emotional programming to improved school attitudes, behaviour, and performance. They stated that:

Students’ social-emotional competence fosters better academic performance in a variety of ways. For example, they reported that students who become more self-aware and confident about their learning abilities try harder, and that students who motivate themselves, set goals, manage their stress, and organize their approach to work perform better. Additionally, students who make responsible decisions about studying and completing their homework and use problem solving and relationship skills to overcome obstacles achieve more (p 470).

Other research speaking to the benefits of SEL programs state that social-emotional functioning and academic performance are interrelated. Children who do not develop a healthy social-emotional competence are at a greater risk of falling behind in school, and are more likely to show signs of behavioural, emotional, academic, and social developmental problems. A student who is well equipped to recognize and work through his or her emotions is more likely to persever when they are faced with challenges in (and outside of) the classroom (Barbarin 2002, as cited in Aviles et al., 2006).

4.5.1 Benefits of programs/lessons/strategies

There are many benefits that come from implementing SEL into schools and classrooms. The participants touched upon many of the benefits when they were asked to identify what they believe SEL is, as the benefits are indeed learning the skills these
programs are aiming to teach, such as awareness of yourself and others, resiliency, regulation, problem-solving skills, team work, empathy, and goal setting to name a few. When looking at what the literature says in relation to how my participants defined SEL and its benefits, we can look at some of the goals for social-emotional learning programs, which are, but not limited to: how to set positive goals; how to behave ethically and responsibly; how to increase motivation; how to reduce/prevent violent outbursts; how to manage challenging situations in a constructive manner, and; how to build positive relationships with peers and adults (Greenberg et al., 2003; Raimundo, Marques-Pinto, Lima, 2012; Desai, Karahalios, Peruad, & Reker, 2014; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, Walberg, 2004; Cohen, 2001). Valerie, Alana, and Stephanie’s responses to the benefits they see come from SEL all correspond with the goals that have been set by many researchers and educators. Through role-playing and discussions, students are able to learn and practice pro-social behaviour, self-regulation, problem-solving skills, and more depending on the program.

4.5.2 Behaviour directly influences students’ ability to succeed academically

Although schools are beginning to raise more awareness about, and implement more SEL programs, there is still a lack of understanding that student behaviour directly affects their ability to learn. Stephanie talks about her experiences of having to explain to teachers that any kind of behaviour, no matter how mundane it may seem, like getting up to sharpen your pencil multiple times when it is not necessary, is a behaviour issue that indeed influences the students’ ability to work. Stephanie says that work avoidance, and students appearing unengaged are dealing with a social-emotional regulation issue, and it’s impeding their ability to get work done in the classroom. Similar to more extreme
behavioural issues, teachers need to take this opportunity to implement functional behaviour strategies for their students.

Many SEL programs focus on being able to identify appropriate tools to deal with challenging situations to avoid a “blow up”. Aviles at al., 2006, states that students who suffer from serious emotional disturbance often lack social-emotional skills, and have an underlying issue of poor anger management skills, which may result in the child becoming verbally or physically aggressive. This in turn may lead to suspension, or perhaps expulsion, which will have a direct affect on their academic achievement if they are missing school days (Aviles et al., 2006). Stephanie believes that any behaviour “problems” stem from a lack of regulation skills, and believes that enforcing social-emotional regulation skills will reduce behaviour, in turn allowing the student to focus on academics.

4.5.3 Mental health affects academic success

With there being more of a focus on mental health in schools these days, people are more open about discussing mental health and how it affects students and their ability to learn. One of my participants’ states:

I think people are underestimating how intertwined they are. Like everyone says if you’re experiencing depression you wont do well in school. Like everyone will acknowledge that that is true, but I don’t think they’re really seeing first of all how early this lack of regulation and learning happens, and the impact it has later, and I think the only way to change the thinking in that level is research based. So they need to see if it’s over time or whatever, but that connection for sure.
Another participant I interviewed talked about mental health as she was defining SEL. Valerie states that SEL is “understanding mental health, anxiety, and depression”. Again, this is directly related to being able to identify emotions, triggers, and tools to support you in responding to your emotions. Cohen (2001) speaks to this by reporting findings that when students are able to identify, and manage their emotions in a constructive manner, the easier it will be to overcome academic challenges.

**4.6 Participants observed that it is the students that are visibly struggling academically and/or behaviourally that are receiving specialized support for social-emotional learning**

*4.6.1 Visible destructive behaviour receives the most attention*

During my interviews, specifically with Zenia the CYW and Stephanie the SERT, I learned that the students who are receiving the most SEL support through those who are exerting obvious behavioural needs. Stephanie said that because teachers are expected to be modifying and accommodating their lessons and approaches to meet the needs of students who are struggling academically, her focus becomes more so on the students who pose behavioural “problems”. Zenia also spoke to the fact that the way the staff divvies their support stems from going through class lists and highlighting students’ names who have been identified as having behavioural issues. Although all participants stated the importance of SEL for all students, research proves that students demonstrating “problem behaviours” are recorded as having a more difficult time persevering through challenging situations, such as testing (Aviles at al., 2006). Although SEL is vital to all
students, research proves that behaviour is linked to academics (Barbarin 2002, as cited in Aviles et al., 2006).

4.6.2 Violent behaviour is often a sign that social-emotional regulation is required
As previously mentioned, support is typically given to students who are showing outwardly destructive behaviour. When I asked my participants to expand on what behaviours they look for, many spoke to the violent outbursts experienced in the classroom and/or school. Stephanie stated that students who have poor self-regulation, are often unable to control their frustration, which may lead to violent behaviours such as throwing chairs or other objects, threatening others, or even self-harm. However, Alana stated that there are more subtle behaviours that are also important to watch for, as the quiet or introverted students require social and emotional support as well.

4.6.3. Students who don’t engage in violent behaviour or don’t struggle academically are more difficult to identify and give them the support they require

Unfortunately, there are also many students suffering with mental health issues such as anxiety and depression that aren’t displaying as obvious behaviours, meaning they may get left behind in the younger grades. Alana, the junior intermediate interviewee, said that this can lead to more serious issues when the students get older and may become anorexic, cutters, etc. However, when behaviour is less overt, schools and teachers tend to feel there is less need for SEL, and it does not become a priority. Stephanie struggles with this because she knows that even though the behaviour may not be presenting itself, there is still a need for SEL. Stephanie says:

When the behaviour is less overt they [schools] feel less need for it [SEL] and so it doesn’t become a priority, when in reality, we know that anxiety levels are going up and the
amount of kids with these kinds of struggles are going up and sometimes its invisible. Sometimes it doesn’t look like kids trashing rooms and that kind of violent anger. So I think environments that have less overt behaviour aren’t fulfilling it as well as they probably could be. Because it just doesn’t become a priority if you aren’t struggling with it.

Alana, Zenia, and Stephanie all stated that not all students that require extra support and SEL are showing obvious and overt signs that they are struggling, especially students that are struggling with internal mental health issues, as we know many of their symptoms are invisible.

4.7 Participants reported that all students respond positively to SEL

Two of my participants, Zenia and Stephanie, had experience working at schools that were on different ends of the spectrum in terms of demographics. Stephanie in particular spoke to how students from different SES families respond to SEL programs.

I find that the response is fairly similar. They all seem to crave the structure given to them. They love the kind of clear picture of when I’m feeling like this, this is what I can do about it. And so it didn’t seem to matter in terms of the demographics how they seemed to internalize that.

Although the two participants were in agreement that all students respond similarly to the programs, no matter their SES background, there are differences in how the students transfer those skills. Stephanie said:

The difference that I do find is how well they are able to consolidate that and transfer it into different situations. I find it’s hard to get beyond that immediate situation, and up there
(in the higher SES demographic) for the most part they seem to be able to transfer those skills and have that foresight you know next time it happened or with a totally different situation.

This point goes back to where I discussed my findings on how children with more educated parents are better able to transfer skills from school into the outside world. However, education isn’t the only difference that my participants spoke to when discussing the different responses from students from lower SES families to students from higher SES families. Stephanie, who is now working at a high needs school with a low SES demographic, and a school to many new comers to the country, she finds that these students are coming in with more baggage, and it takes more time for these students to develop the social-emotional skills as they need to break down other walls before teaching them new skills.

4.8 The challenges that teachers encounter when implementing SEL programming involve a range of stakeholders in students’ lives

As the literature states, the pressures to show achievement gains are rapidly increasing, so are the expectations on educators to create caring communities within schools (Cefai & Cooper, 2009). Although specific goals are being set on how to increase meeting these expectations of all students and promote important, challenging, and meaningful learning experiences for everyone, research on the most effective strategies and programs is still lacking, especially within Canada, due in part to the limited programs being implemented within school setting (Zins et al., 2004). As previously mentioned, SEL comes from the top down, and there needs to be a push for it from the
board or administration level. I will also go into more detail about the challenges of expectations and challenges at the school board level later in this section.

When asked about the main challenges they face when implementing SEL, all participants all answered with very similar challenges. There are 8 challenges that seem to affect all students. They are: home life; challenges with parents; resistance from teachers; resistance from students; student physical and academic abilities; challenges at the school board level; challenges inside the school; and challenges for teachers.

4.8.1 Home life needs to support the social and emotional skills being taught at school

As previously mentioned, both Zenia (CYW) and Stephanie (SERT) have experience working with students who come from different home lives. They both noted that students coming from lower income homes, whose parents may not be as educated, tend to need more support than students who come from higher income, more educated families. Students who see what their life is like at home, and how their parents are, don’t seem to have the same motivation to succeed as others do. Zenia states that:

Well you know some kids know enough, some kids somehow learn to excel beyond what’s going on at home. Its almost like its that self preservation, they kind of know where they have to go in life and that they want to be better, but most of them don’t seem to know that they should want better. They think what they have is ok, even though they might see what others have, and so they don’t kind of push themselves, even though you’re trying to tell them that if you do better at this, then this is going to come too.

Alana also spoke to the fact that students from less stable homes need more support. “I find demographically kids that probably come from more stable homes are able to benefit and able to appreciate it [SEL] more, but its probably the ones that have the less stable homes that need it the most”. The ability to support students’ development
and understanding of social-emotional development is not the only challenge educators face dealing with parents. Many parents are resistant to the fact that their child needs extra support, which as Zenia stated, leads to more problems such as the refusal to seek extra support outside of the school.

4.8.2 Challenges with parents

Participants have found that there are many parents who become defensive when they are told that their child needs extra support. This poses as a problem because it then means students are receiving the support they need, and are therefore “sliding backwards”. Although schools are beginning to implement more programs that foster SEL, the students who require more support than teachers and school supports can give them need to be seeking outside agencies. Parents who are resistant are less likely to seek the outside resources they may need, however this could also be due in part to the fact that they can’t afford it.

4.8.3 Student physical and academic abilities

Another challenge that is closely related to challenges with parents is students’ physical and academic abilities. Zenia, the CYW, works with a particular student whose physical abilities are getting in the way of him succeed and reaching his goals. She said, “I have a student whose mother is making him use a 3 inch binder. This is a student who has low muscle tone, gross motor issues, and fine motor issues, and he is carrying around this 3 inch binder and a laptop”. Unrealistic goals that are being set for students is a similar problem to what Stephanie spoke to when talking about challenges with parents. She talked about her experience with gifted students, and said that because of their higher
academic abilities, they feel so much pressure to succeed that anxiety and depression levels seem to be higher than many of the other students in typically classrooms.

4.8.4 Resistance from/challenges for teachers

The literature says that most of the resistance coming from teachers to implement SEL into their classrooms is because of their lack of knowledge and comfort level with mental health. Teacher education on how to support social-emotional learning is not as developed as it should be. “Teachers could benefit from further training in terms of their ability to identify and act upon children’s mental health problems in a timely manner, thus minimizing the need for future intervention” (Loades & Mastroymannopoulou, 2010, p. 154). As research is still developing on mental health programs, such as SEL programs in schools, teacher education on how to support mental health promotion has not reached its highest potential. One of my participants states “I think teachers are quite hesitant to address that emotional piece in students if that’s not their comfort level”. Stephanie addressed this point in terms of the zones of regulation program, as it has lots of flexibility for teachers to adjust the lessons to fit their comfort level.

Education and comfort level is not the only challenge teachers face when attempting to implement SEL in their schools/classrooms. The lack of support available to teachers, and lack of collaboration from other team members is making implementing consistent programs more difficult. Another challenge teachers face again can be linked back to challenges with parents, as well as challenges at the school board level. Zenia touched upon the fact that educators and other support personnel are so limited in what they can say to parents. She said, “It feels a bit disrespectful of what we do and what we know and our backgrounds as well”. Zenia talked about her frustration when it comes to
communicating with parents and being unable to discuss possible “problems” or challenges students’ may be facing, and the interventions that would likely be beneficial to the child.

4.8.5 Resistance from students

4.8.5.1 Lack of support/intervention at a younger age makes it more difficult to get through to students when they are older

All of the participants I interviewed spoke to the importance of early intervention. Zenia talks about a student who is currently struggling in school due to the lack of early intervention, “The problem is that because unfortunately through his life he hasn’t the counseling that he so badly needed to deal with outside stuff, things with his family, it is like he’s stagnated. He’s not at a point where we feel like we can get him past that.” Once students get stuck in the mindset of how they deal or don’t deal with situations and emotions, it is harder to get them to that point later in life. Stephanie had a similar response when she talked about the challenges of lack of early intervention. She said, “they have 13 years of this is how I’ve reacted whenever ive felt like this. So the older they are definitely the harder it is. And it’s harder to make that connection with them as well”. Students who have struggled in their early years tend to have more baggage once they are in the older grades, making getting through to them more challenging.

4.8.5.2 Students don’t see the point/benefits of SEL

Lack of intervention in the early years is not the only reason educators see resistance from students when trying to implement SEL programs. Two of my participants talked about the challenges of getting students with cognitive barriers and learning disabilities to see the long-term benefits of SEL, or struggle to carry the skills
being taught into other parts of their life. Valerie said that students with cognitive barriers also struggle to understand the benefit of interpersonal relationships, again making it more difficult to get them to transfer those skills into real life situations that happen outside of school.

4.8.6 Challenges at the school board level

Stephanie spoke a lot on the challenges that are presented at the school board level. She begins with again explaining how SEL programming comes from the top down, and when the board does not see it as a priority, administration is resistant to take it on as a whole school initiative. Stephanie then goes on to talk about her belief that the lack of importance put on SEL is due in part to again the lack of knowledge surrounding SEL. She says:

There needs to be research presented to them [the school board] that connects the impact between academic success and SEL, because really at the end of their day, their focus is on academic success. All their percentages are based on academic success, that’s always going be their focus, so I think it need to be more apparent to them how closely these two relate.

The last challenge that was identified at the school board level was the fact that hands are tied when it comes to communication with parents. When educators are limited in what they can say to parents, they may not fully understand what educators are trying to say, therefore they may not be seeking the outside support they may need.

4.8.7 Challenges inside the school
Multiple participants spoke to the challenges of implementing successful SEL programs due to challenges within their school. Stephanie, the SERT that I interviewed identified what she believes it the biggest challenge within the school - lack of communication.

Our program departments who do the more academic based programs, and the special education department function totally separately. And it is to me that lack of understanding of this is one in the same. It really is exactly the same, and until we start approaching it as one in the same, there's always going to be that disconnect for sure because students struggling with behaviour or academics or emotional issues or whatever, it's all just a cycle. It all impacts on another. So I've always been so stumped on why these departments function separately. It seems like they never talk to each other. And I'm sure at some level they do, but it's like ok you have a student that's struggling you … we should be pulling in all the team members. We should be pulling in the literacy coach, we should be pulling in tech trainers, like that sort of collaboration. There's just that disconnect…and it will be interesting to see how it evolves ad if someone finally says you need to look at this.

Valerie spoke to similar challenges where because there is a lack of understanding and awareness, schools are not providing enough manpower and individualized programs that will help support students social-emotional development. Valerie said another challenge that comes from the lack of awareness is the lack of buy in piece for SEL programs as SEL tends to be class by class, and is not being pushed by administration.

4.9 Core priorities of SEL programming that participants identified included knowing your students, collaborating with colleagues, adopting a whole school approach, and implementing programming in a pro-active manner
SEL is a huge responsibility for schools and teachers to take on, but it is our responsibility to make sure we are supporting our students’ needs. Literature states that successful implementation of social-emotional learning programs in schools also requires administrative support, sound scheduling, and continuous instruction (Cohen, 1999; Greenberg et al., 2003).

4.9.1 Schools and teachers must know their students in order to properly meet the needs of their student population

I discussed earlier the importance of individualized lessons and programming. If you look at the literature, you will find that SEL was first introduced by the Fetzer Group in 1994, and was described as a “conceptual framework to address the needs of young people… and the response of schools to those needs” (Elias et al., 1997, as cited in Greenberg, Weissber, O’Brien, Zins, Fredericks, Resnik, Elias, 2003, p. 467). My participants spoke to the importance of knowing your students in order to provide them with the resources and tools that fit their specific needs, be it behaviour, academic, or mental. Zenia, the CYW, noted that it is important to use students OSR’s to get more background information on them, and keep observation notes so you can track their progress, record what works and doesn’t work with that student, and note anything else you feel will help the student succeed.

In terms of school priorities, Stephanie, who has worked at schools with very different demographics, stated that the school priorities need to be much different at a high needs school. I will speak more to my findings of the responsibilities of schools in the next section.
4.9.2 Raising awareness at the school board level

As previously mentioned, schools are beginning to implement more resources and support into schools to help tend to the social-emotional needs of students (Cohen, 1999). Although many schools are making great strides, many of my participants were in agreement that the school board and administration need to take more of an initiative to make SEL a school wide focus. The implementation of such programs comes from the top down, so it is really individuals at the board and administration level who should be advocating for SEL programs in our schools. Similarly, schools must be supporting and encouraging team members from inside and outside the school to work together collaboratively so students get the full support they require, as some students need more than just what the classroom teacher can offer.

4.9.3 Schools are still in a state of transition from focusing on test scores to students’ social-emotional development

The SERT, Stephanie, that I interviewed addressed the fact that although schools are in a state of transition into building that mental health awareness piece and putting supports in place, many programs are still very focused on reactive programs, rather than proactive programs, which is indeed the point of SEL. Similar to what the literature says on the importance of having proactive programs rather than reactive measures and supports in place, Stephanie stated that:

The initiatives are still quite reactive, and I think that they are underestimating how young that begins. There is a big focus on mental health right now, I attended not too long ago the mental health first aid training and things like that, but it’s still all very adolescent focused because that’s when it presents, that’s when it’s a lot more outward, but I think we’re really
underestimating how long that is in the making, and kids don’t have those kinds of resiliency skills that I think we used to have, for whatever reasons, changes in parenting… but I think we would have a lot bigger impact on the mental health piece if we look at this kind of learning in the much younger ages, and I don’t think that kind of thinking has happened at that level yet.

Alana, the junior and intermediate interviewee that I met with touched upon Stephanie’s point on the lack of training and support for students in the younger grades. Many of these students lack the resiliency skills to deal with internal or external issues, and they are failing to receive the proactive support they require so they aren’t suffering from even poorer mental health, or they haven’t fallen so behind by the time they reach the higher grades.

4.10 Conclusion

My findings from all four interviews were very closely related. When talking about how to support social-emotional learning in the school/classroom, the participants were in agreement that early intervention, support for all students, collaboration, and consistency were key in running successful SEL programs. Although many of my participants spoke about different programs, they all talked about the importance of using a multitude of programs and resources based on the students’ individual needs, and the comfort level of the teacher. Participants all seemed to face similar challenges, such as lack of teacher knowledge, resistance from the school board and administration, resistance from parents, and resistance from students. Although there were challenges attached to the implementation of SEL in schools, all participants agreed that the benefit of teaching the “whole” child, and preparing them for the real world was the most important factor to focus on.
While interviewing my participants I was able to draw many connections between the existing literature and the things that my participants spoke to. For example, both the literature and my participants stated the importance of early intervention, and using SEL as a preventative measure in schools (Aviles et al., 2004). Another common theme between the literature and my findings was the importance of integrating SEL across the curriculum, and making it consistent throughout the school from the very beginning (Cohen, 1999; Cohen, 2001; Greenberg et al., 2003; Zins et al., 2004). Another conclusion I can draw from the literature in regards to my findings from my interviews is that social-emotional learning targets teaching the whole’ child, and introducing pro-social behaviours while introducing students to the tools and resources they need to be self-aware and use appropriate problem solving and communication skills to handle all of the different and difficult circumstances students will experience in and outside of the classroom.

Although there were many similarities between the literature and the findings I took from my four interviews, I found my participants were able to add unique contributions in terms of expanding, elaborating, and adding on to several points discussed in the literature. First of all, my participants were able to speak more candidly and directly to the problems and challenges they face when trying to implement SEL into their school or classrooms. For example, although the literature speaks to the fact that there is a lack of knowledge at a higher level about the relation between mental health and academic success (Loades & Mastroyannopoulou, 2010), Alana was able to identify other obstacles between staff and administration that can make implementing SEL a challenge. Alana brought up that when administration and teachers do not have the same
philosophies, that chances of making SEL a school wide initiative are very slim. Not only is it a problem when the administration doesn’t share the same philosophy as teachers, but Alana and Stephanie both touched upon how it is important that in order to lead a successful and consistent SEL program, other teachers need to support these practices as well.

Another unique contribution that my participants were able to add the existing literature is how students respond to SEL. The literature states that SEL is imperative for all students (Aviles et al., 2004; Pasi et al., 2001), but it fails to mention how it affects students coming from different types of homes. As a result from my interviews, I learned that although all students have been reported to respond positively to SEL in the younger years, students who come from lowing income/SES and undereducated households are less likely to be able to transfer pro-social skills to their lives outside of school. This could be due to the lack of understanding or resources provided from parents, or students may believe that they are unable to achieve a better life than what they have had growing up. This is turns reinforcing the notion that although we need to be providing SEL to all students, it is crucial that we know our students backgrounds in order to provide them with the best possible resources to overcome their specific obstacles.

A third point worth mentioning that my participants were able to speak to that the literature did not, was how SEL is important for students who have limited physical abilities. Zenia and Alana who both have experience working with junior and intermediate students stated that a large focus of SEL at that age is setting realistic goals to prepare the students for high school. Zenia emphasized the fact that students with limited physical abilities need to have modified realistic goals so that the individual is
able to meet them and feel successful, in turn making the student more motivated to continue working to set and reach goals that will make him successful in school. This again returns to the idea that teachers must know their students well in order to support them in school.

Next, in chapter 5, I speak to the significance of my findings for me as a beginning teacher, as well as for the educational research community. I also make recommendations based on the data I collected.
CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS

5.0 Introduction

In this chapter I speak to the significance of my findings for me as a beginning teacher, as well as for the educational research community. By connecting my findings from the four semi-structured interviews I conducted with the literature I reviewed in chapter 2, I will create a clearer understanding and connection between what the research says, what practices (or lack of) are being implemented in the Toronto, Durham, and York Region School Boards, what we should be seeing, and how we can create healthier social-emotional development in schools. Finally, along with addressing the broad and narrow implications of my findings, I make recommendations based on the data I collected for future research that will benefit the school board, administration, teachers, and students.

5.1 Overview of key findings and their significance

In this section I will be giving a short summary of the most significant of my findings from chapter 4, while using research from chapter 2 to support and challenge the practices in place to support social-emotional development in schools and classrooms. The findings that will be examined in this section are: those that speak to the skills that are taught/learned through Social-Emotional Learning (SEL); the supports that teachers need to successfully implement SEL Programs; how to ensure successful SEL Programs, and; the challenges that are faced when attempting to implement SEL Programs in the school/classroom.
5.1.1 Social-Emotional Learning Programs teach social, practical, and regulation skills that help students succeed in and outside of the school environment

All four of my participants stated that in their experience, the most valuable skills being taught through Social and Emotional Learning Programs were those that students need in order to be responsible and active citizens in the real world. My participants’ observations reflect a recent study done by The Collaborative for Social Emotional Learning (2015) that identifies the five core competencies of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) programming in schools: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decisions-making (Desai et al., 2014). I found the study between the Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning (Desai et al., 2014) and the findings I collected from my four participants complimented each other, as my participants too had 5 competencies/skills that were consistently brought up when discussing what SEL is and what it teaches, which were: social-skills, self-regulation, self-awareness, interpersonal skills, and thinking/regulation strategies to help us respond to situations in constructive ways. The skills identified by my participants and the literature compliment each other as the majority of skills focus on how to be aware of ourselves, our emotions, and the emotions of others. Another common theme is being able to make responsible decisions in how we respond to certain situations.

Social-emotional learning aims to teach children about awareness and pro-social behaviour, which are skills that help student’s achieve more than just academic success. Social-emotional learning programs are put in place as a preventative measure. Stephanie spoke more in depth about the use of SEL programs as a violence prevention strategy. She believed that any behaviour “problems” stem from a lack of regulation skills, and
believed that enforcing social-emotional regulation skills will reduce behavior problems, in turn allowing the student to focus on academics. Studies done by Birnbaum, Lytle, Hannan, Murray, Perry, & Forester (2003), explain that students who have been exposed to violence often have trouble regulating emotions, managing anger, and may become easily agitated when trying to learn new concepts/skills, leading them to give up. Again, this shows how violence, and exposure to violence, can have a direct affect on academic success.

5.1.2 Programs and resources to support successful implementation of Social-Emotional Learning programs

Although the programs identified by my participants differ from those identified in the literature review, the big ideas behind these programs are congruent. The main concept behind all of the programs that were discussed was teaching children how to react in positive and healthy ways in different scenarios by being able to identify emotions, and then identify the tools and/or strategies that are needed to approach the situation. The point of Social-Emotional Learning is preparing students how to handle and thrive in life outside of the classroom.

Three out of four of my participants identified the Zones of Regulation (ZOR) as a program/support to foster SEL, saying they found this program one of the most useful. ZOR allows teachers to pick and choose what they want to teach, which in turn helps teachers who may be more uncomfortable addressing the mental health piece in the classroom. Participants stated that the lessons are easily adaptable for all students. The ZOR main focus is on the use and power of common language, which is also a focus of the Emotion Locomotion program, and the Second Step Violence Prevention program
If everyone is using the same vocabulary to express themselves and communicate with others, students are more likely to understand their peers, and help them problem solve or regulate. Stephanie mentions that unlike many other programs she has seen that focus either on building self-awareness, or strategies and tools, the ZOR links the emotional identification piece with the strategy piece as well.

Although the ZOR was not identified in the literature, it can easily be compared to the Social Decision Making and Social Problem Solving (SDM/SPS) (Zins et al., 2004) approach to teaching that was first implemented in the New Jersey, United States area. Stephanie stated that the ZOR links the identification piece with the skills/tools piece, whereas most other programs focus on one or the other, and although there are three main domains in the SDM/SPS practice, the two final domains focus on strategies they can use to work through a problem to help them identify how and why they are feeling a certain way, and then teaching application skills, which focuses on providing students with opportunities to focus on specific everyday problems they may face in constructive ways (Zins et al., 2004).

Human resources were identified by all four participants as the most important resource a classroom teacher can have. When looking at the challenges/obstacles that are encountered when trying to implement SEL, two big ones are lack of resources and time. Teachers have a vast amount of curriculum to teach, so by having access to human resources, the student has the opportunity to get the individual attention they need to keep up and succeed in the classroom (Cefai & Cooper, 2009). Zenia and Stephanie spoke to this challenge, saying that this is why human resources are so crucial, as teachers need
support just as much as the students do in order to maintain balanced and successful SEL practices in the classroom.

5.1.3 Ensuring successful social-emotional learning programs through consistency and reinforcement in and outside of the school/classroom

As previously mentioned, to ensure the consistency of integrating SEL in schools/classrooms, all four of my participants state that it should be reinforced through cross-curricular teaching. Stephanie, the SERT, emphasized throughout her interview that SEL should not be an add on in the classroom, it should be present at all times in order for students to get the consistency and reinforcement of the social-emotional skills that we are teaching them to develop. The literature provided multiple examples of how successful SEL programs have been integrated into the curriculum, such as the New Haven Social Development Program, the Child Development Program, and the Social Decision Making/Social Problem Solving practice. All three of these programs either made modifications to, or created an entirely new curriculum to ensure that SEL was being implemented daily and reinforced throughout all subjects (Cohen, 1999; Cohen, 2001; Greenberg et al., 2003; Zins et al., 2004). In order to ensure the successfulness of SEL instruction, educators need to be consistent in integrating it into all areas of the curriculum.

My interviewees spoke to three areas of the curriculum in which they believe can best support SEL: The Arts, Language, and Social Studies. When it comes to the Arts, my participants, especially Alana, stated that a lot could be done through drama. Students can develop empathy for other people by acting out somebody in a bad mood and figuring out how can you support them. Participants were in agreement that by using
role-play to reflect and explore situations that they have experienced or worry about, helps engage students more, and offers more meaningful teachable moments. Zenia, the Child and Youth Worker (CYW) I interviewed, has the student’s role play different situations that make the students feel uncomfortable, or that may trigger certain reactions. She will have the students identify how they feel, and what they can do to make that feeling stop. The idea of not only being able to identify your feelings and what triggered them, but also identify tools to help the students overcome that, reflects the focus of the Zones of Regulation. Stephanie believes the language curriculum has the richest opportunities to explore SEL, as the curriculum calls for students to self-reflect, set goals, and identify their strengths and needs. Having the freedom to write about any topic allows students to reflecting on a certain experiences and/or their emotions and how they handled that experience.

The Child Development Project (1993) has a component called Literature-Based Reading which includes the reading and discussing of books, which helps students not only practice their reading and writing skills, but allows them have a better understanding of human relationships (Cohen, 2001). As previously mentioned, social decision making and social problem solving programs can easily be integrated into the language arts curriculum as well, and literature-based learning provides and excellent opportunity for the integration of SEL.

Three out of my four participants were very passionate about the importance of SEL being reinforced at home. As mentioned earlier when discussing the Zones of Regulation, common and consistent language is beneficial to children as it helps them better understand and be aware of specific emotions and triggers. Communication with
students’ families is also crucial in order to ensure consistency and reinforcement between the school and the home life. Another component of the Child Development Project (1993) is Homeside Activities, which refers to including families in the children’s learning and development. By sending home activities with children that encourage them to develop meaningful conversations with their families or other significant individuals in their lives, their families learn about what they are being taught at school, which in turn may lead to activities that foster social-emotional development at home (Cohen, 2001).

5.1.4 Social-Emotional Learning is imperative for students’ academic success and readiness to succeed in life outside of school

Social-emotional functioning and academic performance are interrelated (Barbarin 2002, as cited in Aviles et al., 2006). Children who do not develop a healthy social-emotional competence are at a greater risk of falling behind in school, and are more likely to show signs of behavioural, emotional, academic, and social developmental problems. A student who is well equipped to recognize and work through his or her emotions is more likely to persevere when they are faced with challenges in (and outside of) the classroom (Barbarin 2002, as cited in Aviles et al., 2006). Several participants spoke to this when discussing the challenges of implementing SEL, as there is resistance from the board due to the lack of knowledge of how SEL impacts students’ ability to be successful in school.

5.1.5 Challenges faced by the school board, parent/child resistance, teacher resistance, and lack of supports/resources

With research on effective mental health promotion programs within schools lacking, teacher education on how to support social-emotional learning is not as
developed as it should be. Loades & Mastroyannopoulo (2010) state teacher education, or lack there of, in turn causes resistance from teachers when it comes to implementing SEL programs, as many feel unprepared for how to teach programs or lessons that are connected to mental health. Zenia and Stephanie also talked about the resistance they see from students. Zenia and Stephanie observed this mostly from older students in the transitional years to middle school or high school. Many students pushed back against SEL programs, as they “didn’t see the point”. It is for this reason exactly why SEL interventions need to be put in place at a young age, and allow for students to see how the skills we are teaching them connect to and are important to our real lives.

Zenia and Stephanie addressed the fact that a big challenge faced when trying to make SEL programs consistent, is the lack of support being given at home. Parents may ignore suggestions that have been given by teachers, CYW’s, SERT’s, and so on, as they deny the fact that their child is struggling. Stephanie and Zenia stated that from their observations, this is more common in lower socio-economic status (SES) communities. Zenia noted that the lack of support outside of the classroom could likely be due in part to families being less educated, and/or not being able to afford additional support, and because of this we should be mindful of the recommendations we are giving to families.

Although my participants addressed many challenges that are faced when trying to implement a successful SEL program at the school or in their classroom, I believe the biggest challenge, that if addressed could bring into line the majority of the other challenges, is the lack of research of SEL and its benefits, and in turn the lack of reinforcement coming from “the top down”.
5.2 Implications

In this section I address the implications that have derived from my research. I begin by discussing the broad implications of my research findings for the education community, and educational stakeholders such as the ministry of education, the faculty of education, school boards, parents, and students. I conclude this section by speaking to the implications of my findings for me as a beginning teacher and researcher.

5.2.1 Broad: Implications for the educational community

The purpose of my research has been to examine how a sample of educators foster social-emotional learning in the school/classroom environment. Although my participants actively implemented teaching strategies and programs that help support students’ social and emotional development, they noted that many schools and educators were still more focused on mathematical and literacy scores than teaching students practical skills. I believe this is due in part to the lack of research, knowledge, and implementation that links academic achievement to the students’ social and emotional development and abilities.

After concluding that the largest issue at hand is that lack of research and knowledge provided to school boards and administration about SEL, a goal is that my research will encourage the educational community to conduct more extensive research on the benefits of SEL, and inspire teachers to foster students’ social and emotional development. In order to this, administrators need to be informed of these implications, and push SEL onto principals to encourage these practices be implemented throughout their schools. Because teachers are seeing resistance, and may be hesitant themselves, principals need to actively be supporting collaboration between staff members, and
encouraging that all staff becomes familiar with SEL practices. A recommendation for how to accomplish this would be to bring in professional development workshops that are mandatory for teachers to attend.

The literature and my participants spoke to the importance of SEL being fostered and reinforced outside of the classroom, specifically at home (Cohen, 2001; Mindess et al., 2008). This means that students’ families also must be knowledgeable on SEL and its benefits. I believe in order to ensure consistency between school and home life is to participate in constant communication with parents. Similar to how principals should be pushing for professional development workshops, I believe teachers should be offering workshops to parents to offer strategies, tools, and suggestions on how to help reinforce social and emotional competency at home.

5.2.2 Narrow: Implications for me as a beginning teacher and researcher

As I continue my path as a beginning teacher, I am positive the research and information I have attained over these past two years will tremendously guide my philosophy of teaching and my teaching practice. Although to me social-emotional learning is essential in student learning and development, it is not as present as I believe it should be in schools/classrooms. This to me tells me that as a beginning teacher, I need to take the responsibility to raise awareness of, and push for SEL programs in the school/classroom. In order to ensure my knowledge is vast and current, I believe that participating in professional development, and seeking outside resources such as community services that focus on social and emotional development will aid in my practice as a beginning teacher.
As I review research, and discuss the benefits of SEL, it seems like it is an easy practice to implement across the school, as like the research and my participants have mentioned, it can easily be fit into the curriculum. However, Valerie, the high school teacher I interviewed who implemented a number of SEL programs into her school, advised me to “take it slow”. As SEL is not yet as recognized and relied on as it should be, programs should start small, as to not make it seem overwhelming for teachers, faculty, and students who are already resistant to such teaching and learning strategies.

The literature provided multiple examples of successful programs such as The Child Development Program, The New Haven Social Development Program, Sociak Decision Making and Social Problem Solving, Second Step: A Violence Prevention Program, and Emotion Locomotion (Cohen, 1999; Cohen 2001; Mindess et al., 2008; Greenberg et al., 2003; Zins et al., 2004; McLachlan et al., 2009). Like all of my participants stated, there are a magnitude of resources available, but teachers need to take the time to explore each practice, and ensure they are choosing the right practices for not only their students, but for themselves as well. I will do this by ensuring I commit to lifelong learning, and am continuously informing myself and other teachers around me about strategies to foster SEL, and the benefits it provides students and the school community.

5.3 Recommendations

In order to ensure successful implementation of social-emotional learning programs in the school/classroom environment, I propose four recommendations based on my literature review, and the findings from my four semi-structured interviews. These recommendations include: more extensive research at a higher level; improved teacher
education; consistency of SEL programs in the schools, and; integration of SEL across the curriculum.

5.3.1 Research at a higher level

- The ministry of education and all school boards should be made aware of the lack of research on social-emotional learning, while being presented with current research that proves the importance and correlation between social and emotional competency and academic achievement. In order to accomplish this, I believe advocates, such as myself and other educators who believe in the benefits of SEL should take time during staff meetings with the principal and/or superintendent to raise the awareness needed.

- Knowledge of the importance of SEL and how it has a direct correlation to students’ academic success should be pushed onto school administrators to make SEL a priority in schools.

5.3.2 Teachers colleges and universities should require more in-depth teacher education on how to support mental health in the classroom

- Teacher education facilities should require teacher candidates to have additional training in mental health and special education so they feel prepared to implement programs and strategies that teach skills that improve students’ mental health development. The curriculum should provide a larger focus on the tools required to handle certain specific challenges, and how to deal with “problem” behaviours, rather than just defining the “problem” behaviours and disabilities teachers will see in their classrooms.
Teacher training and workshops should be made available, if not made mandatory in schools so that all educators are better prepared and comfortable with implementing consistent SEL programs across the school community. Additional training should be provided by multiple sources such as professionals who have experience implementing practices in schools that promote well-being and SEL, similar to professional development workshops where teacher candidates are provided with real life and practical examples of how teachers can promote SEL in classroom and school environments.

5.3.3 Consistency in schools

- It is important for schools that are committed to SEL familiarize themselves with a range of programs and their overlapping emphasis on such practices as adopting a common language, working collaboratively, making cross-curricular connections, and investing in human resources.

- Ensuring the programs are lasting at least a year instead of implementing short term programs will increase the validity of the research on the benefits and outcomes of these SEL programs in the long run.

5.3.4 Integration across the curriculum

- Educators should use a cross-curricular teaching approach to integrate SEL across all subject matters. Language, Social Studies, and Drama have the richest opportunities to incorporate SEL as the curriculum for those subject areas have common focus on communication, understanding others, and problem solving, which are three large components of SEL.
Educators in later years who teach subject focused classes should collaborate with other educators to create strategies and practices to ensure consistency of SEL, whether through the use of common language, and/or individual and classroom discussions about how students are feeling and coping with school.

5.4 Areas for further research

The majority of the participants that participated in my research study voiced strong opinions that there was a lack of research being done and/or presented to those who are higher up in the educational community, such as board and ministry members, on the benefits of SEL and the affects it has on students’ academic achievement. Zenia, Stephanie, and Alana all addressed the fact that there is still pressures coming from the “top down” to focus on high mathematic and literacy achievement scores, and not acknowledging that social-emotional development has a direct affect on academic success (Barbarin, 2002 as cited in Aviles et al., 2006). In order to make social-emotional learning more of a priority in schools, both qualitative and quantitative research on how social and emotional competency can improve students’ motivation and ability to do well in school needs to be presented at the ministry and board levels to increase knowledge of the benefits of Social-Emotional Learning Programs in schools.

It is important that research on SEL turn its attention to how schools and teachers make decisions about which SEL programs to implement in their schools, and learn how schools and teachers monitor whole-school outcomes of SEL. Similarly, research should provide information on how teachers and administration who have opposing philosophies of education can come together to build and environment in which all educators feel safe.
and motivated to integrate SEL practices into their classrooms. Although current research states the importance of SEL being provided for all children, I believe with more research on how individualize SEL for students would increase not only the comfort level that teachers have in implementing such practices, but with a larger focus on how SEL affects students from different backgrounds, SEL could be specified to the student population, increasing its successfulness in schools.

5.5 Concluding comments

The two-year process of my research on social-emotional learning has enhanced the significance of this topic for me, and underscored the need for further research. SEL programs are designed as a preventative measure to decrease the number of students who require additional support in the later years. SEL aims to teach students practical skills that help them regulate and be successful in school and after they graduate. It is important to integrate SEL across the curriculum by emphasizing the importance of communication, group work/collaboration, problem solving, empathy, and the ability to recognize emotions, what triggers those emotions, and the skills/tools needed in order to respond to challenging situations in positive and healthy ways. In order to overcome the challenges that educators face when attempting to implement SEL programs, such as the lack of support, lack of recognition of the correlation between social-emotional competency and academics, lack of integration, and resistance from faculty and/or other teachers, continuous research needs to be in place, and advocates for SEL need to take these findings to individuals at the ministry and board level. If we can teach children how to identify and deal with their emotions, the better prepared they will be to meet the challenges they will face everyday, in, and outside of the classroom/school.
REFERENCES


Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interviews

Date:

Dear _______________________________

My Name is Hannah King and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on Social-Emotional Learning Programs in the primary and junior years. Teachers should have demonstrated commitment and experience with social-emotional learning programs in schools and/or classrooms, and should have at least two years of teaching experience. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one 45-60 minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a research conference or publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will
not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. This data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only people who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor Dr. Angela MacDonald-Vemic. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to participation, and I will share with you a copy of the transcript to ensure accuracy.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,
Hannah King
(647)883-1534
hannah.king@mail.utoronto.ca

Course Instructor’s Name: Dr. Angela MacDonald-Vemic
Contact Info: ________________________________
Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Hannah King and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ______________________________________

Name: (printed) _______________________________________________

Date: _____________________
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Thank you for participating in this research study. The aim of my research is to learn about social-emotional learning programs that are in place in elementary schools, and how they help children thrive academically, and in the real world. The interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes, during which I will ask you a series of questions about your thoughts and experiences with social-emotional programming. I want to remind you that you have the right to refrain from answering any questions I ask. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Initial Questions to Build Rapport

- Can you please describe for me your current position? What grades and subject areas do you teach?
- How long have you been a teacher?
- Can you describe for me the school you currently work in (e.g. size, demographics, program priorities)? How long have you been at this school?
- In addition to being a classroom teacher, do you fulfill any other roles in the school (e.g. coach, counselor, advisor, leader)
- As you know, I am interested in learning how teachers create opportunities to foster social emotional learning for their students. Can you tell me more about what personal, professional, and educational experiences contributed to your interest, commitment, and preparation in this area of work? *listen and probe as
necessary re: own experience of schooling, undergraduate degree, teachable
subjects, professional development etc.)

Teacher Beliefs and Values

1. What does social-emotional learning mean to you? How would you
describe social-emotional learning in your own words?
2. What kinds of social emotional learning programs are you familiar
with? Can you give me some examples of the types of programs that come to you
mind so that I can have a better understanding of how you understand this term?
3. Why do you believe social-emotional learning is important for
children? What do you believe are the benefits for students?
4. What do you believe is the role and responsibilities of schools and
teachers in creating opportunities to develop students SEL and why?
5. Do you believe that schools do a good job of fulfilling this kind of role
and responsibility? Why / why not?
6. In your experience, what do you think are some of the challenges teachers
and schools face when implementing social-emotional learning programs?
7. In your experience, what kinds of supports are helpful and important to
consider when implementing SEL programs in the school/classroom?
Teacher Practices

8. What, if any, social emotional learning programs have you implemented in your classroom and why?
   o Can you please tell me more about these programs involve? What are their learning goals? What are the primary practices / opportunities for learning?
   o How have your students responded to these? What outcomes do you observe from them? Do some students respond better than others? If so, why do you think that it?
   o What kinds of resources enable you to run these programs?

9. Staying at the classroom level, can you tell me where you see opportunities for SEL in the curriculum? Which subject areas do you see aligning with SEL and why? What provincial or board level policy priorities do you see as relevant?

10. Can you give me an example of a lesson that you have taught that integrated opportunities for social emotional learning?
   o What grade and subject area were you teaching?
   o What were your learning goals?
   o What opportunities for learning did you create? What instructional strategies and approaches did you apply?
   o How did you students respond? What outcomes did you observe from them? Do some students respond better than others? If so, why do you think that it?
11. What, if any, SEL programs have you been involved with at the whole school level?
   - What was your role/involvement in these?
   - What are the goals of these programs?
   - Who participates in these programs?

Supports, Challenges, and Next Steps

12. What challenges, if any, have you faced when implementing social-emotional learning programs? How did you respond to these challenges? How might the education system further support you in meeting these challenges?

14. How, if at all, are you utilizing the resources in your community (in, and outside of the school environment) to support social-emotional learning?

15. Are there any specific resources that come to mind that you find particularly useful for SEL program implementation?

16. What advice, if any, do you have for beginning teachers who are interested in implementing SEL programming in their practice

Thank you for your time and participation.