Social Emotional Learning and Students with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: The Benefits and Challenges of Implementation

By

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Abstract

This qualitative research study was conducted in order to address the question: How do teachers implement Social Emotional Learning (SEL) to support students with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in elementary classrooms? Data was collected through the use of semi-structured interviews with two Ontario Certified Teachers working in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Four main themes emerged from the data including: 1) characteristics of students with ADHD, 2) definitions of social emotional learning (SEL), 3) successful strategies for SEL implementation, and 4) challenges of SEL implementation. Both participants emphasized four main components necessary in order to successfully implement SEL. Firstly, the need for professional development and life-long learning is imperative as a way to better one’s own practice, and make their teaching relevant to their students. Secondly, the need for good resources was stressed as a way to feel comfortable and confident in implementation. Thirdly, the need for repetition and the opportunity to practice over time was discussed as a way to ensure that a student with ADHD has more than just one opportunity to solidify their knowledge and practice. Lastly, the need for administrative support in making SEL a priority was recognized as a necessity to effectively implement SEL.

Key Words: attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, ADHD, social emotional learning, SEL, elementary classroom
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Introduction to Research Study

The field of education is constantly changing to meet the needs of students with varying learning abilities. As such, teachers are continuously challenged to find new and unique techniques in order to fully reach all students whose intelligences, abilities, and development are divergent from one another. I believe that the role of the 21st century educator is to provide an environment in which students have all the tools and educational opportunities necessary to succeed. If teachers can provide students with environments that promote and support their differences, this will provide students with the motivation they require to succeed within and beyond academics.

Current literature suggests that Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is one of the most prevalent childhood psychiatric disorders (Rogers & Meek, 2015). In fact, researchers estimate that rates of ADHD amongst school children range from 3% to 9% (Arcia, Frank, Sanchez-LaCay & Fernández, 2000; Carbone, 2001; Fabiano & Pelham, 2003; Ohan, Visser, Strain & Allen, 2011; Wehmeier, Schacht & Barkley, 2010). Students with ADHD are noted to be more disruptive in the classroom as they are more often off track when attempting to tackle a task (Leroux & Perlman, 2000; Whalen & Henken, 1985; Ohan et al., 2011); this can be attributed to being distracted and struggling to filter out ‘irrelevant’ or tempting stimuli (Carbone, 2001; Leroux & Perlman, 2000). Such behaviour may be preventing not only the students themselves from completing work, but their peers as well, leading to increased student frustration (Semrud-Clikeman & Schafer, 2000). These types of disruptions can lead to a negative relationship and social interaction between students with ADHD and their peers (Semrud-Clikeman & Shafer, 2000; Whalen & Henken, 1985). Furthermore, students with the
hyperactive form of ADHD may diminish the perception of themselves to their peers as such interactions may make peers see them as limited in social skills, hostile, aggressive (Leroux & Perlman, 2000; Ohan et al., 2011), bossy, defiant, or intrusive (Wehmeier et al., 2010) and thus, unable to maintain friendships (Carbone, 2001).

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is defined as the process through which children develop and manage sets of cognitive, affective and behavioural skills (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011) as a means to recognize and manage their emotions, be socially conscious and caring for others, have interpersonal positive relationship skills, and appropriate decision making skills using ethics and responsibility (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg & Walberg, 2004). Wehmeier et al. (2010) suggests that more than half of children with ADHD tend to have problems with their peers. Due to the nature of how ADHD manifests itself, these students’ social and emotional skills may be less developed toward helping them overcome such social barriers. As such, I aimed to uncover whether or not SEL can help support students with ADHD through their development of both their academic, as well as their social and emotional competency. The goal of this study was to reveal and explore how teachers’ knowledge and implementation of SEL can better support students with ADHD.

1.1 Research Problem

Various studies have examined topics relating to the present study, including the social and emotional challenges and benefits of having ADHD (Arcia et al., 2000; Guevremont and Dumas, 1994; Wehmeier et al., 2010; Whalen & Henken, 1985), as well as the general importance of SEL for students (Durlak et al., 2011; Pellitteri & Smith, 2007; Zins et al., 2004). However, after reviewing the related literature, I identified a gap in the research regarding the link between
ADHD and SEL, thus providing the rationale for this study. The problem that I addressed is how educators implement SEL to support students with ADHD in elementary classroom settings.

There is a general consensus around the importance of SEL in the literature, even as it relates to academic success (Elias & Arnold, 2006; Greenberg, Weissberg, O’Brien, Zins, Fredericks, Resnik, Elias, 2003; Zins et al., 2004); however, there is a lack of research connecting it to the needs of students with ADHD. Therefore, I questioned how classrooms can satisfy and encompass the term ‘inclusivity’ if they are uninformed and unaware of the effects that children with ADHD might have on the atmosphere and learning environment due to their differed SEL (i.e. abilities). Research suggests that without achieving social emotional competencies, students with ADHD can experience a variety of personal, social, and academic problems, including mental health problems, anti-social and aggressive behavior (Durlak et al., 2011; Guevremont and Dumas, 1994), as well as defiant, disruptive, intrusive and poor peer interactions (Kats-Gold, Besser & Priel, 2007). Furthermore, some research has suggested that active implementation and demonstration of SEL skills may help these students to improve their academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011; Pellitteri & Smith, 2007). As such, uncovering how to best support a student with ADHD through SEL offered the potential for successful inclusion of such students within the classroom.

Although SEL is widely recognized as being beneficial in successful instruction for children, there is little literature that narrows in on how SEL might help support a student with ADHD. These are students that tend to have difficulty with social and emotional competency (Choi & Lee, 2015; Kats-Gold et al., 2007). As such, the understanding of how educators implemented SEL to support students with ADHD within the elementary classroom setting was intended to provide insight into this relationship, in order to ultimately aid in developing future
implementation strategies for students and teachers. SEL may be able to provide students with the tools to be able to work through and confront their feelings, while also developing awareness of their feelings’ impact on their own learning and on the learning of others.

1.2 Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to better understand SEL implementation strategies that teachers use to support students with ADHD in elementary classrooms. I aimed to explore teachers’ beliefs around the benefits of SEL in helping students with ADHD become more socially and emotionally competent.

Previous research has suggested that students with disruptive disorders, such as ADHD, tend to have more difficulty cooperating with other children (Guevremont & Dumas, 1994), and can be more disruptive in the classroom, as they may often be off track when tackling different assignments (Leroux & Perlman, 2000; Ohan et al., 2011; Whalen & Henken, 1985). It is clear that this disruptive behaviour may ultimately prevent students with ADHD and their colleagues from reaching their full learning potential, while also diminishing the positive relationships between these students and their peers.

Understanding and addressing the shortcomings and challenges of students with ADHD in relation to their social and emotional competencies, as well as appreciating and accepting the benefits, may be necessary for proper implementation of SEL. I propose that if we, as educators, give students the right skillset to cope with social and emotional stressors, disruptions in the classrooms may decrease and social relationships between peers may become more positive. As both a student and a future educator, I plan to use the results of this study to guide my future practice in education. In order to successfully create a supportive learning environment, I will
need to acknowledge differences and promote inclusion between the differing learning styles, abilities, and development of all my future students.

1.3 Research Questions

This study employed techniques of qualitative research in order to uncover how teachers implement SEL to support students with ADHD in the elementary setting. The main research question that guided this study was: How do teachers implement SEL to support students with ADHD in elementary classrooms? Creating sub-questions helped to narrow in and guide me toward answering the primary question. These sub-questions included: what are elementary teachers’ experiences working with students who have ADHD?; what are teacher’s experiences with and/or knowledge of SEL?; and what methods, tools, or supports do elementary teachers use to introduce students with ADHD to SEL?

I gathered data for this study via a thorough analysis of current literature around the topic. In addition, I conducted two semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with elementary teachers (both current and formerly in the field), in order to better understand the techniques teachers use to implement SEL to support students with ADHD in the elementary setting. Insights brought forth from this study are shared here in order to create a community of awareness and collaboration within the field of ADHD. I conducted research holistically with my participants, rather than “on” them, as I believe that collaboration is the key to success. Data from the interviews was analyzed and coded by reviewing key emerging themes from the topics discussed, and combining them to arrive at new insights. All of the themes that emerged from these interviews were reviewed in relation to the previous literature available on this topic, including any implications that may have previously been found in the field.
1.4 Background of the Researcher/Positionality

ADHD is becoming increasingly common amongst children. Disruptive behaviour does not only harm the learning environment of students with ADHD, but can also interfere with their peers’ learning. Having had experience working with students with ADHD in a multitude of settings, I was interested in exploring how educators teach lessons to students with diverse learning styles, abilities and exceptionalities. I was confident there were teaching strategies which could help students to become more cognizant of their effect on their learning environment. As students with ADHD do not solely affect themselves, but typically others around them, it was important to understand the difficulties a student with ADHD may have with social and emotional skills. My intent was to understand these relationships and ultimately help bridge this gap, in order to better understand how to implement and share strategies with and amongst teachers, to better their teaching practices.

I felt a sense of privilege throughout my childhood, as I was less aware of the inequalities present in our education system. Although I did not realize it at the time, I was extremely fortunate to grow up in the environment I did, which cannot be said for many students. Throughout my educational career, I have had both parents wholeheartedly support me and all of my educational endeavors, both emotionally and financially. My parents provided me with the tools and support to be successful in school, which included extra help at home, tutors, and even private school courses with smaller classrooms. At one point in time, a special education teacher approached me as they thought I might have a learning disability. Through my parents’ (and my extended families’) advocacy for me, we later determined that that was not quite the case. We discovered that I had been having problems hearing, and ultimately reading, due to an obstruction in my ear canals. As well, I needed corrective lenses. With the support of my family,
I was able to figure out why I was not excelling in school at the time. Looking back, I am extremely thankful that I had a supportive community with a strong interest in my success.

Using the term “equity” in the classroom means to look at what a person needs in order to be successful. “Equality,” in comparison, aims to provide fairness and justice for all. The difference between the two definitions is that equality assumes that everyone starts from the same place and thus, needs the same things. Given my own difficult educational experiences, I am more aware of the importance of having had a school that strived to provide me with the help they believed I needed. I was also extremely lucky to have my parents as supporters and advocates, both emotionally and economically. I am now able to really appreciate how rare it is to have this type of support, and that there are many other students in the educational system who were not as lucky. As I am a firm believer in equity, and having had the experiences and background that I do, I see the importance in advocating for students and truly trying to figure out the best way to help them be successful in the classroom environment.

1.5 Overview of the Study

Chapter 1 of this research study includes an introduction, a look at the research problem, the purpose of the study, the research questions, my background and positionality as a researcher looking at students with ADHD, and how I became interested in this topic, as well as an introduction to the methods I employed in order to evaluate this topic. Chapter 2 reviews the literature I researched regarding students with ADHD—their effects on their learning environments, their teachers, and other students in the classroom, and the relationship between students with ADHD and SEL. Chapter 3 provides insight into the methodology and procedures that were used in the study to develop a framework of understanding students with ADHD and their relationship to SEL, as well as educators’ strategies in implementing SEL. Chapter 3 also
includes information about my sample participants, and the process of data collection and analysis. Chapter 4 examines the research findings, which are organized into four main themes and eight sub-themes. Chapter 5 discusses the broad and narrow implications of my research, and my recommendations for future research and study. References and a list of appendices follow at the end of this research study.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction to the Chapter

The field of education is constantly evolving, and teachers are continually being exposed to new and unique students whose intelligences, abilities and development are divergent from one another. As such, the role of the 21st century educator is to provide an environment that gives all students the tools and educational opportunities needed to succeed. This includes students that may otherwise be at risk of academic and/or social exclusion. The Education Act: Ontario Regulation 132/12 says that, “A class to which this section applies shall have 23 or fewer pupils” (Government of Ontario, 2014, p. 2). As such, if a classroom contains 20 children, it is likely that 1 or 2 will have ADHD (Ohan et al., 2011). One or two students can constitute a large proportion of a class, thus providing a rationale for why teachers should use a differentiated approach to help all students achieve success.

The following literature review aims to provide a framework of understanding students with ADHD and their relationship to SEL. Understanding and addressing the shortcomings and challenges of students with ADHD in relation to their social and emotional competencies, as well as appreciating and accepting their benefits, may be necessary for proper implementation of SEL. The intention is to: provide definitions of ADHD and SEL; provide a brief description of some challenges that teachers and peers may experience when interacting with students with ADHD; uncover and question the interaction between students with ADHD and SEL; identify why SEL may be the next step in successfully integrating students with ADHD in the classroom; and detail the possible challenges of implementing SEL within this student population. This literature review provides readers with the opportunity to examine the relationship between students with ADHD and SEL. As such, it also serves to solidify the importance of
understanding how teachers implement SEL to support students with ADHD in the elementary setting. I believe that if we, as educators, can give students the right skillset to cope with social and emotional stressors, then disruptions in the classrooms may decrease and social relationships between peers may become more positive.

2.1 Definitions

This section provides the definitions for the terms I am using in this study, as suggested by research.

2.1.1 Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Current literature suggests that ADHD is the most prevalent childhood psychiatric disorder (Rogers & Meek, 2015). It is characterized by persistent and varying levels of inattention, impulsivity and hyperactivity (Carbone, 2001; Leroux & Perlman, 2000; Ohan et al., 2011; Rogers & Meek, 2015; Wehmeier et al., 2010). In order to be diagnosed with ADHD, a child must show 6 out of 9 symptoms of inattention (e.g., has trouble maintaining attention on tasks and easily distracted), 6 out of 9 symptoms of hyperactivity and impulsivity (e.g., fidgets frequently, unable to wait their turn, and often interrupts others) or a combination of both symptoms (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016; Ohan et al., 2011). Although the exact prevalence is unknown, it is estimated that rates of ADHD amongst school children range from 3% to 9% (Arcia et al., 2000; Carbone, 2001; Fabiano & Pelham, 2003; Ohan et al., 2011; Wehmeier et al., 2010).

2.1.2 Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is defined as the process through which children develop and manage sets of cognitive, affective and behavioural skills (Durlak et al., 2011) as a means to recognize and manage their emotions, be socially conscious and caring for others, have
interpersonal positive relationship skills, and appropriate decision making skills using ethics and responsibility (Zins et al., 2004). SEL firmly appreciates that schools are social places and that learning is in fact a social process (Denham & Brown, 2010; Zins et al., 2004). As such, learning emerges from the collaboration between students and their teachers, peers, and family support systems (Denham & Brown, 2010; Zins et al., 2004). The ultimate goal of SEL is to teach children to be self-aware, regulating and socially cognizant individuals.

2.2 Challenges of Students with ADHD in Schools

What succeeds this section is some of the challenges of students with ADHD in schools, as dictated by research. I touch on the possible effects a student with ADHD may have on their own learning environment, as well as their teachers and peers. Following this, I include research that centers around students with ADHD and the possible benefits of SEL for them.

2.2.1 Students with ADHD — possible effects on teachers & peers

As classrooms keep striving towards encompassing the term ‘inclusivity’, it is important to look at the effects children with ADHD may have on the atmosphere and learning environment of their peers and teachers. Guevremont and Dumas (1994) suggest that children with disruptive behaviour disorders, such as ADHD, tend to have more difficulty cooperating with other children. In fact, it is estimated that upwards of 50% of children with ADHD have problems with their peers, including elevated levels of peer rejection (Guevremont & Dumas, 1994).

Children with ADHD are said to be disruptive in the classroom as they are more often off track when attempting to tackle a task (Leroux & Perlman, 2000; Whalen & Henken, 1985; Ohan et al., 2011); likely because they are distracted and struggle to filter out ‘irrelevant’ and tempting stimuli or simply their own thoughts (Carbone, 2011; Leroux & Perlman, 2000). This type of behaviour not only prevents the students themselves from accomplishing their work, but it also
STUDENTS WITH ATTENTION-DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER

disrupts their peers during their learning (Carbone, 2001; Ohan et al., 2011). In future research, it would be interesting to examine the effect students with ADHD have on their teachers, in addition to their peers.

Furthermore, children with ADHD, many of whom are extremely active, will sometimes take part in behaviours that are disruptive and frustrating to other students (Semrud-Clikeman & Schafer, 2000). Such examples may include fidgeting or out of seat behaviour (Carbone, 2001). As some students with ADHD need immediate gratification, outsiders tend to think that they are simply acting before they think (Carbone, 2001). Instead, their search for immediate gratification often leads to breaking classroom rules and social norms, even when they have no intention of being problematic in the class (Carbone, 2001; Whalen & Henken, 1985). These types of disruptions can lead to negative social interactions and relationships between students with ADHD and their peers (Semrud-Clikeman & Shafer, 2000; Whalen & Henken, 1985). It appears that students cannot help their behaviour, nor put a stop to it. Thus, when exhibiting extreme amounts of hyperactivity, this type of interaction may make their peers see them as limited in social skills, hostile, aggressive (Leroux & Perlman, 2000; Ohan et al., 2011), bossy, defiant, or intrusive and thus, unable to maintain friendships (Carbone, 2001).

Guevremont and Dumas (1994) state that students with ADHD have been found to negatively criticize their peers, and be argumentative and more noncompliant than students without ADHD. Participating in argumentative and noncompliant conversations, as well as criticizing peers is linked to social rejection (Guevremont & Dumas, 1994). Semrud-Clikeman and Schafer (2000) argue that children with ADHD typically do not intend to annoy or bother their peers, so much so that they do not understand their peers’ reactions. Whalen and Henken (1985) go as far to say that it may even be the high social activity levels exhibited by students
with ADHD that result in negative relationships with their peers. Thus, it is not that students with ADHD are not social, but actually the opposite. In comparison to students without ADHD, those with the disorder tend to talk more frequently (Guevremont & Dumas, 1994). Thus, Whalen and Henken (1985) suggest that perhaps children’s’ higher rates of social interaction, which subsequently affects their overall tendency to be talkative, may actually be seen as undesirable by their peers.

One of the challenges that a student with ADHD faces, arguably in the absence of SEL, is peer rejection and active involvement within the bullying dynamic. Baumeister, Storch and Geffken (as cited in Espelage, Rose & Polanin, 2015) stated that:

…8 out of 10 children with a LD [learning disability] were peer-rated as rejected, that 8 of 10 were rated as deficient in social competence and social problem solving, and that students with LD were less often selected as friends by their peers (p. 301).

The hope of implementing SEL programs is to help students learn how to manage their emotions through the use of problem-solving, collaboration and positive communication with peers. Based off this research, Espelage et al. (2015) suggest that perhaps the implementation of SEL may increase social competence, and actually decrease involvement in the bullying dynamic for students with disabilities.

2.2.2 Students with ADHD and their SEL

While it is clear that SEL is widely recognized as being beneficial in successful instruction for children, there is little academic literature discussing how SEL might help support students with ADHD, who tend to have difficulty with such learning. Some research has suggested that children with ADHD tend to have difficulty when it comes to social and emotional competence (Choi & Lee, 2015; Kats-Gold et al., 2007; Leroux & Perlman, 2000; Semrud-Clikeman &
Schafer, 2000). A student with ADHD may have difficulty picking up social cues (Guevremont & Dumas, 1994), as they tend to frequently search their environment, only picking up on certain, more obvious details, while ignoring or missing others, giving them an incomplete understanding of what is going on around them (Leroux & Perlman, 2000; Semrud-Clikeman & Schafer, 2000). Parker and Asher (1987), as cited in Semrud-Clikeman and Schafer (2000) suggest that children with ADHD:

- Often misinterpret the situation and react in an unexpected manner as well as appearing to be capricious in their responses. Thus, children with ADHD may well experience problems in fully processing social-emotional information. Repeatedly I have found that they will not be able to change their behaviours because they first of all do not interpret the situation fully, secondly they don’t modulate their behaviours well, and finally they react impulsively (p. 12).

Guevremont and Dumas (1994) suggest that children with ADHD often show signs of elevated emotionality. A child may show more emotion than expected when dealing with instances of minor inconveniences or overreacting to stimuli presented in the environment (Guevremont & Dumas, 1994). Aggression may be a result of these emotions as children have difficulty adjusting their emotions accordingly to the situation (Guevremont & Dumas, 1994). Much of the related academic research suggests that aggressive behaviours tend to coincide with high peer rejection between a student with ADHD and a student without ADHD (Guevremont & Dumas, 1994; Leroux & Perlman, 2000; Semrud-Clikeman & Schafer, 2000).

One particular study discusses the combined social and emotional factors of a student with both ADHD and giftedness. Mendaglio (as cited in Leroux & Perlman, 2000), suggests that having both ADHD and giftedness creates an increased sense of alienation, sensitivity and
overreaction in a student. The feeling of peer rejection one may experience from having ADHD can cause them to feel alienated, ultimately affecting their attitudes, achievement and self-worth (Leroux & Perlman, 2000). As well, the emotional overreaction, disturbance and irritable moods associated with ADHD can cause manipulative and egocentric reactions (Leroux & Perlman, 2000). Thus, without successfully implementing emotional and social learning strategies, these difficulties can potentially become exaggerated lifelong problems (Leroux & Perlman, 2000).

Although this specific research initiative did not look at gifted students, Leurox and Perlman’s (2000) work provides weight for the connection between SEL and students with ADHD. Connecting these two fields can potentially provide great advantages to children and students if implementation is regularly conducted in classrooms and schools. Therefore, SEL could be the key to helping students with ADHD become more socially aware as to how they impact their own learning, and that of their peers. More information needs to be looked at in terms of finding out how teachers implement SEL to support students with ADHD in the elementary classroom setting. As such, my targeted research aims to shed light on this subject, and by doing so, tries to fill this gap in the literature.

2.3 Possible Solutions: SEL

SEL is not a new concept. In fact, many schools have already acknowledged that as educators, we will be most successful when we can integrate efforts to achieve academic success, along with social and emotional competence (Greenberg et al., 2003; Zins et al., 2004). If schools only focus on academic success, then students may fall short of their goals (Zins et al., 2004), and they may become less connected to their schools as they age and transition from elementary to high school (Durlak et al., 2011). In turn, this may affect their behavior and academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011). Greenberg et al. (2003) encompasses the importance
of SEL by stating that:

[...] high-quality education should teach young people to interact in socially skilled and respectful ways; to practice positive, safe, and healthy behaviours; to contribute ethically and responsibly to their peer group, family, school, and community; and to possess basic competencies, work habits, and values as a foundation for meaningful employment and engaged citizenship (p. 466).

SEL strives to help students develop and manage their emotions, while being socially conscious and caring for others, having interpersonal positive relationship skills, and appropriate decision making skills using ethics and responsibility (Zins et al., 2004). If educators can help students develop emotional skills, they may provide students with the tools to be able to work through and confront all of their feelings—whether they encompass sadness, anxiety, stress, or anger; while also being cognizant of their impact on others. SEL strives to maximize student’s success by integrating both academic and social-emotional learning, as it is clear that academic achievement is not the only component necessary for success in school.

The combination of a child focusing on understanding themselves and their emotions, while being mindful of their attention, behaviours, ethics, and the overall impact that they have on their peers, can be extremely powerful. Extensive research has looked at the implementation of SEL and its effects on varying outcomes. For example, students who actively implement and demonstrate SEL skills may show improved academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011; Pellitteri & Smith, 2007). CASEL (as cited in Zins et al., 2004) states that:

…[In a review of the 80 nationally available programs,] 34% included methods to promote the integration of SEL with academic curricula and teaching practices...; 83% of such programs produced academic gains. In addition, 12% of the programs that did not
specifically target academic performance documented an impact on academic achievement (p. 14).

Failure to achieve social emotional competencies can lead to a variety of personal, social, and academic problems, including, but not limited to; mental health problems, and anti-social and aggressive behaviour (Durlak et al., 2011; Guevremont & Dumas, 1994). Thus, such information has provided rationale as to why SEL can tremendously affect a student with ADHD (and even a student without ADHD) for the better.

2.4 Challenges: Why is SEL not Integrated?

Academic literature, as seen from the above, suggests that SEL is imperative to the holistic learning of students. However, a limited number of sources have suggested that SEL implementation is problematic. One academic source suggested that educators, although mostly ‘on board’ with social and emotional development, are apprehensive to implementing SEL programs as they cannot noticeably see nor predict its benefit on students’ academic progression through means of their test scores (Zins et al., 2004). Zins et al. (2004) explains that in today’s schools, academic accountability tends to be the main focus, saying that:

[...] In this era of academic accountability, receptivity for SEL programming will be even greater if a strong empirical case is made connecting the enhancement of social and emotional influences to improved school behavior and academic performance (p. 5).

It is clear that some educational systems still prioritize grades and academic achievement above SEL, which may pose as a barrier to its implementation. Although SEL initiatives have been introduced in schools in the past, they were fragmented (Greenberg et al., 2003; Zins et al., 2004). Fragmentation ultimately does SEL a disservice, as it would be best implemented cohesively, rather than in isolation (Zins et al., 2004). Students could get the most out of these
programs if they were linked to the central mission of the school and were mandatory for teachers to implement (Greenberg et al., 2003). As well, in order for such programs to be successful, there cannot be a lack of leadership or development amongst educators (Greenberg et al., 2003). Support, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and dedication are some of the characteristics needed in order to sustain such programs in order to see desired results within the students (Greenberg et al., 2003).

2.5 Conclusion

Published prevalence rates of ADHD imply a high likelihood that an educator will have at least one student in their class per year that has ADHD. As such, educators should be experienced in fostering these students’ unique learning needs; moving beyond a focus only on academic achievement. This literature review has provided an introduction to the connection between ADHD and SEL. SEL can potentially be the connection between helping students (with or without ADHD) foster their social and emotional competencies. By doing so, we will create an environment in which every student is successful, both interpersonally and academically. My research aimed to identify the strategies taken by educators to implement SEL to support students with ADHD in the elementary setting. As such, the next step was to determine how to cohesively and effectively fit SEL into the curriculum.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction to the Chapter

In order to better understand the implementation strategies that teachers use to support students with ADHD in elementary classrooms, I aimed to explore teachers’ beliefs around the benefits of SEL in helping students with ADHD to become more socially and emotionally competent. The main research question that drove this study was: How do teachers implement SEL to support students with ADHD in elementary settings?

This chapter describes the research methodology used to conduct this study. I review the general approach, procedures, and data collection instruments; before elaborating on participant sampling and recruitment. I thoroughly explain the data analysis procedures, as well as review the ethical considerations pertinent to my study. I speak to some of the methodological limitations this study had, while additionally accrediting its successes. This chapter concludes with a brief summary of the key methodological decisions and my rationale for these decisions given the research purpose and questions.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

This research study was conducted using a qualitative research approach in order to better understand how (i.e. strategies) teachers implement SEL to support students with ADHD in the elementary setting. I compiled data through use of: a) a literature review on the topics of ADHD, SEL, and the connection and relationship between the two; and b) semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with two elementary teachers currently and formerly in the field. After I completed both interviews, I analyzed the interview data and coded themes that emerged from the topics discussed, in relation to the literature previously researched on this topic, including any
implications that may have been found previously in the field. Additionally, the data was coded for null data.

A researcher may employ qualitative techniques when they are seeking to find a deeper truth (Abawi, 2008), or when there is emphasis on capturing a detail in depth within the social realm (Johnson & Waterfield, 2004). The intended goal of qualitative research is to understand a social or human problem through the eyes and perspectives of varying people (Abawi, 2008). Historically, qualitative research has had a negative bias towards the approach as a whole (Carr, 1994). Carr (1994) suggested that this type of discrimination has been based off of the fact that quantitative approaches produced legitimate and scientific results that are classified as ‘hard’ data, whereas qualitative approaches produced ‘soft’ data that lacks answers and notions of change. As such, discrimination occurs because generalizability is strong in ‘hard’ data or quantitative research, and is believed to lack in ‘soft’ data, as opposed to transferability, in qualitative research (Carr, 1994). I would even argue that the use of ‘hard’ versus ‘soft’ implies that one approach is stronger than the other, something that Carr (1994) has also agreed with.

The value of qualitative research is that it allows a participant the freedom to express their opinions and views in their own words, while providing their interviewer with a much richer and in depth understanding of the social topic in question (Abawi, 2008).

Quantitative research tends to depend upon numerical data in order to quantify or measure a phenomenon, generate findings, and ultimately confirm or deny a cause and effect relationship between two (or more) subjects (Carr, 1994). As aforementioned, qualitative research tends to try and understand a social or human problem through the eyes of varying perspectives (Abawi, 2008), and it does so by collecting and recording “…human beings’ richly textured experiences and reflections about those [their] experiences” (Jackson II, Drummond & Camara, 2007, p. 22).
Therefore, given the context of my research purpose and sequential questions, a qualitative research study was an appropriate approach for me for a variety of reasons. In using qualitative research, I was able to uncover and understand the unique perspectives and strategies of educators who have experience working with students with ADHD and know their social and emotional skills and competencies. Abawi (2008) and Marshall (1996) have agreed that qualitative research is most interested in uncovering answers to large questions that tend to ask ‘why’, ‘how’, or ‘in what way’. As such, my research topic satisfied the benefits of qualitative research—which is to better understand the humanistic approach of how and why.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

Due to the nature and parameters of this Masters of Teaching Research Paper (MTRP), my main instrument of data collection was through semi-structured, face-to-face interview protocol to gain insight into my research topic. This method of data collection is one of the main ways that qualitative researchers collect data; however, this is not to denote that all qualitative studies use this exact format. Other researchers may include focus groups and observations in conjunction with interviews, as a means of data study (Jackson II et al, 2007).

Participants were involved in semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. A semi-structured interview is best described as, “a qualitative method of inquiry that combines a pre-determined set of open questions (questions that prompt discussion) with the opportunity for the interviewer to explore particular themes or responses further” (Evaluation Toolbox, 2010, p. 1). Such interviews do not limit participants to a set of pre-determined answers, like for example a questionnaire or survey (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Instead, semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility and responsiveness to emerging themes between the interviewer and their participant (Jackson II et al, 2007). The characteristics of semi-structured interviews include the
interviewer and participants engaging in a formal interview, where the interviewer develops a guide—similar to a list of questions or topics that they want to discuss further during conversation, usually in a structured order (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). During the course of this study, my recruited interviewees and I met individually, and per above, I asked them a variety of open-ended questions in order to gain insight into the research topic.

Semi-structured interviews are best used when an interviewer only has one opportunity to talk to their participants (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). In accordance with this research model, each interview that I conducted only occurred once. Semi-structured interviews are beneficial to researchers as questions can be prepared ahead of time, thus allowing the interviewer to be prepared and confident during the interview (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). As well, because there are no predefined answers, a participant has the ability to express their views and opinions in their own words and on their own terms (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

Using semi-structured interviews was an extremely helpful technique when completing my research, because this technique allowed for my participants to openly discuss their opinions in their own words. My topic was largely based off experience with students with ADHD, and experience using and teaching SEL. As such, it was important that my participants felt open and comfortable enough to be able to speak to their experiences in their own words. As well, because my questions were open-ended, my participants had the ability to freely explain themselves in as many words as needed. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews encourage two-way communication, and as such, when a participant said something particularly interesting and relevant to my topic, I was able to further question and ask them to expand on it. This, in and of itself, is a benefit of semi-structured interviews, the ability to redefine my questions and the direction I wanted to head in, while leaving room for participants to elaborate on areas that I had
previously not anticipated. Moreover, allowing the conversation to loosely sway from intended direction may have helped produce more meaningful data, as it could potentially coincide with my participants’ experience, interests and stance points (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

3.3 Participants

The following section addresses all the methodological decision-making that took place in order to choose my research participants; the sampling criteria that I established for participant recruitment. As well, this section encompasses the multitude of ways in which I connected with possible teacher recruitments. This section also includes two participant profiles, in which I introduce both of my participants.

3.3.1 Sampling criteria

I established a number of criteria for a candidate to be considered as an appropriate participant to partake in my study. I looked to interview teachers who had past experience working with students with ADHD and who understood what SEL was (as well as its implementation techniques). Also, I was looking to understand their strategies and methods for SEL implementation. I required participants to have demonstrated experience in the field of disruptive disorders or special needs. This type of demonstration would ideally have been seen and been held in the form of additional qualifications (AQ’s) and/or a passion and interest in the subject, and/or by having had experience in teaching special education classrooms. This aspect of my criteria was extremely important as I wanted my participants to be able to speak about how students with ADHD operate socially and emotionally in the classroom, and to be able to speak to their disruptive (or lack thereof) behaviours. The candidates needed to be able to comment on patterns they may or may not have noticed when implementing SEL techniques with students with ADHD in particular. Lastly, I looked to work with participants, of varying
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ages, in different school boards, in order to increase the richness in experience and data
collection through my semi-structured, small sample. Due to time and reachability, my focus was
on teachers who were employed in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA).

3.3.2 Sampling procedures

Sampling procedures in both qualitative and quantitative research are often described as
complex (Carr, 1994). Quantitative research requires participants to be randomly selected for the
sample from the study population, ultimately being randomly assigned to varying groups within
the study (Carr, 1994). Due to the nature of qualitative research to be extremely in depth, usually
a small sample is needed and used for such studies (Carr, 1994). This aspect of qualitative data is
yet another reason why some believe qualitative research to be weaker – specifically because the
researcher can potentially be biased or have influenced perspective by way of predisposition,
possibly affecting the generalizability of small scale studies (Carr, 1994). The opposing
argument is that there is usefulness (Marshall, 1996) and strength in this approach as results can
be well generalized to a larger population, if the sample is well defined and representative (Carr,
1994).

Marshall (1996) commented that there are three broad approaches to recruiting participants
as part of a sample for a qualitative study. My sampling procedure fell under the category,
described by Marshall as *convenience sampling* as well as *purposeful sampling*. He stated that
convenience sampling is the least rigorous technique of the three, as it involved selecting
participants by way of convenience in terms of accessibility. Judgment or purposeful sampling is
the most common technique and it involved actively choosing participants that are more likely to
be able to express their insight and understanding to an interviewer (Marshall, 1996). Due to the
parameters set out by the university, I employed a combination of both convenience and
purposeful sampling for my research study. Although the parameters limited my decision making in this aspect, this type of sampling is beneficial as it was the most cost and time-effective to me as a student and researcher.

Having volunteered in the education field as well as completed four practicums in the GTA, I employed the convenience sampling technique by recruiting existing connections. There was an attempt to use the snowball sampling method to find a participant, but this did not follow through. Snowball sampling is a method in which researchers find participants by being referred to by other participants (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). I provided my information to potential participants, as well as obtaining theirs. I made sure to reinforce that there was no obligation to participate if they changed their mind.

### 3.3.3 Participant biographies

Both participants in the present study are professionals in the field of education, in the GTA, Canada. Both teachers have been employed by the public system of Ontario schools. One participant was teaching in a post-secondary institution at the time of the study. The participants have remained anonymous through the use of pseudonyms.

**Felicia**

At the time of the interview, Felicia was teaching grades 1 and 2, in a split class, in a school district in the GTA. Prior to her current position, Felicia was a special education resource teacher for primary, junior and intermediate divisions, as well as a reading recovery teacher, a literacy teacher, and an English Language Learner (ELL) teacher, all within the 15 years prior to this study. Felicia had a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed), and specialist qualifications in Special Education (commonly referred to as Spec Ed), and reading. Felicia also had her Principals’ qualifications, parts one and two, and she was working towards completing her Masters in
Felicia was reading recovery trained, and she also had her Tribes Training. Furthermore, she had her CPI training (Non-Violent Crisis Intervention Training). After completing her undergraduate degree at a large research university in Ontario, Felicia went to the Ontario Teacher Education College (OTEC) for her teaching degree. She has taken her specialist additional qualifications (AQs) through multiple universities. Felicia’s Principals’ courses were taken through the Ontario Principal Counsel (OPC), and her Tribes Training and reading recovery training were done through her GTA School’s board.

**Samantha**

At the time of the interview, Samantha was teaching in the field of teacher education at a higher education institution. Primarily, she worked with Primary/Junior teacher candidates. Prior to that, she was a primary/junior teacher and she taught from kindergarten to grade 6. Samantha had her Bachelor of Education (B.Ed), as well as a Masters in Language and Literacy. Samantha had a reading specialist credential, as well as a doctorate degree in Curriculum Teaching and Learning in the area of Literacy and ADHD. Aside from her extensive education and schooling, Samantha continued to train on both SEL and ADHD through workshops and attending conferences. In fact, Samantha had been invited to speak about mindfulness at a conference outside Canada in the year following the study.

Both participants had a deep understanding of ADHD, as displayed by their education and experience with students with ADHD. That said, the two participants’ education and life experiences differed from one another. Samantha had a deep understanding of ADHD, as she completed her PhD in Curriculum Teaching and Learning in the area of Literacy and ADHD, and attended conferences and workshops during that time. As well, Samantha had the opportunity to do hands-on research by traveling to different school districts in order to understand how
educators were supporting their students with ADHD. Felicia gained her knowledge of ADHD by completing her Special Education course (additional qualifications). Furthermore, she was a Special Education Resource Teacher (SERT).

3.4 Data Analysis

Creswell (2012) described the process of data analysis as a series of tasks including preparing and organizing data (containing all transcripts, images and other miscellaneous items) for analysis, then proceeding to clump the data into themes through the process of coding, and then finally presenting the data in a discussion (or figures and tables) form. The process of data collection and analysis is in no way linear. Instead, researchers tend to employ a data analysis spiral when collecting work, as they are trying to contextualize their findings within the larger world of literature (Creswell, 2012). The literature review in Chapter 2 employed the concept of data analysis spiral. When researching past literature on my topic, I had to systematically organize and colour-code the information to fit into key themes. This method was used to organize and keep track of the information I collected, in order to see what I had and what I was still missing, thus helping me identify the gaps in the literature that I wished to fulfill.

I started by transcribing each interview obtained from my two participants, and then developed coding for my research questions as an interpretive tool. I analyzed and coded the transcripts, and continued by identifying and defining categories within the data. Using this method of categorization, I was able to identify the ‘bigger picture’ and prevalent themes. I then synthesized themes where appropriate in order to identify null data within my data collection.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

Ethical procedures are put into place for the protection and safety of participants and their opinions. DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) articulated the importance of four main ethical
issues in relationship to the interview process. Firstly, the importance of reducing any and all risk of unanticipated harm. Secondly, protecting the participants’ information. Thirdly, enclosing and informing participants about the nature of the study, and lastly, reducing the participants’ risk of exploitation.

Having followed DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree’s (2006) model, I was cognizant of these ethical issues. As such, in order to reduce the risk of any unanticipated consequences, I provided the participants with my questions ahead of time. This way, if they were uncomfortable with a question, they were prepared for it and had the opportunity to discuss this discomfort with me. In protecting my participants’ information, all participants within my study were given a pseudonym and were notified of their right to withdraw from my study at any point during or after the interview. Furthermore, any information pertaining to the individual participants, including identifying markers relating to the schools they work at, students’ names and their names, were excluded.

All participants were informed in advance of the nature and purpose of the study. Furthermore, if they wished to retract any statements from the interview, they were advised of their right to do so. Although there were no known risks to participating in my study, I did account for the fact that some questions may be thought-provoking or difficult to answer on the spot (as they may trigger an emotional reaction). As such, having provided the questions ahead of time, informing the participants of their right to pass and/or forfeit, provided the ability to review the transcript and to clarify, omit or forfeit the interview at any time, as well as requesting completion of my letter of consent (Appendix A) was the method of minimizing risk for the safety and well-being of my participants. Participants were also made aware that any and all audio recordings would be stored on a password-protected hard drive that only I had access to.
Furthermore, all audio recordings are to be destroyed after 5 years from the completion of this study. Reducing the participants’ risk of exploitation was best exhibited by ensuring that interviews were done after school and not on school property. As well, no observations were held, and thus, no identifying factors were recorded about my participants. Again, my participants signed a consent letter (Appendix A) but they were also informed of the ability to pass, deny or skip a question, as well as to pull out at any point in the research study process.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

As aforementioned, some literature has suggested that a weakness of qualitative research is its lack of generalizability (Carr, 1994). Laerd Dissertation (2012) suggested that there is inherent bias in convenience sampling techniques as the sample frame is not known nor chosen randomly. As such, the sample is more likely to not represent the population being studied. Due to the parameters of this research study, my constrained sample size (two participants) may have yielded limitations, as I did not have a wide range of participants to gather information from. However, the intention of this paper was to understand a social phenomenon and as such, generalizability is irrelevant as my research aimed to uncover deeper theological and pedagogical thinking and perspective. Nonetheless, it was important to recognize this possible limitation as although no study has the intention of having any limitations, inherently there may be some present. Another possible limitation was presented in who I was able to interview. My participants were from limited geographical boundaries, as this study took place in Toronto and participants needed to be situated in the GTA region for purposes of accessibility during the interview process.

Within any research, limitations may be present, but that should not detract from the strengths of the study. A key strength of this study was its ability to bridge an apparent gap in
literature discussing the possible benefits of SEL for students with ADHD. This particular topic has lacked exploration in the field of education; and as such, I have contributed to the educational community with my innovative topic. Moreover, using semi-structured interviews, and the inherent way in which they are conducted, allowing participants to openly discuss and expand on their ideas, provided the academic world with real world perceptions and accounts from experienced teachers, and offer greater insight into this topic.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter elaborated on my step-by-step methodological intentions and process. I articulated my research approach and procedures by informing my readers of my qualitative study using semi-structured interviews, and commented on the importance of qualitative research and why it was an appropriate and suitable approach for my research topic. I then discussed the instruments used when conducting my data collection, specifically my semi-structured interviews. I explained why semi-structured interviews are beneficial, and specifically how they would be appropriate for my research topic. I addressed methodological decision-making by providing the criteria I established for the recruiting of participants to be considered for my research study. I described the process of reaching out to and recruiting teachers, and reviewed all the steps that I followed to ensure that my participants’ safety was not put at risk. I have also briefly commented on methodological limitations and strengths that may be associated with my study. Next, in Chapter 4, I present and discuss the findings that emerged from my data.
Chapter 4: Research Findings

4.0 Introduction to the Chapter

This chapter provides the findings that emerged through the data analysis of the research interviews conducted with my two study participants. The first participant was an elementary school teacher in the GTA, the second participant was a former elementary school teacher who was teaching in the GTA in teacher education. The analysis of the interviews was in response to the research question: How do teachers implement SEL to support students with ADHD in elementary classrooms? Findings are organized and presented around four central themes and eight sub-themes. The four themes are:

1. Characteristics of Students with ADHD
2. Definitions of Social Emotional Learning (SEL)
3. Successful Strategies for SEL Implementation
4. Challenges of SEL Implementation

In what follows, each theme and sub-theme are used to further explore and illustrate the relationship between implementation of SEL in supporting students with ADHD in the elementary classroom. Each theme is described as it related to the participants’ data, while making linkages with prior research. Finally, the significance of each theme is discussed, and a summary of the findings is presented.

4.1 Characteristics of Students with ADHD

A major theme that emerged from the data relates to the characteristics of students with ADHD. Participants’ backgrounds and experience with ADHD were significant factors affecting how participants perceived students with ADHD, and their characteristics and behaviours in their classrooms. To begin, the influence of ADHD on social interactions amongst peers is described.
This is followed by a discussion of the connection between gender influences and ADHD characteristics.

### 4.1.1 Perceptions about students with ADHD and their social interactions

Both participants described the students with ADHD in terms of how they differed socially from their peers. Felicia’s description focused on the behaviour of students with ADHD. She shared that she noticed that her students with ADHD tended to have a lot of difficulty paying attention to any lessons delivered, especially “while on the carpet”. She mentioned that a typical characteristic of her students with ADHD was constantly fidgeting. Furthermore, she pointed out that when it was time for students to go back to work on their own, they had to be reminded of the task and often had difficulty settling into starting and completing it.

Felicia’s description of the characteristics of students with ADHD seems to be in line with previous research that suggested that children with ADHD are said to be disruptive in the classroom, as they are more often off track when attempting to tackle a task (Leroux & Perlman, 2000; Whalen & Henken, 1985; Ohan et al., 2011). Furthermore, previous literature confirmed that children with ADHD will sometimes partake in behaviours that are disruptive and frustrating to other students (Semrud-Clikeman & Schafer, 2000), such as fidgeting (Carbone, 2001). Felicia indeed commented that she felt frustration in the past when students were fidgeting, and that she had also gotten complaints from other students. However, over time, she got used to this behavior and better understood it. Interestingly, literature provided insight into behavioral issues and suggested that students with ADHD tend to search for immediate gratification, which often leads to them breaking the classroom rules and social norms, even when they do not necessarily have the intention of being problematic (Carbone, 2001; Whalen & Henken, 1985). As such,
students with ADHD and their peers (Semrud-Clikeman & Shafer, 2000; Whalen & Henken, 1985).

Felicia commented that she perceived her students’ constant fidgeting to affect and interfere with the learning of some of her other students. She stated that because of the fidgeting, her second student would not focus on the lesson, but rather would be distracted by what the other student was doing. She dealt with this by reminding students who got distracted to be responsible for their own behavior (through the use of self-awareness and self-regulation). Research has shown that some of the behaviors that can be exhibited by students with ADHD (such as being disruptive, or being off-track when attempting to tackle a task) can disrupt their learning, as well as their peers learning (Carbone, 2001; Ohan et al., 2011).

Samantha, the second participant in this study, took a research-based approach to characterizing her perceptions of students with ADHD. She suggested that research that she had read showed that people with ADHD have an “under-firing of the executive function region.” The executive function region is the conductor of the brain, and its job is “to call the shots for the rest of the brain”. The brain of a student with ADHD tends to “under-fire sometimes.” The job of executive functioning is to mediate emotions, and thus it helps us to know what an expected response is. As a result, students with ADHD tend to have a more inflated response than peers without ADHD—students with ADHD tend to show their emotions more obviously, because they are not as able to mediate their behaviors and their responses. Guevremont and Dumas (1994) also suggested that children with ADHD often show signs of elevated emotionality. A child may show more emotion then expected when dealing with instances of minor inconveniences or overreacting to stimuli presented in the environment (Guevremont & Dumas,
1994). Aggression may be a result of these emotions as children have difficulty adjusting their emotions accordingly to the situation (Guevremont & Dumas, 1994).

On the other hand, Samantha suggests that this elevated emotionality can also be a positive thing, as students with ADHD show happiness more obviously, and their “compassion is there”. As Samantha further explained, the executive region helps us to figure out what is appropriate and what is inappropriate behaviour. As children get older, when that executive functioning is under-firing, the student without ADHD may be able to say, “okay, I am upset, but I am not going to have a meltdown”. The executive region in this case is helping them know what is appropriate versus inappropriate. Samantha stated that we learn from our past behaviours, and we tend to take them into account when we’re doing the next behaviours. But again, because the executive function is often under-firing for students with ADHD, they’re not tapping into that, “oh, the last time I did this, I created a scene, I got detention, I got in trouble, that person got mad at me”—so they aren’t readily able to use their past behaviour to inform their future behaviour.

Semrud-Clickeman & Schafer (2000) affirmed that as a child matures, they are held responsible to self-regulate their expressions, and learn to ‘mask’ their feelings. However, they also suggested that children with emotional disturbances show a deficit in understanding their internal emotional state, as well as the expression of it. In other words, it is possible that students do not know that feelings don’t have to be acted upon. Because SEL is intended specifically to help students tap into their feelings, Samantha perceived that SEL would really help students with ADHD.

Samantha utilized her research-grounded understanding of social interactions to provide insight into the loss of relationships amongst peers. She stated that children with ADHD tend to lose their peer relationships by grade 2, as often kids with ADHD are impulsive. Thus, students
with ADHD might do or say things that are not considered to be expected or appropriate. Samantha maintained that younger children sometimes aren’t as forgiving, perhaps because they don’t yet understand about more diverse ways of being. Literature agrees with Samantha’s understandings by suggesting that students with ADHD often misinterpret a situation, and they react in unexpected manners, and as a result appear to peers as impulsive or unpredictable (Semrud-Clikeman & Schafer, 2000). A rationale that research further provides is that children with ADHD may be having trouble fully processing social-emotional information, and then repeatedly are unable to change their behaviours because they do not interrupt the situation fully, and then in return, they do not modulate their behaviours, and finally they react impulsively (Semrud-Clikeman & Schafer, 2000). Samantha commented that often, but not always, students with ADHD are the ones in the class that get in trouble, “their name gets called over and over again, or they are the ones that tend to be impulsive and forget what they are supposed to be doing.”

Both Samantha and Felicia approached describing their perceptions of students with ADHD from different standpoints. While Samantha grounded her understandings in literature and prior research, Felicia relied on her observations of students with ADHD in her classroom. In addition, Samantha used her literature-grounded perspective to comment on the influence of gender on characteristics of students with ADHD.

Samantha referenced prior research in commenting on the sometimes-misinterpreted distinctions in characteristics of ADHD through a gender lens, which indicates that female students are often described as less likely to elicit behavioural challenges in the classroom. She noted that female students are typically perceived by teachers as, “simply just sitting in the corner,” and because they are not behaviourally challenged, they don’t get as much attention
from the teacher. As a result, teachers tend not to think of them as having ADHD, even if they do, which may translate into girls developing more anxiety and depression. In addition, Samantha commented that boys are typically seen as having more behavioural issues, and they often get the attention and responses that girls do not. As emphasized in several pieces of literature, girls, when diagnosed with ADHD, typically exhibit signs of predominance in inattention (Rucklidge, 2008; Crawford, 2003). Some research surrounding this topic maintains that girls’ symptoms are often overlooked as they tend to be resembled differently than in boys (Hinshaw, Carte, Sami, Treuting & Zupan, 2002). I now turn to discussing the definitions of SEL, another major finding that emerged from this study’s data.

4.2 Definitions of SEL

When defining SEL, both participants focused on the need to teach students how to learn to be socially and emotionally competent. However, the two participants approached the definition from different perspectives. Felicia’s definition of SEL centered on the binary of ‘under control’ versus ‘out of control’ when emotions are escalated, and she provided details about her students’ behaviour in each of those situations. Felicia stated, “when their [students’] emotions are escalated or they are out of control, they have the appropriate strategies and they know what to do to get themselves back into an area or zone of calmness and being able to handle their emotions or their upset.”

Samantha’s definition emphasized students having the opportunity to engage in learning, and she put forward a variety of strategies to help students achieve self-regulation. She stated that, “SEL is when kids are given the opportunity to learn about how to be socially emotionally competent.” Both Samantha and Felicia defined SEL as a process through which students learn to recognize and manage effective behavioural skills (Durlak et al., 2011), although the weight
each of the participants placed on these skills was different. Samantha’s definition focused more on behavioural skills, while Felicia’s definition reflected the importance of emotions in the process of acquiring SEL competencies.

4.3 Successful Strategies for Implementation

This section examines the requirements that both participants perceived to be necessary in order to implement SEL successfully in the classroom. Furthermore, this section will discuss the varying strategies used by each participant in order to implement SEL into their classrooms.

4.3.1 The need for professional development and life-long learning

Samantha and Felicia both emphasized the importance of being a life-long learner for effective SEL implementation. Specifically, Samantha commented on the importance of going out and gaining knowledge through ongoing professional development opportunities. When asked whether she thought that teachers needed SEL to be part of the pre-service training, Samantha answered that it could not happen, “since the two years of either a Bachelor of Education or Masters are already maxed out”. Instead, Samantha suggested that pre-service training is a “starting ground”. After this “starting ground” teachers would move on to gain and acquire more knowledge. She also stated that new teachers would not know everything the “second they walk out of school,” but instead they need to think of themselves as lifelong learners. She noted, “of course you won’t be prepared, I mean, I wasn’t fully prepared after I had been teaching for 9 years. It’s an on-going thing right? It [pre-service training] starts you off, and then you continue to learn.” Samantha gave insight into the many different ways in which teachers could continue to gain knowledge through their professional development; including signing up for workshops and additional qualifications (AQs), reading books, and talking to parents. She suggested that as teachers “we are lifelong learners, and as such, we need to
continue to learn through ongoing professional development in order to better our practices and ourselves.”

Felicia, my other participant, shared that she often acted as a resource for other teachers in her school since she was familiar with different SEL strategies such as “the daily 5”. She emphasized that she was happy to share, to give ideas, encouragement, and share online links that she found helpful. In addition, she commented that by taking additional qualifications, she was making herself more marketable and well-rounded, but the primary benefit was that she was continuing to “better my [her] practice.” Felicia continued her professional development mainly through taking courses, and she also implemented her own interests and life experiences into her practice, such as tai chi and meditation. When asked why she started and continued to implement SEL, Felicia suggested that emotions and social well-being are “a part of our makeup”, and it is something that has always interested her. She claimed to, “always [have] been open” to learning about SEL because, “I’ve realized that there is a connection between a person’s social well-being and their ability to learn and grasp.” Both participants commented on the importance of ongoing professional development and life-long learning which they both see as valuable in gaining knowledge about SEL and strategies as a way to better their practices. The participants also talked at length about the need for good resources.

4.3.2 The need for Good Resources

The need for good resources goes hand-in-hand with the need for professional development and life-long learning. Both participants stressed the importance of taking the onus on yourself to find good resources. While Samantha’s approach to finding resources was primarily to look for professional development opportunities, Felicia’s approach was to be an
“ally to colleagues, much like a network of sharing, to use the web as your friend, and to use life and personal experiences as well as professional development opportunities.”

Samantha suggested that one challenge for implementation is teachers knowing how to talk about SEL and how to teach it. She linked knowing how to talk about SEL and how to teach it with asking, “where are the resources for teachers?” Samantha suggested that teachers take the opportunity to do professional development around the concepts of SEL and resilience. She commented that when she herself was looking for resources, she turned to the mindfulness and education community, as well as doing workshops. Felicia too commented that one must find resources, and there are many ways to do so. She suggested going to Google as a starting place. She also encourages peers and colleagues to find someone like herself to ask them questions, and for ideas. Felicia further emphasized that there are support groups that are connected and that institute mindfulness and different types of learning in the classroom. As mentioned before, Felicia brought her own life experiences, such as tai chi and meditation practices, into the classroom.

Aside from both participants stressing the importance of finding and using good resources, both discussed a plethora of specific resources that they used to teach their students about SEL. Although they differed in the strategies that they used, they both felt it necessary to frontload SEL before getting to curriculum. As well, they both felt it necessary to provide students with a variety of strategies so that they could choose what worked best for them.

Having resources, and actively seeking them out, is arguably one of the most important necessities in order to successfully implement SEL. Samantha noted that teachers could get overwhelmed when thinking about how to implement SEL, but she also argued that it did not have to be a big, expensive program, “it can just be part of a read aloud.” Samantha employed
strategies such as iMessages, mindfulness, conflict managers, role-play, Readers Theater, read alouds, and discussions/circle time, as a way to implement SEL into her classroom.

iMessages, as Samantha described, are a strategy in which the teacher is asking the student to recognize and name their feelings. Thus, instead of placing blame on someone by saying, “you make me mad”, you would try to say, “I feel angry”. The intention is to talk about your feelings, while also looking at what feeling angry looks like, and sounds like. Samantha’s classes have also included drawing pictures, and role-playing in conjunction with iMessages. Conflict managers, another strategy used by Samantha, are students that are taught how to be managers of conflict, on the playground, by learning how they can mediate challenges between students. Conflict managers also used iMessages, as a way to help mediate students’ challenges by teaching them how to express their feelings in a positive and nonjudgmental way. Samantha frequently used books, specifically reading aloud, to have class discussions and circle time, where students were encouraged to tap into and name their feelings. She encouraged other teachers to do that by saying, “even if someone were to just do that – that’s huge!” Each book she mentioned related to the skills associated with being socially and emotionally competent. For example, she mentioned books that were about empathy, compassion, and giving to others.

Both participants used a variety of strategies to help teach their students how to control their emotions, although their implementation strategies differed. Felicia had her own “bag of strategies” that she employed in her classroom. She discussed in great detail a strategy called ‘the zones of regulation’. She shared that she had formal training with this strategy from her school board. The zones of regulation are a curriculum-designed strategy used to foster self-regulation and emotional control. There are four zones into which the students learn to place themselves, and each zone has corresponding emotions attached to it. The intention of the zones is for
students to be able to recognize which coloured zone they are in, and for them to be ensured that it is okay to be in any one of those zones. The blue zone, for example, is associated with feelings of sickness, being tired, bored, or just generally feeling run down. Within each zone, there are strategies to try and help students get to the green zone—the desired zone, in which one is feeling happy, calm, focused and ready to learn. The yellow zone, as Felicia explained, signifies feelings of frustration, being worried, wiggly or excited. The red zone is where you are mad, angry, terrified, yelling, hitting, or out of control. As she emphasized, the intention is to use the strategies learned in each zone to get back to the green zone; but foremost, this strategy teaches the students that, “it is okay to have emotions, as everybody does. Simply put, the intention is to get back to a ‘sense of calm’”.

In addition to the strategy above, Felicia instituted a “daily five”, different than the “reading daily five”, as she explained. The “daily five” involves her asking her students to make checklists of five features: meditation, some form of daily vigorous physical activity, gratitude, affirmations and journaling. The journaling is done daily, and students are asked to comment on the feelings that they have had that day. In addition to this “daily five”, Felicia also implemented “random acts of kindness” in the class. It is a strategy whereby during circle time, students pass around a teddy bear and give each other a kind compliment. Once a student has received their compliment, they cross their legs so that everybody gives and receives a compliment or act of kindness. Felicia’s “bag of strategies” doesn’t stop there. She also implemented yoga and tai chi. She did so because “every student has something else in their backpack and not everybody gets upset for the same reasons, so they need to be set up with strategies that work for them.”

Literature aligns with Felicia’s view on the importance of allocating resources (i.e. professional
development and staff time) that reflect making SEL a priority, in order to model the behaviours they seek to develop in their students (Promote Prevent Organization, n.d.).

4.3.3 The need for repetition and the opportunity to practice over time

When prompted with questions to better understand the strategies used to support students with SEL implementation, both participants emphasized the need for repetition. Felicia draws on research to say that, “it takes twenty-one days to make or break a habit,” and as such, when she implements the “daily five” into her classroom, “it is just the tip of the iceberg.” She commented that implementing the “daily five” is not as easy as it sounds, as some sessions were very successful whereas some sessions were not. She noted that part of her role as a teacher was to be constantly reminding students what was required of them during this time.

Felicia further illustrated her point with an anecdote attributing a student’s growth to her learning technique of repetition. The year prior to our interview, Felicia had a student who initially showed characteristics of being extremely distracted. She suggested that with repeated exposure, and because of having the same teacher for a second year in a row [Felicia], the student “has learned to focus more. He knows what I expect from him and I’m giving him some leadership roles.” Felicia commented that during the first year the student was in her class, she would have never given her student responsibility because he did not seem able to handle it, whereas during her second year teaching him, he proved that he could take on such roles. Additionally, Felicia mentioned that some of her other students had also shown tremendous growth in the ability to not only control their emotions, but in also supporting “other students with their self-regulation.” Such anecdotes seem to provide a rationale for why Felicia places value on using strategies repeatedly—she observed in her practice that time and repetition maximizes what her students get out of certain strategies. She suggested that she continues to use
these strategies because they helped her students to “control their behaviours” and “keep their emotions in control”. She noted throughout the interview that implementation needed to be “ongoing”, a “year-long journey”, not to be taught “for 2 weeks and it’s a done deal”, and that teachers are “constantly going back”, “constantly refreshing”, and must be employing “constant repetition”.

Samantha also placed emphasis on the opportunity and need for repetition in the classroom, and the need to provide students with opportunity to transfer those skills into different settings. She affirmed that students with ADHD specifically need to have many “opportunities to do.” For example, when placed into workshops, students with ADHD will learn, but the challenge perhaps comes with “seeing that through.” The student might know all that they have learned intellectually, but in a situation in which they are confronted with a challenge, they might revert back to going from impulse to action, even if they know of other ways to respond. As such, Samantha draws on research suggesting that it is helpful for students with ADHD to have the opportunity to transfer the skills they have learned into different settings. She says students with ADHD “are going to need opportunities for SEL for a longer period, but also over time, and in different settings.” The perceived benefit of this strategy is that if students with ADHD have more than just one opportunity to practice SEL and to solidify their knowledge and learning, then it’ll be “transferred into other settings.”

Felicia and Samantha’s views align as they both note the need for opportunity and repetition in learning SEL. However, Samantha adds the importance of allowing such students to be able to transfer these skills into different settings to ensure success and use of the newly acquired skills. The participants’ data also revealed implementation challenges for SEL.
4.3.4 Administrative support making SEL a priority

SEL is not a new concept. Many schools have already acknowledged that as educators, student success will be most evident when efforts can be integrated to achieve academic success along with social emotional competence (Greenberg et al., 2003; Zins et al., 2004). Successful implementation of SEL is a multi-faceted approach, as stated by both Felicia and Samantha, which requires administrative support. Samantha recalled that when she was a primary school teacher, her school had a focus on conflict management training, and thus, SEL was a priority, “as it should’ve been”, in order to provide support for a school population with lots of trauma. One of the challenges mentioned for successful implementation of SEL is whether or not schools are prioritizing SEL in the classroom. This was emphasized by Samantha, as she was able to draw on other experiences in which administrative support for SEL lacked.

Samantha shared that her research and work provided her with ample opportunity to see why, if the schools aren’t prioritizing it, “then it can be challenging in the classroom for teachers.” Samantha recalled having confronted principals in order to ask if SEL was something she could implement. She provided them with information on what she had done in the past, what she had seen in terms of benefits, and ultimately asked if she could implement SEL. She noted that she had had success doing this. When asked why certain schools provided support for SEL while others did not, Samantha used the metaphor of, “every school is their own little island.” She further explained that the principal is usually, “the dictator, as well as the board, so if the principal isn’t on board then it’s not going to happen, and if the principal is on board then it’s going to happen.”

Similar to some of Samantha’s experiences, Felicia’s experience with administration has been positive, and that made her feel comfortable implementing SEL into her routine. Felicia’s
school provided staff with workshops and documents around the topic of SEL, and as such, provided reason to believe that the school valued such learning, and made it a priority. Felicia noted that, “my [her] administrators have said don’t worry about curriculum.” Furthermore, she complimented having administration “behind us [her]” as she felt it important to know that if someone, “walked by [her class] and the lights are out, and you’re meditating, I know that that’s okay.” Research also shows the importance in developing social and emotional skills, and further states that classroom efforts alone, without administrative support, can show unhelpful effects (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016). Further, lack of administrative support can lessen all the positive outcomes that SEL intends to support, such as academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011).

Both participants clearly placed emphasis and value on having administration that is not only progressive, but also supportive of them, as it made implementation possible, and a priority. The significance of this is that both participants, as well as previous literature, feel that SEL is a necessity; and that for successful implementation, administrative support and help is needed.

4.4 Challenges of Implementation

A recurring topic in both interviews was the discussion around why is SEL not taking place in the classroom? Both participants provided insights into the reasons SEL might not be implemented, by drawing on their practices. The following section will outline and compare the perspectives of both participants in regards to challenges of SEL implementation, including: lack of confidence, perceived lack of time, and fear of curriculum. Additionally, the significance of each sub-theme will also be examined briefly.

4.4.1 Lack of confidence and expertise

Both participants commented on the importance of feeling comfortable in implementing SEL strategies. They both feared that if a teacher did not feel comfortable and confident, then no
amount of strategies or resources would be able to help them. Felicia shared that she implemented strategies and resources that she had found online, from doing workshops, and from her own personal life. She suggested that:

I’ve also taken a course on yoga for educators and I found this very helpful. The meditation and the tai chi are something that I institute quite easily because I do it in my own life, but I know that other teachers are not comfortable with it because in order to institute some of these strategies, you have to feel comfortable with them.

Samantha agreed with Felicia in terms of needing an underlying confidence in order to implement SEL. Samantha explained that the implementation of SEL is gradual, and does not have to be overthought, but not all teachers are aware of that. She stated that the implementation of SEL “doesn’t have to be a big elaborate program, and that’s what shuts teachers down, because they don’t have the time, and they feel like they don’t have the training.” Additionally, she drew on research to suggest that “they [teachers] won’t do it if they don’t feel confident to do it.” As such, Samantha’s advice to teachers was to “not be overwhelmed”. Instead, she suggested looking for professional development opportunities to build one’s knowledge, skills, and strategies. The suggestion is that by acquiring more knowledge and resources, a lack of confidence will not hinder the implementation of SEL as an effective strategy in the classroom.

Both participants noted that confidence, along with other qualities, are key in order to implement SEL. They both shared that they acquired their repertoire of strategies while building confidence, through the use of workshops and looking for good resources (as the other themes show as well). Research also shows that many teachers feel that they have not received extensive professional development in SEL and that providing more professional development
opportunities, or looking for them on one’s own, should be of top priority to eliminate feelings of inadequate teaching expertise (Promote Prevent Organization, n.d.).

**4.4.2 Perceived lack of time**

Both Felicia and Samantha empathized with teachers who may fear a lack of time to implement SEL. Felicia mentioned that in the past, she felt a pressure to teach curriculum. However, she affirmed that students have huge emotions, and it is really important, in her opinion, to forefront dealing with such issues, regardless of a perceived lack of time.

Samantha suggested that when school-wide, elaborate programs are brought into the school, “typically you can find teachers feeling like, ‘I don’t have time for anything more.’” As such, she firmly believed that teachers needed to be thinking about, “how do I incorporate this seamlessly, in a way that’s not taking away from other things, but is in minutes a day? Ten minutes a day.” Implied in Samantha’s statements is that instead of focusing on the perceived lack of time that a teacher may have to spend on SEL and not curriculum, one must think of ways to incorporate it seamlessly. The participant stated that many teachers feel the pressure of getting to the curriculum, so they let go of SEL, because of a perceived lack of time. Further, she mentioned that teachers tend to think, “I don’t have time for one more thing,” and that the focus needs to be on making sure that SEL’s implementation is framed such in a way that it is not “just another program that is taking up time, but rather something that is embedded into everyday life.”

As previous sub-themes have shown, SEL does not take up much time in the day if one does it repeatedly, through integration. As suggested by Promote Prevent Organization (n.d.), SEL saves time. If teachers do not have to deal with behavioural distractions and disciplinary issues, then there is more time for learning (Promote Prevent Organization, n.d.). Students will
be engaged and will be able to participate in the classroom (Promote Prevent Organization, n.d.). Furthermore, literature agrees that fragmentation ultimately does SEL a disservice as it is best implemented cohesively, rather than in isolation (Zins et al., 2004). Students get the most out of such programming if it is linked to the central mission of the school and if it were mandatory for teachers to implement, as they are responsible for students’ learning (Greenberg et al., 2003). To many teachers’ surprise, by them not taking the time to forefront SEL, curriculum will be the one to suffer.

4.4.3 Fear of curriculum

Felicia shared that during the first month of school in particular, she concentrated on going through the routines and strategies with students. She noted that her colleagues, in that time, may have started and finished an entire unit, something that fostered anxiety in Felicia. However, she constantly worked on strategies because she believed that if a student did not have their routines and their strategies in place, then the actual curriculum learning could not take place, and would be hampered for the entire year. Although Felicia was anxious as it related to starting the curriculum, she adamantly believed in the importance of providing students with full “tool bags” in place before curriculum work could begin.

Similarly, Samantha talked about the importance of starting and forefronting SEL before curriculum work could take place. She suggested that many teachers, both new and experienced, but mostly new teachers, might feel the pressure of getting to the curriculum, so they “let SEL go”. However, in Samantha’s opinion, not focusing on building a community with trust and opportunity would ultimately lead to curriculum interruption anyway. In fact, she referred to SEL as a classroom management tool. She felt that if students could stay more focused, mediate
their own challenges, and re-direct their behaviours, then they would have more opportunities for learning and for better understanding the curriculum.

The interviews show that both Felicia and Samantha place value in frontloading SEL before curriculum, as they both believe that spending time on SEL will free up time spent on curriculum further into the school year. The significance of this seems to be that if SEL is not dealt with ahead of time, then no real learning can go on and curriculum will be disrupted, contrary to educators’ beliefs about a perceived lack of time and the fear of curriculum being ignored. Literature agrees that while SEL instruction can take some allocation of time, it does not distract from learning, but rather it helps students’ overall academic performance (Promote Prevent Organization, n.d.).

4.5 Conclusion

Chapter 4 provided insight into the findings of two semi-structured interviews with elementary teachers. Specifically, the participants were asked questions surrounding the topic of SEL and the perceived benefits it has for students with ADHD. Through the analysis process, four main themes emerged, including eight sub-themes. The first theme centered on the two participants’ perceptions of the characteristics that students with ADHD exhibited. Previous literature supports many of the characteristics that both participants saw and perceived about their students with ADHD. The second theme focused on teachers’ definition of SEL. Again, both participants’ definitions aligned with literature, suggesting that they are well-versed in what SEL aims to do for students, and what it encompasses.

The third theme focused on what the participants perceived to be necessary in order to make SEL ‘successful’ in the classroom. This section commented on the overlapping requirements that both participants echoed, including the need for professional development
opportunities; the need for good resources; the need for administrative support making SEL a priority; and the need for repetition and the opportunity to practice over time. The fourth and final theme focused on why SEL might not be implemented, along with commenting on the personal challenges that the participants faced when trying to input SEL into their practices. The findings presented in Chapter 4 were largely congruent with the literature discussed in Chapter 2. Past research maintains that SEL could be the key to success in helping students with ADHD be more socially competent and cognizant in both the classroom and in life. Chapter 5 includes a discussion of the broad and narrow implications of these findings, accompanied by recommendations and areas for further research.
Chapter 5: Implications

5.0 Introduction to the Chapter

Chapter 5 provides further discussion and insight into the findings presented in Chapter 4, guided by the main research question, “How do teachers implement SEL to support students with ADHD in elementary classrooms?” The following chapter will summarize the findings and data in the context of the literature, as well as the implications of these findings for the educational community, and future educators like me. These sections will be followed by recommendations for increasing the presence of SEL in the classroom, as a tool to support students with ADHD. The chapter concludes by suggestions for future research areas.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and Significance

One key finding in this study is teachers’ perceptions of common characteristics in students with ADHD. Both participants focused on disruptive behaviour as a major characteristic of their students with ADHD. Samantha’s understanding is grounded in literature and research, while Felicia relied on her knowledge and experience from practice as a special education resource teacher. Samantha provided an explanation of characteristics, such as emotionality and a loss of peer relationships, drawing on her research background in literacy and ADHD. She did so by explaining how an under-firing in the executive function of the brain, typically seen in students with ADHD, can lead to certain behaviours and characteristics. These findings are significant to note as they provide rationale for educators to try and better understand their students with ADHD and where they are coming from when they show signs of hyperactivity, impulsivity, or inattention. Misbehaviour from students with ADHD is not intentional, although it can be perceived to be so by parents, teachers, and peers (Semrud-Clikeman & Schafer, 2000). Students with ADHD will evaluate the environment they are in, only picking up on some of the most
obvious details while avoiding others, including social cues and nuances. If the child does not understand the entire environment, they often misinterpret the situation and react in an unexpected manner (Semrud-Clikeman & Schafer, 2000). As such, a better understanding of why such characteristics or behaviours are present may help teachers to be more compassionate and understanding towards these students. This will hopefully lead to a willingness to educate other students about different ways of being and to find strategies to help diminish the effects on the students themselves, as well as their peers.

Another major finding that emerged from the data reflects what both participants perceived as necessary in order to make SEL successful in the classroom. The four key elements required for successful implementation are: 1) being a life-long learner and looking for professional development opportunities; 2) having access to and utilization of good resources; 3) having a supportive administration that makes SEL a priority; and 4) the need for students to have repetition and the opportunity to practice such skills over time. Both participants are highly experienced, obtaining numerous additional qualifications in actual practice and knowledge, and their opinions are based on these experiences. Kendziora & Yoder (2016) support the need for professional development by stating that research has shown the importance in developing social emotional skills, and suggests that classroom efforts alone (sans administration) will show unhelpful effects. Furthermore, a lack of administrative support can actually lessen all the positive effects that SEL intends to support, such as academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011). Guyn Cooper Research Associates (2013) suggest that teachers recognize the need for social and emotional support for their students, but they feel ill-equipped to deal with it. The significance of such information is in recognizing that successful implementation of SEL is a multi-faceted approach. As such, if teachers do not have all the necessary components, then SEL will never
take place in the classroom. Thus, ensuring the presence of all these factors can contribute to an environment that allows its students to flourish, both academically and socially-emotionally.

The final major theme presented in this study is in understanding the challenges of implementation faced by teachers, that is providing explanation as to why there may be a lack of SEL in the classroom. Both participants’ overlapping analysis provided commentary on three main attributes or factors that they associated with why SEL may not be happening. Per the analysis, the top three deterrents from successful implementation were: 1) a lack of confidence and expertise; 2) a perceived lack of time; and 3) fear of the impending curriculum. The concept of a perceived lack of time and confidence relates back to Felicia and Samantha’s stance on successful implementation of SEL in the classroom. Specifically, where schools do not provide opportunities for development, the onus of improving one’s practice through professional development should fall on the individual teacher. The Promote Prevent Organization (n.d.) suggests that many teachers feel as though they are lacking professional development opportunities in SEL. As such, taking advantage of and seeking out these opportunities should be a top priority in order to reduce teachers concerns over expertise in the subject. Felicia was able to speak from past experiences of perceiving a lack of time to implement SEL, especially due to the vigorous requirements of the curriculum. Samantha noted that teachers fear that they do not have time to add “yet another” thing to their plates. The paradox here is that teachers seem to perceive a lack of time to implement SEL, when really, if you do not forefront it, curriculum may be the one to suffer. My participants’ observations about the implementation of SEL in the classroom are supported by current literature on the topic. The Promote Prevent Organization (n.d.) also believes that SEL saves time. If teachers do not have to deal with behavioural distractions and disciplinary issues, then there is more time for learning (Promote Prevent
Organization, n.d.). By understanding the challenges that teachers face when trying to implement SEL, we can work towards finding the supports needed to make educators feel confident in their skills, and be prepared to integrate SEL without fear of not getting to the curriculum.

5.2 Implications

The following section provides insight into the broad implications of this research study on the educational community, school boards, administration, educators and teachers, as well as the personal implications my research has had on my development as a future educator.

5.2.1 Broad: Implications for the educational community

The purpose of my research study has been to better understand SEL strategies that teachers use to support students with ADHD in the elementary classroom. I sought to explore teachers’ beliefs around the benefits of SEL in helping students with ADHD become more socially and emotionally competent. Although my participants actively implemented a variety of strategies to help support students’ social and emotional development, they recognize that their efforts are not necessarily seen universally across classrooms. Further, my participants had a tendency of speaking not only to their implemented techniques, but to their own perceptions of their colleagues. In doing so, my participants provided four key elements to make SEL successful in the classroom. The first element, being a life-long learner, implies that by not choosing to engage in professional development, educators may not be able to adapt their practice to provide the best educational experience for their students.

It is critical for teachers to have ongoing opportunities to learn from each other, from new research, about emerging technologies and new curriculum resources. Furthermore, by seeking out more professional opportunities, teachers will inherently be exposed to new and shared resources, a second essential element for implementing SEL. It is important to have strong and
up-to-date resources in order to maintain a curriculum that is relevant to students. The implication of not providing teachers with multiple opportunities to acquire the skills, examples, and resources to teach SEL ultimately does a disservice to students with and without ADHD, as these students will not be given the opportunity to learn and refine the everyday life skills that SEL intends to teach students.

Additionally, it is clear that without administrative support, the third element recommended by the participants, SEL is unlikely to be implemented. The implication of this is that students will miss out on the opportunity to refine and learn important life skills related to being socially and emotionally competent individuals. The fourth element, the need for students to have repetition and opportunities to practice such skills over time, points to the fact that students with ADHD need time to solidify their new skills, in differing contexts. While providing students with some exposure to SEL seems productive, fragmentation is actually a disservice (Zins et al., 2004). In summary, professional development opportunities should not only be encouraged by the school, whether that is through vouchers or compensation, but be mandatory for teachers. As felt by both participants, SEL needs to occur longitudinally, as a single exposure is not enough to provide teachers with the support, resources, and confidence they need for implementation in their classrooms.

As per the analysis, a lack of confidence and expertise, a perceived lack of time, and fear of the impending curriculum were the three deterrents from successful implementation of SEL in the classroom. The implication of this is that SEL is intended to provide students with opportunities to refine and learn the important life skills of being socially and emotionally competent people—and by not providing students with these types of learning opportunities, we are not creating well-rounded and active members of society. This concept encompasses
recognizing and managing ones’ own behaviours, being socially conscious and caring for others, having positive interpersonal relationships skills, and appropriate decision making skills using ethics and responsibility (Zins et al., 2004). Furthermore, if teachers were to only focus on academic success, then students may fall short of their goals (Zins et al., 2004), and we may be hindering their abilities to make positive, lasting relationships.

Understanding the effect that students with ADHD can have on the classroom environment is important. This is because students with ADHD typically are not the only ones to be suffering from some of the challenges associated with the disorder. It is important to consider that peers and teachers can also be affected by the characteristics and behaviours of students with ADHD. Felicia mentioned that when her students with ADHD tended to fidget, it often distracted the other students, as they became consumed in what the other student was doing—ultimately resulting in them not paying attention. Thus, teachers need to be better equipped in understanding and recognizing where such behaviours may be coming from, if presented. By having a better understanding of the learning requirements of students with ADHD, teachers can change the dynamics of how other students look at their peers, while also providing these students with strategies to help them self-regulate. If teachers are able to discuss early on why some people react differently to different situations, then students will be more understanding of and compassionate towards their colleagues. Furthermore, if we as educators can provide students with a skill-set to cope with social and emotional stressors, disruptions in the classroom may decrease, and social relationships amongst peers may become more positive.

5.2.2 Narrow: Implications for personal professional practice

The findings of my research study were both valuable and eye-opening. First and foremost, my research has expanded my understanding of the challenges and barriers of implementing SEL
that I may face in my future classroom. However, it is clear that as long as I continue to expand my knowledge and seek out new opportunities, there are ample resources available. As well, I was happy to see that both participants’ views aligned with my own in knowing that learning does not stop at your pre-service training; instead, the need for continued professional development and life-long learning are constant. One barrier to successful implementation of SEL derived from the data was the lack of administrative support in implementing tactics in the classroom. While administrative decisions can often be out of a teacher’s control, I will work hard to fight for opportunities for my students.

Both of my participants have shown me that it is possible to spearhead bringing SEL into your school; just because it isn’t there does not mean that it could not be successful. As such, I know that developing a strong alliance with the administration will be essential to bringing them new information, and providing suggestions for implementation. As well, in terms of my own practice, I know that I will need to continually be looking for opportunities to learn and grow as I better understand the necessity. I am reminded that it is important to continue learning and acquiring knowledge as a way to make my practice the best that it can be. My hope is to not allow the fear of curriculum consume me when it comes time for me to teach my students about SEL.

In the future, I would love the opportunity to further explore some of the daily teaching practices and strategies of my participants in order to observe their effectiveness in a classroom setting. What resonated with me the most was their compassion and empathy towards their students. Both teachers consistently wanted to better their practices in order to understand and help their students. In doing so, they reminded me why, as educators, we can continue to push
ourselves and our learning to the limit—it is all for our students.

5.3 Recommendations

In order to successfully implement SEL, I propose four recommendations based on my literature review and my two semi-structured interviews. The following recommendations are targeted for a variety of stakeholders including but not limited to: teachers, administration, school boards, ministries of education, and teacher education programs.

5.3.1 Make SEL a priority

The ministry of education, school boards, and administration need to make SEL in the classroom a priority. In doing so, the standard of teachers will increase, and feelings of fear and doubt due to their abilities, lack of support, or perceived lack of time will be eliminated. As well, in making SEL a priority and having opportunities for professional development, teachers will be exposed to more resources, which will increase their confidence in their abilities to implement.

Knowledge of the importance of SEL and how it will positively affect students, with and without ADHD, should be emphasized in order to make sure it is a priority in schools. This can be done through encouraging the educational community to engage in professional development and conduct more research in order to learn about the benefits of SEL.

5.3.2 The need for professional development opportunities

Teachers need to take the onus to continually better their own practices. However, without administrative support and leadership, as suggested by both participants, successful programs cannot happen (Greenberg et al., 2003).

Teacher training and workshops should be made available in order to make teachers comfortable with implementing consistent SEL programming. As expressed in my findings, some teachers do not know where to get their resources, how to implement such resources, or
simply where to start. By providing workshops, resources (including funding), and a community of support, teachers will feel more confident in their skills and abilities to implement SEL.

5.3.3 Integration into the curriculum

Both the ministry of education and educators should focus their efforts on integrating SEL, while using it across the curriculum. Like Samantha and Felicia have experienced, fore-fronting SEL and finding ways to integrate it into a teacher’s daily routine has benefitted students instead of taking away from the curriculum. When SEL initiatives were introduced to schools in the past, they typically were fragmented (Greenberg et al., 2003; Zins et al., 2004). Fragmentation is not ideal, and actually does SEL a disservice, as it would be best implemented cohesively, rather than in isolation (Zins et al., 2004). Students would get the most out of these programs if they were linked to the central mission of the school and were mandatory for teachers to implement, as they are responsible for students’ learning (Greenberg et al., 2003). As such, SEL needs to be a part of the curriculum, as that would be a greater cause for teachers to implement it. Further, it may help reduce teachers’ fears of not being able to cover all of the expectations set out by the curriculum, as my participants pointed out.

5.3.4 Pre-service training

Teacher education programs should consider offering mandatory training in various aspects of special education, including SEL, so that teachers feel prepared to teach social emotional skills and differing strategies to their future students. Samantha felt that current B.Ed and Masters programs were already ‘maxed’ out in terms of time. I propose keeping the special education course, but making it year long, and going in-depth into the subject matter, while also making it integrated into other courses. For example, because research has suggested that ADHD
is largely misunderstood, having a year-long course would provide teacher candidates with more time and opportunity to learn more in depth about behavioural disorders, such as ADHD.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

Both participants voiced that SEL implementation was not happening because of lack of confidence and expertise, a perceived lack of time, and fear of the impending curriculum. Although typically in line with literature, one point that was not previously mentioned by either participant was the concept of teachers not implementing SEL as they did not see an academic benefit. One source suggests that educators, although mostly ‘on board’ with social and emotional development, are apprehensive to implement programs, as they cannot noticeably see nor predict its benefit on students’ academic progression through means of their test scores (Zins et al., 2004). This suggests that some educational systems value grades and academic achievement above SEL, which may pose another barrier to its implementation. As such, future research should be focused on how social and emotional competency and learning impacts students’ academic performance. Specifically, I would be interested to see research done on the effects of SEL on the academic performance of students with ADHD. Understanding how SEL helps students, while also linking it to academic performance could be just what is needed to ensure that SEL is implemented into the schools, and maybe even written into the curriculum.

5.5 Concluding Comments

SEL has proven to be a set of everyday life skills that students need to learn in order to have decision-making skills, the ability to manage their emotions, recognize the effect that they have on themselves and others, while also learning how to be in successful relationships, and friendships. I truly believe that SEL could be the answer to helping students with ADHD become more self-aware of their behaviours’ effect on themselves and their peers.
ADHD is largely misunderstood. I strive to see ADHD become less of a description of students’ ‘disruptive’ behaviours, and more of an understanding of where these students with ADHD are coming from. Perhaps, in taking the initiative to better understand ADHD, we as educators can provide our students with opportunities to learn how to self-regulate and become self-aware people. Increased knowledge of the behaviours that students with ADHD may exhibit, along with the combatted use of SEL, will allow students with ADHD to see an increase in positive peer relationships rather than feel isolated at such an early age. It is my hope that such research continues to be done in order to better understand the positive effects that SEL can have on students with ADHD.
References


Carbone, E. (2001). Arranging the classroom with an eye (and ear) to students with ADHD. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 34*(2), 72-81.


Kendziora, K., Yoder, N. (2016). When districts support and integrate social and emotional learning (SEL): Findings from an ongoing evaluation of districtwide implementation of


Appendix A: Consent Letter

Date ___________

Dear [Research Participant],

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 students with ADHD and their Social Emotional Learning and competencies. I am interested in interviewing teachers who feel as though they will be able to give me some insight on strategies and implementation methods they use when teaching SEL to their students and whether they think they make an impact on their students. 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. I may also present my research findings via conference presentations and/or through 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. Any information that identifies your school or students will also be excluded. The interview data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only person who will have access to the research data will be research coordinator Angela MacDonald. 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 during the interview. 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 to participation, and I will share a copy of the transcript with you shortly after the interview 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,

Lauren Lubchansky
Telephone: ______________
Email: lauren.lubchansky@mail.utoronto.ca
Research Coordinator’s Name: Angela MacDonald  
Telephone: ___________________  
Email: angela.macdonald@utoronto.ca  

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 Lauren Lubchansky 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/Questions

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study, and for making time to be interviewed today. This research study aims to learn how educators implement Social Emotional Learning (SEL) to support students with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in the elementary classroom setting, for the purpose of better understanding the implementation strategies that teachers use to support students with ADHD in the elementary classrooms. I want to explore teachers’ beliefs around the benefits of SEL in helping students with ADHD become more socially and emotionally competent. This interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes, and I will ask you a series of questions including questions about your background information, as pertaining to my topic, your beliefs and understandings of ADHD and SEL, your actual practices within the classroom setting as related to ADHD and SEL, and any barriers or challenges you want to share when posed with these types of situations. I want to remind you that you may refrain from answering any question, and you have the right to withdraw your participation from the study at any time. As I explained in the consent letter, this interview will be audio-recorded. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Demographic/Background Information:

1) What grade do you teach and for how long have you been teaching?
   a. Have you taught any other grades?
2) If any, what additional qualifications or specialist qualifications do you have?
   a. If so, when did you get them, from where, and why?

Beliefs/Understanding of Students with ADHD; SEL

1) Have you had any formal or informal education (training) around the concept of ADHD?
2) Have you had any formal or informal education (training) around the concept of Social Emotional Learning (SEL)?
3) Can you tell me about what you understand about the term “SEL”?
4) What are the social and emotional tendencies (or interactions) of students with ADHD in your classroom (previous or present)?
   How confident are you in implementing strategies to support students with SEL development?

Teacher Practices

1) How do you create an environment that fosters SEL for students with and without ADHD?
2) What does Social Emotional Learning look like in your classroom?
(3) What are some of the strategies, methods, and/or resources that you use when teaching social emotional learning? Why is SEL important for you to utilize for your students? What are its benefits for them?

(4) Would you say that there are any challenges in implementing SEL?
   a. If yes, what are some examples?

(5) How does your school community factor in SEL?
   a. Do you feel support from the teaching community (within the school) for implementing SEL?

Next Steps

(13) What advice can you offer to other teachers about the implementation of SEL in their classrooms?
   a. What can they do to successfully implement such techniques?

(14) Is there anything else you would like to share that I have not touched on or asked you about?

Thank you for your time and participation in this research study.