Pre-Kindergarten Teachers' Perceptions of Social and Emotional Learning

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Abstract

Recognition of social and emotional learning (SEL), as an essential educational component, has increased in recent years, and early childhood educators' perceptions of SEL are likely to impact the delivery, evaluation, and outcomes of SEL opportunities for young children. The purpose of this pilot study was to investigate SEL perceptions of prekindergarten teachers in an American urban, public preschool serving predominantly Black students. Participant (n=22) responses to the Teacher Social and Emotional Learning Beliefs Scale (Brackett et al., 2012) were used to calculate mean scores for the domains of comfort, commitment, and culture, which were analyzed in relationship to the independent variables of teacher position (lead or auxiliary), level of education (associate degree, bachelor's degree, or graduate degree), and years of prekindergarten teaching experience (0-20 years and more than 20 years). While results were statistically non-significant, findings of the current pilot study have important and practical implications for implementing SEL in prekindergarten. Auxiliary teachers scored slightly lower in commitment and comfort domain than lead teachers, and teachers with a bachelor's degree scored highest on the comfort domain. Interestingly, experienced teachers (more than 20 years)

did not show a notable difference from those who have been teaching prekindergarten for much less time. Findings suggest that regardless of position and educational level, both veteran and novice early childhood teachers could benefit from explicit SEL training and adequate time and opportunity to become confident in providing effective social and emotional learning in their early childhood classrooms. Further research is needed to examine the effects of SEL training and coaching for prekindergarten teachers on the SEL of young children.

Keywords: SEL, preschool, early childhood, teachers, beliefs

Introduction

Access to public preschool throughout the United States has increased rapidly in the last decade, with states enrolling an average of 50% of four-year-old children across the country in 2017 (National Institute of Early Education Research, 2019). Similarly, there has been an increased emphasis on addressing young children's social and emotional well-being along with their cognitive development resulting in all 50 states adopting preschool social and emotional developmental standards (Weissberg et al., 2015). According to the World Economic Forum (2016) report, students will need more than traditional academic learning to be successful in the 21st century: "They must be adept at collaboration, communication and problem solving, which are some of the skills developed through social and emotional learning" (p. 4).

Social and emotional development is multi-faceted and comprised of a set of specific skills and abilities needed to set goals, manage behavior, and build relationships along with processing and remembering information, making it integral to academic success (Jones & Kahn, 2017). According to Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), social and emotional learning (SEL) can be defined as:

> [T]the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (CASEL, 2021, para. 1).

The CASEL 5 framework targets five broad, interrelated areas of competence including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. CASEL advocates the implementation of SEL using coordinated efforts involving the academic curricula, schoolwide practices and policies, and collaboration with families and communities for maximum benefit.

Recognizing social and emotional learning (SEL) as an essential learning domain in early childhood helps prevent emotional and behavioral problems and better prepares young children to address the learning and social challenges that they will encounter in later school years (Gunter et al., 2012); thus, the inclusion of SEL in prekindergarten curricula can foster positive attitudes towards school and long-term academic success (Cooper et al., 2014; Denham, 2016; Durlak et al., 2011; Gunter et al., 2012; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Ornaghi et al., 2017) while also playing a critical role in the acquisition of behavioral and self-regulation skills, which are

valued above academic skills by many kindergarten teachers (Soltero-Ruiz, 2013). Jones, Greenberg, and Crowley (2015) found statistically significant associations between measured social and emotional skills in kindergarten and key young adult outcomes across the spheres of education, employment, criminal activity, substance use, and mental health. Furthermore, SEL benefits far outweigh costs by a factor of 11:1 (Belfield et al., 2015).

Jones et al. (2020) found that the association between self-reported SEL competencies and self-reported grades was highest for White high school students as compared with all other racial groups. Researchers noted that "SEL that does not encompass awareness of power, privilege, oppression or culture can serve to perpetuate systems of oppression by contributing to deficit narratives and biased appraisal of students' behavior" (Jones et al., 2020, pp. 6-7). Further research is needed to assess the impact of SEL programs for diverse populations (Durlak et al., 2011; Gresham et al., 2017) as well as at various grade levels.

The most comprehensive review of school-based SEL interventions to date comes from Durlak et al. (2011), who conducted a meta-analysis of 213 programs including 270,034 students ranging in age from 5- to 18-years-old. Results supported the assertion that SEL programs in schools increase social and emotional competencies and have positive effects on student attitudes. Additionally, authors noted an 11-percentile gain in academic performance in a small subset of studies. Conversely, weak social and emotional abilities may result in social isolation, dislike of activities and people in the school environment, and lower level of support, leading to poor academic performance, grade retention, and school dropout (Denham & Brown, 2010; Rhoades et al., 2011).

Building on the work of Durlak et al. (2011), Yang et al. (2019) conducted a meta-analytic review of early childhood curricula for SEL in low-income student classrooms. Analysis found that curricula with a SEL focus had a robust impact on student social and emotional competency (SEC) outcomes, while curricula without a SEL focus had little to no effect on student SEC outcomes. Specifically, SEL focused curricula significantly reduced negative outcomes for low-income children's SEC development. Similarly, Calhoun et al. (2020) examined the impact of an SEL curriculum for low-income students across four data collection points spanning from the beginning of kindergarten to the middle of second grade. All children who received the intervention benefited significantly, regardless of baseline functioning.

The connection between language and social and emotional development for prekindergarten children with and without disabilities was established by Kerch et al. (2020). Researchers investigated the relationship between a child's social and emotional competencies and receptive vocabulary and differences in social and emotional competencies among students with and without disabilities. Pretest differences indicated that children with disabilities had lower self-control, more behavioral concerns, and fewer total protective factors while children with better receptive language scores showed more initiative, had more protective factors, and were less likely to have behavioral concerns. In terms of social and emotional competencies, differences between children with and without disabilities decreased significantly after nine months in a high-quality, inclusive prekindergarten setting including SEL standards.

Skills in social and emotional learning (SEL) may be developed through the prosocial skill set which encourage positive relationships through conflict resolution, effective communication, and perspective taking (Yoder, 2014). Early childhood teachers can capitalize on day-to-day interactions which provide opportunities to facilitate children's SEL. Ng and Bull (2018) noted that kindergarten teachers' support for SEL happened more often during small group activities than whole group activities with SEL activities most frequently occurring during outdoor play, followed by occurrences during lessons, meals/transitions, and learning centers. Teachers were observed using the following four strategies to facilitate SEL in their kindergarten classrooms: (1) setting a positive tone, (2) suggesting solutions, (3) allocating tasks, and (4) offering extensions.

Although early childhood teachers play an important role as mediators and are responsible for arranging meaningful social and emotional learning situations (Denham et al., 2012), preschool teachers report a lack of sufficient training to effectively help young children develop social and emotional skills (Bierman & Erath, 2006). With teachers playing a key role in children's SEL process, there is a need for greater attention to the practices of SEL in teacher preparation programs and continuing professional development initiatives (Zinsser et al., 2019). A SEL component in early childhood teachers' initial training could enable them to adopt a wide repertoire of strategies with the potential to enhance the involvement of families in children's development of social and emotional competences (Ferreira et al., 2021). Jennings and Greenberg (2009) offer the following recommendations regarding SEL for preservice teachers: incorporating teaching about SEL innovations in coursework, designing experiences where teacher candidates apply SEL initiatives in field work, providing a training program for teacher educators to develop a knowledge base in SEL, and placing interns with teachers who demonstrate SEL. The effective use of SEL education in preservice programs was linked to reduced teacher experienced job-related stress (Zinsser et al., 2019) prompting the suggestion for introducing secular contemplative practices like Transcendental Meditation (TM) and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) into teacher preparation programs as a means to facilitate future teachers' abilities to create classrooms that can support students social and emotional development and aid them in managing emotional conflict (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Teachers' awareness, knowledge, and understanding of SEL impact their perceptions of the program and the effectiveness of their classroom interventions (Humphrey, 2013) while a teacher's own social and emotional competencies affect everything that happens in the classroom (Jones et al., 2013). Teachers with greater knowledge of SEL combined with increased confidence in, and commitment to, SEL programs are more likely to value SEL programs, hence, implementing them with fidelity (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Zinsser et al. (2014) examined teachers' perceptions of SEL in the preschool setting using a mixed-methods approach. Researchers collected narrative data from focus groups as well as quantitative assessments of classroom environments. Researchers found that teachers' beliefs were related to social and emotional teaching practices. High scoring teachers differed from peers in terms of beliefs about emotions, beliefs about the value of SEL, the importance of discussing socialization practices and SEL strategies, and perceptions of a teacher's role as emotion socializer. Since understanding the differences in teachers' beliefs about SEL in preschool can help support teachers in increasing the quality of their interactions with students, Zinsser et al. (2014) called

for future research to investigate how to better support both pre- and in-service teachers in becoming positive emotion socializers and creating supportive learning environments.

Huynh et al. (2018) investigated perceptions of SEL of primary school teachers from two large cities in Vietnam. Results showed that teachers with higher levels of education had higher perceived levels of necessity of SEL in primary schools. Teachers with an associate (two-year) degree had the highest perceived levels of difficulty implementing SEL programming. Additionally, teachers with more years of teaching experience found it less difficult to incorporate SEL into classroom practice. While analysis found that there is an interactive effect of education background and years of teaching experience, it was not determined to have a strong impact on teacher perceptions.

Poulou et al. (2018) compared perceptions of Greek and United States preschool teachers' own emotional intelligence (EI) and social and emotional learning (SEL). The research examined whether perceptions of EI and SEL vary across cultural groups, whether those perceptions are related to students' emotional and behavioral issues, and whether those relationships vary by cultural group. Researchers hypothesized that teachers with more positive beliefs about implementing SEL would be able to better assist students with emotional and behavioral issues, as well as the converse. Eighty preschool teachers and 337 students from 24 American preschools along with 92 preschool teachers and 238 students from 52 Greek state schools participated in the study. Researchers found that the main effect of the cultural group was significant. Specifically, American teachers scored higher on EI perceptions and SEL comfort of implementation, confirming hypothesized cultural differences. To assess student data, researchers used several hierarchical linear models to account for the nested nature of the data. Researchers identified teacher-level predictors including U.S. teacher beliefs of comfort in implementing SEL skills (lower teacher comfort level correlated with greater student anxiety) and U.S. teacher perception of commitment to improving SEL skills (higher teacher commitment correlated to lower perceptions of peer difficulties). Similarly, Greek teacher level predictors included teacher perceptions of understanding of emotions (lower levels of teacher understanding correlated with more emotional and peer difficulties for students). Despite several limitations, these findings that cultural difference significantly impacts teacher perceptions of SEL supports the need for further investigation into perceptions of SEL across groups.

While research on SEL has grown dramatically in recent years, the focus has been mainly on children's acquisition of social and emotional competences and the effects of SEL on academic achievement and other benefits. Limited attention has been given to teacher's role in SEL even though "[t]eachers are the engine that drives SEL programs and practices in schools and classrooms …" (Schonert-Reichl, 2017, p. 138). As early childhood educators are the primary implementers of SEL in preschool programs, their perceptions of SEL are likely to impact the delivery, evaluation, and outcomes of social and emotional learning opportunities for young children. The purpose of this study was to investigate SEL perceptions of prekindergarten teachers in an American urban, public preschool serving predominantly Black students. Specifically, the following research questions were investigated:

1. Does a prekindergarten teacher's classroom position impact perceptions of social and emotional learning?

2. Does a prekindergarten teacher's educational level impact perceptions of social and emotional learning?
3. Does a prekindergarten teacher's years of teaching experience impact perceptions of social and emotional learning?

Methodology

A quasi-experimental, survey design was used to investigate prekindergarten teachers' perceptions of social and emotional learning. Survey research provides a numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population (Creswell & Hirose, 2019), making it a preferred method to gather data in educational research (Diaz de Rada, 2013). In this study, two rationalistic measures were employed to collect data related to preschool teachers' perceptions of social and emotional learning along with demographic information. It was posited that teachers with higher levels of education and more years of preschool teaching experience would have higher comfort, commitment, and culture domain scores as compared to teachers with lower levels of education and fewer years of prekindergarten teaching experience.

Instruments

The 12-item Teacher Social and Emotional Learning Beliefs Scale (TSELBS) developed by Brackett et al. (2012) was used to quantify teacher beliefs about social and emotional learning (SEL) along three distinct subscales: commitment to teaching SEL, comfort teaching SEL, and perceived school-wide culture of support for SEL. Each subscale was comprised of 4 items: Commitment (items 3, 4, 11, and 12), Comfort (items 5, 7, 8, and 9), and Culture (items 1, 2, 6, and 10). The TSELBS uses a gradient scale ranging from 1 to 5 (Strongly disagree - 1, Disagree - 2, Neutral - 3, Agree - 4, and Strongly agree - 5). Item 10 is reverse scored. Domain scores range from 4-20 with higher scores indicating more positive perceptions of commitment to, comfort with, and support of SEL teaching. Along with the survey, a 4-item demographic questionnaire was used to collect information on classroom position (lead or auxiliary), level of education (associate degree, bachelor's degree, or graduate degree), and number of years' experience teaching prekindergarten (0-20 years or more than 20 years).

Participants

Participants were a convenience sample from a public preschool located in a metropolitan area of the southeastern United States. The 324 students are predominantly (98%) of color (94% Black, 2% Hispanic, 2% mixed race, and 1% White) and low socio-economic status, as evidenced by 100% participation in the free lunch program. There are 18 classrooms with two designated as inclusive classrooms that accommodate students with special needs. Each classroom has 18 students, a lead teacher, and an auxiliary teacher. All teachers were female.

Participants (n=22) completed the survey during the week-long data collection period in the second semester of the school year. Participants (13 lead teachers and nine auxiliary teachers) tended to be highly educated with 17 (77%) holding a bachelor's (four-year) or graduate degree while the remaining five held an associate (two-year) degree. Additionally, participants tended to

be experienced early childhood educators, with eight (36%) having more than twenty years of experience teaching prekindergarten.

Data Analysis

Independent variables were the teacher position (lead or auxiliary), level of education (associate degree, bachelor's degree, or graduate degree) and years of prekindergarten teaching experience (0-20 years and more than 20 years). Participants' Teacher Social and Emotional Learning Beliefs Scale responses were calculated for each domain: comfort, commitment, and culture. Mean domain scores (4 lowest to 20 highest) were calculated for each research question's subcategories. A cross tabulation analysis was performed using SPSS 27 to investigate the relationship between independent and dependent variables.

Findings

Research Question 1

As shown in Figure 1, mean lead and auxiliary teachers' mean Teacher Social and Emotional Learning Beliefs Scale (TSELBS) scores for comfort and commitment were very similar, varying only by .7 and .4 points, respectively. Interestingly, scores for perceived culture matched exactly.
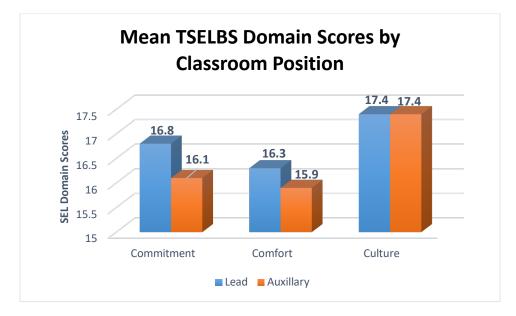
Figure 1 Mean TSELBS Domain Scores by Classroom Position

Research Question 2

Mean scores for each TSELBS domain by educational level are shown in Figure 2. Commitment and culture scores varied slightly, within one point, across degrees (associate, bachelor's, and graduate). The greatest variance between teacher education levels was on the TSELBS comfort domain, which ranged from 15.3 (associate degree) to 16.9 (bachelor's degree).
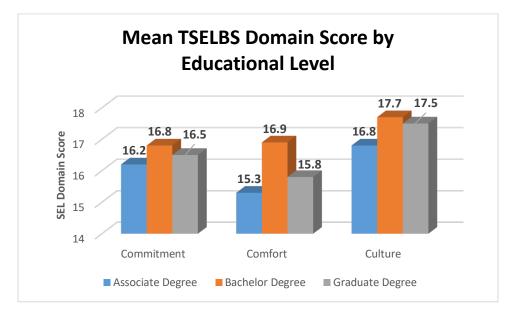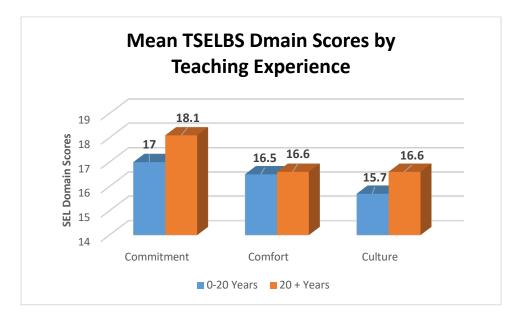
Figure 2 Mean TSELBS Domain Scores by Educational Level

Mean TSELBS Domain Score by Educational Level

- Commitment: Associate Degree 16.2, Bachelor Degree 16.8, Graduate Degree 16.5
- Comfort: Associate Degree 15.3, Bachelor Degree 16.9, Graduate Degree 15.8
- Culture: Associate Degree 16.8, Bachelor Degree 17.7, Graduate Degree 17.5

(SEL Domain Score; legend: Associate Degree, Bachelor Degree, Graduate Degree)

Research Question 3

Lastly, mean domain scores for teacher's number of years of experience teaching prekindergarten were calculated. Teachers with less experience scored lower than teachers with more experience across all three domains, with comfort scores showing the least amount of variation (.1) between the two groups. A difference (1.1) occurred between teachers with more than twenty years of experience teaching prekindergarten (18.1) and those with 20 or fewer years (17.) in domain scores for commitment.

Figure 3 Mean TSELBS Domain Scores by Years of Experience

Mean TSELBS Dmain Scores by Teaching Experience

- Commitment: 0-20 Years 17, 20 + Years 18.1
- Comfort: 0-20 Years 16.5, 20 + Years 16.6
- Culture: 0-20 Years 15.7, 20 + Years 16.6

(SEL Domain Scores; legend: 0-20 Years, 20 + Years)

Discussion

Results in this study do not support the asserted hypothesis that lead teachers, more educated teachers, and more experienced teachers have higher domain scores on the Teacher Social and Emotional Learning Belief Scale. While auxiliary teachers did score slightly lower in commitment and comfort domains, the difference was not significant. In terms of teacher education level, domain scores for commitment and culture were similar across degrees. Comfort level scores were more varied, with holders of an associate degree scoring the lowest; however, because of small sample size, further investigation to substantiate this finding is warranted. There are a few possible explanations for teachers with bachelor's degrees scoring the highest on the comfort domain. It is possible that these teachers are more recent graduates of a teacher preparation program that, possibly, included social and emotional learning (SEL) within the curriculum. Assuming that teachers holding graduate degrees have been teaching longer, teacher burnout may be an impacting factor. However, this trend is not supported by the examination of domain scores by categorical years of prekindergarten teaching experience in which the mean scores for beginning teachers and the most experienced teachers differed by approximately one point for commitment, comfort, and culture.

While Wu et al. (2020) found teachers' experience enhanced the implementation success of a formal, teacher-led social and emotional learning program on the development of four-to-five-year-old children in an Australian preschool setting, number of years teaching prekindergarten was not a significant factor regarding beliefs about SEL in this study. Domain scores for experienced teachers (more than 20 years) did not notably differ from those who had been teaching prekindergarten for less time, seeming to suggest that novice and veteran early childhood teachers alike need explicit training along with adequate time and opportunity to become confident in providing effective social and emotional learning opportunities for their students.

Previous studies (Domitrovich et al., 2010; Durlak & DuPre, 2008) found that teachers who believe that there is a need for SEL and are committed to providing SEL in preschool, are the most effective at implementing SEL activities and/or programs in their early childhood classrooms. Thus, future research might investigate the effects of exposure to SEL training and coaching on teachers' SEL beliefs and/or classroom practices. The impact of age and racial identity on teacher SEL beliefs and/or classroom practices would be another area worthy of further investigation. Research with larger, more regionally expanded participation including teachers with various levels of SEL training would also be beneficial.

Limitations

As in all studies, certain limitations should be acknowledged. Data were collected through survey method, and the limitations of self-report data have been noted (Sallis & Saelens, 2000). While participants remained anonymous, bias associated with individuals reporting on their own experiences (Devaux & Sassi, 2016) as well as a tendency to either consciously or unconsciously present a favorable image of themselves, known as socially desirable reporting, could also obscure the relationships between variables (Van de Mortel, 2008). Further, participants were a homogenous, convenience sample of prekindergarten teachers from a single school. As a result, a

small sample size and homogeneity of participants limit the generalizability of findings. Due to limited resources, a qualitative element was not included in this study.

Conclusions

Given the growing body of research linking SEL with later academic outcomes (Cooper et al., 2014; Durlak et al. 2011; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009), impactful SEL in the preschool setting has the potential to serve as an equity tool in educating young economically disadvantaged students of color (Jagers et al., 2019). Since classroom teachers are the primary implementers of SEL, perceptions and beliefs about SEL likely influence delivery, evaluation, and outcomes (Brackett et al., 2012; Buchanan et al. 2009). By increasing knowledge of teachers' perceptions of SEL, administrators and instructional coaches will be able to make data-informed decisions regarding SEL programs/products, professional development training, and classroom-level behavior intervention strategies. Given that administrators and classroom teachers are expected to address social and emotional developmental teaching standards in all 50 states in the United States (Dusenbury & Weissberg, 2017), more research about teacher perceptions of those standards must be conducted, preferably using larger samples and including qualitative components. Specifically, research must address the gap concerning the cultural relevance of SEL programs in public school settings, specifically those serving students of low socioeconomic status and/or of color (Durlak et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2019).

In this school-specific study, hypothesized trend lines were not supported by the data. These findings suggest that personal beliefs for teachers about social and emotional learning are highly individualized. To support teachers in developing SEL instructional skills and increasing comfort level, personal relationships with administrators and coaches as well as the use of individualized goals are essential. It is recommended that both pre- and in-service early childhood teachers receive the training and support necessary to help students make positive, responsible decisions, create frameworks to achieve their goals, and build positive relationships with others.

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