

The role of leadership in implementing social–emotional learning in the online classroom

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Abstract

Implementing social–emotional learning (SEL) at K–12 online schools is critical for the growth of students. The basic qualitative study aimed to explore the perceptions of online K–12 teachers to understand the leadership support needed for teachers implementing SEL curricula. The experience of leadership support with SEL and the impact of a principal's leadership style on SEL implementation were examined. The themes indicated a need for teacher support in SEL implementation through communication, professional development and training. School leaders should have a transformational leadership style to implement SEL effectively in online classrooms.

Paper type Research paper



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Introduction

Social–emotional learning (SEL) is the development of different skills, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making (Collaborative of Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2023g). Jagers, Rivas-Drake, and Williams (2019) found that SEL improves classroom behavior, academic achievement, better stress management skills, and improved attitudes toward others and self. Self-awareness is one's knowledge of emotions, thoughts and values. Self-management is the regulation of emotions and behavior. Social awareness is the ability to empathize with others and understand norms (Greater Good in Education, 2022). Relationship skills allow for listening well, negotiating conflicts and cooperating with others, while responsible decision-making requires assessment of consequences and actions and making a solid decision



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(McCormick *et al.*, 2019). If affected by disruptive emotions or external stressors, anxiety can affect students' academic performance. SEL-based education can give students the tools needed to succeed in school, chosen careers and beyond (Lubit & Lubit, 2019).

Implementation of SEL requires support from teachers, administrators, coaches, monitors, staff and the community (Esen-Aygun & Cigdem, 2017). Melnick and Martinez (2019) stated robust SEL implementation requires training for all parties with ongoing support and coaching. By teaching emotional competency, all students learn essential skills for future success (Ahmed, Aswati Binti, & Abdullah, 2020). SEL and its impact in the modern world needs to be reviewed so positive citizens can be developed, and academic success can walk hand-in-hand with social and emotional success (McCormick *et al.*, 2019). The online education realm differs from face-to-face learning (Katzman & Stanton, 2020). Exposure to SEL in the online platform leads to greater success and a sense of connection and community for students, leading to greater longevity in online platforms (Katzman & Stanton, 2020). Tawfik, Shepherd, Gatewood, and Gish-Lieberman (2021) found a relationship between leadership and administrative support, and if the relationship was positive and strong, the school was successful with online learning. Implementation of SEL in an online educational setting can lead to success for students, and the role of leadership in SEL program development and implementation is critical (Hardy, 2018).

The problem was lack of leadership support for teachers who are implementing SEL curricula within K–12 online schools. Students in an online setting need more SEL support from teachers than K–12 students in the traditional brick-and-mortar classroom (Melanson, 2019). The purpose of the basic qualitative study will be to explore the perceptions of online K–12 teachers to understand leadership support needed for teachers who are implementing SEL curricula. The study aims to understand how leadership style impacts SEL implementation for online K–12 teachers living in the United States.

Literature review and theoretical framework

Background

SEL has proven to affect students' behavior, academic outcomes and classroom climate positively (McCormick *et al.*, 2019). Applied in an academic context, SEL and attention to social and emotional concerns is a practical focus in education. Academics should not be the only focus in an educational setting, as many elements impact students' attitudes, motivations and success. SEL skill building can build and sustain relationships, create responsive, caring and inclusive classrooms, and provide a foundation for students' academic success as excellent citizens (Schonert-Reichl & Hymel, 2007). Kennedy (2019) explored how school leaders implementing SEL reforms from a caring and equity-oriented lens impacted teacher implementation. Schoolwide results showed that the school's leadership created a more supportive environment for teacher-led SEL implementation. The gap in the literature indicates that while SEL and the implications and strategies with students have been studied face-to-face and online, no research has addressed the impact of school leadership style, including transformational leadership and implementation of SEL in an online environment (Hardy, 2018). Exploring the perceptions of K–12 online teachers of students was necessary to determine how digital leadership style influences the implementation of an SEL curriculum (Rockwood, 2021).

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework focused on the transformational leadership theory (Burns, 1978) and was supported by the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model (ASCD, 2014). The WSCC model is a holistic approach with 10 components that impact a student's health and academic success (Willgerodt, Walsh, & Maloy, 2020). With WSCC, the child or student is at the center of the classroom, and all actions are performed to help support student development. WSCC promises that every child can reach their full potential across

developmental domains (Chafouleas & Iovino, 2021). Students should be examined through physical, academic, social, emotional and behavioral lenses (National Commission on Social, Emotional and Academic Development, 2018). Students should be examined as academic beings and as whole humans with social and emotional needs. With the information supported by the WSCC model, transformational leadership theory served as the theoretical framework for this study. Transformational leaders have many attributes, including self-awareness, confidence, trustworthiness and collaboration (Ugoani, Christian, & Emenike, 2015). Self-aware transformational leaders successfully implement SEL within the school (Allen, Grigsby, & Peters, 2015). Transformational leadership is required to implement the SEL skills necessary for students to grow and develop. Transformational leaders think outside the box, consider all stakeholder relationships and are creative about structure (Buil, Martinez, & Matute, 2019; Elias, O'Brien, & Weissberg, 2006).

Mahfouz and Gordon (2021) found that effective leadership begins with principals—proactive, highly self-aware leaders who can recognize personal values, beliefs and emotions. Principals can take a transformative leadership lens, learn to self-reflect and identify inequities for teachers and students. Chu and DeArmond (2021) recommended that school leaders play a vital role in implementing SEL as a whole-school effort and that they should share best practices and data. SEL interventions are effective when a principal exercises transformational leadership traits and a climate is safe, caring, supportive and well-managed (Allen *et al.*, 2015; Schonert-Reichl, 2019).

SEL and online learning

Katzman and Stanton (2020) stated that barriers to success exist in online learning. However, exposure to SEL in the online platform leads to greater success and a sense of connection and community, leading to greater longevity in online platforms (Katzman & Stanton, 2020). Walker and Venker Weidenbenner (2019) examined technology in developing SEL skills, specifically empathy. They researched the benefits of coupling technology with developing SEL skills and employed a qualitative interpretive research method. One finding was that technology can be used to assess and teach SEL skills. However, technology should be paired with the mediation of speech and community-building interaction within an online environment.

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted students around the globe. Hamilton and Gross (2021) stated that school closures meant learning occurred online, students did not interact with teachers, peers and other adults, and could not participate in extracurricular activities. Students were balancing family health and welfare, and some teachers acquired new responsibilities. In 2021, the Center on Reinventing Public Education gathered a panel to assess and examine child development and mental health due to the pandemic. The effects on students and mental health were widespread. The panel additionally noted that students' mental and social-emotional health were not adequately addressed, and SEL was needed for all students. SEL approaches should be innovative; online approaches need even more extensive support (Exner-Cortens, Spiric, Crooks, Syeda, & Wells, 2020; Hamilton & Gross, 2021).

SEL implementation

Before an SEL program is implemented, educators and administrators should self-examine their needs to look at beliefs and the use of responsive practices (Barnes & McCallops, 2019). Cressey (2019) recommended that when implementing SEL practices at the school level, culturally responsive practices are an essential lens to consider as the foundation for SEL. Teachers should focus on personal emotional regulation and mindfulness. With this focus, culturally responsive education and SEL are integrated, and the integration prepares future teachers and supports students (Cressey, 2019). Risks are associated with culturally responsive education and SEL as SEL can become stressful for minority students. Teachers and administration should be aware of the risk for nonminority students and plan to include all learners and all experiences with implementing SEL (Cressey, 2019).

SEL programs should be long-term and meaningful, which can challenge schools (Allbright, Marsh, Kennedy, Hough, & McKibben, 2019). Morgan, Close, Siller, Kushner, and Brasher (2021) found a need for teachers to be equipped with tools and professional development that assist in the transition to SEL programs that are socially inclusive and diverse. Teachers benefited from professional development to prepare for active engagement in implementing SEL (Morgan *et al.*, 2021).

SEL implemented intentionally is most successful (Allbright *et al.*, 2019). The implementation should vary depending on the support at the site and the student population. What remains to be studied is the specific link between the leadership style of administration and the success of teacher implementation in SEL curricula in K–12 online education (Hardy, 2018).

Research questions

Exploring the perceptions of K–12 online teachers in the United States in the essential qualitative study evaluated the effectiveness of the support received from leadership in implementing an SEL support curriculum to better understand improvements needed from school leaders. The following research questions guided the study:

- (1) What resources and community and professional development support are needed for K–12 online teachers to implement SEL in the online classroom?
- (2) What are the perceptions of K–12 online teachers about leadership support received in implementing SEL in the online classroom environment?

Methods

This study was a basic qualitative study, which recorded participant experiences from questionnaire data related to the research questions (Kostere & Kostere, 2021; Teherani, Martimianakis, Stenfors-Hayes, Wadhwa, & Varpio, 2015). A basic qualitative approach was fitting for this research because it drew on participant experiences and perspectives through a questionnaire and focus group (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The 15 participants were K–12 teachers serving online schools in the United States. LinkedIn was used to recruit participants who were asked to review the recruitment letter. The LinkedIn group administrator was contacted for permission to post in groups that fit the sample sought (Forero *et al.*, 2018). A recruitment flyer was posted for those who qualified within the group and were interested in participating in the study (see Appendix D). The sampling method was purposeful (Forero *et al.*, 2018). Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants who may have unique perspectives and live across the United States but still work in a K–12 online environment. Purposeful sampling is the most efficient and cost-effective method (Acharya, Prakash, Saxena, & Nigam, 2013). Using LinkedIn alone, 15 participants could not be located, so snowball sampling was employed. Snowball sampling allowed for the recruitment of research participants by asking the current participants to assist in identifying other potential subjects.

Interested participants reviewed the recruitment flyer and, if interested, reached out to the email address listed. The informed consent form was emailed to interested participants in PDF format so the participants could digitally sign the consent. Once the informed consent form was complete, emailed to the researcher, and stored in a Google Drive, the questionnaire was emailed to the participant. The results from the questionnaire were encrypted to ensure greater protection. The questionnaire was self-administered via Google Forms, and at the time of submission, a numerical identification was randomly assigned to each participant for anonymity. Questions related directly to the research questions and overall alignment of the study as alignment builds a smooth flow to the research and allows for the reproduction of the research by other individuals (Newman & Covrig, 2013). Participants accessed the questionnaire through the emailed link after completing the informed consent; participants

were given 2 weeks to complete individual responses. Google Forms automatically tracked the date of submission from each participant. Following submission of the questionnaire, participant responses were securely stored in Google Drive, and participants received an emailed copy of individual questionnaire responses.

After completing the questionnaire, all data were manually reviewed and coded. Purposeful sampling was used to ensure variety in perspective, and the process utilized for coding analysis was Creswell and Poth's (2018) spiral analysis model. Five K–12 online teachers who participated in the questionnaire were chosen to contribute to a focus group. Using a questionnaire and focus group in the study allowed for data triangulation and deepened understanding of participant experiences and perspectives (Caillaud & Flick, 2017). Participants who agreed to participate in the focus group met through Zoom Video Communications. The focus group was asked to reflect on and provide insight into the questionnaire. Surmiak (2018) stated that one way to support vulnerable populations and maintain confidentiality, which is essential in research ethics, is through password-protected technology. Thus, the focus group Zoom session and recording were password protected. Participants were asked before the recording if they consented to be recorded, and the focus group session lasted 45 minutes.

Data preparation

Data were generated from questionnaires, and responses were saved and coded manually. Excel was used for coding the data. Data were collected and analyzed manually for thematic patterns. Leadership style and the impact on teacher implementation of SEL curricula were examined to discover themes. After the data were collected and codified, five members from the participant group were chosen, using purposeful sampling, for the focus group (Adashi, Walters, & Menikoff, 2018). Data were downloaded from the Zoom recording to analyze the focus group responses and transcribed manually using a combination of Microsoft Word and Otter. Otter.ai is a transcription software that transcribes meeting notes in real-time. For privacy and anonymity, all responses were stored in a Google Drive and will be destroyed after the mandated 3 years after the end of the study.

Data analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted using Excel for the qualitative data. Coding and analysis were completed manually, and an exact copy of each questionnaire response was carefully recorded, saved and analyzed. To delve further into the study's qualitative data, identifying the themes and then coding this information were important. Thematic analysis is one of the most powerful methods when trying to understand a lived experience and a need exists for considering experiences, thoughts and behaviors in the data. The approach used in the data analysis was the inductive theme analysis approach, whereby themes came from the data that were produced. This approach was useful for considering data within a specific finding or research question. Thematic analysis allowed for larger and more complex data to be organized in a meaningful way to discover themes and make sense of the data.

The process utilized for coding analysis was Creswell and Poth's (2018) spiral analysis model. The first step was to prepare and organize the data. Step 2 was to take note of the emergent ideas before classifying them into themes in Step 3. The final step in manual coding was to assess interpretations based on the themes and then present all data visually (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To maintain confidentiality, a numerical identification was assigned to each participant as part of the questionnaire process. Names were removed from documents. Data were analyzed, themes were explored and the focus group was asked to participate in the group Zoom meeting to provide further insights.

In sum, data in this study were examined repeatedly. Then, initial codes were generated based on the questionnaire responses, and the data were organized around common themes. Next, the themes were reviewed to make sure enough data existed for each theme and each

theme made sense concerning the research questions. Once themes were identified, the themes were categorized and named, and the final report was produced (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Field notes were taken and a transcript downloaded from Zoom for further perspectives to support the research (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018).

Threats to objectivity are important to consider. Such threats can include a researcher's integrity or working environment being compromised, a conflict of interest or appearance of risk so that the researcher will not take action. Potential threats to objectivity can impact the study if the researcher cannot maintain objectivity (Harvey & Dasborough, 2018). In this study, no threats to objectivity were present.

Results

Data were analyzed to align with the research questions. Exploring the perceptions of K–12 online teachers in the United States in the basic qualitative study evaluated the effectiveness of the support received from leadership in implementing an SEL support curriculum to better understand improvements needed from school leaders. The following research questions guided the study:

- (1) What resources and community and professional development support are needed for K–12 online teachers in the implementation of SEL in the online classroom environment?
- (2) What are the perceptions of K–12 online teachers about leadership support received in the implementation of SEL in the online classroom environment?

Two themes were identified addressing Research Question 1—leadership and communication—and two themes were identified addressing Research Question 2—professional development and success.

Theme: leadership

Leadership was a prominent theme that aligned with Research Question 1, derived from the questionnaire and focus group responses. The leadership theme refers to the importance of leadership in the implementation of SEL curricula and support for K–12 online teachers. Of the 15 teachers, 9 reported feeling supported by leadership in their implementation of SEL. The remaining six teachers felt only partially or not at all supported by their leadership in the implementation of SEL.

Theme: communication

The second theme aligned with Research Question 1 was communication in SEL implementation. Four teachers perceived communication as an important part of leadership in implementing SEL curricula. Participant 3 explained the culture of the school and SEL implementation, stating, "We collaborate and communicate regularly as a team and share best practices, so it is obvious SEL is a priority." (See Table 1)

Table 1. Teachers' perceptions of communication importance and SEL implementation

Participant	Perception of supports needed
112	"Leadership helps by actually meeting you and getting down at ground level. And we're the ones, the teachers are the ones that are meeting face-to-face with students and knowing what is going on. And so, I think it's important for them [leaders] to work with teachers when making big decisions related to students."
167	"I think just getting together more in meetings to discuss this with everyone. I think we just need to talk more and have the language incorporated, and be in communication."

Research question 2 themes*Theme: professional development and training*

Professional development and training was the first emergent theme related to Research Question 2. Professional development and training was identified by teachers as important for SEL curriculum implementation. According to eight of the 15 respondents, professional development and training was described as an important resource for teachers to implement SEL. Three teachers noted the importance of leaders providing opportunities for teachers to continue their training.

Theme: success

Success was the second theme that emerged from the data addressing Research Question 2. Teachers perceived success as part of SEL implementation, noting if a school had a strong SEL program, students would be successful. SEL and its impact in the modern world need to be reviewed so positive citizens can be developed and academic success can walk hand-in-hand with socioemotional success (McCormick *et al.*, 2019). Questionnaire and focus group participants noted success as a theme in SEL implementation. Teachers also believed modeling a strong program could lead to success, which would support strong SEL implementation. Participant 56 linked success to leadership when stating, "SEL is seen as the foundation for student success, and the teacher (and ultimately leadership) are responsible for getting students to success." (see Table 2)

Discussion

Research Question 1 addressed the resources and community and professional development support needed for K–12 online teachers in the implementation of SEL. Perspectives shared by participants demonstrated a need for strong leadership within the school and clear and transparent communication that is ongoing. Emergent themes for Research Question 1 included leadership and communication.

Research Question 2 sought to examine participants' perceptions of leadership support received in the implementation of SEL in a K–12 online environment. Participants explained the importance of support through ongoing and robust training and the overall significance of a successful SEL program for students. Emergent themes for Research Question 2 were professional development and training, and success. Data yielded insights and potential solutions for administration to support SEL implementation in K–12 online classrooms. Research questions and findings are detailed further.

Findings, interpretations and conclusions

The study could help fill a gap in the literature by examining the leadership styles of administrators and the impact of styles on SEL implementation in schools (Liu, 2021). Two themes arose addressing the first research question: leadership and communication. The themes of professional development, training and success emerged to describe the second research question. Transformational leadership theory was the theoretical framework guiding

Table 2. Teachers' perceptions of success and support needed for SEL implementation

Participant	Perception of supports needed
2	"SEL is seen as the foundation for student success, and teachers (and ultimately leadership) are responsible for getting students to success."
117	"SEL is important to be modeled from the top to bottom of the school organization. Teachers need to see that administrators/leaders see the benefit of SEL success throughout the school."

the study (Bass & Bass, 2008). The importance of a specific leadership style was identified. Distance Learning Findings are described and linked to the guiding theory and literature reviewed, and each section is aligned with the research questions.

Research question 1

In Research Question 1, the support for K–12 online teachers in implementing SEL curriculum through the questionnaire and focus group was examined. Leadership and communication emerged as the two themes from the first research question. Participants described the significance of leadership and communication and the importance of both to the successful implementation of SEL in a K–12 online environment. Of the 15 teachers, 9 reported feeling supported by leadership in implementing SEL. The remaining six teachers felt only partially or not at all supported by their leadership in the implementation of SEL.

The first research question of the questionnaire asked participants to reflect on the resources, community and professional development support needed for K–12 online teachers in the implementation of SEL. The first theme which emerged was leadership. In the data, participants explained the importance of leadership as they implemented SEL initiatives. According to participants, SEL implementation with fidelity across grade levels meant creating consistency through strong leadership. Teachers and administrative staff should be models of SEL for online students, and if strong modeling does not occur, SEL implementation can suffer (Geesa, Robbins, & Shively, 2022; Liu, 2021).

The second theme from the first research question, communication, was described by participants as sharing best practices about SEL implementation, connecting with leadership and colleagues, and creating a supportive atmosphere helping make SEL implementation easier and student success in K–12 online schools inevitable. Communication about SEL should be clear and ongoing and can help stakeholders understand SEL, engage teachers and staff in SEL implementation, build enthusiasm for implementation and increase awareness around SEL (Collaborative of Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2023a; Khan, Rehmat, Butt, Farooqi, & Asim, 2020). By teaching emotional competency, all students, regardless of background, learn essential skills for future success (Barnes & McCallops, 2019; Yeh, Sharma, Jaiswal-Oliver, & Wan, 2021).

Findings related to existing literature. Leadership occurred as the first theme in response to the first research question. The literature supports the importance of leadership in K–12 online SEL implementation. Online school leaders should play a vital role in the implementation of SEL as a whole-school effort and share best practices and data with teachers (Chu & DeArmond, 2021; Geesa *et al.*, 2022). School leaders should do several things to support SEL implementation, including tending to the self-efficacy of students and teachers, providing training, choosing SEL programming fitting with the culture, understanding research on all pertinent issues, and identifying strengths in students and teachers (Kennedy, 2019; Martinsone, Ferreira, & Talic, 2020). When buy-in from school leaders and effective leadership exist at a school, teachers are involved in developing a connection to the school mission, impacting implementation and intervention around SEL (Mahfouz & Gordon, 2021). SEL interventions are effective when a school leader exercises transformational leadership traits and the climate is safe, caring, supportive and well-managed (Allen *et al.*, 2015; Schonert-Reichl, 2019).

Literature also supports the importance of communication in online K–12 SEL implementation (Geesa *et al.*, 2022; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Within a school community, communication should be part of prioritizing SEL. Teachers should be encouraged to provide regular feedback and engage in dialogue with school leaders to improve SEL implementation (Kennedy, 2019). Online K–12 school leaders should prioritize SEL initiatives and align plans with input from staff, students, and families (Varghese & Natsuaki, 2021). School leaders should also develop an understanding of SEL to include various frameworks and school policies around SEL (Education Development Center, 2023; Katzman & Stanton, 2020).

Regular and consistent communication can improve the trust between a faculty team and the larger community so that schoolwide implementation of online SEL is more straightforward (Geesa *et al.*, 2022; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). SEL implementation should include regular communication with all stakeholders, opportunities for community feedback and regular reviews for effectiveness (Collaborative of Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2023c). SEL implementation's vision, mission and goals should be communicated to online staff to reflect on best practices, future successes and challenges (Education Development Center, 2023; Liu, 2021).

Findings related to theoretical framework. SEL curricula implemented by transformational leaders have the power to transform schools (Hardy, 2018; Elias *et al.*, 2006). One participant in the study explained the importance of leadership modeling SEL competencies for better SEL implementation. Transformational leaders possess emotional intelligence, confidence, trustworthiness and collaboration (Ugoani *et al.*, 2015). The participant stated that the administration should acknowledge the feelings of staff and govern with humility to model SEL. If school leaders possess emotional intelligence, the resources and support teachers need for successful K–12 online SEL implementation are more easily understood (Ugoani *et al.*, 2015).

Research question 2

The study explored participants' perceptions of leadership in SEL implementation within K–12 online schools, as addressed by Research Question 2. Professional development, training and success emerged as the two themes from the second research question. Participants described the importance of professional development, training, and success and how both contribute to successfully implementing SEL in a K–12 online environment. According to 8 of the 15 respondents, professional development and training were essential resources for teachers to implement SEL. Participants explain the need for and value of consistent, ongoing professional development. Online school leaders should create professional development to support teachers with SEL implementation (Kwan, 2020; Kennedy, 2019).

The second theme of Research Question 2 indicated participants' beliefs regarding the linkage between a strong SEL program and student success. One participant explained that teacher and leadership modeling from the top to bottom of the school organization leads to SEL success. Participants described the need for school leaders to understand how online SEL implementation can lead to student success. By teaching emotional competency, all students learn essential skills to become socially responsible citizens in the future (Ahmed *et al.*, 2020).

Findings related to existing literature. The first theme of the second research question addressed the need for professional development and training by online school leaders for online teachers. Participants described feeling supported by school leaders if they received consistent professional development. Through professional development and training, goals should be established for an online SEL program (Geesa *et al.*, 2022). Implementing SEL is an ongoing practice that is effective when adult SEL skills and competencies are promoted. Professional learning and training for online teachers should occur over time and be implemented using evidence-based practices (Bozkus & Bayrak, 2019; Collaborative of Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2023f; Willgerodt *et al.*, 2020). Modeling by school leaders as part of training is vital to building SEL skills and mindsets (Collaborative of Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2023e; Hardy, 2018). During day-to-day interactions, school leaders should model SEL (Elias *et al.*, 2006; Mahoney *et al.*, 2020). To model SEL competencies, online school leaders can conduct brief daily virtual check-ins, conduct one-to-one staff and faculty meetings regularly, share a verbal appreciation for the time and be visible with time spent interacting with stakeholders (Collaborative of Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2023e; Hardy, 2018).

The second theme that emerged from the second research question was success. In the data and teacher reflections, success referred to mastery of developmental skills, as defined by curriculum standards, assessment and practice. Developmental skill building for SEL can include sustaining relationships, creating responsive, caring and inclusive students, and providing a foundation for students' academic success as excellent citizens (Schonert-Reichl & Hymel, 2007). For successful SEL implementation, online school leaders should select a student curriculum that considers all SEL competencies and prioritizes developmental benchmarks (Cressey, 2019; Melanson, 2019; Denham, 2018).

Findings related to theoretical framework. Positive school environments can promote the growth of students physically, psychologically, cognitively, socially and emotionally (Collaborative of Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2023d, g). The study confirmed that most participants view the success of K–12 online SEL implementation by school leaders who consider the whole child holistically. The WSCC model is a holistic approach with ten components impacting a student's health and academic success (Willgerodt *et al.*, 2020; ASCD, 2014). With WSCC, the child or student is at the center of the classroom, and all actions performed are to support student development. Transformational leaders or those who exercise transformational leadership skills can promote the implementation of SEL using the WSCC model, focusing on academics and the psychosocial and physical environment established for students (Willgerodt *et al.*, 2020; Murray, Hurley, & Ahmed, 2015). Students should be examined as academic beings and as humans with social and emotional needs (Collaborative of Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2023g; National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, 2018).

The first theme that arose from the second research question was professional development and training. The WSCC model can be integrated to support a concerted effort in Online SEL implementation and can result in layered opportunities for students to practice SEL skills (Colorado Department of Education Wellness Unit, 2023). WSCC can assist teachers in approaching SEL implementation with a schoolwide lens. All faculty and staff should be provided with professional training on supporting the development of healthy SEL skills (Colorado Department of Education Wellness Unit, 2023).

The second theme that emerged within the second research question was success. To create a successful online environment for SEL implementation, transformational leaders should lead with vision and courage and should be committed to developing staff members' SEL skills. For students to reach their goals, the SEL environment should be considered daily, and online teachers and transformational leaders should model caring and moral behavior (Liu, 2021; Mahoney *et al.*, 2020). When implementing SEL, online school leaders should consider all stakeholder relationships (Buil *et al.*, 2019; Elias *et al.*, 2006). Measuring online SEL success requires school leaders to adopt a developmental lens in which SEL is measured through a developmental foundation, standards, assessment and instruction (Denham, 2018). Leaders should have a clear framework that informs assessment (Denham, 2018). The development of standards and assessments should be supported by professional development for online teachers (Denham, 2018).

Study limitations

The first limitation of the study was the recruitment of participants through LinkedIn. The study participants were sampled from a specific group of teachers with access to LinkedIn, so bias may exist in the type of individuals who hold membership to the networking site. To overcome this limitation, advertisements for the study could occur outside of LinkedIn at more populated social media sites.

Another limitation was the use of technology, which could limit some teachers who need access to the technologies used in the study. To overcome this limitation, the questionnaire was presented on a public, accessible Google Form, and the focus group was conducted on a camera-free, no-cost and secure web conferencing software that can be downloaded on a

mobile device. A final limitation was time and travel. No travel was required or an option for participants in the study. However, the data collection time was limited to a 10-week term.

Implications for the field

Teachers from the questionnaire and focus group perceived support for SEL implementation from school leadership as superficial. School leaders should use the transformational leadership approach with an equity-focused lens to move from superficial support to transformational support for effective online SEL implementation (Kennedy, 2019). A transformational leadership approach with an equity focus creates a welcoming, inclusive school (Kennedy, 2019). A servant leader with a transformational lens and a person who is committed to equity, ongoing learning, personal growth and emotional intelligence may also be effective in SEL implementation (D'Ascoli & Piro, 2022; Schonert-Reichl & Hymel, 2007). School leaders interested in honing transformational leadership skills should be trained in strategies for giving feedback, learning to leverage others' strengths, helping faculty and staff see a larger vision and mission, and in methods of frequent and varied communication (D'Ascoli & Piro, 2022).

School leaders should also understand the importance of communication in the SEL implementation process (Collaborative of Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2023b; Rosanbalm, 2021). Schools should establish SEL teams, the source of information and foundational implementation for a schoolwide SEL approach. Families should be an essential part of the SEL implementation process. Connections and reinforcement of SEL skills can be built between the school and the family. School leaders should learn about communities served through surveys, open houses or communication outreach. Next, school leaders can invite families to help create SEL goal generation for children by identifying specific skills they would like students to develop. A resource center or a space where families can access physical resources designed to support families can also be created (Billy & Garriguez, 2021; Shafer, 2018). Community partners and organizations can share in shaping SEL with students so students witness SEL outside of school and view SEL skills as lifelong (Collaborative of Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2023b). To incorporate diverse perspectives from the school community, all stakeholders should collaborate to create an SEL communication plan (Collaborative of Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2023a, b). A plan for communication about SEL implementation should explain the importance of SEL for all students, support all school leaders in communicating regularly about SEL and ensure that messaging is consistent to address gaps in knowledge. A communication plan involving all stakeholders can build support, enthusiasm and transparency about goals and SEL achievements (Collaborative of Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2023a, b). To create a long-lasting communication plan, online school leaders should address their challenges, create an action plan with a team and monitor progress toward more frequent, streamlined communication (Collaborative of Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2023a, b).

Online school leaders should be creative in approaching SEL professional development online. SEL guidance for in-person schools is clearly defined, but as Geesa *et al.* (2022) noted, how online schools should implement SEL needs to be clarified. Geesa *et al.* (2022) suggested that professional development for online learning should include the student's perspective, be immediately transferrable to the online classroom, and allow opportunities for feedback, reflection, sharing and collaboration. Professional development for online teachers should be sequenced and follow the development of competencies, active and focused on helping students develop new skills, focused by guiding teaching to implement curriculum intentionally and explicitly or targeting specific skills (Geesa *et al.*, 2022; Bailey, Stickle, Brion-Meisels, & Jones, 2019).

When considering a new professional development program to support online teachers for SEL implementation, online school leaders should follow the sequential thinking process from

Geesa *et al.* (2022). First, school leaders should survey teachers about challenges faced when implementing SEL. Next, problems encountered in SEL implementation by teachers are defined, and school leaders brainstorm solutions to teacher problems. Finally, after training modules for SEL implementation are developed for online teachers, modules are sent for review before publishing (Geesa *et al.*, 2022).

Approaches that could be used for professional development for SEL implementation include utilizing one morning per week for collaboration between teachers, asynchronous professional development held before a professional development meeting, the freedom for teachers to choose the meeting day and time for professional development or one-on-one meetings between teachers and administration to develop and support individualized needs in SEL implementation (Kennedy, 2019; Raywid, 1993). To create more time for SEL throughout the school day, K–12 online school leaders can train teachers to integrate SEL for short periods, integrating subjects as needed. K–12 online school leaders can virtually model the beginning of the day with an SEL or morning meeting, announcements and a reminder of expectations (Dorshorst, 2023). Throughout the day, online school leaders should virtually visit classrooms and guide teachers on integrating SEL within teaching, practicing routines and content learning, encouraging teachers to discuss SEL skills with students (Dorshorst, 2023; Sugishita & Dresser, 2019). Professional development should include the whole-child approach in alignment with the WSCC model. Transformational online school leaders can participate in the WSCC model and SEL implementation by focusing on ongoing professional development and helping teachers set data-driven goals for student SEL (Colorado Department of Education Wellness Unit, 2023).

Professional development and training recommendations

Due to the unique environment of an online school, school leaders should be honest about personal and professional shortcomings and act with self-awareness, realizing there may be opportunities for professional or personal development before implementing SEL effectively. By taking advantage of professional development opportunities that assist in developing adult SEL, the improvement intended with SEL implementation outcomes for the school will be realized. Involving an entire instructional team in shared decision-making can allow diverse perspectives and help school leaders determine goals and track data (New Leaders, 2023; Morgan *et al.*, 2021).

Setting aside time consistently in a school schedule for professional development and providing training for teachers implementing SEL is essential. Online school leaders should develop robust, engaging, ongoing, relevant and monitored professional development. Professional development should be a priority for online school leaders, so time should be set aside to plan for professional development at the beginning of each year (Melnick & Martinez, 2019). Online teachers should be surveyed at the beginning of the school year and asked about their desires and needs for professional development. Online teachers should also be allowed to provide feedback to school leaders about the professional development provided and what sessions were useful and those that were not so that online school leaders can adjust the offered professional development (Kwan, 2020; Melnick & Martinez, 2019). School leaders should plan professional development with best practices in mind and allow time to collaborate and be engaged in hands-on practice. A process for implementation and a professional development training plan will provide students access to lifelong skills needed to become productive adults and lifelong learners through the acquisition of SEL (Billy & Garriguez, 2021).

Professional development should not be an information exchange but responsive to online teacher needs and should be proactive, engaging, relevant and something that can be implemented immediately into teacher practice (Bozkus & Bayrak, 2019; Kennedy, 2019). Participants in the study explained that professional development supporting SEL implementation was critical and should be collaborative, monitored and measured over time. School councils and school leadership should be aware of obstacles such as insufficient

time for SEL implementation and other barriers, as identified by the questionnaire responses. To improve SEL implementation, teachers should have the chance to collaborate and share (ASCD, 2014). Figure 4 depicts the suggested professional development practices cycle online school leaders can use to implement strong professional development and training for online K–12 SEL implementation.

Recommendations for hiring practices

For the most successful SEL implementation, only online school leaders who adhere to the transformational leadership theory or those who exhibit characteristics of the theory should be hired (Ugoani *et al.*, 2015). Mysirlaki and Paraskeva (2020) found that leaders' emotional intelligence impacted virtual team effectiveness, team performance and member satisfaction. The more emotional intelligence a leader possessed, the more effective the team was, as supported by transformational leadership behavior. From the research, Mysirlaki and Paraskeva (2020) found that emotional intelligence and transformational leadership can significantly predict online team effectiveness.

School leaders are the most important figure in students' school lives, next to teachers, since the decisions made by school leaders impact students' day-to-day experiences in school (Rosanbalm, 2021). Online school leaders should understand best practices of leadership and request additional leadership training for self-improvement, if necessary (New Leaders, 2023) reduce wordiness, improve clarity. To start with a strong foundation and begin the process of improvement and change, study findings should be shared with school districts, superintendents, principals, assistant principals and teachers. Sharing findings will inspire change within the field and encourage sharing of best practices. SEL will support lifelong skills and success for students through proper implementation, inspiring and supporting change. To address the findings and conclusions of the study, collaboration should occur with all stakeholders to plan to make SEL an integral part of K–12 online education.

K–12 online school leaders should prioritize SEL implementation, recognizing its significance in supporting student success (Hardy, 2018; Melanson, 2019). K–12 online school leaders should understand the fundamental goal of SEL implementation, which is improving SEL skills for students. SEL skill development can help students grow as citizens, assist students in building and sustaining relationships, create responsive, caring and inclusive classrooms, and provide a foundation for students for academic success (McCormick *et al.*, 2019; Schonert-Reichl & Hymel, 2007).

Second, communication should be a priority for school leaders, and the involvement of parents and other stakeholders in the consistent implementation of SEL will be a solution to success (Shafer, 2018). Third, ongoing, measurable, individualized professional development on SEL implementation and support should be a priority for school leaders to continue assisting teachers in implementing SEL (Kennedy, 2019; Raywid, 1993). Finally, new online teachers may also need specialized training to implement SEL online and to understand the needs of K–12 online students.

Conclusion

Lack of time and strong school leadership were perceived as obstacles to SEL implementation in the K–12 online classroom. School leaders should collaborate with teachers to overcome obstacles, grow to achieve individual emotional intelligence, communicate clearly with all community stakeholders, support ongoing and individualized professional development for teachers, and create a space that is equity-based and safe to implement K–12 online SEL effectively. Literature shows teachers have not been supported at the beginning or throughout the implementation of SEL (Hardy, 2018). More time, strong communication and leadership, and professional development and training are needed to support K–12 online teachers in SEL implementation. Online school leaders should be provided opportunities to continue education

about best-supporting teachers through online professional development. Online professional development provided by school leaders should be robust, engaging, ongoing, relevant and monitored. Online teachers should have the time to collaborate, discuss best practices with leadership, and address feedback and concerns. Additional training for new online teachers should be provided to understand further the specific needs of K–12 online students and how technology can assist in implementing SEL.

Online school leaders who exemplify transformational leadership traits can effectively and successfully support teachers in implementing SEL for students (Hardy, 2018; Kennedy, 2019). The characteristics noted previously, often possessed by a transformational leader, can also apply to servant leaders willing to grow in and integrate SEL skills (D’Ascoli & Piro, 2022). An opportunity exists for all stakeholders to focus on transformational leadership by working together to overcome current issues and obstacles. Online school leaders should regularly be presented with teacher feedback to implement meaningful change for students learning SEL skills in the K–12 online classroom.

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