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Teachers' perspectives of social and emotional learning in Aotearoa New Zealand primary schools

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to study teachers' perspectives of social and emotional learning (SEL) in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) primary schools.

Design/methodology/approach – This research was a case study design investigating the phenomenon of SEL in primary schools (elementary school level) in Aotearoa NZ (Stake, 2005).

Findings – The SEL themes that were drawn from the data were: positive interdependence, empowerment, self-management, self-awareness restorative conversations and circle time.

Research limitations/implications – The research challenges the field to work with teachers and community workers to create more in-depth qualitative research knowledge that is contextually relevant to SEL for researchers, educational policymakers and our children.

Originality/value – Based in Aotearoa NZ primary schools, this qualitative research provides a unique perspective of SEL from school-based practicing teachers.

Keywords Aotearoa New Zealand, Elementary school, SEL global curricula, Social and emotional learning

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In the last decade, there has been a substantial body of theory, research and practice in the area of social and emotional learning (SEL) (Martin *et al.*, 2017), with growing interest among educators and policymakers continuing to expand (Dyson *et al.*, 2016; Humphrey, 2013; Jones and Doolittle, 2017). Broadly speaking, SEL refers to "the process through which individuals learn and apply a set of social, emotional, behavioral, and character skills required to succeed in schooling, the workplace, relationships, and citizenship" (Jones *et al.*, 2017, p. 12). While different disciplines have produced frameworks describing and defining SEL (Garcia, 2014), the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework is among the most prominent, extensively implemented and regarded as a "comprehensive multi-dimensional framework of the skills essential for successful social and emotional development" (Ross and Tolan, 2018, p. 1188).

CASEL (2015) defines SEL as "the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (p. 5). The CASEL (2015)

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framework identifies five interrelated sets of cognitive, affective and behavioral competencies (self-management; self-awareness; social awareness; relationship skills; and responsible decision making), with growing advocacy for its implementation across educational contexts (Weissberg and Cascarino, 2013).

Yet, Ross and Tolan (2018) note that the extensive uptake and implementation of this model, and the evidence-based justification for its use, is limited and "has not been tested for whether it is a multidimensional model and valid in explaining outcomes" (p. 1188). The continued growth in evidence of SEL programs and interventions in these meta-analyses have provided for accomplishing social-emotional outcomes, improving behavior, and increasing academic achievement, has also brought with it a "lack of conceptual and definitional clarity" within the field (Jones *et al.*, 2016). Despite this, dissemination of SEL frameworks, particularly CASEL's, has led to their continued adoption and implementation, becoming the subject of several meta-analyses (Corcoran *et al.*, 2018; Durlak *et al.*, 2011; Korpershoek *et al.*, 2016; Sklad *et al.*, 2012; Wigelsworth *et al.*, 2016; Taylor *et al.*, 2017). Significant findings from these not only highlight the promise of current SEL programs and interventions, but, examine and raise questions about their limitations also, reflected in many studies showing little positive impact on students' SEL outcomes (Hattie, 2012).

Nevertheless, the growth of SEL continues to drive educational reform and policy initiatives, with huge interest and a recent call for conference abstracts explicitly grounded in the area. In addition, the Aspen Institute has just released a nationally commissioned report on SEL (http://nationathope.org/report-from-the-nation-download/). There is a growing Special Interest Group at the American Education Research Association and professional learning and development bodies that are now providing outlets for research and professional work in SEL. But, just how well do teachers understand SEL, and how does it manifest itself within school curricula? Keeping this mind, the purpose of this paper is to explore teacher's perspectives of SEL in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) primary schools.

Research on social and emotional learning

Research shows that implementation of evidence-based SEL interventions and programs can improve both immediate and long-term social-emotional competencies, resulting in direct and measurable academic gains and helping make a meaningful difference in schools and in children's lives (Jones *et al.*, 2017; Taylor *et al.*, 2017). Studies broadly reflect the meta-analyses findings that SEL programs are accomplishing social-emotional outcomes, improving behavior and increasing academic achievement, most notably at early childhood and elementary level (Bierman *et al.*, 2010; Flook *et al.*, 2015; Haslip *et al.*, 2018; Jones *et al.*, 2011; Martínez, 2016; Novak *et al.*, 2017; Raimundo *et al.*, 2013; Schonert-Reichl *et al.*, 2015; Schonfeld *et al.*, 2015; Zhai *et al.*, 2015). However, challenges and limitations have been found that impede the effectiveness of SEL programs, with findings continuing to be mixed in the literature (Coelho and Sousa, 2018; Zhai *et al.*, 2015). A number of studies have called for more defined and sustained measurement of the effectiveness of SEL outcomes (Humphrey *et al.*, 2018; Kendziora and Yoder, 2016; Ross and Tolan, 2018; Wright and Irwin, 2018), including greater focus on measuring students' own perspectives of program quality as an important predictor of outcomes (Ee, 2014; McKown *et al.*, 2013; Pereira and Marques-Pinto, 2018) over a more sustained period of time (Merrell, 2010; Doikou-Avlidou and Dadatsi, 2013). Teachers, students and school contexts emerge as conflicting factors in the implementation of SEL. Teachers' perspectives about SEL programming influence program implementation, efficacy and longevity (Humphrey *et al.*, 2018) and their perceptions of their role in SEL may impede the success of its infusion (Ee and Cheng, 2016).

A significantly conflicting factor is the context. Policymakers are paying increased attention to the role of school climate in student learning (McCormick *et al.*, 2015;

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Weissbourd *et al.*, 2013). There is a need to scrutinize and assess SEL programs, ensuring they are developmentally appropriate for the students they serve (Coelho and Sousa, 2017; Oberle *et al.*, 2014), while also valuing and reflecting the local culture and context where they are delivered (Elias and Leverett, 2011). Studies focusing on evaluating the effectiveness of SEL programs under real-world conditions, so as to enhance their translational value in the natural classroom setting remains a challenge (Carroll *et al.*, 2017; Merrell and Gueldner, 2012). When teachers lack the climate and resources to promote SEL, children show lower levels of on-task behavior and performance (Humphries *et al.*, 2018).

While the case for SEL is strong, how it is implemented and accomplished remains far from clear (Carroll *et al.*, 2017). Wigelsworth *et al.* (2016) argued rather than questioning "does SEL work?" we should instead question "how does SEL work (or, why does it fail?)?" (p. 368). In particular, there is a lack of qualitative research and a predominance of quantitative research designs foregrounded in the literature (Corcoran *et al.*, 2018). Research exploring SEL implementation from teachers' and students' perspectives using qualitative methods is required to help understand what makes effective and sustainable quality SEL programming possible (Martínez, 2016).

The New Zealand school context

While NZ has a variety of different contexts NZ schools are high in math, science and literacy. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2015) ranking show NZ students are 10th out of 70 countries for reading, were 12th in 70 countries for science and were 21st in 70 countries for maths (http://gpseducation.oecd.org/CountryProfile?primaryCountry=NZL&treshold=10&topic=PI). Nonetheless, teachers and principals would argue that the holistic education of students is more appropriate than academic performance.

The NZ curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) is grounded in social constructivism as a theoretical framework. We too adopt a social constructivist perspective we will frame our arguments within the naturalistic setting of the school context, positioning our work with scholars such as Azzarito and Ennis (2003) and Rovegno and Dolly (2006). We agree with Vygotsky (1978), who proposed that interpretation and interactions occurring through cooperative activities was a powerful way to develop knowledge and understanding. From social constructivist theory, the classroom is seen as a community of learners. According to social constructivists, "learning occurs through peer interactions, student ownership of the curriculum and educational experiences that are authentic for students" (Azzarito and Ennis, 2003, p. 179). Dewey (1966) argued that we develop through a teaching of beliefs, emotions and knowledge, which occurs through experiential activities that relate to our social interactions in our schools, and the community. Coming from an interpretivist perspective (Pope, 2006), we seek meaning from the literature with a frame of reference grounded in real-world school-based and community contexts.

The NZ curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) encourages teachers to use experiential education and pedagogical practices with a strong emphasis in education outside the classroom, health and physical education, and a connection to the indigenous Māori peoples of NZ. Restorative practices have shown capacity to build social and emotional skills by focusing on relational practices that empower students (Morrison *et al.*, 2005). There is an expectation that NZ teachers promote an atmosphere of inclusiveness so that all voices can be heard through the practice of restorative conversations (RC) and restorative circle time (Hemphill *et al.*, 2018; New Zealand Ministry of Justice, 2011). RC aim to include students involved in a behavioral incident to explore what has happened, support taking accountability for the harm caused and provide support to repair harm while restorative circle time provide strategies to include all youth in conversations (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2014). Similarly, circle time is a versatile restorative practice that can be used proactively to develop relationships and build

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community or reactively, to respond to wrongdoing, conflicts and problems (Wachtel, 2013). In doing so, SEL competencies and skills can be demonstrated and, in doing so, can provide new opportunities to inform the future directions of SEL programs and interventions. A case study design utilizing qualitative research methods was conducted in NZ primary schools which are outlined in the next section.

Therefore, the purpose of the research was to study the teachers' perspectives of SEL in NZ primary schools. A case study design (Stake, 2005) utilizing qualitative research methods was conducted in NZ primary schools which are outlined in the next section.

Methods

This research adopted a case study (Stake, 2005) design investigating the phenomenon of SEL in primary schools (elementary school level) in NZ. The study used two sources of data (interviews and field notes) drawing on qualitative data collection and data analysis research traditions (Miles *et al.*, 2014).

Settings

The NZ curriculum is unique in that it emphasizes five key competences (relating to others, managing self, thinking, participating and contributing and using language, text, and symbols) and has a unique indigenous (Māori[1]) emphasis infused throughout the curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007). The concept of Hauora has been prompted in NZ curriculum as a more holistic approach to educating children. Hauora is a Māori philosophy of well-being that illustrates the interconnected nature of health. The NZ curriculum adopted and modified Durie's (1998) concept, "Te Whare Tapa Whā" to represent the concept, Hauora (Figure 1).

The Māori philosophy of Hauora presents "Te Whare Tapa Whā," which likens well-being to a house where four equally important walls (or dimensions of health) ensure strength and balance to the house. The four dimensions are Taha hinengaro: mental and emotional well-being; Taha whānau: social well-being; Taha tinana: physical well-being; and Taha wairua: spiritual well-being. Therefore, when teachers and students construct their learning environments, this model is employed to illustrate the interconnected nature of the mental, social, physical and spiritual dimensions.

Participants

This research was in partnership with teachers and the full co-operation of principals in Aotearoa NZ. In total, 18 interviews were carried out with teachers at three primary schools in NZ.

Paletta School was a school of 650 students in a low socioeconomic area of a large urban city. It was a very culturally diverse school, with the most common student ethnicities being Pacific

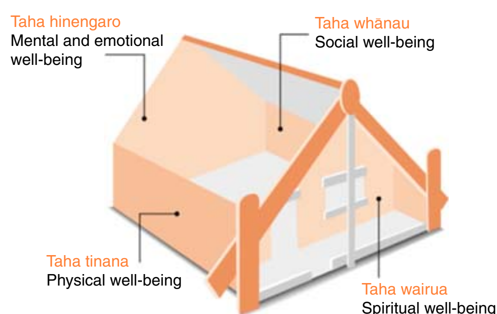

Figure 1.
Hauora

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Islander (40 percent), Māori (29 percent) (Indigenous people of NZ) and Indian (30 percent). Approximately 1 percent of students were White (NZ European). In total, 10 percent of the student population was also identified in the special education program.

Goodson was an elementary school of over 895 students in a mid-socioeconomic area of a large urban city. Approximately 7 percent of students were Pacific Islander, 9 percent were Māori (Indigenous people of NZ) and 29 percent were Asian. Approximately 51 percent of students were White (NZ European) and 4 percent represented a large number of mixed ethnicities.

Pounamu School had approximately 215 students in a low socioeconomic area of a suburb of a large city. Nearly 73 percent of students were Pacific Islander, 23 percent were Māori (Indigenous people of NZ) and 3 percent were Asian. Approximately 1 percent of students were White (NZ European).

Data collection

In total, 18 teachers were interviewed at the three schools in pairs (two teachers) or individually between 55 and 85 min. Nine teachers were interviewed three times in May, July and November. There were a total of 21 interviews and field notes were written during observation at each of the schools.

The study also involved non-participant observation of the classes using an organized method of taking and organizing field notes (Emerson *et al.*, 2011). Field notes were collected by the principal investigator during six 1-h time periods at each school. The investigators took field notes during the classes and then talked to the teacher before and after the class regarding SEL in their curriculum and pedagogy and learning intentions for the lessons.

Data analysis

Inductive analysis and constant comparison were used to analyze this qualitative data (Miles *et al.*, 2014). It is the researcher's obligation to establish trustworthiness by guaranteeing the findings have credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Miles *et al.*, 2014). The process started by transcribing interviews and field notes organized. Once transcriptions were complete, descriptive codes were used to identify and group interesting statements or events from the data sources. All data were entered into NVivo 12 to organize and manage the data. This formed the first-order of analysis, which produced nodes and category descriptions from the data. The second stage of analysis involved the inferential coding of these initial descriptions (Miles *et al.*, 2014). Credibility was achieved through extended engagement with the schools, since this was eight months working at each of the elementary schools. In addition, two member checks were carried out. The first member check consisted of returning all interview transcripts to the teachers, which gave them an opportunity to adapt or modify any parts of the interviews. The second member check involved the teachers meeting with the research team and reading a draft of the interview transcripts to check on their interpretations. In these member checks only editorial and grammatical changes were suggested by the teachers. The dependability of the findings was addressed by laying out an audit trail for a colleague that is familiar with this research, but not directly involved with it (third author). This colleague was then able to challenge the logic behind our interpretations and the conclusions subsequently drawn, resulting in a much more reflective process and account than would otherwise have been possible. Confirmability was attempted by providing a reflexive, self-critical account by triangulating our findings and interpretations. Importantly, throughout the process, peer debriefing with research colleagues and teachers was an iterative process of the data analysis. The non-participant observations, interviews and field notes triangulated the findings. Transferability is a messy concept and it was difficult to determine, that is, whether transfer

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occurs from one school context to another (Miles *et al.*, 2014). We would suggest that transferability becomes plausible when the schools have students with similar demographics and socioeconomic status. We argue that since we have worked in three primary schools for an extended period of time these findings could be transferable to other teachers in other similar school contexts. Trustworthiness was enhanced by utilizing the data analysis strategies and was undertaken through the analysis of data by continually challenging the interpretations of the findings, identifying conceptual links and uncovering key themes and sub-themes through frequent peer debriefing with the researchers and teachers.

Findings

The findings are presented in themes using teachers' words to present their shared perspectives of SEL. All participants have been given pseudonyms. The themes that were drawn from the data were: positive interdependence, empowerment, self-management, self-awareness and RC and circle time.

Positive interdependence

Teachers identified positive interdependence as a key element they incorporated in class. For Kathy, interdependence promoted "acceptance and inclusion," with students "working together to complete a task." Having that "inclusiveness" for Michael meant his students could feel "safe physically and emotionally." Ann understood positive interdependence as providing students with the "tools that they need to be able to talk to each other in a way that is appropriate for the school context." James wanted to encourage his students to be "positive and interdependent on each other," allowing "all students to know that there is a way for them to be valued": "Being able to develop a culture where when students work together they don't just think about getting the job done, but they think about finding ways for every student to feel successful […] like everybody being interdependent to solve the task."

Fostering positive interdependence meant teachers desired students to solve problems cooperatively. Phillip wanted his students working together "to look at ways of supporting each other." Claire referenced getting her students to learn about "working as a team" so that they learned they had "someone to help them if they get stuck because there are two of them working on it together."

From a teacher–student perspective, Sally emphasized the importance of "communication, consistency and connections" with her students in promoting interdependence, emphasizing that "you got to know your kids, you've got to know where they come from, you've got to know the families" when infusing SEL among a diverse range of students: "I think once you start understanding kids, you understand where they come from […] they like to know that when they come to school every day the teachers can have that same smile on their face." Kathy referenced being "connected to the people" as a significant in developing relationships. Collette perceived interdependence as a significant in shaping further learning in her classroom: "If we are thinking around relationship building, we are also thinking around team builders, class builders, learner builders […] they have to build those relationships in order to be able to do those things." Key to successfully fostering positive interdependence and making connections among students and teachers was the demonstration of the following elements or sub-themes that were drawn from the teachers' words: respect, care, sharing, listening, trust and empathy.

Respect

Respect emerged as a skill valued by teachers when they discussed how their students developed interdependence. Teachers provided a number of examples of what they felt respect looked like. For Sarah, it was "saying hello and saying thank you"; for Laura to respect others,

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in turn, meant to “respect yourself.” Mary expanded on this; that as well as being courteous in greeting someone, students also needed to learn “how do you tell [someone] to go away?” Respect for Claire meant students “being able to disagree respectfully.” Demonstrating respect was something which Lisa “treasured,” and hoped her students could practice beyond the classroom and “take that out there to society” and be “with them at home.”

Care

Care was mentioned regularly by teachers when considering SEL. Collette described care as students “having respect, mana [Māori word for respect], understanding, and empathy, and love, aroha [Māori word for love], towards others within your environment”: “It doesn’t mean that you agree, it doesn’t mean that you see things the same way. What it is that you care for that person?” For Kathy, care meant students having their “basic needs met” such as “safety and security” and “consistency with the people in your life.” James felt that by “giving attention to each other,” students responded positively because they knew “that person actually cares about what you are saying and what you are doing.” Claire saw care more broadly in the sense that “care is like being careful and looking after things and helping either people or things at school be the best they can”:

> That might be as simple as picking up rubbish or not walking through the garden or, like, that kind of care and, then yeah, in terms of people, like, respecting how they feel and knowing that when people feel they need something.

Sharing

Claire described the skill of sharing as students “being willing to give someone something you need because they need it as well,” referring to instances where, early on, students “struggle with sharing and taking turns.” She found she had to “break lots of those things down” when teaching students to demonstrate “taking turns, including everybody’s opinion, active listening, and sharing equipment and resources.” A student “giving something up” because they learned that “I might not have this to myself anymore” was an example of sharing by Emily. James tried to teach students early on that they can “contribute as long as they are not cutting someone off or interrupting anyone.” James pursed creating an environment in his class where students felt “safe to be able to share their ideas.” Sarah believed that learning and demonstrating how to share and take turns were necessary for students as they needed to “know what their role is and who is doing the talking and who is doing the listening” and that “everybody is going to get their opportunity.” Helping students to learn this meant Michael observed that his students “all feel like they’ve got something to contribute.”

Listening

Listening was seen as key element from the teachers’ perspectives. Emily felt that listening was “quite hard to teach,” often finding students “are not listening to each other, they just want to get their idea out.” Claire identified teaching “listening and then also responding appropriately,” and asking students “to think about how would you know when someone is listening to you?” Providing opportunities to listen meant Collette felt students could “articulate the ideas of others,” which in turn “would transfer out” of the classroom and “into their home.” In addition, James felt his students needed to “actually learn how to listen properly, not listening while you wait for your turn to speak”:

> What I am trying to achieve is more active listening as well and just being able to give attention to whoever is talking and to put your own needs to the back while you listen […] there’s a lot of stuff they might discover that they are actually missing out on because they are not engaging with the other students.

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Trust

Kathy identified trust as "a key part of social emotional learning." She established trust in her classes by "connecting with the students" and "actually being very purposeful about re-establishing or establishing trust." Collette felt that by adopting the practice of RC, he was "really building the relationship and the trust" with students. Sally saw trust as pivotal and requiring time and "ongoing communication" among everybody involved: "Trust between student to student, student to teacher, teacher to teacher. And so, for some of our kids that actually it takes a long time because they don't trust yet."

Empathy

Empathy emerged as a key skill repeatedly among teachers. Kathy recognized empathy as a "process where the child has to walk in the other person's shoes," similar to Mary who described it as students understanding "how your reaction affects somebody." In Deborah's words, empathy was a skill which required "putting yourself in the position of others." Chris described empathy as demonstrating "care for others." "Developing empathy" was important for Emily, allowing her students to understand others and, "how they feel." Claire saw empathy as "developing understanding and thinking about others." She acknowledged that understanding "when someone does something to you it is because of something in them" and demonstrating empathy is "really hard for a six-year-old to understand," but that "even if a child doesn't display that, if they see it in someone else and understand that a bit more," it was significant. James also saw his students demonstrating empathy by "how much they are aware of what is going on not just in their social circle, or their head, but others as well."

Empowerment

Another practice teachers perceived as important was empowering students. Collette asserted that it is a teacher's responsibility "to empower them and support them." Chris saw empowerment as a means for students "to share their thoughts and shift some of the power to them," requiring him to "let go of control and let the students lead." Kathy believed that "the more empowered you are to be able to know you can resolve things when they come up eliminates some of the fear about taking risks." Giving students "more freedom" meant Monica was able to "empower them." Phillip believed affording students "more freedom so they can choose" to work with others and "empower them to make their own choices" was significant in promoting SEL.

A similarly empowering practice Kathy felt fitted into "teaching social and emotional skills" was positive behavior for learning (PB4L). Collette also alluded to PB4L as a means to empower students. The teachers at two of the schools were required to teach a PB4L lesson every week. PB4L was employed at these schools to empower students to make positive behavior decisions and was connected to managing self, which is one of the key competencies from NZ curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) and recognized by teachers.

Self-management

Self-management emerged as a theme when teachers considered SEL competencies they promoted in their classes. Collette identified self-management as one of the "key competencies" and that "each week the teacher is explicitly teaching some skills around self-management." James wanted his students to be competent in "how they manage their emotions." For him, self-management meant students were independent in "how they manage their emotions" in the classroom. Kathy pinpointed practices which taught students resilience was key for students when demonstrating self-management: "You can't build resilience and transfer the skills of resilience without experiencing opportunities that structurally test that."

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A challenge for Emily when infusing self-management skills into her classes was "that actually some children have very good social skills and emotional awareness but maybe they don't talk about it because they don't have the language." "Getting them to be able to verbalize how they're feeling" was also a priority for Mary in her class: "Understanding the language, you know, the vocabulary […] it might not be everyone says I'm going to be sad. They might say miserable and if you don't know what miserable means and you might not be able to relate." James felt that in understanding the "value in overcoming challenges," his students first needed to learn the appropriate language "that they can fall back on and say to themselves" when doing so. Emily acknowledged that learning to use appropriate language and self-manage themselves allowed students to "express themselves better and deal with conflict."

Self-awareness

Teachers acknowledged self-awareness as critical for students recognizing and managing their emotions. James noted that helping students develop a "growth mindset is a big part" of what he does with his class. Michael wanted students to demonstrate "having that fortitude to deal with the ups and downs that come along." Collette stated her school was actively "supporting and coaching students to be self-aware" so that students "can bring who they are into the school and the classroom." Central to developing students' emotional self-awareness was the fostering of confidence within them as individuals, and as a group. James observed his students "becoming confident at dealing with problems" as a result of focusing on self-awareness. Laura observed that practices involving students demonstrating confidence meant they had "a higher chance of speaking out or attempting new things or doing group tasks."

Restorative conversations and circle time

RC and restorative circle time were seen by teachers as a successful practice in promoting SEL. Sally saw RC as "a way to get the students to manage their own behavior"; that "rather than punishments, we look at consequences," discussing issues in a "very calm way" through a "class together collective": "We discussed what happened and then they actually own the problem because they come out with what they've done depending on what it is or they write a letter of apology." Collette saw RC facilitating students "to be self-aware" and "building those neurological pathways in the brain around the social interactions and development." Key to the success of this practice, she felt, was creating a sense of fairness and justice for students and following up afterwards:

> We have restorative conversations and some classes do restorative circles where it is explicitly talking around emotions how we feel, how we act in those moments of those feelings or emotions, skills and strategies that we can use when we are feeling like out of control […] They learned that their side will get heard, that they have got just as much voice and the processes everybody else […] it's not about having any punishment, it's around having the conversation to restore the relationships […] the follow-up is really important in those situations.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to study the teachers' perspectives of SEL in NZ primary schools. Findings suggest that SEL practices are necessary to meet the intentions of the NZ curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007). When we analyze the teachers' words regarding SEL, we can see a direct relationship between the NZ curriculum key competencies of thinking, relating to others, managing self and participating and contributing (Ministry of Education, 2007) and the teachers' perspectives. While the promotion of SEL was an important part of the enacted curriculum, it did not come directly from a school curriculum, school leadership or NZ curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007). SEL emerged as

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important part of the teachers' operationalized curriculum because they believed that SEL was a part of the education of their students.

From a teacher's perspective, the attainment of certain SEL competencies occurred. However, the extent to which all perceived competencies are considered and implemented varies and this does not automatically mean the attainment of competencies across the board (Ross and Tolan, 2018). Teachers recognized and prioritized certain competencies more than others. For instance, the CASEL (2015) framework competencies of self-management and self-awareness were regularly identified by teachers as being the focus of practice in their classes, observing students demonstrating these in numerous ways. When it came to relationship skills, social awareness and responsible decision making, the elements, skills and practices associated with these competencies, such as care, trust, listening, respect, sharing, empathy and empowerment, were recognized by teachers under the umbrella of positive interdependence. It was within tasks which promoted positive interdependence that teachers recognized students demonstrating these SEL skills. As such, it was through teachers' prioritizing of the broader practice of positive interdependence rather than the explicit individual pursuit of these competencies themselves that these skills were developed and observed. Opportunities for social interactions as a means of developing SEL was a greater priority for teachers as they wanted their students to develop relationships with their peers that could in turn support their greater learning in class. This makes it difficult to establish a relationship between SEL activities the teachers implemented and children's genuine SEL development (Zhai *et al.*, 2015). Adding to the lack of definitive measurement of learning outcomes and competencies, few validated measures for systematically observing and documenting teaching behaviors as they relate to SEL and the affective learning domain (Wright and Irwin, 2018). We cannot assume that all SEL competencies and outcomes were accomplished, suggesting that more empirical research is needed.

The teachers from NZ primary schools placed emphasis on two parts of the national curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007), focusing on the Māori concepts Taha hinengaro (mental and emotional well-being) and Taha whānau (social well-being). However, they did not talk about Taha tinana (physical well-being) or Taha wairua (spiritual well-being). While teachers appeared to value social well-being and emotional well-being in their perspectives, they do not talk about practically implementing practices promoting physical or spiritual well-being. From a NZ teachers' perspective, the lack of focus on physical well-being might be attributed to the lack of dedicated physical education teachers at elementary level (Dyson *et al.*, 2018). Instead, at the primary level in NZ generalist classroom teachers typically focus on traditional academic subjects due to the national standards for math and literacy. We were intrigued that spiritual well-being was not discussed by teachers since it is part of NZ curriculum. Its failure to emerge as an identifiable SEL element from a teachers' perspective suggests that teachers did not attribute value to spiritual well-being in SEL. This comes as no surprise as, generally, spiritual well-being is not the focus of education and policy making in western countries. While, spiritual well-being is widely recognized in society as important it is rare to see example of explicit pedagogies to develop students' spiritual well-being.

The literature from meta-analyses and studies from elementary research have placed significant emphasis on academic improvement as a result of SEL initiatives (Jones *et al.*, 2017; Taylor *et al.*, 2017). It is worth noting that within this study, there was no evidence or suggestion from teachers that SEL can improve academic achievement. This did not appear to be a priority for teachers, who instead valued SEL as a means for students learning positive behavioral competencies and social and emotional skills. Teachers' lack of association of SEL with academic learning in this study could be a result of cultural or education difference coming from NZ. It is important to note that NZ students perform well on OECD assessments. However, it could also be argued that for teachers in this study, promoting SEL meant promoting competencies and skills that helps make their students better people first and foremost and that, perhaps, the conclusions that can be drawn

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regarding the pure influence of SEL on academics is arguably confounded by the explicit academic content of school curricula in general (Humphrey, 2013).

From a teachers' perspective, and in line with Morrison *et al.* (2005) and Hemphill *et al.* (2018), RC emerged as a successful practice in promoting students' SEL. In a couple of interviews (Sally, Collette and Monica) the teachers talked about a behavioral modification system called PB4L. Two of the schools were expected to present one PB4L lesson every week. This indicates that the schools saw the need for an on-going behavioral management system. One of the schools purposely did not use PB4L as behavioral management system (field notes: Michael; Collette). Instead Goodson focused using RC and circle time as a strategy to enhance student's social and emotional development. PB4L is a behavior management system that was designed by the NZ Ministry of Education (2007) to improve behavior management. However, RC was a more substantial contributor to the teachers understanding and pedagogy to improve students' SEL. The teachers in this study appear to have moved beyond PB4L, focusing more on restorative practices which are less punitive and more equitable and inclusive strategies to deal with behavioral problems and create a positive learning environment (Wachtel, 2013). RC are a recognized pedagogical practice that NZ teachers use to teach students SEL. The teacher's perspectives of their success suggest that restorative practices like these should be encouraged and implemented within current and future SEL programs and interventions.

We must consider different students' previous experiences, cultural preferences and economic, social, temporal and emotional differences (Dyson, 2014; Corcoran *et al.*, 2018) when measuring the quality and suitability of SEL programs in a variety of contexts (McCormick *et al.*, 2015; Weissbourd *et al.*, 2013) such as this study. Adopting a qualitative approach and having intimate knowledge of these school and contexts means that there are many degrees of difference from the teacher's perspectives and the findings reported in the literature. There is a need to scrutinize and assess SEL programs, ensuring they are developmentally appropriate for the students they serve (Coelho and Sousa 2017; Oberle *et al.*, 2014), while also valuing and reflecting the local culture and context where they are delivered (Elias and Leverett, 2011). Compared with the predominantly quantitative methodologies meta-analyses and large-scale studies, we should air on the side of caution of falling into the trap of suggesting that one shoe size fits all when it comes to implementing and measuring SEL (Corcoran *et al.*, 2018). All schools were culturally diverse. Paletta and Pounamu were categorized similar to a Title 1 schools and Goodson was from a mid-socioeconomic area but had a diverse student population. Teaching is a messy business, and due to its complexity, any attempt to comment on or improve effectiveness involves a deep understanding of teachers' work and the culture of schooling (Dyson, 2014; Ovens *et al.*, 2013). The same applies for researchers who wish to seek in-depth greater meaning of SEL in schools. Certain teachers prioritized specific competencies and skills over others as they served their students and their contexts best. Qualitative research, such as that which was conducted in this study, helps us to better understand the "black-box" of SEL program interventions (Corcoran *et al.*, 2018) which may not appear using a quantitative approach.

In exploring teachers' unique perspectives of SEL in Aotearoa NZ primary schools the greater macrocosm of how SEL is implemented, observed and measured across schools requires greater consideration. Seeking meaning from an interpretivist perspective (Pope, 2006), the qualitative approach taken within the school-based settings and participants using qualitative procedures and measurements not typically associated with SEL work helped inform us about teachers' perspectives of SEL more clearly. Applied research is difficult enterprise in schools and community settings. We argue that this qualitative inquiry brings into light some of the complexity of such work in defining and measuring the success of SEL so far. This is addressed in the concluding section, along with future recommendations.

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Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to explore and interpret teachers' perspectives of SEL in Aotearoa NZ primary schools. This study is among few which have adopted a qualitative approach to investigating SEL in schools. Qualitative methods were adopted by a desire to understand teachers' lived experience (Maitlis, 2017). Such an approach allowed us to explore the more intricate nature of how teachers in this study interpreted and implemented SEL. As we can see from the findings, developing SEL competencies is not a clear-cut step-by step process. It requires careful intertwining of practices and skills on the part of the teacher and students which naturally differs from school to school, class to class and student to student (Miles *et al.*, 2014). The value of qualitative research is that it provides in-depth knowledge of the context and we would suggest an equally valid means of investigating SEL in schools. Again, we must consider Wigglesworth *et al.*'s (2016) call for questioning how does SEL work; we know that it works, but it is still not clear how SEL works for children, under what circumstances and why (Jones *et al.*, 2017). Appropriate climates and resources for teachers and students cannot always be assumed pre-requisites when promoting social-emotional development in classrooms, which can lead to lower levels of behavior and performance (Humphries *et al.*, 2018). As Sally puts it from a teacher's perspective: "you got to know your kids, you've got to know where they come from, you've got to know the families." In-depth qualitative research has the potential to identify further opportunities and challenges that arise within a nuanced contextualization such as that which was observed in this study.

There is an awareness among policymakers and teachers of what SEL is and the value it has for students. This study serves to add to this knowledge base by acknowledging the positive impact SEL centered curricula and practices can bring to different school settings, particularly when pursued using restorative practices. However, the perspectives of teachers in this study also tell us that while such an approach to teaching and learning is imperative, we still have a long way to go and more to do in order to implement and measure SEL effectively and consistently.

By listening and learning from students, we begin to see their experiences of their worlds from their points of view (Oliver, 2010). Future qualitative research needs to access students' perspectives of SEL. SEL studies must be conducted in a variety of school contexts and need to be planned, delivered and evaluated by those directly involved and invested – the teachers and students. Given the calls for observing and measuring the quality of SEL, initiatives over a more sustained period of time in real world settings (Carroll *et al.*, 2017; Doikou-Avlidou and Dadatsi, 2013; Merrell, 2010) that can follow up students are warranted. Much of our understanding of SEL outcomes relies heavily on its impact on students' social learning and from meta-analyses and quantitative research. We recommend future research needs to address this imbalance and appropriate focus should be placed on the students' affective domain using qualitative methods (Miles *et al.*, 2014).

Greenberg *et al.* (2003) envisioned that the next generation of the science and practice of school-based SEL programs would require researchers, educators and policymakers to work together to design evidence-based, coordinated programming and accountability and support systems to ensure their effective implementation. Hoffman (2009) observed that "although SEL promises more attention to the emotional and social lives of children as these are integrally related to successful and more equitable academic and life outcomes for all, existing debates focus largely on questions of empirical basis and effectiveness" (p. 549). It is our view that the rhetoric surrounding SEL is not matched by enough empirical research on its effectiveness. In closing, we challenge education research to provide more in-depth empirical evidence, both quantitative and qualitative, so that teachers, parents and community workers can be guided in improving SEL for our children.

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Note

1. The Māori are the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand. In New Zealand, the country must follow the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi, which ensures indigenous knowledge is protected in our schools (Ministry of Education, 2007).

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