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J Appl Sch Psychol. Author manuscript; available in PMC 2019 February 05.

Published in final edited form as:

J Appl Sch Psychol. 2018 ; 34(2): 157–179. doi:10.1080/15377903.2018.1425790.

Early Childhood Teachers' Perspectives on Social-Emotional Competence and Learning in Urban Classrooms

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Abstract

The promotion of social emotional competence (SEC) and implementation of social emotional learning (SEL) programs have increased substantially in schools, however little is known about teachers' perceptions of such programs. This qualitative study explored early childhood (three- to eight-year-old) teachers' perceptions of classroom-based social-emotional programs for young, urban-dwelling children. A focus of the study included learning what teachers believe were the critical components and challenges of such programs. Five themes emerged from the content analysis: Responsibility, Curricula/Program Design, Contextual Relevance, Support, and Barriers. The findings from this study are discussed in regards to educational policy implications about SEL curricula and programs, especially those implemented in urban schools.

Keywords

teacher perceptions; social emotional learning; social emotional competence; classroom-based programs; qualitative

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Emotions shape the learning process, influencing how and what we learn (Zins & Elias, 2006). Children who are able to manage or regulate their emotions are more likely to adjust to school and have better academic achievement outcomes (Bierman, Nix, Greenberg, Blair, & Domitrovich, 2008). These abilities are thought to provide a strong foundation for academic success. As such, early childhood education, in particular preschool programs, have traditionally focused on developing young children's social and emotional competence abilities. Social emotional learning (SEL) programs are aimed at increasing students' social and emotional competence abilities (SEC) while also promoting students' academic performance and prosocial behaviors (Zins & Elias, 2006). Given the connection between emotions and learning, schools have become the context of choice for delivering prevention and intervention programs to address a variety of emotional and behavioral issues among school-aged children (Greenberg et al., 2003; Humphries & Keenan, 2006; Rones & Hoagwood, 2000; Roeser, Eccles, & Samoroff, 2000). Urban schools are often characterized, sometimes unfairly, as having students with compromised social, emotional functioning and academic outcomes. This includes emotional, behavioral, and health problems along with discipline difficulties (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). As such,

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urban schools are frequently targeted to implement SEC or SEL programs that will counteract these challenging issues and promote positive development.

Teachers emerge as key figures in the implementation or sustainability of classroom-based programs and curricula, including SEL programming. However most teachers have little to no training, both at the pre- and in-service levels, in SEC or SEL (e.g., Fleming & Bay, 2004; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Teachers' attitudes about classroom programs and curricula can affect implementation and effectiveness (Bowden, Lanning, Pippin, & Tanner, 2003; Gingiss, Gottlieb, & Brink, 1994). With notable exception (e.g. Zinsser, Shewark, Denham, & Curby, 2014), little is known qualitatively about U.S. teachers' perceptions of SEL programing, especially as it relates to teachers in urban schools. Like other school or classroom based programming or curricula, SEL programs are often developed by researchers and then implemented in educational settings. This can possibly create a chasm between research knowledge and the application of research informed practices in a real-world context. Obtaining teacher voice may help bridge the divide between practice and research (Buchanan, Gueldner, Tran, & Merrell, 2009). The purpose of this study is to gain insight into urban school teachers' perceptions of SEC and SEL programs for urban dwelling children in pre-kindergarten through 3rd grades (three to eight years old).

Social-Emotional Competence and Learning

A growing body of research has shown that SEC and SEL are related to academic achievement (Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, Hertzman, & Zumbo, 2014). SEC has been linked to school readiness (Denham, 2006; Blair, 2002; Bierman, et al., 2008; Raver & Knitzer, 2002) and academic success (Graziano, Reavis, Keane, & Calkins, 2007; Trentacosta & Izard, 2007; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004). SEC is a multivariate construct which includes children's ability to identify emotions in themselves and others, being able to manage their emotions appropriately, having positive interactions with teachers and peers (Raver & Knitzer, 2002), and solving problems effectively (Zins & Elias, 2006). Five, core teachable social emotional competencies essential to SEL are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2003). The ability to encode, interpret, and organize emotional and social information are skills needed to both engage in learning, and to develop self- and social- awareness and make responsible decisions. This is particularly relevant during early childhood since this is a critical period in the development of children's social and emotional abilities (Kramer, Caldarella, Christensen & Shatzer, 2010).

A recent meta-analysis found that school-based, universal SEL programs had a positive impact on children's social and emotional competence abilities, academic performances and prosocial behaviors (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Specifically, Durlak and colleagues (2011) found that children who participated in a SEL program in grades K-12 had an 11-percentile increase in academic achievement compared to those children who did not receive SEL programming. A lack of social emotional competence abilities was related to less academic engagement and lower academic

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achievement (Elias & Haynes, 2008). To understand these findings in context, there is a need to understand the role of the teacher.

As the key agent in the classroom, teachers are responsible for the classroom environment. Therefore, they are often targeted to implement classroom programming. Given the many demands (e.g., delivering rigorous instruction, facilitating learning, high stakes testing, etc.) teachers face in the classroom, implementation of SEL programming may be particularly challenging or even seen as an intrusion. If there is a desire to successfully implement such programming, there is a need to understand the teacher as the key classroom socializer.

Early Childhood Teachers' Perceptions of SEL

Teachers set the overall tone of their classrooms including the academic and social expectations for their students, along with the emotional or affective climate. Socially and emotionally competent teachers can create a classroom environment that encourages and develops positive student-teacher relationships, capitalizes on students' strengths and abilities, promotes students' intrinsic motivation, promotes cooperation, models age-appropriate regulation and conflict resolution strategies, and supports positive communication (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Furthermore, teachers' perceptions and attitudes about SEL programming influences program implementation, efficacy, longevity, and effective SEL adoption (Buchanan et al., 2009; Elbertson, Brackett & Weissberg, 2009; Zinsser et al., 2014). Zinsser and colleagues (2014) found in their mixed-method study of preschool teachers' SEL beliefs that suburban, largely Caucasian teachers valued SEL and identified parents as primarily responsible for developing young children's SEC. Furthermore, teachers who were identified as highly supportive incorporated SEL into their teaching.

One's judgment of whether a program, intervention, or treatment is appropriate, fair, reasonable, and unobtrusive is treatment acceptability (Kazdin, 2000). Treatment acceptability has been shown to impact implementation of classroom programs and interventions. If teachers do not believe a program, even an empirically validated program, is appropriate and relevant for their students, it is likely that there will be limited buy-in. This lack of buy-in may lead to compromised implementation thereby decreasing program success.

Given the multiple demands teachers face in their classrooms, especially in urban schools, teachers may be wary of classroom based SEL efforts. Many teachers have received little to no training in social-emotional competence, or how to effectively implement a SEL program or curricula. Teacher buy-in can be critical to program or curricular success, therefore it is important to understand teachers' perceptions of SEC and SEL efforts in urban classrooms. We contend that it is important to understand treatment acceptability among "typical" classroom teachers who have less exposure or experience with SEL given they will likely be charged with classroom implementation.

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Urban School Context

Urban schools are often characterized, sometimes even demonized, as less than optimal places of academic learning because of academic underperformance based on low standardized testing scores (Chrisman, 2005), low graduation rates (Swanson, 2009), having some students experiencing challenging behavioral and/or emotional problems, less qualified teachers and greater teacher turnover (Day & Hong, 2016). While urban schools are faced with unique challenges, they also have endless possibilities.

With the increasing value placed on standardized high stakes testing as a means to evaluate schools (Au, 2013; Hursh, 2013), there has been a shift in schools to focus almost exclusively on increasing test scores. This seems to be especially true of urban schools because many have struggled with lower academic achievement (Day & Hong, 2016). This increased focus in the United States has led to prioritizing reform efforts that directly target student achievement in reading and mathematics (Lipman, 2002). The increased focus on standardized test scores has seemed to create a tension between students' academic needs and supporting the development of the "whole child" (e.g., academic, social, emotional, and behavioral needs) (Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2003).

Many urban schools are often under-resourced (Council of the Great City Schools, 2004) which can heighten resistance to the use of resources for the inclusion of social and emotional development programming because resources are perceived as being diverted away from academics to support students' social-emotional development. Teachers in low-income, urban schools are often faced with a greater workload that can lead to competing demands for their time and provide fewer opportunities to implement additional programs (Ginsburg & Drake, 2002). This can lead many educators to feel conflicted in addressing non-academic skills (Kress, Norris, Schoenholz, Elias, & Seigle, 2004). When classroom or school based programs compete with academic demands and in turn class time, teachers need to believe in the purpose of the program to facilitate successful implementation (Elias & Clabby, 1992), e.g., treatment acceptability. The increased emphasis on academic skill development, in theory, is not problematic; rather there is a need to situate academic skill development within a developmental framework, especially in early childhood education, that includes supporting and emphasizing non-academic abilities like social and emotional development. Successful schools not only prepare students academically, but they integrate social-emotional competence into the academic curricula, which promotes success into adulthood (Elias, et al., 1997; Greenberg, et al., 2003).

Current Study

A school's purpose is not just to graduate their students, but to help produce individuals that can be successful in the world. SEC and SEL can enhance and create a context where both constructive learning and academic engagement can occur. Teachers are often the deliverers of classroom-based SEL programming many of whom have no formal SEC or SEL training. Research has shown that teacher perceptions influence implementation and sustainability of program and curricula, however, little is known about teachers' perceptions of SEL programming. The current study examines early childhood teachers' perceptions of SEC and

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SEL in the context of teaching three- to eight-year-old children from economically stressed environments in a large urban city. Two research questions guide this study. First, what are teachers' perceptions of their role in supporting students' SEC abilities in the classroom? Secondly, what do teachers think about and want in SEL programming?

Methods

Participants

The sample included 15 early childhood teachers (pre-kindergarten – 3rd grades), 14 females and 1 male. Initially 22 teachers expressed interest in participating in the current study, however two declined to participate after learning more about the study and five were unable to participate due to scheduling conflicts. With respect to the teachers' racial background, nine teacher participants identified as African American and six as Caucasian. Age is represented by eight age categories (see Table 1 for a list of age categories); the mode for age was the 30–34 year old age category. The teachers taught at 12 public schools and three (3) private schools in a large, urban Midwestern city.

Two teachers had 30 or more years of teaching experience, therefore to prevent these teachers from skewing the number of years teaching data, separate means are provided for those teachers who had less than 10 years of teaching experience, teachers with 10–15 years of experience, and those with 30+ years (identified as senior teachers). Teachers ($n = 5$) with less than 10 years of teaching experience had been teaching on average for 5.6 years ($SD=$ 2.51). The eight teachers who had been teaching for 10–15 years, had on average almost 12 years (M = 11.75 years; SD = 2.19) of teaching experience. The two senior teachers averaged 38 years ($M = 37.5$, $SD = 10.61$) of teaching. The teachers experience were largely in early childhood classrooms. Specially, early childhood teaching experience varied Teachers with less than 10 years of experience had been teaching in early childhood for 3.38 years ($SD = 3.11$), those with 10–15 years had 11.6 years (SD = 0.71) of early childhood experience, while the senior teachers had an average of 35 years ($SD = 14.14$) of early childhood teaching experience.

Participants were recruited through a longitudinal, preschool research study that examined disruptive and normative behaviors among 3–5 year old children who were from economically stressed backgrounds (200% within the federal poverty line for family size). Flyers were distributed to preschool/pre-kindergarten through 3rd grade teachers by the school observation team at schools where they were conducting observations. None of the teachers who participated in the larger longitudinal study were participants in the current qualitative study. Teachers who were interested in participating in the current study completed a participation interest form which was collected by the school team and given to the first author. Inclusion criteria for participants involved being a teacher of three to eight year old children (preschool/pre-kindergarten through 3rd grade) in general education classrooms. Participants had to be teachers in the schools where children who were participating in the larger study attended. These schools were located in a large urban city and the suburbs bordering the city with similar demographics (large population of racial minority families from low-income and working class families). Participants who taught

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children under the age of three years old, in the fourth grade and above, or in special education classrooms were excluded.

Each teacher was contacted by phone and received a detailed description of the study, at which time they determined if they wanted to proceed with participation. Teachers who indicated they wanted to participate were scheduled for a focus group session where informed consent occurred.

It is acknowledged that the academic orientation and demands of classrooms vary significantly between preschool and primary education classrooms. To diminish the potential impact this issue may impose on focus group conversations, teachers were assigned to focus groups based on the grade level they taught. Specifically teachers from pre-kindergarten, Head Start, and kindergarten (e.g., 3–6 year olds) classrooms were placed in focus groups together, while primary grade (1st –3rd; e.g., 6–8 years old) teachers were placed together.

Measures

Focus Group Protocol.—The focus group protocol was composed of semi-structured, open-ended questions that addressed the two study research questions. The focus group questions represent four areas: social and emotional development, teacher perspective, social emotional competency curriculum and programs, and program implementation. These four areas were developed based on the SEC and SEL literature as it relates to student outcomes. Informal conversations with teachers during the study development stage also contributed to development of the focus group questions. To address the first research question regarding teachers' perceptions regarding their role in students SEC abilities, focus group participants were asked, "What are key skills that children should develop?" "Should teachers be responsible for teaching or supporting children's social and emotional development? Why or why not." The second research question focused on teachers perceptions of a SEL programming and more importantly, what they wanted from such programs. A sample question addressing social and emotional competency curriculum and programs was, "What are critical components of a curriculum that supports a child's social and emotional development?" Teacher perspective questions included the following, "Should teachers be responsible for teaching or supporting children's social and emotional development? Why or why not" A sample question from the social and emotional development theme, "What do you think is important in terms of promoting young children's social and emotional development?" A sample question that was representative of the program implementation was "What type of support or resources do you need as a teacher to implement such curricula or programs?" The structure of the focus groups supported group interactions as well as collective elaboration.

Background demographics form.—Participants completed a general background and demographic information form (e.g., gender, age range, and race/ethnicity) at the end of their participation in the focus group. This measure also included questions regarding their teaching experiences, and experience with social-emotional curriculum and school/ classroom prevention programs.

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Procedures

Focus group sessions took place in a private conference room at a medical center after typical school hours. Six focus groups sessions were conducted over a period of three months. Participants were encouraged to not only respond to the focus group questions, but were encouraged to discuss the questions and issues that emerged among the other members of the focus group. Participants naturally began to discuss and interact with each other without any additional prompting from the interviewer. They often asked each other for advice around issues that had emerged in their own classrooms and schools around social and emotional issues.

The first author conducted all focus group sessions. Focus groups sessions lasted for approximately 90–120 minutes. Dinner was provided during the focus groups and each participant was compensated monetarily with a $50 store gift card and validated parking at the end of their focus group session. All interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and then checked for accuracy by the first two authors. Transcripts were coded and uploaded into NVivo for analysis.

Content Analysis

Content analysis, a qualitative data analysis technique, allows for the interpretation of text data by way of systematic classification and coding, followed by the identification of themes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In the current study, conventional content analysis was used to analyze the qualitative text data across focus groups. This form of analysis is generally used when there is limited literature on the specific phenomenon and a study aims to describe such phenomenon (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The advantage of conventional content analysis is that it allows the themes and theory to reveal itself through data while minimizing researcher bias. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), the researcher reads the data to create codes and continues until themes emerge from the data.

Author Characteristics.—The qualitative paradigm acknowledges the backgrounds of the researchers in the study in order to understand the researcher influence on the findings. As such, background information is provided regarding the authors of this paper. All three authors are African American females. The first author is a faculty member whose research examines African American children's normative and prosocial development, including their social and emotional development. The second author is a graduate student whose research explores parental socialization of African American children emotional competence abilities. The third author is an advanced graduate student who is a former early childhood special education teacher. He research examines how caregivers in early childhood daycare settings are trained to support young children's social competence.

The first two authors independently coded and analyzed the data. The second author was not involved in the design of the research study methods or data collection. She joined the research project as an independent, external auditor in data coding and interpretation which allowed for cross checking of the data (Barbour, 2001). She led and participated in all phases of coding to create stability and reliability while also reducing bias during the coding process. The second author served as the master coder. There were no pre-constructed codes

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for the focus groups, as such codes were developed and refined through the extensive review of the transcripts.

Coding began by reading through all of the transcripts. This open coding allowed for the classification of themes by identifying phenomenon in the data and then grouping data that were similar into categories. Subcategories of the data were identified in order to identify more precise explanations of the phenomenon that emerged among the participants in the focus groups. The two research questions guided our analysis.

This first level of analysis led to the development of 32 initial codes that were most central to the research questions (i.e., those that pertained most directly to teachers' perceptions of SEL programs and their role in SEC promotion). Reviewing the research questions during coding process provided another way to examine the extent of coder agreement on the fundamental themes. This initial code list was refined and added to inductively-based on data analysis. After this pass of coding, the initial code list was revised by combining similar codes, adding new codes and creating subcategories and subcodes. The addition of subcategories and codes allowed for more detailed coding of responses given by the teachers. At this time categories and subcategories were clearly defined and refined. A third and final pass of coding occurred which led to the identification of five overarching themes. Coders met during the analysis process to review codes and resolve any disagreements. An inter-reliability of 89% was calculated as the agreement of the two coders divided by the number of agreements plus disagreements multiplying this fraction by 100.

Results

This section is divided into two parts. The first part presents the descriptive and the second provides detailed information regarding the qualitative analysis of the teacher focus groups. There is a presentation of the themes that emerged from analyzing early childhood teachers' perceptions of SEL programming for young, urban dwelling children.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 provides means and standard deviations for the demographic data. Almost half (n = 7; 46.7%) of the participants reported having some experience with social emotional competence curricula and programs that averaged to one year of SEC experience ($M = 1.3$, $SD = 2.44$). The remaining teachers were equally divided to have some experience with other classroom prevention curricula or programs (n = 4; 26.7%), or they had no experience with classroom prevention curricula or programs at all (n = 4; 26.7%).

Qualitative Analysis

This study aimed to identify teachers' perceptions regarding SEL programming along with what teachers identified as the key components for SEL program implementation by way of qualitative methodology. Teachers were asked about their overall thoughts regarding social and emotional development, teacher responsibility in supporting students' social emotional development, perspectives on SEL programs, key components of these programs, supports, resources, and barriers to implementation. Although not all participating teachers had experience with SEL and programming, they had strong opinions about how such programs

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should be implemented based on their experience with other classroom and school-based programs. Qualitative content analysis (See previous section for analysis details) of the focus group data identified an initial list of codes which were refined and reduced inductively from which five themes (see Table 2) emerged: curricula/program design, contextual relevance, responsibility, support, and barriers. These themes are presented below and highlighted with teacher quotes to provide a deeper understanding. Pseudonyms were used to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

Responsibility.—All of the participants indicated that teachers had some form of responsibility in promoting students' social emotional development. Despite their sense of professional responsibility, some of the teachers expressed that this was beyond their original conceptualization of the "traditional" teacher role.

> I think we have to be…I think as teachers, as educators, it has become our responsibility whether we like it or not; we have to teach that. (Ms. Evans)

> Yeah…given the profession it is something that just comes along with it. (Ms. Everest)

Some of their perspectives on this responsibility had transformed their conception of the role of teachers.

> And, given the way that our society is now, and our children are having to be made to do things a lot faster, our job as early childhood teachers is to still nurture that baby, that's still there, that's still a baby there. And if that's not what you gonna do, then you shouldn't be in this profession. (Ms. Robinson)

This exemplifies the belief that teaching entails supporting the social and emotional development of students. This responsibility was seen as a key component of what teachers conceptualizes as to what it means to be a teacher.

Other teachers implied partial responsibility for teaching social emotional competency. These teachers believed parents were mainly responsible for promoting or teaching SEC abilities, and teachers should support or back-up parents. Teachers reported that children should have developed some social-emotional competency abilities prior to entering the classroom.

> I think it should be a joint effort. The reality is there with kindergarten, preschool they're with those parents the majority of the time, the first 4 years of life."(Ms. Riddick)

> I think so too, to a certain extent…before they come to school I think that they should have some [social and emotional] skills… (Ms. Durden)

Teachers also discussed the ages and grades at which teachers should be responsible for promoting students' social emotional development. They specified that SEC abilities should not only be promoted at the early childhood level, but also extend into the upper grades.

Ms. Evans: No it goes beyond, far beyond the school age…

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Interviewer: Something that is ongoing?

Ms. Peters: Ongoing.

Ms. Riddick: I think its ongoing, even high schoolers need it…

Ms. Durden: …I think you need it all the way through [school].

Essentially, teachers believed that they not only had personal and professional responsibilities, but also a joint responsibility with parents to support their students' SEC skill development. These teachers saw SEC skill development as something that was not just important for young children, but an important skill that facilitated all students' success. As teachers accept full or partial responsibility in promoting student's SEC skills, they need support to do this work successfully.

Curricula/Program Design.—Curricula/Program Design represents the elements and strategies of the curricula or program, including the actual content, structure, flexibility and the timing of material that teachers identified as relevant components of SEL programs. Despite a lack of experience with SEL programming, participating teachers provided clear ideas and direction regarding these programs.

The teachers strong opinions about how SEL programs should be implemented was based on their experiences with other classroom and school-based curricula and programs, and their perceptions about how new programs could successfully be implemented in an urban school.

Teachers wanted the freedom to use their own ideas and materials to enhance the delivery of SEL curricula. Although teachers wanted curricular freedom, they still wanted manuals or outlines of the programs. They viewed these documents as being very helpful supports or guides to their work.

Ms. Payne: No I don't feel that they allow creativity, many of them don't.

Investigator: "Do you think it would be more helpful than the script? Or do you think it's even better to come up with a topic and objective and the teacher just decides what that looks like?

Ms. Peters: Both ways…But sometimes I just come up with things off the top of my head…

Ms. Everest: I think teaching is creativity…I think it would be very helpful to see a couple of different ways that could be incorporated into the lesson.

Teachers noted a need to not only have a classroom social emotional curricula but that the teaching of social emotional skills was should come first. Specifically teachers believed that children's social and emotional skills were a necessary foundation upon which academic learning should be built. For instance, Ms. Spangler indicated:

> …whatever grade it is you need those social skills needs to be developed, emotional, and then to me you can't even get to the academics until you have mastered [emotional & social skills] those too.

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This was a strong and recurrent statement that was echoed by several teachers across all of the focus groups.

Overall, teachers wanted SEL curricula for their classrooms but they did not want a scripted curricula. but were concerned with They were concerned that scripted curricula placed restrictions on their creative freedom which some teachers believed limited their ability to effectively implement SEL programs in their urban classrooms.

Contextual Relevance.—Teachers questioned the content of SEL programs. They discussed the need for SEL programs to be informed by and supportive of the school and classroom culture, the children's racial and ethnic background, and the culture of the children's community or neighborhood. Teachers were adamant that programs must represent the cultural background of the students. They not only wanted the characters in the curricula to be of the same racial and ethnic background of their students, but they wanted the background contexts, activities, and experiences represented in the curricula representative of the experiences of the children in their community. Teachers saw Cultural Relevance as a way for the students to actively engage with the curricula.

> Bring in like outside literature that goes along. You know with characters that the students can relate to in the books, that live in the same type of neighborhoods that they live in and things like that. So they can kind of see themselves you know as those characters and you know do some critical thinking about what they would do in that situation. (Ms. Jason)

The mirroring of the children's lives in the program was emphasized as a critical program component.

The teachers also wanted to have curricula or programs that were integrated into the everyday culture of the classroom as well as have real-world application. Integration entailed a seamless connection of SEL programming to the learning activities already taking place in the classroom. Non-integrated SEL programming was perceived as foreign or counter to the work in the classroom.

> I don't think the curriculum we have now supports the culture in my room…I don't think it supports my culture in my room. (Ms. Lawrence)

> I think that it could be integrated, we integrate it with everything that we do every day. To teach it separately in addition to the other things would be kind of in my opinion a little too much. (Ms. Oliver)

Teachers resoundingly identified the need for culturally relevant SEL programs that engaged students and were integrated into the structure of the classroom.

Support.—Support either through the form of human capital or tangible resources (e.g., classroom materials, funding) were seen as a critical component of successful SEL implementation. Several teachers reported wanting external help from social workers or school counselors who would come into the classroom and deliver the curricula. External help was thought to take some pressure off teachers while also bringing someone into the

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classrooms who had more knowledge about developing children's social emotional competency.

> I would prefer someone coming in and you know perhaps 30 minutes and implement a program …because I feel that we do so many things, that you just cannot teach everything. (Ms. Lewis)

These teachers acknowledged the multiple challenges they had in supporting the various forms of learning occurring in their classrooms. However, teachers were not just interested in the external assistant merely taking over the delivery of SEL in the classroom; many wanted a true, collaborative relationship. "I think having someone come in, you know, could be helpful if that person is familiar with young kids and is qualified…" (Ms. Spangler)

The idea that teachers wanted assistance from those who were knowledgeable about SEL programming and early childhood education was not confined to external aids. Teachers also wanted to see this knowledge in their administrators which they believed would translate into administrative support. This type of support was seen as a critical asset to successful program implementation.

> Administrative support…That's a good resource, because I've had parents to question my technique in the classroom, and they won't come to me they'll go to the principal…If the administration had an early childhood background where they could support us… (Ms. Watkins)

Teachers believed that administrators with more experience at the early childhood level would be sensitive to age appropriate instruction; meaning that administrators would understand the importance of teaching social and emotional skills, and its impacts on successful academic performance.

> …I think it's a lack of exposure in education about serving different needs in every level especially as an administrator. I know if I went to an administrator I would want to know how to service the needs of all the children at every level no matter what my specialization is, but most administrators, I don't feel they think that way. (Mr. Martin)

It was believed that administrators with early childhood experience would champion teachers' decisions to promote social and emotional development in the classroom. Furthermore, teachers thought that these administrators would understand that academic goals could not be reached if the students did not have age appropriate social and emotional competence skills. Teachers were adamant about needing school administrators to buttress SEL program implementation.

Barriers.—Limited time, lack of support, insufficient resources, devaluing the teaching of SEC, and curricula or programs that were not contextually relevant were all identified as Barriers to SEL implementation. Note, the Limited Time represented teachers not having the time to adequately prepare to teach SEC. This limited time was linked to increased standardized testing and paper work associated with many early childhood programs (e.g., Head Start, state pre-kindergarten, etc.)., "Testing gets in a huge way because we are spending so much time on testing them and not teaching them more" (Ms. Riddick). The

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focus on testing interfered with not only their ability to teach traditional academic lessons, but also reduced the time teachers could devote to teaching SEC.

Teachers thought parents needed to reinforce the development of social emotional skills at home. There was a perception that there was a lack of parental support in reinforcing social emotional skills. According to teachers, certain parenting styles or practices may counter the development of appropriate social and/or emotional competency abilities. "I have to say that sometimes I feel that some parents can be a barrier. The different philosophies of raising kids and values that they are teaching" (Ms. Spangler).These parenting practices (e.g., use of certain punishment techniques, less positive reinforcement) were thought to thwart SEC development stressed in the classroom. Furthermore, teachers believed that these parenting behaviors were confusing children regarding what was appropriate social and emotional competence behaviors to be enacted at school. Thereby making their job more challenging in the classroom.

Programs that were deemed as not fitting into the cultural context of the classroom were seen as a barrier to successful implementation. Teachers reported that due to the demands of the classroom they needed SEL program curricula that acknowledged these demands. Specifically, teachers wanted program curricula that were easy to read, understand, and implement. They thought that if programs were easy to understand and implement in the context of a busy classroom that this would make implementation more likely. Teachers wanted to implement SEL programming, but the curriculum needed to be easy or less taxing for teachers to implement in urban classrooms where they had multiple demands on their resources. The ability for a program to fit into the cultural context of the classroom was seen as critical for consistent and successful implementation given the multiple demands teachers faced in the classroom.

> Mm-hm how to respond properly because it should be, I would want it to be a teaching manual. You know, that um it's giving me the tools as a teacher and it's not wordy…I've got several of them on my shelf right now that are collecting dust, because they were too wordy, too rote like uh, excuse me, psychiatrist. You know. (Ms. Robinson)

Teachers were either less likely to use or believe in the effectiveness of curricula that were not informed by the reality of teaching in an urban classroom. As such, they wanted a curriculum that was jargon free, unscripted, and written in short concise sentences.

Many of the teachers emphasized the importance of consistency in programming, with a particular focus on the negative impact of having fragmented curricula. They complained that the curricula and programs instituted by their school administrators were constantly changing. This complaint was not specific to SEL curricula but was something they feared would also happen if SEL curricula were implemented in their schools.

> Another year you're doing this, and it's constantly being changed constantly. (Ms. Watkins)

> It doesn't give us a chance as teachers to perfect it because it's wanting us to keep switching and changing things… (Ms. Robinson)

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They're always coming up with something new… (Ms. Payne)

Overall, teachers clearly identified the barriers they perceived as impediments to successful SEL program implementation in urban, early childhood classrooms. These barriers included a lack of administrative and parental support, implementation consistency, and programming that was not culturally and contextually relevant.

Summary.—These qualitative findings reveal that teachers overwhelmingly believed it was their professional responsibility to promote their students' social emotional competence abilities. Although a number of the early childhood teachers (n=9) had no experience with SEL programs, their experiences with other classroom and school-based program curricula informed their perceptions of implementing SEL in their classrooms. An overall agreement emerged from the analysis was that these teachers understood the importance of social emotional competency for young children in the school environment. Despite their commitment to promoting these competences, teachers identified several challenges in making this commitment a reality. Overall, this study gave teachers a voice to express their opinions about SEC and SEL programs as it relates to early childhood education.

Discussion

If schools are the primary site for the delivery of social emotional competence (SEC) and learning (SEL) programs, then teachers are likely the main socializing agents in schools leading this initiative. Our society expects teachers to manage the emotional lives of their students (Hargreaves, 1998), however the current structure, demands, and climate associated with urban schools can impede SEL work (i.e., Stoiber, 2011). The current study examined early childhood teachers' perspectives on social emotional learning curricula and programs within the context of teaching three- to eight-year-old children from economically stressed environments in a large urban city. Content analysis yielded five themes that represented the focus group data: Responsibility, Curricula/Program Design, Contextual Relevance, Support, and Barrier to Program implementation. Teachers' perceived role in supporting and implementing SEL in schools emerged across the Responsibility, Curricula/Program Design, and Barrier to Program Implementation themes.

The early childhood teachers in the current study overwhelmingly reported that they were responsible for supporting and teaching SEC. This was surprising given that anecdotal comments from teachers in other contexts indicated that supporting SEC was something additional teachers were being asked to do. However many teachers in the current study had incorporated this sense of responsibility in how they conceptualized their roles as teachers. This conceptualization was not just directed at early childhood teachers, but at all teachers through high school. Although teachers identified supporting students' SEC abilities as a professional responsibility, they believed that parents were also responsible for facilitating SEC development. Teachers indicated that prior to school entry, parents needed to provide children with the initial foundation of SEC abilities that teachers could then build upon in the classroom. The development and support of children's SEC abilities was conceptualized as a joint process between parents and teachers.

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The teachers in the current study believed that children needed a solid foundation in SEC before academics could be addressed. This belief may have contributed to teachers' strong sense of responsibility to support students' social and emotional competence abilities. Similar findings were reported among a sample of White (Buchanan, et al., 2009; Zinsser, et al., 2014) and Greek elementary teachers (Triliva & Poulou, 2006,).

Similar to most teachers in the U.S., the majority of the teachers in the current study did not have experiences with SEL curricula, however they had strong ideas and recommendations about the curricula, including how it should be designed. They wanted curricula that was nimble in that teachers had flexibility in the delivery of the content allowing for creativity. This need for flexibility seemed to focus on the teacher being able to adjust the curricula to both their students and the demands of teaching in an urban classroom. However, flexibility can undermine implementation fidelity and effectiveness. This is an area of curricula/ program development that will need to be examined in future research.

There was a strong agreement among teachers that they wanted SEL programs needed to be relevant to the culture of the classroom, the students, and the students' community acknowledging the importance of the urban school context for this group of teachers as represented with the Contextual Relevance theme. For example, the ideal SEL programs would be seamlessly integrated into the classroom structure in order to increase implementation especially given the daily demands of the classroom. Consistent with past reviews of early childhood classroom-based interventions, programs that were integrated into the culture of the classroom were found to be more effective (Humphries & Keenan, 2006; Rones & Hoagwood, 2000). This integration reduces the perception that SEC is separated from academics, which is especially relevant given that teachers are more effective than non-school staff in the successful delivery of SEL programs (Durlak et al., 2011).

Cultural relevance (Contextual Relevance theme) was highly valued by the teachers in the current study and divergent from previous research examining teacher perceptions of SEL (e.g., Buchanan et al., 2009). Specifically, teachers in the current study wanted SEL curricula and materials to mirror the cultural background of the students in multidimensional ways, not just in reference to the students' racial and ethnic background, but also the urban context. As such, our teachers wanted curricula vignettes and scenarios that mirrored urban settings and experiences. Students that traditionally attend urban schools are more likely to be minority, English language learners, and/or come from economically stressed backgrounds (Council of the Great City Schools, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Expression of social emotional abilities are specific to the social cultural characteristics of children (Carlo, 2006; Dubow et al., 1997; Garner, Mahatmya, Brown, & Vesely, 2014). However, many SEC and SEL programs may not be culturally or contextually relevant to not only the cultural background of the students, but the urban school community. School-based SEL programs need to be responsive to the culture of the school in order to maximize their success (Humphries & Keenan, 2006). SEL program materials that did not compliment students' culture, along with the context and routines of the classroom, was identified as a major hindrance to implementation and sustainability. This is important as cultural relevancy may increase buy-in from teachers, students and families.

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Knowledgeable and supportive school leadership (e.g., principals and administrators) can be instrumental in making program implementation a priority within the school (Hans & Weiss, 2005). Administrative support (Support theme) was reflected in the time, resources, incentives, evaluation, and training allocated to SEC/SEL program as well as the expectation of accountability in schools. Teachers indicated that in order for administrators to completely support their SEL efforts their administrators needed training in early childhood education. This contention was echoed several times across multiple focus groups. Teachers wanted administrators who understood how to best support learning in young children and to understand the link between social-emotional competence and academic performance. Consistent support from school administrators has emerged as a key factor associated with enduring SEL implementation (Joseph & Strain, 2003; Elias, Zins, Graczyk, & Weissberg, 2003).

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2003), developing an infrastructure to support SEL programs, which includes time, funding, and supports and resources to program implementation, is key for effective and successful implementation. The teachers in the current study had concerns that SEL implementation may be fragmented and lack consistency based on their prior experiences with classroom-based curricula and programing. This finding was consistent with previous critiques of SEL programs (e.g., Zins et al., 2004). When teachers lack resources to effectively promote social emotional development in their classrooms, children show lower levels of on-task behavior and performance (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

In addition to a lack of resources, limited time and lack of both parental and administrative support were identified as significant Barriers to SEL implementation. This is similar to other research that reported teachers unhappiness with the amount of time needed to implement an SEL lessons (Gueldner & Merrell, 2011). Teachers wanted time to prepare for and implement the program in the classroom. There was no specification on the amount time tea hers wanted and/or needed. However, the perceived lack of time to promote children's social emotional competencies may be due to the increased focus on academic demands in early childhood classrooms and time allocated to paperwork and rigorous standardized testing. There may be an unwillingness to devote classroom time to what is perceived as nonacademic efforts (i.e., SEL) and/or to efforts that are not directly measured by high stakes tests (e.g., Fagan & Mihalic, 2003). Understanding teachers' perceptions of these curricula and programs allows for the identification of obstacles that can derail SEC/SEL implementation (Elias, Bruene-Butler, Blum, & Schuyler, 2000).

Similar to the teachers in the Zinsser and colleagues (2014) study, some of the teachers in the current study envisioned their role in supporting student's social emotional development as a collaborative effort with parents; believing that students should possess some basic social emotional abilities before they enter early childhood classrooms. The lack of perceived parental support identified by some teachers is not novel (e.g., Zinsser et al., 2014), but rather may reflect difficulties in creating true home-school partnerships with diverse parents in urban schools (Elias, et al., 2003). This home-school discrepancy may be misperceived by teachers as a lack of parental support for SEC development as opposed to

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understanding that different SEC skills are needed at school, home, and in the children's communities.

Given that adherence to intervention programs is affected by one's beliefs about said program (e.g., Horne, 1999), it seems valuable to acknowledge and understand urban teachers' perceptions about SEL programming as this may help increase program effectiveness. Understanding and incorporating teacher input can possibly improve curricula design issues and dismantle barriers to SEL program implementation in urban schools.

Future Directions

The current qualitative study provides initial support for examining teachers' perceptions of SEL programs, including their development and implementation. This research highlights the resources and supports teachers believe they need to implement SEL in their classrooms. Although the teachers in the current study overwhelming supported the promotion of SEL in schools, this may not be reflective of all early childhood teachers. The teachers in the current represents a racially diverse group of teachers for three- to eight-year-old children attending urban schools. Perhaps the teachers in the current study already had favorable opinions of SEL, thereby causing them to participate in this study. Future research should examine the perceptions of both experienced (current and former SEL program experience) and novice teachers. Although the majority of the teachers in the current study had no previous experience with SEC/SEL programming, this lack of SEL experience is consistent with the majority of teachers in the United States who are charged with delivering SEL (Fleming & Bay, 2004). As a result, the current teachers are likely more representative of the average teacher who would be presented with an SEL program in their school. The inclusion of novice and experienced teachers of SEL helps researchers and program/curriculum developers create programs that are more likely to be accepted and effectively implemented by teachers.

Implications & Conclusions

The teachers in this qualitative study contend that students' SEC abilities need to be developed prior to addressing academics. Research has shown that children's learning can be facilitated or impeded by emotions (Durlak, et al., 2011; Kress, et al., 2004). These findings, could have possible implications for how school curricula are developed and implemented, as well as how pre-service education programs train teachers and school administrators. For example, pre-service educators can be taught how to develop content lessons that purposely promotes the development of students' social and emotional abilities while simultaneously targeting academic content. Integrating social-emotional skills into literacy instruction can lead to the promotion of children's positive social-emotional and academic outcomes (Jones, Brown, & Aber, 2011).

Effective teacher training both pre- and in-service is vital to treatment acceptability and effective implementation of SEL in classrooms. For instance, preservice training not only educates future teachers on the importance of supporting students SEC abilities and how SEC abilities are related to academic outcomes, but also how to integrate SEC into their

lessons. Unfortunately to date, few teacher preparation programs have incorporated SEL training into their curricula (Fleming & Bay, 2004; Hoffman, 2009). Teacher preparation as well as principal leadership programs should consider exposing their teacher candidates to efficacious SEL programs and curricula, thereby increasing the likelihood that teachers and administrators will actively support students' social and emotional development.

SEC and SEL curricula and programs are gaining national acclaim and momentum given that they encourage students' successful academic performance and prosocial behaviors (Elias & Haynes, 2008). In general, these programs have shown empirical promise, however there is still much to be learned in terms of implementation with racial and ethnic minority populations and in urban school contexts. SEL programs targeted at schools in urban areas with largely African American and Latino populations can potentially be improved by incorporating the voices of those key stakeholders that are in those communities. When teachers are included in the development and implementation process they are more motivated to participate and implement the program; this seems to increase buy-in (Murray & Malmgren, 2005). Acknowledging and utilizing community experts along with teacher input may increase the effectiveness and acceptance of SEL programs in urban schools.

Acknowledgements:

Funding for this study was provided to the first author by the National Institute of Mental Health (3R01MH062437-02S1 Minority Supplement), although the authors alone are responsible for the findings and interpretations presented herein. Data collection occurred while the first author was at the University of Chicago. We wish to thank the teachers who participated in this study. And we are grateful to Kate Keenan, and to Andrea Brown, Maribel Nieves, and Esther Young for their help with recruitment.

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Table 1

Focus Group Demographics

Pseudonym	Age Category	Race/ Ethnicity	Years Teaching	Years ECE	Years SEC/SEL	Years Program
Ms. Durden	4	AA	12	11	0	5
Ms. Evans	3	CA	7	1	6	0
Ms. Everest	1	CA	2	1	2	0
Ms. Jason	3	AA	7	0	0	5
Ms. Lawrence	3	CA	10	10	0	0
Ms. Lewis	3	CA	10	10	2	0
Mr. Martin	4	AA	12	0	0	2
Ms. McGill	10	AA	45	45	0	0
Ms. Oliver	4	AA	10	3	0	0
Ms. Payne	9	AA	30	25	1	0
Ms. Peters	3	AA	8	7	8	0
Ms. Riddick	6	CA	15	15	0	0
Ms. Spangler	3	CA	10	9	0	0
Ms. Robinson	5	AA	4	6	0	2
Ms. Watkins	8	AA	15	12	1	0
Mean(SD):<10yrs 10–15yrs 16+yrs			5.6 (2.51) 11.75 (2.19) 37.5 (2.19)	3.38 (3.11) 11.6 (0.71) 35 (14.14)		
Mean (*SD*)			**13.13 (10.88)**	**11.07 (11.77)**	**1.33 (2.44)**	**0.93 (1.79)**

Age Ranges: 1: 18–24 3: 30–34 5: 40–44 7: 50–54 9: 60–64 2: 25–29 4: 35–39 6: 45–49 8: 55–59 10: 65+

AA = African American CA = Caucasian American

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Table 2

Qualitative Focus Group Themes

Themes	Sub-Categories
Curricula/Program Design	*Actual Content* *Consistency of program content* *Content Structure* *Flexibility of Implementation* *Timing Schedule* *Creative Freedom*
Contextual relevance	*Culture Informed & Infused Curriculum* *Supports children's racial & ethnic background* *Supports Classroom & School Culture* *Support Community Culture*
Responsibility	*Teachers' Professional Responsibility* *Parents' Responsibility* *SEC taught Pre-k to 12 grade*
Support	*External Help* *Knowledgeable Administrators* *Collaborative Relationship* *Tangible Resources/Materials*
Barriers	*Limited Time* *Lack of Parental Support* *Insufficient Resources* *Lack of Contextual Relevance* *Lack of SEC Emphasis in Teaching*