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MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS PERCEPTION OF SOCIAL
EMOTIONAL LEARNING AND FACTORS AFFECTING ITS
IMPLEMENTATION

by
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A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
to the Department of Education
of the Faculty of Art and Sciences
at the American University of Beirut

Beirut, Lebanon
January 202

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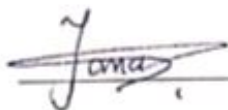
Date of thesis defense: January 27, 2021

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABSTRACT
OF THE THESIS OF

Jana Omar Assaad   for   Master of Arts
                                                Major: Educational Psychology

Title: Middle School Teachers Perception of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and Factors Affecting its Implementation

This thesis explored middle school teachers' perceptions towards SEL in private schools in Beirut, Lebanon. The study consisted of 20 teacher participants, from 10 schools who teach social studies or literary curriculum. Teachers' perceptions were collected through semi-structured qualitative interviews. The interview questions aimed to answer the three major themes that the research questions include: perception of SEL, SEL Benefits and factors affecting SEL implementation. These major themes were answered by the sub-themes that emerged from the interview data.

The study revealed that teachers believe SEL is important and essential for social, emotional, and academic reasons: academic achievement, emotional well-being, and self-awareness. However, the study also revealed that believing that SEL is essential does not mean that teachers are willing to incorporate it in their classroom. Moreover, although there was somehow a lack of SEL in the sample of the selected schools, the lack of SEL integration did not mean lack of teachers' use of strategies known as (informal practices).Finally, factors that hindered or facilitated SEL integration were explored.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Attention towards the mental health needs of youth is essential for helping their development and emotional coping strategies. Inadequate attention to social and emotional development leads to difficulty in dealing with issues, thus affecting social and emotional welfare in the context of a classroom. New interventions that were introduced and that focused on students' mental and social needs demonstrated their effectiveness on the overall quality of their life (Becker & Luther, 2002). Without the needed skills and strategies to cope with psychological stressors, youth will resort to mental fights and will lack motivation and self-confidence, and these will negatively contribute to their academic achievement.

The social and emotional experiences of students in the classroom are linked to many outcomes, such as grades, discipline records, motivation, and self-confidence (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) programming is an educational strategy that aims to help students to acquire self-awareness, emotional management, decision making, problem-solving, and relationship management (Greenberg, 2003). The implementation of SEL policies and curricula results in the development of social-emotional skills in students, as well as an increase in academic achievement. Incorporating SEL into the classroom aims to achieve different results such as emotional, social and academic enhancement by improving the overall environment of the classroom. This takes place by focusing on the social, emotional, and development needs of students (Becker & Luther, 2002).

SEL programs are designed to fit the needs of different grade levels, as well as the needs of the school. For example, if the school is aiming to focus on the increase in academic achievement in certain grade levels, then there is a specific program designed for that. If the school aims to focus on reducing anxiety in students of a certain grade level, a particular program for that is adopted. Moreover, each program focuses on a specific strategy or curriculum that will aid the students to meet their needs (Frydenberg, 2017).

Pritchard (2018) states that the most common problem with implementing SEL is the inadequate focus on agents who will be implementing the program. Many SEL programs fail since the perspective and understandings of teachers toward SEL are not taken into consideration. Teachers' beliefs and attitudes regarding SEL directly impact the effectiveness of teaching the competencies, regardless of the program used (Brackett et al., 2012). Thus, if there is a negative belief or attitude set on the part of the teacher, it will lead to a rejection of SEL practices and philosophies. For example, if a teacher does not believe that SEL is important and effective, then this lack of motivation and ambition for adopting the program will not result in a positive outcome. According to Frydenberg (2017) teachers who do not have a positive attitude towards SEL, will not believe that the program will lead to a positive outcome for students.

It should be noted that teacher burnout was expressed to be a significant barrier to SEL program implementation (Brackett et al., 2012). Teachers believed that program implementation should take into consideration the many roles teachers take in the classroom and implementation should make their roles easier. For example, teachers have many different responsibilities towards their students, as well as many roles. This should be taken into consideration since overwhelmed teachers will not be able to adopt

SEL without the help and support of the administration. According to Stickle (2017), understanding the teachers' perception of SEL, will help reform and adjust the program qualities in the best possible way that would make it acceptable to the teacher. This will lead to a positive outcome of the program since the teacher will be working on a program that they are comfortable with. The literature indicates that socially and academically effective schools have implemented an SEL based approach; however, this was in the case where the teachers' perspectives were studied and used to improve the programs. CASEL (2003) has urged that schools should promote mental health in students and allow the SEL programs to be altered by the perceptions and beliefs of the teachers taking part in the curriculum.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

Adelman and Taylor (2000) claim that schools that only focus on academic instruction to help students towards academic achievement will fall short of their goals. For this reason, it is essential to understand and enhance the social and emotional characteristics of students. Historically in education, emotions have been thought to be irrelevant to the process of academic achievement and learning. However, research indicates that comprehending one's emotions is an essential component of education (Elias, 2004). Thus, using SEL programs, education institutions have realized positive effects and have recommended their integration into the curriculum (Zins et al.,2007).Additionally, Stickle (2017) states that although SEL programs as a concept have a positive outcome, without understanding the perceptions of the teachers who will implement them, the programs will fail. For this reason, it is important to study teachers' perceptions and opinions towards SEL in general, as well as towards the chosen program to be implemented.

This study aims to investigate teachers' perception in the Beirut area of the importance of SEL and its competencies. Since perceptions are known to "drive behavior and behavior drives environment," it is thus essential to identify teachers' perceptions (Flood, 2009). Additionally, the study aims to understand which factors the teachers believe would help facilitate or hinder the implementation of SEL programs. Understanding the teachers' perceptions of SEL helps future researchers on the most effective way to implement SEL programs and how to deal with the factors that hinder implementation in private schools in Beirut.

1.2.1 Research questions

The current study will examine the following research questions:

- What are teachers' perceptions on the importance of implementing SEL and its competencies in middle school classrooms?
- What are the factors that could facilitate or hinder the implementation of such programs?

1.3 The Rationale of the Study

The study of teacher attitudes, as well as their beliefs, is essential for understanding and directing the successes and failures of educational innovations. There is an evident lack of studies in Lebanon surrounding SEL, in specific, middle school teacher's perceptions of SEL and factors affecting its implementation.

Understanding the perceptions of teachers can help identify key competencies that they believe are needed to support their efforts to champion SEL adoption. Given the context of schools, it is reasonable to say that schools are only as successful as their teachers (Vilcina, 2017). The perceptions of teachers are the main components that affect the motivation of their students and the school environment. Henceforth, creating

a caring school environment that values social, emotional, and psychological well-being.

1.4 Significance of the Study

Implementing SEL programs into school curricula is not enough without the essential guidance of teachers and understanding their role in the practice of SEL. Moreover, research reports that teachers who were given several workshops on implementing the SEL program showed more positive results in the classroom. Accepting the interventions has been shown to affect the application and involvement of educational services (Curby, 2012).

If teachers don't believe a program, not even a validated empirical program, is appropriate for their students, the buy-in will probably be limited (Fredericks, 2010). This lack of buy-in might lead to a compromise of program success. Thus, this study will help understand teacher's perceptions towards SEL in Beirut, Lebanon, and the most optimal way to implement or alter the SEL programs. This will lead to a positive outcome that aims to benefit both the teachers and the students.

Middle school students go through a range of emotional difficulties, especially students who do not have a supportive household. Because many students develop anxiety and depression, it is essential to help them develop skills that will benefit them. Mental issues that can cause emotional dysfunction will affect school performance and social interaction. Moreover, since students spend the majority of their weekdays at school, incorporating programs that will help develop their social and emotional skills will positively impact them in both their short- and long-term lives.
Although a few schools in Beirut have implemented SEL in their curriculum, this study aims to help future research as well as future SEL implementation.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

To comprehend SEL in the context of this study's research questions, it is essential to determine a clear definition of SEL and how it is used in practice. Additionally, it is crucial to understand how different programs of SEL are used to reach different results. Moreover, since this study will focus on the perceptions of competencies, it is significant to define as well as explore the competencies as revealed through the literature. Additionally, the literature will be used to explore and understand the importance of teachers' perceptions of SEL, and the different studies that investigated the subject.

2.1 Social-Emotional Learning

2.1.1 Defining SEL

Over the years, the term SEL has increased in popularity, especially within the field of education (Bruce, 2015). Thus, understanding the definition of SEL can be seen through the definition by (Humphrey, 2013, p.50), where he defines it as "a synonym for any positive or desirable aspect of education outside the basic curriculum." This is why educators who work on SEL, label it as universal, for it to be applied successfully in all schools around the world, following the same definition and procedures (CASEL, 2015).

SEL is an example of an essential school curricula reform that has become a mandatory part of many schools around the world (Bruce, 2015). What makes SEL even more unique, is that the many different programs used universally have also included

the different needs that students require, which is why educators can choose the specific

required program that targets their students' needs (Humphrey, 2013).

2.1.2 SEL in Practice

Having a clear image of how SEL is used in practice brings clarity to the term

and how it should be used. SEL takes place in many forms but is based on the following

two essential components that are interconnected and function together (Farrar, 2018).

The first essential component uses explicit instruction to develop social-emotional

competence by implementing structured instructions that teach skills and concepts. The

second component is based on the advancement of learning techniques that foster a safe

school environment (Durlak et al., 2011). This technique involves implementing the

program according to the schools' culture. For example, understanding the needs of the

students as well as teachers' perceptions will help determine which techniques should

be used and advanced to achieve the needed goals.

The method or styles used vary depending on each school's preferences and

needs, as well as the educator's abilities to implement SEL (Kress & Elias, 2006). The

positive outcome of SEL develops after some time, which is different for each program

and school. In practice, SEL should be implemented through direct instruction, both in

informal and formal ways using the school curricula. This is commonly done through

social studies and language arts curricula which already include material similar to SEL

programs.

Based on the meta-analysis of several studies, the findings suggest that the

effects of SEL are maximized when integrated into daily classroom activities, and with

a systematic integration of SEL into academic subjects (Borner, 2019). More

specifically, the integration into social studies and language arts curricula was most beneficial as it is easier to integrate it with class material.

2.1.3 SEL competencies

Five competencies are referred to under the term 'social and emotional learning' (Farrar, 2018). These competencies highlight the specific aspects of the term SEL. These five competencies are 'self-awareness', 'self-management', 'social awareness', 'relationship skills', and 'responsible decision-making'.

According to Farrar (2018, p. 45), the skills related to each competency are detailed below:

<u>"Self-awareness</u>

Self-awareness includes skills such as identification of emotions, and consideration of how such emotions, thoughts, and values affect behavior. It also relates to creating an accurate self-perception, recognizing one's strengths and weaknesses, and building self-confidence, a growth- mindset, and self-efficacy.

<u>Self-management</u>

Self-management involves the ability to respond to different situations and environments, and regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. This competency incorporates several skills including impulse control, stress management, self-discipline, self-motivation, goal-setting, and organizational skills

<u>Social awareness</u>

Social awareness is related to one's ability to understand behavioral norms and recognize available resources and supports. This includes a variety of skills including perspective-taking, empathy, appreciation for diversity, and respect for others

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<u>Relationship skills</u>

Relationship skills build strength in the area of the building and maintaining healthy relationships with others. It is important to be able to communicate well, work cooperatively with others, and manage conflict in a positive and productive way

<u>Responsible decision-making.</u>

Responsible decision-making is associated with the identification, analysis and solving of problems and evaluation of the results and consequences of such solutions through a reflective process. It also addresses the need for an understanding of one's ethical responsibility, or rather, the responsibility to do 'right thing'."

Through SEL competencies, students learn how to manage emotions, as well as become socially aware of others around them. Moreover, the competencies teach students how to behave ethically, develop healthy relationships, and avoid negative emotions (Elias et al., 2008). Casel (2003) analyzed the effectiveness of the SEL programs in schools and the specific models to be replicated in schools. The results indicated that there was a positive outcome towards students' social and emotional skills, as well as academic achievement. Effective models of SEL programs provide teachers with specific competencies and resources that permit their implementation (Cassel, 2006).

2.2 SEL Benefits

Weissberg and Utne O'Brien (2004) claim that SEL programs address emotional and behavioral issues within the school, and community environments allow students to build social connections with others. Luiselli et al. (2005) studied the benefits of quality SEL programs and found that they brought the school community together from all aspects, as the whole community started to have a common goal. The authors concluded

that SEL programs may be the main component that helps promote and attain academic success.

It is important to implement SEL into schools since it helps create a positive school environment. The skills taught in classrooms are reflected in interpersonal relationships between students. Social and emotional skills can be taught through specific programs that are implemented in the curriculum. When educators implement programs, they aim to help students form stronger bonds, which increases the motivation to learn and, thus, results in higher academic achievement and better mental health (Durlak et al., 2015).

2.3 Program Implementation

In the case of SEL, understanding teachers' perceptions towards implementation and the outside factors that play a role, will help researchers adopt programs preferred by teachers to ensure better success (Meyers et al., 2012). A meta-analysis of SEL implementation in schools shows that for it to be successful it "must be clearly designed, continuously monitored and evaluated, and modified or adapted to fit teacher preferences (Meyers et al., 2012).

Based on a study by Bracket et al., (2012) three domains influence the implementation of SEL to ensure positive outcomes for students. Teachers who were more aware and knowledgeable in SEL were more likely to have positive perceptions towards its implementation (Bracket et al., 2012). Additionally, teachers who believed that SEL is essential and needed were more likely to accept its commitment to the classroom. Finally, school culture and whether the administration provides the resources and support needed by teachers played a major role in its implementation. Teachers who

believed in SEL, but did not have the support of the administration, believed that it was a hard role to carry alone in terms of time, resources, and efficacy.

2.4 Teacher Perceptions

Teachers are experts in the dynamics of the classroom that they observe, manage, and implement daily (Brackett et al., 2011). Additionally, some educators can also apply their training in one classroom to what they have learned in other classrooms and over time (Brackett et al., 2011). Assessing the learning environment through the lens of educators brings not only personal experience but also professional opinion to the data pool. Not only are teachers' perceptions towards SEL itself important, but also their willingness to participate in additional training would significantly influence the effective maintenance of SEL. Additionally, the teachers' and school's motivation towards SEL practices should extend beyond the classroom and into the cafeteria, school playground and elsewhere. This creates both program effectiveness and sustainability. Teachers can identify the overall tone of their classes and the mental or affective environment, including the academic and social standards for their pupils (Fredericks, 2010).

Skilled teachers can create a classroom environment that encourages, develops positive student-teacher relations, builds on the strengths and abilities of students, promotes the intrinsic motivation of students, encourages cooperation, model regulation and conflict resolution strategies, and promotes positive communication (Fredericks, 2010). The perspectives and perceptions of teachers towards SEL programs often influence the development, feasibility, sustainability and successful SEL delivery of the programs (Curby, 2012). Although it is crucial to understand teachers' perceptions of SEL, it is also essential to understand whether the administration and school climate

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support the implementation. Teachers believe that the lack of administrative support towards the implementation of SEL would leave an overwhelming task on the teacher to fulfill alone. They believed that outside experts' help and support of administrators with programs are essential for the successful maintenance of SEL. For example, if the administration does not provide the resources and support needed for the implementation of SEL, this will negatively affect the outcome of the program.

Teachers' perceptions have proved to influence the classroom environment as well as student's success and effectiveness. Evidence shows that teachers' perceptions about their teaching program affect the students' capacity for learning positively or negatively (Cheng, 2013). For example, if the teacher does not believe in the benefits of SEL, their motivation and approach towards incorporating SEL will lead to negative outcomes. According to Jennings and Greenberg (2009), teachers with positive beliefs towards social-emotional skills can successfully engage their students with these skills. Thus, to maintain a highly positive classroom climate, teachers need to have the right perceptions and beliefs towards SEL (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

In terms of implementation, while educators claim that it is feasible to include a period of SEL per week, the majority of teachers feel that it is not feasible (Williams, 2019). This was due to the lack of time to prepare the lesson, as they are already overwhelmed with other tasks. Thus, the teacher's perception of the time they have influences the effectiveness of the infusion (Williams, 2019) and the growth of the students. In terms of responsibility, if the teachers' perception towards the liability of developing SEL for students falls outside their scope of work this will lead to carrying out the program with a lack of motivation (Preckel, 2017). Teachers who believed that it did not fall within their scope of work, carried out the program with a lack of

enthusiasm, which resulted in few positive results. Successfully implementing innovative programs is based on the positive attitudes towards both the importance and difficulty of these programs. This indicates that since the teachers are the primary deliverers of SEL programs, their beliefs, perceptions, and support towards SEL influence the "adoption, sustainability, and impact of such programs."

Research conducted on the teachers' perceptions of SEL in Vietnam indicated that one of the most prominent variables in the perceptions was the educational background and teaching experience (Huynh et al. 2018). The teachers with high educational background believed that there was an essential need for SEL in classrooms. However, teachers with average educational backgrounds were not familiar with SEL and were not comfortable with implementing the program (Huynh et al. 2018). Additionally, teachers with more teaching experience believed that the program is easy to implement; while teachers with less teaching experience did not believe that they had the time to effectively implement the program.

Understanding teachers' perceptions of their self-efficacy are essential for the successful implementation of SEL. Kelm and McIntosh (2012) claimed that it is important for teachers to reflect and evaluate their abilities. With time and experience, teachers can build their sense of efficacy, however, new challenges can cause a re-evaluation of their abilities. Teachers' perception of their beliefs and abilities impacts student outcomes and program implementation. Teachers with a strong sense of efficacy exhibit "greater levels of the planned organization, are more open to new ideas and methods to better meet the needs of students, are more understanding when things fall apart, are less critical of low- performing students, and are less inclined to refer struggling students for special education evaluation (Anderson, 2016, p. 111)."

In general, the belief is made that teachers' perceptions of SEL and self-efficacy are related to the development of positive teacher-student relationships. Additionally, teachers believed that their knowledge and ability to apply social-emotional skills in their own life is essential (Polou, 2017). The emotional well-being of a teacher during the implementation and adaptation of the SEL program is an important factor to its success. The findings of several studies highlight the importance of teacher-training in helping teachers develop personal and professional skills and their emotional competencies that would help them to focus on teacher-student relationships and their students' social and emotional skills as well.(Kelm and McIntosh, 2012).

2.5 Research on social and emotional learning

Evidence has shown that SEL strategies and programs based on evidence can improve both immediate and long-lasting social-emotional skills, which lead to direct, measurable academic improvements and which can make a significant difference either in schools or in the lives of the youth (Hymel, 2015). Results based on the meta-analysis findings of SEL, in particular early and middle school education; show that SEL programs achieve social-emotional outcomes, better behavior and increased academic achievement (Harris, 2017). However, there have been challenges and limitations to impede the efficacy of SEL programs, whereby the literature continues to have mixed findings. Several studies have requested for a more defined and sustained measurement of SEL outcomes, including a stronger focus on teacher program quality prospects as an important forecast of outcomes over a longer period (Hymel, 2015). The opinions of teachers about the development of the SEL curriculum affect the application of the system and its feasibility and durability (Harris, 2017).

Izard et al. (2001) conducted a study where they analyzed the social-emotional levels of students and compared them to their academic performance and behavior. Students who scored higher on the emotional skills report also scored higher academically. Moreover, teachers reported that students with higher SEL skills did not suffer from attention or learning problems like students who scored lower on emotional skills (Izard et al., 2001). Furthermore, students who had better social-emotional skills found it easier to form relationships and deal with their emotions. However, students who did not have sufficient social-emotional skills suffered from more mental issues as well as low self-esteem (Izard et al., 2001). Elias and Arnold (2006) found that educators who integrated the promotion of students' emotional and social skills had an increase in the overall rate of social and emotional success.

The benefits of SEL are not only temporarily found in school education and disappear after schooling. A qualitative open ended structured interview study conducted by Jimenez (2016) looked at emotional management and self-awareness strategies of SEL to understand if they were indicators of academic success. The study revealed that schools that did not implement SEL had an increased chance of unemployment, poor mental health, criminal behaviors, and anger issues. To further prove the advantages of SEL, the study cites a neuroscience report which claims that SEL skills in kindergarten "can have long-term academic benefits on students' reading and vocabulary, including in high poverty schools, suggesting that SEL may assist in closing achievement gaps (Jimenez, 2016, p. 80)." Based on many different studies, the skills that SEL programs provide, have an overall positive outcome (Jimenez, 2016). Brown et al. (2010) claim that the relationship between social-emotional skills and the behavior of students indicates that classrooms with higher social-emotional skills have a

more caring, productive, and thriving learning environment. In contrast, classrooms with less social-emotional skills would need more resources and materials to help foster social-emotional skills, as well as psychological welfare. Thus, based on many research findings, SEL integration in school curricula provided evidence for the adoption and increase in social-emotional skills in classrooms (Raver, 2008).

Hong (2019) states that since SEL competencies and strategies focus on the social and emotional aspects of students, the programs are easily integrated into language arts and literacy subjects. For these reasons, Hong studied the perceptions of language arts and literacy teachers in South Korea and the United States, towards the importance of social and emotional learning. Additionally, Hong wanted to examine teachers' use of academic and nonacademic strategies to support students in the language arts or literacy classrooms, because curricula of these subjects are more likely to be associated with learning about one's and others' emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. Also, teachers utilize a range of instructional strategies to promote social and emotional learning more often in language arts and literacy lessons than in other content lessons.

2.6 Lebanon: SEL and Teacher Perceptions

2.6.1 SEL

The education system in Lebanon is composed of four general levels: kindergarten (3 years), elementary school (6 years), intermediate (3 years) and secondary (2 or 3 years) (Shuayeb et al., 2016). Like most educational systems, students spend most of their years being part of a school system, and this is essential to acknowledge since their life is split between their home and school. However, a common concern in most schools in Lebanon is the academic success of students, which

constitutes the general academic achievements of the school. For this reason, several schools have incorporated programs that have been deemed essential for student well-being and academic success (Shuayeb et al., 2016).

The director of Lebanon's Mental Health Unit in the Ministry of Health, for example, cited the psychological impact of conflict as one of the primary factors hampering the youth's learning and social development (Hejase et al., 2012). Research has determined the essential need for SEL programs to help the youth "manage their emotions, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions can significantly improve school-aged the youth's foundational social-emotional skills" (Hejase et al., 2012, p. 19).

A study conducted by Kiwan (2017) with the purpose was to understand the importance and need of SEL in Lebanon. Her results were based on both private and public schools in Beirut, Lebanon. She claims that three main factors burden the relationship between teachers and students in the Lebanese educational system: No access to resources, lack of awareness, and the lack of skills the youth have towards dealing with emotions. Thus, the results from the study reveal that there is a need for awareness of psychological and social levels, such as the universally used concept of SEL programs (Kiwan, 2017).

2.6.2 Teacher Perceptions

Shal (2016) conducted a study about teachers' perceptions of cyberbullying in the Lebanese context. Shal (2016) mentions that teachers were the chosen participants since they are indispensable agents for the success of school reform. Without teacher commitment and involvement in program implementation, the process will most likely be unsuccessful. This is why teachers' perceptions are essential and should be valued.

Shal (2016) aimed to create a presentational program that will lead to a decrease in cyberbullying, however, he believed that without the teachers' support, the implementation of the program would fail. A common opinion among the teachers was that presentational strategies are important, however, working on the behavior of the students first should be a priority. Finally, the study provides attention to the value of the perceptions embraced by teachers about cyberbullying. Whether a prevention program is to be implemented or an interventional program, it is believed that the support of teachers is key for its effectiveness and success (Shal, 2016).

Moukarzel (2018) conducted a study on the perceptions of teachers about students' performance in mathematics in single-sex versus co-educational schools in Lebanon. Examining the perceptions of teachers of single-sex education helped show that they have an immense influence on student achievement. Moukarzel (2018) claims that teachers "directly affect how students learn, what they learn, how much they learn, and the ways they interact . . . (p. 22)". In the case of this study, the teacher's beliefs and attitudes determined the success or failure of single-sex programs. This is because if teachers have positive perceptions and are supportive, it will help reduce student anxiety and stress.

Due to the agreement on the importance of teacher perceptions in the education context, understanding teachers' perceptions in Lebanon towards SEL is a major contribution towards the successful implementation of SEL.

To understand the aim of this study, it is essential to discuss SEL in detail. For this reason, the review includes SEL, as well as the factors that surround it. Additionally, the discussion of teacher perceptions about SEL is essential for this project. Finally, relating the literature to the Lebanese context gives insight into a private school in

Beirut. The preceding review suggests that research regarding teacher perceptions in Lebanon has not addressed SEL, and their perceptions merely focused on student's performance in Mathematics and cyber-bullying in the Lebanese context.

2.7 Critical Reflection

SEL is generally portrayed by the literature to be an essential component in education, that aims to help students; socially, emotionally, and academically. Moreover, the essential need to explore teachers' perception for effective SEL implementation is recommended. The literature supports the essential need of SEL; specifically, in middle school contexts. This includes social studies and literary curriculum; which studies show are more practical and easier to incorporate SEL into the curriculum.

In the Lebanese context of literature, the studies found are not specific to the aim of my research questions. However, this is essential to include since it helps give insight into the general context of SEL and studies related to it. Each study takes a different approach towards SEL and for this reason, I would like to support the literature and focus on the factors that are vital to SEL integration. In this study, I focused on middle school teachers who taught literary or social studies curriculum. These criterions were chosen in support of the literature, as well as adding a new approach to the literature in the Lebanese context.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the following qualitative descriptive study is to explore middle school teachers' perceptions of SEL and its competencies. Additionally, the teachers' perspectives on the factors that facilitate, or hinder implementation are explored. The data was collected by conducting semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. When choosing a research design, it should be based on the most effective way to answer research questions (Patton 2002). This chapter describes the research method.

3.1 Research Design

The main criteria of qualitative studies include studying people in the natural world, understanding how individuals create meanings of their experiences, analyzing individuals in a specific context and reporting the results in the common language of the participants (Hatch, 2002). This study aimed to explore the teachers' perception of SEL, not to investigate or build a theory about their perceptions. Moreover, the focus of this study is individual teachers' perceptions from different private schools located in Beirut.

This study used a qualitative descriptive interview design, where teachers gave insight into their beliefs and perceptions on social-emotional learning programs and competencies in general. Moreover, the study aimed to understand which factors teachers perceived to facilitate or hinder the implementation of such programs.

3.2 Contexts for the Study

One of the main key features of the qualitative design is identifying the context of the research study (Merriam, 2002). Contexts are considered the physical setting of a study, the participants and the processes included (Hatch, 2003). The context of this study is 10 private schools in Beirut, Lebanon with a chosen factor of grade 7,8 and 9 teachers responsible for the literacy and language art curriculum. 10 participants were grade 7 teachers, 6 were grade 8 teachers and 4 were grade 9 teachers.

The reason behind choosing these grades is because research has shown that the most effective programs were implemented in middle school levels (Izard et. al, 2000). Additionally, as previously discussed in the literature, language art and literacy curriculum are the most suitable contexts for implementing SEL material.

3.3 Measures for Ethical Protection

The research was conducted following IRB ethical guidelines. The proposal was approved by IRB and potential participants received an email that explains the purpose of the study, as well as consent forms (Appendix C).

Before the interviews were conducted a clear overview and explanation of the study was presented (Appendix A). Participants were informed and reminded that at any time they can withdraw or discontinue the study if they so wished.

3.4 Population

The selection of participants in a qualitative study is dependent on many different factors such as "what the researcher wants to learn, the research paradigm, the kind of study, the context, method of collecting data, and the type of generalization needed" (Cresswell, 2003, p.10). Choosing specific participants for a study is crucial to

the strength of the study (Morris, 2007). Teachers are experts in the dynamics of the classroom that they observe, manage, and implement daily (Brackett et al., 2011). Assessing the educational programs through the lens of educators brings not only personal experience but also professional opinion to the data pool. The chosen population of this study is language art teachers of grade 7, 8 and 9 students who teach in private schools in Beirut, Lebanon. Ten private schools were randomly chosen from the CERD list of schools in the Greater Beirut area using English as a medium of instruction, and two teachers from each school were selected and online interviewed. The participants were able to provide their perceptions and understanding of this study's research question.

Many researchers recommend sample sizes of six to eight participants to achieve rich descriptions of participant's perceptions and experiences (Creswell, 2003; Maxwell, 1996). Moreover, the sample should not be too large where it is difficult to manage data that will remove the extensive details of the participant's insight. Thus, the following selection strategy is chosen to obtain the qualified participants who will give the most credible information needed for this study. The 20 participants chosen were to ensure that there were enough participants to avoid general insights and not too many where it was not manageable. A purposeful sample of 20 teachers was chosen, due to the importance of obtaining the most insightful source of information to answer research questions (Patton, 2001). For this study, teachers who met the following criteria were selected: (a) teachers of grades 7 (10 participants) ,8 (6 participants) and 9 (4 participants); and (b) teachers who teach the language arts (11 participants) and literacy curriculum (9 participants).

3.5 Procedure and Strategies

In this study, ten private English schools in the Beirut area were randomly selected. To obtain school acceptance, the researcher contacted the principals of the schools and explained the research project in detail. Once the principal accepted, the researcher asked for the contact details of the grade 7,8 and 9 literacy and language art teachers. The teachers were then contacted and informed of the acceptance of the principal and head of the middle school division as well as the explanation of the study in detail. Upon the approval of the teachers, a consent form (Appendix C) was sent to be reviewed and signed.

After the consent forms were signed, the researcher set appropriate dates for each teacher in order to interview them. Due to the pandemic (Covid 19) circumstances, the researcher had to conduct the interviews online, via IRB approval on the international program known as WebEx. During the 60-minute WebEx-recorded interview, the grade 7, 8 and 9 teachers were given an overview of SEL and relevant details (Appendix A). This was based on a prepared handout by the researcher that contains the needed information relevant to the study. During the interview, the handout was explained further by the researcher, along with other elements.

After the handout was explained, the researcher began by asking the interview questions (Appendix B). The questions were prepared based on many studies that aimed to understand teachers' perceptions of SEL and its implementation. Interviewing the teachers focused on three main focal points: Perception of SEL and its competencies, benefits of SEL, and factors affecting the implementation of SEL. For this reason, I used the questions that most resonate with my study, along with questions that have

been personally added, to reach an optimal amount of information about the teachers'
perceptions in my study (Appendix B).

3.6 Data Collection

The interview was conducted using guided open-ended questions that helped
assist the participant in talking about the program. According to Hatch (2002), the
questions should be developed before the interview and should aim to guide the
participants. The data was collected by semi-structured, open-ended, WebEx-recorded
interviews with each of the 20 participants.

Single interviews are used based on several different factors, especially focusing
on research questions and the needed information (DiCicco-Bloom, 2006). The first part
of the interview, which was about 10 minutes, was used to go over the handout with the
teachers. The second part of the interview was used to gather the teacher's perception of
SEL as a whole and the factors that could facilitate or hinder the implementation of such
programs.

Interview

As mentioned in the literature review, Moukarzel (2018) and Shal (2016)
conducted studies about teachers' perceptions towards SEL. In their studies, their
interview questions were based on many factors such as teacher experience, subject,
previous experience, etc. Thus, in this study, the interview questions were selected from
both studies and adapted on the basis of this study. Since this study focused on the
competencies and goals of the program, the questions selected were more directed
towards the purpose of the study.

3.6.1 Demographic

The teachers chosen for the project had different experiences and qualifications. There are no specific required years of experience since this allowed to gather perceptions from teachers with different experience, Additionally, the teachers are qualified in the Language arts or social science domains, specifically for grade 7,8 and 9 curricula.

3.6.2 SEL perceptions

Some of the selected teachers already had previous experience or knowledge about SEL. This was not a variable in choosing the participants. The teachers chosen did not have to have any prior experience in SEL. However, if they did, this was addressed and explored in the interviews.

3.6.3 Factors

The interview consisted of questions that refer to the factors that impede or facilitate the implementation of SEL. Teachers were asked about these factors in order to give an understanding of which factors could be used in future or current implementation.

3.7 Data Analysis

The interviews were recorded and transcribed following each interview. During the process of reading the transcriptions, a reflection of notes was kept. This reflection helped serve as a form of informal data analysis which helped develop additional themes and typologies. According to LeCompte and Preissle (1993) typologies are known as "dividing everything observed into groups or categories based on some canon for disaggregating the whole phenomenon under study (P. 12)." Analyzing the data

presented was done by dividing it into categories or groups on predetermined typologies. Thus, the chosen typologies were an essential step towards the analysis and discussion process. Hatch (2002) states that his typological strategy is helpful in interview studies since it helps provide a design for data analysis. Thus, this study used Hatch's framework to analyze the collected data.

This process allows the researcher to organize and question data so that patterns, themes, and relationships can be revealed. In this study, the data were analyzed and coded for important themes using Hatch's (2002) nine-step Typological Analysis. Hatch (2002) suggested that this model of analysis is useful when "initial groupings of data and beginning categories for analysis are easy to identify and justify" (p. 152). The research question underpinning this study asks for descriptions of teachers' perceptions regarding SEL, its competencies, and the factors.

Based on Hatch (2002), the data was hand-coded with different colors marking the sub-themes. In this step, open coding was used. Line-by-line searching was used with the data in order to color groups of sentences, phrases, and paragraphs that related to the three main themes. In the next phase of coding, all data with the same code were added in their own sections on a new Microsoft word document. This helped organize and create a data set that is distinguished by categories. Each data set was analyzed and reviewed, where the themes across the data were looked into and summarized, which then became the findings for the study.

3.8 Limitations

Due to the large number of private schools in Lebanon, focusing on the Beirut area is more viable. However, the results obtained from the study, do not reflect teachers' perceptions in all of Lebanon. Additionally, there is a lack of studies in

Lebanon surrounding SEL, in specific, teachers' perceptions of SEL. For this reason, the study   relied on international studies mostly rather than culturally representative studies of the Lebanese context.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this chapter is to report the results from the data collected to describe teachers' perceptions of SEL and its competencies in private schools in Beirut, Lebanon; and to explore possible factors that hinder or facilitate SEL integration. Reporting of the results is organized into seven sections. Each section reports responses to an interview question from the seven questions used in the interviews. I report the findings, relationships, and themes, and how they address the research questions. Finally, I conclude this chapter with the main key findings that will be discussed in the next discussion chapter.

Evidence has shown that SEL instruction is beneficial for all students and can significantly support students socially and those with mental health issues and can enhance academic motivation. Respondents were 20 participants who taught social studies or literary studies in 10 private schools in Beirut. Two teachers were selected and interviewed from each school. No background demographic information was collected, to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of each participant, hoping that this will encourage them to respond accurately.

The research questions provided the initial categories this study explores: (a) What are teachers' perceptions on the importance of implementing SEL and its competencies in middle school classrooms in Beirut? (b) What are the factors that could facilitate or hinder the implementation of such programs? The research questions were not directly used. Different types of questions were designed to provide an opportunity for teachers to discuss their perceptions about SEL implementation.

The following paragraphs will present and attempt to interpret the results of the study in seven different sections with each section focusing on an interview question.

4.1 Interview question 1

Have you ever heard of the term "social-emotional learning"?

Three main themes emerged from the data gathered during the interview with the teachers. 16 of the 20 participants were aware of the term "social-emotional learning," however, the participants differ in their amount of knowledge of SEL, to what extent do they know about it, and how they acquired or learned about it, etc.

The main themes derived are educational background, personal experience, and role of the school (curriculum and teaching experience). The following table displays the variety of answers given by the teacher participants and each theme will be discussed, and more data will be used to show how these themes emerged and their relevant analysis.

Table 1: **Have you ever heard of the term "social emotional learning"?**

A. Yes, and it is one of the most essential aspects of authentic learning because nowadays you cannot call yourself a 21st-century learner if you're not equipped with social and emotional skills
B. I have heard of it through my educational background and professional development courses, such as critical thinking, thinking outside the box and emotional intelligence. Its more theoretical and many teachers lack the experience to integrate this term into their practices
C. Technically, I have not heard about this. But as meaning, we relate learning to academics, so we don't pay as much attention to the social and emotional aspects of learning.
D. Yes of course. We have been working with SEL in advisory programs. We teach them differently based on the students' needs; some students enjoy working in a group, some on their own, depends on how comfortable they feel and, on their weakness, and on their emotions.

4.1.1 Educational background

The educational background of teacher participants played a role in whether they have heard of the term or not. The teacher participants were either introduced to SEL

directly, through certain course curriculum or material and indirectly, through courses

that focused on the mental well-being of students in schools.

Participant A (Table 2) learned about SEL extensively while obtaining his/her

education degree, whereas for Participant B the term was introduced to him/her

indirectly through courses in education taken previously.

Participant C claims that SEL was not commonly known when she completed

her education. Teachers' main priority was to ensure that their students have learned the

relevant material.

Table 2: Teachers' Knowledge of SEL

A. I did my BA in English language literature and a lot of my courses heavily prioritized content on how students have diff needs and it's not only about teaching them content and language skills as much as it is about teaching them life skills.
B. I came across these terms indirectly in educational courses that target similar social and emotional skills and that focuses on the wellbeing of the student. however, I was never really exposed to the program itself.
C. No, I have not heard of it, especially since when I finished my education back in the day, the main objective was to make sure I could teach the material to students.

4.1.2 Personal experience

Teacher participants heard about SEL through their own experience either from

research or discussion amongst peers. Participant A (Table 3), claims that although

he/she has heard of SEL, believed it was more essential for life skills, rather than

academic achievement. Participant B heard about SEL during discussions with

educators but is not fully knowledgeable about it.

Table 3: Teachers' Experience with SEL

A. Yes. I've read about it online when I research things about education, SEL helps more with life skills than academic achievement and how to implement in the real world. How to control their anger, stress and projecting their feelings appropriately
B. Yes, it's very common as we do discuss these things as educators but haven't gone in-depth to it. Its skills are embedded indirectly in the curricula.

4.1.3 School Role

The school played a role in whether participants had heard of SEL or not.

Participants A and B (Table 4*)* have not only heard about SEL but have also

attended workshops or training that allowed them to be knowledgeable about it. Both

participants refer to the fact that their schools provided this training.

Participants C and D mention that the school did not provide any sort of

discussion or workshop that allowed them to hear about the term SEL. Participant C

claims that they have an idea, but this knowledge does not come from the school itself.

Table 4: School's Role in Introducing SEL

A. Yes, we have attended several courses in school about SEL and as 21st-century educators, we try our best to embed the 21st skills which promote collaboration, critical thinking, to help them come up with practical solutions and make responsible decisions. Also, thru research, as a teacher and a parent you need to read more about ways to help build better generations
B. Yes. In my training to become a teacher and professional development and understanding and thru my mentors. And also workshops at ACS
C. Personally, I have an idea, but not directly from school resources or curriculum. When I was hired, it was purely based on my comprehension in the subject I teach.
D. No, I have not heard of it and honestly, it has not been brought up in any of our staff meetings. We do discuss student's emotional well-being in general, but not in detail to the extent where terms like SEL come up.

4.2 Interview Question 2

Do you think it is important for students to have social-emotional skills to be

successful in school and life? Why?

18 out of 20 of the teachers believed that SEL skills are important for students to

be successful in school and life, where a range of different reasons were given. The

common themes that emerged amongst the variety of data can be seen in Table 5. These

themes are academic achievements, skills development, and emotional understanding,

self-awareness, and psychological well-being.

Table 5: Do you think it is important for students to have social emotional skills to be successful in school and life? why?

A. To be a part of the 21st century world you have to have several sets of skills, amongst them is the ability to differentiate and to show empathy to others. You have to understand yourself before understanding your surroundings.
B. Character development consists of social and emotional elements. It's extremely important.
C. Absolutely. As adults, we use these strategies to form our interpersonal relationships, to maintain our jobs, pay our bills, be successful. We use these to set up our students, we don't just set them up to succeed at school
D. In life definitely, I think you need a social-emotional aspect no matter what, however, academic performance does not depend on these aspects.
E. Yes definitely. Students don't understand boundaries for themselves or others or have the right to say no, which is very problematic. It helps raises awareness and helps students stand up for themselves and create healthy boundaries with their peers

4.2.1 Academic Achievement

One of the common themes amongst the participants was the importance of SEL in enhancing academic achievement. The teachers commonly believed that academic achievement is acquired through the skills that SEL provides, which allows the students to grow. Participant A (Table 6) believes that SEL skills are what allow students to build a strong core that will help their academic achievement. Participants B and C also focus on the importance of skills and their positive role towards academic achievement.

Participant D does not believe SEL skills are essential since academic achievement can happen when students separate their emotions from how they perform in school.

Table 6: **Importance of SEL in Increasing Academic Achievement**

A. Of course. When we work on the social-emotional skills of students, we support their communication skills, their growth, we teach them self-progress and evaluations which is the core for growth. This helps students academically, as we have built a strong core.
B. It directly impacts their growth in terms of communication skills and reflects on their academic performance positively.
C. In life definitely, I think you need social-emotional aspects no matter what because its tangled with their academic performance in school.
D. You can have both confident and anxious students who excel academically. I think the most important skill, more essential than SEL skills is to teach students how to separate their personal emotions from their role at school.

4.2.2 Skills Development

Another common perception extracted from the data is that SEL skills help the development of essential skills that will help students tackle problems in their life, build their character and build healthy relationships. In Table 7, participants A and B believe that SEL skills will help students overcome obstacles at school and in their daily lives.

Participants C and D focus on the strength and character development these skills provide students with. Additionally, when developing these skills, essentially students can form positive relationships with others and themselves.

Although the perceptions of participants from A to D present the positive aspects that SEL skills provide, these aspects differ from one to another teacher. The Participant B focuses on how it provides communication skills, while the Participant C focuses on positive relationships.

Participant E focuses on the power of student's upbringings and home environment.

Table 7: SEL and Skill Development

A. Yes, because it helps them deal with the outside world (fieldwork) and understand their own weakness/ strengths and personality. Helps them in problem-solving skills in everyday life, prepares them into adulthood and school to university transition
B. It directly impacts their growth in terms of communication skills and reflects on their academic performance positively.
C. SEL skills will help students manage and advocate for themselves, understand life from different perspectives and make the right choices in life. As for school, it will allow them to form healthy and positive relationships with their peers and to promote teamwork and collaborative learning in the classroom. Also, build their family and community partnerships.
D. It will help the student become confident, independent, and acquire 21st-century skills that they need in school and real life.
E. Although these skills are essential, they are rarely effective since the way parents influence their children is far more impactful. If parents do not encourage these skills, then students will not learn them at school.

4.2.3 Emotional awareness

A common perception of SEL skills can be seen in Table 8 below, where achieving self-awareness was a common benefit. For example, Participant A (Table 8) believes that self-awareness will lead to students being able to more emotionally aware of their emotions and their influence on their acts. The participant mentions how crucial this is for students to be ready for the way society functions. Participants B and C also focus on self-awareness and how this will help students become more emotionally intelligent which in effect has positive outcomes.

Table 8: SEL and Emotional Awareness

A. Your school is a smaller society, which resembles the actual society that we are trying to prepare our kids for. In school you form relationships and decisions to make, so a kid should develop self-awareness to have the ability to accurately recognize their emotion and their influence on their behavior.
B. Yes definitely. Teaching SEL competencies are crucial for their development both at school and in society. Their critical developmental stage starts at school, that's why it's important to help students be aware of their emotions.
C. People who have EI skills are capable of dealing with different individuals and being self-aware by putting themselves in other people's shoes. They are more understanding and empathetic towards others.

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4.2.4 Psychological well being

The psychological well-being of the students was a common theme that arose when discussing their perceptions towards SEL skills. Commonly, it was perceived that SEL skills help aid students towards a healthy mental state, which allows them to excel in both life and school.

For example, Participant C (Table 9) believes that it is not the focus on whether students academically achieve or not, since even those who achieve high results are not necessarily confident. Thus, SEL skills will help all students and support their mental well-being.

Participant D believes that the skills are essential but should be the focus of the school counselor.

Table 9: SEL and Psychological Development

A. It makes them stronger and aware of the stress they will be exposed to in life no matter how old they are. It promotes a healthy psychological being and helps students understand themselves better and identify their emotions. It helps them become comfortable with who they are and their identity.
B. SEL is important at any age and it essential for the student's mental wellbeing. They will be eligible to different experiences and look at situations from a different perspective and when issues arise, it affects people based on their own coping mechanism.
C. Not all students who achieve high results in exams are confident in their social and emotional abilities. In my classroom, I realized that the students who excel academically mostly suffer from emotional and social issues. These SEL skills will help ensure that all students are receiving the support they need to establish healthy minds.
D. Honestly, I think they are essential, but they are impossible to be taught by the teacher. A counselor would be better at doing this since their sole job is the psychological well-being of the students.

The data presented in question 2, explores how SEL might benefit students in the school, as well as in their life. Participants believed that SEL was beneficial in school, as well as positively impacting their life outside school.

4.3 Interview Question 3

What do you think are the benefits of infusing SEL into the curriculum?

The participants commonly mentioned 5 themes in relation to the benefits of

SEL in the curriculum. These main themes were derived from the data are reported in

table 10.

Main themes:

Life skills

Safe school environment

Psychological support

Cultural Values

Table 10: **What do you think are the benefits of infusing SEL into the curriculum?**

A. It's a life skill and very crucial to be given and can add up to their leadership qualities later on in life.
B. It encourages students to refer to teachers whenever they have any problems. Students have to feel that teacher is supportive, and the relationship should be non-threatening and safe. Promoting a positive school environment, which helps students create healthy relationships with their peers.
C. When you build more confident students, they become more motivated and it will reflect positively on their academics.
D. I think benefits would be related to increased academic performance and improving their psychological wellbeing. This results in decreased emotional distress and generating a positive atmosphere in the school. It alters their perception of life and how to create deeper meanings of their experiences in school and society.
E. I believe it represents the core of our social studies curriculum. We teach them cultural values that reflect on the Lebanese society. Our main goal is to build active and effective individuals in society that can contribute positively through constructive change

Table 10 includes the range of different perceptions that arose from the relevant interview question 3.

4.3.1 Life skills

Life skills is a common theme that 5 of the teachers mentioned when asked about

infusing SEL into the curriculum. Generally, it is believed that life skills will develop

when students are introduced to lesson plans or certain activities that help them build these skills.

Participants A and B (Table 11), report how lessons in the classroom will be used by students in their life outside the classroom.

Table 11: SEL and Life Skills

A. It's a life skill and very crucial to be given and can add up to their leadership qualities later on in life. If given in an advisory session with certain objectives for every session, it'll help them a lot. Even in dealing with family issues and outside world. It can be introduced through themes (lesson plans) given in curriculum, or by any social studies / English teacher.
B. We would be giving them opportunities to manage their expectations, to know themselves better, and to create goals. To share successes in their classes is going to be transferable for them to be able to do that in their real lives.

4.3.2 Safe Environment

Another common theme is that teachers believed that infusing SEL into the curriculum would result in a safe environment, where students can communicate and feel secure. Participant A (Table 12) believes that incorporating SEL would help students feel okay about making mistakes. Participant B explained the program that was integrated into their school and how it helped students build positive relationships, as well as feel safe.

16 out of 20 participants mentioned the importance of its integration; however, it was emphasized that the school should integrate it, not the teachers themselves. Additionally, Participant C mentioned that it should be integrated into Math and other teachers believed in the importance of being integrated beyond subjects such as English and social studies.

Table 12: SEL and Safe School Enviroment

A. It's important to cultivate this mentality where it's okay to make mistakes. Working on their SEL skills will help them grow and help others grow to feel safe and secure around them. It should be part of the school system
B. At our school, we have the advisory program which tackles these issues and gives insight on how to treat one another, classroom atmosphere and enhance positive teacher-student- and peer relationship.
C. It also promotes a positive school climate, since teachers are responsible for creating a safe classroom environment that prevents bullying and disruptive behaviors among students. It should even be integrated in math.

4.3.3 Psychological Support

Commonly, it was believed that students need to be aware that psychological support, like seeking solace in their teacher is available, which will result from SEL implementation. For example, Participant A (Table 13) mentions a certain class activity that can help students to discuss topics that will help them seek psychological support. Participants B and C mention how events like COVID 19 could be handled better when students are prepared to deal with these situations, as well as to seek support.

Table 13: SEL and Psychological Support

A. First, the hidden curricula, there are many teachable moments in class where you can pose and reflect and discuss with the student's certain things that can help encourage them to seek psychological support if needed.
B. In the curriculum it can't exist as a program alone, it has to be embedded. They have to take it into consideration in all subjects and classrooms. They need to make it clear for students that psychological support is available. This will help prepare for situations like this pandemic.
C. It's crucial for these skills to be infused in the curriculum especially during these critical times, like covid 19, that we live in. Students need to feel psychologically supported, especially with all the stress they go through.

4.3.4 Cultural Values

Incorporating SEL into the curriculum was generally perceived to help students gain the necessary cultural values of society, which will help create future change. Participant B (Table 14) focuses on how Lebanon is already segregated and helping students gain essential values will maybe give hope for the future. The concept of

students being the main hope for the future was widely shared, especially by participant

C, who believes they can create a more unified country in the future.

Table 14: SEL and Cultural Values

A. Teaches them life skills, ethics and cultural values. Incorporating SEL into the curriculum will help students hold the essential values of society.
B. I believe it represents the main component towards change. We must teach students cultural values that will help decrease segregation in the future. Our main goal to build active and effective individuals in society that can contribute positively through constructive change.
C. It becomes unified in the curriculum, cohesiveness of all classes implementing into the school curriculum is very important. Students are our hope for a more unified country, and teaching them the importance of cultural values, such as equality and equity is important.

The data presented in question 3, explores the different aspects that SEL

integration would provide towards students. Perceptions differed in the different ways

that SEL integration can help students; psychologically, socially, and academically.

4.4 Interview Question 4.

Which social-emotional competencies such as self-awareness, self-management,

social awareness, relationship management and responsible decision-making do you

believe are most important for students?

Table 15 reflects the different perceptions that participants shared, based on the

relevant research question 4.

Table 15 shows that most teachers believed that self-awareness is the most

essential competency for students since it is the base that opens access to all the other

competencies.

Additionally, the perception that they are all interlinked or equally as important

was common. The common themes are self-awareness and emotional competencies.

Table 15: **Which social emotional competencies such as self-awareness, self- management, social awareness, relationship management, and responsible decision-making do you believe are most important for students?**

A. All of these competencies are important in life. Each one is unique by itself and has a special impact on the student and they will all contribute to their healthy overall being
B. Emphasize Self-awareness mainly (psychological issues- bullying-peer pressure). Because they're still trying to understand and find who they are and where they belong, and they can easily lose sight of what they care about in the situation
C. They're all interrelated and equally, important if you focus on one of the skills, the results will not as be as fulfilling or not as fruitful for the future if u have the 5 competencies. It should be taught gradually throughout the year by teachers and should be aligned throughout all subjects (everybody working in the same direction
D. I believe it all starts with self-awareness as it's the main competency and without it, the rest of the competencies cannot be acquired. It starts with knowing one's self and strengths and weakness before jumping into making the wrong decisions both in life and at school
E. To be honest, I do not think there is any competency that is most important. Each competency has its benefit and I guess it depends on what the needs of the students are.

4.4.1 Self-awareness

The most common SEL competency that was believed to be essential is self-awareness, where participants believed that it should be focused on the most when teaching students. Participant D (Table 16), believes that by teaching self-awareness first, the student will then pick up on self-management. This indicates that self-awareness is seen as the base which opens the door towards acquiring all the competencies.

Table 16: **SEL and Self- Awareness**

A. Start to emphasize self-awareness and its related to age group.
B. They have to learn how to express their emotions in a constructive way and how to manage their anger. So, I feel self-awareness which creates self-management is very important to teach first.
C. At this age there's a lot of ongoing development and whatever you sow you reap. There should be a lot of emphasis on self-awareness because students really need to know themselves
D. Self-awareness complements self-management; for example, if a student is aware they have a behavioral issue they will seek the teachers or counselor help to fix that issue.

Interlinked

Additionally, other teachers believed that all competencies are unique and are interlinked with each other. Participants A, B and C (Table 17) claim that all the competencies are unique and will help contribute to a healthy overall being. Participant D mentions that middle school teachers do not have the time, especially considering the old practices of the Lebanese curriculum.

Table 17: SEL Competencies Interlinked

A. All of these competencies are important in life. Each one is unique by itself and has a special impact on the student and they will all contribute to their healthy overall being.
B. They're all interrelated and equally important. If you focus on one of the skills, the results will not as be as fulfilling or not as fruitful for the future if you have the 5 competencies.
C. Every skill is equally important, I can't choose decision making if he can't understand himself. They're all interrelated and complement each other. I need to integrate all these skills in different lesion plans and target these skills separately as objectives over a certain period.
D. Its absent in the Lebanese curriculum, middle school teachers don't have time for that. The skills are all equally crucial, but a lot of factors hinder them in our traditional Lebanese curriculum.

The data presented in question 4, explores which competency teachers believed to be most essential. Commonly, self-awareness was the common competency that was seen as the base of all competencies. Additionally, the perception that competencies are interlinked and are most successful when taught together was present.

4.5 Interview Question 5.

Please indicate whether a social-emotional learning (SEL) program has been: taught in your classroom by you/ taught in your classroom by someone else/ not taught at all in your classroom

17 of the 20 teachers did not have an SEL program that was taught in their classroom, however, 3 out of the 20 teachers did implement their own strategies that focus on the social and emotional skills of their students. These strategies can be seen in Table 18, in addition to the

two other themes: teachers who did not have SEL incorporated by the school and those who did

not incorporate anything on their own

Common themes:

SEL activities in the classroom
No SEL
Other activities

Table 18: Please indicate whether a social emotional (SEL) program has been: taught in your classroom by you/ taught in your classroom by someone else/not taught at all in your classroom

A. I usually start the class with 5 min meditation. Students at this age are very fussed up and active so in order to calm down and be prepared for the session, I teach them some breathing techniques and put music in the background
B. Yes, I have taught SEL skills through my adopted program. Organization I think is really imp, the organization looks different for everybody. We try out diff ways and hopefully they can figure out which way works best for them and that's the case with HW,
C. All of the SEL skills I teach take place in my 60 min Eng. class, its completely embedded with my academic classes
D. In my lesson plans, I create short term objectives that target self-management skill For ex, during reading a story, we can do a circle time and lead a discussion where we discuss a social issue and cover diff points of views by putting themselves in the person shoes and discuss feeling, ask leading questions, and self-assessment throughout the lesson.
E. Objectives that target cultural values and ethics- teaching them about discipline-taking breaks- give students time or a break to answer- classroom discussions- model how to respond rather than react- give them an opportunity to evaluate their ways of communication and behavior
F. Personally, I haven't been exposed to a specific program related to SEL. But from to time, without acknowledging the name of this term, I target some of these skills indirectly in my classroom without labeling them. It somehow integrated into the 21st century skills that focus on building character and promoting other skills under the SEL sphere

4.5.1 SEL activities in the classroom

The teachers in this theme all had SEL programs incorporated by the school, where many different SEL strategies were used by each teacher. Participant A (Table 19) focuses on emotional intelligence and self-management activities that were provided to her from a booklet.

Participant B used a certain program provided by the school, that focuses on becoming the character in a story. Participant C used competencies of a specific program and adopts them into the curriculum of the class.

Table 19: SEL Activities in the Classroom

A. I follow a booklet about emotional intelligence and self -management activities provided by my school.
B. Student reacted positively and discussed their personal experiences openly. It was a great experience and taught them how to manage their emotions and anger in certain situations. For example, if they were in the past, they have to put themselves in a certain situation or to reflect on a certain decision that was taken by a ruler or president and to see if they agree or not and explain their perspective. Also, having debates with their peers and sharing and accepting different perspectives.
C. All of the competencies take place in my 60 min Eng. class, it completely embedded with my academic classes

4.5.2 No SEL

Schools that did not have SEL had some teachers who did not incorporate their own set of strategies. These teachers mainly focused on the academic aspect of their students. Participant A mentions (table 20) that it was because of the lack of motivation of the students, as well as that the school did not have such a program. The teacher did not personally incorporate any kind of activities that focuses on the social or emotional conditions of the students. Participant B mentions that the school lacks interest in SEL programs, as well as any modifications for special needs students.

Participant E does not think SEL should be incorporated, especially since teachers do not have enough time or resources. However, if SEL could be taught as a subject itself then it could be more effective.

Table 20: NO SEL Present

A. School doesn't have a program for SEL. The counselor did a presentation about bullying but the middle school weren't responsive because they don't really care
B. As a working teacher, none of the schools I previously taught at really managed to target any of these skills through lesson plans and objectives. Barely even did any modifications for students with special needs.
C. Personally, I haven't been exposed to a specific program related to SEL.
D. Unfortunately, our administration only focuses on academics and meeting curricula needs.
E. I do not think SEL should be incorporated, so I do not. If SEL is taught as a separate subject it would be more effective I feel. It will consume a lot of time during and teachers will feel discouraged when students realize that SEL isn't related to material or grading system.

4.5.3 Informal Practices

Some schools that did not have any SEL programs did have teachers that incorporated their own type of activities in the classroom. These activities consist of different methods teachers believed would help their students.

Participant A uses meditation as a strategy to help relax students and give them the possibility to release any harbored anxiety. The teacher mentions that he/she has always believed in the well-being of their students and hopes that this strategy is benefiting them.

Participant B uses an activity incorporated into their literary class, where students need to use their writing skills to write about their own emotions. Finally, participant C asks students to write thoughts and relate them to an emotion.

Table 21: SEL as Informal Practices

A. We don't have SEL. I usually start the class with 5 min meditation and teach them some breathing techniques and put music in the background.
B. I do not have any SEL curriculum to follow. But I do have an activity where I ask them to sit down and empty their mind of all the negative things.
C. I ask my students to write down their thoughts in a diary every 5 minutes of the start of our class. I think this will help them release some emotions.

The data presented in question 5, explores the different teacher experiences of whether SEL has been integrated into their classroom. The teachers shared whether they had or had not integrated SEL into the classroom, in addition to other activities that they incorporated themselves.

4.6 Interview Question 6

Referring to this definition of social-emotional learning:

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) refers to the process of developing a competency skill set which focuses on emotions, self and social-awareness, self-management, and relationship building.

Given your level of training and knowledge about SEL, how confident are you in implementing a program in your classroom?

The themes of teacher perceptions varied on whether they believed they are capable of incorporating SEL or not; as well as if it would be feasible, despite their own belief. These different perceptions can be seen in Table 22.

Table 22: Given your level of training and knowledge about SEL, how confident are you in implementing a program in your classroom?

A. I do have the abilities but in Lebanon, teachers need a breather, the amount of stress we go through in one week is unbelievable and some teachers find it as a big responsibility to be able to ensure students development on all levels
B. I am not confident I can implement a program, despite my extensive knowledge. I do believe there is a difference between knowledge and actual practice.
C. Even If I believe I have the capabilities, I don't think the circumstances, like no administration support, would make me very comfortable to do so.
D. I'm not sure it's feasible to implement such a program at our school because it requires vast amounts of training that should include continuous workshops and resources to effectively implement it
E. I feel confident enough to implement such a program in my class. However, I require more research readings and training workshops to make it more systematic. I need to put a plan for it

4.6.1 Confident

Teachers who had SEL incorporated by their schools were 3 out of 20 participants (Graph 1) were more confident about their ability to carry SEL curricula

successfully. Teachers who did not have SEL required by their school did feel confident about being able to follow a program, but with more practice. This can be seen with participant A (Table 23) who mentions that they are confident, but they need the support of the administration, as well as more training.

Table 23: Teachers Who are Confident about SEL

A. I am confident in my abilities to do so. but no one told me its mandatory. I do it because I learned how to do it, however I need a lot of training to be able to implement it considering its absence in the Lebanese curriculum. I would need support from the counselor and administration.
B. We have been trained very well to work on programs like this. So, I feel very confident in my ability to implement it.

4.6.2 Not confident

12 of the 20 teachers (Graph 1) were not confident in implementing SEL in the classroom. Participant A (Table 24) does not believe it is an educator's job, but rather a counselor. Additionally, the participant believes that they can implement skills, but not a program. Participant B mentions the lack of time and capability to implement the program.

Table 24: Teachers' Not Confident about SEL

A. In one way or another, it's should be the counselor's job. Language teachers can aim to implement such skills but not to apply such a program.
B. I attended a couple of courses regarding SEL, but I cannot say I am ready to implement such a program or have the time to personally follow such a program.

4.6.3 Not feasible

2 out of 20 teachers (Figure 1) who believed they have the abilities, did not believe they can implement the program due to external factors, such as lack of parent's support, culture, and availability of time and resources. Participant A (Table 25)

mentions the lack of resources, which does not motivate them to actively implement

such a program. Additionally, Participant C believes whether they have the ability or

not is irrelevant, also due to external factors.

The factors discussed mention the lack of time, administration support,

resources, parents, cultural beliefs, and practices.

Figure 1: Teachers perception towards their ability (or not) to implement SEL
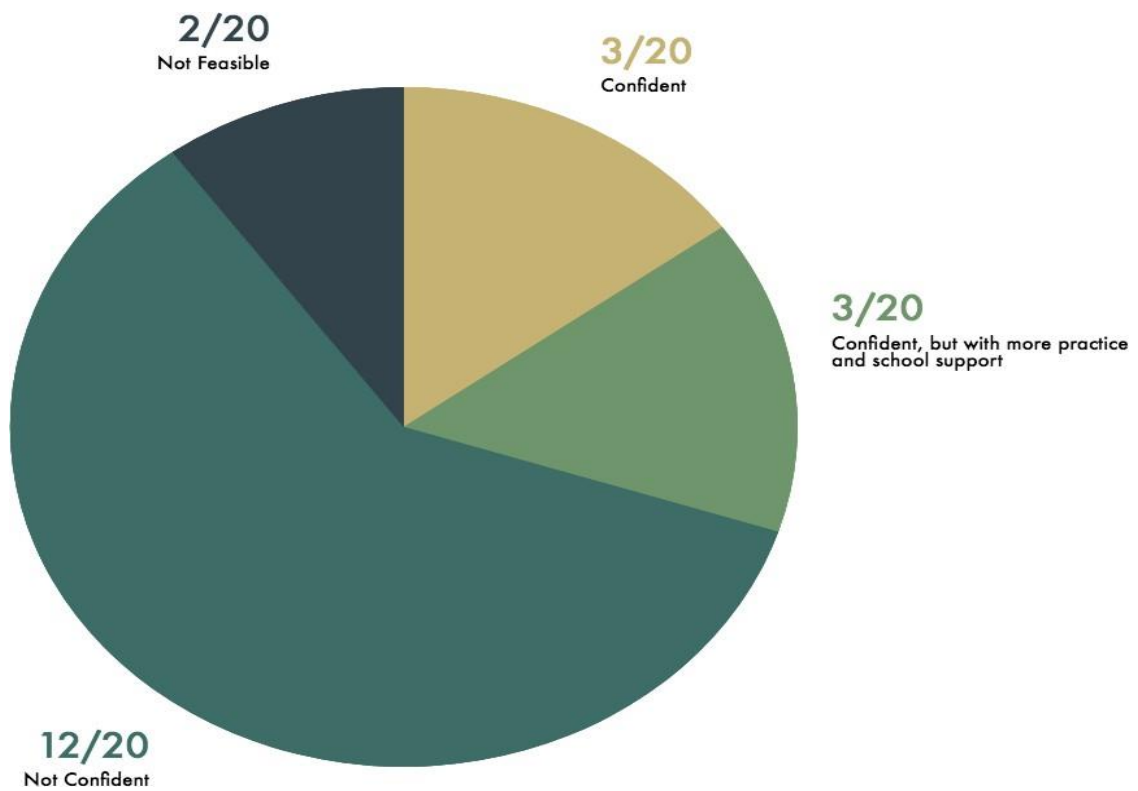
Table 25: **Teachers Who Consider SEL Not Feasible**

A. I do have the abilities but unfortunately, in my school, I would not have the resources or the time.
B. I do not believe that this can be done since most parents care more about their children being taught class material.
C. Even if I did believe so based on my knowledge, I think it would mentally exhaust me without external support.

The data presented in question 6, explores the perception of the participants on whether they believe they can implement SEL or not. The perceptions ranged between, teachers who are confident, teachers who are not confident and teachers who believed that it was not feasible.

4.7 Interview Question 7

What are the factors that could hinder or facilitate the implementation of such programs?

The themes hinder and facilitate consist of the factors relevant to each and their effect on the programs. These two aspects can be seen in the data presented in table 26.

Table 26: **What are the factors that could hinder or facilitate the implementation of such programs?**

A. Time constraints, certain syllabus to cover, unexpected and uncertain situations in Lebanon, always something popping up and it would hinder the continuity of such a program
B. Ongoing professional development
C. Teacher must find out her own weakness and attend the workshop that benefits her the most or it will be a waste of time. The teacher needs to seek professional development and create the time for it.
D. It can be a bit time consuming considering that it needs early preparations and searching for activities that accommodate students social and emotional needs
E. If the program is well planned and prepared for and there's consistency among all classes, and with the support of counselor and administration we'll get the results we need even if there were challenges in the beginning but that's very normal and expected at the beginning phases. Challenges are what teach us the most and help us with modification for effective results eventually.

4.7.1 Facilitate

Teachers mentioned factors that can facilitate the implementation of SEL. The factors that could help facilitate SEL implantation consist of workshops, training, administration support, youth talk programs, cultural programs, curriculum changes and awareness.

Participants A and B (Table 27) believe that workshops are more feasible since they will not take class time, and thus it is important. Participants C and D (Table 27) believed that administration's support, as well as youth talks, would help facilitate implementation by helping teachers.

Participants E and F focus on programs and raising awareness beyond academics.

Table 27: Factors that Facilitate SEL Implementation

A. Workshops would be ideal. I wish for SEL, teach students and doing activities that help them practice implementing these skills.
B. If SEL is taught as a separate subject it would be more effective
C. Support and resources should be available and provided by the administration for the effective implementation of such a program.
D. Through advisory sessions and "youth talk" which is prepared by the school and teachers can add their own ideas, depending on the classroom dynamic.
E. Cultural programs that help them grow socially and emotionally as well as do social work which goes under the SEL sphere.
F. Investing more time and awareness about the program rather than consuming it mostly on religious studies and Lebanese official exams requirements. Working on solely meeting the needs of official exams doesn't leave room for such a program.

4.7.2 Hinder

Teachers mention factors that can hinder the implementation of SEL programs which consist of time constraints, standardized testing, Lebanese curriculum, unprofessional development, teacher perception and lack of support.

Participants A, B and C (Table 28) focus on the time constraint and how this factor can hinder and prevent the implementation of SEL in the curriculum.

Participants D and F focus on the lack of support that comes from the parents, administration, and culture. Participant E mentions the perception of teachers and its importance on the implementation since if they have a negative perception, the implementation won't work.

Table 28: **Factors that Hinder SEL Implementation**

A. A lack of time (time constraint) made specifically just for this purpose, need approval and support from the administration
B. As a 9ᵗʰ grade teacher, my learners sit for standardized and since they are so stressed and under pressure, they have to study a lot of subjects and memorize. Although they desperately need the SEL at that point, they don't have time for that.
C. If its properly embedded in the lesson and not work on it purely during class, throughout the class, I am continuously highlighting and pinpointing and teaching that students that mentality where they feel safe and can depend on themselves.,
D. In the Lebanon case, what hinders is the lack of professional development and training in certain schools. the teachers aren't knowledgeable enough about this program and the skills that accompany it.
E. A teacher won't teach something if she's not convinced with it and this will be reflected on her students through her teaching strategies and the atmosphere, she creates in the classroom
F. Lack of support of parents and culture they were raised in

The data presented in question 7, explores the perception of the participants on the factors that hinder or facilitate the implementation of SEL.

The data collected helped give insight into teachers' perceptions of SEL, as well as the factors that affect implementation. The themes that emerged from that data after each interview question helped answer the research questions.

Limitations

The data was analyzed by subthemes, but occurrence /importance of each sub theme was not quantified or identified, and this could lead to a loss of important information. Only number of respondents selecting each response was reported.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to gain greater insight into Beirut middle teachers' perceptions regarding SEL instruction and competencies, as well as the factors that facilitate or hinder implementation. This is to better understand how this insight may impact the ability to implement SEL initiatives in Beirut schools.

This chapter will be separated into three different sections which incorporate the major themes of the two research questions. The three major themes are the Perception of SEL and its competencies, benefits of SEL, and factors that hinder or facilitate SEL implementation. These three themes will be explored using the sub-themes that emerged from the data found in the results chapter (Chapter IV).

The sub-themes will be explored beyond the results, by analyzing and discussing with reference to the available literature. The subthemes are based on the themes that emerged from the results providing valuable information towards answering the following research questions: *What are teachers' perceptions on the importance of implementing SEL and its competencies in middle school classrooms in Beirut? What are the factors that could facilitate or hinder the implementation of such programs?*

It is important to note that all the themes that emerged from the data are interlinked and each question contributes to one or both of the research questions in different ways.

5.1 Perception of SEL and its Competencies

   Results from the data showed that perceptions of SEL and its competencies emerged from different themes that were commonly mentioned during the interviews. Combining the interview questions, the themes that emerged towards the perception of SEL and its competencies are:

⇒⇒ Educational background and personal experience
⇒⇒ School role
⇒⇒ Self-awareness and interlinked competencies
⇒⇒ SEL in the classroom and No SEL
⇒⇒ Informal practices
⇒⇒ Confident, not confident and not feasible

  The themes will be further discussed individually by creating connections and further discussing the results. The themes will then be discussed in relation to the available literature.

5.1.1 Educational Background and Personal Experience

   The theme educational background shows how the university education curriculum, especially for future educators needs to include training and exposing teachers to essential concepts like SEL. Additionally, this shows that their background education does not necessarily equip or make teachers compatible in teaching. There should be expectations and skills that teachers need to acquire before educating others.

   The different personal experiences of teachers helped them become aware of SEL, whether through their own research or from their colleagues. This shows that teachers have individualized experiences with respect to how they heard of the SEL

5.1.2 School role

Schools that offered training or resources for teachers to learn about SEL, had teachers who were aware of the term. However, in schools that did not have SEL training or awareness, teachers were exposed to other ways of learning about SEL, or not at all. It is important to note here that schools play a major role in whether teachers are familiar with SEL or not, especially since teachers aim to adjust to the administrations' priorities and needs. If the administration enforces training or workshops that help teachers become aware of SEL, perhaps this could ensure that in the future, all teachers in the same school would have undergone a uniform process that allows them to learn about SEL, as well as assists them in incorporating it in the classroom. Here, the essential role of the school in educating and preparing their teachers for using such important concepts should be emphasized.

Self-awareness and Interlinked Competencies

The most common SEL competency that was believed to be essential is self-awareness, where participants believed that it should be focused on the most when teaching students. Participants believed that by teaching self-awareness first, the student will then pick up on self-management.

This indicates that self-awareness is seen as the base which opens the door towards acquiring all the other competencies.

Another common belief among teachers was that there is no preferred or important competency since all of the competencies are essential and equally interlinked. . For SEL implementation to be effective, students need to acquire all competencies which

complement each other. This is another perception that does not give preference to any of the competencies but treats them equally, except for self-awareness.

5.1.3 SEL in the classroom and No SEL

Three out of the 20 participants implemented SEL practices in their classroom, due to the administration's requirements as well as external support towards implementation.

The lack of SEL integration in the school sample shows that although there was a positive view towards the benefit of SEL, however, this does not translate to it is being officially implemented. This lack of teacher SEL implementation can help educators in Lebanon to direct positive change in the school curriculum, by advocating for SEL integration.

The data shows that when SEL is incorporated by the school, teachers are more likely to be using SEL as well. However, even when schools do not incorporate it teachers may use their own adopted strategies. Moreover, different schools use different programs, in which teachers use different strategies. A lack of motivation or use of any strategy can be seen in the schools that don't have programs as well.

5.1.4 Informal Practices

Different types of activities or assignments were mentioned by teachers who claimed that they might not follow official SEL strategies, however, they do believe in the psychological well- being of their students. For this reason, the teachers used their own activities during their class, which they believed aimed to help students mentally and emotionally.

5.1.5 Confident, not confident, and not feasible

Understanding the amount of SEL programs being followed in schools is essential, however, it is important to keep in mind that if schools do not have programs; teachers themselves might be making their own initiative to incorporate these strategies. This helps give an understanding of the use of SEL through the teacher's perceptions of their capabilities. The different reasons that lead teachers to not feel confident about implementing an SEL program need to be taken into consideration since they allow researchers to find ways to create motivation and solutions to these common obstacles. Finally, the factors discussed by teachers who believed it was not feasible to implement include the lack of time, administration support, resources, parents, cultural beliefs, and practices.

5.2 Discussion in relation to the literature

There appears to be a general understanding that SEL is important and needs to be taught, though there is some disagreement about whose responsibility it should be. We may associate this developing advantage of the positive aspects about SEL to the progressively successful spread of investigation by organizations such as CASEL. Thus, teachers in this sample see SEL instruction as helpful to their students (Emery, 2016).

This perception was reliable over different developing subjects that centered on academic, behavioral, and social-emotional results.

This perception shows that teachers in this sample, no matter on the off chance that they educate social or literary studies, see SEL instruction as important for their students (Jones & Doe, 2017). A number of responses to the open-ended questions asking participants to describe what they know about SEL reflected this sentiment.

(Janes and Doe, 2012). Brackett et al. (2012) pose a thought with respect to the relationship between teacher attitudes and program success.

Teachers who believe that their students will succeed, have a better outcome towards students academic achievement (Anderson, 2019). This is due to the fact that teachers who hold a positive perception towards their students, tend to treat them in different ways that help students optimally benefit. Thus, this can be applied to the success of SEL program integration, when teachers have positive perceptions towards SEL.

This study aimed to gain insight into the different factors that impact teachers' ability to successfully implement SEL. In general, the teachers in this study mentioned their strengths and weaknesses regarding their ability related to SEL integration.

Overall, one of the strengths can be seen in the teacher's positive perception towards the benefits of SEL, as well as its need in schools. The weaknesses can be seen through the teachers who said they did not have opportunities towards SEL training and instruction. These teachers mentioned that they were not confident in providing SEL instruction to students. On the other hand, teachers who did receive SEL training were more confident in their ability to implement it. These perceptions help give an understanding towards the teacher's ability to provide SEL instruction. This can be seen in one of the largest studies conducted by (Cunnings, 2018, p. 32) who claimed that teachers at middle school levels "endorse and value" SEL.

Although studies present the overall positive teachers' perceptions of SEL, it is important to note that this does not correlate with teacher's positive perception of their ability to implement SEL instruction. Thus, recognizing SEL is beneficial, does not mean that teachers are willing to implement it.

The interviews provided insights into how familiar teachers are with SEL and its competencies. The sub-themes that emerged from the open-ended responses showed that there were different levels of understanding regarding SEL. Teachers had a more intuitive based understanding of SEL, where they used their own words and experiences. It is essential to understand teachers' perceptions towards the competencies and their level of importance (Durlak et al., 2017). The teachers in this sample developed an intuitive understanding through their own experiences at schools and their personal understanding of social and emotional competencies.

If teachers do not have a strong understanding of what SEL is, then they are at the risk of limiting the positive effects towards their role in implementing SEL. In this study, the teachers believed that self-awareness is the most important competency, reflecting how teachers valued the student's ability to be aware of their emotions.

5.3 Benefits of SEL

Results from the data showed that perceptions of SEL benefits emerged from different themes that were commonly mentioned during the interviews. The themes that emerged towards benefits of SEL are it promotes the following: academic achievement, skill development, emotional awareness and psychological well-being, life skills, safe environment, and psychological support. The themes will be further discussed individually by creating connections and further discussing the results. The themes will then be discussed in relation to the available literature.

Academic achievement

Participants did have a consensus that SEL skills are beneficial for academic achievement. However, there was a perception that students at school must make academics their sole priority while attending classes and would deal with their emotions when they return home.

What is interesting about the different perceptions is that it shows how teachers perceive things differently and how these perceptions are important to analyze, in order to see the best way to approach the introduction and integration of SEL.

5.3.1 Skills Development

It is important to gather and consider all these different perceptions of teachers on how SEL provides benefits and use this information to perhaps influence other teachers. Different skills were mentioned to benefit the students with the implementation of SEL.

Although students spend the majority of their time at school, as researchers it is essential to think of the factors that might hinder students from fully acquiring these skills.

5.3.2 Emotional awareness

The overall positive perception towards SEL skills shows that most of the teachers do believe in the emotional well-being and development of their students. However, here it is important to consider if it is enough for teachers to have positive perceptions. Positive perceptions do not equate to the fact that SEL skills are being incorporated or that the teachers themselves apply these beliefs in the classroom.

5.3.3 Psychological well-being

The different perceptions bring insight to the fact that although psychological well-being is a priority for teachers, it cannot necessarily be achievable, especially since some teachers may believe it is simply beyond their job.

These different perspectives can help encourage researchers to find ways that might make it easier for teachers to hold such a role and incorporate these skills.

5.3.4 Life skills

Generally, it is believed that life skills will develop when students are introduced to lesson plans or certain activities that help them build these skills. These skills were believed to be developed in the classroom and will benefit students in the future and outside the classrooms.

5.3.5 Safe environment

A benefit towards SEL included creating a safe environment, where students can build connections with their peers, as well as with their teacher. This is important to note since perhaps no matter how much a teacher supports SEL and believes in its benefit, without the school's support, these positive perceptions won't be put into practice.

5.3.6 Psychological support

A common benefit of SEL was that it provides students with psychological support, where they are aware that they can share their emotions, as well as seek guidance. Additionally, the psychological support can happen indirectly, through activities in the classroom.

Thinking about this pandemic and the toll it has taken on many students, it is essential to consider such events, since in many ways the general idea is to support children in school and outside of school. Perhaps if SEL is integrated into the curriculum, students will not only hold skills to help them overcome obstacles, but also this integration will allow them to know that it is okay to ask for help, but more importantly, that help is available.

5.3.7 Discussion in relation to the literature

Previously, schools highly focused on the academic instruction and achievement of the students. However, throughout time, schools aimed to focus on the social and emotional components of their students'. Schools claimed that it was critical to focus on the physical and mental health of their students, as high attention was being given to SEL implementation (Taylor, 2016).

SEL helps students build positive relationships and develop skills that help them recognize and manage their emotions (Zins, 2018). These skills and competencies help students towards their emotional well-being, such as relieving stress and anxiety. Additionally, it can help towards their academic achievement and relationship building.

Among the many factors related to students' academic difficulties is understanding the important role of SEL and the benefits it provides (Taylor, 2016). Teachers who believe in the benefits of SEL, are more likely to incorporate it into their classroom. Thus, teachers have different perceptions towards the impact of SEL, however, this provides insights into what teachers believe towards SEL, as well as how it positively affects students (Hallinger, 2018).

5.4 Factors (hinder or facilitate) of SEL implementation

Time, curriculum, and external support are the factors that were thought to hinder SEL implementation. Time constraints, due to the expectation to fulfill the academic curricula might not motivate the teachers to integrate SEL learning in their teaching. Another interesting challenge that was found was that of parents and culture. This is essential to consider in order to ensure that the SEL programs are created towards the needs of all students, regardless of their background.

The data distinguished between the teachers mentioned factors that hinder or facilitate SEL implementation. The themes that emerged are split as followed:

5.5 Facilitate

Teachers mentioned factors that can facilitate the implementation of SEL. The factors that could help facilitate SEL implantation consist of workshops, training, administration support, youth talk programs, cultural programs, curriculum changes and awareness. This could help teachers and parents be aware of the importance of SEL and gain the attention of the administration.

The themes that emerged towards factors that facilitate SEL implementation are workshops, training, support, cultural programs and curriculum.

5.6 Hinder

The themes that emerged towards factors that hinder SEL implementation are: time constraints, standardized testing, Lebanese curriculum, lack of support, cultural values and teacher perception. repetition

5.6.1 Discussion in reference to literature

Durlak and Dupre (2008) claim that cultural beliefs and practices of the parents and society play a role that towards SEL integration. The importance of school and the lessons that students learn can be seen as essential, especially in a country like Lebanon. A country largely affected by politics and religion, focusing on cultivating students' minds towards moral values, might create the change that is needed. Similar perceptions towards the Lebanese curriculum and how it hinders the ability to introduce these competencies to the curriculum were discussed. This is essential since the recommended universal SEL curriculums and strategies available do not take into account these cultural factors.

Culture of support is affected by many factors and gives insight into the overall perception of a certain community to an innovation such as SEL (Cunnings, 2017). The culture of support reflects the school's ability to support the integration of SEL. In general, teachers in this study claimed that they perceive external support in SEL implementation crucial.

The need for training and support of resources was expressed by teachers, since they did believe SEL was beneficial, but shared factors that hinder them from implementing it. It is important for all teachers to comprehend the underlying theory of SEL, so they can know how to support the social-emotional outcomes (Stan et al., 2018). Although the teachers in the study expressed the value and importance of SEL, their capacity to provide SEL instruction is limited by factors such as knowledge and training.

5.7 Conclusion

Attending to teachers' beliefs and the respective hindrances are extremely essential towards successful implementation. As seen throughout the data, teachers' perceptions differ towards SEL in general, as well as its implementation. The many different perceptions help educators understand how they can alter or culturally adapt such programs into the school. This can assist the incorporation of formal programs, which is supported from previous data that is collected from the main agents who will be incorporating the program.

An interesting finding that was unique in this study, is the wide use of different informal practices. This finding is unique since the lack of SEL implementation in schools does not mean they lack SEL practices, which take place in the form of informal practices. Only 3 schools from the 10, had teachers who were trained based on universal certified program, such as CASEL. Nonetheless, this indicates that schools are still attempting to address the social-emotional needs of students through school-wide initiatives focused on school climate.

Teachers are under a lot of pressure and are expected to focus on the academic skills at the expense of social-emotional skills (Durlak et al., 2011; Humphrey, 2013; Zins, et al., 2004). Informal practices are a tool that provide a path towards the support of social-emotional outcomes despite these expectations. Just as formal practices are based on evidence-based interventions, informal practices should be considered. Such approaches can and should be taught to teachers as an expected part of effective implementation. Although there was a lack of an official SEL program

implementation in the Beirut schools, the data shows that many teachers did focus on their students' emotional and social well-being. This was seen through different practices or activities that teachers incorporated into their curriculum or class environment. These are essential to acknowledge since these informal practices can help facilitate the implementation of formal practices.

Some teachers, especially if they have limited knowledge of SEL, may not realize the extent to which they are supporting students' social, emotional, and mental growth through activities or informal practices. For this reason, further study is needed to better understand the informal SEL practices and the different activities teachers use and their impact.

To end, it is recommended that future studies employ larger samples and more rigorous data analysis and reporting procedures.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The literature, as well as the data that resulted from this study, both show the essential need to implement SEL, as well as how to implement it more effectively, with the consideration of teacher's perceptions. However, a tragic event that took place on August 4, 2020, is something I would like to conclude this thesis with. SEL is a subject that holds personal value, especially since I have suffered from mental illness throughout my teenage, as well as adult years. The lack of focus on the psychological and well-being of students in schools; is a major problem. This problem stems from deep-rooted cultural, religious and social ideologies surrounding the topic of mental illness. It is a stigma that has been ingrained into the rhetoric, as well as the society itself in Lebanon.

Over the years, it has improved, with many organizations advocating towards removing the stigma behind mental illness. However, the reality lies in the fact that the lack of resources, awareness, and support towards mental illness; has led many individuals in Lebanon to commit suicide, as well as students. The problem stems deeper than this, where religious institutions, as well as many media outlets, do not report nor acknowledge suicide. The amount of trauma that has been passed over for years, is something I always was aware of and hoped that it would change. Back to the event of August 4; prior to the explosion, Lebanon was already in deep need for change through programs such as SEL. However, after the explosion, it should no longer be a recommendation to implement SEL; but rather, it should be strictly enforced.

In a country that is complex and unstable, students deserve to be taught and equipped with strategies and competencies that can help aid them in their social and academic lives.

Additionally, it is essential that there is a focus on the psychological well-being of students, especially after a traumatic incident, like the explosion that occurred on August 4, 2020.

Future researchers and educators need to understand that the school setting itself could be of high-stress, where an urgent need for SEL programs is essential for students suffering from trauma caused by many different events (explosions, Covid 19, economic crisis, etc..). The personal histories of students play a role in the receptiveness to social-emotional learning.

The challenge for all SEL programs, then, is to be prepared for the level of trauma that students are likely to bring to the classroom. Further, and perhaps most important, all SEL programs should give priority to the development of emotion-related skills. Youth who have experienced trauma tend to show significant weaknesses in recognizing emotions accurately (Javdani et al., 2017). SEL is essential and an effective way to help students manage these emotions, as well as deal with future situations.

APPENDIX A

SEL OVERVIEW AND HANDOUT

The following handout will be used during the interview to give an overview of SEL, its importance and competencies. This will help give teachers insight about SEL, as well as the needed information to conduct the interview.

Jana Assaad (Student)

What is SEL?

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.

Social and emotional learning means teaching students, step by step, to manage their behavior and get along with their classmates. It can include helping students to understand what they're feeling, show empathy for others, create healthy relationships and make responsible decisions. There is no single curriculum or approach.

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL) COMPETENCIES

SELF-AWARENESS

The ability to accurately recognize one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior. The ability to accurately assess one's strengths and limitations, with a well-grounded sense of confidence, optimism, and a "growth mindset."

- ➲ IDENTIFYING EMOTIONS
- ➲ ACCURATE SELF-PERCEPTION
- ➲ RECOGNIZING STRENGTHS
- ➲ SELF-CONFIDENCE
- ➲ SELF-EFFICACY

SELF-MANAGEMENT

The ability to successfully regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations — effectively managing stress, controlling impulses, and motivating oneself. The ability to set and work toward personal and academic goals.

- ➲ IMPULSE CONTROL
- ➲ STRESS MANAGEMENT
- ➲ SELF-DISCIPLINE
- ➲ SELF-MOTIVATION
- ➲ GOAL SETTING
- ➲ ORGANIZATIONAL SKILLS

SOCIAL AWARENESS

The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures. The ability to understand social and ethical norms for behavior and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.

- ➲ PERSPECTIVE-TAKING
- ➲ EMPATHY
- ➲ APPRECIATING DIVERSITY
- ➲ RESPECT FOR OTHERS

RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. The ability to communicate clearly, listen well, cooperate with others, resist inappropriate social pressure, negotiate conflict constructively, and seek and offer help when needed.

- ➲ COMMUNICATION
- ➲ SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT
- ➲ RELATIONSHIP BUILDING
- ➲ TEAMWORK

RESPONSIBLE DECISION-MAKING

The ability to make constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards, safety concerns, and social norms. The realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and a consideration of the well-being of oneself and others.

- ➲ IDENTIFYING PROBLEMS
- ➲ ANALYZING SITUATIONS
- ➲ SOLVING PROBLEMS
- ➲ EVALUATING
- ➲ REFLECTING
- ➲ ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever heard of the term "social emotional learning"?

2. Do you think it is important for students to have social emotional skills to be successful in school and life? Why?

3. What do you think are the benefits of infusing SEL into the curriculum?

4. Which social emotional competencies such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management and responsible decision-making do you believe are most important for students?

5. Please indicate whether a social emotional learning (SEL) program has been: taught in your classroom by you/ taught in your classroom by someone else/ not taught at all in your classroom

6. Referring to this definition of social emotional learning:
Social Emotional Learning (SEL) refers to the process of developing of a competency skill set which focuses on emotions, self and social-awareness, self-management, and relationship building.
Given your level of training and knowledge about SEL, how confident are you in implementing a program in your classroom?

7. What are the factors that could hinder or facilitate the implementation of such programs?

APPENDIX C

CONSENT FORM

Your name will not be used in this study, however, please sign this form as a record that you volunteer to participate in the study. This form will be locked and preserved in the researcher's possession. Please read the information below. Your completion of this consent form indicates your agreement to the terms below. If you do not wish to participate, please discard this page.

You are invited to take part in a research study on middle school teachers' perception of SEL and Emotional Management. You were invited to participate in this study because you are a language arts middle class teacher in a private school located in greater Beirut. Your participation in this study will help understand teachers' perceptions of SEL as a whole.

Please read this form and ask any questions you have before agreeing to be part of the study. This study is being conducted by a researcher named Jana Assad, who is an MA student at the American University of Beirut. The researcher is a special education major completing her thesis study.

Background Information:

This study aims to investigate teachers' opinions in the Beirut area of the importance of SEL and its competencies. Since perceptions are known to "drive behavior and behavior drives environment," it is thus essential to identify teachers' perceptions (Flood, 2009, P. 19)." Additionally, the study aims to understand which strategies of SEL would the teachers perceive to be the most impactful. Although a few schools in Beirut have implemented SEL in their curriculum, this study aims to help future research as well as SEL implementation in Beirut. By understanding the teachers' perceptions of SEL in general as well as its strategies, this will help future researches on the most effective way to implement SEL programs in private schools in Beirut.

Procedures:

If you would like to volunteer to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Sign the consent form
- Complete a 60-minute audio recorded interview

If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later and you may stop at any time without consequences. You may skip any questions that you feel are too personal.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study: There are no direct benefits to you from being in this study. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts involved in this study.

Compensation: There is no compensation for participating in this study.

Confidentiality: All information you provide will be kept confidential and locked in the researcher's file cabinet and password protected computers. The researcher will not use your information for any purposes outside of this research project. In addition, your name or anything else that could identify you will not be included in any reports of the study.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher's name is Jana Assad. The researcher's faculty chair is Dr. Karma El-Hassan. You may ask any questions you have now or later by contacting the researcher at (+961) 71 270 047 and/or joa03@mail.aub.edu

APPENDIX D

GLOSSARY TERMS

Academic Achievement: Academic achievement or academic performance is the extent to which a student, teacher or institution has attained their short or long-term educational goals. Completion of educational benchmarks such as secondary school diplomas and bachelor's degrees represent academic achievement.

Program Implementation: Program implementation is about making a program work. It includes who, what, where, and how a program is set up and run.

SEL: Social and emotional learning (SEL) is 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.

SEL Competencies: Social-emotional learning competencies are the specific skills, habits, and mindsets that fall under the umbrella of social-emotional learning. These skills are varied, and school communities may prioritize different SEL competencies based on identifiable student needs or the district's portrait of a graduate.

Teacher Perceptions: The thoughts or mental images which teachers have about their professional activities and their students, which are shaped by their background knowledge and life experiences and influence their professional behavior.

As defined by: ProQuest, Jstor, Wikipedia and Ebsco.

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