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# REIMAGINING SCHOOLWIDE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING IMPLEMENTATION IN THE URBAN SETTING: A CASE STUDY OF A MASSACHUSETTS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

A Dissertation Presented

by

MOLLY WISEMAN DUFFY

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies,
University of Massachusetts Boston,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2024

Urban Education, Leadership and Policy Studies Program

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ABSTRACT

REIMAGINING SCHOOLWIDE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING IMPLEMENTATION IN THE URBAN SETTING: A CASE STUDY OF A MASSACHUSETTS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

May 2024

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For social and emotional learning (SEL) initiatives to have the greatest positive impact on students, they must be implemented schoolwide. There is an urgent need for schools to shift away from traditional SEL frameworks toward transformative SEL (TSEL). TSEL program implementation cannot be done in isolation; rather, it must be fueled by a shared vision and dedication to team learning. To conduct this study, the researcher employed the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) Guide to Schoolwide SEL and Senge's learning organization as a theory of change. The study sought to uncover gaps in schoolwide SEL implementation in one public urban elementary school designated as requiring assistance or intervention by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Using a case study research design, the researcher met

with school-based staff in a variety of roles to find out the degree to which their knowledge of SEL, or lack thereof, affected the implementation of successful schoolwide SEL. This qualitative research project included interviews and focus groups along with a document review. The study results call for urban schools to rethink SEL implementation and encourage their transformation into learning organizations that include the voices and participation of all members of the school community.

***Keywords***: social and emotional learning, elementary, learning organizations, SEL, implementation, urban schools, CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL, transformative SEL, TSEL

# DEDICATION

*To my mother: I will never find the words to truly express how grateful I am for your unwavering support. Thank you for believing in me and in this work. And thank you for always stepping in for the boys whenever I had to step out. This is* our *accomplishment.*

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Thank you, Dr. Yan, for serving as my committee chair. There was so much I did not know about this process, and you always provided me with answers and guided me along the way. I am grateful for your attentiveness and support and for helping me get to this point. I could not have done it without you.

Dr. Krueger-Henney, please know how much I appreciate you, your honesty, and your constant encouragement; thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for pouring into me.

Dr. Fallon, I was so pleased when you agreed to join my committee. Your deep knowledge of MTSS, behavior interventions, and implementation sciences was the perfect fit for my topic, and I sincerely appreciate you sharing your feedback and expertise. Thank you.

My mentors, Dr. Conner and Dr. Roselli, it is because of you both that I am here today. Dr. Roselli, you are missed; I wish you were here to see me reach this accomplishment.

I do not believe I would have ever finished this degree without my cohort. Dana Marie, Joslyn, Tory, and Josh, thank you for the walks to the parking lot after class during those early years, the Zoom calls, the text chain, the guidance, support, and of course the comic relief when things just felt impossible. It has been one of my greatest privileges to learn from and with you all, and I am so proud of the work we have accomplished.

My incredible school, principal, and colleagues must be acknowledged since they are the backbone of this study. Thank you all for your time, your voice, and your dedication to this challenging work; you continue to inspire me.

To my family and friends who were with me every step of the way and continued to show interest in my work and offer words of encouragement when I needed it most, thank you for helping to make this dream a reality. Mom and Dad, thank you for instilling a strong work ethic in me. This process has been grueling but I am so proud of where I am now.

Dan, thank you for picking up the slack at home and making the time and space for me to get this done. You are the best teammate I could ask for. Finally, my boys, Brendan and Patrick, someday you will understand why Mama was always running off to the library. Until then, I look forward to being fully present and soaking in your sweet giggles and cuddles in the days, months, and years to come! Dream big, little ones!

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# CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

When Bobby[1] finally arrived on the third day of school, his foster mother approached me in the schoolyard. She pointed to Bobby, a very thin light-skinned Hispanic boy, sitting on the pavement as still as could be and told me to "watch him, really watch him." It did not take long for me to make sense of this woman's words. Bobby ran out of the classroom countless times that day and in subsequent days for the rest of the school year, a few times even leaving the school building completely. He would slam doors, shout and scream, kick and hit, and cry like I had never heard a 6-year-old cry before. Bobby was often physically and verbally aggressive toward his peers and toward me. I knew that if I truly wanted to connect with Bobby, I had to not only *continue* to care, but also *show* him how much I cared. Caring teachers listen and respond to their students in different ways (Noddings, 2005). There was no script I could follow or easy lessons I could pull out; rather, I had to delve deeper. I had to connect with Bobby in ways that only caring teachers do.

Bobby entered my first-grade classroom unable to recognize most letters and with knowledge of only a few letter sounds. He was significantly below grade level and academically far behind his peers. Bobby struggled with unpredictable behaviors and mood

[1] All references to people, places, and curriculum are pseudonymous to protect the study participants' identities.

swings all year, but once he finally felt safe in the classroom and in his relationship with me, something began to click: Bobby started learning. In fact, he made nine levels of growth in his reading that year, and he left first grade scoring above proficient on the Text Reading and Comprehension (TRC) assessment. My colleagues were astounded, but I was confidently aware of the positive impact social and emotional learning (SEL) practices were proven to have on academic achievement, as Fopiano and Haynes (2001) stated so eloquently:

> Academic and social and emotional learning are implacably intertwined. Learning for all children is in large part as much social and emotional experience as it is a cognitive experience. Academic learning takes place in home and school environments where emotional and social experiences serve as the background or foreground for this learning. We cannot and do not turn off children's emotions when trying to teach them to read, or write or solve math problems. If anything, many academic learning experiences heighten the need for children to be socially and emotionally skilled in order to be successful in school and life generally. (p. 56)

SEL and an ethic of care contributed to Bobby's academic progress. SEL and an ethic of care allow me to nurture the basic needs of my students so that they can successfully participate in school. SEL is not a magic bullet, and it is certainly not going to be a cure-all for students dealing with significant trauma or those who have been diagnosed with an emotional impairment (EI), but it is something that all children need and would benefit from (Cohen, 2001; Greenberg et al., 2017; Zins, Weissberg et al., 2004).

I have long been committed to nurturing the social and emotional needs of my students, but I am aware that much of this work is being done in isolation. Bobby formed a strong relationship with me and began to feel safe and welcome in our classroom, but the rest

of the school was not able to respond to his unique needs in the same way. Bobby made great strides in my classroom, and for that I am grateful, but I still cannot help but think how much greater the impact would have been for Bobby if SEL was being implemented with fidelity across the entire school. If the language I used with Bobby and his peers was used in common spaces such as the cafeteria and schoolyard as well, if the calming-down strategies had been modeled by other teachers and students outside our classroom, if SEL had truly been infused throughout the culture of the school, I can only imagine how much more Bobby and his peers would have been able to accomplish that year.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL; 2017) defined SEL as

> the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. (para. 1)

Research has shown that teaching social and emotional learning in schools leads to academic success (Bridgeland et al., 2013; Cohen, 2001; Durlak et al., 2011; Goleman, 2004; McCombs, 2004). According to a 2011 meta-analysis, students who receive SEL instruction have academic achievement scores roughly 11 percentile points higher than their peers who do not participate in SEL practices and programs (Bridgeland et al., 2013; Durlak et al., 2011). Similar reports have also found correlations between implementing schoolwide SEL programs and an increase in student interest in learning and student motivation to learn, improvement in overall student behaviors and the culture of the school, and reduction and

prevention of bullying at and outside of school (Bridgeland et al., 2013; Dusenbury & Weissberg, 2017; Payton at al., 2008; Sklad et al., 2012).

For the purpose of this study, SEL is, at times, connected to an "ethic of care." First introduced by Carol Gilligan (1977), an ethic of care has evolved as more scholars have supported the theory and its application to education. Nel Noddings (2005) asserted,

> In reviewing the forms of care, it becomes clear that there is a challenge to care in schools. The structure of current schooling works against care, and at the same time, the need for care is perhaps greater than ever. (p. 20)

Since the current structure of schooling, with its emphasis on high-stakes testing and accountability measures, is arguably working against care, I speculate that an increased degree of SEL in schools is exactly what Noddings (2005) called for.

The research provides a convincing argument as to why SEL practices and an ethic of care should be incorporated into urban schools. Yet, many of the efforts to implement SEL specifically at urban elementary schools have not been as successful on a whole-school level as they have the potential to be. Here, the "whole school" is defined as both the physical school space, inside and outside, and staff, including all roles. The work to implement SEL programs schoolwide can be hard and draining for school leaders and teachers alike, but if it were valued and subsequently taken up by school districts, school leaders, educators, and other stakeholders, then it might change the way children learn for the better.

As a result of my work as both a fourth-grade and then first-grade teacher at two different urban elementary schools labeled Level 4 turnaround,[2] I believe there are many

[2] Level 4 represents the state's most struggling schools not under state control (American Institutes for Research [AIR], 2016, p. 4).

more children like Bobby sitting in classrooms. Some cases might be severe, as Bobby's was, while others may be less significant; however, SEL does not discriminate, and it has been proven to benefit all students (Cohen, 2001; Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2017; Zins, Bloodworth et al., 2004). To ensure that classrooms fully serve the social and emotional needs of students, school districts must first start with appropriately educating teachers and other building staff on this topic, its ethics, and pedagogical practices.

Each year, as new students would enter my elementary classroom, I would speak with their former teachers and families, send home surveys, meet with the children one-on-one, and take observational notes throughout the day to better serve the needs of each child. I always spent a great deal of time building the classroom community, primarily by strengthening caring relationships so that all students would feel safe and accepted. Noddings (2005) stated,

> When we discuss teaching and teacher–learner relationships in depth, we will see that teachers not only have to create caring relations in which they are the carers, but that they also have a responsibility to help their students develop the capacity to care. (p. 18)

This work is not easy, and building such a caring classroom environment cannot be done with one or two quick lessons; rather, it takes months. In years past, I have been criticized because I spend "too much time" on community building and less on academic lessons from the start. Though such comments have caused me to reflect more deeply on my teaching practice, at this point in my career, I have done enough research on SEL and have compiled enough "student success stories" to proudly stand my ground. Bobby's story is just one of the many driving me to do this work. Yet, I am well aware that implementing SEL in my

classroom alone is not enough. SEL initiatives need to be schoolwide and must take into consideration the multiple identities of both teachers and learners to be most successful (Devaney et al., 2006, as cited in Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2023). My work will not be finished until that is the case.

Since schools are labeled, compared, and evaluated based on academic achievement (Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], 2015), which is mainly measured by high-stakes test scores, it comes as no surprise that many of Massachusetts' lowest performing schools have traditionally turned to purely academic interventions such as acquiring academic partners and extending the school day to allow for more learning time. Teachers have become fearful that their students will receive failing test scores (Walker, 2014), leading them to push academic content and seek primarily academic support for students. Teachers are forced to conform to new expectations of "best practice" since it appears that "how well schools prepare students for various high-stakes tests has become the gold standard" (Zins, Bloodworth, et al., 2004, p. 5). While a heightened focus on academics is not a bad thing, prioritizing high scores on tests as the sole "gold standard" while neglecting the social and emotional needs of students certainly is problematic.

When this discussion is grounded in the ethic of care, one is reminded that "a child's place in our hearts and lives should not depend on his or her academic prowess" (Noddings, 2005, p. 13). In my professional experience, I have found that many of my colleagues refer to students by their level of proficiency. For example, I often hear comments such as "he's my lowest" or "she's in my high groups," even when the topic of conversation is not intended to be about academic achievement at all, and I hesitate to admit that I have been guilty of using these descriptors as well. The culture that has been cultivated in many urban schools in recent

years forces teachers to look at their students as percentages rather than unique individuals with unique needs, dangerously coercing educators to care more about test scores than they do about students themselves. Fortunately, this is an extremely exciting time for children, educators, and families across the United States, as SEL is finally receiving the attention it deserves and being seen as an integral part of schooling (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2021). School leaders and educators must be mindful, however, that it is not enough to just open an SEL-focused curriculum and teach a lesson; the implementation of SEL goes far beyond curriculum. SEL must also be alive throughout the entire school building, climate, and culture. There must be shared language across all stakeholders to support the implementation of SEL. Adults must be willing to allow their perspective on teaching and learning to shift from a traditional, purely academic approach, they must be ready to embody SEL practices daily and model for students what it means to be competent in the five domains, and they must be able to see SEL as a lever for advancing educational equity.

This study was particularly concerned with SEL implementation within urban schools. The following speaks to the urban classification:

> Compared with their suburban and rural counterparts, urban schools are more likely to serve racially and ethnically diverse populations from minoritized, economically disadvantaged backgrounds (often co-occurring demographic characteristics) and are frequently confronted with contextual stressors that are qualitatively different from student experiences in non-urban settings. (Boutte, 2012; Graves et al., 2014, as cited in El Mallah, 2022, p. 290)

It is important to acknowledge race and class among the student populations who attend lower academically achieving schools. To highlight this, I looked to data collected in a large urban school district in the state of Massachusetts. In 2019, this particular district named 28 transformation schools, that is, those requiring assistance or intervention. Student demographics from these transformation schools indicate that 73.8% of students are low-income, 27.3% are students with disabilities, nearly 40% are English language learners (ELLs), 34.7% are Black, and 51.3% are Latinx (Sabin, 2022). Each of these percentages is higher than non-transformation schools within the same district, indicating that the schooling contexts are extremely inequitable, that there has been chronic disinvestment in these schools, and that the students attending these schools—majority students of color—have the highest needs. SEL must be equitable going into low-performing schools by ensuring that these schools and their students receive the resources necessary to successfully implement SEL programs and meet the high needs of students. This means providing additional funding to these schools for teacher training, salaries to hire additional staff, and SEL materials for classrooms.

## Problem Statement

I argue that elementary schools in urban areas across Massachusetts are serving the most vulnerable populations of students. For the purpose of this paper I define "vulnerable populations of students" as those who receive little support and guidance from adults outside school, students who are economically disadvantaged (ED), students with disabilities (SWD), students in foster care, ELLs, students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE), students who are lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender, or questioning, students who are homeless or in transition (AIR, 2024), and/or students who are members of systemically non-

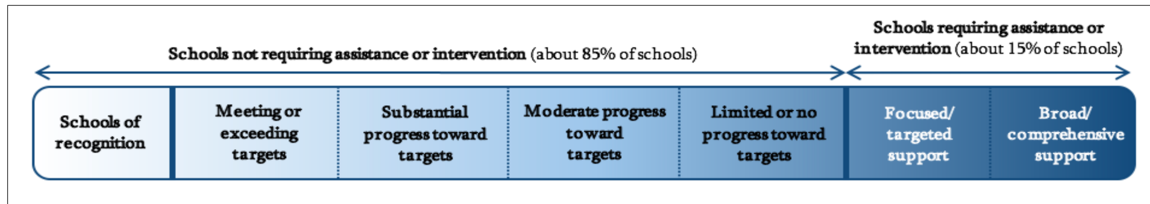
dominant groups (Jenkins, 2018). By Massachusetts state standards, underperforming schools are schools designated as requiring assistance or intervention, formerly known as Level 3, 4, or 5 schools. Level 3 schools in Massachusetts were those in the lowest performing 20% of schools across the state within the same grade span. Levels 4 and 5 schools were chronically underperforming and therefore labeled as turnaround schools, which participate in the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) Monitoring Site Visits (MSVs) each year (Anderson & DeCovnick, 2016). The following is a description of the Massachusetts School Accountability Classification as of 2020:

> Massachusetts uses information related to progress toward improvement targets, accountability percentiles, graduation rates, and assessment participation rates to determine each district and school's overall classification. Most districts and schools are placed into two categories: those that require assistance or intervention from the state, and those that do not require assistance or intervention. Districts and schools that are new or very small are classified as having "insufficient data." Placing schools and districts into categories helps districts know which schools need more support, and helps the state know which districts need the most assistance. (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2020)

Figure 1 is an image taken from the DESE website (https://www.doe.mass.edu) illustrating the categories used to classify schools. As shown in this image, only about 15% of all Massachusetts schools are classified as requiring assistance or intervention.

**Figure 1**

*Categories for Classifying Massachusetts Schools*




Students attending schools that require assistance are in desperate need of appropriate social and emotional support within their classrooms and throughout their schools. I argue that although SEL initiatives have recently become more prevalent across the state (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2021), the implementation of SEL has been inconsistent. This dissertation serves as a call for Massachusetts schools to begin making the shift to a systemic approach to SEL.

Educators across Massachusetts have most likely received training or professional development on SEL by now; many have probably also been provided with an explicit SEL curriculum to use with their students. Yet, the problem of implementation remains. For years, teachers have been taught to analyze test score data, write action plans for re-teaching certain common core standards, and re-evaluate their schedules to incorporate more time on academics. These same educators and school leaders are now being asked to look at teaching and learning in a whole new way—but with little support to do so. Educators are required to implement SEL curricula in their classrooms, but I am not confident that the training and professional development surrounding the chosen curricula are adequate. For some teachers, implementing SEL means significantly altering their schedules and teaching pedagogy, all while the greater school operations, systems, and demands remain the same. This is the root

of the problem. SEL cannot be done correctly if it is being done in isolation. Teachers cannot be asked to implement SEL curricula while the rest of the school building continues to operate without it. The 2013 CASEL Guide for Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs summarized the importance of schoolwide implementation:

> Social and emotional learning can serve as an organizing principle for coordinating all of a school's academic, youth development, and prevention activities (Shriver & Weissberg, 1996). It provides a common language and coordinating framework for communicating not just about SEL but about a wide range of programs and teaching approaches that schools normally provide (Elias et al., 1997; Devaney et al., 2006). When systemic social, emotional, and academic learning becomes the overarching framework for a district or school, the result is an organization whose integrated programming activities are greater than the sum of its parts. (p. 11)

Until school districts fully devote themselves to a social, emotional, and academic learning framework throughout all schools, SEL initiatives will fail to reach their greatest potential.

There are multiple parts to this problem. Improper and/or unsuccessful implementation of SEL in urban schools in Massachusetts has been caused by several factors: (1) Teachers have not been provided with the appropriate tools and knowledge on how to integrate SEL into their classrooms along with the adequate time needed to do so; (2) school-based administrators have not been trained on how to support their teachers in such endeavors; (3) schools have yet to experience a paradigm shift toward becoming learning organizations fueled by the work of SEL; (4) more education is needed on how to use SEL as a lever for advancing educational equity and promoting culturally responsive teaching (CRT)

given the intersectionality of urban schools; (5) "SEL programs must create spaces for teachers and school leaders to engage in discussions of deep cultural analysis (Pollock, 2008) that include the development of sociopolitical consciousness" (Ladson-Billings, 2014, as cited in Mahfouz & Anthony-Stevens, 2020, p. 61); (6) SEL does not take into consideration how emotional expression often varies across race, class, and gender (Smith, 2022, p. 95); and (7) White scholars dominate the field of SEL, but programming is often directed at students in urban districts and do not mirror this demographic (Starr, 2019), and this disconnect directly impacts successful implementation of SEL in urban classrooms.

Research has suggested that purchasing SEL curriculum materials will do little good for educators without ongoing training, coaching, and support (CASEL, 2013). "Just selecting a strong program is not enough. Implementation and support for the program are critically important" (CASEL, 2013, p. 11). Additionally, if the entire school staff, from principal to lunch monitors, are not fully aware of the importance of SEL schoolwide, then initiatives will fail to reach their greatest potential.

## Purpose and Rationale

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into how Massachusetts educators and school-based personnel in one urban public elementary school made meaning of social and emotional learning (SEL) and saw SEL come alive and be implemented throughout their school building. I aimed to uncover reasons why efforts to implement SEL in urban schools more broadly may not succeed schoolwide.

### College and University Course Catalog Search

I believe that the majority of Massachusetts teachers have not been properly educated on what SEL is and how it should be implemented in classrooms and throughout schools. To

support this statement, I conducted a brief initial search reviewing a sample of teacher preparation programs across the state of Massachusetts. The University of Massachusetts (UMass) Boston 2017–2018 course catalog for undergraduate students included one course titled "Supporting Young Children's Social Interactions and Emotional Growth" (ECHD 221; UMass Boston, 2018). The course description did not explicitly mention SEL, so although it appears that the topic may have still been covered, that remains unclear. The UMass Boston 2015–2016 course catalog for graduate students also included one course with the potential to teach SEL, titled "Social, Emotional and Behavioral Assessment and Intervention" (SPYG 604). After reviewing this course description, it appeared that the course was intended to teach students how to administer tests and analyze results rather than educate them on the topic of SEL. Additionally, it should be noted that this course as listed as part of the school psychology program of study, not teacher preparation. The Boston University (2018) elementary education 1–6 program of study for undergraduate students included no courses on SEL; Stonehill College (2018) and Westfield State University (2018) also included no courses on SEL. Though this is not an exhaustive list of all teacher preparation programs available in Massachusetts, the programs listed are all reputable, represent a mix of private and public higher education institutions, and are likely to have trained Massachusetts educators.

After a search of the Boston Public Schools teacher professional learning portal, which includes all of the professional learning opportunities for educators across the district, a search for "social and emotional learning" yielded no results. A search for "SEL" yielded one result, a course on bullying prevention. Again, this search highlights the fact that training and professional development for educators at the district level is limited.

## Goals and Significance of the Study

In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus health crisis a global pandemic. Coinciding with the pandemic were racial inequities and protests along with political unrest throughout the United States. Quarantined in their homes, students across the globe missed out on months of valuable in-person learning time. The unemployment rate in the United States skyrocketed to an all-time high of 14.8% in April 2020 (Falk et al., 2021), as businesses were forced to downsize and even close, leaving many parents without work. These unemployment rates were even higher for part-time workers (24.5%), workers without a college degree (21.2%), Black workers (16.7%) and Hispanic workers (18.9%; Falk et al., 2021). Galea and Abdalla (2020) wrote,

> Ubiquitous fear and anxiety that accompanied the emergence of the new coronavirus led to widespread limits on physical contact in attempts to mitigate the spread of the virus. That in turn brought the U.S. economy to a halt, resulting in more than 40 million people filing for unemployment, approximating numbers not seen since the Great Depression of the 1930s. (p. 227)

Parents who were considered essential workers found themselves working longer days while scrambling for childcare as schools and daycare facilities closed their doors, many indefinitely.

During a time of isolation and uncertainty brought on by the global pandemic, protests and riots began across the country in response to racial inequities, including the violent murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, among others. The controversial presidential election was another source of anxiety for the American people. Consequently, the mental health of Americans has suffered greatly (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020). If there

has ever been a time to push for universal mental health services for all children across the United States, it is now.

During the pandemic, many children across the country were forced into a world of schooling where they learned from a device and their classroom was a Zoom video call. Every ounce of personal connection and interaction was taken away from these kids when the transition to remote/hybrid learning occurred, and for some, it is still occurring. For a countless number of students, friendships were no longer being cultivated during recess time in the schoolyard or over lunch in the cafeteria. For those fortunate enough to attend school in person, new restrictions often required personal protective equipment (PPE) to be worn by children as young as 2 years old. Face masks, which hid a teacher's warm smile, made it difficult for children to feel part of their classroom community, while the enforcement of social distancing caused students to feel disconnected from their teachers and peers, even though they were all in the same room. “Essentially the public health measures introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic have temporarily hindered young children from engaging in social interactions with peers, and thus the opportunity to develop their social-emotional skills within the common play contexts” (Katzman & Stanton, 2020, p. 132). This study explored schoolwide SEL implementation during the 2022–2023 school year.

## Research Questions

The research questions for this study were as follows:

- Research Question 1: How has SEL been integrated into school structures, curriculum, and daily interactions at Rockwell Elementary School?

- Research Question 2: How has Rockwell Elementary School followed the CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL, particularly focus areas 1A and 1B, “Build Foundational Support” and “Create a Plan”?

## Summary

SEL has been proven to teach children the skills they will need throughout their lives to become contributing members of society who are able to function appropriately, set and achieve individual goals, cooperate with others, and overcome struggles and challenges as they are encountered (Greenberg et al., 2017). When concluding their meta-analysis of follow-up effects of SEL in schools, Taylor et al. (2017) commented, “SEL programming can prepare students to move successfully through school and college, and to be productive workers and good citizens” (p. 1168). Bridgeland et al. (2013) further stressed this point by reminding readers that SEL produces better citizens at all levels, including pre-kindergarten, elementary, middle, and high school.

Students in urban districts in Massachusetts deserve to attend schools where SEL is a top priority and implemented appropriately. This chapter began by defining SEL and connecting SEL to Nel Noddings’s (2005) ethic of care, and it offered deep reflection into how this work can be pushed further with the help of Senge’s (2006) theory of the learning organization and the CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL framework. Chapter 2 reviews the theoretical and empirical literature on social and emotional learning. Chapter 3 focuses on the research methods used for this study. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study, and Chapter 5 offers a conclusion, including a discussion of the findings as well as implications and recommendations for future research.

It is time to reflect on the harm that may be done to future generations if teachers, especially those serving in high-needs, urban elementary schools, are not appropriately trained and versed in SEL skills, strategies, and competencies, and if school leaders are not given guidance on how to properly implement such initiatives at a schoolwide level. It is time for a paradigm shift—for schools to become learning organizations that aspire to embracing SEL on a personal, and schoolwide, level.

# CHAPTER 2

# LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews the theoretical and empirical literature on social and emotional learning (SEL) in four sections, each representing a specific domain: (1) SEL and schools; (2) trauma and learning; (3) SEL and teacher learning; and (4) SEL through an equity lens. The first section, on SEL and schools, explores the connection between SEL and academics, which encompasses the common claim that SEL leads to an increase in overall academic achievement, while including voices of scholars who believe there is greater reason to include SEL practices in schools than simply improving academic success. This section reviews literature that draws a connection between SEL and a positive school culture, including heightened student motivation and improved student behaviors. It also includes a review of SEL elementary school-level curricula.

Trauma and learning represent the second section of this review. The detrimental effects of childhood trauma on learning have been researched more thoroughly in recent years (Massachusetts Advocates for Children, 2005). This literature argues that by employing trauma-informed practices, which are closely connected to SEL practices, in the classroom, teachers can help make school a better place for these young learners.

Scholars have suggested that to best implement SEL practices, teachers need to be on board, be properly trained and supported, and have SEL competence themselves; therefore, teacher SEL will serve as the third section of literature.

Lastly, the section on SEL through an equity lens discusses how the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is rethinking the five SEL competencies by adding equity elaborations to each one. Additionally, this section describes how SEL can be used as a lever to promote educational equity and discusses how shifting to transformative SEL is necessary.

Taken together, the research in these domains demonstrates that SEL is a vital piece of teaching and learning in urban elementary classrooms. Throughout the literature reviewed, themes point to the need for proper implementation of programs and initiatives, supporting the urgency around urban elementary schools in Massachusetts becoming learning organizations that internalize SEL with the help of the CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL framework.

The conclusion of this chapter offers a critique of SEL as well as a brief overview of the theoretical framework used for this study.

## The Different Domains of SEL

### Domain 1: SEL in Schools

This section is organized into the following subsections: SEL and academic achievement, school culture and student behavior, and SEL curricula for elementary schools.

#### *SEL and Academic Achievement*

Previous research has found that cognitive growth depends on the development of social and emotional understanding. Greenberg et al. (2017) asserted that school-based SEL

programs increase student test scores and grades while decreasing problem behaviors. For the purpose of this dissertation, "problem behaviors" include tantrums, defiance, physical and verbal aggression, and breaking general school rules. When implemented properly, SEL programs increase student confidence, which leads directly to higher academic achievement overall (Greenberg et al., 2017). When students are motivated and take pride in their work, they can learn and master new concepts at a much faster rate. Goleman (2004) further supported this statement by stressing that "social and emotional learning facilitates academic learning" (p. 7). As the culture of high-stakes testing and education reform was beginning to grow, Goleman posed this idea as "a very timely aid to schools" (p. 7). Though he was certainly correct in identifying the positive impact SEL could have on academic achievement, his suggestion to implement such practices across schools has yet to gain sufficient momentum (Bridgeland et al., 2013).

In their meta-analysis of the follow-up effects of SEL, Taylor et al. (2017) reported that by fostering SEL skills and competencies through school-based, universal interventions, improvements were made in each of the following areas: academic performance, prosocial behavior, and positive attitudes about school and learning. Their research showed that when students receive SEL instruction in school, they are able to become the best version of themselves by forming respectful relationships with others and learning to handle their emotions appropriately. Handling emotions in an appropriate way may include naming feelings, removing oneself from others, and learning coping strategies that work best for the individual such as breathing exercises, writing, or drawing. When children do not feel safe, respected, loved, and cared for in their classroom and school, they will act in unpredictable

ways, hindering their ability to succeed academically and socially. Yet, when students attend schools that practice SEL strategies with fidelity, they can soar (Bridgeland et al., 2013).

Bridgeland et al. (2013), in partnership with Civic Enterprises, Peter D. Hart Research Associates, and CASEL, added to this conversation with striking results from a national survey. They reported that schools with strong SEL supports were, on average, 10 times more likely to show considerable gains in academic areas, such as literacy and mathematics, than schools with no support or weak support. This research also strengthens claims that schools with SEL programs boost the number of students achieving proficiency ratings on grade-level reading tests. This report closed with a reminder that since SEL leads to an increased interest in learning, it is no wonder that levels of academic achievement improve radically as well.

Fopiano and Haynes (2001) argued that since school is the first formal setting where children interact with others outside their families, there is a great deal more that needs to be taught before any mention of academics comes into play. Drawing on Howard Gardener's (1993) ideas on "interpersonal intelligence," these scholars maintained that "school success, then, involves not only developing cognitive skills, but also forming friendships, developing interactive skills with groups, and understanding one's self and one's behaviors" (Fopiano & Haynes, 2001, p. 47). SEL in schools is precisely what is suggested here—only this argument extends far beyond improving academic success.

More recently, Uygur et al. (2023) conducted a study investigating the roles of academic, social, and emotional self-efficacy and gender in predicting academic resilience among Turkish adolescents. The participants consisted of 346 adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18. This study found that the second strongest predictor of academic resilience was

emotional self-efficacy—that is, “Adolescents who are confident about their emotional control and management abilities tend to be more resilient in the face of academic challenges (Uygur et al., 2023, p. 257). These findings are consistent with the literature presented earlier in this chapter, indicating that SEL leads to an increase in overall academic achievement.

***School Culture and Student Behavior***

The dominant SEL research community has focused on the strong correlation between successfully implemented SEL programs and higher student test scores and achievement rates (Bridgeland et al., 2013; Cohen, 2001; Greenberg et al., 2017; Zins, Weissberg et al., 2004). Though this is certainly something to celebrate, it is important to keep in mind that academic achievement does not just happen; rather, it occurs as a result of an improved school culture and climate. Jensen (2009) encouraged educators to understand why aspects of SEL are needed in high-poverty schools:

> We must go back more than half a century to Abraham Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs, which asserts that students cannot be expected to function at a high academic level when their basic needs—for food, shelter, medical care, safety, family, and friendships, for example—are unmet. (p. 70)

Schools are responsible for fulfilling numerous basic and psychological needs of their students before any learning can even begin to take place in the classroom. Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs goes on to identify elements such as belongingness, love, care, friendship, and feelings of accomplishment, all of which must be met well before achieving one’s full potential. When students’ needs are met in partnership with effective SEL programs, student motivation has been proven to increase (Taylor et al., 2017) and disruptive behaviors

(Greenberg et al., 2017) have been shown to decrease while improving overall school culture and climate.

Fopiano and Haynes (2001) identified several important school climate factors contributing to healthy social, emotional, and academic development, including "adult nurturing, good peer relationships, and sensitive and responsive support services" (p. 51). Researchers have found a direct correlation between how well students do in school and positive, caring adult relationships (Fopiano & Haynes, 2001). Although caring adult relationships may not eliminate problem behaviors, the research has suggested that when students can identify adults in their school whom they can trust, they tend to have a more positive overall school experience than peers without these relationships. Mugno and Rosenblitt (2001) stated that although strong teacher–child relationships are vital to student emotional and social success, especially for emotionally vulnerable and at-risk children, these relationships need not always be positive. These scholars noted, "Most children who are at risk emotionally are not capable of a mostly positive relationship" (Mugno & Rosenblitt, 2001 p. 65).

When SEL is appropriately incorporated into all aspects of a school—among all staff and in all spaces (classrooms, auditorium, cafeteria, office, schoolyard, etc.)—students are able to engage with peers and solve problems more successfully due to the SEL strategies, competencies, and skills, such as problem solving and conflict resolution (Zins, Weissberg et al., 2004), which have been explicitly modeled, taught, and practiced. Additionally, Greenberg et al. (2017) noted that SEL not only helps students better handle their problems, but also has the power to assist in decreasing the likelihood that students will experience social, behavioral, and emotional problems in the future.

In a national teacher survey on how SEL can empower children and transform schools, Bridgeland et al. (2013) found “that of the teachers who view negative school climate as a problem, 80 percent view SEL as a solution” (p. 7). This survey results also indicated that teachers working in schools with successful SEL programs are half as likely to report a negative school culture or climate than teachers working at schools without such programs. Furthermore, Bridgeland et al. (2013) identified a lack of SEL skills with heightened student disengagement from learning. Again, students will not learn if they are not in the mindset or encouraged to do so. Yet,

> studies have found that students who receive high-quality SEL instruction, including students in schools with high rates of poverty, demonstrate improved attitudes and behaviors, including a greater motivation to learn, improved relationships with their peers, and a deeper connection to their school (Bridgeland et al., 2013, p. 25)

Teachers have much more success teaching students when they feel connected, safe, and cared for.

In a qualitative study measuring the effects of implementing an explicit social and emotional learning curriculum in the classroom according to teachers across four school districts in Illinois, findings indicated that when one explicit SEL curriculum was implemented consistently, the classroom environment improved (Cline et al., 2022). As part of this study, teachers filled out rubrics for each student in their class that were used to examine students’ social and emotional behaviors; teachers also kept field notes in the form of observation journals throughout the study and completed a survey at the close of the study. Similarities were found across observation logs indicating that teachers found SEL practices,

such as morning meeting and closing circle, to be effective approaches to increasing desirable student behaviors and strengthening the overall classroom environment:

> Researchers also shared the positive impact of Closing Circles on their end of the day routine and students' behavior during pack up. An example of one researcher's field notes stated, "Closing Circles help end the day on a positive note no matter how the day started or how the day went." Another researcher described, "Students are starting to help each other become more self- aware. Reminding each other of their goals, choosing partners that will improve them. They are relying on their classroom family for support." (Cline et al., 2022, p. 198)

This study highlights the powerful impact of SEL practices on both the classroom and school communities if implemented intentionally and consistently.

This section of the literature review concludes that SEL has the power to change the way students and teachers perceive their school building, the overall school culture, and the work being done.

***SEL Curricula for Elementary Schools***

In 2013 CASEL identified 25 "SELect" programs for use in elementary classrooms. According to *the 2013 CASEL Guide: Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs—Preschool and Elementary School Edition*, to be designated as SELect, a program had to be well designed, including allowing opportunities for practice and multi-year programming, deliver high-quality training and other implementation supports, including initial training and ongoing support to ensure sound implementation, and be evidence-based, with at least one evaluation documenting positive impacts on overall school success for students. Though the 25 CASEL SELect programs all work to promote social and emotional learning in schools by

targeting the five competencies, they do so in different ways. For this review, the Open Circle Program (OCP) is presented and analyzed first, followed by the Second Step Program. Both SEL intervention curricula have been/are currently being used in the Phillips Public School District (Driggers, 2005; Montgomery, 2008).

***Open Circle Program***

OCP was developed by Pamela Seigle at the Stone Center at Wellesley College. The program was first piloted in six classrooms in Framingham, Massachusetts, in 1987, under the name "Framingham Schools Project." Today, the OCP is used across New England, New York, and New Jersey in 98 communities and in over 300 elementary schools (Hennessey, 2007). The program is intended to be used starting in kindergarten through Grade 5. Each grade level has a slightly different curriculum containing, on average, 34 lessons for the school year. This program focuses on a whole-school approach, meaning that every adult in the building is knowledgeable about the curriculum and students and teachers build a school community in which all students feel safe, cared for, and engaged in learning (Jones et al., 2017). The lessons are designed to cover relationship building, communication skills, understanding/managing emotions, and problem solving. OCP combines a theoretical basis in relational theory with year-long instruction in social skills (CASEL, 2013; Hennessey, 2007).

Two unique components of OCP are the professional development sessions provided to teachers and the structure of lesson delivery. OCP teacher training includes three 7-hour, in-person training days. Two of these days are held back-to-back in the fall, and the third is held with the same cohort in the winter. In addition to the training sessions, teachers are invited to participate in optional implementation coaching. OCP training is adapted to the individual needs of the school staff member, and sessions are held for classroom teachers,

specialists, counselors, administrators, support staff, and families. “Schools sustain and improve SEL capacity over time by developing Open Circle trainers, coaches and leadership teams, providing training, mentorship, outcome measurement and action planning” (Open Circle, 2018; Porche et al., 2014).

The structure for lesson delivery sets this program apart from others of its kind. The Open Circle format is one in which the “students and teacher arrange their chairs in a circle and keep one chair empty to symbolize that the circle is open to anyone” (Taylor et al., 2002). If someone enters the classroom during an Open Circle lesson, they are invited to join the group in the open chair. Additionally, students as young as kindergarten age are taught how to pick up their own chair and bring it to the circle. This practice enhances feelings of ownership and inclusion while in Open Circle. These lessons are held twice a week for approximately 15–20 minutes. OCP provides educators with several extension lessons, recommended literature, and home connections to reinforce the skills being taught. According to Hennessey (2007), OCP claims that for SEL interventions succeed they must be relevant to the challenges children are actually facing, they must teach social competence over several years, and they must take an ecological approach to instruction—OCP does all of this.

A 2002 study found that students who had exposure to OCP, previously known as Reach Out to Schools: Social Competency Program (SCP), in elementary school were, on average, more successful in middle school (Taylor et al, 2002). This study reported that girls made easier adjustments to school and boys engaged in fewer physical fights. Furthermore, this study revealed that girls had higher levels of assertiveness and boys had better self-control (Jones et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2002).

A study conducted by the Wallace Foundation in 2017 reported that OCP focuses on "recognizing and managing emotions, empathy, positive relationships, and problem solving" (Jones et al., 2017). This same report determined that the most frequently used instruction model was discussion, with visual displays and skill practice as supports. The primary skill focus of this curriculum is interpersonal skills. Findings suggested that about 65% of the OCP curriculum focuses on this area, while 38% of the program focuses on emotional processing. Cognitive regulation made up 20% of the curriculum, where mindset and character combined only made up 3% of the curriculum. Finally, this study reported that "informally collected data revealed that both teachers and students came to view time spent in Open Circle as valuable" (Jones et al., 2017).

### ***Second Step Program***

Second Step (SS) is an SEL intervention program developed by the Committee for Children, a nonprofit organization located in Seattle, Washington, founded in 1979 to champion the well-being and social success of children. In 1985, the first version of SS was launched in Nashville, Tennessee, and by the late 1990s, SS reached schools in all 50 states. Today, the SS program has been purchased by over 25,000 schools (Low et al., 2015). Since its inception, SS has received many accolades, including being named a Model Program in the *Annual Report of School Safety* by the White House in 1998 and a Safe & Drug Free Schools exemplary program by the U.S. Department of Education in 2001, along with CASEL rewarding high marks to the curriculum in 2002 and naming it as one of the 25 SELect programs in the 2013 CASEL Guide (Committee for Children, 2018).

What was initially intended to be a violence prevention curriculum grew into much more as the needs of children across the United States became greater. SS uses a cognitive

problem-solving model that teaches children how to *solve* social problems rather than focusing on teaching specific behavioral responses (Edwards et al., 2005). The developers of SS were committed to a logic model that would incorporate direct instruction, opportunities to practice SEL skills, and opportunities for reinforcement when students were caught exhibiting these previously taught SEL skills. When this model is followed, students are more likely to experience a range of improved outcomes in the short and long term (Low et al., 2015). The curriculum began as three units of study: empathy training, impulse control, and anger management. In 2012, with the release of the fourth edition of SS, the units were restructured and a fourth was added. SS now includes units covering skills for learning, empathy, emotion management, and problem solving (Edwards et al., 2005; Low et al., 2015).

The SS curriculum varies according to grade level but consists of 22–25 weekly lessons. The model for lesson delivery is one lesson per week for 25–40 minutes depending on the grade level, with planned 5- to 10-minute follow-up activities targeting the same skill (Jones et al., 2017). The lesson is delivered in a traditional manner with scripted lessons but also utilizes pictures, posters, and, if age-appropriate, puppets to support student thinking. The SS website allows teachers, staff, and school leaders to sign-up for accounts, receive training on the curriculum, and access an entire digital library of resources, including songs and videos that reinforce skills and lessons for students. According to the Wallace Foundation, SS lessons follow the following sequence:

> Each main lesson typically includes an introduction to the lesson concepts, a Brain Builder game that develops cognitive regulation skills, a discussion of a story or video with an SEL theme, an opportunity for students to practice new

> skills, and a brief review of lesson concepts. Follow-through activities vary based on the lesson and may include Brain Builder games, skill practice, songs, and writing or drawing activities. (Jones et al., 2017, p. 161)

In a mixed-methods study involving fourth- and fifth-grade students in an urban school district that was published in 2005, student interviews about SS and SEL were conducted. These interviews found that most students spoke about the lessons from SS that focused on learning techniques for anger management (Edwards et al., 2005). The same students reported using strategies learned not just in school, but also in places outside the school building. The SS intervention program clearly has a positive impact on students. According to Low et al. (2015), “Overall, the data support the internal validity of the program but suggest that the benefits of Second Step are most pronounced for children with lower baseline competencies” (p. 474). Children at a lower baseline are those entering elementary classrooms without the basic knowledge of any SEL competencies. This lower baseline could be due to several factors, yet it is safe to say that these same children can be categorized as vulnerable, with many attending low-performing urban schools.

Teacher training for the SS program is provided through online modules. The program also offers frequent free webinars to staff at participating SS schools for ongoing training (Jones et al., 2017). No staff member can gain access to the SS resources and materials until the 2-hour training session is complete and a certificate of completion is generated.

#### ***Shared SEL Curriculum***

The RAND Corporation published a case study highlighting the successful partnership between the Russell Elementary School, a Boston Public School, and the Boys

and Girls Club of Dorchester, when implementing SEL in and out of the school day. The study highlighted the work done over 4 years, between the 2017–2018 and 2020–2021 school years. The findings from this study were many, but most importantly, the study found that the consistent use of one explicit SEL curriculum, in this case Mind Up, may have contributed to the successful schoolwide implementation of SEL. Both the Russell and the Boys and Girls Club had 100% of staff trained on the curriculum so that all adult members during the school day and during out-of-school time programming were able to implement shared language, SEL practices, and SEL rituals with students. (Tosh et al., 2022).

## Domain 2: Trauma and Student Learning

Discussions around trauma in education have become more prevalent during recent years (Barr, 2018; Crosby, 2015; Orpinas & Horne, 2006; Seedat et al., 2004; Sitler, 2009; Terrasi & de Galarce, 2017). Although educators across the United States have been privy to information regarding trauma-informed practices, the research has suggested that there are still many misconceptions about what trauma is and how it relates to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as evidenced by the array of definitions for both terms. Additionally, without the proper support from administration, teachers are often at a loss for how to deliver trauma-informed practices in the classroom.

This section is organized using the following subsections: trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, learning, and trauma-informed practice frameworks.

### *Trauma*

The Center for Treatment of Anxiety and Mood Disorders (2018), which serves as a regional clinic of the National Social Anxiety Center (NSAC), defines trauma as “a psychological, emotional response to an event or an experience that is deeply distressing or

disturbing." The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) defines trauma as

> the experiences that cause intense physical and psychological stress reactions. It can refer to a single event, multiple events, or a set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically and emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. (SAMHSA, 2014, as cited in Crosby, 2015, p. 223)

According to the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-V), trauma can be categorized into the following: assault violence, other injury or shocking event, learning of traumas to close friend/relatives, and learning about unexpected death (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Finally, trauma, or traumatic events, are now often referred to as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs; Reddig & VanLone, 2023, p. 37). These definitions help clarify the causes of trauma and how the body reacts to it.

It is important to add the terms "complex trauma" and "secondary traumatic stress" to this discussion. Complex trauma is identified as "the cumulative effect of traumatic experiences that are repeated or prolonged over time" (Terrasi & de Galarce, 2017, pp. 36–37). Secondary traumatic stress, according to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2012), is "the emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma experiences of another. Its symptoms mimic those of post-traumatic stress disorder" (p.1). During my time in urban education, I have heard colleagues present puzzling cases of children who come from "stable families" and/or who have "good home lives" but display undesirable behaviors in the classroom such as withdrawal or disruption to learning. Trauma touches people in a variety of ways, and secondary trauma is a very real condition with

adverse effects on learning. Something as simple as witnessing a classmate's tantrum repeatedly or hearing a classmate share a story at morning meeting about a parent being in jail or engaging in violent activities can trigger other children in the classroom.

Previous research has indicated that more than 25% of children encounter experiences perceived as traumatizing (Duke et al., 2010, as cited in Crosby, 2015). This percentage increases for children of color, those living in poverty, and those who are in foster care or juvenile justice systems (Abram et al., 2004 as cited in Crosby, 2015; Ford et al., 2012 as cited in Crosby, 2015; Lawrence & Hesse, 2010 as cited in Crosby, 2015; Salazar et al., 2012 as cited in Crosby, 2015). Many students are affected by trauma in urban settings, and responses to trauma can play out in the classroom setting in a variety of ways. Terrasi and de Galarce (2017) reported that a population of children suffering from trauma are unable to trust their environment, form relationships, and understand verbal and nonverbal cues. They assert that behavior may look like severe acting out, tantrums, disobedience, aggression, or extreme withdrawal from the learning and other students in the class. Being aware of these behaviors is vital to identifying students who have experienced traumatic events. However, it is important to acknowledge that although the behaviors identified by Terrasi and de Galarce can certainly be indicators of trauma, issues arise when educators assume that *all* students displaying these behaviors are in trauma without considering other outside factors. Additionally, when teachers are ill-equipped to address the needs of students suffering from trauma within their classrooms, the learning environment can quickly suffer.

***Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder***

Similarly to the practice noted earlier, when educators assume students are suffering from trauma based solely on classroom behavior, many urban educators are quick to label

children with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The American Psychiatric Association (2013) stated that PTSD "is a psychiatric disorder that can occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, a serious accident, a terrorist act, war/combat, rape or other violent personal assault" (p. 2). Although exposure to trauma increases one's risk of PTSD, it does not necessarily lead to it. According to Breslau (2009), less than 10% of victims suffering from trauma will develop PTSD. The Massachusetts Advocates for Children (2005) echoed this by stating, "While sometimes children's behavioral, cognitive, and emotional reactions to trauma meet the threshold criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), there are many traumatized children who are highly symptomatic but who do not meet this threshold" (p. 93).

The fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-V) notes that PTSD is a condition that follows a traumatic event when a person demonstrates certain symptoms lasting longer than 1 month, namely hyperarousal, reexperiencing, and avoidance (The American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Hyperarousal occurs when the individual experiences heightened levels of anxiety, reexperiencing occurs when the individual involuntarily relives the traumatic event in their mind, and avoidance suggests that people who have PTSD can consciously and/or unconsciously avoid people, places, smells, and sounds that remind them of the initial trauma (Cole et al, 2005).

***Learning***

The preceding information about trauma and PTSD articulates the harmful physical and mental effects of both on the body. When children suffering from traumatizing experiences enter a classroom setting, they struggle to learn to the best of their ability and appropriately focus on academic lessons with their peers (Barr, 2018; Crosby, 2015; Orpinas

& Horne, 2006; Seedat et al., 2004;Sitler, 2009; Terrasi & de Galarce, 2017). There are many links between experiences of trauma and specific academic deficits throughout childhood (Anda et al., 2006 as cited in Crosby, 2015 Black et al., 2012 as cited in Crosby, 2015; Cole et al, 2005; Wolpow et al., 2009).

Since teachers can often confuse trauma in students with pure laziness or carelessness (Sitler, 2009), further harm is done by punishing these students in the school setting rather than supporting their mental health needs. A 2011 report published by the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University indicated that students affected by trauma often have delays or deficits in age-expected executive functioning skills (Barr, 2018). It was reported that teachers notice a lack of attention, trouble managing emotions, problems finishing tasks, and issues with communication in students affected by trauma (Barr, 2018, p. 40). Barr (2018) asserted, “Children raised in highly stressful home or social circumstances are prone to delays in the normal development of executive function” (p. 44). Although trauma does cause changes in the brain, including developmental delays, the brains of younger children retain a high level of plasticity, which means the neural connections within the brain can be altered (Barr, 2018). If a school can employ social and emotional learning practices throughout daily instruction, routines, procedures, extracurriculars, and the overall culture of the building, then children suffering from trauma will begin to heal. Yet, if schools remain idle in addressing these needs, then trauma can continue to have long-term negative effects on learning and the ability to participate successfully in society as adults (Terrasi & de Galarce, 2017).

The information presented in this subsection has focused on linkages between trauma and negative impacts on learning. Although this is a fact that cannot be disputed, recent

research has sought to flip this idea around by focusing on how, when given the right environment, learning can work to undo the effects of trauma (Terrasi & de Galarce, 2017). This shift is only accomplished when schools become safe havens, or what Terrasi and de Galarce (2017) referred to as trauma-sensitive schools. Sitler (2009) supported this theory by suggesting that trauma often masks itself in behavior that can be interpreted erroneously. It is of vital importance, therefore, that educators develop a pedagogy of awareness to reframe perceptions and help disengaged and difficult students who are affected by traumatic experiences re-invest in their learning. The use of a schoolwide social and emotional learning program, ongoing professional development and training for teachers and school administrators, and a change in the perception of “difficult” or “troubled” students is what urban schools need to become trauma-sensitive safe havens.

In a case study conducted in a Massachusetts school over the course of three school years, 2018–2020, the positive effects of implementing a trauma-sensitive approach were overwhelming. When discussing the study results, the researcher stated, “One overarching theme emerged from the analysis: the faculty and staff’s commitment to creating and maintaining a caring school community dominated the data” (Ballin, 2023, p. 98). Additionally, when speaking about academic student growth in the trauma-sensitive approach, the principal of the school in the study shared, “Individual student growth increased, as measured on the yearly Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) assessments, student attendance improved, and the number of suspensions decreased” (Ballin, 2023, p. 106). This study confirmed that trauma-sensitive schools can help undo effects of trauma.

### *Trauma-Informed Practice Frameworks*

Trauma-informed practices can assist in making schools and classrooms trauma sensitive. When these practices are employed correctly, students affected by trauma will be better able to achieve academically, behaviorally, and socially (Crosby, 2015). It must be noted that for this work to be the most successful, it cannot be done in isolation. As Oehlberg (2008, as cited in Crosby, 2015) explained, “Trauma-informed education requires buy-in from administrators, disciplinary policies that are sensitive to students, staff professional development, and strong relationships between school staff and mental health professionals” (p. 224). The emphasis on “staff” is important to note. Teachers serve extremely important roles in this work, yet they are not the only adults interacting with children inside school buildings. For a school to become truly trauma sensitive, all staff members, from lunch monitors to crossing guards, must be trained in trauma-informed practices. Fortunately, there is a plethora of frameworks offering the guiding principles for this work.

Multiplying Connections (Perry, 2009 as cited in Crosby, 2015; Walkley & Cox, 2013 as cited in Crosby, 2015), which is a project of the Health Federation of Philadelphia, provides a framework that references the mnemonic CAPPD, which is intended to remind school-based staff to “Stay and teach CALM, be ATTUNED, PRESENT, and PREDICTABLE and DON’T let children’s emotions escalate your own” (Multiplying Connections, 2010, p. 5). Some techniques for CAPPD include creating safety, providing choice and control, communicating respect, being nurturing, providing stability, getting down on eye level, and disciplining strategies such as using praise to highlight smart choices. This framework is just one piece of the overall program available through Multiplying Connections. In addition, this program offers training for all staff, strategies for how to

employ practices, activities to assist in employing strategies, as well as tangible items such as posters and CAPPD cards used to support staff in remembering and internalizing the practices.

Making SPACE for Learning (Australian Childhood Foundation, 2010, as cited in Crosby, 2015) provides a similar framework for trauma-informed practice but uses a different set of tenets. “Making SPACE for Learning is a resource guide to assist schools to unlock the potential of traumatized children and young people to grow and develop at school” (Australian Childhood Foundation, 2010, p. 4). This guide suggests that school and learning should be staged, predictable, adaptive, connected, and enabled. “Staged” means that information should be presented in a sequential pattern. “Predictable” focuses on the importance of providing students with expected routines and structures throughout the school day, every day. Uncertainty and unpredictability increase levels of stress in children with a background of trauma; therefore, it is crucial that daily routines and structures are put into place at the beginning of the school year and that children are given proper notice when there will be a disruption in a plan. “Adaptive” proposes that teachers should allow for more flexibility when responding to children in trauma. By being open to multiple options for intervention, a teacher can more easily address the unique need(s) of a child rather than relying on locked-down behavior systems that may better suit other learners. “Connected” focuses on the importance of relationships in this work:

> Effective strategies to support traumatized children and young people emphasize relationships with safe and consistent adults and peers as the foundation for change. Relationships become the primary vehicle through which new meanings about feelings, beliefs, behavior and identity are resourced to emerge. Connected children

> and young people are calmer and more able to access their internal systems to learn. (Australian Childhood Foundation, 2010, p. 61).

Lastly, "enabled" highlights the unfortunate truth that children and young people who have a background of trauma are not enabled or empowered. They often feel that their present and future are disconnected from their past, and they find it challenging to understand themselves. "They struggle to piece together a coherent narrative about their qualities, their attributes and their talents" (Australian Childhood Foundation, 2010, p. 61). Trauma-informed teaching practices can assist in enabling children and young people in ways they have never been before.

The third and final framework is the Flexible Framework, developed by Massachusetts Advocates for Children in collaboration with Harvard Law School as part of the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative (TLPI). "The Flexible Framework is an organizational tool that enables schools and districts—in collaboration with families, local community organizations, and outside providers—to maintain a whole school focus as they create trauma sensitive schools" (Helping Traumatized Children Learn, 2023). This framework is intended to be used as a tool for school leaders to inform their action plans, for teachers to reflect on their daily interactions and teaching of students, and for policymakers to use as they design laws and policies that affect schools.

The Flexible Framework comprises six core operational functions: leadership, professional development, access to resources and services, academic and nonacademic strategies, policies and protocols, and collaboration with families. This "top down" model targets school leadership first to ensure that teachers are set up for success when they enter their classrooms. Similarly to the other frameworks presented, the focus on academic and

nonacademic strategies encourages teachers to build predictable classroom routines, view all children holistically, and spend time nurturing relationships.

This is not an exhaustive list of all the trauma-informed practice frameworks currently available. However, it does allow some insight into what trauma-informed practices can look like and how different frameworks can work in similar yet unique ways to reach the same goal of establishing trauma-sensitive schools. It is important to note a few of the common themes found across all three frameworks.

Predictability is one common theme across all three frameworks. When working with children and young people affected by trauma, it is of vital importance that daily routines, structures, and protocols are put in place to lessen anxious feelings and stress. If learners can predict what comes next in their day, transitions, which can typically be difficult for traumatized children, are often made more easily. Relationship building is another common theme. CAPPD highlights relationships under being present, Making SPACE for Learning categorizes relationships under the connected domain, and in the Flexible Framework, relationship building falls under academic and nonacademic strategies.

The trauma-informed practice frameworks presented in this section are clearly connected to the SEL practices identified by CASEL. Once again, SEL teaches students the skills they need to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve goals for themselves, understand, feel, and show empathy for others, form positive relationships with peers and adults, and practice responsible decision making (CASEL, 2017). While trauma-informed practices and SEL are not the same, their similarities are significant. SEL will not heal students in trauma, but if teachers and schools commit to these practices, they will be better equipped to teach all students.

## Domain 3: Teachers and SEL

Domain 3 is organized using the following two subsections: perspectives, knowledge, and SEL competencies and compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma.

### *Perspectives, Knowledge, and SEL Competencies*

According to "The Missing Piece: A National Survey on How Social and Emotional Learning Can Empower Children and Transform Schools," 95% of teacher respondents indicated that SEL is teachable, while 97% recognized that SEL can benefit students regardless of socioeconomic backgrounds (Bridgeland et al., 2014, as cited in Greenberg et al., 2017). Taylor et al. (2017) agreed that positive benefits have been found for students of various socioeconomic and even racial backgrounds, while Bridgeland et al. (2013) found that teachers at high-poverty schools are even more likely to endorse SEL. Clearly, teachers agree that SEL can be taught in schools and can benefit students from diverse backgrounds, yet, even so, a national survey indicated that only about 50% of teachers receive intentional SEL training (Bridgeland et al., 2013). Furthermore, in their study on teacher perceptions of SEL, Esen-Aygun & Sahin-Taskin (2017) found that although most teachers had heard of the concept of SEL, they could not give a detailed explanation of what it is. This supports the argument that SEL should be a priority in teacher preparation programs, yet in a review of state teacher preparation standards from all 50 states and Washington, D.C., Reddig and VanLone (2023) found that only five states require pre-service teachers to receive training in trauma-informed practices (p. 37). These researchers included the following six areas in their definition of trauma-informed education practices: identifying and assessing trauma, creating safe and predictable learning environments, cultural responsiveness, positive behavior management, positive relationship building, and social and emotional learning.

Soutter (2023) highlighted, “Despite a large body of extant literature on social and emotional learning (SEL) itself, it is not yet clear how SEL can most effectively be incorporated into teacher preparation programs to support both student and teacher outcomes” (p. 8). In a study conducted between January and July 2020, in which 11 teachers from across the United States were interviewed, Soutter found that a focus on SEL during pre-service teacher programs is integral to teacher success. The study findings indicated that teachers make connections between SEL and longevity in the profession. This study also highlighted the importance of SEL work during teacher preparation programs: “Teacher educators must not stop at developing SEL alone but rather must lay a foundation where teacher candidates can reflect on their biases and blind spots, grapple with privilege and racism, and feel prepared to navigate and challenge roadblocks” (Soutter, 2023, p. 24).

Greenberg et al. (2017) found that for SEL programs to be successful, teachers must have high levels of social and emotional competence themselves. Gregory and Fergus (2017) took issue with SEL’s tendency to focus primarily on students while neglecting to recognize that students’ and teachers’ social and emotional proficiencies are interrelated. Fopiano and Haynes (2001) asserted that SEL skills are acquired more quickly when adults are modeling healthy behaviors and strategies in a supportive school context. Schonert- Reichl (2017) concurred with these statements, maintaining that the well-being of the teacher, including their ability to practice appropriate social and emotional skills, will have a strong influence on students.

Schonert-Reichl (2017) also held that stress is contagious. She recognized that since teaching is such a demanding and stressful job, if teachers are not able to appropriately manage their emotions and practice SEL competencies, they will be more likely to produce

stressed-out students. Furthermore, teachers describe having an increase in ownership over SEL in their classrooms and greater levels of confidence in its implementation when they are better trained and have spent significant amounts of time improving SEL competencies themselves (Bridgeland et al., 2013). Bridgeland et al. (2013) reported that 82% of teachers want further training in SEL practices, and SEL training is best when partnered with coaching. As the literature has suggested, coaching is an element of supporting proper SEL program implementation, which can make or break attainment of success. Typically, in urban schools, academic coaches are readily available to support teacher needs, yet SEL coaches are seldom available, if at all, to assist in this way.

Additionally, previous research has found that educators must be highly trained in theoretical knowledge as well as pedagogical strategies essential to teaching and implementing SEL programs appropriately in the classroom (Bridgeland et al., 2013; Greenberg et al., 2017). In line with a report published by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, Schonert-Reichl (2017) suggested that “pre-service teachers should learn about many issues related to SEL, including children’s social and emotional development, teacher–student relationships, and the learning environment” (p. 146). Zins, Bloodworth et al. (2004) highlighted that new professionals entering the field of teaching need to be trained in how to appropriately address social and emotional learning within the classroom to ensure effective classroom management and higher levels of teaching and learning for all students, including those with challenging behavior. Finally, Greenberg et al. (2017) emphasized the important role school administrators and policymakers play in supporting teachers in offering high-quality SEL programming to their students. Teachers need adequate time in their daily schedule to step aside from test preparation and focus on

SEL, as well as a shared school/district vision that will emphasize SEL, policies to support programming, and opportunities to engage in professional learning communities.

### ***Compassion Fatigue and Vicarious Trauma***

Children are not the only ones affected by secondary traumatic stress. A sample of terms often used interchangeably with secondary traumatic stress include "compassion fatigue" and "vicarious trauma." Both are typically used in reference to adults working in the helping field. According to the American Counseling Association (n.d.), "Vicarious trauma is the emotional residue of exposure from working with people as they are hearing their trauma stories and become witnesses to the pain, fear, and terror that trauma survivors have endured." (n.d). Wolpow et al. (2009) added the following definition of vicarious trauma: "PTSD behaviors and emotions resulting from internalizing the traumatizing event experienced by another" (p. 2). There are many signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma, and the impact on the physical, mental, emotional, behavioral, and spiritual domains can be great. Tiredness, changes in sleep patterns, anxiety, lack of concentration, procrastination, mood swings, irresponsible behaviors, nervousness, depression, irritability, and a decreased sense of self love are all symptoms (Nieves, 2018).

Compassion fatigue, though similar to vicarious trauma, can be defined separately. Wolpow et al. (2009) defined this term as "fatigue, emotional distress, or apathy resulting from the constant demands of caring for others. The weariness that can come from caring" (p. 38). Additionally, Wolpow et al. (2009) cautioned that "high levels of compassion fatigue can, over time, lead to burnout" (p. 40). To combat compassion fatigue and burnout, Terrasi and de Galarce (2017) suggested that "it is critical for teachers to monitor their own emotions, practice mindfulness and other self-care strategies, and seek support when

necessary" (p. 37) since compassion fatigue often results when caregivers, such as urban school teachers, do not practice appropriate self-care (Figley, 2002). Figley (2002) offered a second definition for compassion fatigue: "a state experienced by those helping people or animals in distress; it is an extreme state of tension and preoccupation with the suffering of those being helped to the degree that it can create a secondary traumatic stress for the helper" (p. 1). School leaders and teachers must be properly informed about these terms so that they are better able to tend to their own mental health and therefore better equipped to model and teach students to do the same through strong SEL practices.

### Domain 4: SEL Through an Equity Lens

A common critique of SEL programs is that they do not address political and cultural assumptions and that curricula promote a very western perspective (Hoffman, 2009). Critics have warned that teaching emotional skills may presume a single model of emotional competency and neglect to consider how a given curriculum engages with and reflects cultural diversity. Most SEL programs and curricula have been developed through a Eurocentric lens, which is extremely problematic since the five SEL competencies highlighted by CASEL may be expressed differently in different cultural contexts (Lantieri, as cited in Hoffman, 2009). Fortunately, CASEL has responded to these concerns and has recently published reports and made resources available that highlight how SEL can be used as a lever for advancing educational equity and that add equity elaborations for each of the five competencies (outlined later).

CASEL is dedicated to moving ideas, practices, and beliefs from traditional SEL toward the more recent theory of transformative SEL. "Transformative SEL connotes a process whereby students and teachers build strong, respectful relationships founded on an

appreciation of similarities and differences, learn to critically examine root causes of inequity, and develop collaborative solutions to community and societal problems" (Jagers et al., 2018, p. 3).

Self-awareness is the first of the five CASEL SEL competencies. When considered as part of transformative SEL through an equity lens, self-awareness is clearly foundational for equity. Since sense of self includes cultural values and collective identities, self-awareness encompasses ethnic/racial groups, socioeconomic status, and gender. Though recognizing individual ethnic/racial identity is a step toward equity, it is simply not enough. CASEL cautioned that dominant U.S. cultural norms still promote White racial entitlement and negative biases and stereotypes about people of color and those from low-income backgrounds. Schools and districts must take this into consideration when addressing this first SEL competency.

Self-management follows self-awareness as the second SEL competency reviewed through an equity lens. CASEL shared a common concern regarding self-management. As social institutions, such as schools, prioritize middle-class, American culture, student success often requires acculturation. This acculturation and mismatch between a student's host country and their home country can itself cause mental health problems (Jagers et al., 2018). Students may become very conflicted about self-management due to wanting to adhere to the norms of the dominant culture while also wanting to respond out loud to their frustrations in a way that does not follow the definition of regulating one's emotions, for example. Fortunately, CASEL has offered a potential opportunity for this competency: "Instead of becoming emotion-focused and disengaged, students could become more focused on

identifying situational or societal challenges and pursuing individual and collective solutions” (Jagers et al., 2018, p. 6).

Social awareness through an equity lens goes beyond just recognizing differences. This competency pushes individuals to take the perspective of those with the same and different cultures and backgrounds. Additionally, it involves the ability to empathize with others and feel compassion for individuals who may experience trauma related to their ethnic/racial identity. The next competency, relationship skills, builds off social awareness in many ways. According to CASEL, the equity elaboration for this competency

> includes the tools needed to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships, and to effectively navigate settings with differing social norms and demands. It involves communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking help when it is needed. (Jagers et al., 2018, p. 8)

Responsible decision making through an equity lens also calls on schools and districts to actively engage students in the decision-making process. In doing so, adults and students must first recognize the harmful systems, structures, and policies that further marginalize certain racial groups as well as those individuals of low socioeconomic status. Next, adults and students must partner to co-create structures and initiatives that are inclusive, equitable, and mutually supportive.

Adding the equity elaboration to each of the five CASEL SEL competencies is a step in the right direction, yet it is just the beginning. Nancy Duchesneau (2020) from The Education Trust, a national nonprofit that works to close opportunity gaps that disproportionately affect students of color and students from low-income families, warned

educators about the dangers of implementing SEL programs without taking into account important considerations such as learning environment and race:

> Approaches that fail to acknowledge the influence of the learning environment, or fail to address the processes and structures in schools that disadvantage some students, may do more harm than good. For instance, telling students of color to believe in their ability to achieve goals will not be effective if the adults with whom they interact harbor deficit thinking and haven't addressed their own negative biases and beliefs about the abilities of students of color. Even worse, telling students of color they must learn to regulate their emotions when they are experiencing systemic racism and discrimination is just another form of placing the burden on those who are experiencing harm, and further prevents adults from recognizing when students are already displaying social and emotional competence. On the other hand, when educators have asset-based mindsets and use culturally sustaining practices to truly challenge students and connect them to content, students are more likely to believe in their own abilities. (Duchesneau, 2020, p. 6)

One of the most meaningful suggestions Duchesneau offered to educators was to focus on adult beliefs and mindsets to create equitable classrooms. Adult beliefs, expectations, and actions have a direct impact on students' social and emotional development. For example, an educator's implicit or explicit bias will play a role in whether a student's behavior is seen as punishable, threatening, acceptable, or harmless. Schools and districts must work with teachers to first recognize their own bias and then begin addressing these inequities. Addressing adult/teacher mindset and biases is an integral piece in moving SEL to truly become a lever for advancing educational equity.

## Critique of SEL

The literature reviewed in the preceding sections has supported traditional SEL practices and curriculum and has highlighted the many benefits for students, including improved academic performance and positive behavior outcomes. This section presents a critique of SEL focused on how current mainstream SEL literature does not reckon with social identities and racism.

### SEL and Social Identities

SEL advocates have stressed that all students can benefit from opportunities for SEL development, yet they often do not take into consideration social identities such as race and gender. For example, an SEL program that intends to offer strategies to a group of students on how to manage emotions neglects to recognize that students have already been socialized to believe that girls can cry but boys should not. Other examples of how socialization impacts emotional management and regulation relate to race. An angry white person may be spoken to or asked to calm down, while an angry Black person may end up in jail. In education settings, we see this play out through the disproportionate representation of Black and Latino males in special education, often receiving the most restrictive education placements (Cartledge & Dukes, 2009). It is evident that a response to human behavior varies greatly according to gender, race, and class. Smith (2002) supported these examples of socialization, stating, “The dynamics of the socialization process with regard to emotion and their expression are different for men and women and for people of different races" (p. 95). SEL programs claiming to benefit all students regardless of gender, race, and class fail to recognize the influence of these social identities.

## SEL and Racism

There is a disconnect between who contributes to the SEL narrative and where SEL programs and funding are directed. Starr (2019) eloquently highlighted this disconnect:

> I worry that the SEL movement hasn't been careful enough to address the racial divisions that permeate American public education. To date, the discourse around SEL has been dominated by White researchers and reformers, though much of the programming has been directed at Black and Brown students in urban districts. (p. 71)

This same concern has been shared by other scholars critical of SEL, including Dena Simmons of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, who described SEL without context as "white supremacy with a hug" (Madda, 2019, as cited in Drake & Oglesby, 2020). Simmons cautioned that when SEL is taught to students of color without any context, it becomes problematic. Simmons asked, "What's the point of teaching children about conflict resolution skills if we're not talking about the conflicts that exist because of racism or white supremacy?" (Madda, 2019, as cited in Drake & Oglesby, 2020). Teaching SEL competencies without addressing systems of oppression will only further contribute to systemic trauma of marginalized communities. This same concern is present when reviewing SEL work with Indigenous populations. Mahfouz and Anthony-Stevens (2020) stated,

> SEL programs are growing in schools with high Indigenous populations and are intended to address critical social-emotional needs and the impacts of intergenerational trauma. However, these programs struggle to address the complexity of historical-political processes that contribute to contemporary struggles. (p. 63)

Although it may be a challenging reality to accept, the concerns of these scholars are legitimate and comprise a call to immediate action.

### SEL Curriculum

CASEL has a list of 85 high-quality SEL programs. Of these programs, 69 offer free-standing lessons, while only nine offer an integration of SEL into core academic instruction (CASEL, 2023). This means that the majority of the SEL programs are designed to take time away from core academic instruction. As discussed previously, there is a huge push for the implementation of SEL programs in schools with the highest needs. High-needs schools serve larger percentages of students with disabilities, English language learners, and low-income families. Additionally, high-needs schools are those performing far below expectations and not meeting performance targets set by the state. SEL programs that require lessons in addition to the core academic content take precious teaching and learning time away from the most vulnerable populations and further contribute to the ever-widening achievement and opportunity gap in the United States. Once again, this is a racist practice.

The purpose of this critique is not to negate the SEL literature previously reviewed or the work of SEL scholars; rather, it is to ensure that this study does not contribute to another whitewashed narrative of SEL. This critique suggests improvements, which, if turned into actions, would enhance the quality of SEL implementation for all.

## Theoretical Framework

In this study, Senge's (2006) theory of the "learning organization" assisted in analyzing the structures and systems in place at urban elementary schools in Massachusetts. In addition, the CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL framework was used as a tool for

identifying where the Rockwell Elementary School in the Phillips School District,[3] an urban district in the state, may have been lacking in the implementation of schoolwide SEL.

**Learning Organization**

In his book *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, Peter Senge (2006) defined a learning organization as one "where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together" (p. 3). He suggested that learning organizations are possible because, deep down, all people are truly learners, adding, "not only is it our nature to learn but we love to learn" (p. 4). I chose to use Senge's theory to better conceptualize my research on how teachers at Rockwell Elementary School, an urban school categorized as requiring assistance or intervention by the state of Massachusetts, make meaning of SEL.

Applying this lens, I approached my research by using Senge's (2006) five components, or disciplines, of learning organizations: systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, building a shared vision, and team learning. Though I looked thoughtfully at each of these components, building a shared vision and team learning were the two disciplines from which I anticipated gaining the greatest insight. By focusing on these components, I was better able to conceptualize the problems surrounding teachers' implementation of SEL. Since all public schools in Massachusetts require professional development hours to be completed (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and

[3] All references to people, places, and curriculum are pseudonymous to protect the study participants' identities.

Secondary Education [DESE], 2021) on- and offsite, with certain schools, such as Rockwell, requiring teachers to attend to an additional 100 hours of professional development, I believed that many of the educators working at these schools already have a desire to learn together with their colleagues, and thus a learning organization is possible. However, as Senge (2006) suggested, issues arise when there is not a genuine shared vision among the staff.

Through my research, I intended to uncover a wide range of visions among the educators working at Rockwell Elementary School. Senge (2006) maintained that a genuine vision is one that goes beyond just a vision statement and that cultivates an environment where people are driven to learn and achieve together because they want to, not because they are told to. If Rockwell Elementary School were truly operating as a learning organization, I believe that the implementation of SEL would look much different.

This was not the first study to conceptualize schools as learning organizations. Coppieters (2005), Hargreaves (1995), Honig (2008), and Scanlan (2011) all made compelling arguments for why schools and/or school districts should begin shifting toward becoming learning organizations. The gap in the literature this study intended to fill centers on considering how organizational learning in schools can aid in the successful implementation of schoolwide SEL initiatives. Since the terms "learning organization" and "organizational learning" were both used for this study, it is important to clarify that "the most often encountered distinction refers to the learning organization as a form or a type of organization, whereas organizational learning is the activity or the learning process within organizations" (Ortenblad, 2001, as cited in Palos & Stancovici, 2016, sp. 3).

Scanlan (2011) stated, “Organizational learning provides a lens for socially just educational leaders to link theory with practice and to shift their focus from the knowledge, skills and dispositions of individuals to the communities of practice within schools" (p. 329). The concept of organizational learning focuses on the group rather than the individual and therefore aims to make changes in the system not in the individual(s) (Cook & Yanow, 1993, as cited in Scanlan, 2011). Coppieters (2005) added, “Organizational learning depends on the motivation of the agents (individuals, teams, departments) of the system” (p. 134); this is the very reason why Senge’s (2006) shared vision and team learning disciplines are so important to this work. In line with this same thought, Hargreaves (1995) found that organizations that can truly change are categorized by flexibility, adaptability, collaboration, creativity, and the ability to continuously learn. If urban elementary schools in Massachusetts, such as Rockwell Elementary, are ready to change and commit to the important work of SEL, great improvements may follow.

**CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL**

According to CASEL, schools where “leaders consistently model good practices, proactively train staff, welcome parents as partners, focus on relationships (student–student, adult–student, adult–adult), use positive discipline policies, and invest time and resources in and out of the classroom” (CASEL, 2018b) succeed in implementing SEL. Luckily, for school districts that desire the proper implementation of SEL, CASEL provides a detailed CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL, complete with a district SEL planning and implementation rubric, which includes specific activities and benchmarks for success.

The CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL consists of six parts and overlaps at times with components of Senge’s (2006) learning organization, making it an ideal tool for this

study. Districts and schools that choose to use this framework are encouraged to complete a six-step process: (1) develop a shared vision; (2) conduct an SEL-related resources and needs assessment; (3) design and implement effective professional learning programs; (4) adopt and implement evidence-based curriculum; (5) integrate SEL at all levels of school functioning, including curriculum and instruction, schoolwide practices and policies, and family and community partnerships; and (6) establish processes to continuously improve academic, social, and emotional learning through inquiry and data collection (CASEL, 2018b).

After a thoughtful review of this guide as a framework, it is evident that urban school districts in Massachusetts could benefit from the structure and support offered by CASEL. It is also clear that schools in the state are headed in the right direction, as there are elementary schools within Massachusetts that do use evidence-based curricula (Boston Public Schools, 2021), meaning that this piece of the puzzle is already in place. The district SEL planning and implementation rubric allowed me to ground my study using a research-based tool. I intended to draw questions from the activity and benchmark columns of the rubric to gauge how SEL had been implemented at a schoolwide level and determine where there may be room for improvement at Rockwell Elementary and other, similar urban schools.

## Summary

The literature reviewed in this chapter clearly identifies the importance of including SEL supports in urban elementary classrooms while highlighting that SEL initiatives are most successful when implemented at a schoolwide level. Taken together, previous research on SEL and schools, trauma and learning, and teachers and SEL depicts a complex implementation process. Placing an equity lens over SEL is a step forward, yet more work is

needed before SEL can truly become a lever for education equity, as evidenced by the critiques of SEL presented in this chapter.

The first key activity identified in the CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL framework can be used to streamline the information presented in this review. Key Activity 1 recommends conducting an SEL-related resource and needs assessment, also known as the District Strength Inventory, across the district and schools. This needs assessment allows individual schools to determine if/how SEL is already being implemented, what type of professional development may be needed for school-based staff, what type of evidence-based SEL intervention program may be best at the schoolwide level, what challenges (e.g., trauma, etc.) students are facing, and how they might be best supported, and to determine a schoolwide vision statement that prioritizes social, emotional, and academic learning for all students. To do this work, there is a great need for urban elementary schools in Massachusetts to become learning organizations, that is, “organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to learn together” (Senge, 1990, as cited in Coppieters, 2005, p. 134). If willing to transform, develop a shared vision, and devote sacred time to team learning, schools will be better able to do this SEL work schoolwide. Chapter 3 outlines how I conducted my study on this important topic.

# CHAPTER 3

# RESEARCH METHODS

Social and emotional learning has grown in recognition in recent years. In October 2019, the Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) held its inaugural SEL Exchange, the largest national SEL-focused conference to date. This conference brought together over 1,500 attendees from 48 states and 30 countries; future planning will allow even more participants to join in this incredible learning experience. Although SEL initiatives have recently become more prevalent across the United States, there is wide variation in how SEL programs are implemented state to state, district to district, and even school to school. Empirical evidence suggests that when districts make SEL a priority, there is often more consistency from school to school. In a study conducted over 4 years that examined the collaboration between the social and emotional learning Lab and the Plainfield, New Jersey, schools, a large portion of the success attained was attributed to the district's clear vision and goal for SEL (Romasz et al., 2004, pp. 101–102). A clear vision and goal for SEL that unifies educational leaders, teachers, and staff makes the implementation of SEL programs and other initiatives an easier task for schools.

It should be noted that even when districts or schools do adopt an explicit SEL curriculum and/or begin to incorporate SEL skills and competencies into classroom learning, the effectiveness of SEL often remains inconsistent on a schoolwide level (Oberle et al.,

2016). Romasz et al. (2004) stated, “Within schools, programs to address the social and emotional learning needs of students must be systematic and well integrated into the existing culture of the school” (p. 92). If programs are simply implemented inside individual classrooms but not connected to the greater culture and inner workings of the school, educators and school leaders run the risk of students getting very little out of the SEL work being done. It is not enough to provide educators with a beautifully packaged curriculum and a quick training session, and then expect that SEL will work wonders for students. Instead, explicit SEL curricula must be carefully selected to best meet the unique needs of the students at the school while taking into consideration that even the “best fit” curriculum will need to be modified and adjusted.

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, there has been a great deal of research conducted on the benefits of SEL. From boosting academic performance to limiting the number of behavior referrals and concerns (Bridgeland et al., 2013; Dusenbury & Weissberg, 2017; Payton at al., 2008; Sklad et al., 2012), there is no question that the SEL work being done in schools across the United States is powerful. When speaking about schools, however, it is important that one refrain from generalizations. The implementation of SEL should look different in a high school than an elementary school, the same way that the implementation of SEL should look different in urban schools than suburban schools. The reason for this is due to the intersectionality in urban schools, which includes students bringing their multiple identities into the school setting along with the conditions imposed on urban schools, and the fact that the focus of SEL is preparing students to be able to interact with, and participate in, the world around them. The five CASEL SEL competencies—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making—must

be taught in a way that is most relevant to students while also being culturally responsive. The decisions high school students will encounter are different from those of elementary or middle school students. In the same way, the decisions suburban youth will encounter, at times, will differ from the decisions urban youth will have to make for themselves. As Romasz et al. (2004) skillfully summarized,

> Although all children must develop SEL skills, it is true that certain groups of students are at risk for significant difficulties in these areas and consequently are limited in their long-term academic, professional, intrapersonal, and interpersonal capabilities. In particular, students attending school in disadvantaged urban areas are faced with a number of significant stressors such as violence and drugs in the community, economic hardships, domestic conflicts, a high incidence of child abuse, threats to physical health, a high prevalence of mental health conditions within the community, an overwhelming number of teenage pregnancies, and a high prevalence of illiteracy within the community. Social and emotional skills are particularly essential for these urban youth in that they serve as the necessary tools for negotiating these stressors on a daily and ongoing basis. (p. 92)

Taking these words into consideration, for the purpose of this study, I chose to illuminate the unique challenges facing one public urban elementary school. By narrowing the scope of my research, I sought to provide a rich account of what the implementation of SEL looks like in settings such as this. Although this study represents a solid foundation, there is more work to be done before I can say this was accomplished.

My study intended to uncover gaps in schoolwide SEL implementation in a public urban elementary school. Using a case study research design, I interviewed school-based

staff serving in a variety of roles to determine the degree to which their knowledge of SEL (or lack thereof) affected the implementation of successful schoolwide SEL. The research site for this study was Rockwell Elementary School, an urban public elementary school in Massachusetts categorized as needing targeted interventions and support. The following research questions guided the study:

- Research Question 1: How has SEL been integrated into school structures, curriculum, and daily interactions at Rockwell Elementary School?
- Research Question 2: How has Rockwell Elementary School followed the CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL, particularly focus areas 1A and 1B, “Build Foundational Support” and “Create a Plan”?

This study looked beyond the benefits of SEL and its positive impacts on the overall climate, culture, and academic success of the school, as that research has already been done. Instead, the study focused solely on the schoolwide implementation of SEL, including school structures, curriculum, and daily interactions between school staff during school meetings and informally in common spaces within the school building.

## Researcher Positionality

Before presenting my research methods and design, it is important that I acknowledge my standpoint as a white, English-speaking, middle-class, cisgendered, heterosexual woman and the biases that come with these multiple identities. I attended my K–12 public schooling in a majority white, suburban area where I lived within walking distance of my elementary, middle, and high schools. I was raised in an Irish Catholic family and shared this cultural background with many of my peers. Growing up with two parents and three siblings in a house my parents owned, with a father who worked full-time in a family business and a

mother who stayed at home with us, I was provided with a comfortable childhood. My background is very different from the backgrounds of the students and many of the staff at my research site, including the participants of this study. Although I cannot change this fact, I acknowledge that my multiple identities influence my perspective and that this impacts my position as a researcher. I have engaged in ongoing self-reflection, learning, and unlearning and continue to do so, yet I still come to this work with unintentional biases.

My role as a school-based instructional coach who sits in the same office as the school principal provides me with power not afforded to all members of the school community. I chose to conduct this study at the same school for which I work, and that decision complicated the research process at times. It was helpful to have a level of background and understanding of the school that an outside researcher would not have; however, my role and relationships with both teachers and the school principal could have impacted my data collection, including who chose to participate in the study and how much was shared by those participants.

I have worked in urban education for nearly 15 years, serving in a variety of roles in elementary schools. I feel that I have gained a great deal of knowledge about urban education through my work and my research, yet I do not have personal experience attending and navigating urban public schools the way some of my participants do. I chose to conduct this study because I care deeply about my students, those I have taught in the past, those I interact with on a daily basis, and those I will meet in the future. When I started my work as a classroom teacher in an urban school, I was determined to form strong relationships with my students so that they would view me and their classroom as a safe space. In those early days, I turned to SEL practices to create the warm and welcoming classroom environment I sought,

and from my perspective at the time, those practices were successful. Now, however, I ask myself questions such as, were these practices successful for my students? Or did these practices serve my needs as a young white teacher in a classroom with majority Black and Hispanic children? I approach this work acknowledging that SEL practices are imperfect in the ways they are implemented, where they are directed, and whom they currently serve. I also approach this work with a deep belief that all learning is both social and emotional and must be treated as such.

I believe there are many misconceptions about SEL among Massachusetts educators that are in line with Bridgeland et al.'s (2013) statement that although teachers identify SEL as important, "it is often described in varied terms" (p. 13); therefore, SEL practices are not being utilized as they should be.

There are inconsistencies around the implementation of SEL in urban elementary schools in Massachusetts. This study intended to explore the ways school leaders and teachers in one urban public elementary school viewed SEL and worked to integrate SEL into school structures, curriculum, and daily interactions schoolwide. More specifically, using organizational learning theory and the CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL, this study sought an in-depth understanding of the ways school leaders, teachers, and school support staff could unite to do the important work of SEL on a schoolwide level.

In a national survey on how SEL can empower children and transform schools, district leaders identified SEL as "the foundation for academic success" (Bridgeland et al., 2013, p. 23). Although Massachusetts has begun identifying SEL as an integral part of education across the elementary, middle, and high school grades, more structures and supports could be put in place to see a more successful implementation of SEL.

According to Dasho et al. (2001), SEL encompasses three domains: development of cognitive understanding, development of skills, and development of will. These domains can also be labeled thinking, action, and motivation. SEL is then further broken down into five core competencies, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. Research has found that when these competencies are not taught appropriately in schools, students are at a greater risk of dropping out, achieving less academically, and dramatic decline of overall mental health and well-being (Bridgeland et al., 2013). I conclude that urban public elementary schools must be provided with the proper support necessary to transform into learning organizations to implement SEL at a schoolwide level.

## Methodological Paradigm

Creswell (2014) stated, "Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 4). My research was situated in the social constructivist paradigm, as social and emotional learning centers on human interactions with self, others, and the world. According to Creswell (2014), research within this paradigm includes questions that are

> broad and general so that the participants can construct the meaning of a situation, typically forged in discussions or interactions with other persons. The more open-ended the questioning, the better, as the researcher listens carefully to what people say or do in their life settings. (p. 8)

My study best matched a qualitative research approach; for this reason, I conducted a case study.

## Research Design

Zainal (2007) stated, "Case study method enables a researcher to closely examine the data within a specific context. In most cases, a case study method selects a small geographical area or a very limited number of individuals as the subjects to study" (p. 1). My study focused on the Rockwell Elementary School, in the Phillips Public School (PPS) district,[4] an urban district in Massachusetts. A case study "enables the researcher to gain a holistic view of a certain phenomenon or series of events" (Noor, 2008, p. 1603). As mentioned previously, I investigated how SEL had been integrated into school structures, curriculum, and daily interactions at Rockwell Elementary School. Robert Yin (2014) stated that "the case study's unique strength is its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence—documents, artifacts, interviews, and direct observations, as well as participant-observations" (p. 12). Utilizing a case study allowed me to conduct interviews and focus groups and analyze documents applicable to schoolwide SEL implementation.

It is important to note that the sources of evidence I used each had strengths and limitations. According to Yin (2014), though interviews are targeted and insightful, there can be response bias and inaccuracies due to poor recall. Physical artifacts included in a document review can offer insights into cultural features and technical operations, but availability can be challenging (Yin, 2014, p. 114).

For my case study, I utilized a linear-analytic structure, which, according to Yin (2014), is "a standard approach for composing research reports" (p. 229). A linear-analytic structure can be used for exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory case studies. The study I

[4] All references to people, places, and curriculum are pseudonymous to protect the study participants' identities.

conducted was a descriptive case study, “whose purpose is to describe a phenomenon (the ‘case’) in its real-world context” (Yin, 2014, p. 287).

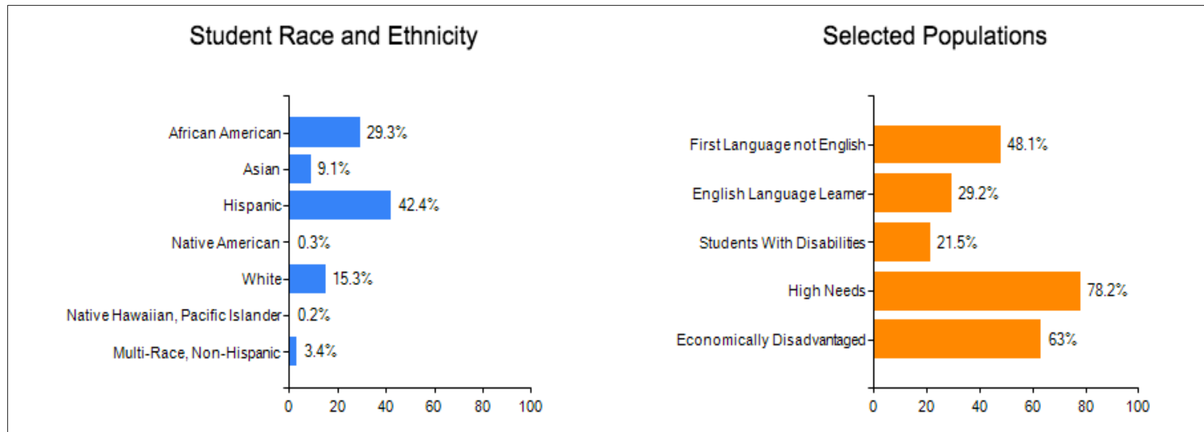
**Research Setting**

As noted, this study was conducted at the Rockwell Elementary School, part of the Phillips Public Schools district. During the 2016–2017 school year, 6 years before conducting my study, the Wallace Foundation informed the PPS district that the district had been selected to participate in the Partnership for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative (PSELI), a 4-year grant providing seven PPS schools with support in implementing schoolwide SEL. The 2017–2018 school year was the first year of this grant, and the greatest focus during that year was placed on setting up a high-functioning SEL leadership team and identifying the SEL needs of the school. Through this initiative, PPS expanded their Office of Social and Emotional Learning and Wellness to include new positions such as SEL coaches for the schools involved in the partnership. It is important to note that my research study was independent of the Wallace Foundation’s. I provide information about their initiative here simply to share background information about the SEL work being done in the PPS district.

The PPS district encompasses 115 schools with an enrollment of 48,112 students Grades pre-kindergarten through 12. The district is home to students with varying needs, including 63% of students who are economically disadvantaged, 29.2% of students who are English language learners, and 48.1% who report that English is not their first language. In addition, 42.4% of students identify as Hispanic and 29.3% as African American (Figure 2 depicts student demographics). PPS is a model district for considering intersectionality in urban schools.

**Figure 2**

*2021–2022 Enrollment Overview*

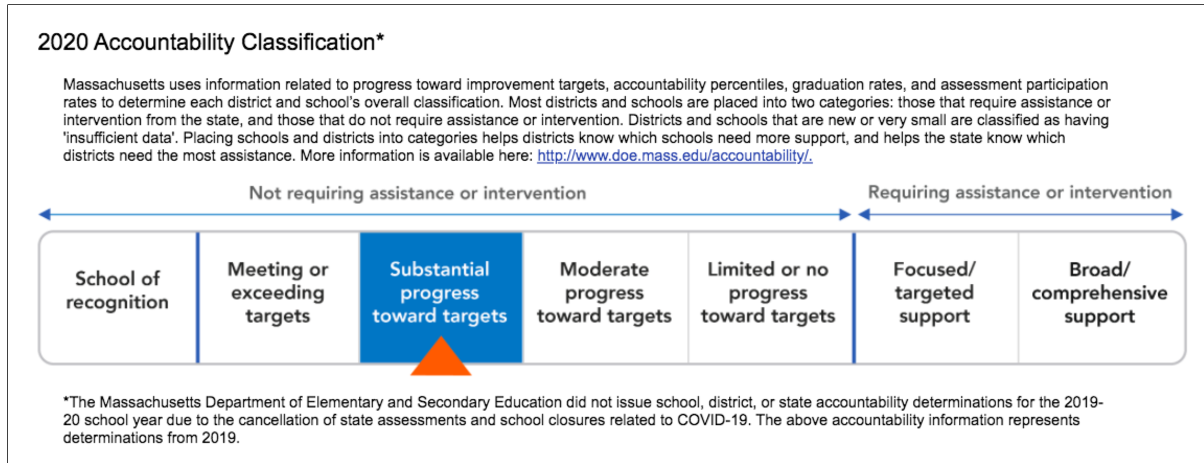



*Note*. Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, School and District Profiles, 2021.

In 2020, the PPS district received an accountability classification of "not requiring assistance or intervention," specifically as a district "making substantial progress towards targets." Figure 3 shows where the PPS district fell on the accountability classification spectrum at the time of the study.

**Figure 3**

*2020 Accountability Classification—District Level*




*Note.* Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

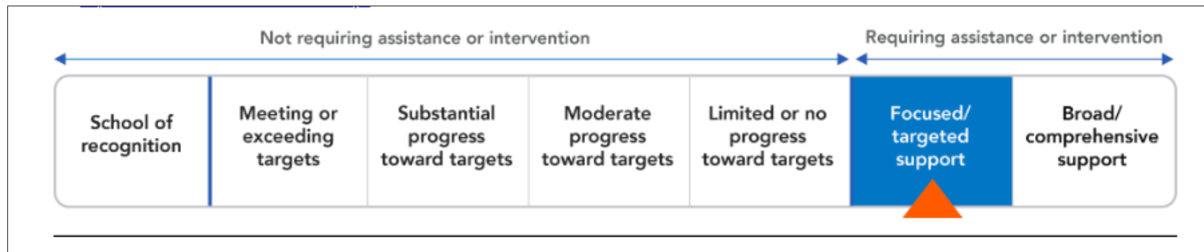
Rockwell Elementary School, serving 372 students in Grades pre-kindergarten through 6, is the setting where this research was conducted. According to the 2020 School Report Card, 87.8% of students were categorized as economically disadvantaged, 93.4% as high needs, 46.4% as ELLs, and 10.8% as students with disabilities (SWDs). Rockwell Elementary is situated in a residential community surrounded by houses, trees, and parks. It is one of four PPS elementary schools within a half mile radius and serves both students living in the immediate community as well as students in different parts of the city. Although some of the teachers and staff reside in the immediate area, the majority of staff commute to the school from other communities each day.

Figure 4 appeared in the 2020 Accountability Classification Report. Rockwell Elementary School had been classified as "requiring assistance or intervention" and was to receive focused and targeted support from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and

Secondary Education (DESE). Only 15% of Massachusetts schools receive this classification, while 85% fall into the “not requiring assistance or intervention” category.

**Figure 4**

*2020 Accountability Classification Report—School Level*




I first received verbal permission from the Rockwell Elementary School principal to conduct my study in October 2021. I successfully completed my dissertation proposal hearing and then received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval through the University of Massachusetts Boston. After securing IRB approval, I applied to conduct research through the PPS district. I received approval to conduct my study within the PPS district in May 2022 and began collecting data in November 2022.

**Participants**

There were 13 participants in this study, including lower elementary teachers (Grades K–2), upper elementary teachers (Grades 3–6), specialist teachers (physical education, art, music, etc.), school leaders (principal, assistant principal, coaches), student support educators (teachers of English learners [ELs)] and teachers of SWDs), and support staff members (lunch monitors, family liaison, secretary). Since most SEL literature has focused on teachers and school leaders, it was imperative that I include voices of non-teaching staff in this study.

My goal was to keep the group of participants diverse, not only in their role at the school, but also in their number of years of experience, number of years working at the school, number of years working in the district, number of years working in the field of education, level of education, other applicable certifications, race, ethnicity, personal ties to the school, gender and age.

Table 1 presents an overview of the participants in this study, including their role(s), gender, cultural background, and years at the Rockwell School.

**Table 1**

*Study Participants*

| Name (Pseudonym) | Role | Additional Roles/Duties | Gender | Cultural Background | Years at School |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ms. Thomas | Lower Classroom Teacher | Climate & Culture Leadership Team (CCLT) | F | Mixed Race, including Mexican, Irish, German, Native American, Spanish, and Italian | 5 |
| Ms. Williams | Upper Classroom Teacher | Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) & Language Acquisition Teacher Facilitator (LATF) | F | Caucasian—Irish, Scottish, English | 4 |
| Ms. Davis | ESL/Special Education Service Teacher | | F | Black Hispanic | 7 |
| Mr. Smith | Principal/School Leader | | M | African American/Black | 5 |
| Ms. Miller | Specialist Teacher | | F | White Norwegian American | 1 |
| Ms. Johnson | Upper Classroom Teacher | ILT | F | Jewish, Irish Catholic | 5 |
| Ms. White | ESL/Special Education Service Teacher | CCLT | F | White European | 5 |
| Ms. Lewis | Lower Classroom Teacher | CCLT | F | Black American | 3 |
| Ms. Clarke | Instructional Coach/School Leader | ILT/LATF | F | Italian | 4 |
| Ms. Scott | Family Liaison | | F | Hispanic | 4 |
| Ms. King | Lunch Monitor | | F | Hispanic | 6 months |
| Ms. Hill | Lunch Monitor | | F | Black | 10 + |
| Ms. Green | Secretary | | F | Italian American | 5 |

### *Participant Profiles*

**Demographic Information.** The 13 participants were recruited in two phases of the data collection process. The first eight participants responded immediately to the initial email I sent and were eager to share their voices as part of this research study. This initial email was sent to the entire Rockwell Elementary staff. As I reviewed the staff directory and the listserv to which I distributed the invitation, I came across some discrepancies that I corrected by forwarding the email to the appropriate members of the staff. Two participants indicated that they would participate if needed; however, they had some questions about the process. The remaining three participants were recruited during face-to-face conversations with me when I was able to share information and they were able to ask questions before agreeing to be part of the study. Of the 13 participants, 12 identified as female and one identified as male. The participants' years of experience ranged from less than one full year to more than 10 years at Rockwell Elementary. The following profiles provide more specific background on each participant.

**Ms. Thomas.** Ms. Thomas was the first teacher to sign up for an interview. Ms. Thomas grew up in a suburb in the Greater Boston area but moved away to attend college and begin her teaching career in a charter school. Ms. Thomas returned to Massachusetts and began working for the Phillips Public School District as part of a service-year program, which landed her at Rockwell Elementary School 5 years previous. Ms. Thomas had worked at Rockwell for 4 years, spending 1 year at a different elementary school within the district. Ms. Thomas held a master’s degree and, at the time of the study, was working toward her reading specialist degree as well. Aside from her role as an early childhood classroom teacher, Ms. Thomas was also a member of the school CCLT, playing a large role in

schoolwide climate and culture initiatives. When asked what made up her cultural background, Ms. Thomas responded, “A lot. My mom is Irish and German and Native American. And my dad is Mexican and Spanish and Italian.” Ms. Thomas shared that she understood Spanish and would speak it with her students and families with whom she was comfortable, but she did not identify as a Spanish speaker.

**Ms. Williams.** Ms. Williams was an upper elementary classroom teacher who had been working at Rockwell for 4 years. Prior to serving in her current role, she taught for 1 year at another PPS school and 5 years at a private school. Ms. Williams held two master’s degrees, one in public administration and one in elementary education. Ms. Williams shared that she identified as Caucasian and explained that her cultural makeup was a mix of Scottish, Irish, and English. Aside from her teaching role, Ms. Williams also served as one of the school language acquisition facilitators and as a member of the school ILT. Although she did not speak Spanish, Ms. Williams worked closely with native Spanish-speaking students.

**Ms. Davis.** Ms. Davis was a teacher servicing students with English language development (ELD) levels. She identified as Black Hispanic and was a Spanish speaker. Ms. Davis began her career teaching at a parochial school in an urban area in Massachusetts for 7 years. She found her home in PPS about 15 years earlier, starting first as a substitute teacher, then as a paraprofessional before moving into a classroom teaching position where she taught kindergarten. Ms. Davis had been in her current role at the Rockwell school for 7 years. Aside from her role as an ESL teacher, Ms. Davis supported family outreach and events at Rockwell. Ms. Davis held a master’s degree.

**Mr. Smith.** Mr. Smith was a school leader at Rockwell Elementary. Mr. Smith was not originally from Massachusetts but moved here in 2010 and had been here, working and

studying in the field of education, ever since. Mr. Smith's teaching experience was primarily at the upper elementary/middle school level where he had taught both ELA and fifth-grade general education. Mr. Smith completed a leadership program in Massachusetts from which he obtained a master's degree and school leader licensure, which he then used as an assistant principal in a district neighboring PPS. He spent 1 year working as the director of instruction at another PPS elementary school before moving into his current role, in which he had served for the previous 5 years. Mr. Smith identified as a Black African American man who explained that he was raised in a conservative family.

**Ms. Miller**. Ms. Miller had just joined the Rockwell community at the beginning of the 2022–2023 school year as a specialist teacher. In this role, she saw homeroom classes of students once or twice a week for a 50-minute block outside their classroom and without their homeroom teacher present. Ms. Miller identified as White Norwegian American. Before coming to PPS, Ms. Miller had taught ELA and writing at the middle school level for 7 years at charter schools close by. Ms. Miller held one master's degree and was about to begin a program to obtain a second master's degree that spring.

**Ms. Johnson.** Ms. Johnson had been working within the PPS school district since 2009. She had been working in the role of upper elementary classroom teacher at Rockwell for 5 years. Aside from her duties as a classroom teacher, Ms. Johnson was also a member of the ILT and supported the instructional coaches by engaging in coaching cycles with teachers and facilitating common planning time meetings. Ms. Johnson held a master's degree and was working on her doctorate at the time of the study. Her cultural background was Jewish and Irish Catholic, and she shared that she spoke Spanish but did not claim to be fluent; rather, she considered herself conversational.

**Ms. Lewis.** Ms. Lewis was a Black American lower elementary classroom teacher in her third year of teaching at Rockwell. Prior to becoming a classroom teacher, Ms. Lewis worked as a substitute teacher in PPS. Ms. Lewis did not speak any languages other than English, though she worked closely with Spanish-speaking students and considered herself comfortable with the Spanish language. Ms. Lewis held a master’s degree and was also proud to share that she had attended PPS for her K–12 schooling. Ms. Lewis is a member of the Rockwell CCLT and leads the school club program, an SEL initiative to promote school bonding and relationship building among students and adults.

**Ms. White.** Ms. White had also attended PPS for some of her K–12 schooling. Ms. White did not originally go to school for education and shared that she had completed a pathway program to obtain her licensure before going on to earn a master’s degree in reading in May 2022. At the time of the study, Ms. White had been working within the district for 7 years; 5 of which had been at Rockwell. She had held a variety of different roles, including teaching both early elementary and upper elementary as a classroom teacher, before moving into her current role as an ESL/special education service teacher. Ms. White shared that her cultural background was White European but explained that she did not have strong cultural ties.

**Ms. Clarke.** Ms. Clarke was an instructional school leader at Rockwell Elementary School. She had been working in the PPS district for over 12 years but had been at Rockwell in her current role for 4 years. Ms. Clarke shared that she was a career changer and began her career in education as a paraprofessional in a suburban school district in Massachusetts. Ms. Clarke held a master’s degree in education and worked closely with all teachers, focusing primarily on literacy instruction. Ms. Clarke was of Italian heritage and was an Italian

speaker. In addition to her role as an instructional leader, Ms. Clarke was also one of the language acquisition facilitators at Rockwell.

**Ms. Scott.** Ms. Scott served the Rockwell school community by focusing on parents and community outreach and partnerships. Ms. Scott was Hispanic, and she spoke, wrote, and read Spanish. She had been in the PPS district for 12 years, beginning first as a paraprofessional. In her role, she led the Rockwell School Site Council and held equity roundtable meetings for the community several times throughout the school year. Ms. Scott had the important role of supporting the Rockwell Parent Council as well as managing all the school's out-of-school time partners.

**Ms. King.** Ms. King was a lunch monitor at Rockwell. She was new to the PPS district and had only been in her current role for 6 months. Ms. King shared that she was Hispanic and was a speaker of both English and Spanish and that the experience of having her own children had helped prepare her for the role in which she was now serving.

**Ms. Hill.** Ms. Hill identified as a Black woman and had been working at Rockwell for over 10 years as a dedicated lunch monitor. Ms. Hill lived close to the school, in the same neighborhood as many of the students and families that Rockwell serves.

**Ms. Green.** Ms. Green was the Rockwell Elementary School secretary. She was an Italian American woman who had been working for the PPS district for over 23 years. Ms. Green shared that she started her career as a paraprofessional, but when her mother retired from her role as school secretary, she took over and had been proudly serving as a PPS school secretary since as long as she could remember. This was Ms. Green's fifth year at Rockwell. She loved her career, especially the students she served, but did share that she was a mother first.

**Recruitment of Participants**

As part of my recruitment of study participants in October 2022, I explained to them how they held the power to impact change. I wanted my participants to understand how their answers to my questions could influence district and school systems, policies, and protocols in the future. I also wanted them to be aware of their choice to participate and therefore made myself available to answer any questions regarding the study.

I first sent an email explaining my study and including a link to a Zoom session for those interested in learning more and/or asking questions (Appendix A). I then asked school-based staff members to complete a Google form or contact me directly if they were interested in participating in the study. I was initially unable to assemble a diverse cohort of participants through this first recruitment effort. The first participants to sign up were classroom teachers, many of whom also held leadership roles within the building. I collaborated with these initial participants to determine if they had in mind other members of the school community who might be assets to the group. This resulted in the recruitment of two more participants. In my third attempt, I reached out directly to adult members of the school community whose voices I felt would add value to my study; however, none of these individuals responded so I made the difficult decision to move forward with my study with the 10 individuals who had agreed to take part.

Once my data were collected and I began analyzing the interview and focus group transcripts, I knew the dataset was incomplete. I knew there were voices that needed to be part of this study, so, once again, I set out to recruit participants. This time, I took a different approach by engaging in face-to-face conversations with non-teaching staff at Rockwell. I

successfully recruited two lunch monitors and the school secretary during this final recruitment attempt.

To compensate my participants for their time, I provided each participant with a $15 Amazon gift card immediately following their interview or focus group. I also worked to make the process as easy as possible for all participants by accommodating timeframes and schedules that worked best for them and conducting interviews and focus groups either over Zoom or in person, depending on the needs of each individual.

## Data Collection

This study included three forms of data collection: participant interviews and focus groups, a document review, and memoing. Phase 1 of data collection comprised participant interviews, Phase 2 focus groups, and Phase 3 a document review. Memoing happened throughout the data collection process, and a second round of interviews with new participants occurred alongside the document review in Phase 3.

### *Phase 1: Interviews*

I began my data collection by conducting one-on-one interviews (Appendix B). I conducted five of these one-on-one interviews with individuals serving in the following roles: school leader/principal, lower elementary classroom teacher, upper elementary classroom teacher, ESL teacher, and specialist teacher. Each interview lasted roughly 30 minutes and addressed a series of questions related to the implementation of SEL at Rockwell Elementary School (see Appendix B for the interview protocol). Phase 1 interviews took place over Zoom. Questions addressed general SEL knowledge, teacher/staff SEL-related professional development and training, the explicit curriculum being used at the school, expectations for SEL implementation at the school, how SEL success is measured,

the vision for the school, and what type of SEL district support the school receives. Data from these one-on-one interviews guided me in determining what documents I would need to review.

### *Phase 2: Focus Groups*

Once the first five interviews were complete, I moved to the next phase of my data collection: focus groups. I planned to hold four focus groups but ended up only recruiting five participants for two group conversations. I originally had planned to design focus groups to include the following: (1) school leaders, (2) teachers, (3) instructional and student support staff, and (4) operations and building support staff. I wanted to make sure to separate school leaders so that teachers and other staff members could speak openly and freely without hesitation. Due to the limited number of participants, my plan could not be executed as described earlier, and I ended up with the following two focus groups: Focus Group 1 included one upper elementary classroom teacher, one lower elementary classroom teacher, and one teacher of SWDs. Focus Group 2 included an instructional coach and the family liaison. Focus group conversations took place over Zoom and lasted roughly 45 minutes each. The same protocol was used for focus groups as interviews (see Appendix B for interview protocol).

### *Phase 3: Document Review*

The third phase of data collection included a document review along with the one-on-one interviews with the three late additions to the participant group. I reviewed the following meeting agendas: all staff professional development (PD) sessions for school year (SY) 2022–2023 and the Instructional Leadership (ILT) and Climate and Culture Leadership Team (CCLT). I requested the school master schedule and individual classroom/homeroom

schedules as well as the Rockwell School Arc of Adult Learning for SY 2022–2023 and the Quality School Plan (QSP) for SY 2022–2023. Other documents I reviewed that were either linked into the documents already mentioned or open for public access were the Rockwell website, the ELA curriculum for both Grades K–2 and 3–6, the SY 2022–2023 clubs spreadsheet, and a document describing the flow of Rockwell Elementary morning meetings. In reviewing these documents, I gained a better understanding of how frequently topics related to SEL were discussed, in what ways SEL had been integrated into school structures (if at all), and to what degree the school had followed the CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL framework for SEL implementation. The reviewed documents were either open access, such as the curriculum materials and the school website, or shared by participants.

Table 2 presents each document as well as how I gained access to each for review.

**Table 2**

*Documents Reviewed*

| Document | Access |
| --- | --- |
| 1. Professional Development Rolling Agenda | Shared by participant(s) |
| 2. Instructional Leadership Team Rolling Agenda | Shared by participant(s) |
| 3. Climate and Culture Leadership Team Rolling Agenda | Shared by participant(s) |
| 4. Arc of Adult Learning SY 2022–2023 | Shared by participant(s) |
| 5. Quality School Plan SY 2022–2023 | Shared by participant(s) |
| 6. School Website | Open access |
| 7. 3–6 ELA Curriculum | Open access |
| 8. K–2 ELA Curriculum | Open access |
| 9. SY 2022–2023 Clubs Spreadsheet | Linked into shared document, open access |
| 10. Master Schedule SY 2022–2023 | Shared by participant(s) |
| 11. Morning Meeting document | Linked into shared document, open access |

### *Phase 4: Memoing*

As mentioned previously, memoing occurred throughout my data collection. Memoing allowed me to record my thoughts, reflections, questions, and reactions on paper. Using memoing as a data collection method was particularly helpful when listening to the interviews that my research assistant conducted, as I was able to reflect on the tone of a participant's voice, their hesitation or lack thereof when answering certain questions, and the overall "feel" of the conversation. In discussing grounded theory, Charmaz (2017) stated, "Memo-writing provides a space to become actively engaged in your materials, to develop

your ideas, and to fine-tune your subsequent data-gathering” (p. 72). I was better able to connect and develop my ideas by memoing throughout the data collection process. Memos were completed by hand in a notebook and stored in a locked drawer when not on my person.

Table 3 summarizes the types of data collected.

**Table 3**

*Data Types*

| Data Type | Number |
|---|---|
| Individual Interviews | 8 |
| Focus Group Conversations | 2 |
| Document Reviews | 11 |
| Research Memos | 14 |

## Data Analysis

I began data analysis by transcribing all the interviews and focus groups using an online program called Temi. Once the interview and focus group transcriptions were complete, I coded them. According to Miles and Huberman (2018), “Codes are primarily, but not exclusively, used to retrieve and categorize similar data chunks so the researcher can quickly find, pull out, and cluster the segments relating to a particular research question, hypothesis, construct, or theme” (p. 72). After I coded the transcriptions, I moved on to coding documents. Coding was an integral part of my data analysis as I had a number of transcriptions and documents to synthesize and make sense of; as Miles and Huberman explained, coding is a “data condensation task that enables you to retrieve the most

meaningful material, to assemble chunks of data that go together, and to further condense the bulk into readily analyzable units" (p. 73).

I began by using deductive coding. I generated a starting list of codes taken from my theoretical frameworks, research questions, and problem statement. These codes included the following: explicit curriculum, professional development, training, district, school leadership, school vision, common spaces, and daily schedule (see Appendix C for a full list). Though I began my analysis with deductive coding, the majority of my analysis utilized inductive coding, as I wanted the data to speak for themselves. Specifically, for the purpose of this study, once my data had been collected and I began my analysis, I prioritized in vivo coding, which includes using participants' exact words and phrases as codes, since I wanted to honor the voices of my participants in a way other styles of coding cannot.

***Coding Process***

My research assistant conducted five interviews and two focus groups over Zoom. The research assistant voice recorded all interviews on a separate recording device, saved and downloaded each file, and then sent each file to me via email immediately following the interview or focus group. Once I received each file, I completed a first listen so that I could get a general sense of the discussion and make mental notes of salient impressions and then add notes to my memos. I then submitted the audio file to Temi, the online program, for a transcription, which was emailed to me moments after uploading the audio file. Once I received the transcription, within minutes, I saved the file to my OneDrive + encrypted, which is password protected. Next, I listened to the audio recording for a second time while reading through the transcript. During this phase, I edited the transcript, pausing the recording as needed to ensure accuracy, as there were some errors made by the Temi

program. I conducted three interviews later in the data collection process; I voice recorded those interviews and then transcribed them by hand immediately following since I was concerned about background noise. This seemed to be a more efficient option.

Once all transcriptions were completed and edited, I merged them into one large file, which totaled 99 pages. I read through the entire 99-page document and jotted down notes as I reviewed it, and some of these notes inevitably turned into codes. My next readthrough occurred when I began my first true cycle coding. Miles et al. (2018) “divided coding into two major stages: First Cycle and Second Cycle coding. First cycle coding methods are codes initially assigned to the data chunks. Second Cycle coding methods generally work with the resulting First Cycle codes themselves” (p. 73). The 99 pages of interview and focus group transcripts were printed, and I coded the document by using handwritten post-it notes. I ended up with 32 initial codes, which were then analyzed and organized into four themes: Engaging the Whole School Community; Organized SEL: Planned and Intentional; Informal SEL; and Inconsistencies Affecting Implementation

## Ethical Considerations

As requested by the PPS district, I involved a third party to support my data collection to ensure that my relationships with Rockwell Elementary School teachers and staff would not influence their comfort during participation. My research assistant, who interviewed most participants and ran the focus groups, had no affiliation with the Phillips Public Schools. She was a former classmate of mine and was identified to assist due to her deep understanding of urban education, elementary school curricula, and SEL along with her interest and willingness to serve in this role. My research assistant was a white female who worked as a second-grade teacher in a bilingual school in a small urban district.

I ensured data integrity by using triangulation. The data collected from the one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and document review were all analyzed at the same time.

Before beginning my data collection, I shared with participants detailed information about my study and what it meant to participate. I explained that SEL became an area of interest for me when I began teaching in an urban setting and that I view it as a vital part of school improvement initiatives. I shared with participants that my intention was to bring the findings of this study to school and district leadership to continue improving the schooling experience for teachers and students. I made it clear that participation was completely voluntary and that participants could withdraw at any time. I secured consent, through a signed agreement, from each participant.

Once the interview and focus group data were transcribed, I shared the transcriptions with participants either via email or in person to review them. To ensure accuracy, I invited participants to confirm that their words on paper matched the words they used during the interview, make any changes, or add additional comments to better capture what they were trying to convey.

Finally, I used pseudonyms when referring to participants, the district, the school, other community places, and the curricula that were part of this case study to ensure confidentiality.

## Limitations of the Study

It is necessary to recognize the limitations of this study. First, as a qualitative case study, data were only collected at one school. The data collected provided an in-depth look at Rockwell Elementary School, but this narrow focus limits generalizability. This is mainly because, although schools can share similar characteristics, such as student and teacher

demographics, size, location, and curriculum materials being implemented, no two people are the same, and roles vary greatly depending on the person serving in them. Though recommendations based on the study findings can be made for schools like Rockwell, there are many factors at play, and therefore generalizability remains a limitation.

Additionally, I acted as a researcher at a school where I have another role, as an instructional coach (for five years at the time of this study), and this both added value to my study and complicated it. I had the advantage of knowing, first-hand, about the inner workings and operations of the school, yet I worry that some of my participants crafted answers to their interview and focus group questions more carefully and with greater caution, due to the proximity of my role to the principal, than if I were an outside researcher. To account for this limitation, I hired a research assistant who conducted all interviews and focus groups for individuals within the school with whom I worked daily on a professional level. The PPS district would not allow me to interview any participants with whom I worked directly, so my research assistant played a valuable role in this study. Further, having someone else conduct most of the interviews and focus groups eliminated the opportunity for me to ask follow-up questions, rephrase questions, and receive clarification from participants. This would have been helpful to ensure that participants answered the intended questions in their entirety. When I listened to recordings of the interviews and focus groups, there were a handful of times, as I noted in my memos, when participants only answered part of a question or provided an answer that did not match the question intended. My research assistant was not able to make this determination; therefore, there may have been things left unsaid.

I came to this research with my own biases, which represent a limitation that must be considered. Having been a teacher in the Phillips Public School district and other urban

districts, I have my own perspectives on this work and my own personal beliefs. As a researcher, I consistently reflected on my work and made thoughtful decisions to eliminate bias as much as possible, yet bias remains. Potential biases may appear in the design of the study—for example, my decision to conduct interviews, focus groups, and a document review but not observations. Additionally, potential biases may also be present in the questions asked of participants during data collection and the value I put on certain participant responses and documents during data analysis.

Lastly, I found it challenging to recruit participants in non-teaching roles. I engaged in many conversations with individuals who either did not feel confident in their knowledge of SEL or who did not feel they had the time. I tried to answer questions and provide these individuals with reassurance that they had the right to skip questions, ask for clarification, or withdraw from the study at any time; however, I did not want to make anyone uncomfortable, especially given the fact that I also work at the research site. I also respected the time constraints and the fact that not everyone has the privilege of flexible schedules.

## Summary

Using a case study design, this study gathered and analyzed data from focus groups, interviews, and a document review. Researcher memoing was used to assist in analyzing data, from which emerged the fours themes, detailed in the next chapter. There were 12 documents reviewed for this study, including the master schedule, Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) rolling agenda, the Climate and Culture Leadership Team (CCLT) rolling agenda, the Rockwell School Arc of Adult Learning, professional development (PD) rolling agenda, the ELA curriculum for Grades 3–6, the ELA curriculum for Grades pre-K through 2, the Quality School Plan (QSP), the staff website, the school clubs spreadsheet, the school

club information document, and the morning meeting one-page reference guide for staff. All documents reviewed were the most current versions (i.e., SY 2022–2023). The purpose of this study was to gain insight into how Massachusetts educators in one urban public elementary school made meaning of social and emotional learning and saw SEL "alive" throughout their school building. The next chapter presents the study's findings.

# CHAPTER 4

# "IT'S KIND OF, LIKE, MIXED MESSAGES; WHETHER YOU CAN TAKE THE TIME FOR SEL PRACTICES OR NOT": FINDINGS

Bobby,[5] the student introduced in Chapter 1, had the most trouble during unstructured non-instruction times at school. Lunch and recess were particularly challenging for the charismatic yet strong willed 6-year-old. He greeted most everyone with an enormous smile and a great big hug, which made adults feel loved by and connected to him. Although the school lunch staff looked forward to the smiles and the hugs, everyday lunch and recess ended with a new incident being documented. Regardless of the preparation, regardless of the incentives for good behavior, regardless of the multiple supports put in place to help Bobby find success during this 40-minute block, there was always an issue to address, a fight to break up, and relationships to repair.

Bobby had emotional challenges that led to externalizing behaviors within the classroom, but he could use his tools and strategies that he learned from his therapist and counselors to navigate a path to success most days. Success for Bobby included the ability to self-regulate, use his words to express his feelings, work in small groups on academic tasks, and/or play without engaging in verbal or physical altercations with peers, move freely

[5] All references to people, places, and curriculum are pseudonymous to protect the study participants' identities.

around the classroom as needed while respecting himself, the other members of the classroom environment, and the materials. Lunch and recess were overwhelming and scary for Bobby and for the adults assigned to care for him during that time. The large number of students inside the cafeteria, the noise level, and the limited structure were some of the factors contributing to this being such a difficult time during the school day for Bobby.

Bobby's story is not an isolated one. The district where Bobby attended school is the same district where this study was conducted. Social and emotional learning had been a buzzword across the district for many years, and most schools invested in explicit SEL curricula and professional development for teachers. As a teacher within this district, I was extremely proud of my vast knowledge of SEL and the strength of SEL implementation within my classroom year after year. I found myself constantly struggling with lunch and recess and other non-instruction times during the school day, and I was frustrated by the inability of the adults in these spaces to offer the same level of socially and emotionally supportive care to my students. I realize now, thanks to the findings of this study and my recent learning, that I was operating in a deficit-based mindset. All I could focus on at the time was what lunch monitors and other non-teaching building staff could not do or did not know.

One week, I chose to keep Bobby in the classroom with me during lunch and recess because it seemed easier than the alternative. That Friday, one of the lunch monitors approached me and questioned my plan. I will never forget hearing her tell me that keeping him in the classroom was taking away from her opportunity to build a relationship with him. "We've come so far," she said. "If he's not here, we can't continue to strengthen our relationship." In that exact moment, I realized she, and other members of the school

community, knew more and contributed more to the implementation of SEL than I ever gave them credit for. Teachers are essential, but they are not the only members of the school community. For that reason, this study sought to lift up the voices of individuals in the roles of family liaison, school secretary, and lunch monitor in addition to teaching staff and school leadership. The data presented in this chapter support the argument that in one urban public elementary school in Massachusetts, gaps exist in the implementation of schoolwide SEL due to the negligence of not including all members of the school community in SEL work.

## Data Themes

As shown in Table 4, four themes and 14 subthemes emerged from the data. Theme 1 is Engaging the Whole School Community. The data for this theme is organized according to the following four subthemes: (1) who comprises the school community, (2) who participates in Rockwell meetings and professional learning, (3) SEL school communication, and (4) shared vision. This first theme introduces the Rockwell school community so that readers can gain a better sense of the individuals, including the study participants, involved in this work. Theme 2 is Organized SEL: Planned and Intentional, and data are presented according to the following three subthemes: (1) explicit curriculum, (2) SEL practices, and (3) school events to promote SEL. This theme relates to explicit ways that Rockwell prioritizes and practices SEL work. Theme 3 is Informal SEL, highlighting SEL is rooted in care, as an ethic, that cannot be captured by formalized curricula and standards. From Theme 3, two subthemes emerged: (1) relationship building as SEL and (2) staff identity supporting SEL. Finally, Theme 4 is Inconsistencies. This section points to some of the contradictions and tensions at Rockwell and is organized by the following five subthemes: (1) mixed messages, (2)

competing priorities, (3) SEL and academics, (4) professional learning, and (5) foundational knowledge of SEL.

**Table 4**

*Themes and Subthemes*

| Theme | Subtheme |
| --- | --- |
| 1. Engaging the Whole School Community | • Who comprises the school community<br>• Who participates in Rockwell meetings and professional learning<br>• SEL School Communication<br>• Shared Vision |
| 2. Organized SEL: Planned and Intentional | • Explicit Curriculum<br>• SEL Practices<br>• School Events to Promote SEL |
| 3. Informal SEL | • Relationship Building as SEL<br>• Staff Identity Supporting SEL |
| 4. Inconsistency in Implementation | • Mixed Messages<br>• Competing Priorities<br>• SEL & Academics<br>• Professional Learning<br>• Foundational Knowledge of SEL |

**Theme 1: Engaging the Whole School Community**

The CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL uses the language “all members of your school community” when offering suggestions for building foundational SEL. Whole school community was a theme present during the analysis of both interview and focus group transcripts as well as the document review. This section presents data aligned with the

subthemes “who comprises the school community,” “who attend Rockwell meetings and professional learning,” “school communication,” and “shared vision.”

#### ***Who Comprises the School Community***

Throughout the data, there was discussion about the Rockwell community comprising the Rockwell staff. Curious to find out who was included in the school staff and community, I reviewed the Rockwell website as part of the document review for this study. Under the website tab titled “Family Portal,” there were three sub-tabs that included Rockwell staff members’ names and positions; these tabs read, “Meet My Teacher,” “Support Staff,” and “Administration.” Table 5 shows the roles included under each tab and how each role is categorized.

**Table 5**

*Rockwell Website Family Portal Staff List*

| Titles of Links | Titles of Sub-Links |
|---|---|
| Meet My Teacher | K1<br>1st Grade<br>2nd Grade<br>3rd Grade<br>4th Grade<br>5th Grade<br>6th Grade<br>Specialists |
| Support Staff | Coordinator of Special Education<br>EI Strand Specialist<br>Social Workers<br>English as a Second Language/Language Acquisition<br>Family Liaison<br>Health Paraprofessional<br>Dean of Students<br>Instructional Coaches |
| Administration | Administration Team (Principal, Director of Operations, Secretary) |

School-based roles that were not included on the website were the nurse, the custodians, the lunch monitors, the cafeteria staff, and some of the paraprofessionals. After another review of the website, I found that separate area of the site introduced the school nurse and provided her information to families; that tab was titled “The Rockwell Virtual Health Center.”

During the seven interviews and two focus groups, participants spoke about lunch and recess as a space and time during the day but never referred to lunch monitors by role or name. The school secretary was mentioned by name once. There was no mention of school custodians during interviews and focus groups, with the exception of when participants

restated the interview question about how schoolwide SEL initiatives were communicated. The cafeteria manager was mentioned by one participant, and the school nurse was mentioned three times. The school instructional coaches were mentioned in seven conversations, the principal was mentioned in seven conversations, the emotional impairment (EI) strand specialist/coordinator was mentioned in four conversations, and the manager of operations was mentioned in three conversations.

### ***Who Participates in Rockwell Meetings and Professional Learning***

Based on the attendance log and meeting minutes for the Rockwell rolling PD agenda for SY 2022–2023, the staff included the principal, instructional coaches, classroom teachers, specialist teachers (i.e., physical education, art, theater, French, science, dance, and library), coordinator of special education (COSE), the EI strand specialist, and student support teachers, as well as paraprofessionals and student teachers on a case-by-case basis. At times, the school social worker(s), manager of school operations, and family liaison were present, but this was often not the case based on my document review. Additionally, the attendance for the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) and Climate and Culture Leadership Team (CCLT) meetings included the same individuals as the PD meetings, just a smaller group.

Documents were reviewed for both the content included in the meeting minutes and document details such as who owned the various agendas and who was listed as being responsible for facilitation. During this review, I found that the instructional coach owned the Rockwell rolling PD agenda and the joint ILT/CCLT agenda, the principal owned the Rockwell Arc of Adult Learning for SY 2022–2023 but gave editing rights to both of the school instructional coaches, the principal also owned the SY 2022–2023 Rockwell Quality

School Plan (QSP), and the director of operations was the individual responsible for creating and publishing the school website.

The documents reviewed for this study never included the names of the Rockwell custodians, lunch monitors, secretary, or cafeteria staff. The Rockwell rolling PD agenda was shared with the Google group “Rockwell Staff”; however, there was no access to the names on this list.

***SEL School Communication***

One of the interview and focus group questions addressed by all participants was, “How are SEL initiatives, language, and themes shared with non-teaching staff such as lunch monitors, custodians, secretary, etc. so that there is consistency across the school for students?” Responses to this question varied, but there was one individual mentioned who served as the EI program director/strand coordinator and who shared information across the school staff, particularly with the lunch monitors and cafeteria team.

In response to this question, Ms. Thomas explained, “I know last year they received like, um, a training through our EI [strand/program coordinator].” She then added that the EI strand coordinator had wanted to train the entire lunch staff in trauma response and teach them how to write incident reports. However, Ms. Thomas concluded her response to this question saying, “I just don't know if that trickled over this year.” Similarly, Mr. Smith shared,

> And now we do what we call a huddle. So, [the EI coordinator does] a huddle with [lunch monitors] now to be able to kind of set the stage for, hey, here's how we want to interact with kids, and then to debrief. Here is how it went…

Ms. Thomas and Mr. Smith highlighted the EI strand coordinator shared information particularly with the lunch staff. Ms. King, a lunch monitor, also mentioned this individual when responding to this question, stating, “Umm, probably the EI strand coordinator, probably more informal. Daily she checks in and asks how the day was, any issues, any concerns, anything in particular about the children, anything she should be aware about.” In her response, Ms. Davis did not state the name or role of the individual; however, she referred to similar check-ins as the other participants, stating,

> The custodians, I am not sure if they had a training or they have had a conversation around this. But I know with the lunch mothers, there is a person that has had conversations with them about the use of [their] voice, you know, how to talk to them, for them to feel that they're in a certain environment also, even when they're in recess, recess and lunchtime, um, I think it happens every 3 months. They come together and they have this meeting, oh, lunch mothers for them to get, uh, a sense of where the school is going and what needs to happen with the students.

The person Ms. Davis refers to here may or may not be the EI strand coordinator. Other participants had a different view of how information, specifically information related to SEL, was shared.

When asked if SEL language and initiatives were shared with non-teaching staff, Ms. Williams responded, “I doubt it. I don't know for sure, but I would think probably not. I've never seen any evidence of it.” Ms. Miller also said she was unaware. Ms. White assumed that the secretary was never provided with information about SEL initiatives and language, but questioned if lunch monitors received this information, saying, “I feel like they tried to do something with the lunch monitors, didn't they? [The former director of operations] gave

them all this Great Strides[6] stuff but did not present it in Spanish and then was like, 'Why aren't you using this?'" Ms. White's comment was confirmed by Ms. Scott's response to this same question:

> I wouldn't, I wouldn't say custodians. However, I would say that the, um, the training has been offered and given to, like, the lunch monitors, and the previous operational manager was also leading the PD. But I wouldn't, I wouldn't go to the extent that like our building custodians and like people that don't work directly with students.

The school secretary confirmed that she had never received information regarding the SEL language and initiatives being used within the school. When asked, she stated simply, "I am sad to say, no."

Taken together, the data presented in this section consistently indicated who was included in the Rockwell community. Instruction-focused staff members and school leadership team members were the most frequently discussed during interviews and focus groups, and their names/roles were most often written in the documents reviewed, including attendance, ownership of documents, or explicitly stated involvement in the Rockwell community. The final data presented under Theme 1 relates to the subtheme "shared vision."

***Shared Vision***

When participants were asked about the school vision statement during the interviews and focus groups, the keywords and phrases that arose repeatedly were "I don't know," "instructional focus," and "equitable literacy." This section presents findings into two categories: the written school vision and the unwritten school vision.

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[6] All references to people, places, and curriculum are pseudonymous to protect the study participants' identities.

**Written Rockwell Vision.** During interviews and focus groups, participants were asked if they knew the school vision statement. Of the 10 participants who answered this question, three could locate the vision statement on the school website and read it out loud. Two participants could recall parts of the vision statement from memory. Mr. Smith shared a detailed explanation of how the vision statement was written. He described a diverse team of individuals who had worked to craft the school vision statement; however, eight of the 10 participants said they had no voice in developing it. Ms. Davis mentioned that the vision statement was simply shared with staff at summer PD before the start of the school year, and when asked if she had a voice in writing the vision statement, she responded, "No, no, no, no. It just came to us." Mr. Smith, Ms Johnson, and Ms. Thomas explained that the Rockwell vision statement was written as part of a transformation plan during the 2019–2020 school year. For reference, the Rockwell vision is

> to continue making great strides to become a school that is reflective and representative of the cultures of all the students and their families. With a joint focus on strong academics and social-emotional learning, the school will have a welcoming environment where everyone seeks to respect themselves, respect each other and respect the learning. This environment will be created by clear and consistent expectations that all are supported and held accountable to meet. Teachers support the learning through increased small group instruction and common intervention blocks which allow students to gain a sense of responsibility for their own learning. Classrooms are centers of learning with adequate resources, technology and staffing to support the development of 21$^{st}$-century learners. Woven into all this is a strong

sense of pride and belonging to the Rockwell community and identity worth celebrating.

Mr. Smith and Ms. Scott were both able to locate the vision statement on the Rockwell website and read it aloud during their interviews.

**Unwritten Rockwell Vision.** The interview question that asked explicitly about the Rockwell vision statement elicited various answers. Interview and focus group, along with information gathered from the document review, told a story about an unwritten school vision. The study findings included voices of teachers, school leadership, student support, the family liaison, the school secretary, and lunch monitors. Terms that were repeated throughout the merged interview transcript and that were highlighted during the coding process included "care," "safe," and "welcoming." The word "respect" was used 25 times throughout participant responses, and the word "help" was used 39 times in reference to working with both students and adults at Rockwell. Rockwell's unwritten vision statement was clear during the analysis of interview and focus group transcripts, but it was also evident during the document review. Making time for welcoming rituals, engaging practices, and optimistic closures sent a message to all adults involved that connecting on a human level mattered.

Theme 1, Engaging the Whole School Community, illuminated that not all members of Rockwell were valued and appreciated in the same way. Based on who attended various meetings and who was given access to documents, the data made clear that instructionally focused staff and school leadership were the most highly informed and valued. Individuals in other roles were not privy to the same information and not seen as holding the same level of importance within the building.

### Theme 2: Organized SEL: Planned and Intentional

This section presents findings related to the use of explicit SEL curricula as well as some insights into the feelings that members of the school community had toward such programs. For this presentation of the study findings, I use CASEL's definition of explicit SEL instruction:

> Explicit SEL instruction often occurs through free-standing lessons that provide step-by-step instructions to teach students social and emotional competencies on age-appropriate topics. Topics may include labeling feelings, coping with stress, setting and achieving goals, developing empathy, communicating effectively, resolving conflict, being assertive, and making responsible decisions. The most effective lessons provide explicit instruction as well as opportunities for practicing skills beyond the lesson and throughout the day, or through connections during academic lessons. Parents and community members might also be invited to help or participate in lessons and activities. (CASEL 2023)

Throughout the interviews and focus groups, participants used common language to describe how SEL was being integrated into the Rockwell Elementary school day. Ten of the 13 participants were able to name Great Strides as the explicit SEL curriculum used across all grade levels. At times, other explicit SEL curricula were mentioned, including Brain Power, Leader Making, and Welcome All. The interview and focus group data suggested that Brain Power was purchased for the newly added sixth grade at Rockwell and that these other curricula were sometimes used to supplement Great Strides. Mr. Smith, the school principal, offered this information.

SEL practices and school events that fit under the umbrella of SEL were also mentioned by participants when responding to questions about the integration of SEL into the school structures, curriculum, and daily interactions at Rockwell. Morning meetings, morning announcements, school clubs, community meetings, and larger school assemblies were some of the SEL practices and events cited by participants as schoolwide SEL initiatives. Morning meeting was mentioned eight times during interviews and focus groups, and school clubs were mentioned on nine occasions. The remaining schoolwide SEL initiatives—morning announcements, community meetings, and larger school assemblies—were each mentioned five or fewer times during the interviews and focus groups.

***Explicit Curriculum***

Participants were asked if Rockwell implemented an explicit SEL curriculum across all grade levels throughout the school and, if so, which one. Most participants responded yes and named "Great Strides," a program presented by the Committee of Children, a nonprofit that has "championed the safety and well-being of children since 1979." Three participants could not name the SEL curriculum being implemented: Ms. Green, the school secretary, and Ms. Hill and Ms. King, two of the school lunch monitors. Of these three participants who could not name the explicit SEL curriculum, Ms. Hill responded immediately that she had heard the name Great Strides but that she did not know much, if anything, about it. When asked if she had ever heard about Great Strides, Ms. Green, the Rockwell secretary, said, "Oh, of course I have … but I don't really know anything, but yes I have, yup, yup." Ms. King was not familiar with the curriculum, but her body language, nodding and tilting her head in a favorable way, indicated that she was interested that the school had such a curriculum.

Throughout the interviews and focus groups, participants explicitly mentioned a few other SEL curricula, including Brain Power, Leader Making, and Welcome All. Both the Welcome All and Leader Making programs were mentioned six times during interviews and focus groups, and Brain Power was mentioned once. Most participants also shared that Great Strides lessons took place every Wednesday morning; some responses further identified that the Great Strides lessons on Wednesdays took the place of the normal intervention block for students.

Ms. Thomas shared some thoughts about the program, beginning with scheduling, stating, “In my schedule that was given to me, I'm supposed to do it every Wednesday morning.” She explained that although it is part of her Wednesday schedule, the pressure of working at an urban elementary school with diverse learners to improve academic outcomes often caused her to push Great Strides lessons to the back burner. Ms. Thomas offered the following opinion of the program:

> I think some of the curriculum is, a, very wanting students to conform and wanting students to like, like, we're like, I think in the fourth lesson and it's, like, respecting others. Respecting yourself. I think that's an accurate lesson to teach my students. But then, like, like, self-talk. That's so nice on paper. But if students are in crisis, they're not gonna do self-talk. That's not gonna be a reaction.

Ms. Thomas mentioned that Monday mornings would be a more suitable time for explicit SEL instruction to occur throughout the school, explaining that after the weekend, all students could use a reset of some sort, and these lessons seemed to provide that.

During one of the focus groups, deliberative thoughts on explicit SEL scheduling also arose. Ms. Johnson shared that Great Strides was on the master school schedule for

Wednesday mornings, and she felt confident that approximately 95% of the school taught their weekly lesson at that time. She commented:

> There's two problems with it. One, that means it's very hard to get any kind of support, so that's number one. Number two, for certain grades… So, for me, I don't know about other people, but I know 4th grade, it's probably, it's actually way too short of a block because we have specials at 10:10 a.m. So, it's not enough time to do Great Strides.

Ms. Johnson explained that she followed the schedule and did as much of the weekly lesson as she could fit into the block, but lessons were often left unfinished, with no time to return and conclude; therefore, she questioned the curriculum's effectiveness.

The data collected through interviews, focus groups, and the document review focused heavily on the fact that Great Strides was the explicit curriculum for the school and that Great Strides lessons were scheduled to take place every Wednesday morning. Mr. Smith, the principal, indicated that this dedicated Wednesday morning block was "the minimum" and explained how certain teachers choose to incorporate explicit SEL instruction more often, depending on their personal preference and needs of the students.

When asked about SEL training and professional development at the school level, participants frequently mentioned Great Strides. Ms. Williams said, "So, Great Strides, I don't think we've ever had any specific training." Ms. Davis echoed this, sharing that she had not received any SEL training on the use of an explicit curriculum while at Rockwell. Other participants explained that training for Great Strides did occur the year the curriculum was first implemented at the school (i.e., the fall of 2018), sharing that it was an online training

completed independently during an all-staff afterschool PD, which took place on the second floor of the Rockwell building. Ms. White explained during the first focus group,

> When we first got Great Strides, we had whole school training. Since then, we've had about an 80% staff turnover. So, it wouldn't surprise me if you guys who came in in the second wave didn't get that. But we, like, I have, like, a little certificate.

Ms. Clarke, an instructional coach and the leader of the school ILT, said that all teachers are trained in Great Strides. She went on to explain that the school had just purchased Brain Power, with the intention of rolling it out in the sixth grade, and mentioned the Think Space training that the lower grades, K–2, and some specialist teachers were receiving as an additional SEL support for their students that school year. Mr. Smith, the school leader, explained,

> We've been using Great Strides, so that's something that is schoolwide, you know, it's in all spaces of the school. So, there's a classroom element, but there's a whole school element as well, with the announcements. And I also think there's a place where we could, you know, it could be, Great Strides specifically can be stronger.

Mr. Smith clarified that the announcements he referred to were a component of the morning announcements that another participant had referenced in a separate interview.

The information shared by participants directed my review and analysis of the Rockwell professional development rolling agenda for the 2022–2023 school year to determine if Great Strides was mentioned as part of a PD objective or agenda item or shared in meeting minutes. The PD agendas, along with the school 2022–2023 Arc of Adult Learning were included in the document review and there was no mention of Great Strides within either document. I searched for explicit mention of SEL in another capacity reviewing

these documents for the other SEL curricula that participants mentioned, including Brain Power, Leader Making, and Welcome All; the PD agenda and Arc of Adult Learning did not include these curricula by name.

Throughout the data, Great Strides was repeatedly referred to as the "official" SEL curriculum at Rockwell. A quick word frequency search revealed that the program name "Great Strides" appeared 57 times within the merged interview transcript. Other SEL curricula mentioned were Brain Power, Leader Making, and Welcome All. Leader Making was the program chosen prior to the 2018–2019 school year, and participants stated that some aspects of this program were very much alive in the school today. Mr. Smith shared that Great Strides was the program used at the classroom level and that the Leader Making program was used more for whole school initiatives, such as Golden Ticket incentive events. At times throughout the data, the Leader Making program was referred to as "Habits," since it focuses on the seven habits of happy kids.

As a former facilitator of the Rockwell CCLT, Ms. White, an ESL/special education teacher, shared some history of the explicit SEL curriculum, explaining,

> SBA [Success Bound Academy—Emotional Impairment Strand] leans pretty heavily on the Habits. Um, and the Leader Making stuff, which isn't bad, it's just, it's just not super consistent. And then at some point, last, was it last year or the year before, there was a push towards Welcome All and Circle Programming and Restorative Justice [RJ] circles and that never really got off the ground.

Both Ms. Johnson, a classroom teacher, and Ms. Clarke referred to Welcome All when discussing SEL training they had received throughout their career, and Ms. White referenced the curriculum when explaining the history of the SEL work done at Rockwell. Although

exact school years were not given, Ms. White continued, “So, they [i.e., Rockwell] were a Welcome All school and then they were the Leader Making school and then we were a Great Strides school.” This explanation offered clarity as to why various programs were mentioned throughout interviews and focus groups. This quote highlights the confusion among staff at Rockwell when discussing SEL curriculum, as there have been many.

It is important to include the words of the three participants who voiced their personal beliefs about SEL programs and the population being served at Rockwell. Ms. Thomas, a classroom teacher, shared that when she was first working in the Philips Public School district, the community partnership program she was part of had an SEL focus. She explained, “I think it was very whitewashed, and I think it was not realistic to the demographic that we're working with.” Ms. Davis, an ESL/special education teacher, shared these same sentiments when she stated, “I do think we still need to look at our Black and brown children a little closer to see how, what other support we can give them other than the program that we have already.” When asked if there was anything else she would like to add at the end of her interview, Ms. Williams, a classroom teacher, focused on the school’s choice of explicit SEL curriculum:

> One thing I will say, I, and I've said this before, I personally don't find Great Strides sufficient for the urban setting. I, I really just don't think it's relatable. The situations are not relatable to the kids. Even, like, watching the videos of the problem-solving steps, this is not what happens in the classroom. It's not what happens in recess. And, like, I think SEL is really important, but I don't think we have the right curriculum. I don't know if there is one out there, but I just don't think that Great Strides is sufficient. And I've even had, like last year, I had a couple of the sweetest kids and

> they told me, they were like, "Miss, we tried to do the problem-solving steps, but then they just started swearing at us," and I'm like, "You're so sweet that you tried to do the problem-solving steps."

Ms. Williams' voice sounded defeated when she shared this final remark during her interview. It was evident she was passionate about SEL instruction but, at the same time, understood the complexity and intersectionality of urban schools, such as Rockwell, and knew there has to be a curriculum better suited to match the real needs of urban schoolchildren.

***SEL Practices***

As participants shared responses to the interview questions, certain SEL practices came up over and over, including morning meetings, welcoming and closing rituals, and brain breaks throughout the day. Mr. Smith explained that there had been professional development on the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) SEL Three Signature Practices and that the school wanted to ensure that adults knew what they these practices were and how to incorporate them into the school day. The CASEL SEL Three Signature Practices are a welcoming routine or ritual, engaging strategies throughout the lesson/meeting/school day, and an optimistic closure (CASEL, 2019). Ms. Williams explained that Rockwell seemed more focused on SEL than other schools within the district and also referred to SEL practices in the following response:

> I know we did, we have done some stuff in, like, PD around, like, practices. We've done stuff in PD and the principal has shared different things you can do, like, during the school day, brain breaks, things like that. Um, welcoming ritual, closing ritual,

> morning meeting. So, I think I definitely had more [PD on SEL] at the [Rockwell] school than I had at the previous PPS school I was at.

While conducting the document review and analysis, it was evident that the CASEL SEL Three Signature Practices were alive in the adult learning spaces at Rockwell. On the agendas reviewed, including those for PD, ILT, and CCLT, there was consistent time set aside for a welcoming ritual and an optimistic closure. Engaging practices seemed to occur throughout the meetings according to the agendas, although this area was harder to determine without being an active participant.

The CASEL SEL Three Signature Practices were also alive across many classrooms, including homeroom classrooms and specialist classrooms. Ms. Williams described her observations of specialist teachers who included SEL practices in their teaching:

> I'm not sure if they're using specific, like, the Great Strides language, but I do se,e like, especially when I'm dropping my students off or picking them up from specials, a lot of the specialists do have a welcoming and closing ritual. So, I do see those practices. Not, I wouldn't say every specialist, but um, at least half of them.

Ms. Williams's comment supported the observation that the CASEL SEL Three Signature Practices were, indeed, a focus area and priority at Rockwell.

Ms. Davis had the privilege of working with many classroom teachers and students throughout the school, and therefore she spent time in many different spaces. In response to one of the interview questions, Ms. Davis began speaking about some of the SEL practices she had observed:

> Ms. Mongoe does stop, and she has a very nice way of talking to the children and trying to bring them back. She will be teaching a class or doing something with them

> that has to do with literacy or with the learning, with the reading, and she sees that they're not all 100%. She stops, she gives them a break, she asks questions, she gives them a minute, and then she regroups, and then she comes back to the lesson. So, I have seen that play out in many classrooms. My kindergarten teacher, Ms. D., when [her students] come back from recess, she does not go into a lesson. Immediately she stops, she asks them what went well, you know, anybody had any issues with any students that needed to, you know, go talk to your friend and go and fix that issue.

The preceding quote highlights how some teachers at Rockwell took time out of instruction to address student issues and concerns. The SEL practices described here include taking brain breaks, teacher-to student check-ins, and peer-to-peer problem solving.

During participant interviews and focus groups, participants cited morning meeting as another schoolwide SEL practice, and based on meeting agendas and the Arc of Adult Learning, there was evidence of morning meetings being discussed within adult learning spaces. Mr. Smith explained that “every single [teacher] has morning meeting on their schedule. That's something we've reiterated.” Based on the Rockwell rolling PD agenda, morning meeting was mentioned and/or discussed at both the January 25, 2023, all-staff PD as well as the March 29, 2023, all-staff PD. The structure for morning meetings, as cited on these agendas as well as the one-page reference guide for staff, was to begin with a greeting, move to a sharing, engage in a group activity, and end with some type of message to close out. The document describing this outline was owned and created by the Rockwell social worker and had been shared by both the social worker and the Rockwell instructional coach on separate occasions.

### *School Events to Promote SEL*

In their responses, participants mentioned a few school events that were part of initiatives to promote SEL at the schoolwide level. For instance, s. Thomas, Ms. White, Mr. Smith and Ms. Lewis commented on the Rockwell clubs program. Linked to the rolling PD agenda was a spreadsheet titled "Clubs Master Sheet 22–23," and I spent time reviewing this to gain a better understanding of the school club program. This document provided information about the schedule and frequency of clubs, the club offerings, the teachers participating, locations, and student rosters. The Rockwell clubs program was an SEL initiative in its fifth year of implementation. Clubs happen once a month on Fridays for one period of the school day and last approximately 50 minutes. Teachers work together to determine what they will offer as a club and then create commercials and advertisements that students watch during the selection process. The number of students in each club ranges from five to 20, and students can engage with students from other classes and grades while in their club. The club offerings that were listed in the Clubs Master Sheet 22–23 included, but were not limited to, art, drawing, basketball, knitting, cooking, dance, Legos, coding, blogging, and astrology.

Ms. Thomas, a classroom teacher, explained that she helped with the implementation of Rockwell clubs during the 2018–2019 school year and mentioned that it was originally part of the Partnership for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative (PSELI) through the Wallace Foundation. Mr. Smith shared, "So, we have Rockwell clubs, I know [our instructional coach] did so much in, in setting the foundation, and it is really great, makes us unique, was also in the local newspaper." Mr. Smith went on to mention who leads the Rockwell club program now, stating, "It's a combination of the wellness team and we still

have CCLT." Ms. Lewis, who is a classroom teacher and member of the CCLT, shared how the 50-minute club block would be utilized each month, stating, "Community meeting once a month, clubs once a month, and the other two, um, Fridays in the month, like Fun Friday in the classroom." As Ms. Lewis stated, community meetings were another SEL schoolwide event for promoting SEL.

Mr. Miller, Ms. White, and Ms. Lewis discussed community meetings during the interviews and focus groups. Community meetings were listed on the August 2022 leadership retreat agenda under the work of CCLT on the rolling ILT/CCLT agenda for the 2022–2023 school year; however, community meetings did not appear on the agenda again after that date. Community meetings were listed under the heading "Culture of Achievement" on the Rockwell rolling PD agenda for the meeting dated January 25, 2023. During review and analysis, it appeared that this was connected to a staff discussion around the Rockwell QSP and making adjustments for the second half (i.e., the last 90 days) of the 2022–2023 school year.

Ms. Lewis, a classroom teacher, explained that community meetings were held once a month on Fridays; Ms. Miller, a specialist teacher, echoed this in her response, and Ms. White described the following: "Well, so we have a Great Strides block, and then the community meeting would fall under our social and emotional learning and PBIS initiative." All three participants identified community meetings as an SEL initiative, yet Ms. White was the only one to also connect community meetings to positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS).

The data presented under Theme 2 highlight how SEL was organized at Rockwell Elementary School by using explicit SEL curricula, embedding SEL practices into the classroom and adult learning spaces, and organizing events to promote SEL schoolwide.

## Theme 3: Informal SEL

The third data theme calls attention to the rest of the SEL work happening throughout the school in an unofficial way, showing how SEL was rooted in care, as an ethic, that could be captured by formalized standards and curricula. For this study, the term "unofficial SEL" is loosely defined as SEL that is not guided by a curriculum or taught following a lesson plan, SEL that is not tied to a program, and SEL that occurs organically throughout the school building. As participants responded to the interview questions, they offered insights into how elements of SEL were also present informally throughout the school. The theme Informal SEL was present throughout the data and has been organized here according to two subthemes: "relationship building and sense of community as SEL" and "staff identity supporting SEL."

### *Relationship Building and Sense of Community as SEL*

Although Rockwell staff employed the CASEL SEL Three Signature Practices as previously discussed, it was evident throughout the data that study participants identified several daily routines that also fell into the category of SEL practices. Relationship building with students was highlighted as a more informal daily SEL practice. Ms. Thomas explained that since she had known certain students for several years, it was easier to support them academically since she already had that relationship. She stated, "Just knowing [the students] in the building has helped me a lot with, like, SEL." Similarly, Ms. Miller shared a strategy to support the overall well-being, mental health, and SEL of students by inviting them from

the school cafeteria into a separate space during their lunch block to spend time with her, “and that has been a really effective intervention, I would say. Like a therapeutic one.” SEL practices and relationship building were also patterns that emerged from participant discussions about specialist teachers and classes. At Rockwell, specialist teachers teach physical education, art, science, music, theater, dance, French, and library. Ms. Miller stated, “I think also just like relationship building, like, seeing specialist teachers, like, pushing into other classes to sit with kids or, like, at lunch, like, interacting with kids in those kinds of ways.” In reviewing the Rockwell master schedule, I noted that typically a specialist teacher would see a class of students one, two, or three times each week. Ms. Miller’s previous comment related to what these specialist teachers do in addition to their given schedule and how they work to make extra time to build those relationships outside their own classroom setting.

In response to the interview question “How do you see SEL alive outside of the classroom? (i.e. common places—specialist classes, gym, cafeteria, school yard, hallway, etc.),” Ms. Davis offered a great deal of insight. She explained, “It is a challenge. And I will say it's a challenge because most of our specialists are not only new to Phillips Public Schools, they're new teachers.” Ms. Davis shared that she was often called upon to provided support in these spaces when teachers and students were struggling:

> They call on me to, to help with, with regulations, students with behaviors. You know, when, when a child is not listening. I'm not sure what they see in me, but when they see me, they know the behavior needs to stop. It needs to cease. And I can ask them when they're calm, “What is a problem, how can I help you? What could you do better?” These are the conversations to help them.

Ms. Davis continued sharing how her relationship with students allowed her to support them during challenging times. Ms. Davis responded to each interview question asked; however, in this section of the interview, she spoke the most, and it was clear through the tone and calmness in her voice that she was passionate about helping all students in the school building. Ms. Davis went on to explain her approach:

> I do believe that they understand that they, that I care for them. Yeah. They know that I am not there to harm them or to hurt them. I just want to make sure that, that they are safe and other children are safe. And my demeanor means that this is not the time or the place for you to behave like this. I'll bring you out [of the classroom/space,] and then we can have a conversation. And I usually end with a hug and tell them I'll see them tomorrow.

Elements of the SEL Three Signature Practices were also present in Ms. Davis's approach to students, namely an optimistic closure. As noted earlier, the Three Signature Practices include welcoming inclusion activities, engaging strategies, and optimistic closure (CASEL, 2019).

Relationships as SEL appeared throughout the data as terms and phrases such as "relationships," "relationship building," "sense of community," "care," "helping," "meeting individual needs," "knowing students," and "sitting with students." Ms. Davis, an ESL teacher, shared how she fostered relationships to support student challenges and needs. Similarly, Ms. Green, the Rockwell secretary, explained how she formed relationships to support students, stating,

> I think, just getting a different perspective when they come in [the main office,] you know, I'm not questioning them as far as, you know, "Why aren't you learning?," I

> am asking them what do they need as an individual. You know, "Is there something I can help you with?"

The main office at Rockwell Elementary School is a place where students enter when arriving late to school or leaving early, when sent by a teacher to deliver a message or ask a question, when picking up necessary supplies or flyers, and for a variety of other reasons. Ms. Green explained that at the core of what she did and who she was, " I love just meeting people and helping people with their needs, and I love children."

Mr. Smith highlighted relationships as SEL during his interview, particularly when discussing how Rockwell serves a variety of students, including those with emotional impairments. Mr. Smith stated,

> So, first thing I really want to say is, we are a school with an emotional impairment (EI) strand. So, I think that, that really does set us up to make sure that kids, you know, feel like they can emote, they feel a sense of community as well as, you know, we have the resources in place to help them to be able to kind of regulate.

Mr. Smith explained that the emotional impairment program is part of the larger school community and how important relationship building is when dealing with all students.

Rockwell school clubs were mentioned under Theme 2. As part of the document review, I examined a six-page PDF document titled "Rockwell School Club Initiative," and the subtheme "relationship building and sense of community" was salient. In the introduction, this document told the story of why the Rockwell School Club Initiative began, stating that, based on SEL data from district assessments, "the area of 'school bonding' was identified as one of our top challenges. Seeing that students self-reported that they did not feel connected and bonded to the school, we wanted to do something to change that."

Although the club initiative was categorized earlier as organized SEL, there were no lesson plans or curriculum being used to promote school bonding and relationship building during this time; rather, those efforts were happening organically. For that reason, those data are also presented in this section. The following excerpt was taken directly from the Rockwell School Club Initiative document and summarizes the goal of the program:

> The culture of the Rockwell School has often been that teachers take care of the students on their roster or caseload, but do not take responsibility for all students in the school. The club initiative was an effort to allow teachers to build positive and caring relationships with other students in the building and begin to think of all students as their own.

This document was written and shared in 2018. Notably, however, it was not referenced by any of the study participants; instead, it was embedded in a CCLT agenda under "additional resources," which is where it was located for this review.

The document review also revealed Rockwell's school pride, mainly on the school webpage. The phrase "Together we can. Together we will" appeared on multiple pages of the website, written in red, the school color, and paid tribute to the strong sense of community the Rockwell team sought to create.

The Rockwell Quality School Plan was a document used to narrow the school's strategic focus and connect initiatives to desired outcomes in the following three areas: instruction, climate and culture, and attendance. I reviewed and analyzed the QSP for the 2022–2023 school year, and most of my findings pointed to schoolwide relationship building and strengthening a sense of community across Rockwell. For instance, Desired Outcome 1, under Priority 1, instruction, illuminated the need for Rockwell students to spend time

speaking with one another to strengthen student learning and push student thinking. Prioritizing daily student discourse focused on academic tasks is an informal practice to promote SEL by building student-to-student relationships and providing them time and space to communicate verbally. Additionally, the QSP called for the "Think, Write, Pair, Share" protocol to be used widely throughout the school, again highlighting the school's strong focus on sharing with other students and informally building relationships. This protocol was referred to and discussed at the February 15, 2023, all-staff PD and the June 14, 2023, ILT meetings, emphasizing the importance of this work.

Under Priority 2, climate and culture, the QSP read, "Staff believe in the vision of staff culture and participate on a school team," followed by, "A staff culture goal will be identified and shared." In the progress monitoring section of the QSP, the goal was written as, "100% of staff work to create a positive culture as measured by The Characteristics of a Healthy Culture Survey." Taken together, these data conveyed that Rockwell Elementary strives to build a welcoming community, with opportunities for staff to work together on school teams and contribute to the overall culture within the building.

School teams were referenced seven times in the ILT/CCLT agenda and twice on the PD agenda. "School teams" has two meanings, both of which promote fostering relationships. "School teams" refers to the grade level or specialist team that teachers and staff meet with during their weekly, administratively led common planning time (CPT) meetings, and also refers to various teams within the building that staff sign up to serve on to contribute to the school community in a focused and intentional way. For example, the Rockwell Math Team planned the school family math nights, and the Rockwell Clubs Committee planned the execution of the school clubs program. The Rockwell master

schedule revealed that school CPT meetings were a total of 90 minutes each week, except the K1 team and the specialist team. By providing most teachers with this amount of sacred planning time, the Rockwell school signaled the importance of this type of collaborative work.

On the November 30, 2022, PD agenda, the welcoming ritual involved filling out a staff culture survey, and on May 31, 2023, a presentation titled "Staff Culture" was led by one of the Rockwell social workers. Staff culture is closely connected to building relationships and forming a sense of community.

### *Staff Identity Supporting SEL*

The interview protocol's introductory questions asked participants to share information about themselves, their experiences, their knowledge, and their cultural background. No questions in the interview protocol specifically called out "identity," yet this emerged as a theme within the data in connection to the SEL work at Rockwell. Clarke (2015) described the difference between formal identities and individual identities, stating that there is a "divide between those who believe identities should be determined based on objective biological or social standards, and those who believe identities are a matter of individual choice" (p. 747). For this study, the term identity considered both formal identity and identities chosen by an individual.

**Identity as a Mother.** As data were collected, reviewed, and analyzed, the subtheme "staff identity supporting SEL" recurred. The participants in this study had a variety of lived experiences and background knowledge that shaped their answers to interview and focus group questions. Some participants offered definitions of SEL that were close to the CASEL definition, while other individuals summarized this type of learning in their own words.

When defining SEL, 10 of the 13 participants offered CASEL-like definitions, one participant did not define SEL, and two participants explained SEL in their own words. Ms. Green's and Ms. King's definitions differed most from CASEL's. Both Ms. Green and Ms. King drew from their identities as mothers, and their strong maternal instincts, to define SEL.

In her interview, Ms. King, one of the Rockwell lunch monitors, explained how she utilized her role as a mother to support SEL needs and teachings in her current role. She shared,

> [SEL] means to learn, like, social cues, to learn how to, um, social behaviors, emotional, I guess children's, behaviors. Luckily, I have my own personal kids, so I am familiar with a lot of the emotional stuff because I have school-aged kids. I just, my mom mode kicks in and I just talk to them, like, "What's the matter?"

Similarly, Ms. Green explained,

> I carry on a motherly role. I think it basically comes down to that, you know, I am a mother first, social emotional is definitely something that we learn even having our own children, you know, and how to cope with these things already, so it comes easy to people, you know, especially women.

Both Ms. King and Ms. Green highlighted their roles and identities as mothers and how that had supported their professional roles, particularly their responses to students, at Rockwell. Both participants saw students in more informal settings, including lunch, recess, arrival, and dismissal, and they shared a similar understanding of their role in supporting the school's SEL work. Although both Ms. Green and Ms. King referred to their identity as mothers a few times throughout their interviews, both participants answered the interview questions

regarding SEL-related training by referring to their roles as mothers and how that supported their interaction with students in a way that was socially and emotionally supportive.

**Childhood Identity.** The sub-them of childhood identity emerged from the data in three participant responses. Two participants, Ms. Lewis and Ms. White, shared that they were former Phillips Public School district students, and Ms. Thomas shared that she had gone through her K–12 schooling living in a wealthy Massachusetts suburb. Ms. Lewis proudly stated, “I went to Phillips Public Schools my whole life. I graduated from [PPS highly rated school].” Similarly, Ms. White shared, “So I actually went to PPS schools primarily, for my, elementary, graduated from [top exam school in PPS district].” Ms. Lewis and Ms. White both held teacher leadership roles at Rockwell and shared that they were involved in the Rockwell CCLT; Ms. White was once a facilitator of the team, and Ms. Lewis currently served as the lead for the school club initiative. Their identity as former PPS students was evident in their group responses and set the tone for why each individual felt so connected to the school’s SEL work.

While Ms. White and Ms. Lewis spoke with pride about their PPS schooling, Ms. Thomas shared about her schooling experience in one of the wealthiest suburbs of Massachusetts, delivering her response in an aggravated tone. Ms. Thomas stated,

> I've seen, like, the two ends of what education looks like [i.e., urban and suburban]. I was the worst student. I was the worst little kid. I was mean. I was horrible. And I don't know why I deserved to have the teachers and the funding and the support and the supplies that I received. It was [because of] my dad’s job.

Ms. Thomas shared how the schools she attended in a wealthy school district would not let her fail, despite her behavior. Ms. Thomas credited her father’s job for her privileged K–12

education. Now, working as an educator in an urban school district with far fewer resources for students, Ms. Thomas served on the Rockwell school trauma team researching how to better serve the students at Rockwell and across the PPS district. Ms. Thomas's identity as an individual raised in a privileged community led her to her current work and to the SEL focus she so clearly possessed.

**Identity as a Black Hispanic Woman.** Ms. Davis opened her interview by sharing that she identified as a Black Hispanic woman and was a speaker of both the English and Spanish languages. Throughout her interview, Ms. Davis shared how, given her role as an ESL teacher at Rockwell, she had a more flexible schedule and was often called upon to support students experiencing challenges. Ms. Davis stated, "I'm not sure what [the students] see in me, but when they see me, they know the behavior needs to stop." Although Ms. Davis may not have known what the students saw in her, given the fact that roughly 50% of students attending Rockwell were Hispanic, English was not the first language for roughly 50% of students, and approximately 30% of students were learners of the English language, it can be surmised that many students felt connected to Ms. Davis because they shared a common identity. Ms. Davis may have spoken, looked, and acted like students and their families, and therefore they felt compelled to listen to and respect her authority. Sharing a common identity can lead to a stronger sense of belonging for students and adults alike, and this is closely connected to the work of SEL.

This section presented data connected to Theme 3, Informal SEL, which was organized into the subthemes relationship building as SEL and staff identify to support SEL. The third and final theme is Inconsistencies.

## Theme 4: Inconsistencies

Participants spoke consistently about Great Strides being used as the explicit SEL curriculum at Rockwell and the variety of SEL practices embedded in the school's teaching, learning, and daily operations. When participants were asked questions about how SEL was prioritized, the connection to academics, and suggested time spent on certain SEL activities, answers varied, generating a fourth theme: Inconsistencies. This section is organized into the following subthemes, which frame the levels of inconsistency: "mixed messages," "competing priorities," "SEL and academics," "professional learning," and "foundational knowledge of SEL."

### *Mixed Messages*

Participants mentioned mixed messages in the context of schoolwide SEL implementation throughout the data, both implicitly and explicitly. Explicit responses were those that were clear, leaving no room for ambiguity. Implicit responses were statements that were less direct but implied a similar message. Participant responses varied when they were asked about district support, the school vision, and how SEL fit in with the academic demands of an urban elementary school in a high-profile school district like Rockwell's. Ms. Williams stated explicitly that when it came to the relationship between SEL and academics at Rockwell, she felt that they were completely separate. Ms. Williams went on to explain how information shared to inform teacher practice did not always match the feedback received when teacher practice was observed. Responding to the interview question about the relationship between SEL and academic standards, Ms. Williams stated explicitly that she felt she was often given mixed messages:

> I feel like they're, they're, they're considered, like, super separate. And I've always thought that there's, there's been like a disconnect. So like, especially in our first year back [from COVID-10 and remote learning] when we were from, when we were like kind of doing hybrid and on the computer and then even, like, the next year, like, there was almost, like, the principal was like, "Oh, here's this SEL and all this stuff." And then we would get, like, feedback, sometimes from a coach or someone else, like, "Oh, you're not on pace, you're not on the schedule. Like, you know, you shouldn't be doing all this." And so, it's kind of mixed messages of whether you can take that time [out of instruction] for the SEL practices or not.

This quote points to the complexity of SEL work and how it is often unclear what SEL implementation looks like within the classroom, even when it is seen as a focus of the school. The response provided by Ms. Williams clearly aligns with the theme Inconsistencies and the subtheme "mixed messages."

Participants, particularly classroom teachers, mentioned that there was time built into their schedules for Great Strides. The data also provided insight into how the schedules worked, with Great Strides taking the place of the daily intervention block on Wednesday mornings. The interview and focus group data led me to review the Rockwell master schedule for the 2022–2023 school year to better understand how the first block of the school day was being utilized. The master schedule did indeed include 15 minutes for a daily morning meeting followed by 25 minutes of intervention time on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday and a Second Step lesson on Wednesdays. The only discrepancy identified during the document review and analysis of the master schedule was that on Wednesdays, morning meeting was listed as happening from 9:30–9:45; however, Great

Strides lessons were listed as beginning at 9:40 and ending at the close of the first block, (10:10 a.m.). To better understand the messaging around minutes, the “Morning Meeting Flow” document, created by the Rockwell social worker and shared with teachers on various occasions by both the school social worker and instructional coach, was reviewed and analyzed. This document was also referred to as the morning meeting one-pager and information guide. This document mentioned that on Mondays, morning meetings may be as long as 20 minutes; therefore, morning meeting expectations also fell into the subtheme “mixed messages.”

***Competing Priorities***

Participant interviews and focus groups told the story of SEL at Rockwell, and the document review told the story of additional school priorities. The August 2022 leadership agenda listed the CCLT as having some of the following responsibilities: determining dates for family events, determining plans and implementation of school clubs, planning and leading school assemblies and community meetings, facilitating teacher common planning time (CPT) meetings, facilitating CCLT team meetings, and participating in peer observations and walkthroughs. Mr. Smith, the Rockwell leader, shared the following insight into the vision for CCLT:

> And so, then we formed a CCLT, Climate and Culture Leadership Team, which really the work of SEL came, would fall under. And then at that time, we had gotten 1.5 social workers in the school so that is who could lead that work. So, then they, you know, that work really fell under that CCLT team to kind of do the [SEL] action plan. Then, uh, I think as we ended that plan, we merged that specific SEL leadership action plan team with our wellness team. And so that's where that work lies. I, I feel

> like it's a combination of the wellness team, and we still have CCLT that does like Rockwell clubs in our building, that does Golden Ticket. A lot of those character-building SEL things as well.

Here, Mr. Smith refers to an SEL action plan, which was a part of the work through the Partnership for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative (PSELI). He mentioned additional CCLT duties that were not present in the August 2022 leadership agenda. Furthermore, Mr. Smith mentioned this work being performed by the school social worker, yet when reviewing school year 2022–2023 CCLT agendas, neither of the 1.5 school social workers were listed as attending. The ILT and CCLT met together during the 2022–2023 school year for all meetings, according to the rolling agendas; however, the agenda items were heavily focused on instructional initiatives, not what was described earlier as being the responsibilities of CCLT and therefore supporting the subtheme "competing school priorities."

When asked about the Rockwell vision, participants also highlighted competing priorities. Ms. Thomas and Ms. Williams said that the school vision included a focus on equitable literacy. Ms. Miller, Ms. Johnson, and Ms. Clarke shared that they were not certain about the school vision, but they felt confident in sharing Rockwell's instructional focus. I reviewed the following documents to find out more about the school's competing priorities: SY 2022–2023 Arc of Adult Learning, SY 2022–2023 PD rolling agenda, SY 2022–2023 ILT and CCLT agendas, and the Rockwell 2022–2023 Quality School Plan. These documents highlighted equitable literacy as a district priority, the focus of the majority professional learning for Rockwell teachers, and the purpose of the majority of classroom walkthroughs for the 2022–2023 school year. Table 4 provides the PD dates for the 2022–2023 school year and the adult learning objectives for each 2-hour session from September

through April. Of the 17 objectives listed in the table, three are explicitly connected to SEL: training on Think Spaces, reviewing climate survey data, and engaging in a morning meeting. The remainder of the objectives align more closely with academic priorities.

**Table 6**

*Rockwell SY 2022–2023 Professional Development Objectives*

| PD Date | Objectives for Each 2-Hour PD Session |
|---|---|
| 9/28/22 | • To understand how Paper Academic tutoring can be used to support all students during the school day and at home<br>• To assess Rockwell MCAS Writing and draw conclusions about next best steps to support student writing. |
| 10/26/22 | • Partnering with students and teachers to create think spaces in K2–2nd grade classrooms<br>• Participate in a whole school close reading activity and review writing expectations |
| 11/30/22 | • To understand the design and features of ST Math that promote student engagement and skill building |
| 12/21/22 | • To understand the design and features of the Equitable literacy tool and the expectations that promote the use of culturally relevant grade-level text and student discourse<br>• To understand the facilitation of student discourse and the push for students to be doing the heavy lifting during each lesson |
| 1/25/23 | • Overview the Rockwell enrollment projections and budget implications for FY24<br>• Understand the adjustments to the 90-Day Plan (QSP) for the second half of the school year<br>• Review and reflect on the Rockwell Mid-Year Climate data.<br>• Strengthen lesson planning by aligning instructional strategies to the Equitable Literacy Observation tool and Instructional Dialogue Look Fors |
| 2/15/23 | • Overview the “Think Write Share” strategy |

| PD Date | Objectives for Each 2-Hour PD Session |
|---|---|
| | • Understand the importance of a culture rich in equity and identify actions steps to build and strengthen |
| 3/29/23 | • Engage in a morning meeting as a community<br>• Grades 3–6 will receive MCAS test security training for administrators<br>• Grades K–2 will participate in a small-group reading session lead by the Early Childhood department |
| 4/26/23 | • Identify and describe specific instructional moves educators can make to give multilingual learners access to the components of Equitable Literacy in Tier 1 instruction |

The objectives listed in Table 6 tell the story of Rockwell's priorities. The objectives point to PD sessions focused on housekeeping, assessments, and academic curriculum training, with some SEL work sprinkled in lightly. It is important to also outline who attended these meetings.

I reviewed and analyzed the PD monthly agenda for many purposes, one of which was for attendance. The document analysis found that monthly professional development at the Rockwell was mandatory for all teaching staff, school leaders, and social workers. Paraprofessionals were required to complete a limited number of hours of PD as stated in their contract, so at any given Rockwell PD, there tended to be some paraprofessional representation. Lunch monitors, the school secretary, and custodians did not attend afterschool PD. The family liaison, dean of students, manager of school operations, school nurse, and health paraprofessional attended Rockwell PD as needed but were not mandated to be there on a monthly basis. The attendance at PD added another layer to the subtheme "competing priorities" and the overarching theme, Inconsistencies.

### *SEL and Academics*

Participants were asked about the relationship between academic standards and SEL at Rockwell, and their answers varied. Ms. Thomas, Ms. Williams, and Ms. Scott explained how the two areas were considered separate at Rockwell, whereas Ms. Davis, Mr. Smith, and Ms. Miller shared that they were connected, that SEL was integrated into school academics. Ms. Clarke was divided in her response, explaining how for lower elementary grades, the two were connected, but for upper grades, it was not as clear and was more teacher dependent.

Ms. Thomas explained the relationship between SEL and academics at Rockwell in the following way:

> I think we have, very, like, explicit academic standards and our testing and the curriculum we're supposed to use, the platforms the students are supposed to use on the computer. I think that is very addressed in PD, emails, information from admin. Whereas Great Strides is kind of like a brief all, and SEL is, like, however you interact with your students, whatever relationships you have with them, just build on that, foster that. Um, but I think that, academics definitely take priority.

Ms. Williams echoed this sentiment in her response to this same interview question, stating, “I feel like they're, they're, they're considered, like, super separate. I've always thought that there's, there's been like a disconnect.” Ms. Scott took a different approach in answering this question yet made a similar point about how separate SEL and academics were at Rockwell as she explained how the first 6 weeks of school were used explicitly for SEL and after that, academics took priority. Ms. Clarke shared how “in the upper grades, it depends on how the teachers integrate [SEL] and their, uh, personal commitment to SEL. Some teachers are more

committed to it than others." Ms. Clarke offered a different response when discussing lower grades (included later).

Other members of the school community offered opposing views, explaining how SEL and academics at Rockwell were very much connected. Mr. Smith referred to the school vision statement and Rockwell's "joint focus on strong academics and social emotional learning." Ms. Clarke explained that in the lower grades (i.e., K–2), which used the PPS-created ELA curriculum named Center, had SEL standards and texts built into the curriculum. She stated, "So in the lower grades, it's integrated into the curriculum as I was saying. So, the books that are chosen for read-alouds and the activities all support both academic standards and the SEL standards." Ms. Miller explained that she viewed SEL and academics as interrelated: "I think it's interrelated but it feels a little bit heavier emphasis on just getting kids to, like, baseline regulation so that academics can be achieved." Her response highlighted her view that SEL was used at Rockwell as a foundation for academic learning to take place. Ms. Davis agreed with Ms. Miller but specifically shared how she saw this connection more in the SBA program, which serviced students with emotional impairments: They are connected, and I see more when I am in the SBA space, which is where SEL is a step for academic success."

Prompted by the divide in participant responses, I reviewed ELA curriculum documents for both lower and upper grades at Rockwell. The Center ELA curriculum designed by the school district for kindergarten through second grade did include SEL standards in most lessons. The Explore website explained how SEL was integrated into the curriculum used in Grades 3 through 6:

Central to Explore Education's curriculum is a focus on "habits of character" and

> social-emotional learning. Students work to become effective learners, developing mindsets and skills for success in college, career, and life (e.g., initiative, responsibility, perseverance, collaboration); work to become ethical people, treating others well and standing up for what is right (e.g., empathy, integrity, respect, compassion); and work to contribute to a better world, putting their learning to use to improve communities (e.g., citizenship, service). In this module, students work to become ethical people: treat others well and stand up for what is right (e.g., empathy, integrity, respect, compassion). Students also work to become effective learners, developing the mindsets and skills for success in college, career, and life (e.g., initiative, responsibility, perseverance, collaboration). Finally, students also work to contribute to a better world, putting their learning to use to improve communities (e.g., citizenship, service). (EL Education, 2023)

During participant focus groups and interviews, participants noted that the K–2 ELA curriculum included SEL standards; however, they did not mention the Explore curriculum implemented in Grades 3 through 6.

***Professional Learning***

The major theme of Inconsistency included the subtheme "professional learning," specifically in relation to educator and staff training prior to their work at Rockwell. There are many avenues future educators can take to achieve a teaching degree and license, to secure a career in education, or to work in some capacity at a school; therefore, it is no surprise that participants came to the Rockwell with an array of prior education and professional learning experiences. When participants with educator licenses were asked what type of SEL training they had received during their teacher and/or leadership preparation

programs, six of the 10 participants stated that they did not have any coursework related to SEL, one participant shared that SEL coursework was available as electives but had not been part of the program requirements, and three participants who had attended programs specifically designed to prepare teachers for careers in urban education had completed required SEL coursework (see Table 5).

**Table 7**

*SEL Training During Educator/Leadership Preparation Programs*

| SEL Training | Participants Receiving Training |
|---|---|
| No coursework focused on SEL | Ms. Thomas (lower teacher), Ms. Williams (upper teacher), Ms. Davis (ESL teacher), Ms. Johnson (upper teacher), Ms. Clarke (instructional coach), Ms. Scott (family liaison) |
| No coursework focused on SEL was part of the program of study for the degree, but electives focused on SEL were available | Mr. Smith (principal) |
| Preparation program did include coursework focused on SEL | Ms. Miller (specialist teacher), Ms. Lewis (lower teacher), Ms. White (ESL and SWD teacher) |
| No educator preparation program(s) | Ms. Green (secretary), Ms. Hill (lunch monitor), Ms. King (lunch monitor) |

Participants were asked what type of SEL professional learning they had acquired throughout their career, and, again, answers varied. Ms. Thomas shared that she had received some SEL training early in her career while part of an outside school partner organization that worked directly with students. Ms. Williams summarized her SEL training, explaining that it was "pretty poor" prior to the pandemic but had "definitely stepped up a little bit"

during the pandemic; she then stated, “I still think that it's lacking” but did not give specifics about what this SEL training and PD had entailed. Five of the participants mentioned the training that Rockwell teachers and staff received through the Wallace Foundation study, also known as the Partnership for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative (PSELI). The majority of this discussion included participants sharing about explicit SEL curriculum training such as Great Strides and Welcome All.

Ms. King, a lunch monitor who had been working at the Rockwell for 6 months at the time of her interview, shared that she had received “no training at all” prior to beginning in her position, adding, “It would be helpful,” with a laugh, at the close of her response. Ms. Hill discussed that she had received more informal training, or information sharing, from staff members at Rockwell but had not had any formalized training since the 2018–2019 school year, when she participated with a group of Rockwell lunch monitors as part of the PSELI. Finally, Ms. Green, the school secretary, responded “No” and “No I have not” when asked about any SEL-related training from the PPS district or at Rockwell.

The type of SEL-focused trainings and professional learning one receives undoubtedly connects directly to one’s foundational understanding and knowledge of SEL. For that reason, the subtheme “foundational knowledge of SEL” is presented next.

***Foundational Knowledge of SEL***

During the interviews and focus groups, participants were asked to define social and emotional learning in their own words and/or to describe what SEL meant to them to better understand the foundational knowledge of SEL as a whole school community. This question was asked at the beginning of the interview to help clarify what lens each participant was looking through when responding. The definitions shared by participants focus largely on

teaching students skills necessary for managing their emotions. Also, most participants mentioned teaching students about how their emotions, behaviors, and actions impact other individuals and how to interact appropriately as members of society.

After coding and then analyzing the focus group and interview data, it became apparent that participants believed that much more fell under the umbrella of SEL than their initial definitions captured. For example, only one participant stated explicitly that "trauma" was part of their definition, yet the notion of trauma recurred throughout the data. In fact, the word "trauma" appeared 20 times in the 98 pages of merged interview and focus group transcripts. Since the word "trauma" did not appear in the interview protocol, this means that the word was used only by participants in their responses. Participants also associated restorative justice (RJ), trauma-informed practices, culturally responsive teaching (CRT), multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS), positive behavioral intervention and supports (PBIS), school clubs, morning meetings, think spaces, Golden Ticket events, and community meetings with "SEL" or "doing SEL" throughout their responses to questions.

**Definitions of SEL.** Of the 13 participants in this study, 11 offered definitions of SEL, one participant chose not to answer this question, and Ms. Lewis agreed with the other members in her focus group, Ms. Johnson and Ms. White, and did not feel the need to add to their definitions. To honor the voices of all participants, the words shared by all 12 individuals are presented in this section. The section is organized according to role, beginning with how Mr. Smith and Ms. Clarke defined SEL as members of the Rockwell leadership team, how classroom teachers Ms. Thomas, Ms. Williams, and Ms. Johnson defined SEL, how specialists and student support staff, who included Ms. Davis, Ms. Miller, and Ms. White, defined SEL, and finally how members of the Rockwell staff who interacted

with students in more informal settings, including Ms. Scott, Ms. King, and Ms. Green, defined SEL.

Beginning with members of the school leadership team, Mr. Smith, the principal, stated, “I guess social emotional learning is, really, the learning of skills or as we call them, soft skills, to be able to help individuals succeed in and out of the classroom.” Mr. Smith’s definition included all students, whereas Ms. Clarke’s definition focused more on a certain group of students, that is, those who have experienced trauma. She stated that SEL “means that we provide this emotional support for students who have experienced trauma or some kind of non-SEL event outside or inside of the school.” She followed up by defining a non-SEL event as one that does not provide the necessary emotional support for students.

As a lower elementary classroom teacher, Ms. Thomas included the following when offering her definition of SEL, “I guess what I've interpreted it as, giving students, like, coping mechanisms and strategies, in and out of the classroom, when they're dealing with big emotions.” Ms. Thomas also highlighted the use of the Great Strides curriculum in her response.

Ms. Williams shared,

> So, I see social emotional learning as, um, kind of like different things. So, first as the way we're teaching students how to deal with their own emotions, um, that are coming up, teaching them how to, how to deal with conflict that's happening. Um, and then also, like, I see it as the practices in the classroom. Whether that's having a morning meeting, having, like, a calm-down space, having a process for students when they're, you know, feeling a heightened emotion. Having, like, times during the

> day where we can take a brain break, we can check in. So, I see it as, like, as practices, as well as instruction.

Ms. Williams echoed Ms. Johnson's point that SEL has to do with managing emotions but added the discussion about SEL practices. Ms. Johnson's definition was consistent with emotion management:

> I think it has a lot to do with, like, how do you manage yourself and your own emotions, right? How do you, how are you able to interact with the community around you, and how are you able to interact with communities that are different from your own, and, like, basically walk through the world being a good person.

This concluded the definitions of SEL offered by classroom teachers. Next, the definitions from specialists and student support staff are shared.

Ms. Davis defined SEL in the following way: "Social emotional learning to me means that we are arming students with tools that they would need in order to know how to regulate themselves when they are a little bit dysregulated." In her response, Ms. Davis discussed how adults can use SEL to bring students back to a good space where they are able to control their emotions and talk through what is going on and how they are feeling.

Ms. White shared,

> I've kind of always thought of [SEL] and approached it as learning how to be a member in a community and understanding your own emotions and humanity so that you can relate well to others' emotions and humanity. It's not necessarily, uh, I think it kind of often gets boiled down to, like, social skills and social scripts, and I don't think that that's always all-encompassing of what we would hope SEL is and how it's really, it can really be effective in helping kids be more successful in more areas of

their lives, um, because they understand how to approach different situations and navigate different scenarios a little bit better.

Ms. White highlighted how SEL can sometimes be viewed as relating simply to social skills but offered insight into why that is not appropriate.

Ms. Miller, one of the Rockwell specialist teachers, offered her definition SEL: “I think that the term [social emotional learning] describes the way that we learn to interrelate, with, uh, within our, our world or our society.” Ms. Miller added that SEL has much to do with regulating one’s emotions and understanding how they impact others. To conclude her definition of SEL, Ms. Miller added, “And how to navigate interpersonal conflict.”

Finally, members of the Rockwell staff who interacted with students in more informal settings, including Ms. Scott, Ms. King ,and Ms. Green, offered their definitions of SEL. Ms. Scott said, “I would just say that it's an additional, it's in addition to the curriculum, so that we teach students how to manage or control their emotions and behaviors.” Ms. King explained SEL in the following way: “It means to learn, like, social cues, to learn how to, um, social behaviors, emotional, I guess children, behaviors…” Ms. King did not finish her response but motioned in a way that meant she felt the researcher understood what she was saying. Lastly, Ms. Green defined SEL in two parts, the social component and the emotional component, saying, “Getting along with one another is the social, and the emotional is taking on what that certain child feels.” Ms. King and Ms. Green shared that they had never received any type of training on SEL, so the definitions they shared were more personal than academic.

The participants’ definitions of SEL were important to include as they provided the underpinning for all SEL-related work and initiatives and therefore connected directly to SEL

implementation. Although there were some similarities in their definitions, there was no consistent definition being used across Rockwell Elementary School.

The data presented in this section support the final theme, Inconsistencies. The data suggest that inconsistency, including mixed messages, competing priorities, an unclear relationship between SEL and academics, and a range of professional learning and foundational SEL knowledge, may have contributed to challenges with Rockwell's schoolwide SEL implementation.

## Summary

This chapter presented a selection of findings from this study. Four themes emerged from the data, which were gathered from two focus groups, seven one-on-one interviews, and the review of 10 documents. Throughout the data, it was overwhelmingly clear that SEL took many different forms, and each member of the school community played a role in the implementation of SEL, whether formally or informally, explicitly or implicitly. The study's findings indicate that not all individuals who worked within the Rockwell building were valued in the same way and that not all types of knowledge were appreciated and respected in the same way. Findings presented in this chapter suggest that there were individuals in certain roles whose voices dominated conversations in which knowledge was gained and decisions were made. This chapter highlighted that Rockwell had structures in place to support explicit SEL instruction, initiatives, and events that promoted schoolwide SEL. Additionally, the chapter presented data supporting that informal SEL happened across the school building and took place in spaces and places that may not even have been recognized by instructionally focused staff and school leadership.

Theme 1, Engaging the Whole School Community, tells the story of a hierarchy among school-based staff at Rockwell which undoubtedly placed leadership and instructionally focused staff at the top. These data uncovered the process of information sharing and school communication at Rockwell and offered insight into the school vision, which comprised the written vision statement as well as the unwritten school vision. The unwritten Rockwell vision presented itself through participant responses rooted in creating a supportive and caring environment for all individuals to thrive.

Theme 2, Organized SEL, identified Great Strides as the explicit SEL curriculum used at Rockwell. The data found that although there was time allotted on the master schedule for weekly Great Strides lessons, there were inconsistencies around the fidelity to teaching weekly lessons and possible gaps in the teachers and staff receiving the curriculum training and their access to the online platform. Findings presented under this theme were connected to common SEL practices and school events geared toward promoting SEL schoolwide. Theme 3, Informal SEL, included relationship building as SEL and how staff identity may have supported SEL in common spaces such as the main office, cafeteria, and recess yard, as well as classrooms.

Finally, the chapter presented data supporting Theme 4, Inconsistencies, which illuminated a disconnect across the school building regarding SEL, how it was incorporated within school structures and academics, and how it was viewed and valued by staff. Some participants discussed the integration of SEL into the academic blocks at Rockwell, whereas others described SEL and academics as being two separate entities. Ultimately, the data presented under this theme suggest a need to clarify what SEL looks like at Rockwell and to

ensure there is a baseline understanding of SEL across all staff members, due to the varying levels of prior SEL-related professional learning.

The next chapter considers how these findings support or contradict findings from other studies, offers implications of the research, acknowledges limitations, and provides recommendations for future research. The next chapter also suggests a new perspective and understanding of SEL that was not considered prior to conducting this study and that will strengthen future research and avoid further harm to marginalized groups.

# CHAPTER 5

# DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

> *By privileging the central authority of schooling, SEL is legitimizing dominant points of view that solidify existing race, class, and gendered social orders. Even with these well- intentioned efforts to address social and emotional learning, schools will continue to be institutions that mystify the colonial reality and place the onus of social and emotional health on the very young people whose social stressors have been shaped because of dispossession and marginalization*. (Camangian & Cariaga, 2022, p. 903)

I have had countless conversations with colleagues and academics about social and emotional learning (SEL) and core instruction, the need for connections and integration, and the obvious intersectionality of the two, yet one conversation in particular left me speechless. And it led me to question everything I thought I stood for and believed in about SEL, everything I preached, researched, and practiced. When discussing SEL with a colleague who understood the intense and urgent need to focus simultaneously on high-quality SEL and academic instruction, he said, “SEL may keep kids safe in the classroom, but learning to read will keep them safe in the world.” His words resonated profoundly. I had chills as his words sunk in. As an instructional coach, I had preached for years the importance of pausing academics to focus on SEL as often as needed, and I had also practiced this as a classroom

teacher. What had I done? Had I robbed my Black and brown students of precious instructional minutes and contributed unknowingly to the ever-widening opportunity gap in this country? I would be remiss if I did not mention this shift in my thinking, that traditional SEL frameworks may not be the most effective for urban schools, and if I did not take the time to provide my readers with both the conclusion to my findings as well as the recent learning that has entirely shifted my perspective and the implications of this work.

This chapter's epigraph by Camangian and Cariaga (2022) calling out traditional SEL frameworks as contributing to the already raced, classed, and gendered social orders present in schooling, partnered with the insight from my colleague shared earlier, establish the foundation for this conclusion. I write this so readers can prioritize the task of this chapter: to think about how social and emotional learning can be reimagined for urban school children in ways that dismantle the current structure of schooling and instead honor the cultures and identities of those who have been oppressed. If the narrative were shifted from marginalized urban school children needing to conform to, and behave in accordance with, the dominant point of view to empowering these same children to share their social and emotional intelligence in a way that honors their cultures and unique identities and knocks down the barriers preventing them from becoming the best versions of their true selves, then maybe SEL in urban schools would look very different. I ask readers to consider how the current transformative SEL (TSEL) framework could be used to improve the SEL implementation at schools like Rockwell. This study found that although the intention of having an SEL focus at Rockwell led to positive and beneficial outcomes, there were gaps in schoolwide implementation. TSEL will be considered throughout this chapter as a step in the direction of improvement.

This final chapter begins by revisiting my research questions and providing a brief overview of the study, followed by a summary of the findings. I then reconnect with the theoretical framework and place the study findings in conversation with the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. The implications of the findings for policy and different areas of practice are presented, along with suggestions for further research. The chapter concludes with some personal thoughts and reflections on the study.

## Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into how Massachusetts educators in one urban public elementary school made meaning of social and emotional learning and saw SEL alive throughout their school building. I aimed to uncover reasons why efforts to implement SEL in one urban school may, or may not, have been successful schoolwide. The following research questions framed this study:

- Research Question 1: How has SEL been integrated into school structures, curriculum, and daily interactions at Rockwell Elementary School?
- Research Question 2: How has Rockwell Elementary School followed the CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL, particularly focus areas 1A and 1B (“Build Foundational Support” and “Create a Plan”?

The setting for this study was Rockwell Elementary School, a public K–6 school located in the heart of a large urban area in Massachusetts and part of the Phillips Public School district. At the time of the study, Rockwell Elementary School served 318 students. According to the 2022 School Report Card, 87.8% of students were categorized as economically disadvantaged, 94.3% as high-needs, 49.4% as English learners (ELs), and

10.7% as students with disabilities (SWD). These data highlight the intersectionality present at Rockwell and other similar urban schools.

This study sought to hear from the adults working within the confines of the school building, from the classroom to the cafeteria, and to understand how their own identities and lived experiences may have worked for or against the implementation of social and emotional learning on a schoolwide level. Thirteen participants were interviewed one-on-one or met within a small focus group. Of these participants, three were classroom teachers, three were ESL/special education teachers, one was a specialist teacher, one was a family liaison, two were lunch monitors, one was an instructional coach, one was the school principal, and one was the school secretary. This study also included an in-depth document review. In total, 12 documents were reviewed, including the Rockwell master schedule, Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) rolling agenda, the Climate and Culture Leadership Team (CCLT) rolling agenda, the school Arc of Adult Learning, professional development (PD) rolling agenda, the ELA curriculum for Grades 3–6, the ELA curriculum for Grades pre-K through 2, the Quality School Plan (QSP), the staff website, the school clubs spreadsheet, the school clubs initiative description document, and the morning meeting one-page reference guide for staff. All the documents reviewed were the most current versions. Throughout data collection and analysis, I also engaged in memoing, yielding a total of 14 memos.

## Summary of Findings and Reconnection with Theoretical Framework

In this section, I present my findings in line with the research questions, which were the basis for my study. To begin, I share findings around the first research question: How has SEL been integrated into curriculum, school structures, and daily interactions at Rockwell Elementary School? Then I present the findings for Research Question 2: How has Rockwell

Elementary School followed the CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL, particularly focus areas 1A and 1B (“Build Foundational Support” and “Create a Plan”)?

**Research Question 1**

Research Question 1 sought to address how Rockwell Elementary integrated SEL throughout the school day and across the school building. The findings associated with this question were categorized into the following three themes: Organized SEL: Planned and Intentional, Informal SEL, and Inconsistency of Implementation. The CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL was one of the frameworks used for this study and was essential in analyzing the findings aligned with both research questions and therefore is referenced throughout this discussion.

The CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL is divided into three sections: organize, implement, and improve SEL. As the guide explains, “Developing a strong foundation for SEL helps ensure that efforts are sustained long term. This requires engaging the entire school community and developing a coordinated plan for implementation” (CASEL, 2023). The guide views SEL implementation for all as “both adults and students … actively cultivating their own social and emotional competencies” (CASEL, 2023). Finally, the tool emphasizes the need to constantly improve: “Continuous improvement is essential for quality implementation that's aligned to your school's needs. Here, teams use data to reflect and take action” (CASEL, 2023).

Since Research Question 1 focused on understanding SEL implementation at Rockwell, the implement section of the tool offered helpful framing, including how proper SEL implementation considers both students and adults within the school building. This study found that there were aspects of organized, planned, and intentional SEL present for

both students and adults at Rockwell that included the use of an explicit SEL curriculum, SEL practices (e.g., the CASEL SEL 3 Signature Practices), and school events used to promote SEL.

***Curriculum***

CASEL identifies 10 indicators of schoolwide SEL as evidence of high-quality, systemic implementation; two of these indicators are explicit SEL instruction and SEL integrated with academic instruction (CASEL, 2023).

**Great Strides Was the Explicit SEL Curriculum Used at Rockwell.** Great Strides is a research-based SEL curriculum for students in kindergarten through Grade 5. Of the 13 participants, 10 named Great Strides as the explicit curriculum. One had heard of Great Strides but did not know what it was, and two participants had not heard of the curriculum at all. The lunch monitors were the participants who were not familiar with the curriculum, and the secretary was the participant who had heard the name Great Strides but did not know anything about it. The instructional coach shared that the Brain Power curriculum was recently purchased for the newly added sixth grade at Rockwell since the version of the Great Strides program being used was exclusively focused on elementary Grades K–5. Participants shared that there was a weekly block on the Rockwell master schedule set aside for Great Strides lessons. The document review confirmed this to be true, as the individual classroom schedules had a weekly block on Wednesdays labeled “Great Strides,” and this block was the same across all classrooms.

The study findings revealed that although Great Strides was clearly used as the explicit SEL curriculum at Rockwell and that the majority of classroom teachers were implementing weekly lessons, there were still gaps in implementation. These identified gaps

included the following: it was hard to get Great Strides support during this time since all classes were teaching lessons throughout the school building; the academic pressure in the school was so high that Great Strides lessons were occasionally omitted from weekly plans; not all members of the Rockwell staff had received the appropriate training for the Great Strides curriculum; the Great Strides curriculum could not be used by Grade 6, and therefore that grade they did not have an explicit SEL curriculum to start the 2022–2023 school year; and the principal shared that some aspects of Great Strides could be strengthened such as using the weekly and monthly themes and announcements for coherence schoolwide. Ms. Thomas, a classroom teacher, explained that she often had to "push Great Strides lessons to the back burner" due to the strict academic requirements. Ms. Thomas also expressed a concern about the Great Strides curriculum: "I think some of the curriculum is very, wanting students to conform." Ms. Thomas explained that time restrictions did not always allow her to teach explicit SEL lessons, yet her response may have indicated that it was a combination of both academic pressure as well as personal beliefs about the Great Strides program that prevented this.

While conducting data analysis through the TSEL lens, I uncovered an additional gap. The data revealed no mention of updated Great Strides lessons being implemented in Rockwell classrooms in accordance with the current shift to TSEL and SEL as a lever for educational equity. In 2022, Great Strides published a free set of lessons for Grades K–8 aligned with learning for justice, which are available for download on their website under the title "Anti-Racism and Anti-Bias Resources: A Focus on Transformative SEL"; however, there was no trace of such a resource in the data collected. The fact that such a resource was

not being utilized at Rockwell—a Great Strides school with majority Black and brown students—raises questions.

**The ELA Curriculum at Rockwell Is Center for Grades K–2 and Explore for Grades 3–6.** This study focused considerably on explicit SEL instruction and how the chosen explicit SEL curriculum, Great Strides, was utilized in classrooms and across Rockwell Elementary School. The study also sought to understand how SEL and academics were related and to what degree SEL was integrated in the academic curriculums. For the purpose of this study, the ELA curricula for Grades K–2 and 3–6 were reviewed. The ELA curriculum currently implemented at Rockwell for Grades K–2 was Center, a PPS district-created curriculum, and for Grades 3–6 Explore, a nationally recognized ELA curriculum geared toward educating students in diverse district schools.

The document review found SEL standards and objectives for the majority of lessons within the Center curriculum. Each unit of this curriculum starts with an introduction, which maps out the standards being taught throughout each lesson and the unit overall. The standards were listed in the following order: ELA, speaking and listening, social studies, science, and SEL. The integration of SEL into the Center curriculum was clear, yet participant responses still varied when asked about the relationship between academics and SEL.

Similarly, the Explore curriculum was reviewed. Information related to lessons within the Explore curriculum was presented in the following format: guiding topics and big ideas, task, targets, text, content connections, habits of character/SEL focus, units, assessment, performance task, and materials. As various lessons were reviewed, it became evident that the Explore curriculum valued teaching students SEL competencies, such as empathy,

respect, integrity, responsibility, and collaboration, by affirming their cultural identities and placing these identities at the forefront of the learning. However, there was a clear disconnect between data that emerged from my review of the Explore curriculum and the participants' responses.

In conclusion, this study found that SEL was indeed integrated into Rockwell's ELA curriculum materials, yet teaching staff may not have been implementing curriculum in a way that effectively integrated the two.

### *School Structures and Daily Interactions*

School structures are closely tied to school operations and include areas such as the master school schedule structure, individual classroom schedule structures, the structure of teacher meetings, and the overall structure of a student's day. Daily interactions are harder to define; however, for the purpose of this study, I categorized daily interactions as ways adults and children interacted with one another and the structures that supported these interactions.

The structure of SEL practices as a means of enhancing daily interactions came up repeatedly as a topic throughout participant interviews and focus groups. The SEL practices identified included, but were not limited to, morning meetings, welcoming and closing rituals, and brain breaks throughout the day. The Rockwell principal explained that there had been PD around the CASEL SEL Three Signature Practices and that those practices were a focus for the school, ensuring that adults knew what they were and how to incorporate them throughout the school day. As noted earlier, the CASEL SEL Three Signature Practices include a welcoming routine or ritual, engaging strategies throughout the lesson/meeting/school day, and an optimistic closure (CASEL, 2019). While conducting the document review and analysis, it was evident that the CASEL SEL Three Signature Practices

were very much alive in the adult learning spaces at Rockwell. On the meeting agendas I reviewed, including those for PD, ILT, and CCLT, time was consistently set aside for a welcoming ritual and an optimistic closure.

Morning meeting was another SEL practice prominent throughout the data. The master schedule was structured in a way that allowed for a morning meeting each day, there was a dedicated Rockwell professional development training for teachers on how to structure and implement a successful morning meeting, and resources were shared with teachers. School events were the final piece of organized SEL at Rockwell. The data showed that there was a clear structure for events, including monthly Rockwell clubs meetings and weekly community meetings.

The theme Informal SEL was present throughout the data and included the subthemes "relationship building and sense of community as SEL" and "staff identity to support SEL." The data reflected that participants spoke a great deal about relationships with students, relationship building, and connecting with students as integral components of SEL implementation, particularly those connected to SEL through daily interactions.

"Staff identity in support of SEL" was a subtheme that arose during interviews. Both the Rockwell secretary and one of the participating lunch monitors shared how their role as a mother supported their knowledge and understanding of children and how to respond to them in varying situations. Both participants connected their maternal role and instinct to SEL and the way they interacted with students daily. Two teacher participants who were heavily involved in the school's SEL work were former PPS students, an identity that provided a different purpose for the work. One teacher participant shared her frustration about how her K–12 schooling in one of the wealthiest communities in Massachusetts was vastly different

from what her students were currently experiencing, and it was clear that this part of her identity drove her to do this work. Finally, one of the Rockwell ESL teachers discussed her identity as a Black Hispanic, Spanish-speaking woman and how students listened to and respected her. Given that, at the time of the study, approximately 63.1% of Rockwell students were Hispanic and 31.8% were African American, and that for over 50% of students, English was not their first language, it was obvious that this teacher's identity connected her to students in a way that other staff may not have been.

The final findings in support of Research Question 1 were connected to the theme, Inconsistency. Participants shared, and documents confirmed, that there were often mixed messages around how SEL was prioritized throughout the school, including how long and/or how often it was acceptable to teach explicit SEL lessons or engage in SEL practices. This study found many competing priorities, including the district priority surrounding equitable literacy instruction. As mentioned earlier, the relationship between SEL and academic standards at Rockwell was unclear, based on participant's responses, even though SEL standards were clearly incorporated into the ELA curriculum for Grades K–2 and 3–6. Finally, there was inconsistency around professional learning, including who received training during teacher preparation programs, during their career, and at Rockwell Elementary. Whom the training was offered to was also an area of inconsistency: Lunch monitors had not received any training in 4 years, the secretary shared that she had never received any SEL-related training, and even some of the teachers who had been new to Rockwell in the previous 1–3 years had not received certain SEL training that would have benefited their position(s).

Regarding the CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL, the study findings suggest that

Rockwell Elementary School had implemented some aspects of organizing for SEL, including building a foundation for SEL and fostering commitment to SEL. The areas where Rockwell saw gaps in SEL implementation, according to this guide, were engaging the entire school community, establishing an SEL team, and developing a communications strategy. In conclusion, it was difficult to identify who, whether an individual or a team, was leading the Rockwell SEL work—discussed further in the next section.

**Research Question 2**

This research question was addressed using both the CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL and Senge's (2006) theory of a learning organization to frame and analyze findings. Senge (2006) defined learning organizations as

> organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together. (p. 3)

Senge's theory includes five disciplines: systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, building a shared vision, and team learning. This study considered all five disciplines but paid particularly close attention to building a shared vision and team learning to promote successful schoolwide SEL implementation, which are closely aligned with area 1A, "Build Foundational Support," and 1B, "Create a Plan," from the CASEL Guide. Area 1A includes establishing an SEL team, providing foundational SEL learning opportunities, and two-way communication between the SEL team and all stakeholders. Area 1B in the CASEL guide includes establishing a shared vision among stakeholders, creating an SEL plan, and ensuring that the appropriate resources are available.

The data related to Research Question 2 were organized under the theme Engaging the Whole School Community. This theme includes four subthemes: “who is part of the Rockwell school community,” “who attends Rockwell school meetings and professional learning,” “the process for sharing information with staff,” and “shared vision.” Notably, both focus area 1B from the CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL, and the fourth discipline of Senge’s (2006) learning organization theory focus on building a shared vision.

When asked to define social and emotional learning, the majority of participant responses centered on teaching students the skills necessary to recognize and manage their emotions. Additionally, most participants mentioned teaching students how their emotions, behaviors, and/or actions impact other individuals around them and how to interact appropriately as a member of society. Eleven of the 13 participants offered their own definitions of SEL, one participant agreed with what had already been shared by other participants in her focus group, and another participant did not answer this question. It is certainly promising that the majority of participants were familiar and comfortable enough to define SEL in their own words, yet Rockwell lacked a common definition to ground SEL work schoolwide. To highlight this, I share a few examples of the SEL definitions offered by participants. Ms. Williams, a classroom teacher, shared that she viewed SEL as practices as well as instruction within the classroom. Ms. Davis, a specialist teacher, explained that she saw SEL as arming students with the tools they need for self-regulation. Mr. Smith defined SEL as “the learning of skills, or as we call them, like, soft skills, to be able to help individuals succeed in and out of the classroom.” Although there may be a common thread connecting these three definitions, it would greatly benefit Rockwell to agree on one common definition of SEL to focus and, in turn, strengthen the work as a whole.

Much of the CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL outlines the need for all members of the school community to be part of the work. The guide's overview of focus area 1A states,

> A schoolwide approach to SEL relies on the ongoing, collaborative effort of all staff, teachers, students, families, out-of-school time partners, and other community partners. This collaboration begins with establishing a strong foundation of support among all stakeholders. (CASEL, 2023)

Senge (2006) stated, "When you look carefully you find that most 'visions' are one person's (or one group's) vision imposed on an organization. Such visions, at best, command compliance—not commitment" (p. 192). Taken together, these findings make clear how imperative it is that a school community correctly identify—and all individuals be part of—the process for developing a shared vision.

Theme 4, Engaging the Whole Community, with a particular focus on the subtheme "shared vision," highlighted how Rockwell Elementary School was building foundational support and creating a plan for schoolwide SEL. The data showed that teaching staff and those in leadership roles at Rockwell were part of the most important meetings and conversations at the school. Lunch monitors, the school secretary, and paraprofessionals interacted daily with students in some of the most critical ways, yet their presence and voices were often missing. Inconsistencies emerged around how information was shared to ensure that all adults within the school building were supporting the goals, mission, and vision of the school, not working against it. The written vision statement was written by one small group of individuals, which included the principal, some teacher leaders, and one paraprofessional who was no longer a member of the school community. The unwritten school vision—to care deeply about supporting students to achieve their personal best in a respectful and loving

way—was more consistent across all participant responses and documents. An ethic of care was felt intensely through the data analysis process but was never referred to explicitly by participants. There is a clear need to formalize the SEL work being done at Rockwell, and that starts with establishing a dedicated team.

Question 6 of the interview and focus group protocol asked participants, “Is there a school team, or individual, leading the SEL work at your school? If so, please tell me more about the work that is being done and who is on the team.” This question received a variety of responses, including the school trauma team, school social workers, the school emotional impairment strand specialist, the instructional coach, the CCLT, and the principal. Some participants hesitated, with one participant, Ms. White, explaining that the school once had a SEL Leadership Team, but that team was now housed under CCLT. The review and analysis of the CCLT rolling agenda found no mention of the trauma team and did not include the emotional impairment strand specialist or social workers on the attendance list for any meeting. Clearly, Rockwell did not have, or had not communicated that it had, a leader of the SEL work for the school. Although participants indicated that there was some level of foundational SEL learning opportunities (another piece of focus area 1A), this work can only go so far without a clearly established team.

In conclusion, the findings indicate that although Rockwell had some components of the CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL, the absence of a SEL leadership team and a shared vision as a school were major gaps in this work that must be addressed for schoolwide SEL to be successful.

## Discussion of Findings

This section places the findings in conversation with earlier research on similar topics, as shared in Chapter 2. I use some of the themes and subthemes presented in Chapter 4 and in the summary of findings section of this chapter to organize this discussion.

### Explicit SEL Curriculum

The Great Strides curriculum varies according to grade level but consists of 22–25 weekly lessons. The model for lesson delivery is one lesson per week for 25-40 minutes depending on the grade level, with planned 5- to 10-minute follow-up activities targeting the same skill (Jones et al., 2017). Ten (77%) of the 13 participants in this study identified Great Strides as the explicit SEL curriculum used at Rockwell. However, of these 10 participants, only one, Mr. Smith, the school principal, reported that the weekly Great Strides block on the master schedule was "the minimum." No other participant mentioned any type of follow-up activities; in fact, both classroom teachers, Ms. Thomas and Ms. Johnson, mentioned that either they did not have enough time to complete an entire Great Strides lesson or, due to competing academic priorities, they sometimes omitted their Great Strides lesson from their instruction entirely. This study also found that the designated Great Strides block was written on the Rockwell School SY 2022–2023 master schedule as being 30 minutes long; therefore, if a lesson for a given grade was designed to last 40 minutes as mentioned earlier, that lesson would not fit the time frame presented by the school and would risk losing effectiveness.

According to the Great Strides program description, teacher training is provided through online modules. The program also frequently offers free webinars to staff at participating Great Strides schools for ongoing training (Jones et al., 2017). No staff member can gain access to the Great Strides resources and materials until the 2-hour training session

has been completed and a certificate of completion generated. Participants were asked about SEL-related training during their time at Rockwell. Ms. White spoke about the Great Strides training and reported that she had received a certificate. Ms. Williams, Ms. Clarke, Ms. Davis, and Ms. Johnson also mentioned having completed training for Great Strides online. Although it is less shocking that participants in non-teaching roles may not have received this training, Ms. Lewis is an example of a classroom teacher who, due to a lack of training, may not have been able to access the online portions of the program, therefore impacting successful Great Strides implementation for her students.

**Professional Learning**

According to "The Missing Piece: A National Survey on How Social and Emotional Learning Can Empower Children and Transform Schools" (Bridgeland et al., 2014, as cited in Greenberg et al., 2017), 95% of teachers who responded said that SEL is teachable, while 97% recognized that SEL can benefit students regardless of socioeconomic backgrounds. Taylor et al. (2017) found positive benefits for students of various socioeconomic and racial backgrounds, while Bridgeland et al. (2013) showed that teachers at high-poverty schools are even more likely to endorse SEL. Something is still lacking, however, since a national survey indicated that only about 50% of teachers received intentional SEL training (Bridgeland et al., 2013).

This study asked participants if they had received SEL training during their respective teacher preparation programs (if applicable), during their career, and/or during their time at Rockwell Elementary. Six participants reported that their teacher preparation programs did not include SEL courses, one shared that SEL-focused elective courses were available, and three teachers who attended pathway programs specifically designed for urban educators

reported that they had received SEL-focused training during their preparation programs. When asked about SEL training at Rockwell, participants referenced either Great Strides training when the program was implemented or the recent Think Space training, a partnership with the PPS district Office of Health and Wellness. Curious to understand more, I reviewed the professional development agendas for the 2022–2023 school year and found 17 learning objectives listed, of which only three, or approximately 18%, were connected to SEL.

**Relationships**

Fopiano and Haynes (2001) identified several important school climate factors contributing to healthy social, emotional, and academic development; among these factors are "adult nurturing, good peer relationships, and sensitive and responsive support services" (p. 51). Researchers have identified a direct correlation between how well students do in school and positive, caring adult relationships (Fopiano and Haynes, 2001). In this study, "relationship building and sense of community" was one of the subthemes that emerged. Relationship building with students was a highlight related to more informal, daily SEL. Ms. Thomas, Ms. Miller, Ms. Davis, Ms. Green, and Mr. Smith all identified relationships with students, particularly building relationships with students, as SEL.

Legette et al. (2022) reminded readers that student–adult relationships can be both positive and negative. It may be assumed that the study participants who referenced building relationships with students were speaking about positive relationships; however, there is no way to know how students feel without their voice, which was not present in this research. Ideally, positive student–teacher relationships are

> marked by warm interactions and open communication between youth and their teachers. These are regular interactions that confirm for students that their teachers

> care about them, are invested in their overall well-being, and their future success (Bakadorova & Raufelder, 2015). Positive student–teacher relationship experiences profoundly shape students' sense of belonging, which can lead to evidence of SEL skill development, greater participation in classroom lessons, and overall improvement in students' academic performance (Gregory & Weinstein, 2004; Hamre & Pianta, 2005). (Legette et al., 2022, p. 278)

The six-page Rockwell school club initiative information guide explained that clubs were designed to promote school bonding for students but also encouraged relationship building among staff. Staff members were encouraged to partner with a colleague and work together to design a club experience for students that was rooted in sharing the passion and interests of the adults. By connecting to share common interests, talents, and passions, adults strengthened relationships with diverse peers across the school building.

**SEL Through an Equity Lens**

One common critique, which aligns with the earlier epigraph by Camangian and Cariaga (2022), is that SEL programs do not address political and cultural assumptions and that curricula promote a western perspective (Hoffman, 2009). Critics have warned that teaching emotional skills may presume a single model of emotional competency and neglect to consider how a given curriculum engages with and reflects cultural diversity. Most SEL programs and curricula have been developed through a Eurocentric lens, which is extremely problematic since the five SEL competencies highlighted by CASEL may be expressed differently in different cultural contexts (Lantieri, as cited in Hoffman, 2009). This observation by Hoffman (2009) was evident in the data I collected for this study.

During their interviews, Ms. Thomas, Ms. Williams, and Ms. Davis all made this same point. Ms. Thomas shared that when she first started working in the Philips Public School district, the community partnership program she was part of had am SEL focus, but as she explained, “I think it was very whitewashed, and I think it was not realistic to the demographic that we're working with.” Ms. Williams shared similar thoughts during her interview, particularly about Great Strides: “I personally don't find Great Strides sufficient for the urban setting. I, I really just don't think it's relatable. The situations are not relatable to the kids.” Finally, Ms. Davis shared similar a sentiment, stating, “I do think we still need to look at our Black and brown children a little closer to see how, what other support we can give them other than the program that we have already.” The points are critical when thinking about the marginalized students being served in urban classrooms. Responding to these concerns, CASEL recently published reports and made resources available that highlight how SEL can be used as a lever for advancing educational equity. The shift toward transformative SEL (TSEL) is also exciting, as well as an addition of equity elaborations for each of the five competencies (CASEL, 2021). Yet, there was no mention of TSEL or these equity elaborations during participant interviews or the document review conducted for this study—a disheartening absence.

***Humanization***

Carmangian and Cariaga (2022) argued that “humanization confronts the systemically imposed, colonial, and dehumanizing consciousness that oftentimes manifests itself in students through manufactured self-hate, divide-and-conquer, and suboppression if it teaches students knowledge (and love) of self, solidarity, and self-determination” (p. 902). Their research suggests that CASEL’s five SEL competencies fit into the humanization framework

in the following ways: knowledge (and love) of self: self-awareness and self-efficacy; solidarity: social awareness and relationship building; and self-determination: responsible decision making, self-management, and growth mindset (Carmangian & Cariaga, 2022, p. 903). I include this here because the data from this study indicated that the members of the Rockwell school community care deeply about their work and the children they serve. Perhaps if SEL shifted to TSEL and were viewed through the lens of humanization, then schoolwide implementation would include all stakeholders and therefore be more successful.

## Implications

> *From the schoolhouse to the state house, we have emphasized the academic skills our students need. But overwhelming evidence demands that we complement the focus on academics with the development of the social and emotional skills and competencies that are equally essential for students to thrive in school, career, and life*. (The Aspen Institute, National Institute on Social, Emotional & Academic Development, 2019)

This qualitative study focused on one public urban elementary school and included the voices of teaching staff, school leadership, the school secretary, the family liaison, and lunch monitors because each of these adults played an important role in the lives of young learners. The purpose of this study was to gain insight into how Massachusetts educators in an urban public elementary school made meaning of SEL and understood how SEL was present in their work. I aimed to uncover reasons why efforts to implement SEL in the school may or may not have been successful schoolwide. The findings from this study have implications related to both policy and practice.

### Current State of SEL

Since the time data for this study were collected, there have been advances in SEL, particularly within the Phillips Public Schools district, that must be mentioned. As CASEL began providing more guidance on the shift to TSEL, the PPS district did the same. The PPS SEL competencies were updated in 2019 to include a transformative SEL approach. The transformative SEL strategies are represented by three pillars--developing and affirming positive identities, fostering agency, and building a sense of belonging—which align with the following SEL competencies: self-awareness, self-management, and social awareness. In 2023, the PPS district added two additional pillars in line with guidance from CASEL—collaborative problem-solving and curiosity—which aligned with the SEL competencies relationship skills and responsible decision making.

Other advances in SEL within the PPS district during the 2022–2023 school year consisted of more targeted work around the integration of SEL into academics. An updated "SEL in Literacy Instruction Guide" was released in November 2022, and the "Planning Tool for Creating SEL Learning Objectives" was shared in February 2023. Along with these tools, the Office of Health and Wellness was restructured and additional social, emotional, academic development (SEAD) coaches were hired. SEAD coaches are now regionalized to ensure that all schools within the district have access to this type of support.

Chapter 1 shared results from a 2017 search reviewing professional development offerings within the PPS district; this search yielded one result for a training on bullying prevention. I repeated this same search during the summer of 2023 and found nine professional development sessions offered to prepare for the upcoming school year. Four of

these PD offerings, listed as follows, focused on SEL, and some were offered two or three times:

- Overview of Transformative Social Emotional Learning and Adult SEL (offered three times)
- SEL Integrated into Academics with a Focus on ELA (offered three times)
- Co-Creating Think Spaces (offered twice)
- Culturally Responsive Behavior Management Series (offered once)

The PPS school district is not alone in their work to increase SEL-focused learning opportunities for teachers. Universities now offer SEL certificates and even master's degrees, including some local Massachusetts schools such as Endicott College, Bridgewater State University, and Merrimack College (2018).

**Implications for National Policy**

According to CASEL, there are two key pieces of federal legislation that support statewide and districtwide implementation of SEL: the American Rescue Plan (ARP) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

The American Rescue Plan was signed into law on March 11, 2021, by President Biden. "The ARP provides a historic investment in America's preschool through twelfth grade (P–12) schools in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to keep schools safely open, tackle learning loss and mental health" (American Recue Plan, 2021). ARP played a significant role in determining when and how schools were reopened during the pandemic, largely due to the availability of ESSER funds that were intended to be used to hire more teachers, tutors, and mentors, and addressing the mental health needs of students across the United States.

This study illuminated that not only do schools need to hire teachers, mentors, counselors, and other school-based staff using ESSER funds associated with ARP, but they also need to provide these newly hired individuals with the appropriate training so that they can better serve the mental health needs of students. The COVID-19 pandemic left many children in social isolation during their most critical years of schooling, and they are still transitioning back into normalcy. Hiring additional adults using ESSER funds can be an asset to schools, but as my study highlights, this can also complicate efforts when not done in a thoughtful manner. Any adult hired by a district or school must have proper onboarding, understand the daily operations, systems, and values of the school, and know how to support students in a non-harmful manner. Additionally, since ESSER funding is limited to only a certain number of years, my study points to the need to identify a consistent plan for what comes next. How will a school counselor, for example, create structures and systems and provide training to all members of the school community that will last even if their role does not?

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) supports SEL in a plethora of ways. Signed into law by President Obama on December 10, 2015, replacing the previous version of the law, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. According to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), ESSA Title 1 emphasizes well-rounded education and supports such as behavioral, counseling, and mental health programs. Under Title 11A, funds can be used for professional development for all educators, not only core academic teachers.

### Implications for State-Level Policies in Massachusetts

Conversations with urban educators at Rockwell Elementary School made clear that there must be more guidance from the district and the state around instructional minutes devoted to SEL and what exactly those minutes should entail. In Massachusetts, under legislation 603 CMR 27.00 27.04: Structured Learning Time Requirements, "every elementary school student is scheduled to receive a minimum of 900 hours per school year of structured learning time," and the PPS district requires a certain number of minutes to be devoted to English language arts, mathematics, and physical education according to grade level. The findings from this study suggest that state and district policy should view SEL as foundational learning in the elementary grades and therefore include a required number of minutes for SEL instruction. That said, there also needs to be guidance that distinguishes between explicit SEL instruction and SEL instruction that is integrated into the curriculum. The state needs to determine what is preferred, provide a rationale, and offer examples of standards, lessons, and curricula for successful implementation.

Additionally, given the intersectionality and complexity of urban schools, namely how race, gender, language, socioeconomic status, and family dynamics factor into students' lived experiences, the findings from this study highlight the need for a policy requiring TSEL-related coursework for all educators but especially those teaching Black and brown students. This study found that of the 10 participants with education in the field of teacher preparation, only three participants who had completed programs with a focus on urban education received this type of training. Given that teachers may move to various districts during their career, all educator preparation courses should include coursework focused on SEL and the complexities of urban schools so that every educator is prepared to teach all

students. In Massachusetts, this is particularly important since programs such as the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO) exist in 30 primarily suburban districts in the Greater Boston area. All teachers must be prepared to educate all students. This point was crystallized by Legette et al. (2022):

> A teacher's capacity to develop and negotiate relationship skills that acknowledge and actively confronts Black youth's dehumanization in schools is necessary for a transformative SEL approach to improve Black students' schooling outcomes. In a racially oppressive society, such skill development requires racial literacy, or a growing understanding of the meanings accorded to race and racism for shaping everyday life (Stevenson, 2014). To this end, teachers' own social–emotional competencies are implicated, such that their effectiveness in implementing TSEL (Transformative SEL) requires that they have developed awareness of how race operates in their own lives, and the ways that they may participate in racially oppressive systems. Thus, the training that teachers receive for SEL (i.e., teacher preparation programs or professional development) is key to effectively building a humanizing learning environment that counters the reproduction of anti-Black racist social relations. (p. 280)

In addition, James Comer, a Black SEL pioneer, is referenced in the quote below speaking to the importance of white educators understanding Black sociality, again emphasizing the need for high-quality training during teacher preparation programs and throughout career development.:

> For Comer, teaching future white teachers to understand Black sociality was the first step toward making schooling a homeplace where school–family and teacher–student

> alliances could flourish. Writing a generation later, Love (2019) echoes Comer's conclusion that teacher preparation must be dramatically reimagined if schooling is to become a homeplace where children of color can thrive. Also echoing Comer, Darling-Hammond (2020) insists that white teachers must willfully learn from students' lived experiences if education policy reforms are going to succeed in protecting and loving children of color. (Kearl, 2022, p. 193)

Finally, there needs to be a district policy to invest in the professional learning of non-teaching staff. Young learners interact with a variety of adults within the school building every day, and this study found that these adults need to be equipped with the same tools that their classroom teacher and school leader counterparts possess. The message that schools and districts send by excluding certain roles from learning opportunities and conversations is deafening. This study suggests that this is where Massachusetts should be directing some of its ESSA funds.

Enacting a policy is the first step, yet ongoing accountability for districts and schools to follow the policy may be lacking in some cases. In November 2017, the Massachusetts Guidelines on Implementing SEL Curricula were revised. This study illuminated that not all guidelines are followed in every school in Massachusetts. As the study findings suggest, it is imperative to include non-teaching staff in SEL-related professional development and training. According to DESE's Guidelines on the Implementation of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Curricula K–12,

> All adult members of a school community should receive training so everyone can support, model, and reinforce SEL skills in a variety of settings beyond the

> classroom. Investment in initial and continuing staff development for all school personnel is important for program success.
>
> To the extent possible, districts and schools should create opportunities for cross-system professional development that includes educators, administrators, counselors, school nurses, cafeteria workers, custodians, bus drivers, athletic coaches, advisors to extracurricular activities, support staff, and paraprofessionals. (DESE, 2017, p. 10)

The preceding quote aligns with the findings of this study, which brought to light the need to put accountability measures in place to ensure these important guidelines are enforced across school districts in Massachusetts.

Massachusetts has improved SEL access, quality, and implementation over the years. In July 2016, Massachusetts was selected to participate in the Collaborating States Initiative (CSI), organized by CASEL. The main focus of CSI was to establish "a common language and shared vision of positive social and emotional competencies for all students" (CASEL, 2018a). The work included revising the Massachusetts curriculum frameworks for both mathematics and ELA/literacy, updating the guidelines for implementing SEL curricula as discussed earlier, exploring the addition of SEL competencies to the Massachusetts teacher rubrics and continuing to integrate SEL throughout other state initiatives. The state, undoubtedly a leader in this work, has a dedicated website full of information and links to SEL-related resources. This study concluded, however, that these resources may not be getting into the hands of the right people—for example, school leaders and teachers. As an instructional coach in a Massachusetts school who has a passion for SEL, I am embarrassed to say that, as I dug deeper into the DESE website, I found documents I had never seen

before but that were nevertheless vital to my work as a practitioner and researcher. Thus, this discovery points to the need to make these resources known and readily available for all school-based staff.

### Implications for School District Policy

Both Massachusetts and the PPS district prioritize the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) framework, which has been recommended by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). Under a new superintendent, the PPS district offices were reorganized in the summer of 2019 to better meet the needs of students and implement a whole child approach. Since 2019, PPS has added an Office of Health and Wellness, which includes physical and health education, wellness policy and promotion, and social emotional learning and instruction. This study found evidence of representation from this office at Rockwell Elementary School through the role of a district liaison, with the title of SEAD (social, emotional, academic development) coach, who was responsible for providing coaching on the implementation of Think Spaces for teachers of students in kindergarten through Grade 2 and any specialist teachers who opted in. However, as this study illuminated, there was little time allotted for this work to be done during administratively directed adult learning time, such as professional development and common planning time. Consequently, teachers often engaged in this work during their own time both before and after school, during lunch breaks, and during self-directed preparation and development time. Although the formation of the Office of Health and Wellness as well as the newly added position of SEAD coach are to be celebrated, there is still a need to prioritize this work and send the appropriate message to teachers and staff by including this focus in the Arc of Adult Learning school year plan. Additionally, this study reinforced the need to have representation

from the Office of Health and Wellness at all school-based meetings with district officials and liaisons. The participants in this study highlighted confusion around the relationship between SEL and academics, yet this would not have been the case if all district officials and school leaders were on the same page during walkthroughs. The work will not move forward if it is done in isolation.

## Implications for Practice

There is a myriad of implications for practice. In this section, I discuss implications for practice specific to Rockwell school systems and structures, implications for curriculum, and implications for out-of-school time programming.

### *Rockwell Elementary School*

Rockwell served as the research site for this study, so although the findings have implications at the national, state, and district levels, the most immediate changes should occur at the school level. Clearly, Rockwell would benefit greatly from transforming into a learning organization. To begin, it is critical that the Rockwell school community come together to redefine the school vision. The findings from this study revealed that not all teachers and staff knew the written vision statement or how to access it through the school website and that many voices were left out when the statement was crafted. Additionally, participants shared that this vision statement was written approximately 5 years earlier, during the 2018–2019 school year. With the turnover of staff, changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, and various advances in the field of education, this vision may no longer be relevant. Ideally, school leadership, teachers, non-teaching staff, students, families and partners would come together to craft a statement and vision that feels most appropriate for where Rockwell is today and where it is headed. It is vital for every individual to take

part in this process if the school vision is to be more than just a statement written on a website. For a vision to come to life, it must be shared and felt through all that is done within the school community. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2016) urged schools to transform into learning organizations, stating,

> A school as a learning organization has a shared vision that gives it a sense of direction and serves as a motivating force for sustained action to achieve individual and school goals. Having a shared vision is more an outcome of a process than it is a starting point—a process that involves all staff, students, parents and other stakeholders. (p. 2)

Framing shared vision as an outcome of a process is a helpful way to think about this work. This study's findings indicate that Rockwell would benefit greatly from transforming into a learning organization with a shared vision that gives a sense of direction schoolwide.

Crafting a shared vision for Rockwell Elementary is a strong start, but that is not where engaging the whole school community should end. School-level implications from this study also include engaging the entire Rockwell staff in the same TSEL-focused professional development and training focused ideally on this major shift to transformative SEL and how vital it is for all students, but particularly the Black and brown students whom Rockwell serves. If Rockwell were to truly transform into a learning organization, this would be the work of team learning. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2016) explained the importance of promoting team learning and collaboration among staff: "Neuroscience confirms that we learn through social interaction. Team learning and collaboration are central to the school as a learning organization and to the pedagogical development of teachers and support staff" (p. 4). Shifting toward team learning, as a whole

school community, will ensure that there is shared language used with students across all spaces in the school building and that there is a clear response to student behaviors and meeting diverse mental health needs. These professional development sessions would also be an excellent time to hear from non-teaching staff (e.g., lunch monitors and the school secretary) to learn more about their identities and lived experiences, which may enhance the SEL work being done in classrooms. Having these conversations and sharing best practices, regardless of role, through the process of team learning as a learning organization is paramount.

When considering implications at the school level from a critical justice perspective—which takes into account how society is divided by power dynamics and systems of power and privilege—a learning organization that values all members of the school community as important would be one step toward deconstructing certain systems of power and privilege within the school.

The data collected that addressed Research Question 2 indicated that the Rockwell school does not have a clearly established leader of SEL work. Given the array of participant responses, there is a need to clarify who, whether a team or an individual, is responsible for schoolwide SEL. The SEL lead, or TSEL lead, at Rockwell should have a place in all meetings connected to instruction, climate, culture, and operations. This is necessary to ensure that TSEL work is being done appropriately and consistently and to educate various stakeholders, from district leadership to school partners and everyone in between, who may not be aware of the shift to TSEL. If implemented correctly, this can truly benefit Rockwell as a whole.

Finally, Rockwell must continue to hold SEL-focused events for all grade levels, but adults must make certain that these events are consistent and work in partnership with the SEL-focused work being done in classrooms and other school spaces. The district SEAD coach should be working with teachers across the school building, not just in lower grades, and should be part of all instructionally focused school meetings and walkthroughs. The SEAD coach should also have designated time during teacher common planning time meetings and professional development to convey the importance of this work. Rockwell needs to make this a priority.

### ***Instruction and Professional Learning***

This study found that urban educators at Rockwell were often unsure how to manage all the competing priorities with which they were presented. I believe that school and district leaders need to do a better job connecting SEL with the academic standards and subjects. Based on the document review in this study, it was clear that much of this work had already been done, yet, according to participant interviews and focus group responses, gaps remained. School districts and leadership must present teachers with professional learning opportunities focused on how to teach SEL through academics, emphasizing that the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive. If framed through the lens of school as a learning organization, then a shared vision that provides direction for the work would support teachers and staff as they transition from attending professional development sessions because they are told to, to learning as a team because they want to and are highly motivated to do so.

### ***Including All Voices***

To begin deconstructing systems of power and privilege in schools, there needs to be a concerted effort by school leaders to critically examine their school communities and

ensure that they are including individuals representing the many roles in school meetings, professional learning opportunities, and other places and spaces where conversations are impacting school systems and structures that affect students. This study found that roles such as school secretary and lunch monitor are often left out of these conversations and spaces, yet these individuals interact with students in vitally important ways and bring much of their own multiple identities into the school space. The voices of non-teaching staff should be honored, respected, and listened to in the same way the voices of teaching staff and school leadership are. Oftentimes, individuals serving in roles such as lunch monitors are also members of the community the school serves, therefore placing these individuals in unique positions to speak to the needs of the community in ways others may not be able to.

### *Socially Constructed Identities*

It is important to discuss how socially constructed identities impact the teaching, learning, and implementation of SEL. For example, educators must be aware of how gender, particularly gender norms, play a role in the SEL development of a student. One way this can be done is by becoming critical consumers of the curriculum. It is imperative that school districts and leaders find the right explicit SEL curriculum for urban school children, if an explicit curriculum is best for the students—one that celebrates and honors their identities. In some cases, it may be more beneficial for districts and schools to do the work of creating a curriculum alongside various stakeholders. Such a curriculum for an urban setting should recognize the real experiences of students and their communities, such as social alienation and systemic harm, and celebrate their complex identities, including the unique ways various cultures interact socially, view success, and experience happiness.

## Limitations and Recommendations

### Limitations

As mentioned in Chapter 3, this study had limitations. Collecting data at only one school, utilizing a school that I have a personal connection to as my research site, hiring a research assistant to conduct the interviews and focus groups to comply with the PPS district's strict policy, and the challenging recruitment of participants were all major limitations.

As I reflect on this research, particularly my data analysis and my recent personal learnings, I have identified an additional limitation of this research: my negligence in not including, from the beginning, the voices of scholars critical of traditional SEL frameworks, which would have contributed to the design of this study. When I conducted the bulk of this research between 2016 and 2018, I relied heavily on the CASEL guide to inform my understanding of SEL, and I honored the voices of the many SEL champions involved in the work. Not until I read more closely the scholarly works focused on transformative SEL did I begin to recognize names of individuals with varying perspectives. Drake and Oglesby (2020), Camangian and Cariaga (2022), and Simmons (2018) are just some of the scholars I would like to pay tribute to now. These scholars, though critical of many traditional SEL frameworks, still recognized the transformative power of SEL while cautioning that "despite containing transformational potential, current SEL frameworks are designed from vantages that are more likely to protect the emotionality of white teachers than the emotional wellness and mental health of students of color" (Kearl, 2022, p. 192). Had I challenged my own perspective and considered these scholars' arguments, such as the need to provide a context for conflicts due to racism and white supremacy, I believe that the design of this study would

have been stronger. Additionally, although transformative SEL and SEL through an equity lens set the stage for this study and the analysis of findings, a limitation that must not be overlooked is that this study failed to center these frameworks and the power they hold to truly change the SEL work being done in schools.

Furthermore, I must acknowledge my own biases and perspective as a white, middle-class, cisgendered, heterosexual woman. Although I have engaged in ongoing personal self-reflection, growth, learning, and unlearning, I do come to this research with biases.

Finally, although this study explored the inner workings at one urban public elementary school in Massachusetts through adult participant interviews and focus groups as well as a document review, a school is only a building without children to teach, and the voices of those children were left out of this study—an enormous limitation that must be considered.

**Recommendations**

Future research is needed to better understand the daily operations of urban schools both regarding SEL and in other contexts. This study included the voices of 13 participants, nine of whom were teachers or school leaders. Given the challenges recruiting non-teaching staff, coupled with the power of their responses, I believe strongly that this is just the beginning of such work. I hope to be a part of and see future research studies that interview members of the school community serving in roles that include, but are not limited to, lunch staff, custodial staff, bus drivers, bus monitors, crossing guards, nurses, student teachers, itinerants, out-of-school time partners, hallway monitors, and deans of discipline.

Families and caretakers must be included in future research as well. Studies focusing on the thoughts, feelings, and recommendations of families and caretakers of students in

marginalized communities should be conducted. Likewise, there needs to be an in-depth examination of how SEL competencies are, or are not, present in various communities and if SEL supports or contradicts cultural values.

Given the current state of SEL and the shift toward a transformative approach, future research should investigate the impact of transformative SEL on students over time. A longitudinal study that follows Black and brown children from elementary school through high school and beyond who have attended schools with strong transformational SEL approaches is needed. Additionally, future research should explore the impact of early career teachers who have had extensive training in transformative SEL during their teacher preparation programs and continue to deepen their learning through professional development opportunities with the same focus. The same type of research could be conducted following school leaders who take a transformative SEL approach.

This study highlighted the need to invest in all members of the school community by providing professional learning opportunities, regardless of role, and by honoring the voices of all staff as important. Future research is needed to explore the correlation between investing in all members of the school community by providing focused professional development, training, and coursework, and the retention and professional growth of those individuals. If schools invested in, and prioritized, school lunch monitors, for example, maybe some of these individuals would go on to become paraprofessionals or even teachers—which would be powerful.

Finally, as a White female educator, it is my responsibility to speak directly to my fellow White and female teachers of SEL. Here, I offer some warnings along with opportunities for future research. According to the National Center for Education Statistics

(2023), 80% of K–12 public school teachers in the United States identify as White. Seventy-seven percent of public school teachers across the country are female. However, less than half (46%) of the K–12 student population is White (NCES, 2023). These statistics are important to consider when implementing SEL, since national student demographics do not match the national demographics of teachers, therefore creating a dangerous situation for students. I encourage my White and female counterparts to ask the question, Who benefits from SEL instruction? Additionally, it is important to contemplate the following, "SEL programs that assume White middle-class behaviors as the standard by which everyone should be measured pose problems for schools that serve racially and culturally diverse students" (Forman et al, 2022, p. 354). Prior to implementing SEL in schools, it is the job of educators to be critical consumers of curricula and standards, as well as the identified SEL skills and competencies "that articulate what students should know and be able to do for academic success, school and civic engagement, health and wellness, and fulfilling careers" (CASEL, 2023). Since "White teachers often view their students and approach SEL through an uncritical lens of Whiteness" (Forman et al, 2022, p. 356), it is all too easy to perpetuate harmful systems and structures if we are not hypervigilant. It is our responsibility to consider the multiple identities within our schools and classrooms, connect with families and communities, listen to understand, challenge inequities when we are faced with them, and allow all students to be the emotional beings they are regardless of race, ethnicity, gender identity, gender expression, socioeconomic status, dis/ability, religion, and other social identities. Dr. Shereen El Mallah's words speak directly to this conversation: "I have a fierce love for the relational and emotional parts of ourselves that cannot be neatly or formulaically wrangled into predetermined lessons and learning objectives" (El Mallah, 2022, p.50).

While conducting this research and reviewing SEL-related literature, it became clear that additional research is needed, particularly research focused on how SEL can be used to support White teachers in gaining cultural competence. It is possible that SEL is better suited as a tool for dealing with Whiteness and disrupting color evasiveness. In a recent study exploring how school leaders use SEL to disrupt Whiteness, a common theme emerged: White teachers were defensive when conversations about race surfaced. The researchers "observed that defensiveness and shame halted White teachers' ability to learn about race and racism, but framed SEL strategies as a support for teachers to stay engaged during emotionally difficult sessions. (Forman et al, 2022, p. 378). Forman et al.'s (2022) offers a compelling take on how SEL can be implemented with teachers, through adult learning spaces, as a means of supporting adults, specifically White educators, in managing their emotions while engaging in conversations around race, ethnicity, and culture. It would be interesting to see more research conducted on this phenomenon.

## Conclusion

I recommend that urban schools redefine SEL expectations within their buildings and work to ensure that all adults, regardless of role, are truly invested in and provided with appropriate learning opportunities that will foster a deep understanding of TSEL and the role of all individuals in this work.

This study serves as an urgent call to action. We cannot wait for urban district and school leaders to make the necessary changes. Urban school educators must begin prioritizing TSEL and pushing back on traditional SEL approaches when they do not serve the diverse needs of urban students. Now is the time for change.

It was an honor and a privilege to conduct this study and share in conversations with the 13 passionate professionals from the Rockwell Elementary School community, as well as review and analyze documents that tell a story of a dedicated cohort of individuals committed to the well-being and success of their students. I conclude this study with these final words: SEL is complex. Transformative SEL provides a promise to Black and brown children that we see them, and we are working toward a better world for them. Transformative SEL also provides a promise to teachers that when we know better, we do better. SEL alone may not be the answer urban schools are looking for, but we will not know for sure until implementation is strengthened on a schoolwide level, focused on transformation, and acts as a lever for educational equity.

# APPENDIX A

## RECRUITMENT CORRESPONDENCE

Hello,

My name is Molly Duffy. I am a doctoral student at the University of Massachusetts Boston in the Educational Leadership department. I am conducting research on social and emotional learning (SEL) in urban schools and I am inviting you to participate in either a one-on-one interview or a focus group with other individuals at your school. The questions I will ask you in either context will be focused on SEL, specifically the types of training and development you have had in this area and how SEL is implemented at your school. You may choose to skip any question you do not have an answer for or do not feel comfortable sharing with me.

Please note, your part in this research is confidential. The information gathered for this study will not be published or presented in a way that would allow anyone to identify you.

If you are currently working at the Rockwell elementary school and employed by Phillips Public Schools, you are eligible to participate in this study. All participants will receive a $15 Amazon gift card, delivered via email to the address of the participant's choice, as compensation for your time immediately following your interview or focus group.

If you have any questions or research-related concerns, please contact me at Molly.Wiseman001@umb.edu or join my information session on (Date & Time) via Zoom to learn more. You may find the link for that information session here. Registration is not required.

Clicking the link provided in this email will prompt you to select a time slot for your interview or focus group. Once your time is selected, you will receive a calendar invitation and Zoom link from me.
(link goes here)

I sincerely look forward to hearing from you.

Molly Duffy
University of Massachusetts Boston
Molly.Wiseman001@umb.edu

APPENDIX B

SAMPLE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Script prior to interview:

*I'd like to thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. As was mentioned in the email I sent, the purpose of my study is to gain insight into how MA educators in underperforming urban elementary schools make meaning of SEL. I aim to uncover reasons why efforts to implement SEL in schools have not been successful schoolwide. Our interview today will last approximately 30 minutes during which I will ask you a series of questions related to SEL. Your answers to these questions will remain anonymous. At the close of my study I will share a report with you and the other participants along with recommendations for improving schoolwide SEL implementation, if any.*

Please let me know if you are comfortable with me audio recording our conversation today.
Yes _____ No ______

If Yes - *Thank you. Please let me know if at any time you would like me to turn off the recorder to keep something that you would like to share off the record.*

If No - *Thank you for letting me know. This session will not be recorded, I will simply take notes of our conversation.*

(Begin recording if consent provided)
*Before we begin, do you have any questions for me? (Provide time to discuss questions) If at any time throughout the interview, or the course of this study, you have questions please let me know. I am always happy to share more information and speak with you about my study.*

Interview Questions

Introductory Questions

1. Please state your name and role at the school.
2. How many years have you been in this role?
3. How many years have you been at the Rockwell?
4. How long have you been working within Phillips Public Schools?
5. Have you worked in any other school districts? If so, which ones, for how long and in what capacity?
6. What is your highest level of education?

7. Where did you attend school? (high school, college, and graduate school)
8. (If teaching staff) Which MA teaching licenses do you currently hold?
9. Do you speak any other languages, if so, which ones?
10. What is your cultural background?

Key Questions

1. Please define SEL.
2. When you hear the phrase SEL, what do you think about?
3. What type of SEL training or professional development, if any, have you received during your teacher preparation and throughout your career?
4. What type of SEL training or professional development, if any, have you received during your time at the Rockwell?
5. Do you have an explicit SEL curriculum at the Rockwell? If so, what curriculum do you use? Can you explain a bit about implementation?
6. Is there time allotted at the Rockwell for all staff (from school leadership to teachers and support staff) to collaborate with one another?
7. Is there a school team or individual leading the SEL work at your school? If so, please tell me more about the work that is being done.
8. What is the school's vision statement?
9. Did you have a voice in developing the vision statement?
10. Have you engaged in whole staff SEL professional development during this school year?
11. Is there a culture of learning present in the school building? (*Do people learn because they want to or learn because they are told to?)*
12. Is there time on the daily schedule dedicated to SEL? How often? What might an SEL block on a teacher's schedule consist of?
13. How frequently, and in what settings, do you and other teachers/staff speak about SEL?
14. What types of SEL related support come from the district?

Closing Questions

1. Is there anything else you feel I have missed that you would like to add with regard to SEL?
2. Do you have any questions about anything I asked or that we discussed that you would like clarified at this time?

Script at the end of the interview:

*Our time together has come to a close. Thank you, once again, for participating in this study. If any questions arise in the upcoming days or weeks, feel free to reach out to me. If you*

*referenced any documents during our conversation that you would like me to view, please send them directly to me at Molly.Wiseman001@umb.edu.*

(end recording)

## APPENDIX C

## LIST OF DEDUCTIVE CODES

1. Explicit curriculum
2. Professional Development
3. Training
4. District
5. School Leadership
6. School Vision
7. Common Spaces
8. Daily schedule
9. SEL
10. Implementation
11. Trauma
12. Support
13. Relationships
14. Academics
15. School Events

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