The University of Chicago

**Analyzing SEL Implementation in Title I Schools During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic took a major toll on the mental health of students and teachers, especially low-income students. Historically, schools have supported student and teacher wellbeing through social and emotional learning (SEL), which is the process through which people develop social and emotional skills such as self-management and relationship skills. Drawing on interviews with teachers from across the United States, this study focuses on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on SEL implementation in Title I schools. Using CASEL's Guide to Schoolwide SEL as the basic SEL framework for schools, this thesis examines teachers' experiences of implementing SEL during the pandemic. This research finds that only schools that had fully integrated SEL into the school structure continued their SEL practices, while teachers created new SEL techniques and methods in response to the pandemic. Policy recommendations include integrating SEL into school structures and incorporating teacher voice and leadership into SEL planning and implementation.

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Schools in the United States moved classes online in March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, causing disruptions in educational practices and leading to a major mental health crisis for everyone in schools, especially low-income and minority students (Hamilton et al., 2020; Shah et al., 2020; Holingue et al., 2020). Given the impact on students' mental health, schools began to focus more on supporting students' wellbeing through social and emotional learning (SEL). School leaders and teachers had to rethink school structures and invent new creative ways of supporting students. Research has shown that social emotional learning, which is defined as the process of developing social and emotional skills such as self-awareness and self-regulation, has been an increasingly important part of schools (CASEL, 2013; Hamilton et al., 2019; Kendziora & Yoder, 2016). Quality SEL implementation can have a positive impact on many student outcomes, including improving academic success, emotional skills, and behavior (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Durlak et al., 2011). Due to the negative impact of the pandemic on the emotional wellbeing on both students and teachers, SEL had an even bigger role to play in creating a welcoming school environment during the 2020-2021 schoolyear.

There is a growing body of literature that examines the impact of COVID-19 on schooling and education, specifically the changes to academic structures (Hamilton et al., 2020; Middleton, 2020; Katzman & Stanton, 2020; García & Weiss, 2020). Yet none of this research has addressed what SEL implementation has looked like during the pandemic. While existing surveys of teachers analyze the general impact of moving online and the teachers' experience during the pandemic, the research fails to address how teachers experience SEL implementation (Hamilton et al., 2020).

In this study, I will use 15 semi-structured, hour-long interviews with teachers from around the country to build on our understanding of the impact that COVID has had on SEL

implementation. These teachers work at Title I schools, which receive funding from the government based on the percentage of low-income students the school serves. I analyzed the differences in formal and informal SEL implementation in schools, using CASEL's Guide to Schoolwide Implementation as a framework for SEL implementation. I find that while schools prioritized SEL implementation over academics, the burden of implementation often fell to teachers, who created new and innovative techniques for supporting their students. Formal, schoolwide SEL programs disappeared unless they were fully integrated into the organizational structure of the school. Teachers created new informal systems to both fill the gaps left by the school and meet the increased emotional needs of their students. These findings reveal teachers' ability to creatively adapt and build methods to support their students' wellbeing, as well as the ways in which schools can best support teachers' SEL implementation.

## Background

### Life during COVID-19

Schools in the United States began to conduct classes online in March 2020 in response to increasing COVID-19 cases in the United States, with statewide school closures beginning as early as March 16th (Education Week, 2020). The first outbreak of the coronavirus occurred in December of 2019 and the World Health Organization (WHO) announced it to be a worldwide pandemic on March 11, 2020 (Peirlinck et al., 2020). By April 7th, 50 states had closed schools and moved classes online, with unclear return dates (Adolph et al., 2021; Alrutz, 2020). Several states reduced and waived requirements around grading and testing for the 2019-2020 school year (Alrutz, 2020). Schools then spent the summer building multiple plans for the coming school year due to the extreme uncertainty (Bailey, 2020; Darling-Hammond, Schachner, & Edgerton, 2020; Guthrie et al., 2020).

There were three options proposed for school formats in the 2020-2021 school year: fully online, fully in-person, or a hybrid model (Bailey, 2020). For fully online classes, teachers conducted video calls with their students during scheduled times. This format was called synchronous online learning. Other schools chose to have asynchronous online classes, where teachers provided the students work to do on their own time, with no formally scheduled class time. For the schools that did return to in-person classes, there were significant changes to the format of the school, such as reduced class sizes, increased space between each desk, as well as other safety measures (Guthrie et al., 2020). Hybrid models offered students a combination of online and in-person classes (Darling-Hammond, Schachner, & Edgerton, 2020). They generally involved students taking classes online for part of the week and going in-person to school for the rest of the week. Oftentimes, the hybrid model required the school to rotate students through the school in order to accommodate the smaller class sizes.

Online school required administrators and teachers to make new decisions about how to run their school. These decisions ranged from how to measure attendance to whether students needed to keep their cameras on during class. Hamilton et al. (2020) found that there was great variety in the ways in which schools handled online learning. Most schools reduced the amount of content covered in classes, with only 12% of teachers covering the full curriculum mandated by the state.

The pandemic negatively affected the mental health of people of all ages in different ways (Serafini et al., 2020; Torales et al., 2020; Rothe et al., 2021). Children and adolescents who did not have pre-existing mental health conditions reported higher stress and worse mental health (Rothe et al., 2021). 27% of parents report worsening mental health for themselves (Patrick et al., 2020). Higher income was also found to be protective against the negative effects

of the pandemic on mental health, as people with higher income did not face stress around issues such as food and financial security (Holingue et al., 2020).

**Racism and Inequality during the Pandemic**

While this paper is focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is also important to understand the other major historical events that occurred during the transition to online school. Due to increased attention focused on racism in the United States, teachers had to prepare for charged conversations around race and inequality. Inequity and racism are ingrained in the history of the United States, with people of color constantly fighting for their rights and lives. At the end of May 2020, in the middle of the pandemic, protesters marched in response to recent videos of police brutality against people of color, which raised awareness around the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) (Gibson et al., 2020). These protests were widespread, with an estimated 6 to 10% of the adult population of the US attending at least one protest (Buchanan et al., 2020). While no research has been released regarding the impact of the BLM movement on the mental health of students of color, there is a consensus on the negative emotional effects of racism and police brutality (Berry, Tobón & Njoroge, 2021).

The teachers in this study worked at Title I schools, where they worked with predominantly low-income students and students of color. Even before the pandemic, these students dealt with significant barriers to education. Low income students and students of color often face challenges in school due to teachers' negative biases (Fish, 2019; Annamma, 2017; Willis, 1977). These students generally have worse outcomes than their white, privileged peers (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Beyer, 2017). Additionally, some SEL practices, such as restorative justice, are less likely to be implemented in schools with predominantly students of color (Payne et al., 2015).

Low-income students of color have encountered many challenges during the pandemic, beyond those faced by their privileged peers (Bylander, 2020; Ambrose, 2020). Many low-income students did not have access to strong Wi-Fi, which prevented them from easily taking online classes (Hamilton et al., 2020; Middleton, 2020). Additionally, some students did not have the technology necessary to be in class, as some households share one computer. Some schools were able to disseminate computers and Wi-Fi hotspots to students in need, but the problem persisted even into the 2020-2021 school year (Hamilton et al., 2020). During the pandemic, schools with majority low-income students, the teachers were more likely to focus on review rather than building new content (Hamilton et al., 2020). Additionally, only 62% of these teachers said that they were able to reach all their students. These issues may increase overall inequality in the US in the long run (Azevedo et al., 2020).
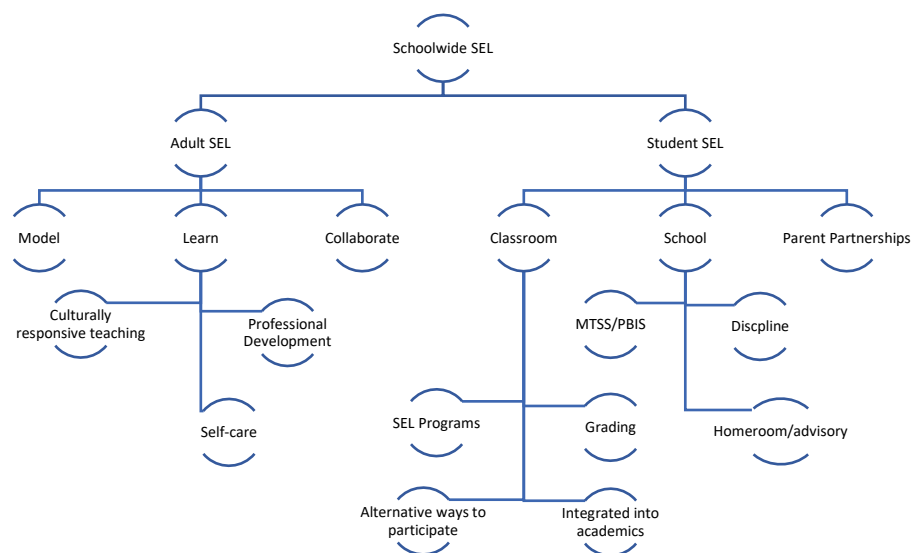
**Social and Emotional Learning**

During their years in school, students gain academic knowledge while developing their sense of identity and building social skills. Researchers have named these non-academic skills "social emotional learning" (SEL). The term was first introduced in 1997 to conceptualize building social and emotional skills (Garner et al., 2014). One of the most prominent SEL research institutions is the Collaborative on Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, otherwise known as CASEL. CASEL defines SEL as the process through which children develop skills such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. Their later research has extended SEL to adults as well because framing SEL as a solely for children ignores the continuous nature of personal growth.

To fully implement SEL practices, schools must integrate the values and ideals of SEL at every level of the school structure (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016). CASEL's framework identifies

three steps of SEL implementation: planning, implementation, and continuous improvement. CASEL breaks each of these tenets into smaller pieces that target different parts of the school. Planning encompasses building a shared vision, deciding which programming to implement, assessing the needs and resources of the school, as well as other components. Implementation is broken down into adult SEL and student SEL, and focuses on the ways that student and adults experience and engage in SEL in their day to day lives. Continuous improvement includes collecting data to evaluate and rework the implementation in the school. Using these three sections, CASEL developed a Theory of Action called Guide to Schoolwide SEL, which schools and districts can use when implementing SEL.

Figure 1. Components of schoolwide SEL described in this study (Appendix A)



The adult and student SEL sections complement each other but contain significantly different components. Adult SEL focuses on building social and emotional competence for teachers. The process of developing adult SEL involves offering SEL-focused professional development, encouraging community building, and ensuring that administrators build their

social and emotional competence. Teachers must model SEL for students through their own behavior in the classroom. Combined, these components help teachers both grow their own emotional competence, as well as learn ways to teach SEL to students.

Student SEL includes implementing formal SEL programming, developing supports for students based on their level of need and integrating SEL into academics. CASEL's Theory of Action encourages schools to form partnerships with families and communities in order to more fully support students. SEL programming refers to a wide range of practices that teachers and school leaders can implement in their schools. Many schools integrate SEL into their school culture through formal programs such as The Toolbox Project and RULER, which are developed by private organizations. One critical component of schoolwide SEL is the way in which discipline is restructured to be an activity that promotes personal and community growth. To replace more punitive measures, schools introduce new structures that allow students to repair the harm created. These structures are commonly referred to as restorative justice methods. Some schools also have a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS), which provides differential support based on the needs of the student.

An alternative to MTSS is the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports system (PBIS), a program that focuses on reinforcing how students should behave in schools. These two systems are employed at the school level and generally require whole-school buy-in. Within the classroom, teachers can implement SEL through fostering a supportive classroom environment, integrating SEL into academics and leading explicit lessons on SEL. Some teachers implement mindfulness practices, which includes meditation and breathing strategies. With so many possibilities for programming, SEL implementation varies greatly at both the school and classroom level.

## Literature Review

### Theory

Implementation theory draws on the contrast between "formal" versus "informal" practices to highlight the different forms of rules in an organization. Formal practices are dictated by those in power and generally are recorded in writing (DiMartino et al., 2018). Informal refers to practices that are not written down or implemented in the same way by everyone (Thacker, 2017). Research in different fields such as healthcare, construction and business have used this distinction when building theories of implementation (DiMartino et al., 2018; Bygballe, Endresen & Fålun, 2018; Belak & Milfelner, 2011). Informal and formal practices overlap and interact to increase flexibility in organizations through a process called "braiding" (Gilson et al., 2010).

This theory of formal versus informal has been applied to school research by several authors (Hofstein, & Rosenfeld, 1996; Lewis-McCoy, 2014; Thacker, 2017; Russell et al., 2013). In schools, formal rules can be dictated at the administrative level or at the classroom level by the teacher (Lewis-McCoy, 2014). Lewis-McCoy (2014) differentiates between the formal and informal rules that schools have in place to regulate engagement with the school. Building on that, Thacker (2017) uses formal and informal theory to understand professional learning for teachers. Russell, Knutson, & Crowley (2013) use the distinction to highlight the ways in which outside organizations can collaborate, with school as the formal actor and the outside organizations as informal learning actors. There is some contention in the literature over whether informal practices can be done in formal spaces or if that automatically makes them formal (Hofstein, & Rosenfeld, 1996). For this study, I will focus on the implementation of both formal and informal SEL practices.

SEL practices can be analyzed as formal and informal based on whether they are intentional school structures. Formal practices are the structures created by the school with the intention of SEL support. When teachers coopt formal SEL practices for different components of SEL implementation, the practice then becomes informal. Informal practices encompass forms of SEL support that were not planned or organized by the school. These informal practices range from unintended benefits of formal systems to systems implemented by teachers. Teacher-created practices are informal because they do not permeate the school structure. No one holds teachers accountable for these informal systems, which means that they could stop implementing these systems at any time.

Within the larger framework of SEL implementation, administrators have the ability to formalize all parts of implementation though planning and teacher preparation. CASEL's framework is a guide for schools to implement SEL at every level of the school structure. This framework implies that the administration should be engaged in all components of SEL practices, which would mean that every component of SEL implementation is formal. Yet this understanding of SEL implementation fails to account for the ways that implementation plays out at the school level, with teachers taking initiative on certain components of implementation. The vaguer components of the CASEL framework often fall to teachers to implement as they see fit. Practices such a selecting an evidence-based SEL program for the school fall clearly into the formal category, as schools must select and implement a school-wide system. Student support programs such as MTSS and PBIS are also formal supports. Yet other parts of the model, like modeling SEL for students, do not necessarily require the school administration to play a role in their implementation. Teachers therefore can implement these components on their own, without the support of the school, and in doing so facilitate the informal SEL implementation.

**Previous Research**

A wide range of outcomes are associated with quality SEL implementation. Research on SEL has found the quality SEL implementation can improve academics, reduce the number of office referrals, increase sense of civic duty, improve behavior, and enhance social skills (O'Conner et al., 2012; Durlak et al., 2011). Quality of implementation is hugely important: students in schools with well-implemented SEL programs demonstrated academic gains that were twice as high as those of the students in schools with poorly implemented programs (Durlak, et al., 2019).

A growing body of research has examined the extent to which teachers are prepared to implement SEL in their classroom (Melnick, & Martinez, 2019; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). Only six states have teacher certification programs that cover all components of SEL, including teacher SEL, SEL implementation, and learning context (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). Most research focuses on implementation at the classroom level and finds that quality implementation is a critical component of ensuring positive outcomes (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). Yet Doss, Johnston, and Akinniranye (2020) find that only 60% of educators set goals around SEL.

Some schools draw on CASEL's framework for SEL implementation at the school level, using the Guide to Schoolwide SEL. CASEL's framework has become the most prevalent implementation structure for states: 71.4% of states with K-12 guidelines use an evidence-based framework from CASEL and those that do not use a similar framework that articulates the components of SEL slightly differently (Dusenbury et al., 2019). CASEL's implementation framework is strongly supported by the existing literature, with outcomes related to both student and teacher wellbeing.

*Adult SEL*

Professional development is a critical part of school reform efforts (Elmore, 2002; Brown, 2007). Quality teacher training on SEL can improve outcomes for students (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). One barrier to SEL implementation is that teachers often feel underprepared to teach SEL in their classroom due to insufficient professional development (Johnson & Hutchins, 2019). The quantity of professional development can affect teachers' feeling of preparedness (Parsad, 2001). In fact, professional development can decrease feelings of emotional exhaustion and initial burnout (McLain, 2005; Pas et al., 2012). Adequate teacher support and training reduces negative outcomes such as burnout and stress (Pas et al., 2012).

Teacher burnout is a major issue in the US (Greenberg, Brown, & Abenavoli, 2016). Teachers who work with underserved populations are expected to work "harder and longer" and are therefore at greater risk of burning out (Dworkin, 2009). The four main contributors to teacher stress are school organization, job demands, teacher social and emotional competence, and autonomy and support in decision-making (Greenberg, Brown, & Abenavoli, 2016). High turnover rates in schools can largely be attributed to teacher burn out (Provasnik & Dorfman, 2005).

Researchers have identified collaboration as a critical component in strong SEL implementation (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Parsad, 2001). When SEL programs are selected through collaborative efforts, schools are more likely to continue their implementation, because teachers believe more deeply in the program (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). Not only does collaboration increase buy-in for the SEL programming, but it also supports teachers' wellbeing. Teachers experience less stress and burnout when they perceive strong structure and support from their school (Montgomery & Rupp, 2005; Dworkin, 2009). Regularly scheduled

collaboration provides teachers with a sense of preparedness, more so than infrequent collaboration (Parsad, 2001).

While teachers are supposed to model SEL to set an example for their students, teachers also benefit emotionally from modeling SEL. Practices centered on relaxing and reflective activities such as yoga and mindfulness have been found to improve teacher outcomes including stress, classroom management, mindful observations, and emotional exhaustion (Taylor et al., 2015; Abenavoli et al., 2015; Harris et al., 2015). A randomized trial study found that mindfulness-based professional development programs improved teachers' ability to provide emotional support, to regulate their emotions, and to practice mindfulness (Jennings et al., 2017). In general, increased emotion-regulation ability improves job satisfaction and sense of personal accomplishment (Brackett et al., 2010). Little research has focused on the impact of modeling SEL on the quality of SEL implementation for students.

Teachers also support student learning by using culturally responsive pedagogy, which allows students to reflect on their own identities and biases (Hawk et al., 2017). This kind of teaching ensures that teachers examine their own biases, an important practice given that negative teacher expectations can adversely affect disadvantaged students (Lewis, 2003). Ladson-Billings (1995) identifies the three central criteria for culturally responsive teaching to be 1) culturally relevant teaching must help the academic outcomes of students 2) culturally relevant teaching must support a student's cultural identity while promoting academic success 3) culturally relevant teaching must help students critically analyze the social structures and inequalities in society.

*Student SEL*

For student SEL, school-level structures play an important role in supporting student wellbeing. MTSS and PBIS systems provide a continuum of supports and have been found to have a multitude of benefits for students, from reduced drug use to improved academic performance (Bastable et al., 2015; Gonzalez, 2015; Horner et al., 2009; Bradshaw et al., 2014). In general, schools feel safer after their schools implemented PBIS (Horner et al., 2009). These systems help schools develop processes to support students through restorative justice practices rather than punitive punishments (Gonzalez, 2015). Minority students benefit the most from these continuums of support (Swain-Bradway et al., 2019). In schools with PBIS, at-risk students received fewer office disciplinary and teachers referred fewer at-risk students to special education services (Bradshaw et al., 2014).

Schools also implement restorative justice practices to make schools feel safer and more welcoming (Horner et al., 2009). Restorative justice policies greatly reduce suspension rates, as well as decrease disparities in suspension rates between white and black students (Gonzalez, 2016; Schiff & Bazemore, 2012; Fronius et al., 2016). Indeed, schools that implement these practices have fewer behavioral issues than schools that use other discipline methods (Rideout, 2010). One study found that implementing community circles, a practice from Indigenous nations, improved academics in an elementary school setting (Lenertz, 2018; Mehl-Madrona, 2014). Organized programming such as these community circles strongly benefit students' academic and social emotional outcomes (Durlak et al., 2019; Durlak et al., 2011; Sklad et al., 2012). Research on implementation is limited by the variety of implementation quality, yet there is still a strong consensus on the benefits of SEL programming.

One form of classroom SEL support involves integrating SEL into academics. Some teachers integrate social skills into the curriculum through project-based learning, which has been found to improve academic outcomes (Cervantes & Kouzekanani, 2015; Mahasneh & Alwan, 2018; Çakici & Turkmen, 2013). Similar to project-based learning, service-based learning encourages students to develop and reflect on their attitudes toward self, attitudes toward school and learning, civic engagement, social skills, and academic achievement (Celio et al., 2011). Other teachers integrate SEL into their academics using the subject material. For example, one history-based SEL program focuses on improving students' political tolerance, civic literacy skills, civic efficacy (Barr et al., 2014).

Outside of the school and classroom structure, parent partnerships also play an important role in improving academic outcomes in schools (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Bryk, 2010). Unsurprisingly, teacher attitudes towards parents are related to teachers' parent engagement efforts (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Teachers are more likely to stay at schools with high levels of trust with parents (Allensworth et al., 2009). While the Allensworth study cannot prove causality, the study does speak to the importance of creating an inclusive school environment that values the input of all its members.

The literature identifies several challenges associated with SEL implementation, including poor leadership, insufficient preparation, and lack of continuity (Snipes et al., 2002; Durlak & DuPre, 2008). SEL implementation requires strong and effective leadership, which can be supplemented with a "program champion" who can help build support and buy-in for the program (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). The whole school community must believe in the SEL program for it to succeed (Chrispeels & González, 2006). Additionally, lack of accountability can make it difficult for teachers and schools to maintain their SEL systems (Gonzalez, 2011).

Gonzalez explains that outside organizations with knowledge of the community can hold schools accountable for implementing SEL practices such as restorative justice.

Teachers faced significant barriers to SEL implementation during the pandemic. One survey found that during the pandemic, 23% of teachers in the US felt like they needed more training on how to access a student's social and emotional needs (Hamilton et al., 2020). The literature is inconclusive on the first step towards improving SEL implementation in the pandemic. Katzman and Stanton (2020) identify the three biggest barriers to education during the pandemic to be the lack of internet access, the need for increased SEL training, and the challenge of building cultural responsiveness. They argue that each barrier precedes the next, such that schools must address technology issues before they can address SEL and SEL before cultural competency. In contrast, Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Williams (2019) explain that a culturally responsive lens is necessary for SEL to be truly transformative. Through this study, I hope to identify the role that schools and teachers can play in improving SEL implementation.

## Methods

This qualitative study is based on 15 interviews I conducted with K-12 teachers in Title I schools. The teachers worked in schools across the country. The goal was to survey a range of educators from different backgrounds who worked in schools that served under-resourced students. I hoped to elevate a variety of voices so that I could get a more holistic understanding of the impact of COVID on SEL implementation, as well as a better understanding of the different ways that teachers addressed new challenges.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 teachers. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour. Of the people that I interviewed, 30% were men and 70% were women.

30% were Latine, 10% were Black, and 60% were White. I interviewed teachers from across the country, including teachers from California, Kentucky, Georgia, and New York. The teachers ranged from first-year teachers to teachers who have been teaching for over 20 years. To protect the teachers' identity, I will use pseudonyms for the interviewees, except for Kathleen Large, who requested that I refer to her by her name.

Figure 2. Descriptions of interviewees

| Name | Years Teaching | Grade Level |
|------|----------------|-------------|
| Sebastian | 3 | 6th |
| Daniel | 2 | 9th |
| Christine | 27 | K-5 |
| Alexandra | 9 | 4th |
| Chloe | 1 | 7th |
| Jessica | 3 | 6th |
| Alice | 5 | 5th |
| Teresa | 3 | 10th |
| Kathleen* | 17 | 6th |
| Elijah | 3 | 10th |

*All names are pseudonyms except for Kathleen, who requested I use her name

I interviewed five teachers during the summer, before classes for the 2020-2021 school year had started. I wanted to understand the planning process for SEL implementation, without any recall bias. After two months, I reached out to them again to conduct a follow-up interview about the outcome of their plans for SEL implementation. All the teachers I asked for follow-up interviews responded to my request for a second interview. I interviewed the other five teachers

during their school year and therefore did not conduct follow-up interviews. It should be noted that I spoke with the interviewees about both the spring of 2020 as well as the fall of 2020.

The interviews were conducted over Zoom. Nine of the interviewees turned on their cameras, which allowed me to connect and build trust with each teacher more easily. The use of Zoom also allowed me to both easily record the conversation, as well as gave the interviewee the opportunity to share their screen with me.

I analyzed the data by coding the interviews based on the themes associated with CASEL's Guide to Schoolwide SEL, such as MTSS and discipline (see Appendix A). As the interviews continued, I added other themes that emerged, such as physical space and technology. I then broke down the responses into the categories of "formal" and "informal" SEL. By coding the interviews using those categories, I hoped to identify which measures required outside resources and which ones could be done by teachers on their own.

This study is limited in that the distribution of interviewees was heavily weighted towards white women from California. I found interviewees through Facebook groups and previous relationships, all of which originated in California. The fact that many of my subjects are white women reflects the national breakdown of teachers, as the majority of teachers are white women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Another possible limitation of this study is that my sample size is small. With only 10 interviewees, my study may not be generalizable. All teachers have different experiences and backgrounds, so the methods used across the country likely vary greatly.

Another limitation of this study was that I was not able to speak with any students. Children are an at-risk population and given the current situation of the global pandemic and the

issues with racism in the US, I felt that children were too vulnerable at this point of time. Future projects should include student perceptions, as centering the voices of oppressed groups is critical as we engage with modes of rethinking the meaning of school (Seller & Weis, 1997).

**Researcher Positionality**

It is important to note that I am a white woman, which places me in a privileged space within schools. My identity may have affected how some of the interviewees interacted with me. White women have historically created harm in schools by perpetuating ideas that support white supremacist structures (Bell, 2004). Because of my identity, some of my interviewees may have hesitated to discuss racial issues with me.

## Analysis

During the pandemic, teachers used both formal and informal methods for facilitating SEL, but schools could maintain formal systems only if the systems were fully integrated into the school structure. Many formal systems set up by schools or districts disappeared during the transition online, as administrators were too overwhelmed to focus on programs that were not central to the school structures. Formal systems only continued through the transition online if there was strong implementation before the pandemic. Successful systems were integrated into school culture and structures such that the systems continued to be a necessary part on schooling in the online setting. For example, teachers continued to use SEL programs that were integrated into their academic curriculum. While a few schools did manage to set up new SEL systems in the spring, the majority of schools relied on teachers to find ways to support their students.

In response to the growing emotional need of students, schools allowed teachers to prioritize SEL through reducing the requirements around grading and testing. Thanks to the

increased flexibility, teachers developed their own informal methods of supporting students. Some techniques were more successful than others, and many could have benefited from the formal support of their school. Oftentimes, teachers developed these informal systems to replace a poorly structured formal system offered by their school. The systems created by the teachers highlight the gaps in formal SEL, as well as demonstrate what SEL can look like when the education system allows teachers to prioritize SEL.

**Adult SEL**

*Teacher Learning and Growth*

  **Professional Development.** Although most teachers had professional development (PD) on SEL, few found it sufficient or beneficial. Sebastian' school provided him with several training videos on dealing with the trauma, but he said that "most of them were garbage" and that he began to dread going to mandatory trainings. While his school did attempt to support teachers in developing their social and emotional competence, the training was counterproductive. Sebastian felt that the trainings were harmful "because if you had secondhand trauma, you were most definitely triggered." He said that he wished he knew how to support students who were dealing with the death of a family member. His district both failed to prepare him for what he felt were the necessary skills to support his students during the pandemic, as well as ignored the needs of the teachers.

  Another issue with many of the PD sessions was the lack of continuity. Elijah, a new high school teacher, spoke at length about the failure of his school to provide sufficient PD around SEL and culturally responsive teaching. Elijah's school offered one PD session before the school year started, but Elijah felt that "it lacks because it's not ongoing. There's no coaching or ongoing resources." The school provided this training to give teachers a general sense of what

SEL is, but the administration did not make the effort to integrate SEL professional development into the long-term plans of the school. SEL development is a continuous process, which requires constant reflection. Therefore this "one-off" PD training will not provide teachers at Elijah's schools sufficient resources to improve their own pedagogy. Professional development focused on SEL must be integrated into the school's support for its teachers in order to be truly effective.

In contrast, some teachers felt that they were receiving more SEL-related PD during the pandemic than in previous years. Jessica, a young middle-school teacher, felt that "there's a bigger push this year to, like, train us, train us on being more informed and more aware of like when we see these, like, stress related behaviors on our students, especially because of COVID." The variation in PD may correlate with the age groups teachers were working with. For the three high school teachers I spoke with, none of them had SEL-specific PD, whereas most of the elementary and middle school teachers attended some form of SEL-related training. As mentioned in the literature (Dusenbury, et al. 2019), SEL is often predominantly viewed as a priority for younger students, which means that few high schools focus on providing SEL PD to their teachers. My findings reflect those priorities, as the high school teachers generally received less training than the lower-school teachers.

Outside of PD sessions, some schools offer their new teachers coaching and mentoring services in order to support their growth as teachers. These formal programs often continued to run during the pandemic, as they were already well-established practices. Because Teresa, a young high school teacher, only worked in school for three years, she had weekly check-ins with her assistant principal who functioned as a coach. The check-ins continued during the pandemic and Teresa appreciated the continued support offered by her administration. Because the school had cleanly implemented the weekly check-ins before the pandemic, the transition online did not

upset Teresa's support system. Daniel, a new high school teacher, also felt supported by his administration, specifically by his assistant principal (AP). As a new teacher, he appreciated that his AP positively responded to his request for help. Daniel explained that this support was similar to the mentoring he received before his school went online. The culture of support at Daniel's school meant that the transition online did not affect the relationships between teachers and administrators.

For many teachers, the pandemic created opportunities for informal professional development, as the circumstances of online teaching forced them to learn and adapt. Christine said that she had to learn to be more patient with her students: "And so I'm just trying to be understanding, I think I'm trying to just be more patient, like, because some kids don't show up. So, there's that, like, irritation, that they're not coming, because you really want them to be there." Christine had to come to terms with her own frustration because she recognized that she could not change the situation. This informal reflection allowed her to work on improving her own emotional competence, outside of the context of formal professional development.

Some teachers drew on previous experiences which functioned as informal SEL professional development. Kathleen has worked as a teacher for 17 years and felt like even though the pandemic created a unique classroom environment, she felt that she could draw on her "bank of knowledge" to handle tough situations. As a single mother, Kathleen took care of her daughter, which did not leave sufficient time for her to attend more formal PDs. Instead, she reflected on similar experiences. For example, in the fall of 2020, Kathleen's students learned that a former classmate from their elementary school had passed away, which called for her to create space for her students to process and grieve the child's death. Kathleen changed her lesson plan on the spot, drawing upon a previous experience when a former student suffered serious

gunshot wounds. While many of the teachers I spoke with mentioned formal trauma-informed teaching PDs, Kathleen learned how to support traumatized students through previous experiences. In fact, her informal learning appeared more successful than some of the formal PDs.

Some teachers drew on advice from previous mentors to identify how to best support their students during the pandemic. This advice acted as informal support for the teachers. Elijah, who is only in his third year of teaching, reflected on personal experiences to help develop his teaching pedagogy. He described to me how he felt "burned out" and "overwhelmed" at the end of his Master's in Education program. He asked his professor for a two-week extension to complete his many assignments, even though he felt as though he would need a year to complete them all. Instead of asking Elijah to complete all the assignments, the professor asked for a different, single assignment, one that covered the same topics and skills as the previous assignments. The assignment was also applicable to Elijah's work in the classroom, which allowed him to feel like his hard work would benefit him in his future career. Elijah said that he wanted to apply that same "grace and flexibility" to his own classroom. In this case, Elijah's mentor modeled SEL by recognizing Elijah's needs. Elijah's own experience of that grace allowed him to understand the importance of integrating flexibility into his teaching pedagogy. Some teachers received more explicit advice from their mentors. Teresa's mentor from graduate school advised her to approach difficult conversations with "the mindset of caring about their wellbeing and asking them 'Are you okay,' like, 'What's going on with you today? Is something going on?' and to try and figure out what is up with them." She felt this strategy helped her approach challenging conversations with an open mind.

Teachers drew on a combination of formal and informal PD during the pandemic and found that only well implemented formal PD was truly helpful. Teachers used the formal PD that they found to be the most helpful, often ignoring the PD provided by their schools. Formal trainings provided by the school were inconsistent and often did not provide sufficient support. Teachers frequently drew on SEL PD from graduate school because they felt it had prepared them well through SEL-focused classes. Therefore, teachers benefitted the most when the SEL PD was provided year-round and more fully integrated in the PD curriculum. Teachers also drew heavily on their own personal experiences as a form of informal PD. The pandemic created challenging situations that forced teachers to grow and learn. This informal growth required these teachers to reflect on what they had learned. The process of growth thus requires multiple phases, in which teachers have experiences and then reflect on what they learned and integrate those lessons into their teaching pedagogy.

**Teacher Self-care.** Some teachers felt like their schools encouraged them to prioritize their own wellbeing over work during the transition online. Christine, an experienced English-development teacher, said "we definitely got the message from, I mean, from our principal, like, 'take care of yourself, take care of your family. This is not normal time. This feels scary'. And so, I feel like they actually did an okay job of saying, you know, 'take the space you need', to some extent." Christine appreciated the empathy and understanding her administration demonstrated, which highlights the importance of a supportive administration. By encouraging teachers to focus on their wellbeing, the administration allowed educators to prioritize their own SEL.

Teachers needed to focus on their own SEL in response to the new challenges associated with online schooling. Because most teachers were working from home, they had to learn to

develop clear boundaries between their work and personal life. Alexandra, an experienced fourth grade teacher, explained how communicating her needs allowed her to take better care of herself, saying that "I had to really create firm boundaries with the kids and the families. 'This is our time. This is our meeting time. And that's it.' And so that really gave me a lot more time to take care of myself." She felt like because school was on Zoom, she was able to stop working by simply logging off from Zoom, which allowed her "to really put things in distinct containers." Drawing clear delineations between work and school allowed her to focus on supporting her own wellbeing. While there was no formal support on how to build this kind of boundary, Alexandra learned how to communicate her own needs by establishing clear boundaries.

For many teachers, giving their phone number to students blurred the boundaries between personal and work life. Elijah knew that a lot of teachers were giving their phone numbers to their students, but he felt like receiving text messages would make it difficult for him to separate his work and personal life. Instead of his phone number, he made a Google Voice number, which turned the messages from his students into emails for him. Through this system, Elijah's email focused on work and his phone was reserved for his personal life. On the other side of the phone debate, Daniel had given his phone number to his students, which created some boundary issues. His students would call him at inconvenient times, whether at midnight while he slept, or when he was trying to relax and drink wine with his partner. Daniel was placed in a challenging situation, as he wanted to support his students as much as possible, but he also needed to recognize his own needs. Daniel was a second-year teacher and had not yet learned to build the boundaries necessary to protect himself from burning out. In this case, Daniel lacked a mentor to instruct him to not give his phone number to his students. Many of the more experienced teachers told me with resounding surety that teachers should not give their phone numbers to

students. Daniel's story demonstrates that informal learning is not always sufficient, as Daniel found himself in a situation that was difficult to fix, even after he had realized his mistake. I found that this issue mainly affected high school teachers, where their students are older and more likely to have a phone. Thus, boundary-making reflected both the context of each school, as well as each teachers' personal needs.

To take care of their own wellbeing, more experienced teachers chose to limit the number of new skills they learned specifically for online learning. Kathleen explained that she knew that learning too many new skills would add unnecessary stress:

> Like, if this was gonna be how we're teaching forever, I might take that graphic design class, but it's not. So, you know, part of it is also just self-preservation. Like, if I were incredibly interested and passionate about graphic design… like live it, go for it. I'm not. I have laundry to fold. I have a household to run. I have a 13-year-old.

Kathleen recognized her own limits and set boundaries around formal professional development. Through recognizing her own needs and establishing reasonable expectations for herself, Kathleen informally developed her own strategies for prioritizing her wellbeing.

Some teachers realized the necessity of incorporating movement into their day in order to preserve their mental wellbeing. Christine and Alexandra brought movement into their classrooms through a program called School Moves. Christine incorporated movement into her classroom for her own needs as well as her students:

> I'm a mover, you know, and I'm also really tactile. There's this program called School Moves. And it came from our occupational therapist. She trained all the teachers on how to use the school moves, and basically, like, they involve things like, you know, grabbing your ears, and rolling out the ends of your ears, holding on to your arms. So I do stuff like that myself all the time. And I like to move so often I'll take a brain break and like, get the kids up, and we'll do jumping jacks or something, and then we'll sit down or breathing like a balloon, filling it up and letting it go. So yeah, I think I incorporate it to keep myself tuned in.

While School Moves is a formal program provided by Christine's school for the students, the program acted as an informal way for Christine to support her own needs. In order to use the formal systems that her school offered, she had to take the time to reflect on what was missing from her day. This example highlights how teacher self-reflection is a critical component of fostering schoolwide SEL. Alexandra also used School Moves, but she did not only focus on the classroom, rather she thought about how she could incorporate movement into her life in quarantine. When I spoke with Alexandra during our follow-up interview, she was walking to school with her bike. She explained to me that she had been struggling with work and that "when I was taking stock of everything, what was missing was that I just needed to move, hence my walking to school with my bike." Through self-reflection, Alexandra realized that she needed to incorporate more movement into her day to ensure her wellbeing. As teachers recognized their own needs through informal reflection, they were better able to create routines and systems that protected them against burnout.

Teachers developed informal techniques for taking care of their emotional wellbeing. These strategies often drew from formal practices, but were uniquely implemented by the teachers, without the guidance of the school. Teachers had to create distance between themselves and work, which required them to create informal communication boundaries. Other teachers chose to find ways to include movement in their day. In the case of Christine and Alexandra, they used a program provided by their school, but coopted it for their own benefit. Therefore, schools can design structures that support teachers informally.

**Culturally Responsive Teaching.** Given the increased attention to the issues of racism in the US, many schools focused on providing more spaces for teachers to learn and discuss topics such as implicit bias and culturally responsive teaching. These formal opportunities

allowed teachers to engage in informal reflection on issues around race and equity. Thanks to the formal trainings at her school, Jessica reflected more on the ways that her practices affect students differently in the classroom. She explained that she is analyzing her own practices because of the equity trainings. She asked herself "is this communication style that I'm supporting further creating a rift between students?" Jessica wanted to ensure that she fosters open dialogue in her classroom and that students from all cultures feel comfortable contributing. She questioned her practices and way of thinking, asking if her methods are based in Western, individualistic ideals and looks to see if there are better ways to engage her students. Thus, the formal PD offered by the school allowed Jessica to engage informal learning about how race and culture influences her practices in the classroom.

The pandemic gave teachers a deeper look into the lives of their students, as teachers could see what was happening in the child's home through their video calls. Kathleen found that she was able to understand the cultural background of her students more fully because of the format of online classes:

> I have one boy who is just amazing. And one day he was on the call, sweeping the kitchen floor, holding his baby brother, and then fixing a bottle for his brother. Like an amazing example of multitasking. And I think a less experienced teacher might be like, 'you need to sit down in front of your computer and be in the frame and you're not concentrating and blah, blah', you know, and it's like, I was like, you are amazing. Like, first of all, you're going to be a great parent, if you choose to do that one day. Like, he was just so tender and nurturing with his baby brother that that was a side of him I would never have been-- I mean, he might tell about it in the classroom. But there was something very profound about seeing a 10-year-old boy holding his brother, fixing his bottle, helping his mom.

Kathleen saw her student's homelife and through that understanding built greater respect for the student. These insights into a child's home are an experience unique to the pandemic and online schooling, but the importance of building understanding is critical in normal years as well. This

informal learning allowed teachers to build respect for their students and better understand where they are coming from.

Online learning reminded teachers of the differences in bodies of knowledge that they possessed in comparison with their students. When Teresa's school started asynchronous learning in the spring, they created times for students to meet with the teachers, which they called "office hours." But students did not show up to the first few rounds of the meetings because they had not heard the term "office hours" before. The teachers all knew what office hours were because they went to college, but that would likely not have been discussed in the students' homes. Teresa said that the school should have called it "tutoring" instead. Through this experience, Teresa was reminded that small labels can be prohibitive when they fail to consider what cultural knowledge each student possesses.

While schools tried to provide formal training on culturally relevant teaching, many teachers reflected and developed their culturally responsive pedagogy because of informal learning during the pandemic. The unique structure of schooling during the pandemic forced teachers to confront cultural differences between them and their students. Teachers reflected on their cultural assumptions and faced the reality of these students' lives, which allowed them to build a deeper understanding of the population that they are working with. The formal spaces allowed teachers to reflect on these ideas, but the informal learning allowed teachers to gain experiences so that they could more fully internalize these lessons on culturally responsive teaching.

### Teacher Collaboration

During the pandemic, many teachers relied on virtual meetings to facilitate collaboration. Some meeting formats continued in a similar format as before the pandemic. Teresa continued to

meet with her co-teacher as well as the other social studies teachers throughout the pandemic. Teresa felt that it "was a really nice way to feel both support in what we were doing and also just like in seeing people and talking to them about the challenges." The support from the meetings helped her both personally and professionally and thus provided both formal and informal support. The meetings were ingrained into how the teachers planned and organized their classes, so they continued these supportive meetings during the pandemic.

In contrast, other school administrators chose to adjust the teacher meeting format. The new format of the meeting affected how teachers reacted to them. Jessica's administration focused on sharing only necessary information and therefore shortened many of their meetings while making other meetings completely asynchronous. Jessica found that while she enjoyed having shorter meetings, she appreciated having opportunities to see other teachers: "It's like, I miss people, you know? Even though we're getting a lot of our time back to do work… [...] So it is nice to at least see the other teachers in my grade. And just chat and connect about students." These meetings served two purposes: as a space for learning and growth, and as an opportunity to build camaraderie. Jessica sought a balance between the two purposes, as she desired an efficient use of the meeting times, but also wanted a chance to connect with her fellow teachers. In comparison, Christine's principal decided to make the weekly meetings smaller, with a different meeting for each grade level. Christine felt that "in some ways, that was nice, because you get to connect with, like, your smaller team, but then it makes things feel a little fragmented." While the principal made these changes with the intention of fostering a sense of community, the smaller groups served to make the greater community feel more divided, which affected the ability of teachers to gain the informal emotional benefits of the team meetings. This

story highlights the challenges that some schools face with manipulating the informal components of formal practices.

Collaborative spaces provided formal and informal support for teachers. Teachers recognized that collaboration informally supported their emotional wellbeing by creating spaces, which increased their interaction with their coworkers. These teachers were able to feel like they had a supportive community, within the structure of a formal practice. Yet collaboration also allowed teachers to improve their teaching, by providing opportunities to share best practices with other teachers. Thus, teachers used collaboration both formally and informally to improve their work and support their wellbeing.

*Modeling SEL*

Teachers modeled self-care during the pandemic as a way to reinforce the SEL lessons that their student were learning. By modeling these values, teachers informally reinforced the SEL lessons. Elijah explained that he "didn't want to be a hypocrite" when he asked the students to take care of themselves. He felt that if he does not mirror the self-care he asks of his students, then "that impacts [his] authenticity". Teachers serve as role models, such that students see the teacher's actions as ways to live a successful life. If teachers fail to take care of themselves, then they lose credibility. Through this informal system of modeling behavior, teachers reinforced SEL lessons and concepts.

For some teachers, modeling mindfulness allowed them to better support their students' SEL. Originally, Alexandra found leading mindfulness in an online format challenging, which frustrated her. Then she realized that to address her frustration, she needed to practice mindfulness and model it for the students:

And so, the first session was really... I was super grumpy about it. And then I was like, "I don't want to teach tomorrow. I don't want to teach mindfulness tomorrow". And then I was like, "Oh, this is a practice of mindfulness. Sometimes it doesn't go the way we want it to go". And so I had to remind myself of my own lesson of intention over expectation. So I played with that. And then I was like, "I'll try it again". And we tried it and I was not locking down an expectation, it was just an offering. And it was lovely. The kids were responding. They got it. Felt like my message was more clear. And they're practicing now.

Alexandra's success required her to informally model the mindfulness lessons she was sharing with the students. This example clarifies the way in which informal modeling affects the formal practice of mindfulness sessions.

Many of the teachers I spoke with modeled vulnerability as a way to build relationships with their students. For Jessica, this vulnerability manifested in two ways. The first was through sharing parts of her home life. She explained that:

The more personal I am, the more personal they are. So sometimes I'll say, like, "I'm having a really rough day." Sometimes I'll show them, during advisory or the beginning of class, I'll tell them how good or how bad my puppy has been during the day. Sometimes they'll bring their puppies or I'll ask them tips for brushing teeth and stuff like that.

The other way that her vulnerability manifested was through openness about her own needs in the classroom. She shared with her students that some days she struggled and would ask for their understanding. She wanted them to understand that "I'm putting in a lot of work and this is really hard for me. So when you come in, and you disrupt my class, it's really, really frustrating." By clearly communicating her own needs with the students, Jessica demonstrated the value of recognizing your feelings and being open with others about how to create a more accessible environment. This informal demonstration of SEL supported both Jessica and her students by creating a space centered around respecting one another's needs.

Teachers modeled SEL to help students see self-reflection and emotional competence in practice, but modeling also functioned as an informal way for teachers to improve their

wellbeing. By practicing mindfulness, the teachers implemented the SEL programs for the wellbeing of their students and improved their own wellbeing in the process. In other words, teachers used formal SEL methods to support themselves informally. Teachers also implemented self-care by being open with their students. Vulnerability allowed teachers to not only support themselves but also functioned as an important part of building relationships with students. Many of the teachers I spoke with explained that they were nervous about trying to build relationships. They found that by being vulnerable, the students felt more connected to them. Thus, vulnerability functioned as an informal technique for developing relationships and supporting teacher's wellbeing.

**Student SEL**

*School*

      **PBIS/MTSS.** PBIS and MTSS systems only continued into the pandemic if the school ensured that the program did not burden teachers. Sebastian said that his school made implementing PBIS easy for the teachers: "So the way that it works is that like the person in charge of PBIS. She will make videos and basically it's super easy. [...] Here's the questions you ask the kids. Like it's very straightforward, which I appreciate." Sebastian's school took responsibility for organizing the PBIS system, even at the classroom level. By focusing on formal implementation, the school removed any pressure on the teachers to complete extra work and ensured that teachers would not need to individually adapt the program around the new online learning situation. Thus, for formalized programs, providing structured support can allow for easy implementation, despite major barriers like moving classes online.

      Integrating support systems into the school structure also allowed schools to continue the supports during the pandemic. Alice was a young teacher who worked at an elementary school

that had a wide range of formal SEL programs. Alice's school had implemented a dialogue journal system before the pandemic and continued to use it after they had transitioned online:

> It's a place where we can get tipped off to opportunities for more targeted social emotional learning, so if someone's hopeless feeling, or someone has issues with peer relationships. With COVID, we've seen some kids reporting some more intense feelings that we felt like we needed to reach out to like clinical staff members about because although I can do all this cool stuff in my classroom, I am not a licensed therapist. I'm better at teaching math than emotional stuff.

This program was clearly implemented before the pandemic and, with slight modification, became a huge asset during the pandemic. This formal method of checking in removed pressure from teachers to act as the sole emotional support for their students and created opportunities for students to access resources such as counselors. Because all teachers used the dialogue system, the administration had greater incentive to find ways to move it online. The dialogue system was already understood as an integral part of student support, so teachers were able to rely on it throughout the pandemic.

Other schools prioritized clear communication between administrators and teachers when implementing PBIS systems. Jessica said that the counselor at her school constantly communicates with the teachers so they always understand what supports each student receives. The counselor sent out weekly surveys and held weekly meetings with the staff to ensure that the administration understood each student's situation. This level of communication was uncommon among the teachers I spoke with and this example highlights the impact of quality communication. Jessica knew what supports her students were receiving and could trust that the counselor was taking her reports into consideration. The PBIS system was therefore integrated into the school through the counselor's strong communication. While stronger MTSS programs were able to continue, if not strengthen, their implementation, weaker MTSS programs struggled.

MTSS systems that had not been prioritized before the pandemic often fell apart when schools moved online. Christine's school had an Otter Ticket system for their first tier supports for PBIS, but she said that the system was hard to implement during the spring. This year, there were no Otter tickets because teachers had difficulty thinking of rewards that could be offered remotely. This system relied heavily on rewarding students through external rewards but failed to incorporate methods that extended beyond extrinsic motivation. For other schools, their MTSS systems disappeared because the high-risk students were unreachable. Daniel said it was hard to see MTSS at work in his school during the pandemic, because the students were no longer being pulled out of class for discipline purposes.

Another issue that prevented teachers from using MTSS was the issue of complicated logistics of navigating multiple spreadsheets. Often the logistics of the MTSS systems were too burdensome for teachers, which made them less likely to use the system during the pandemic. Chloe, a first year middle school teacher, found that she was required to log too many interactions into the spreadsheets, which prevented her from fully reporting everything in the MTSS system: "I'm logged on to four or five different software's every day doing attendance and grading and MTSS and parent communication and logging student behaviors. And so I usually just make a note of it in their attendance file. [...] But that does not translate into the MTSS system." Small issues, like when she privately chats a student about not having their camera, arose more than 15 times in the same class. Instead, Chloe chose to log bigger problems, like if "the student just shared another student's phone number to strangers online. Like, time to do something." Jessica felt similarly, complaining to me about the "silly little tasks" that her school required her to do. She had five different spreadsheets that she had to constantly update, which impeded her ability to effectively teach during class time. In this instance, the formal supports

became too logistically complicated, which caused teachers to not fully utilize the program, or give up on it altogether. These systems placed the burden on teachers and asked them to take on additional work while trying to run their classroom. While the formal system had an extensive program, the teachers did not fully implement it, which restricted its ability to be fully integrated into the school structure.

Formal school supports such as MTSS and PBIS can act as critical supports for teachers and students but must be well-implemented and integrated into the school. These systems were established before the pandemic and thus had to adapt when classes moved online. For formal systems that were integral to the school system, such as the dialogue journals, moving online was not an issue. There was no additional burden on the teachers as it was part of every classroom, which meant that the administrators took responsibility for adapting it to the online format. Formal systems rely on school administrations because systems that are not implemented throughout the school are less likely to be maintained.

**Discipline.** Disciplinary issues occurred less frequently during the pandemic, which resulted in a decreased focus on restorative discipline practices. Because the pandemic removed the need for many disciplinary practices, schools deprioritized conversations around restorative justice. Alice said that while peace talks are generally the primary form of restorative justice implemented in her school, she did not discuss peace talks with her class because it was not necessary. These discussions were thus seen only as part of the disciplinary process rather than as a larger part of the culture at the school. Therefore, the school viewed restorative justice as a purely formal form of discipline rather than an informal way to foster SEL. Most schools did not set up new discipline practices in response to the pandemic, which allowed teachers to move the responsibility of discipline to parents. Alexandra said that she emails parents when students

misbehave, or simply tells the misbehaving student that she will send an email to the parents. While this tactic has worked well for her, it does remove the burden of discipline away from the school and onto the student's guardian. Alexandra's school also had a program for peer mediators, where they trained students to help with mediating conflict on the schoolyard. This program paused when the schools went online. This form of community mediation disappeared because the school recognized it as a method of maintaining discipline in schools, rather than a way to educate students about supporting one another.

While many schools have begun to implement restorative justice practices, the pandemic has disrupted the line of communication such that teachers are often unaware of what consequences the students have received. Formal discipline practices require clear communication in order to make all stakeholders feel supported throughout the disciplinary process. While Chloe had seen some successful instances of restorative justice in her school during the pandemic, she also encountered issues with the restorative justice implementation at her school:

> Sometimes. I'm referring things up and I never find out if they got followed up on where I'm like, "Did we ever check in there?" And I just don't know. Like one of my kids got suspended last week. And yeah, I'm supposed to call home every day if they miss school. And so I was calling home. And after a couple days of this kid being gone, the dad picked up and he's like, "My kid can't come because he's suspended" and I'm like, "Oh, my God, nobody told me." And I'm his advisor. So I think there's a little bit of communication breakdown.

This student was not informed of what his restorative justice assignment was, which meant that he was indefinitely locked out of his classes. Chloe's school both made her responsible for this student while failing to provide her with important information on the status of her advisee. In comparison, Jessica has never seen restorative justice take place at her school, even though they were theoretically implementing restorative justice in place of more punitive punishments. She

felt like the program was "all over the place" and when she submitted a referral, the school never followed up with her about it. Jessica did not feel supported due to the lack of communication around the disciplinary practices at her school. The lack of visibility of restorative justice indicates that Jessica's school did not integrate restorative justice into the culture of the school, rather it was reserved for disciplinary purposes.

Even though many schools believe in the value of incorporating restorative, restorative justice practices became less prominent in response to the decrease number of behavioral issues. This decrease in the use of restorative justice indicates that while schools formally implement restorative justice, they only see it as a tool for managing misbehavior, rather than as an SEL technique for student growth and building community. For schools that did continue to implement restorative justice practices during the pandemic, there was a breakdown in communication, which indicates that the formal structures require refinement.

**Homeroom/Advisory.** Designated times for SEL, often called homeroom or advisories, provided structured opportunities for formal SEL instruction during the pandemic. Chloe said that during her advisory, the school provided the teachers with SEL lessons focused on the "cycles of liberation". These lessons were similar to those that they had done before the pandemic. Because of the strong implementation at her school, the formal support allowed her to easily continue the lessons during the pandemic. Sebastian also had a designated homeroom period, although his school encouraged the teachers to be actively engaged in the creation of the homeroom lessons. For example, teachers shared two truths and a lie about their college experience to help the students think about their own future. The school also asked teachers who had once been classified as English Language Learners to create a video about their experiences. Homeroom acted as a reserved time for teachers and students to engage with SEL. This formal

SEL-oriented space was easy for Sebastian's school to maintain because it was ingrained into the organization of the day. Integrating SEL into school structures allowed school leaders to easily continue implementation and ensured that there was always time reserved for SEL.

Some schools adapted their designated SEL periods to respond more directly to the needs of students during the pandemic. Because Jessica's school had previously established advisory periods in the school structure, the administration was able to adapt their formal practices for the pandemic. Before the pandemic, the advisories were less structured and instead were generally spent having conversations about the importance of doing well in class. During the pandemic, the school provided more clear structuring and ensured that the themes covered in advisory aligned with what was happening in the community. For example, Jessica's class covered voting issues while the student council elections were taking place. Although Jessica's school had not originally provided advisory curriculums, the influence of the pandemic motivated them to better support advisory time through structured lessons. This structured time allowed Jessica to foster SEL without the additional pressure of making her need to choose SEL over academics. In this case, the school adapted their formal supports in response to the needs of the teachers and students.

By designating time and space for SEL, schools provide an integrated, formal opportunity for emotional support and growth for their students. While no schools implemented new advisory or homeroom systems, most of the schools were able to continue this practice through the pandemic. These times are integrated into the school schedule, so teachers do not feel like they need to take away from class time for SEL-specific lessons. Homeroom removed the burden of SEL implementation from teachers and instead requires the administration to organize specific programming. Schools that integrated homeroom and advisories into their school schedules did

not need to make major adjustments when they moved online and were thus able to maintain the dedicated SEL time.

*Classroom*

**SEL Programs.** Some teachers continued to implement their own formal SEL programs during the pandemic. Chloe told her students that "we're gonna do a whole bunch of [mindfulness techniques]. You're gonna find at least one that works for you. And that's going to help you later." Chloe was a new teacher, which allowed her to select SEL practices that worked well online. She recognized the importance of prioritizing SEL despite the challenges of online learning. Alexandra also spent a significant amount of time teaching her students about mindfulness and she helped them build vocabulary around their emotional wellbeing by teaching weekly lessons specifically on SEL. Alexandra deeply believed in the importance of SEL and thus made an effort to continue to implement her lessons.

Many programs struggled during the transition online, either because there was poor implementation before the pandemic or because the program itself was too logistically complicated to implement online. Sebastian told me that few teachers at his schools used the Second Step program that his school provided, and that no one implemented the program once the pandemic began. Due to the poor implementation before the pandemic, teachers had no incentive to prioritize the unpopular program as they adapted to major changes in the classroom format. Christine stopped leading mindful minutes when the pandemic started, which she had not realized until she spoke with me. The mindful minutes allowed students to take a minute at the beginning of class to pause and settle so that they would be in the right mindset to learn. The mindful minutes were unique to Christine's class, so no one reminded her to continue using them. While her informal practice was sufficient during regular years, the pandemic disrupted

her routine. Without a formal support system, she could not focus on maintaining the same SEL practices amid the stress and the chaos of the transition online. Other teachers paused their use of some of the formal programs implemented at their school. During the pandemic, Alice stopped using the Mood Meter because she found that sending too many links to the students slowed down the pace of class. Her school also stopped setting up individual SEL plans for students: "And we're not able to set that kind of routine up for kids these days, because we don't have any kind of consistency with them." Yet Alice's case is unique: her school had a strong SEL focus and uniformly implemented Yale's RULER program. Her school did manage to continue many components of the program, but they had to let go of parts that no longer worked as smoothly in the online format. Thus, even with strong, formal implementation, some SEL programming became too logistically complicated. Schools had to recognize what could still be used, as well as consider the burden that SEL programming placed on both the teachers and the students.

Many teachers informally supported their students' SEL development as well. Every teacher I spoke to had developed a method for "checking-in" with their students, whether in a large class setting or one-on-one. Checking-in functioned as a way to provide students the space to reflect on their experiences during the pandemic. Sebastian informally checked in on students "whenever everything was a lot." He said that "a lot of them were feeling sad or lonely. Some of them were just bored, which was normal. I am too." Sebastian began to incorporate these informal check-ins to support students emotionally and allow them a space to discuss their emotions. Jessica specifically built check-in time into her class schedule. She lets her students stay after class for five minutes to tell her about how they are doing: "at the beginning of class I'll ask what they're having for lunch today and just try to like check in." Jessica's method for checking-in was more formal than Sebastian's method, but still required little effort. By making

the explicit choice to spend the beginning of class connecting with students, she set up a consistent, informal time for prioritizing students' wellbeing. Elijah also created a specific check-in form for his students. In the form, students could choose a meme that represented how they felt, and there was space for them to share what was happening in their lives. While only a few of his students used the form, he continued to share it as a resource. Given that he teaches high school, this method was likely better suited for older students as it requires more initiative on the part of the students. Importantly, Elijah did not require formal support to develop this method of checking-in, as it required little effort on his part.

While many of the teachers did find checking-in to be a helpful strategy for supporting students and building relationships, not all teachers were successful. Daniel said that he tried to frequently check-in with students: "I try to do as many check-ins and tell-me-about-yourself sorts of things. And I try to relate things to my life as much as I can. So you can be like, 'look, here's me, I'm a person.'" But he said that it has "been largely ineffective." It is not clear why Daniel has had less success than other teachers. It is possible that the high school population is more reliant on their peers for emotional support. It is also possible that Daniel was not equipped with the skills necessary to build relationships online, or perhaps he held himself to higher standards. This example highlights that different teachers need different strategies based on the context of their situation.

The majority of the check-in systems were informally developed by teachers. Yet one school developed their own formal way of checking-in on students. Jessica described how her school organized a liaison program at the start of the pandemic to ensure that each student had an adult that checked-in with them. Every adult at the school participated in this program, including counselors and administrators. These adults were called "family liaisons" and were a way to

formally "check-in" with students. While most check-ins were informally organized by the teachers, this program was the one example I heard of a school formalizing a check-in system once the pandemic had started.

Most teachers checked-in with their students informally as few schools created unique systems for checking-in. Check-ins times were informally incorporated into classroom time and student routines by the teachers, who wanted to ensure that they were addressing the needs of each student. These systems recognized the increased need of students during the pandemic. Teachers chose to spend some of their class time checking-in with students because they recognized that their students would not be able to learn if they were not in the right headspace.

**Grading.** While grading is not explicitly part of CASEL's framework for implementing SEL in schools, I found that teachers oriented their grading practices to support their students' emotional wellbeing. Elijah began to input missing work as "in progress" (IP). He had originally followed the school's plan for grading by inputting zeros for missing work but found that it immediately fostered inequality. Through his grading policy, Elijah acknowledged that students complete work at different rates. He included more flexibility and grace into his grading policy to support each student's understanding of their academic progress. While grading policies are a formal practice, teachers adapted the policies during the pandemic in response to students' needs, thus making grading an informal SEL practice.

Some of the teachers changed their grading policies to better reflect the needs of each student. Sebastian recognized that his special education students would struggle under the new circumstances, so he "reconfigured" his grading policy. He said that "what I came to is like while everybody else is doing one thing, I'm doing another thing with these, like five kids, and I'm not grading them on the other stuff. If the other kids are doing like three assignments, we're doing

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one the whole week." By assigning quantities of work on ability, Sebastian ensured that he was not failing his special education students.

While grades are not considered part of CASEL's framework, grading had major implications for the students' wellbeing. During the pandemic, teachers adjusted their grading to informally support students' mental health and in doing so redefined grading as part of SEL. While grading itself is a formal policy, the implications on students' wellbeing are not built into the formal grading system, which is assumed to be an objective measure of a student's academic performance. Yet grading policies informally influence students. Some of the teachers I spoke with chose to adapt their grading practices to better help their students. These teachers adapted a formal academic system to be an informal system for supporting students' mindset in the classroom. By coopting this formal practice for their own SEL strategies, teachers pushed the boundaries of what constitutes SEL.

**Integrated SEL into academics.** Teachers found that SEL practices that were integrated into the academic curriculum easily transferred to online teaching. Christine said that she always had started class with a question of the day that allowed students to explore their own identity. During the pandemic, she shifted the questions to focus on the students' experiences of living during the pandemic: "So the questions I would ask would be around my topics, but like one of my first questions was 'What's the silver lining?' You know? Like, 'What feels normal? What's not normal?'" Christine changed her questions to reflect the students' lives during the pandemic, and in doing so created an informal space for students to reflect on their feelings. Christine also continued to lead her lessons on identity, which gave her students the language to talk about how they identify. Because the identity unit was part of her curriculum, Christine could easily implement this formal SEL lesson in her online classroom. Alice also had a unit on identity for

her fifth graders, where they covered topics ranging from dis/abilities to racial identities. The students were also assigned "I am from" poems at the beginning of the year that allowed them to construct personal narratives. Alice easily implemented these lessons during the pandemic because they were part of her curriculum. While Hamilton et al. (2020) found that some teachers did change their curriculums during the pandemic, some teachers were able to maintain the parts that were relevant to SEL.

Teachers continued to implement their lessons that incorporated SEL. These components of the curriculum are built into class time in such a way that it does not feel like the teachers are sacrificing content in order to facilitate SEL. Some teachers found ways to make these formal practices even more relevant to the lives of students during the pandemic. This component of SEL implementation was perhaps the least affected by the pandemic because the teachers and schools had found a way to integrate SEL into the fundamental structure of academic learning.

**Alternative ways to participate.** Online schooling allowed teachers to rethink ways for students to participate in class. In response to the new classroom setting, teachers created new methods for student participation. Sebastian recognized that many of his students did not want to turn on their cameras or unmute themselves because they lived in a challenging learning environment; some students had to take classes in the same room as their siblings, while others had a poor Wi-Fi connection. To accommodate his students, Sebastian told them that they could put their ideas in the chat or privately message him. In doing so, Sebastian provided options that allowed all students to engage in class in whatever way felt the most comfortable to them. Similarly, Teresa found that students were more willing to annotate a shared document or presentation than speak on Zoom. She used a platform called Peardeck to facilitate the group

work. Through this method, students who felt uncomfortable turning on their cameras or speaking were able to continue to participate and engage with the other students.

Teachers informally found ways to include their students in the online classroom format. The new classroom environment allowed teachers to create new norms around participation. Through creativity and flexibility, teachers made the classroom a space where everyone could contribute in whatever way felt best to them. Teachers were willing to accommodate different versions of participation because they were desperate for students to engage in whatever way they could. By offering alternative ways to participate, teachers informally made students feel more welcome in the class.

### *Family Partnerships*

The CASEL framework recommends that schools and teachers build strong connections with families in order to support students more holistically. During the pandemic, teachers communicated more with parents, especially parents of elementary and middle school students. As mentioned earlier, Alexandra relies on parents to ensure that their students are paying attention in class. Because teachers are not physically present with their students, they must rely on the adults who are with the children at home. Alexandra found it to be easier to connect with parents during the pandemic because of the universal use of Zoom. The new norm of video calls allowed her to schedule meetings with parents who she would have a hard time reaching in a normal year. She was excited about the opportunity to speak and connect with a more diverse set of parents:

> So I get a lot more face time with parents who have different schedules. And I've been reflecting on that, like, that creates a lot more buy in or a lot more understanding, a lot more trust when they see you and they know you. And there's a huge population that doesn't know you or see you. Because they work unusual hours, or you know, they don't have babysitting. So now all of a sudden, I'm open to this population of parents who don't

normally come to my classroom after school to talk to me. And it's exciting to me, because I crave that. So I said, "Hey, you know, let's talk, let's not email, let's look at each other and talk about this. What's going on? What did it feel like? I just want to listen."

Alexandra found that the pandemic allowed her to connect with more parents than usual. She welcomed this opportunity and began to use informal methods of contacting parents. Alexandra recognized that in normal school years, she struggles to connect with parents who "work unusual hours". Through a combination of informal reflection and action, Alexandra took steps towards building relationships with the parents of all her students. Christine said that she communicates more with parents so that every parent knows about their child's progress: "But I have made a really concerted effort to make sure I communicate with all of them. And some people are writing me back constantly, like 'so and so did this', or 'I noticed that' and then other people just don't respond, they just say 'thanks' or whatever." While Christine received varying responses from parents, she was still able to connect with every parent.

While many schools provide a system for teachers to communicate with parents, teachers had to set up their own messaging system to overcome communication barriers. Elijah's students came from diverse households and many of his students' parents did not speak English fluently. Elijah started using an app that translated his messages into different languages based on what language the parent selected when setting up the app. He joked with me that he cannot read some of the texts in his phone because the texts are in languages he does not understand. Elijah's desire to communicate with parents led him to develop this informal messaging system. Sebastian also faced communication issues because the information in his school's database was incorrect or lacking. Some parents did not have an email registered, while other emails were outdated. These issues made it difficult for Sebastian to quickly distribute information to his students' parents. Taking matters into his own hands, he asked his students to complete a Google

Form with their parents' information so that he could ensure that he had a way to reach every family. Sebastian rejected the formal system set up by his school and instead created his own informal way of strengthening connections with families. Yet he had to go out of his way and put in additional effort to create a system that served the same function as the one his school had organized. Therefore, formal systems only help teachers when they are well-maintained and organized.

The increased need for parent participation forced teachers to create informal methods for building connections with families. During the pandemic, teachers lost direct access to students and instead had to rely on their parents to help manage their education. This increased communication called for systems that would allow teachers to reach all parents. Many of the formal systems designed by schools failed to meet the needs of the teachers, so the teachers created their own methods for reaching students. Teachers recognized the importance of the formal systems but needed to have improved versions of these systems. By creating their own informal systems, teachers filled the gap left by their schools.

**Summary of Findings**

Schools only continued SEL practices if they were integrated into the school structure. Despite major changes to the learning environment, many administrators kept their advisory and homeroom periods during the pandemic because they were already part of the school schedule. Similarly, coaching and mentoring systems for new teachers continued during the pandemic because these supports was integrated into the jobs of the school staff. Practices like MTSS and PBIS only continued if there was schoolwide buy-in. Schools struggled to implement restorative justice practices during the pandemic because they only used restorative justice for disciplinary

purposes rather than integrating restorative justice values into the culture of the school. At the classroom level, teachers continued to use part of their curriculum that were focused on SEL.

Teachers created new informal SEL methods in response to both the needs of their students and themselves. To take care of their own wellbeing, some teachers learned how to develop clear boundaries. They also modeled SEL by being more open and vulnerable with their students about their living situations. This strategy both allowed teachers to openly express themselves and taught students that it is okay to be vulnerable and struggle. Many teachers instituted check-in systems to provide their students a space for sharing and reflection. In order to help students feel like they could succeed, teachers adjusted their grading systems to allow for greater flexibility and grace. Lastly, teachers developed alternative ways for students to participate, as many of the students did not feel comfortable unmuting themselves or turning on their camera during their online classes. These alternative ways for students to participate allowed for all students to engage in the classroom and encouraged them to participate in whichever ways felt best to them.

## Policy recommendations

Based on these findings, I have identified two recommendations for how schools can improve their SEL implementation. These recommendations focus on finding ways for Title I schools to create space for teachers to implement SEL.

### Recommendation 1: Integrate SEL into School Structures

To develop stronger SEL implementation in schools, administrators in Title I schools must fully integrate SEL into the school structures at every level. In order to support teacher SEL, school administrators must integrate systems that allow teachers to collaborate and access

mentors and coaches. To support students, schools can provide teachers with resources for incorporating SEL into their curriculum. They should also build school structures in such a way that prioritize student wellbeing, which can include MTSS systems and homeroom periods. When schools fail to fully integrate SEL practices into the school structures, the practices may disappear in times of upheaval, or teachers may simply choose to not use the assigned programs. Complete integration necessitates that the school structures require SEL implementation, such that all teachers and administrators engage in SEL programming.

While integrating SEL fully into school structures may take some time, schools should strive to first identify the needs of the community, then plan how they will make SEL a critical part of the school structure. Each plan for SEL implementation will be different based on the needs of the school. Successful implementation will include complete buy-in from all teachers, such that each student is getting consistent SEL programming in every class. Schools should designate time for SEL and provide a structured curriculum to the teachers for these periods. Professional development on SEL should be offered throughout the year, with frequent opportunities for reflection and discussion. Successful professional development should also prepare teachers for culturally responsive teaching, which can be achieved through implicit bias training, creating connections with families and the community, as well as other methods.

Schools ought to integrate restorative justice into the values of the entire school, beyond the discipline system. Restorative justice practices fell away during the pandemic in response to the decrease in disciplinary issues. Yet when implemented school-wide, restorative justice can help schools foster a greater sense of community (Sandwick et al., 2019). Additional research should investigate the best ways for schools to integrate the values of restorative justice throughout the school.

To evaluate the success of SEL integration, administration should identify their goals for integration and then reflect on whether these goals have been achieved schoolwide. This step of evaluation is identified in CASEL's Guide to Schoolwide SEL as "Practice Continuous Improvement". Part of this reflection will require feedback from the school community, including students, teachers, and parents.  If only parts of the school recognize the SEL programming, then the administration has failed to fully integrate the methods. Administration should conduct these evaluations annually.

Schools face significant challenges associated with implementing SEL schoolwide, as it requires complete buy-in from all teachers. In other words, every teacher must choose to prioritize SEL and make the effort to include it into their classroom. Yet many schools have already begun the process of integrating SEL, whether by implementing a PBIS system or by offering professional development on SEL. This movement towards SEL-based schooling requires that these efforts are not simply there for show. Schools must continuously prioritize these systems and encourage teachers to use them so that the systems become an integral part of the school's structure.

**Recommendation 2: Include Teacher Leadership in Planning and Implementation**

Title I schools ought to include teacher voice and leadership as they plan and implement SEL practices. During the pandemic, teachers created informal methods of SEL to adapt to the new reality of schooling. These teachers demonstrated their ability to identify helpful methods of support both for themselves and their students, and in some cases expanded the definition of what constitutes SEL methods. While many of the teachers were able to implement these techniques without the support of the school, the strategies replaced the formal support offered by the school. If schools include teachers in the decision-making process around SEL, teachers

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can offer the techniques that worked best for them. Including teacher voice also ensures that poorly implemented practices are brought to the attention of schools. Administrators should conduct an annual survey among teachers to identify whether they feel that the administration has included teacher voice and leadership in decision-making processes.

Teachers can be included in the conversation at all levels of the planning process. Whether identifying the needs of students and teachers or choosing which programs would work best for the school, teachers ought to be in the room. Part of assessing student needs includes recognizing what SEL means in the context of each school. While grading is not explicitly considered part of SEL by CASEL, this research shows that teachers feel that grading can have a major impact on students' mindsets. By including teacher voice, schools create the possibility of recognizing the SEL implications in all domains of schools.

A critical part of this recommendation requires schools to include teachers in leadership positions such that they can have a say in how the implementation plays out. Schools can ensure they include teacher voice by giving teachers the power to make decisions about implications. Teachers can select representatives who can participate in the planning process for school-wide SEL implementation. The representatives should be included in the final decisions about SEL, as well as in conversations about improvement. Creating a more equal power dynamic will not only ensure that teachers feel heard by the administration but may improve relations overall between teachers and administrators.

Teachers should not be compelled to participate, rather schools should make participation easy and accessible. Possible ways to include teachers are meeting during lunch periods or sending out short surveys. Schools should ensure that they do not add an additional burden to teachers by asking them to participate, as that would be counterproductive. Including teacher

voice therefore includes ensuring that teachers can communicate about the extent to which they would like to participate in the planning process.

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has majorly disrupted the education system and forced educators to rethink how they support their students as well as themselves. In this thesis, I have identified how teachers engage with and apply formal and informal systems of support to facilitate SEL for themselves and their students. When schools allow teachers to prioritize SEL, teachers create their own informal techniques which respond directly to the needs of the students. These informal systems often draw on components of the formal systems put in place by the school.

Given the large effect of the pandemic on mental health, implementing strong SEL in schools is more important than ever. Schools must redesign their school structures in order to better reflect SEL values, such that even academic practices, like grading, include the grace and flexibility required for every student to feel like they can succeed. Additionally, improving SEL in schools can have positive impacts on teachers, who are facing extremely high burnout rates. By strengthening the SEL supports for teachers, schools can reduce teachers' stress.

### Limitations and Areas for Future Research

This study was significantly limited by the number of interviewees, which led to a lack of complete representation across the United States. Schools in each school district face unique challenges, and therefore it is difficult to generalize this data. By creating non-specific recommendations, I hoped to create suggestions that could be applied to any school. I realize that some schools must prioritize more basic needs such as food and housing stability for their

students, but SEL provides a critical form of emotional support that ought to be considered a basic need.

Given the variability between schools and districts, further research ought to be conducted at the school and district level so that these recommendations can be applied more directly. Research should focus on what SEL methods and systems meet the needs of the community. This research should provide specific recommendations for teachers and administrators and can act as a guide for school's future planning around SEL. Speaking to more teachers in a single school could give the administrators a better understanding of what the teachers found to be helpful during the pandemic, so that they might share those strategies with other teachers in the school. Recognizing school-level issues will lead to better implementation of SEL. This research should also include ways to incorporate teachers into leadership positions within the school.

Future research could also investigate the ways that grading systems interact with SEL in schools. Grades have historically not been included in conversations around SEL because they are directly tied to grades, but the field of education must stop ignoring the overlap between SEL and academics. Not only can school curriculums incorporate SEL into their lessons, but SEL ought to be considered in all parts of academic practices. By focusing on how SEL can play a role in every component of schools, researchers can more fully understand ways to make students feel more comfortable and supported in schools.

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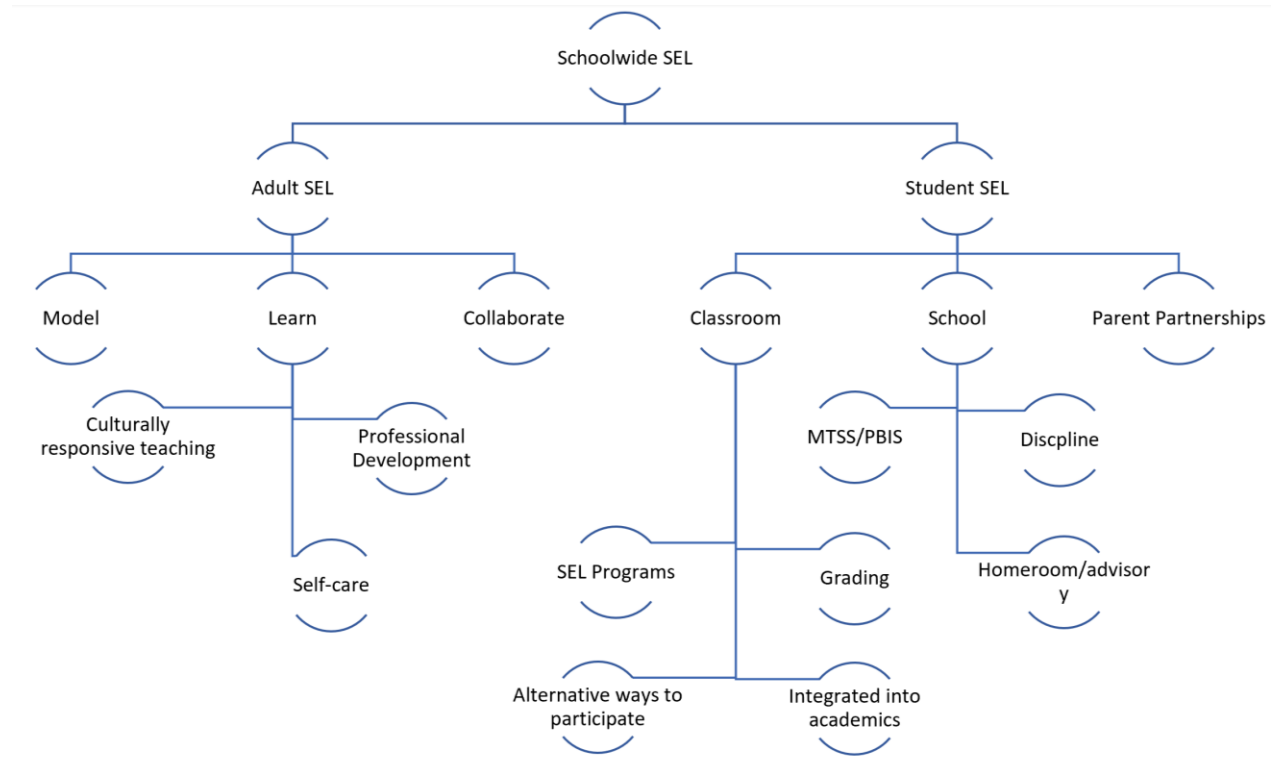
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## Appendices

**Appendix A**. Components of schoolwide SEL described in this study



**Appendix B**. Themes used for coding, with examples

| Theme | Example input |
|---|---|
| Past experiences with SEL | Did a year-long mindfulness training, called Mindfulness in Schools. Taught her to be mindful so she could model it for the students |
| Culture of school/district | **she doesn't feel supported: "**But like, I think that one of my biggest problems with my school is like the lack of support that I have felt the first couple of years or like the lack of like guidance. Everything is just seems very fluffy sometimes, like pretty inauthentic, or like just for show." |
| Professional development | **PD is now focused on race/equity online: "**And now our trainings about race and trauma and stuff are focused on how do you do this online, right. How do you see the signs of abuse online? How do you, you know, how do you deal? You know, how do you deal with people posting slurs on your google classroom? You know, that sort of thing? How does code-switching work online?" |
| School support systems (MTSS/PBIS) | **continued the PBIS videos during the school year, very easy for the teachers:** "So the way that it works is that like the person in charge of PBIS. She will make videos and basically it's super easy. It's very |

| | |
|---|---|
| | different than at my elementary school because it was all based on the teacher, whereas this like you show a video. Here's the questions you ask the kids. Like it's very straightforward, which I appreciate. So we've had a couple for bullying." |
| Transition to online | **Messy transition to online, no guidance: "**I think it was like kind of a mess. Like, we really just had one week to kind of transfer over to Google classroom and everything, and there was no guidance at all. And it ended up kind of being like a, let's just try to like, not make it go into full flames." |
| Technology | **school support with helping students use tech:** "I can put in a tech request and be like "so and so can't log on to their whatever". And I can try and solve the problem because I'm pretty good technology. But I can also put in a tech request, and then someone will call who speaks Spanish or Chinese or Arabic, to help the family figure out whatever tech issue is happening." |
| SEL Programs during COVID | **Changed the question of the day to be more relevant to the pandemic (SEL oriented): "**So, um, so the questions I would ask would be around my topics, but like one of my first questions was, like, what's the silver lining? You know? Like what feels normal? What's not normal? And so you get a lot of those, like, different kinds of responses from kids." |
| Routines | **no longer setting up individual SEL plans for students:** "And we're not able to set that kind of routine up for kids these days, because we don't have any kind of consistency with them." |
| Discipline | **fewer behavior issues because not in the classroom: "**And now especially with distance learning, I don't deal with a ton of behavior anymore. Because the kids are well behaved and they're not stuck in the classroom with me. I think I'd be dealing with more behavior if I was, but I'm able to sass them.**"** |
| Grading | **principal made everyone input missing work as a 55 instead of a 0, which she was already doing:** " I actually agree with my principal that I think it's really demoralizing, especially now, when they look at their grade and see like, Oh, I have like a 12% in this class. I think it's better for kids to look at a class and say like, "oh, like, I have a 50. Like I can come back from this." Where, even though you often can come back from having a 12, I think it feels really demoralizing." |
| Relationships with students | **feels very close with her students:** "I actually feel really close to my students. Part of it is that we're all having a common experience. I mean, it plays out differently, but we're all in the pandemic, right? " "So I think there is an odd intimacy, like I've met siblings, |

| | grandparents, pets, a lot of them are in their bedroom, you know. So you see, oh, my God, they still have a picture of a kitten on their wall. Okay, they're kids, you know." |
|---|---|
| Physical space | **fewer behavior problems:** "I think there are also frankly, just like, much less write ups happening than there would be. Unfortunately, I think with the remote setting, students just choose not to engage if they don't want to engage." |
| Equity | **Hard to create a lot of structure for students bc didn't work for everyone:** "But they needed structure, they needed a lot of structure. And it was difficult to do that. Because again, if I created a lot of structure for some families, that was great, and for other families, it was overwhelming**.**" |
| Making space for teachers to talk about SEL | **speaking with me about SEL was helpful: "**I'm glad, sometimes I feel like I'm just a crazy person talking to myself and anger. You know, it's really weird because you're in this little container and you don't know like, is this good stuff? Or am I...? Like, I don't know. Like, am I doing it right, so it's good to talk things out sometimes with somebody outside of your circle**."** |
| Teacher self-care | **Better at making boundaries during pandemic: "** I had to really create firm boundaries with the kids and the families. This is our time. This is our meeting time. And that's it. And so that really gave me a lot more time to take care of myself**."** |
| Communication | **she didn't know what punishments her students were receiving:** "Sometimes. I'm like referring things up and I never find out if they got followed up on where I'm like, 'Did we ever check in there?' And I just don't know. Like one of my kids got suspended last week. And yeah, I'm supposed to call home every day if they miss school. And so I was calling home. And after a couple days of this kid being gone, the dad picked up and he's like, "my kid can't come because he's suspended" and I'm like, "Oh, my God, nobody told me." And I'm his advisor. So I think there's a little bit of communication breakdown." |
| Stories from the field | **students can share their home lives more easily:** "I was like, okay, bring your pet, you know, or if you don't have a pet, you could bring a-- they're a little old for like dolls or stuffies. But you know, a few of them brought like stuffed animals or just like an object that was meaningful. So we regularly have pets. Regularly. Like, I am a big goofball when I teach. So like, I'll call the attendance and I call the pet, like, "Pup, Pup?" and then they get pup and they make like Pup wave, you know? It's so cute. You know, and there's kittens, right? So there's like, Gustav, who was like, a tiny baby kitten in August, is now like, an |

| | adolescent kitten. You know, so, from time to time, we'll be like "show us Gustav, oh he is so big"." |