The University of Chicago

What is SEL, Anyway?:
Teacher Perceptions of Social-Emotional Learning in High- and Low-Income Schools

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Abstract

Social-emotional learning (SEL), an educational framework that teaches students skills for emotional regulation, interpersonal relationships, and responsible decision-making, has become a cornerstone of modern education. SEL is widely praised for its capacity to improve student behavior and academic success, making its effective implementation a critical topic in contemporary education. This study asks: How does a school's level of economic disadvantage shape teachers' perceptions of and experiences with SEL implementation in Chicago Public Schools (CPS)? Through semi-structured interviews with 13 CPS educators across high- and low-income schools, I find that income level moderately influences teacher autonomy, administrative gatekeeping, professional development in SEL, and how educators define SEL in the first place. Moreover, despite some shared challenges, these findings point to structural inequities that shape how SEL is defined and enacted. The paper concludes by recommending that teacher voices are centered in future SEL policymaking decisions.

Keywords: Social Emotional Learning, Wellbeing, Teachers, Culturally Responsive, Chicago Public Schools, Professional Development, Autonomy, Second Step.

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Introduction

From the point at which they were created, schools have always educated students on more than just an academic curriculum: they serve as important sites of socialization and are often the first introduction to long-term same-age peer contact for children (Dreeben 1968:42). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), America's leading organization in social-emotional learning (SEL) research, defines SEL as "the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions" (CASEL 2024). Given the role that schools play in 'whole-child' development, from the social to the physical to the emotional, over the past two decades, many SEL programs have been developed and implemented in schools across the U.S., and by the 2023-2024 school year, "83 percent of school principals reported that their schools used an SEL curriculum" (CASEL 2024).

Much of the existing research on SEL examines the effect of SEL programming on student achievement (Durlak et al. 2011). Moreover, while some research has attempted to parse out how a school's level of economic disadvantage impacts the quality of SEL at that school, there has been little conclusive evidence gathered from this research (Bavarian et al. 2014; Farahmand et al. 2011; Bierman et al. 2010; Durlak et al. 2011). Therefore, there is very little, if any, research that explores how teachers, who are often the primary implementers of SEL in schools, perceive and interact with SEL differently in schools with high and low rates of economically disadvantaged students. This study attempts to fill this gap in SEL literature by asking the following question: How does a school's level of economic disadvantage shape

teachers' perceptions of and experiences with social-emotional learning (SEL) implementation in Chicago Public Schools?

Schools with higher rates of economic disadvantage, especially in Chicago, "deal with high levels of violent crime on school grounds," which may negatively harm the educational experiences of students at these schools (Burdick-Will 2013:1). Research has found that SEL can actually lead to safer schools through decreased aggression and delinquent acts (Durlak et al. 2011). Thus, schools with high rates of economic disadvantage may be the ones that would benefit most from SEL programming. But if SEL is implemented differently—or less effectively—in these schools, it may exacerbate rather than alleviate existing inequalities. This makes it especially urgent to understand how SEL is being understood and practiced on the ground in high- vs. low-income school contexts. Moreover, I believe that this research is more critical than ever as we approach an era of school reform where SEL will be implemented on a more national scale—before scaling up, I believe SEL program developers must critically analyze the normative standards embedded within their program design and teachers/schools should be obliged to examine their perspectives on socio-emotional behavior and how these views impact their pedagogy and interpretation of curriculum.

The 13 educators I interviewed taught at Chicago Public Schools (CPS) schools across the district, and many of them shared with me that they hadn't received the chance to share their honest thoughts about and experiences with SEL before. Rather than passively implementing the SEL curricula their school provides them, these teachers revealed their status as active players in the implementation process, constantly interpreting, adapting, and sometimes resisting SEL in ways that reflect their professional judgment, classroom realities, and the needs of their students.

This underscored the need for SEL policies that are shaped not just around students, but in collaboration with the educators tasked with bringing them to life.

This paper begins by providing a brief background on SEL policy in the nation, Illinois, and Chicago, which sets up the context necessary to understand the experiences of the participants implementing SEL in this study. Next, I proceed to a review of the literature on SEL, which is largely focused on SEL's effectiveness, its stratification by income and race, and how teachers view SEL on a national level. After briefly describing the methods I used in the study—semi-structured interviews—I go on to present my findings, which are organized under five distinct sections, including (1) how teachers define SEL, (2) their autonomy in implementation, and (3) the professional development they receive. These contributions will demonstrate the need for teacher-led SEL policy design and implementation, and I close by offering five district-level policy recommendations for CPS designed to strengthen SEL implementation, improve equity, and increase teacher investment, especially in low-income schools. Finally, I conclude by emphasizing the importance of including teacher voices in education research and policymaking, and argue that more equitable and context-responsive SEL policies are necessary if CPS is to fulfill the promise of "whole-child" education.

Background and Context

Despite its growing popularity over the past decade (Bushweller 2025), SEL is not a new educational method. In its most broadly defined sense, SEL is "the range of skills and outlooks kids need to thrive as students and individuals" (Minnesota Children's Museum n.d.). Through this definition, SEL can be viewed as existing alongside the birth of education itself: over two millennium ago, Plato proposed education to be a curriculum that produces "citizens of good

character" (Plato 375 BC) through a balance of physical education, the arts, math, science, character, and moral judgment. However, as I'll explore later in this study, the definition of SEL is constantly evolving, particularly given the different ways that schools are increasingly integrating SEL into daily education.

Origins and National Growth of SEL as Policy

While moral and emotional development have long been considered fundamental to education, the modern concept of SEL began to take shape in the late 1960s when James Comer, a scholar of child psychiatry, began piloting a program called the Comer School Development Program at Yale School of Medicine's Child Study Center (Edutopia 2011) based on his idea that "the contrast between a child's experiences at home and those in school deeply affects the child's psychosocial development and that this in turn shapes academic achievement" (Comer 1988).

The Comer School Development Program focused on "two poor, low-achieving, predominantly African American elementary schools in New Haven, Connecticut, that had the worst attendance and the lowest academic achievement in the city" (Edutopia 2011). The program utilized a team for each school, made up of that school's principal, a mental health worker, parents of students at the school, and teachers at the school. Using their own knowledge about the schools' academic and social programs, the team made decisions about which school procedures to change based on what seemed to be causing behavioral problems. By the early 1980s, "academic performance at the two schools exceeded the national average, and truancy and behavior problems had declined" (Edutopia 2011). The clear success of the program helped legitimize the link between students' emotional well-being and academic achievement, paving the way for increased interest in SEL research.

As education policymakers, psychologists, and school leaders took note of the program's outcomes, the 1980s and 1990s saw a surge in academic focused on the social-emotional dimensions of learning, including the W.T. Grant Consortium on the School-Based Promotion of Social Competence, the project that first listed "the emotional skills necessary for emotional competence as identifying and labeling feelings, expressing feelings, assessing the intensity of feelings, managing feelings, delaying gratification, controlling impulses, and reducing stress" (Catalano et al. 1998). This momentum ultimately laid the groundwork for the development of more formalized frameworks, including the creation of the Collaborative to Advance Social and Emotional Learning[1] (CASEL) in 1994. Later, in 1997, nine collaborators from CASEL published *Promoting Social and Emotional Learning: Guidelines for Educators*, an educator guidebook for SEL that went on to establish and define the field of social-emotional learning (Edutopia 2011). While CASEL originally focused on research to convince schools and districts to adopt SEL, in the years since it was founded, the organization has grown and is now also dedicated to ensuring that SEL is adopted into policy (CASEL n.d.).

U.S. policy-wise, the transition from the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) to the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) demonstrated one of the first federal policy adoptions of 'non-academic' measures as an indicator of school success (American Institutes for Research 2016). This not only gave states more flexibility to prioritize SEL in their accountability frameworks but also began to popularize the idea of 'whole-child' development and the importance of noncognitive skills outside of academic research (García and Weiss 2016). Today, SEL is officially recognized by department agencies across the nation and is most widely understood through CASEL's widely adopted framework, which defines five core competencies:

[1] Now named the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL).

"self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making" (CASEL n.d.). In the present day, while not all states require SEL in schools, "27 states have adopted K-12 SEL competencies and all 50 have adopted pre-K SEL competencies" (CASEL 2025).

SEL as Law in Illinois and Its Role in CPS

In 2003, the Illinois State Legislature passed the Children's Mental Health Act of 2003, designed to "provide comprehensive, coordinated mental health prevention, early intervention, and treatment services for children from birth through age 18" (Illinois General Assembly 2003). Part of this bill required the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) to "develop and implement a plan to incorporate social and emotional development standards as part of the Illinois Learning Standards" (Illinois General Assembly 2003). Moreover, the bill included a mandate that "every Illinois school district" had to "develop a policy for incorporating social and emotional development into the district's educational program" (Illinois General Assembly 2003). In 2004, the Illinois SEL standards were approved, and Illinois became the first state to adopt K-12 SEL standards (Dusenbury and Weissberg 2017). Today, the ISBE's standards are divided by developmental level (early elementary, late elementary, middle/junior high, early high school) and, importantly, serve as broad guidelines—districts have discretion in how to implement them (Ayala 2021). The ISBE's three goals, displayed below, represent Illinois's broader SEL mission for schools across the state.

Goal 1: Develop self-awareness and self-management skills to achieve school and life success.

a. Identify and manage one's emotions and behavior.
b. Recognize personal qualities and external supports.
c. Demonstrate skills related to achieving personal and academic goals.

Goal 2: Use social-awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships.

a. Recognize the feelings and perspectives of others.
b. Recognize individual and group similarities and differences.
c. Use communication and social skills to interact effectively with others.
d. Demonstrate an ability to prevent, manage, and resolve interpersonal conflicts in constructive ways.

Goal 3: Demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts.

a. Consider ethical, safety, and societal factors in making decisions.
b. Apply decision-making skills to deal responsibly with daily academic and social situations.
c. Contribute to the well-being of one's school and community.

Figure 1: Illinois' SEL Standards (Illinois State Board of Education n.d.)

Shortly after the ISBE standards were set, CPS "adopted a policy that committed the district to train all school personnel in the area," develop "age-appropriate programs to help students manage their emotions, set goals," and build better relationships with peers and teachers (Kelleher 2016). Today, CPS has an Office of Social and Emotional Learning (OSEL) that provides "training and coaching to school leaders as well as teachers, and the district offers incentives to schools pursuing a Supportive Schools Certification," (García Mathewson 2017) which a school can receive after an OSEL team is able to declare with authority that the school embeds SEL[2] (Kelleher 2016). However, outside of these requirements, individual CPS schools have a large amount of flexibility in deciding which SEL curriculum to use and if they want to expand SEL programming outside of their chosen curriculum (Chicago Public Schools 2024). Given this, while every CPS school has some kind of SEL programming, implementation varies significantly throughout the district.

Literature Review

Variations in SEL Across Socio-Economic Status (SES)

[2] All but one school in my study has received the Supportive Schools certification.

Past research reveals largely positive results following the implementation of SEL: in a study of 270,034 kindergarten through high school students, participants in the SEL program "demonstrated significantly improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance that reflected an 11-percentile-point gain in achievement" (Durlak et al. 2011:405). Moreover, SEL programming has been shown to have a positive impact on teachers, increasing "teachers' self-efficacy regarding behavior management and reduc[ing] their experience of burnout" (Domitrovich et al. 2016:18). Lastly, there is evidence that SEL programming not only improves academic outcomes, but also that a lack of SEL in schools actually hurts students, as children who fall behind in their social-emotional learning are "at an increased risk for academic, social, and behavioral problems" (Mondi and Reynolds 2022:2). However, as promising as this scholarship is, many studies focusing on the effectiveness of SEL don't look at how outcomes and implementation differ between schools in different socio-economic neighborhoods and schools with different racial and socio-economic demographics. Thus, it is essential to see how isolating demographic factors, from family income to ethnicity, affect the efficacy of SEL programming.

Research has demonstrated that persistent poverty has significant detrimental effects on socioemotional functioning, partly due to heightened exposure to acute and chronic stressors (McLoyd 1998). Moreover, for many children considered "at-risk" due to their socio-emotional status, part of the development of this status comes from attending schools that have a high density of high-risk children, making it difficult for teachers to manage the classroom and maintain order. This leads to either a less individualized method of teaching socio-emotional skills or the absence of social-emotional learning entirely (Bierman et al. 2010), perpetuating a

recurring cycle. Importantly, this more disruptive classroom structure and climate may affect how efficient an SEL program is in practice.

Research on SEL programming in low-income populations is limited, but the studies that do exist show mixed effects (Bavarian et al. 2014; Farahmand et al. 2011; Bierman et al. 2010; Durlak et al. 2011). In one study measuring the impact of one SEL program, Positive Action (PA), on academic outcomes among low-income youth in Chicago Public Schools, researchers found that the program improved academic outcomes, student behavior, and student wellness (Bavarian et al. 2014). In contrast, however, a meta-analysis of SEL programming across the U.S. found that "[no] programs specifically focused on conduct problems were deemed effective, 25% reported mixed results, and 75% were not effective" in urban and low-income communities, compared with reports that "42% of conduct-focused programs [were found] to be effective and 21% not effective" in middle- to high-income, suburban communities (Farahmand et al. 2011:384). This study suggests that in many low-income contexts, students may have a much different experience with SEL than students in middle- to high-income communities, whether due to external stressors or program design. Similarly, in a study of Fast Track PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies), an SEL program developed for high-risk children and families, intervention effects were "largest in schools that had less socioeconomic disadvantage (e.g., lower rates of student reduced or free lunch)," (Bierman et al. 2010:14) showing that this program model may be well-designed for most schools, but not those with high student poverty, an important conclusion given the higher stress levels many high-poverty students face (McLoyd 1998). While these results may be due to teacher capacity and the inability of coordinators to accurately rate teacher implementation of the program, it remains unclear why this result arose. Family dynamics may be another factor to consider: Lareau argues

that for middle-income children, expectations for interactions with adults are typically aligned among home, school, and larger society; however, for working class and poor children, families' expectations for adult–child interactions tend to vary from what is expected in school and other institutions (Lareau 2011:197). Given this evidence, it is clear that there is considerable variation when studying the effects of SEL programming in low-income populations.

While on a broader scale, research suggests that SEL programming is just as effective for students in low-income families as for students in middle- to high-income families (Bavarian et al. 2014; Durlak et al. 2011; Farahmand et al. 2011), more focused studies show that effectiveness for students in low-income families appears to be very program- and school-specific (Bierman et al. 2010). While the reasons behind these mixed results are unclear, potential explanations may focus on program implementation and design. Given this, contextually relevant applications of SEL programming may be especially important in low-socioeconomic status (SES) schools or contexts.

Variations in SEL Across Race/Ethnicity

Adolescents from diverse language and ethnic groups may experience and respond to psychosocial stressors differently, an important consideration when designing curriculum and programming for students. For example, research indicates that in comparison to white students, "African-American adolescents are at a higher risk for internalizing and externalizing problems; Latino American children are at a higher risk for poor social-emotional outcomes; Asian American children display higher levels of internalizing emotions and may experience more stress in the context of peer relationships than other children; and Native American children are at higher risk for internalizing problems and for specific types of antisocial behavior" (Newman

2020:19). Moreover, on a broader scale, in a study of large urban public-school districts, every racial group reported "lower levels of SEL" (Jones et al. 2021:1) when compared to their white peers. Given this, race may be an important factor to consider when implementing and designing school-specific SEL programming.

Studies on the effectiveness of SEL programming in which race or ethnicity are isolated as an independent variable face key methodological limitations that hinder their reliability and generalizability. For instance, in a meta-analysis of school-based universal SEL interventions, Rowe and Trickett (2018) examined how often studies reported on student diversity descriptors such as gender, race/ethnicity, and SES. They found that "nearly one third of all the studies did not report student race/ethnicity or socioeconomic status" (Rowe and Trickett 2018:564). This inconsistency in demographic reporting makes it difficult to determine whether SEL programs have differential impacts across racial or ethnic groups. Moreover, even when such variables were reported, they were rarely analyzed as meaningful sources of variation (Rowe and Trickett 2018). Rowe and Trickett (2018) suggest that potential differences in program effectiveness based on race or ethnicity may be going unexamined altogether due to the design and reporting gaps in the field. These omissions limit our understanding of how SEL operates across diverse populations and raise concerns about the generalizability of current findings. The question going forward, therefore, asks: why does SEL programming seem to work less effectively for certain students in specific environments?

Teacher Attitudes Toward SEL

Classroom teachers are central to social-emotional learning implementation, often delivering the majority of SEL instruction (Cooper et al. 2023). Given teachers' role as the

primary implementers of SEL initiatives, research shows that the success of school-based SEL programs largely hinges on teacher buy-in and engagement (Sharma et al. 2024). Thus, it is important to better understand how today's teachers perceive SEL and if this differs by variables like race and income.

To start, studies seem to somewhat consistently find that educators view fostering students' social-emotional skills through SEL positively (McGraw-Hill Education 2018; Cooper et al. 2023; Bushweller 2025). In the McGraw-Hill Education 2018 SEL Report, it was reported that 93% of surveyed teachers believe that SEL is just as important as academic learning. Moreover, the survey indicates that many teachers are putting this belief into practice: 74% of teachers in the survey reported that they devoted more time to teaching SEL skills today compared to five years ago (McGraw-Hill Education 2018). In a study conducted to better understand teachers' perceptions of SEL following the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of teachers "reported feeling neutral to comfortable with SEL," and that their "school culture had a neutral to supportive stance toward SEL" (Cooper et al. 2023). Lastly, according to a survey of 30 educators, the majority of teachers (54%) felt somewhat positive about SEL, while 25% of teachers believed SEL had no impact, and 3% of teachers felt somewhat negative about SEL (Bushweller 2025). Together, these studies suggest that while teachers generally view SEL positively, their experiences and levels of support may vary depending on school context.

School socioeconomic status may also affect teachers' SEL experiences. As explored earlier, economically disadvantaged schools may often face greater challenges in implementing SEL, including tighter budgets for SEL curricula, training, or support staff (Jones et al. 2017). However, while there is a wealth of research available on teachers' general perceptions of SEL (McGraw-Hill Education 2018; Cooper et al. 2023; Bushweller 2025), there is very little

literature that compares teachers implementing SEL in high versus low economically disadvantaged schools. The only research I could find on this topic is, interestingly enough, from the same study that reported most teachers feeling neutral to comfortable with SEL: the researchers found that teachers who taught at more "impoverished schools" and those who felt more "general support from their school district/superintendent reported greater comfort with SEL" (Cooper et al. 2023). While I believe this is valuable data, the study's reliance on quantitative data collected via an online survey limited its ability to explore the nuances of teacher experience. This limitation motivated me to use qualitative, semi-structured interviews in my own research to capture the complexities, interpretations, and lived realities that cannot easily be surfaced through scaled responses.

SEL in the Context of Cultural Relevance

Scholars argue that U.S. schools often reflect the norms of white, middle-class culture, privileging certain emotional expressions, communication styles, and behavioral expectations (Banaji et al. 2021). They argue that these norms are embedded into the rules, laws, culture, and ideologies of American institutions, including schools, through what Banaji et al. (2021) describe as the institutionalization of white, middle-class customs across social processes and structures. Thus, it follows that the institutionalization of white, middle-class norms would position these norms as normal and objective, both directly and indirectly leading to the dominance of the white middle-class and the subordination of minorities. Drawing on this, one possible explanation for variations in the success of SEL programming among students with different socio-economic statuses and/or racial identities is that the curriculum itself is structured in such a way that focuses on the nation's most privileged, leaving behind the unique needs, emotional pressures,

and trauma of low-SES and minority students. This hypothesis is supported by research conducted on SEL curriculum, which revealed that "very few PreK-5 SEL programs have a curricular focus on issues related to equity, justice, cultural competence, or cultural diversity," and only a few programs "seem to intentionally design their content to be equitable" (Ramirez et al. 2021:11). Therefore, it is important to understand how SEL curriculum may carry perspectives that hold students from historically underserved populations responsible for the inequities that they face, especially since this curriculum may be influenced by further biases at the hands of the teacher and the school.

While my study focuses on economic inequality, it is important to note that many SEL curricula may reflect the values of white, middle-class communities—values that may not align with the lived experiences of students in low-income or racially diverse school contexts. The most prominent way that whiteness has been structurally embedded into U.S. schools is through its normalized acceptance as "the standard for educational achievement against which all others are measured" (Brooks & Theoharis 2019:vii). This is achieved through the entrenchment of middle-class and white norms into school policies, structures, and social cultures (Forrest 2021) which manifest as "textbooks lauding white heroes, excuses about too few "qualified" BIPOC teacher candidates, dress codes that criminalize Black hair, productivity over people, and well-meaning educators who correct Black diction but claim color-blindness" (Simmons 2021). The supremacy of whiteness in schools is also codified through standardized tests that "reinforce certain belief systems or ways of knowing that do not reflect minority students' true knowledge or capabilities" (Forrest 2021) and discipline policies that disproportionately punish Black students with suspension or expulsion (Gregory and Fergus 2017). These examples all reflect structural aspects of the educational system, whether at the federal, state, or district level. By

ingraining whiteness into the very structures of educational programs, students of color start at a disadvantage and are then continually disadvantaged throughout their schooling trajectories.

Structural classism reveals itself in similar ways within the U.S. schooling system. One of the most prominent indicators of class in relation to education may be access to a preschool education. Heckman asserts that "skills beget skills," meaning that creating skills as a young child will make it easier to develop skills in the future (García and Weiss 2017). On the opposite end, according to this theory, children who fail to acquire these foundational skills may permanently lose opportunities that would allow them to be more successful later in life. Through this way of thinking, it is clear that class-based opportunities such as preschool can play a significant role in future academic success. Ultimately, examining the cultural relevance of SEL is essential to understanding why these programs may succeed in some contexts and fall short in others, especially in schools serving low-income and historically marginalized students.

Methods

To better understand how teachers at high-income schools and low-income schools in CPS perceive SEL itself, as well as SEL programs at their schools, differently, I conducted qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 13 current educators. The interview methodology is appropriate for the research question because it allows for an in-depth exploration of educators' lived experiences, perceptions, and practices in relation to SEL. Interviews are particularly suited to uncovering mechanisms that might not be visible through quantitative methods, such as how the decision-making processes of teachers affect the implementation of SEL policies and their implications for students.

I used a school's percentage of students eligible for free/reduced lunch (available on the CPS website) as a proxy for socioeconomic status. "High economic disadvantage"[3] schools are classified as schools at which over 80% of students qualify for free/reduced lunch. "Low economic disadvantage"[4] schools are classified as schools at which under 20% of students qualify for free/reduced lunch. By comparing the perceptions of SEL at high- versus low-income schools, I was better able to analyze how views of SEL differ in opposite socio-economic contexts.

My only criterion for enrollment was that participants be employed as teachers at a high- or low-income school in CPS. I didn't limit enrollment by age, gender, race, or grade level/subject taught. Moreover, teachers who didn't play an active part in SEL implementation at their school were not excluded, as these teachers offered critical insight into what SEL looks like in schools where classroom educators are not included in the implementation process—an important perspective, given that these school environments were present within CPS and speak to larger patterns of exclusion and top-down reform. I recruited a total of 13 respondents: 5 teachers from high-income schools, 7 teachers from low-income schools, and 1 principal from a low-income school. The demographic makeup of the participants is 61.53% white, 30.77% Black, and 7.7% Asian. In addition, the study consisted of 76.92% women and 23.08% men. On average, teachers were about 39 years old and had 16 years of teaching experience (see Appendix A for a detailed table of participants).

Participants were recruited primarily via email, given that their contact information was publicly available on school websites. To avoid selection bias based on geography, school

[3] From here on out, I will refer to "high economic disadvantage" schools as "low-income" schools for the sake of brevity.
[4] From here on out, I will refer to "low economic disadvantage" schools as "high-income" schools for the sake of brevity.

performance, or reputation, I used a randomized outreach method: I went down the entire CPS School Profile list (filtering to only General Education schools) alphabetically, rather than selecting schools by neighborhood or other characteristics (Chicago Public Schools n.d.). Through this recruitment protocol, potential participants received an email detailing the study's purpose, confidentiality assurances, and an invitation to participate (Appendix B). In total, I sent 398 recruitment emails and received 20 responses (not all those who responded ultimately ended up being interviewed due to time constraints), yielding a response rate of approximately 5%. Email recruitment occurred in waves of four schools at a time, continuing until the target sample size was achieved. I also recruited one individual by passing out physical flyers with my email in the school's break room (Appendix C).

Interviews were scheduled for 30-60 minute virtual (Zoom) sessions, with informed consent obtained prior to recording. All interviews were conducted in English. I utilized a semi-structured interview guide consisting of the same 19 questions, which ensured that all subjects were asked the same set of questions (Appendix D). Researchers note that semistructured interviews are most effective when the researcher wants to "explore participant thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about a particular topic" (DeJonckheere and Vaughn 2018:1-2). Thus, since the semi-structured interview approach allowed me to ask follow-up questions and have an open discussion of topics that arose during the interviews, I was able to gain more in-depth knowledge of teachers' perceptions of SEL. I developed this protocol based on a review of the literature and consultations with my thesis advisor/preceptor, ensuring that the questions aligned with my research objectives and captured a range of perspectives on SEL implementation. The pre-prepared interview questions were crafted with the goal of capturing each interviewee's unique experiences and centered around understanding the following: (1) each school's SEL

programming, (2) how each interviewee defined and viewed SEL, and (3) what barriers teachers faced in successful SEL implementation. All participants were compensated for their time with a $15 gift card.

All interviews were audio-recorded (with consent) and transcribed using Zoom's built-in AI transcription software. After completing the interviews, I relistened to each recording and followed along using the transcript to make sure the transcription was correct. To analyze the interview transcripts, I followed a two-stage process. The first stage consisted of two steps: (1) read each transcript once; and (2) re-read each transcript, this time attempting to identify recurring themes, patterns, and keywords. Once this stage was complete, I took note of themes and keywords that could be found in multiple transcripts and created a color-coded highlighting system based on the most prominent patterns (Appendix E). I then proceeded to the second stage of my analysis: (1) re-read each transcript for the third time, highlighting key quotes using the color-coded system; (2) transfer the coded data into a spreadsheet for cross-case comparison, writing detailed descriptions for each variable of interest (e.g., professional development, administrative involvement, teacher autonomy) based on individual interviews; and (3) group these detailed responses into broader thematic categories or "buckets" (for instance, determining what features distinguished "high-quality" versus "low-quality" professional development). This two-stage process of analysis allowed me to systematically compare patterns across schools and synthesize commonalities and divergences in teachers' experiences. I was also careful to ensure I noted deviant cases, or those that didn't fit into the broader patterns, to ensure that I did not neglect any important perspectives or experiences.

The study was approved by the University of Chicago's Institutional Review Board (Protocol No. IRB24-1973). Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the

interviews (Appendix F). Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and were given the right to decline recording or withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms replaced all personal identifiers to maintain confidentiality, and in some cases, minor contextual details, such as specific objects or settings, were modified to protect anonymity while preserving the integrity and meaning of the narratives shared. The audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely and were only accessible to me.

It's also important to acknowledge my positionality as a researcher undergoing this study. As a current undergraduate student at the University of Chicago, my academic training has emphasized both structural inequality and the role of education as a site of social reproduction. Moreover, while I'm not currently a classroom teacher, I have worked many jobs in the field of education, including as a summer school teacher, an afterschool instructor, and a classroom assistant. In all of these roles, I've worked primarily with economically disadvantaged students. Moreover, I will be working as a classroom teacher at a Title I school following my graduation from the University of Chicago. All of these experiences have shaped the way I approach education research, and I cannot claim to be completely unbiased throughout this research process. However, through pre-designed interview questions and careful reflexivity, which Jo Warin describes as "an inter-dependent awareness of how I as a researcher am influencing my research participants' perceptions and a simultaneous and interdependent awareness of how they are influencing me" (2011:811), throughout the past year, I have attempted to ensure my biases don't encroach upon my research. Marilyn Asselin suggested that researchers who have some proximity to an 'insider' status should "start gathering data from a fresh perspective with [their] eyes open" (2003:100). By consistently identifying my assumptions before entering an interview, I worked to remain critically self-aware, open to contradiction, and committed to letting

participants' experiences shape the direction and interpretation of the research, rather than allowing my own beliefs to lead the inquiry. Also critically, my identity as a young, college-educated researcher interviewing mostly older, more experienced educators may have affected how participants chose to share (or withhold) certain insights. To combat this, I began each conversation with a recognition that my role was to listen and learn, not to validate preconceived ideas.

There are a few limitations to this study worth noting. First off, this study is based on a relatively small sample of 13 educators and focuses exclusively on CPS. As a result, the findings aren't necessarily generalizable to schools in other cities, districts, or states. In addition, while the study includes interviewees from both high- and low-income schools, the sample is not evenly distributed across all neighborhoods or school types, and it includes only one administrator. However, given my randomized recruitment process in picking which schools to reach out to (I went down the school profile list alphabetically instead of by neighborhood), I believe the distribution of interviewees across neighborhoods/school types still allows for generalizability to the rest of CPS. Moreover, while data is limited to self-reported experiences, which may be shaped by memory, personal bias, or institutional loyalty, since I was hoping to measure teacher perceptions, self-reported data is not only appropriate but essential for capturing the nuances of how educators experience and interpret SEL implementation in their schools. One of the most critical limitations of my study was my inability to recruit any Hispanic educators. 25.1% of all teachers in CPS identify as Hispanic; thus, missing out on the perspectives of this racial group likely means that important viewpoints weren't captured. However, the perspectives shared by Black, Asian, and white educators in this study still provide rich insight into patterns of implementation across socio-economic lines, and the absence of one group does not negate the

validity of the themes identified. Future studies should intentionally seek to include a more racially representative sample of CPS educators to deepen and expand upon these findings. Lastly, the response rate to my recruitment emails was relatively low at approximately 5%. While this is not uncommon in qualitative educational research (Siegle 2024), particularly when utilizing cold outreach, it raises the possibility that my sample may be skewed toward educators who were especially motivated, interested in SEL, or had connections to the University of Chicago. As such, the perspectives captured in this study may not fully represent the broader population of CPS teachers, especially those who are disengaged from SEL. However, I don't believe this low response rate is fatal to my argument—since I equally sampled teachers at high- and low-income schools, any selection bias should impact both groups equally.

Theoretical Contributions and Findings

When comparing the experiences of interviewees who teach at high-income schools to the experiences of interviewees who teach at low-income schools, the majority of interviewees differed in their views on **how SEL is defined**, as well as the following components of implementation at their schools: (1) **teacher autonomy in the implementation process**, (2) **administrative control/gatekeeping of SEL**, and (3) **the quality of SEL-focused professional development at their school**. In addition, looking outside of economic comparisons of schools, the majority of participants reported that while SEL played a role in their school's disciplinary process, it could be easily overused as a "catch-all" for disciplinary issues. Finally, while the majority of teachers reported the use of Second Step in their SEL programming, of those who used Second Step at their school, interviewees were approximately evenly split between having a positive or negative view of Second Step. However, while those with a positive view of Second

Step reported a variety of reasons for their beliefs, teachers with a negative view of Second Step all cited a lack of **cultural responsiveness** as their reasoning.

What is SEL, Anyway?

While teachers across both high- and low-income schools generally agreed on the broad contours of SEL, their exact definitions often diverged in subtle but meaningful ways, particularly when it came to the purpose of naming emotions. While the majority of teachers at high-income schools talked about naming emotions so that students could better understand themselves and their identity, the majority of teachers at low-income schools talked about naming emotions for the purpose of managing them.

When asked how he would explain social-emotional learning to someone unfamiliar with it, James A., a 6th grade teacher at a high-income school in North Chicago, told me the following:

> "I think [SEL is] an opportunity for children to **better understand their own emotions, to better understand themselves,** [and] to focus on how they can be respectful individuals in a community and how they can empathize with others" (James A., high-income[5]).

James's way of defining SEL is echoed by the other teachers I interviewed at high-income schools: SEL was framed as a tool for self-understanding and emotional authenticity, empowering students to use their identity in ways that empower the greater community.

In contrast, almost all of the teachers I interviewed at low-income schools described SEL as the teaching of "how to manage emotions" (Elizabeth W., low-income), about "tools to deal with emotions" (Susan N., low-income), and "how to regulate emotions" (Sarah V., low-income). In other words, teachers at low-income schools were much more likely to focus on

[5] A note on primary source in-text citations: When names are followed by "high-income" or "low-income," this refers to the economic disadvantage level of the school at which the teacher works, not the teacher's personal income.

emotional naming as a means of regulation as opposed to self-awareness. By defining SEL within the context of its use as a tool to preempt disruption or facilitate smoother classroom behavior, teachers at low-income schools demonstrated a key difference between high- and low-income schools. While both groups saw value in emotional vocabulary, the goals diverged: in high-income schools, SEL was more about cultivating reflective individuals; in low-income schools, it was more about maintaining classroom harmony. This difference echoes broader dynamics seen throughout this study: paralleling Varner's warning against SEL programming as a means to achieve compliance (2023), in schools serving primarily economically disadvantaged communities, my interviews revealed that SEL is more likely to be framed in terms of control, routine, and behavioral compliance, even when well-intentioned. These interpretations aren't neutral: they reveal how institutional pressures and the demands of classroom management shape what SEL is allowed to mean in different contexts.

Despite this divergence, one area of overlap stood out: teachers across schools at all income levels placed emphasis on the importance of the social dimension of SEL, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Karen M., a 6th–8th grade special education teacher at a low-income school in Southwest Chicago, explained her beliefs about how COVID-19 has shaped the social development of students:

> "I would say, especially **since the pandemic, we definitely have had to reteach a lot of those social emotional skills** like **peer-to-peer contact, how we talk to our friends, how we make friends and keep friends**… things like that […][6] I would say the students who started school on the internet and missed the social aspect […] are really struggling with SEL right now. Because either they weren't online, or they were just learning online. And that's a lot different than when you're in a classroom with 30 kids… you know, all different levels, all different behavior expectations, things like that. So, I think our students do struggle with some of that stuff" (Karen M., low-income).

[6] A note on quotations: Bracketed ellipses ([...]) indicate omitted text. Unbracketed ellipses (...) reflect natural pauses or trailing off in speech. Quotations have been lightly edited for clarity, including the removal of filler words and repeated phrases (e.g., "like," "you know," "right").

The majority of teachers at both high- and low-income schools shared Karen's understanding of how COVID-19 interrupted students' social development, and many emphasized a greater need for explicit teaching around collaboration and how to make friends more generally. In this way, the pandemic seemed to serve as a shared inflection point, not only increasing the urgency of SEL but also expanding its meaning from a focus on individual development to a framework for building community and personal relationships.

The Role of Teachers in SEL Implementation

In looking at differences between high- and low-income schools, the participants in this study also differed when describing three components of the SEL implementation process: (1) **teacher autonomy in the implementation process**, (2) **administrative gatekeeping of SEL**, and (3) **the quality of SEL-focused professional development at their school**. Moreover, these components of SEL implementation affected how these interviewees chose to define SEL in the first place. As we approach a more universal understanding of SEL, it's critical to consider how these components play a role in a school's SEL programming and practices.

1. Teacher Autonomy in Implementing SEL

Teachers are often cited as a go-to example for the role of street-level bureaucrats in society: individuals in roles that require them to "implement public policy on the frontlines and have significant discretion in how they do so" (Davidovitz and Schechter 2024:1). Students can be unpredictable, and teachers must grapple with adjusting their practices and making judgments in order to cope with the uncertainties that their role comes with. As such, many argue that

policies in the field of education should give teachers a significant amount of agency and discretion in their decision-making (Hall and Hampden-Thompson 2021).

The role of autonomy in school culture extends beyond the need for flexibility in unpredictable situations; teacher satisfaction is also affected. By the end of the 2022-23 school year, “38 teachers, or about 10 percent of all employees in Virginia’s Prince Edward County school district, resigned” (Heubeck 2023). In the exit interview explaining why, 25% of respondents blamed “a lack of autonomy in instructional decisions and/or classroom management,” (Heubeck 2023) an example which correlates with research by the Learning Policy Institute, which found that teachers with greater levels of perceived classroom autonomy were more likely to report high job satisfaction (Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond 2017). Thus, teacher satisfaction is an increasingly important measure when considering the high teacher turnover issue that’s faced by predominantly low-income schools. In fact, research suggests that “Title I schools—those receiving federal funds for low-income students—see turnover rates that are nearly 50 percent greater than other schools” (University of Massachusetts n.d.). These numbers are even more exaggerated “in schools with a larger population of students of color” (University of Massachusetts n.d.).

While most of the teachers at high-income schools that I interviewed reported feeling a considerable amount of freedom in SEL implementation, the majority of the teachers at low-income schools in this study reported feeling low levels of autonomy when implementing SEL. While not all of those who perceived themselves as having low classroom autonomy perceived this limited flexibility as inherently negative, all of them did note that these constraints impacted their relationship and understanding of SEL.

Linda M., a 3rd grade teacher at a low-income CPS school in Southwest Chicago, emphasized the rigidity of SEL programming at her school:

> "It is very clear that it's, like, you should be doing Second Step. You need to be doing it once a week. Like that part is **not negotiable**. There's even a feature… where **[admin] can track what lesson we're on**. So they can literally see who's doing it and who's not doing it […] So I think a lot of teachers do feel like they **don't have a lot of choice** because they're not given alternatives" (Linda M., low-income).

Linda further described to me how this perceived lack of choice by teachers can encourage them to actively dislike SEL and feel unmotivated to teach it, especially since teachers must undergo "extra work" (Linda M., low-income) to find supplementary materials that may be a better curricular fit for the students or teacher. She continued to describe how the tracking of teachers seemed to increase the distrust between the admin and staff in the school. Thus, when given less flexibility, teachers may not only assign less meaning to teaching SEL, but also begin to feel more distrusted by admin, decreasing teacher satisfaction and increasing teacher turnover.[7]

Elizabeth W., a 1st grade teacher at a low-income school in the South Side of Chicago, also describes how all of the SEL practices at her school are inflexible, even when teachers believe a different component of SEL programming may work better in the classroom:

> "I would say [there is no variation in how teachers teach SEL] at our school only because the things that we implement for SEL [are] required school-wide. So, **we really don't have an option** where it's like, oh, I prefer doing Calm Classroom over Second Step or vice versa, or I don't really think I should have a Calm Corner. Those are like **non-negotiables** at our school, so most of the time, everything you see in one class, you should be able to find in another classroom" (Elizabeth W., low-income).

Elizabeth's experience further illustrates how rigid, schoolwide mandates around SEL programming can limit teachers' ability to exercise professional judgment and adapt practices to meet the needs of their students. In both her account and Linda's, SEL becomes more about

[7] As demonstrated by earlier research (see Heubeck 2023).

compliance than connection. This rigidity not only reduces teacher investment but may also undermine the relational and responsive goals that SEL is meant to promote.

In contrast to the more unbending structure depicted by teachers at low-income schools, teachers at high-income schools often described a more flexible approach to SEL implementation. James A., a 6th grade teacher at a high-income school in North Chicago, even chose to opt out of using the Second Step curriculum that the rest of his school utilized in order to present SEL lessons that he felt were more relevant and engaging for his students:

> "[In] my second year [of teaching], I **stopped using Second Step** as much and started to just **[teach] off my own PowerPoints** based on these websites that other teachers shared with me" (James A., high-income).

James continued to describe how SEL programming at his school tended to be "dependent on what the teacher wants to cover" (James A., high-income). He also emphasized that this flexibility allows him to pick out lessons that he believes are the best "issue[s] to talk about [with] the kids" (James A., high-income) based on what's going on in their day-to-day lives. James's description of how SEL curricula are decided upon at his school demonstrates a common theme I found within the interviews: teachers at high-income schools have a much higher level of flexibility in teaching SEL than teachers at low-income schools, which allows them to curate it in a way that's most relevant to their students. Thus, while in high-income schools, autonomy allows SEL to be reimagined as a living, responsive practice, in low-income schools, lack of autonomy repositions SEL as a box-checking task, detached from the relational and emotional labor required to make it meaningful.

Moreover, while teacher autonomy is a crucial factor across many areas of instruction, it plays a particularly significant role in the implementation of SEL. Unlike traditional academic subjects, SEL is a relatively new and evolving field, with definitions and best practices still in flux (Positive Action 2022). Thus, because of SEL's positioning as a relatively new pedagogy,

teachers are often navigating how to make it meaningful within the structures they've been given—figuring out what works for their students while working around inflexible standards or prescribed curricula. In this context, autonomy becomes not just helpful, but essential: teachers need the space to adapt SEL practices to their classroom realities, particularly when the frameworks themselves are still evolving. Michael S., a 6th–8th grade special education teacher at a high-income school in North Chicago, described this tension in further detail:

> "I feel like SEL is a bit of an attempt to reflect on the real world, but I think that it **often fails because states have standards that they sort of push you into**. It doesn't mean that standards are always wrong, but **[for] the best teaching, standards should be interpreted by the teacher. And SEL is often, I feel like, too new to see that done really well often.** I think it varies. [In short], I feel **very constrained**" (Michael S., high-income).

Michael's argument underscores how teacher autonomy may be especially important in the context of implementing new curricula. When curricula are new and still being shaped, like SEL, teachers need even more flexibility, not less. Without autonomy, SEL risks being implemented in ways that are overly standardized, detached from classroom realities, and ultimately ineffective.

2. <u>Administrative Gatekeeping of SEL</u>

One of the most salient divides between high- and low-income schools is the role of administrators in SEL implementation. My interviews demonstrate that in high-income schools, administrators most often serve as either supportive facilitators of SEL, enabling teacher-driven adaptation of the school-provided curriculum, or neutral overseers, only intervening in the implementation process when explicitly called upon. In contrast, in the majority of low-income schools, administrators play the role of gatekeepers, consolidating SEL control in ways that reduce teacher autonomy, trust, and curricular buy-in.

Mary B., a Pre-K teacher at a high-income school in Northwest Chicago, shared her perspective on the role non-teachers play in the SEL implementation process:

> "This year is our first year that we have a Social and Emotional Coordinator. She's like an administrator, but her like main role is to facilitate SEL [in] small groups as needed […] but then she also creates like an entire family engagement document once a month to tell the community at large what everyone is working on, what she's been seeing, some tips and resources and all of that… so she's been an **amazing resource** in terms of like SEL instruction" (Mary B., high-income).

Mary continued to emphasize her positive view of non-teachers in SEL, telling me that "everything, all the information that" the counselor and social worker at her school have "provided to [the teachers] is wonderful and very clear" (Mary B., high-income). Patricia B., a 6th–8th grade teacher at a high-income school in Northwest Chicago, echoed Mary's sentiments, explaining that her school's Social Emotional Learning Coordinator works successfully as a supplement to her own SEL teaching, offering students the opportunity to "meet with the [SEL coordinator] when something is bothering them" (Patricia B., high-income). Both teachers note that these non-teacher SEL roles **work well as resources** to students outside of their teacher's in-class SEL curriculum—**not as a replacement.**

Barbara B., a Pre-K teacher at a low-income school in the South Side of Chicago, described a very different relationship between the teachers and administrators at her school who play a role in implementing SEL:

> "School-wide, I would probably say **[SEL has] less of an impact because there's really no trust amongst teachers and admin** […] **Teachers are not really well received in their ideas** about implementing things. A lot of the teachers, they are aware of social emotional learning. A lot of them did this [SEL] training over last summer […] They go to the trainings. They learn information, right? And they want to bring it back to school. They want to improve the school. [But] it's not well received on a school-wide level. We have a **high turnover**. Last year, nine teachers left in the middle school year. And then this school year, maybe six teachers left. So they're constantly leaving. [The administration sends us] mixed messages. So that affects the support with teachers and students" (Barbara B., low-income).

Barbara describes a system by which teachers can be, and often are, excited about improving the SEL programming and curriculum at their school, but due to administrative gatekeeping of SEL, they aren't given the opportunity to lead change. This leads teachers to enter the limited autonomy outcome that I explored earlier: given less freedom in SEL practices, teachers become disengaged and distrustful, leading to their resignation and heightening overall teacher turnover at these low-income schools.

Robert G., a 7th grade teacher at a low-income school in the South Side of Chicago, described to me his confusion about the state of SEL at his school and his frustration with his school's administration:

> "I'm a little bit **less clear** on what's happening with our new Restorative Justice Coordinators […] I just **don't have a good sense** of what [they're doing] actually looks like. I think some of [my confusion is] a reflection of a kind of **firewall where a lot of this information is being kept from teachers.** I think at some point there will be a realization that **that's not ultimately the best solution for creating the best environment for students.** We're just not there yet" (Robert G., low-income).

Robert's discontent with his administration primarily stems from the school's intentional concealment of students' engagement with SEL from teachers. However, he notes, this discretion doesn't occur without reason. Research shows that CPS schools using the highest rates of exclusionary discipline practices primarily serve students who are low achieving, African American, and live in poor neighborhoods (Sartain et al 2015:24). Furthermore, the CPS Student Code of Conduct proclaims that school staff members "must respond to student behavior as confidentially as possible" (Chicago Public Schools n.d.). Data shows that there's an increasing use of restorative practices, which are defined as practices that encourage "self-reflection, empathetic listening, and the creation of non-judgmental spaces for conflict resolution" (Chicago Education Lab n.d.), in disciplinary procedures in CPS schools (Chicago Public Schools n.d.). Given this, many administrators in low-income schools, given the context of heightened

disciplinary needs, have become more private and controlling concerning information about students engaging in restorative practices. Moreover, since discipline makes up such a big part of what SEL hopes to address at these low-income schools, teachers begin to perceive the primary components of SEL programming as something withheld from their knowledge. Robert G. explained how he perceived this process happening in his own school:

> "I think **[restricted information] is a frustration that I've heard expressed increasingly over the last few years**, as this sort of becomes a thing. There is protecting student privacy, student privacy is important. But I think [in] the district, a lot of [their] **policies are often crafted by, not educators, but lawyers** [and] their main goal is to make sure that the [district] doesn't get sued. Increasingly, it feels like **course teams are left out of the loop about anything that's happening with students**. I'll understand that 10 kids are not in class today because they're all with the Restorative Justice Coordinator, but I don't know what happened. I don't know what I should be looking for in the classroom to help with it" (Robert G., low-income).

Overall, the process by which administrators must conceal ongoing SEL practices from educators leads to a kind of a procedural form of SEL that lacks cohesion or authenticity, and teachers become implementers of policies they had no role in shaping. This goes on to prompt the limited autonomy outcome, starting with mistrust, then resentment, and ultimately, attrition. In other words, discipline's need for privacy in CPS schools, especially when tied to SEL, often necessitates administrative control. But in doing so, it removes teachers from meaningful involvement in SEL practice—the very opposite of what research shows is necessary for effective, culturally responsive SEL (Burnham 2024).

Jessica S., a 4th grade teacher at a low-income school in Southwest Chicago, explained that at her school, SEL lessons are not taught by teachers; instead, the school's social worker presents an SEL lesson to each grade level once a week (Jessica S., low-income). The impact of not teaching SEL is reflected in how Jessica describes her own and her fellow teachers' reactions to SEL in the classroom:

> "Whenever something interrupts classroom time, I feel like [the 4th grade teachers] all draw straws like, it's your turn, it's your turn, it's your turn. Because we don't want our classroom time interrupted. Not because we don't think SEL is important, but because we got to do other stuff too. So, I think we're pretty good about working as a team to make sure that it's not one class that's particularly disrupted" (Jessica S., low-income).

Following this, Jessica continued to explain that she doesn't "know for sure what curriculum [the social worker] uses" (Jessica S., low-income) for SEL. While Jessica herself didn't paint SEL in a completely negative light, throughout the interview, she remained **unsure of both what SEL actually consists of and how SEL was implemented in her school.** Thus, Jessica's account ultimately reveals the consequences of a school system where SEL is removed from the day-to-day responsibilities—and identities—of teachers. Since they weren't directly involved in SEL implementation, Jessica and her fellow grade-level teachers began to view SEL as an external, interruptive obligation rather than an integrated, relational practice. As a result, SEL became not only physically but also emotionally detached from the core of their teaching. This detachment doesn't indicate a lack of care, but rather a structural design that fails to center teacher voices. In schools where SEL is managed from the top down and kept at a distance from teachers, the programming itself risks becoming hollow—performed rather than embodied. Such models of administrative gatekeeping not only diminish teachers' investment but also fracture the potential for SEL to serve as a consistent, culturally responsive, and relational tool.

3. <u>SEL-Focused Professional Development</u>

The last key difference teachers in my study identified was the quality of SEL-focused professional development. While the majority of the teachers at high-income schools described their school's professional development as either engaging or adequate, the majority of the

teachers at low-income schools believed their school's professional development to be disappointing.

Jennifer H., a 7th–8th grade teacher at a high-income school in Northwest Chicago, explained to me how her school's professional development focuses on integrating SEL into everyday dialogue and classroom management, instead of only focusing on SEL during weekly lessons:

> "At our staff [professional developments], we do discuss social emotional health and well-being of students **quite a bit**. So, like I said before, I think we do make an effort to think about it, not just as this isolated thing that we have to teach a couple times a week but something that we're **thinking about every day**, every time we're working with students" (Jennifer H., high-income).

Jennifer also mentioned attending a districtwide professional development "on talking circles" after her "administration encouraged [her] to go" (Jennifer H., high-income). Here, Jennifer emphasizes that not only does her administration encourage continuous education in SEL, even advocating for teachers to attend non-schoolwide professional development seminars, but also approaches SEL professional development through a non-siloed perspective—explicitly ensuring teachers view SEL as part of their everyday professional language and actions.

Mary B., another teacher at a high-income International Baccalaureate (IB) school in Northwest Chicago, noted a similar positive experience with SEL-focused professional development at her school:

> "[In] my second year at [my] school, they sent me down to Florida to do an IB conference. And my **three days of instruction there were on SEL**. So, it was just a different idea or lens of how to incorporate SEL within the IB framework. Like, what does that look like in terms of student choice and voice, and agency? So, it was **very interesting and helpful**, I think, to look at it through that lens. Now this year, when we have our teacher-directed or principal-directed professional development days, our SEL [Coordinator] will facilitate professional development. And one time we did a survey, and she gave us three options about what [we] need[ed] more training or resources on. And then we went into breakout groups [based] on that. [At] the beginning of the year, **I facilitated a smaller group on how to implement Second Step** into your scope and

> sequence. Some of it is at the school level and some of it is more broad in the IB world" (Mary B., high-income).

Again, Mary, like Jennifer, describes being actively encouraged by her administration to attend SEL-focused professional development sessions and speaks positively about the SEL professional development within her school. Moreover, Mary's experience of bringing back what she learned and successfully using it to lead professional development at her school serves as a potent example of how quality professional development can contribute to increasing teacher autonomy—both components may then work in tandem to heighten teacher satisfaction and buy-in to SEL.

In contrast to Jennifer and Mary, Karen M., a 6th–8th grade special education teacher at a low-income school in the South Side of Chicago, explained to me why her perspective on SEL-focused professional development at her school was more negative than positive:

> "**Our whole staff has gotten training on Second Step**, which is our curriculum. And then in the past, our K-5 teachers have gotten training on BARR[8], which is another SEL curriculum […], and then **I've actually provided SEL trainings for staff**… more for adult SEL. So, I've done how full is your bucket and things like that. But I would say that the SEL training overall, like specific **SEL training, is definitely lacking**" (Karen M., low-income).

Karen has an interesting perspective on SEL professional development at her school: she notes that SEL training at her school primarily consists of the required training for the curricula her school uses, including Second Step and BARR, and that any SEL training outside of this (if there is any) is underwhelming and insufficient. However, she also notes that she was given somewhat more autonomy through presenting her own professional development on SEL for staff. Karen's perspective highlights a deeper tension: even though she recognizes that the SEL-focused professional development at her school is underwhelming and overly tied to basic curriculum

[8] BARR is a model for SEL used in some CPS schools. See barrcenter.org for more information.

requirements, she has taken it upon herself to lead professional development sessions for her colleagues, primarily focused on adult SEL. Her experience underscores a common theme among teachers at low-income schools: when institutional structures fall short, the burden often falls back on individual educators to fill the gaps (Pearson 2023). While Karen's initiative speaks to her commitment, it also signals a lack of systemic support. Instead of being resourced and empowered through robust professional development, teachers like Karen are left to patch together fragmented SEL training in isolation. This model is only exacerbated when educators don't receive quality SEL-focused professional development in the first place—only teachers who are already motivated to teach SEL or have received outside-of-school training end up compensating for these institutional shortcomings.

Linda M., who's also a teacher at a low-income school, describes a similar model at her school, except in her school, there are no teachers who are able to fill the institutional gap:

> "[CPS is] really pushing restorative justice too […] But it's **usually just one or two people from the school** [who] do this really big, intensive professional development. So **not everyone gets to do it,** and then, if those people don't become leaders and share the information, [the information is] kind of [in the school], but it's kind of not. So that's where our school is at" (Linda M., low-income).

At Linda's school, administrators invested primarily in one or two individual teachers instead of providing all the teachers at the school with quality professional development. Since these teachers didn't have either the opportunity or the initiative to share this learning with the rest of the school, all of the other teachers at Linda's school only gained an extremely limited understanding of SEL. Linda's story exemplifies why this model of SEL learning, in which schools require individual teachers to step up, is so dangerous—if no one steps up, everyone is left without knowledge.

Robert G. explained to me a slightly different experience with SEL professional development—while his low-income school does provide some professional development opportunities, he finds them largely disappointing:

> "There have been school-run professional developments around social emotional learning, but **they often feel [like] part of the problem** […] They often feel like **trying to squeeze a whole lot of things into a single day** and dipping our toes, and getting a taste of something that we're not going to return to. If we wanted to take [SEL] seriously, **it should be an ongoing thing** that we're really focusing on and returning to much more frequently" (Robert G., low-income).

Robert's experience with school-wide SEL professional development shows that infrequent SEL training, while likely better than none at all, isn't conducive to creating a version of SEL that teachers commit themselves to and embed in their daily classroom. His critique—that SEL PD "dips our toes" but never returns—reinforces a larger pattern found across low-income schools in this study: professional development that lacks continuity and depth often fails to inspire teacher investment. Similarly to Linda M.'s experience, in this context, SEL becomes a fleeting initiative rather than an embedded pedagogy, limiting the potential impact of SEL and mirroring the broader systemic issues of fragmentation that many teachers in low-income schools face.

Lastly, looking again at Jessica S.'s experience being disconnected from SEL implementation at her low-income school, since teachers at her school don't teach SEL lessons, they also don't receive SEL-focused professional development or training (Jessica S., low-income). This only amplifies the emotional detachment from SEL mentioned earlier: without direct involvement in SEL practice or access to professional development that might contextualize its purpose, Jessica and her peers are left with a limited understanding of what SEL actually entails. Jessica's story illustrates how administrative gatekeeping and professional development are tightly intertwined: when administrators remove SEL from the classroom teacher's domain, they also remove the opportunity for teachers to grow with it. This

disconnection doesn't just weaken implementation—it erodes the foundational conditions for buy-in, consistency, and relational depth that SEL requires to be truly effective.

Looking at all three of these components of SEL implementation—autonomy, administrative control, and professional development—together, a clear pattern emerges: in high-income schools, these elements tend to function as a mutually reinforcing ecosystem, allowing teachers to implement SEL with authenticity, flexibility, and support. In contrast, in low-income schools, the same elements often work against each other. Administrators take greater control over SEL programming, which restricts teacher autonomy and limits meaningful professional development. This, in turn, breeds mistrust, disengagement, and ultimately, high turnover—all while the intended goals of SEL remain unfulfilled. In these settings, SEL becomes fragmented: a series of isolated policies and practices, rather than a cohesive framework for emotional growth and community-building.

Second Step and Cultural Responsiveness

Second Step, an SEL curriculum widely used across CPS and the nation (Education Week 2020), was reported as the primary curriculum used by the vast majority of teachers I interviewed, both across high- and low-income schools.[9] However, teacher opinions on Second Step's effectiveness and cultural relevance vary, and the two strongest critiques I heard came from teachers in low-income schools—both of whom focused on the curriculum's lack of cultural responsiveness.

Linda M., a teacher at a low-income school in Southwest Chicago, explained her strongly negative view of the Second Step curriculum:

[9] Only three teachers out of my 13 interviewees disclosed that their school didn't use Second Step.

> "So, we do Second Step, which [is what] the majority of CPS schools do. That's the curriculum. **I hate it. It is just not a strong curriculum, in my opinion.** It's just like you teach the lessons, and then I guess you can refer back to them in the classroom, but it just **feels very much dry**. And there [are] like slides you teach and a couple of discussions. So that has been my experience here, [that] **people genuinely don't like [Second Step]**. And so, then I think that skews people's idea of social emotional learning because they're like, this is a **waste of my time**. But it's just [that] the **curriculum that we've chosen is not the best**" (Linda M., low-income).

Linda continued to describe in further detail why she didn't feel Second Step was the best fit for her students:

> "Second Step is one of those [curricula] where people even in our school have spoken out. They're like, it didn't used to be very culturally responsive. I remember when I first taught it, it was in this binder, and it was even worse, but they've updated it to be digital. And they try to make it a little bit more culturally responsive but it's still to me just **very generic**, versus some of the other programs I've looked at where there's like ones directed towards our population, which would be interesting to implement […] So, I think part of it [is, for example], one student I was thinking about that's tier two, tier three SEL. She's struggling so much with stuff at home. And so, her trying to come in here and learn, she's just angry all the time. One day, she was just like, I'm so angry. I want to go [into] the hallway and scream. And I was like, okay, [and] we chucked a ball on the floor instead. So that's kind of where a lot of the kids are coming from. So, sometimes I think teachers feel like, okay, we're just doing this one lesson once a week. **Are you really giving [students] the support they need?"** (Linda M., low-income).

Linda's belief that Second Step isn't culturally responsive to the needs of her students echoes previous research about the development of SEL curriculum around white middle-class normative values. Brooks and Theoharis argue that middle-class whiteness has been structurally embedded into U.S. schools (Brooks and Theoharis 2019:vii). Using this logic, if Second Step was designed within the context of white middle-class normative values and behaviors (like many other academic curricula are), the curriculum naturally wouldn't reflect the needs of economically disadvantaged and/or minority students. Thus, Linda's frustration with Second Step isn't unique to her own school; this lack of relevance may apply to other low-income and/or minority-serving schools as well.

Barbara B., another teacher at a low-income school in the South Side of Chicago, also mentioned her belief that Second Step lacks the cultural responsiveness that students at her school require:

> "The way SEL is embedded in Second Step […] is pretty good. It's just **not culturally responsive for my demographic of students**, right? And not just race, but overall, really what goes on in the pre-K classroom. Like, [Second Step and SEL] **needs to be more [about] preparing [students** for] those experiences" (Barbara B., low-income).

Barbara's view of the curriculum supports Linda's concerns about Second Step's lack of cultural relevance for economically disadvantaged and/or minority students. While Barbara notes that Second Step is better than not having any kind of SEL curriculum altogether, she does acknowledge where the programming fails her students in particular. Together, Linda and Barbara's perspectives suggest that standardized curricula like Second Step may fall short in schools that primarily serve students whose emotional realities are shaped by systemic inequities, despite how much these students may need SEL.

Non-Income-Related Similarities

Despite the clear differences between high- and low-income schools in how teachers defined and implemented SEL, teachers across both contexts shared several common experiences and challenges. Most notably, nearly every teacher I interviewed mentioned that SEL can be difficult to implement because there simply isn't enough time in the day. Michael S., a 6th–8th grade special education teacher at a high-income school in North Chicago, described this challenge in further detail:

> "[There's a] huge problem balancing [SEL with other school priorities]. I get [a small] block of time […], which is not even a whole class period because **there's a notion that, oh, well, we have to get to the real stuff, the academics, the important things**" (Michael S., high-income).

Here, Michael describes the devaluing of SEL as the reason why it's pushed to the back burner. Later, he continues to explain that while SEL lesson times need to be longer, SEL also has to be "integrated" (Michael S., high-income) into the daily classroom for students to take it seriously.

Michael's belief that SEL is undermined by how little time is allotted for it is supported by Linda M., a teacher at a low-income school in Southwest Chicago:

> "I think the big [challenge] is just the **push for content**. So, I'm the ELA teacher, and the **amount of stuff they expect me to get through in a lesson is insane**. Like it's not doable. Even if you had a two-hour block. So, I know a lot of people feel like [they] **don't have time for [SEL] because [they] have to get through the content**. Like I'm being very pushed on [the content]. I just try to integrate [SEL] naturally […] so that [the students] can be successful in the harder stuff. I don't know if other teachers [can integrate SEL]" (Linda M., low-income).

Sarah V., a principal of a low-income school in Southwest Chicago, shared a similar point of view concerning time-based challenges to SEL implementation:

> "[Teachers face difficulties implementing SEL] all the time because there's too much to do. Finding the time to do [SEL] and even [blocking out] time for Second Step [in the schedule] is hard. Like in the schedule that they give us, CPS says they want SEL. But then **the instructional minutes that they want us to implement don't allow for [SEL] time**. Some of the teachers get really [frustrated, saying] 'I'm losing out on math minutes or on reading minutes,' […] And I try to say, well, you can't teach math and reading if the kids aren't socially and emotionally regulated. So, if the kids aren't ready to learn, you're not [able to teach]. It doesn't matter how many minutes of the day you have" (Sarah V., low-income).

Sarah's explanation demonstrates that even when teachers and administrators want to implement SEL, oftentimes, the time they have alongside the academic requirements set by CPS simply don't allow for adequate SEL programming. The belief that there isn't enough time in the day for SEL isn't limited to just Michael, Linda, and Sarah—almost all of the teachers I interviewed brought up that they faced this challenge. The fact that so many teachers face this difficulty, no matter their school's economic disadvantage, suggests that CPS may unintentionally devalue SEL and treat it as an add-on rather than an integrated practice. While limited time is a problem

many teachers face both in the realm of academics and SEL, it's critical to consider this challenge when attempting to develop and implement high-quality SEL programming.

Many of the teachers also expressed an appreciation or desire for more school-wide standardized SEL frameworks, even as they advocated for greater individual autonomy. Robert G., a teacher at a low-income school, described how receiving little direction on what SEL instruction looks like in different classrooms made it much harder for him to tailor his curriculum toward what his students would need in later grade levels:

> "I think it **would be helpful if there was a little more direction** sometimes, not even in terms of me knowing what I should be doing, but just in terms of **having everyone on the same page**. I think that there's a **lack of coordination** that is not helping a lot of [what we're teaching in SEL] to stick [with students]. I think **you need to be hearing the same thing over and over again** everywhere you go, and when the rules are very different everywhere you go, it's just easier to dismiss as a kid" (Robert G., low-income).

Here, Robert isn't advocating for a district-wide standardization of SEL practices; he's explaining that greater coordination across grade levels within a school would ensure that students truly absorb the SEL lessons they're learning each year through consistent reinforcement, as opposed to receiving many different ideas of what SEL looks like throughout multiple years. Barbara B., another teacher at a low-income school, described how having a low level of school-wide standardization created real-time difficulties in her interactions with parents:

> "Some parents have kids in both pre-K classrooms, or [they] have twins […] And I can say that things have been impacted with families when […] a parent may say, 'Oh, well, you're doing this in your class with the SEL, right?' [But then] they see their child doing certain SEL things at home [that] the other child is not [doing]. [Their other kid isn't] demonstrating those same [SEL] skills or language. [It's a] **lack of cohesiveness**. That **really affects my school culture** with teachers [and] the family because most families have kids at multiple grade levels […] And if one teacher or a few teachers is pushing out the importance of social emotional or building those connections, that creates another pool of tension because they want the kid [in that classroom], so that creates another set [of issues]. That's a **negative effect in our school culture** in my classroom, the dynamics of what I see" (Barbara B., low-income).

In the situation described, a lack of SEL coordination within and across grade levels directly negatively affected Barbara's school's culture and upset parents who wanted to see the same level of success for both of their children. These perspectives suggest that restructuring SEL programming/curriculum for each grade level inherently creates confusion around what SEL actually is and fails to cement the lessons that SEL aims to teach. Thus, while teachers may want individual autonomy to interpret and even design curriculum that best fits their students' needs, they still seem to desire a foundational level of coordination and standardization for SEL programming within their school.

Non-Income-Related Differences

There were also a variety of differences in the way SEL was described and utilized that weren't tied specifically to income. Of these differences, only one was mentioned more than a few times: how SEL influenced student discipline.

For some teachers, like Susan N., a 4th–5th grade teacher at a low-income school in Southwest Chicago, SEL works in tandem with practices such as restorative justice:

> "The administration wants to **de-emphasize really punitive [discipline]** like suspending students or in-school-suspension […] And so, **restorative conversations** are [being used a lot for] behavior[al issues]" (Susan N., low-income).

Susan continued to share an example in which a student had substantial behavioral improvement after "having a restorative conversation" and "not getting certain incentives" (Susan N., low-income). Elizabeth W., a 1st grade teacher at a low-income school in the South Side of Chicago, also described to me how her school integrates SEL with student discipline:

> "Most of the time, **Peace Circles involve our high flyers, [who are] the kids that may be chronically always in trouble, or skipping class, or in the hallway**. We normally put [the high flyers] in Peace Circles, which are just **restorative conversations**. We try to **encourage all teachers and anybody in the building, [including] security [and] admin, to use restorative conversations** with any student they're interacting with that's

> having some type of disciplinary problem. Because a lot of things can be explained with words. A lot of times, when you are disciplining a child, they shut down [and] they're not engaged anymore. If you were getting to a solution, they don't even want to have that conversation anymore. So, we try to encourage restorative conversations" (Elizabeth W., low-income).

Mary B., a teacher at a high-income school, also disclosed that her school utilizes SEL when disciplining students, including conducting "Peace Circles," which are defined as circles that are structured to address and repair harm" (Chicago Public Schools), using a "check-in-check-out" system, and even centering in-school-suspensions around restorative learning, "with videos, conversations, a pretest, and a post-test" (Mary B., high-income).

James A., while now a teacher at a high-income school, explained to me that he believed SEL was actually overused in the context of student discipline, particularly while he was teaching at his previous school, a low-income school in South Chicago:

> "One time where I thought [SEL] totally didn't work [was when there was] a girl [who] was in gym class, and she was with another boy, and they were playing tennis, and the boy missed the ball that she tossed, and he threw the racket, and it landed near her, so she picked up the metal racket […] And everybody was quiet […] Now, I wasn't there, but I had to deal with the repercussions of this […] Nobody moved. Nobody stopped her from hitting [the other boy]. And so, she took the metal racket, and she whacked him in the head. She whacked him so hard that he had to get plastic reconstruction surgery, a CAT scan […], stitches, all the works. And she was back in school the next week. And the school counselor came in and she said, 'So we all know what transpired, but how can we use this as an example to exercise self-love, and how can we use this as an example of acceptance and as an example of loving each other?' And one of my students […], he said, 'I'm sorry. Why are we having this conversation here about self-love? She over there, took a metal racket and hit him over there with it, and in the real world that would be considered assault, and we're acting as if this is a lesson of self-love, when, in fact, she took a bat and hit him in the head with it.' And the counselor said, 'Oh, I understand. But let's use this as an example of self-love and of loving each other.' And I thought, 'He's right. He's absolutely right. And I think […] she should be held accountable for hitting somebody in the head, because that could have caused him very serious brain damage. So **that was a circumstance where I thought [talking about SEL] was a totally inappropriate conversation to have in the class**" (James A., low-income).

James's frustration here exemplifies the delicate balance required between student discipline and emotional support, particularly when disruption of this balance may impact other students in the

classroom. While SEL and restorative practices are generally utilized alongside discipline, his experience suggests that indiscriminately replacing discipline with restorative justice and setting no clear boundaries around how far this replacement stretches can make the usage of SEL counterproductive. This is particularly the case in extreme incidents such as the one James recounted: choosing to only use language of self-love and/or empathy can feel like a dismissal of the real harm that another student faced rather than a meaningful response to it. Thus, James's account challenges the notion that SEL is always appropriate for managing serious behavioral issues, especially when it risks minimizing the experiences of those affected.

Sarah V., a principal at a low-income school, echoed James's belief that there's a limit to the benefits of SEL:

> "**SEL and restorative practices can't cure everything**. Because there [are] sometimes kids [who are] going to put each other and themselves in dangerous situations. And it's not a cure-all. And I think that's something that [people] need to remember. Sometimes I think **people [in schools] downtown or in CPS forget that [you can't] "peace circle" out everything**. [For example, there's one student] who we didn't give up on, [and] when I would call people about getting resources and support for him, the number one thing people would say is build a relationship with him. He has some of the best relationships with everyone in the [school]. He loves so many people in this building, and so many people love him. That's not the problem. And sometimes kids act up and act the fool around some of the people they have the best relationships with because they know that you're still going to love them unconditionally. So I do believe we have to have relationships with kids. But that's not going to solve every problem." (Sarah V., low-income).

Sarah's reflection demonstrates that relational strategies can be ineffective when used in isolation. Her explanation also points to a common misconception at the district level: the idea that relationship-building and SEL alone can resolve all disciplinary issues. Instead, she argues for a more realistic and multifaceted approach—one that honors relationships and emotional development, but also acknowledges the need for accountability, resources, and clear boundaries.

In contrast to teachers who described SEL being used too much in disciplinary procedures, some teachers explicitly told me that their schools chose not to center their discipline

around SEL. Michael S., a teacher at a high-income school, described how SEL is only infrequently used in the context of discipline at his school:

> "I see [SEL with discipline] a little bit. I've **not seen it nearly as much as would be good**. [The only] example is the school counselor […] is the first responder at a scene of conflict […] Now, **I don't see [SEL alongside discipline] facilitated as much as it should be**" (Michael S., high-income).

Here, Michael explained that he would like to see SEL further integrated into disciplinary procedures. Together with the previous accounts, his comment highlights a core challenge: the issue is not whether SEL should be used in discipline, but how it's used, when it's used, and to what end.

By looking at how differently SEL is integrated into disciplinary procedures, it becomes clear that there are many more factors than income status stratifying how schools interact with SEL: school culture, leadership philosophy, and a number of other variables all shape the meaning, function, and implementation of SEL—often just as much as structural conditions like economic disadvantage.

Future Research

The findings contained within this paper represent only a fraction of the insights, knowledge, expertise, and experiences that my 13 participants shared with me during our interviews. In addition to describing their experiences implementing SEL within their school, participants also shared what brought them to teaching, what empowers their passion for education, specific CPS policies that have impacted their experiences as teachers, their understanding of how Chicago education has changed over the past decades, and their hopes for the future of education. All of these topics would be worthy candidates for future research.

Moreover, while I was able to address some of the ways that teacher attrition interacts with components of SEL implementation, I came upon this finding randomly and did not originally intend to focus so largely on how SEL affected teacher satisfaction. Given this, my interview questions were more likely to graze over this aspect of teacher perceptions of SEL. Moreover, since I didn't foresee this finding, I didn't speak to teachers who left the field of teaching, which would be necessary in research about how SEL programming affects teacher attrition. The high teacher turnover rate is constantly a cause for concern and research, particularly given the teacher shortage issue we currently face in the United States (Learning Policy Institute, 2017). Thus, in future research, I believe spending more time looking at the connection between teacher autonomy concerning SEL implementation and teacher retention could produce insightful and meaningful results for the realm of education research.

Additionally, though I did not have the time to do so during this study, including student and parent perspectives in future research on SEL programming could provide a new view of SEL—specifically in terms of the reception and effectiveness of SEL instead of its implementation. This would be a particularly helpful insight when comparing how participants describe SEL as a concept: Is it only teachers who vary in how they define SEL based on the income level of the school where they teach, or do students and parents also perceive SEL differently?

Lastly, it is important to note that my sample size of 13 participants is incredibly small in the larger context of the 24,265 teachers and 514 principals that serve as educators in Chicago Public Schools (Chicago Public Schools 2024). To increase the generalizability of my findings, future research ought to be conducted in other cities with a more diverse array of participants who span across race, age, gender, grade level taught, and years of experience teaching. One

specific limitation of my study is that I didn't interview any teachers who self-identified as Hispanic. In order to generalize to the wider population, future research must include the critical perspectives of these teachers. Moreover, teachers at schools that are considered "moderately" economically disadvantaged should be added to the research sample to ensure that findings occur across income levels, instead of only occurring at either extreme. Lastly, while qualitative studies are useful in that they allow participants to share their stories, perspectives, and insights, quantitative insights on this topic may allow us to better understand the in-action effect of SEL on various quantitative measures and could prove useful to leaders in CPS.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Through 13 interviews with educators at high- and low-income schools in CPS, I found that SEL implementation is highly stratified by school income level, shaped not only by available resources but also by patterns of control, teacher autonomy, and access to high-quality professional development. In response, I have developed the following recommendations designed to foster equitable, culturally responsive SEL implementation without mandating highly standardized, one-size-fits-all programs. Crucially, these recommendations acknowledge the diversity of CPS while addressing the specific challenges voiced by teachers in both high- and low-income schools. Moreover, I've decided to limit my policy recommendations to the district of CPS: since I only interviewed CPS teachers, I can't be sure that my results are generalizable to the state of Illinois, much less the nation. Thus, future research would be required to adapt and scale these policy recommendations to the state or federal level.

1. <u>Implement Robust, Ongoing SEL Professional Development</u>

The majority of teachers I interviewed at low-income schools told me they felt that the SEL-focused professional development at their school was low-quality because either (1) only one or two teachers from their school were given the chance to receive SEL-focused professional development, or (2) their school's SEL-focused professional development was sporadic, rare, and felt "one-off" (Karen M., low-income; Linda M., low-income; Robert G., low-income). This feedback suggests that SEL professional development in CPS, whether school- or district-wide, often lacks consistency and relevance. Thus, instead of continuing top-down one-off trainings, CPS should fund the development of ongoing SEL professional development modules co-created by teachers at each school. This way, teachers will be able to increase their own autonomy as leaders within their school, heighten their personal buy-in concerning the importance of SEL, and develop professional development that works best for the teachers and students at their school—after all, teachers will likely know the most about what their fellow teachers require in a professional development session.

While the focus should be primarily on centering teacher autonomy within the professional development design process, I'd also recommend that those creating the professional development modules should focus on emphasizing two goals: (1) integrate SEL into content instruction and (2) reach high levels of adult SEL in teachers. Looking at the first goal, a number of interviewees stressed the importance of SEL being embedded within the classroom on a day-to-day basis (Jennifer H., high-income; Mary B., high-income). Research shows that students can develop social and emotional competencies through multiple avenues: while explicit skill instruction in SEL is helpful, incorporating SEL through general teaching practices and integrating SEL competencies into academic instruction are both strong ways to reinforce SEL skills in the classroom (Dusenbury et al. 2015). For the former, this may look like

creating shared classroom expectations to establish positive social norms for students to follow; for the latter, teachers may, for example, take 15 minutes at the beginning of a lesson to teach problem-solving skills and then apply those skills later on in the lesson.

Furthermore, SEL professional development should involve an aspect of adult SEL, which is defined as "the competencies that adults need in order to manage stress and create safe and supportive environments, the skills and mindsets adults need to effectively embody, teach and coach SEL for students, and the overall wellbeing and emotional state of adults in school settings" (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction n.d.). A study from the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence found that "teachers who were mandated to teach SEL but did not cultivate their own practice worsened their students SEL skills. However, teachers who developed their own SEL skills not only improved their own well-being, but also improved the social, emotional, and academic development of their students" (Woolf 2024). This suggests that adult SEL for teachers may be just as important as student SEL. Looking at the Olympia School District (OSD) in Washington as a case study supports this argument. In 2020, Kris Norelius, the SEL program specialist for OSD, worked with other leaders to design a three-part professional development series focused on adults' SEL skills and competencies. Norelius claimed that this experience "illuminated the need for a solid foundation in adult SEL that allows staff to truly experience what they want to promote for students" (CASEL 2022). Following this logic, incorporating adult SEL into each school's SEL professional development modules would be highly beneficial for both overall teacher satisfaction and student learning.

2. <u>Increase Teacher Autonomy in School-Level SEL Policy Design</u>

Another key finding of my research is the role that SEL implementation played in teachers' feelings of autonomy and overall satisfaction: teachers at low-income schools were more likely than teachers at high-income schools to report feeling low levels of autonomy in SEL implementation, which would often result in greater distrust of school admin. To combat this, I recommend focusing on increasing teacher autonomy in school-level SEL policy design. One way of executing this would be through implementing a school-level participatory SEL policy design program. Research demonstrates that participatory design allows teachers to be directly involved in creating policies, which moves teachers from passive adopters of policy to active participants in the design and integration of policy (Nicholson et al. 2022). Thus, in this program, each school would undergo a community-based participatory design process anytime an SEL curriculum or policy is proposed for adoption. This process may include focus groups with teachers at the school, feedback from students and parents, and regular audits of implementation. Most importantly, the participatory design model would democratize the policymaking process and ensure SEL isn't just another top-down reform disproportionately impacting under-resourced schools. I'd also suggest that the rollout of this program start with principals and teachers who are actually interested. The success of SEL programming in Washoe County, Nevada, suggests that this strategy ensures principals and teachers naturally buy into the program because of "organically seeded interest" in the pilot (Prothero 2022).

3. Require Protected SEL Integration Time

One of the only sentiments echoed in every interview I conducted was the belief that there wasn't enough time in the day for SEL; given this, many teachers would push SEL to the back burner and choose to focus on content instead. To resist this impulse, I recommend that

CPS and OSEL create a district-wide requirement for at least one hour a week of protected SEL integration time. While this is a district-wide reform, it shouldn't restrict schools from maintaining their own flexibility in SEL implementation. Thus, CPS should allow for this hour to look different across schools—while schools could implement standalone lessons, they could also design more flexible blocks (e.g., advisory, morning meetings, etc.) that can be adapted by teachers in a way that best fits their students' needs. Jessica S.'s description of SEL at her school demonstrates what a school without any teacher-directed SEL instruction may look like: low teacher buy-in to SEL, high misalignment in what SEL entails, and very little embedded SEL in the classroom (Jessica S., low-income). Therefore, this requirement will ensure that teachers play at least some part in implementing SEL, helping to both increase their buy-in and ensure that SEL becomes a consistent part of the school day rather than an optional add-on that's easily deprioritized.

4. Encourage School-Wide SEL Coordination

Teachers across high- and low-income schools also expressed that while they enjoyed or wanted autonomy, they also had a desire for school-wide coordination. Teachers such as Robert G. also expressed frustration that leadership turnover had such a profound negative effect on SEL implementation:

> "At an earlier stage in our school, we were more intentional about having a lot of discussions to make sure […] we had a good understanding of what was happening in other people's classes. For our school in particular, the pandemic was disruptive. It was disruptive everywhere. But **we lost our principal**. Then we had several years where we didn't really have a real principal, and there was no leadership in charge. [During that time], there was a **lot of staff turnover, and I think we lost that sense of what other people are doing [in SEL]**. Things became not only less standardized, but there was just less understanding of [SEL]" (Robert G., low-income).

Thus, to achieve greater coordination within schools, even in the situation of principal or school leader turnover, I suggest that CPS offer grants to schools that plan to build in-school SEL Leadership Teams, made up of teachers, SEL coordinators, counselors, and social workers. These teams would promote site-specific collaboration, ensure that SEL efforts are coherent across classrooms, and help build a shared vision for SEL that can withstand leadership turnover. According to the National Assembly on School-Based Health Care, leadership teams can facilitate effective school-wide coordination "through the establishment of consistent procedures across classrooms, schools, and districts, formalizing roles, responsibilities, and partnerships and ensuring the school personnel receive tailored professional development" (Hanover Research 2017). By fostering shared ownership and aligning SEL practices across roles, these leadership teams would not only improve program sustainability but also strengthen school culture, staff morale, and long-term buy-in.

Importantly, these leadership teams would not be working on the district level: we know that teachers stressed the importance of culturally relevant SEL programming for the students at their school. Thus, not only would district-wide standardization of SEL fail to account for cultural variation and teacher expertise, but it would also risk reproducing the top-down problems teachers in the study were frustrated with in the first place.

5. Improve Reward Incentives for Quality SEL Implementation

Out of all the schools that the teachers in my study taught at, only one school hadn't received the Supportive School Certificate: Jessica S.'s school. Given that Jessica S.'s school is the only one that doesn't involve teachers in the SEL implementation process, this demonstrates that the Supportive Schools Certificate does have some success in showing which schools are

reaching a baseline level of SEL programming. However, the wide variation in SEL quality across certified schools in my research suggests that the certificate measures presence, not depth. To address this, I recommend that CPS move beyond rewarding schools simply for having SEL programs; instead, the district should create a more robust incentive structure that promotes high-quality, teacher-centered implementation.

More specifically, I propose that CPS utilize the existing 5Essentials survey, which is already conducted annually, to reward individual school growth on metrics related to SEL. The 5Essentials Survey is a questionnaire that collects data through teacher, student, and parent responses on five indicators that positively affect student success: effective leaders, collaborative teachers, involved families, supportive environments, and ambitious instruction (Illinois State Board of Education n.d.). CPS should identify schools that show statistically significant improvement on 5Essentials SEL-related indicators, such as teacher trust, trust in leadership, and supportive environments, and reward them by annually recognizing them as schools with a "Model SEL Culture" designation. These designations could be highlighted publicly—featured on CPS school progress reports, celebrated in professional development sessions, or recognized within principal leadership networks—to increase visibility and prestige. Importantly, this approach links SEL recognition to teacher and student experience, not just the existence of programming. By shifting the reward structure to reflect meaningful engagement, particularly in areas tied to teacher voice and relational trust, CPS can increase teacher buy-in and help cultivate deeper, more sustainable SEL cultures across its diverse school communities.

Conclusion

Overall, this paper explores the various ways in which teachers perceive SEL, including processes of redefining the concept and how teachers use their autonomy to design programming for their students. Importantly, while I chose to focus primarily on income-related differences in SEL implementation, the broader findings from this study reveal that SEL is far from a universally defined or implemented concept. While CPS promotes SEL as a district-wide priority, the way teachers define, experience, and enact it varies sharply by school context, particularly along lines of economic inequality. This study finds that teachers at high-income schools tend to describe SEL as a flexible practice supported by administrators and enriched through continuous, integrated professional development. In contrast, teachers in low-income schools often reported experiencing SEL as rigid, disconnected, and externally imposed, characterized by administrative gatekeeping, limited teacher autonomy, and often underwhelming professional development opportunities. I also found that these structural factors shape not only how SEL is taught but how it is understood. At the same time, shared challenges, including time constraints and inconsistent coordination, point to systemic barriers that transcend economic lines.

As I reviewed the literature on SEL in preparation for this research, I was shocked to see that perspectives on the cultural relevance of social-emotional learning were wholly neglected in education research. While there is still some research on how SEL is received differently by various racial groups, there seems to be a large gap in educational research on the impact of SEL outside of academic achievement and decreased crime rates. Thus, I believe that my findings on the cultural relevance of SEL for students are one of the most poignant takeaways of my research. Failing to address the unique emotional and social needs of students outside the white, middle-class norm is not just an oversight. It is a way of limiting SEL's transformative potential

and risks reinforcing the very inequalities it seeks to address. Ultimately, this paper suggests that if SEL is to be equitable, it cannot be one-size-fits-all. It must be rooted in the lived realities of the communities it aims to serve, centered on teacher voice, and responsive to the structures that constrain or enable its practice.

As such, further research, practice, and policy should absolutely consider the bias within the design process of SEL policy and curricula. In this day and age, education as a method of liberation is more important than ever. Thus, I end this study with a quote from Richard Shaull, a scholar of pedagogy: “There’s no such thing as neutral education. Education either functions as an instrument to bring about conformity or freedom.” It is up to us as policymakers to decide which future we are building toward.

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Appendix A: Participant Information

Name	Income Status of School	Age	Gender	Race	Grade Level
Mary B.	High	31	Female	White	Pre-K
James A.	High	32	Male	White	6th Grade
Michael S.	High	45	Male	White	6th–8th Special Education
Patricia B.	High	51	Female	Black	6th–8th Social Studies
Jennifer H.	High	47	Female	Asian	7th–8th Math
Robert G.	Low	40	Male	White	7th Grade
Linda M.	Low	35	Female	White	3rd Grade
Elizabeth W.	Low	27	Female	Black	1st Grade
Barbara B.	Low	35	Female	Black	Pre-K
Susan N.	Low	42	Female	Black	4th–5th Grade
Jessica S.	Low	44	Female	White	4th Grade
Karen M.	Low	33	Female	White	6th–8th Special Education
Sarah V.	Low	51	Female	White	Principal

Appendix B: Recruitment Email

Dear [Teacher's Name],

My name is Katie Fraser and I am a sociology undergraduate student at the University of Chicago conducting an interview-based study on the ways in which Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) programs are implemented within CPS schools. I am reaching out to invite you to participate in this study.

What Participation Involves:

- A one-hour, semi-structured interview at a time and location of your choice (including Zoom).
- If consented, the interview will be recorded to ensure accuracy in data collection. All recordings and transcripts will be anonymized, and pseudonyms will be used to protect your privacy.

Your insights would provide invaluable perspectives for this study, as your experience with SEL practices and their implementation can help illuminate how SEL programming is perceived and enacted in different school contexts.

Confidentiality and Incentives: Participation in this study is voluntary and confidential. Your identity and responses will remain anonymous, and no identifiable information will be shared with CPS or any other entities. To show appreciation for your time, I am offering a $15 gift card to Target.

If you are interested or have any questions, please reply to this email, and I will provide further information on the details of the study. I am happy to discuss any aspects of the study further and answer questions you may have about the research.

Thank you very much for considering this invitation. Your perspective as a CPS educator is incredibly valuable, and I would be honored to include your insights in this research.

Warm regards,
Katie Fraser
B.A. in Sociology and Public Policy, Class of 2025
kjoyfraser@uchicago.edu

Appendix C: Recruitment Flyer

CALL FOR INTERVIEWEES!

Exploring the Role of Social-Emotional Learning in Schools

If you...

- Are a K-12 Teacher
- Work or have worked at a CPS school

then you are qualified to participate in our study!

What Participation Involves:

- A 30-45 minute, semi-structured interview at a time and location of your choice (including Zoom).
- Your identity and responses will remain anonymous, and no identifiable information will be shared with CPS or any other entities. To show appreciation for your time, I am offering a $15 gift card.

If you are interested or have any questions, please email kjoyfraser@uchicago.edu (feel free to use your personal email).

Appendix D: Interview Protocols

INTRODUCTION: Hi! Nice to meet you, and I want to say thank you again for agreeing to participate. I can go ahead and quickly introduce myself again: my name's Katie and I'm a fourth-year undergraduate student at the University of Chicago studying the sociology of education. As we've previously discussed, I am conducting research on how social-emotional learning is implemented and perceived by teachers in Chicago Public Schools. If you don't mind, I am going to record this conversation. This is so I can listen to you, rather than take notes. You are the expert here. I am the learner. I'll ask a few general questions, but you can talk about anything you feel is important, even if I don't ask about it. And, if you don't like my questions, you don't have to answer them. One more thing — if you want to answer off the record, we can turn the recording off, and then turn it on again later. Do you have any questions before we get started? [Start the recording.]

QUESTIONS:

1. Let's start with you telling me a little bit about yourself. For example, where you grew up, what brought you to teaching?
    a. Probe (if they don't volunteer it): what brought you to this school?
2. What motivates you as a teacher?
3. When you attended K-12 school, did you ever engage in SEL programming?
4. How would you describe social-emotional learning to someone unfamiliar with it?
5. Can you describe your school's approach to Social Emotional Learning (SEL)?
    a. Follow-up: Do you believe SEL curriculum/practices differ from teacher to teacher?
6. What training or professional development, if any, have you received regarding SEL?

7. What do you see as the main goals of the SEL programs in your school?
    a. Follow-up: How closely do these align with your experiences of their effects on students? Do you have any stories or examples?
8. How would you describe the role of SEL in managing students' emotional behaviors?
    a. Follow-up: Are there specific behaviors (or emotions) that the SEL programs focus on improving or managing?
9. When you notice a behavioral issue, how do you respond?
    a. Follow-up: How does the school respond?
10. How do you support students who struggle with managing their emotions or behaviors?
    a. Follow-up: What role, if any, does SEL play in this process?
11. Do SEL programs involve monitoring students' emotional behaviors?
    a. Follow-up: What sorts of monitoring/tracking are you required to do, outside of the scope of SEL?
    b. Follow-up: What sort of monitoring/tracking does the administration do?
    c. Follow-up: How is this information used within the school, and by whom?
12. Do SEL initiatives ever intersect with or influence disciplinary approaches in your school?
13. How do SEL programs account for students' varying backgrounds and experiences?
14. How do you see your role in implementing SEL programs in your classroom?
    a. Follow-up: What level of flexibility or autonomy do you have in applying these practices?
15. What kinds of challenges do you face in balancing SEL with other school priorities?

16. What effects, if any, have you seen from SEL programs on students' social and emotional development?
17. Could you tell me about a time when you saw your school's SEL curriculum/programming positively impact a child?
18. Could you tell me about a time when you saw your school's SEL curriculum/programming negatively impact a child?
19. Let's end with some demographic information. If you feel uncomfortable answering any of these, please feel free to answer with "no answer."
    a. How old are you?
    b. What race do you identify as?
    c. What gender do you identify as?

CONCLUSION: Thank you so much for sharing your experiences and insights with me today. Is there anything else you'd like to add or that we didn't cover, but you think is important to understand about SEL or your experience as a teacher? *(Pause for answer)*

Your contributions have been incredibly valuable, and I really appreciate your time and openness in this conversation. If you have any questions about the study later on or think of anything else you want to share, please feel free to reach out.

Appendix E: Color-Coded Highlighting System

Yellow = Teacher's Goals
Pink = Divides in Teacher Experience
Light Blue = COVID-19
Neon Green = Thoughts on Second Step or a Different Curriculum
Olive green = Outside-of-the Classroom SEL Support and Professional Development
Red = Proactive vs. Reactive SEL
Dark Green = Monitoring SEL
Light Gray = SEL and Discipline
Teal = Areas of Ineffectiveness or Challenges

Appendix F: Consent Form

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Version: 1.0

Consent Form for Research Participation

Study Number: IRB24-1973
Study Title: Social-Emotional Learning in Chicago Public Schools
Researcher(s): Katie Fraser (PI: Tessa Hutteplocher)

This is a consent form for research participation. It contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate. Your participation is voluntary.

Purpose: The purpose of this research is to explore how Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs are implemented in schools with different socio-economic contexts. By understanding perspectives on SEL in both high- and low-poverty neighborhoods, this study aims to examine the effects of SEL programs on students and educators, with a focus on the construction of identity.

Procedures and Time Required: You will be asked to participate in a ~~30-45 minute~~ interview on Zoom. With your permission, the interviews will be audio-recorded to ensure accuracy in data collection.

Financial Information: Participation in this study will involve no cost to you. You will be compensated with a $15 gift card as a token of appreciation for your time.

Risks and Benefits: Your participation in this study does not involve any risks to you beyond those of everyday life. The findings from this research may benefit other educators and researchers by providing a better understanding of how SEL impacts students, teachers, and administrators in various socio-economic contexts.

Confidentiality: The information you provide will be kept confidential. All data, including audio recordings and any identifiable information, will be stored securely on password-protected devices accessible only to the research team. Identifiable data will never be shared outside the research team. If you decide to withdraw from this study, the researchers will ask you if the information already collected from you can be used in the analysis. De-identified data from this study may be used for future research studies or shared with other researchers for future research without your additional informed consent. Lastly, if any concerns arise about potential harm or abuse that participants disclose, I am required to report these under mandated reporter obligations.

Contacts & Questions: If you have questions or concerns about the study, you can contact the researcher Katie Fraser at 972-339-0226 or kjoyfraser@uchicago.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, feel you have been harmed, or wish to discuss other study-related concerns with someone who is not part of the research team, you can contact the University of Chicago Social & Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board (IRB): phone (773) 702-2915, email sbs-irb@uchicago.edu.

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Consent: Participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate or withdrawing from the research will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you might otherwise be entitled. You will be provided a copy of this form. By signing below, you agree to participate in the research.

_____

Participant's Signature

Participant's Name (printed) **Date**

Optional Elements
Please mark your choices below:

Yes	No	
_____	_____	The photographs and recordings taken as part of this research can be included in publications and presentations related to this research.