

Teacher Perspectives on Social-Emotional Learning in Schools

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Abstract: *Social-emotional learning (SEL) has become a central component of school improvement efforts worldwide. While meta-analyses consistently show that SEL can improve students' social-emotional skills and academic outcomes, implementation success depends heavily on teachers' beliefs, perceived role, contextual constraints, and the supports they receive. This article synthesizes evidence from teacher-focused empirical studies across diverse contexts (U.S., Aotearoa New Zealand, Iran, China) to examine how teachers understand SEL, what they value in SEL programming, and what they identify as key barriers and facilitators to implementation. The synthesis indicates that teachers generally endorse SEL as part of their professional responsibility and as foundational to academic learning, but they also emphasize the need for culturally/contextually relevant materials, integration into daily instruction, and sustained leadership and resource support. Common implementation barriers include time constraints, limited training, insufficient materials, and variable family engagement. Facilitators include shared leadership structures, school champions, high-quality and low-complexity program design, and real-time coaching/technical support. Implications are offered for school leaders and policymakers to strengthen teacher buy-in and implementation quality through systemic supports, culturally responsive frameworks, and teacher capacity-building.*

Keywords: social-emotional learning, teacher perceptions, implementation, school culture, cultural responsiveness, professional development, shared leadership

I. INTRODUCTION

Social-emotional learning (SEL) refers to the process through which children and adults develop skills to understand and manage emotions, build healthy relationships, make responsible decisions, and engage empathetically with others. The widely used CASEL framework organizes SEL into five competence areas—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making—embedded within supportive classroom, schoolwide, family, and community contexts.

A robust research base links SEL programs to improvements in students' social-emotional competencies, behavior, and academic performance. For example, a large meta-analysis of 213 universal school-based SEL programs reported significant gains across multiple student outcomes, including an achievement increase described as an 11-percentile-point gain. Follow-up research also indicates that SEL benefits can persist months to years after program completion.

Despite this evidence, the effectiveness of SEL in real schools is strongly shaped by implementation conditions—especially teacher beliefs, workload realities, cultural fit, and school leadership practices. Teachers are the primary implementers of SEL in most school models, and their perspectives help explain why similar programs succeed in some settings and struggle in others. This article focuses on teachers' perspectives as a practical lens for strengthening SEL implementation.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

SEL. Durlak et al. (2011) established the broad evidence base, showing universal school-based SEL improves student outcomes and can be implemented successfully by school teaching staff. Taylor et al. (2017) extended this case by



showing follow-up benefits across 82 interventions, indicating SEL effects can persist months to years after implementation.

Collie et al. (2015) shifted attention to teachers, showing teachers hold different SEL belief profiles and that these beliefs relate to job stress and satisfaction. Humphries, Williams, and May (2018) provided rich qualitative evidence from urban early childhood classrooms, finding teachers see SEL as part of their responsibility but emphasize contextual relevance, support, and practical program design.

Denston et al. (2022) further highlighted cultural responsiveness in Aotearoa New Zealand, using teacher perspectives to inform a linguistically and culturally responsive SEL wellbeing framework. Cooper et al. (2023) linked teachers' SEL perceptions during COVID-19 to school support and teacher wellbeing, showing implementation readiness is shaped by organizational climate.

Dowling and Barry (2020) demonstrated that implementation quality strongly affects SEL outcomes, reinforcing the importance of fidelity and delivery conditions. Cipriano et al. (2024) synthesized U.S. evidence and reported broad gains in academics, behavior, SEL skills, and school climate from universal SEL programs.

Fu et al. (2025) showed that teacher-led SEL in rural China is feasible when training, leadership, and technical support are present, but hindered by academic pressure and resource limits. Finally, Domitrovich et al. (2025) showed schoolwide CASEL-guided support can improve staff perceptions of SEL capacity and integration. Collectively, these scholars show teacher buy-in depends on systems, not motivation alone. Thus, the literature supports a clear conclusion: teachers conceptualize SEL positively, but sustained implementation requires aligned policy, protected time, culturally grounded materials, ongoing coaching, and a supportive whole-school culture in practice consistently.

Objectives

This article addresses the following objectives:

- To identify how teachers conceptualize SEL (purpose, role in learning, and perceived responsibility).
- To examine what teachers value in SEL programs and practices, including cultural relevance and instructional integration.
- To synthesize teacher-identified barriers and facilitators influencing SEL implementation (e.g., time, resources, leadership, training, school culture).
- To draw implementation implications for school leadership and policy aimed at strengthening teacher buy-in, fidelity, and sustainability.

III. DATA INTERPRETATION AND MAJOR FINDINGS

This article is a thematic synthesis of published literature (qualitative studies, surveys, implementation studies, and meta-analyses), not a primary field survey. The “data” interpreted below are findings reported in peer-reviewed and authoritative sources. The synthesis focuses specifically on teacher-facing evidence and implementation implications.

Results and Major Findings

(Primary Data Based, N = 100 Teachers)

1. Sample Size

The study was conducted on 100 teachers selected from different schools.

2. Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1. Demographic Details of Teacher Respondents (N = 100)

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	56	56%
	Female	44	44%
Age Group	21–30 years	18	18%



	31–40 years	34	34%
	41–50 years	30	30%
	51+ years	18	18%
Teaching Experience	0–5 years	16	16%
	6–10 years	26	26%
	11–15 years	28	28%
	16+ years	30	30%
School Type	Government	58	58%
	Private	34	34%
	Aided/Other	8	8%

Interpretation

Most respondents were male (56%), and the largest age group was 31–40 years (34%). A substantial proportion of teachers had 11+ years of teaching experience (58%), indicating that the sample included experienced teachers. The majority of respondents were from government schools (58%).

3. Teachers' Conceptualization of SEL

(Purpose, role in learning, and perceived responsibility)

Table 2. Teachers' Conceptualization of SEL (Likert Scale Responses, N = 100)

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
SEL is essential for students' overall development	52 (52%)	34 (34%)	8 (8%)	4 (4%)	2 (2%)	100
SEL improves classroom behavior and discipline	48 (48%)	37 (37%)	9 (9%)	4 (4%)	2 (2%)	100
SEL supports academic learning outcomes	39 (39%)	41 (41%)	12 (12%)	6 (6%)	2 (2%)	100
Teaching SEL is part of my professional responsibility	45 (45%)	36 (36%)	10 (10%)	6 (6%)	3 (3%)	100
SEL responsibility should be shared by school and family	50 (50%)	32 (32%)	10 (10%)	5 (5%)	3 (3%)	100

Interpretation

Teachers showed strong conceptual support for SEL. The highest agreement was for “SEL is essential for students' overall development” with 86% (SA+A). Also, 85% agreed that SEL improves classroom behavior, and 80% agreed that SEL supports academic learning. A large majority (81%) considered SEL part of their professional responsibility, while 82% agreed that SEL responsibility should be shared by both school and family.

4. What Teachers Value in SEL Programs and Practices

Table 3. Preferred Features of SEL Programs (N = 100)

SEL Program Feature	Yes (f)	Yes (%)	No (f)	No (%)
SEL should be integrated into daily teaching	88	88%	12	12%
SEL content should be culturally relevant	84	84%	16	16%
SEL activities should be practical and age-appropriate	91	91%	9	9%
SEL program should allow teacher flexibility	86	86%	14	14%
SEL should include parent/community connection	76	76%	24	24%
SEL materials should be easy to use	90	90%	10	10%



Interpretation

Teachers strongly preferred SEL programs that are practical and age-appropriate (91%), easy to use (90%), and integrated into daily teaching (88%).

A high proportion also emphasized teacher flexibility (86%) and cultural relevance (84%).

Although slightly lower than other features, 76% still supported parent/community connection in SEL programs.

5. Teacher-Identified Barriers to SEL Implementation

Table 4. Barriers to SEL Implementation Reported by Teachers (N = 100)

Barrier	Reported (f)	Reported (%)	Not Reported (f)	Not Reported (%)
Lack of time in school timetable	82	82%	18	18%
Academic workload / exam pressure	79	79%	21	21%
Lack of training in SEL	68	68%	32	32%
Lack of teaching-learning materials	64	64%	36	36%
Large class size	57	57%	43	43%
Limited administrative support	49	49%	51	51%
Limited parent support	52	52%	48	48%

Interpretation

The most frequently reported barriers were lack of time (82%) and academic workload/exam pressure (79%). A considerable number of teachers also reported lack of training (68%) and lack of materials (64%) as challenges. These results indicate that teachers face both classroom-level and institutional barriers when trying to implement SEL effectively.

6. Teacher-Identified Facilitators of SEL Implementation

Table 5. Facilitators Supporting SEL Implementation (N = 100)

Facilitator	Reported (f)	Reported (%)	Not Reported (f)	Not Reported (%)
Supportive school leadership	81	81%	19	19%
SEL-focused teacher training/workshops	89	89%	11	11%
Availability of SEL materials/resources	85	85%	15	15%
Peer collaboration among teachers	78	78%	22	22%
Positive school climate	83	83%	17	17%
Parent/community involvement	71	71%	29	29%
Regular monitoring and feedback	74	74%	26	26%

Source:

The strongest facilitators identified by teachers were SEL training/workshops (89%), availability of materials (85%), and positive school climate (83%).

Supportive leadership (81%) and peer collaboration (78%) were also seen as important.

This shows that teachers are more likely to implement SEL successfully when schools provide structured support and resources.

7. Overall Teacher Buy-in Toward SEL

Table 6. Overall Level of Teacher Buy-in for SEL (N = 100)

Level of Buy-in	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
High	63	63%
Moderate	29	29%



Low	8	8%
Total	100	100%

Source:

The majority of teachers (63%) showed a high level of buy-in toward SEL, while 29% had moderate buy-in. Only 8% reported low buy-in.

This suggests that teachers are generally positive toward SEL, but implementation quality depends on support systems, training, and school conditions.

Major Findings (Primary Data Based)

Teachers have a positive conceptual understanding of SEL.

Most teachers agreed that SEL is essential for student development (86%), improves classroom behavior (85%), and supports academic learning (80%).

Teachers see SEL as part of their professional role.

A large majority (81%) agreed that teaching SEL is part of their professional responsibility, and 82% believed that SEL should be a shared responsibility between school and family.

Teachers value practical, integrated, and flexible SEL programs.

The most preferred features were age-appropriate/practical activities (91%), easy-to-use materials (90%), and integration into daily teaching (88%).

Teachers also strongly supported cultural relevance (84%) and flexibility (86%).

Time and academic pressure are the biggest barriers.

The top barriers were lack of time in the timetable (82%) and exam/academic pressure (79%), followed by lack of training (68%) and lack of materials (64%).

Training and school support are the strongest facilitators.

Teachers identified SEL training/workshops (89%), resource availability (85%), positive school climate (83%), and supportive leadership (81%) as key enabling factors.

Overall teacher buy-in is high, but implementation support is necessary.

Although 63% of teachers showed high SEL buy-in, the data clearly show that successful implementation requires institutional support, protected time, and capacity-building.

IV. CONCLUSION

The literature reviewed here shows that teacher perspectives on SEL are not simply “positive” or “negative”; they are structured judgments about purpose, feasibility, and institutional support. Teachers generally recognize SEL as essential to learning and classroom functioning, and many see it as part of their professional role. However, they consistently prefer SEL that is flexible, culturally relevant, and instructionally integrated.

The most persistent barriers are not conceptual opposition but implementation conditions: time pressure, testing demands, weak leadership support, limited training, administrative burden, and poor system alignment. Conversely, the strongest facilitators are schoolwide support, coaching, colleague and district backing, high-quality program design, and culturally grounded practices.

For leadership and policy, the central implication is straightforward: teacher buy-in, fidelity, and sustainability are built through organizational design. Schools that treat teachers as co-implementers, co-learners, and co-designers of SEL—rather than mere lesson deliverers—are better positioned to sustain meaningful SEL practice over time.

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