

# Teachers' Perceptions on the Impacts of Social Emotional Learning Program Implementation

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*Research has shown the significance in social-emotional learning in children and adults. Likewise, studies have shown the significance on the type of leadership style an organization uses to maximize their employee's work ethic. Despite, these two known concepts, there is a limited number of studies that show how leadership impacts the implementation of a program. This qualitative study aims to understand teacher perceptions on how a shared leadership approach impacts implementing a social-emotional learning program. Through open ended surveys and focus group interviews, data will be collected to interpret how teachers perceive shared leadership has impacted the implementation of a social-emotional learning program. In addition, this study will provide insight into how school culture and teachers' interactions and experiences can impact the implementation of a social-emotional learning program. The data collected was coded and organized into categories to identify common themes among the participants. Following the data analysis, the researcher answered the research questions: (1) What were the teachers' experiences with implementing a social-emotional learning program through shared leadership? (2) What were the teachers' perceptions of the school culture during the implementation of social-emotional learning program? (3) What were the teachers' prior learnings, and experiences of the implementation of a social-emotional learning program?*

**Keywords:** Social-emotional Learning (SEL), School Culture, Social Constructivism, Shared Leadership

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is a concept that has become very popular in all regions of the world. With mass shootings, COVID-19, and everyday struggles, the social-emotional well-being of children is becoming more focused on in education. There are a variety of programs available to educational settings that encompass five main components: social awareness, self-management, self-awareness, responsible decision making, and relationship skills (CASEL, 2013). SEL programs are typically implemented based on the school's leadership style, practices, and what they feel is in the best interest of the school, what fits the school's needs. Each leadership theory, or practice, can impact the faculty and staff differently. With this idea in mind, the study presented shares how shared leadership, along with other components of a school, can impact the implementation of a social-emotional learning program.

Through a qualitative approach, this study describes teachers' perceptions of shared leadership on implementing a social-emotional learning program. The study also examines how teacher experiences, and the school culture impacted this process. Those schools who are interested in adding a social-emotional learning program to their curriculum will gain a better understanding of how to do so effectively from this study's results.

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of the study was to learn how shared leadership, school culture, and teacher interactions and experiences impact an SEL program implementation. To provide knowledge into this experience, the qualitative study presented addressed the following research questions:

R1: What were the teachers' experiences with implementing a social-emotional learning program through shared leadership?

R2: What were the teachers' perceptions of the school culture during the implementation of a social-emotional learning program?

R3: What were the teachers' prior learnings, and experiences of the implementation of a social-emotional learning program?

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

The theoretical and conceptual framework of a study provides insight into what is already known, theories that guide the researcher in developing their study, and other significant information that help the researcher develop their methodology for a study (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The study presented focuses on teachers' perceptions of how shared leadership, school culture, and teacher experiences (social constructivism) can impact the implementation process of a social-emotional learning program. Qualitative research takes place in a natural setting where the event or idea being studied occurs/occurred. Through interviews, observations, and note-taking data is collected to gain a better understanding of what is occurring. Therefore, it was ideal to conduct a qualitative study to better understand how these three theories impact the implementation process.

Shared leadership, social constructivism, and organizational culture theory are all of a social nature that were the foundation of this study. First, shared leadership is becoming more popular and influential in the workplace, especially in schools, due to its positive impacts. Various studies show that shared leadership has shown a tremendous impact on job satisfaction, school

culture and climate, school commitment, and student achievement (Naiker & Mestry, 2013; Tanrıöğen & İşcan, 2016; Ward & Graham-Brown, 2018). Additionally, shared leadership encourages all members of the organization to discuss and collaborate to ensure its' goals are achieved (Strike et al., 2016; Towler, 2019).

The social constructivism framework suggests multiple realities co-constructed by our experiences and interactions with one another, even the researcher, which was used to better understand the teachers' perceptions in this study (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The data collected is very subjective through social constructivism because there are multiple realities to these experiences. To better understand teachers' perceptions social constructivism was used to analyze the information provided by the participants.

The final theory for this framework is organizational culture theory. Schein believes that an organization's culture has three components: artifacts, values, and basic assumptions (Burkus, 2014). Artifacts are what everyone can see when they enter the organization, values are the organization's set values and norms, and basic assumptions are the foundation of an organization. Basic assumptions are the behaviors and actions of the members of the organization, despite what the values may be. In 1992, Schein stated that the school culture comes from a group of people who solve problems together as a team (Grogan, 2013).

Shared leadership, social constructivism, and organizational culture theory are all theories based on social interactions. For this reason, they complimented the ideas behind the study of implementing a social-emotional learning program that was conducted at one school, especially since the school studied used a shared leadership approach.

### **Review of the Literature**

As previously stated, three theories helped guide the researcher in studying the implementation of a social-emotional learning program. Shared leadership, organizational culture theory, and social constructivism theory have been studied in a variety of ways.

Shared leadership is one of many influential ideologies in education. It encourages all parties to take on leadership roles by giving all stakeholders the opportunity to share their thoughts, ideas, and experiences that help lead to the common goals of the school (Strike et al., 2016). For example, when all members (faculty and staff) select a program to enhance the students' education, shared leadership is being used to reach the common goal. This process allows for all teachers to have a voice and share their own ideas and experiences about the programs. It is well known that when teachers are happy in the workplace, the students are more successful than if the school has a negative morale (Naicker & Mestry, 2013). Ideally, through shared leadership, a more positive morale would be achieved in the workplace. Through this approach, teachers can freely communicate their thoughts, create positive relationships with all personnel, and help in the decision-making process which in turn can create a positive culture and climate, making teachers happier (Ward & Graham-Brown, 2018; Tanrıöğen & İşcan, 2016).

Organizational cultural theory states that basic assumptions, or beliefs, are what shape the values of an organization. These values lead what people outside the organization see, the organization's culture (Schein, 2003). Studies show that the culture of an organization impacts the workers' satisfaction and commitment to the organization (Roper, 2011; Burns et al., 2021). Additionally, in the educational setting the changes of a culture can impact student behavior and

experiences (Story, 2010). Various studies show that culture influences various components of an organization, it also shows that culture can impact an individual's development and growth through social interactions.

Individuals develop and grow from their experiences with the world around them based on the social constructivism theory (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Lynch, 2016). Teachers enhance their practices by doing this through professional development. According to one study, the culture of an organization can influence the professional development of individuals (Rauf et al., 2012). Professional development is needed to enhance thinking and teaching practices (Guzey et al., 2014, p.148; Edmondson & Choudhry, 2018). However, it is important to be able to practice the execution of this new learning. The same is true when teaching social-emotional learning.

Social-emotional learning has a correlation to student and adult performance, along with short term and long term effects to all parties (CASEL, 2013; McCormick et al., 2019). Schools that implement an SEL program have seen an increase in group cohesion and a positive school climate (Perryman et al., 2020; CASEL, 2013). The program impacts all individuals in a positive manner, students, teachers, staff, and administrators

Several studies show that social-emotional learning positively impacts students. Students can better utilize the coping skills taught to them through the implementation of an SEL program. With the opportunity to practice the skills of SEL, students were able to show empathy, trust in others, and solve problems on their own (Perryman et al., 2020). Whenever students experience a negative emotion, they can express this clearly to others in a positive manner (Perryman et al., 2020; CASEL, 2013; Gundersen, 2014; Ahmed et al., 2020). Amazingly, one study showed that early intervention of SEL could limit the number of students receiving SPED services (McCormick et al., 2019).

When looking at how adults are impacted by social-emotional learning, several studies give insight into its benefits. Researchers learned that social programs, where individuals meet to build relationships, are essential for universities and colleges. Thompson (2018) found that SEL plays a vital role in the success of international students feeling a part of the community or college in foreign lands. The same is found among teachers. "The stresses of teaching all too often lead to a cycle of diminishing well-being for educators that negatively correlates to student learning" (Nankin & Fenchel, 2019, para. 4). Nankin was an educator who began using yoga to help reduce her own stress and saw a transformation in her students (Nankin & Fenchel, 2019). Whether it is through yoga, medication or any other activity, Nankin's actions show that SEL is important to students and all individuals and can impact all parties when conducted appropriately.

## **Methodology**

Qualitative methods involve the presentation of a narrative based on analysis and interpretation of gathered data and can be presented in the form of artifacts, observations, or interviews with participants (Nowell et al., 2017; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). A qualitative study aims to interpret another individual's experience to generate human knowledge based on those experiences. The components of qualitative research are what made this methodology the best for this study.

Two types of sampling were used to select the study site and participants. Convenience sampling was used because the site studied is the researcher's workplace. Additionally, the school implemented a social-emotional learning program for the first time which allowed for a true understanding of the implementation process. Likewise, criterion sampling was used to gather the appropriate participants and a school that practices shared leadership (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The researcher gathered 14 participants to partake in the questionnaire and six to participate in the focus group interview. Additionally, the researcher gathered consent from all participants through writing. It was also shared, despite the researcher's position at the school, that all information would be confidential and that their identity would not be shared with anyone. To eliminate bias, the researcher did not include their own experiences or opinions with the participants.

Following data collection of the questionnaire, the data were analyzed by focusing on individual responses to understand participants' experiences (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). Data was reviewed twice to highlight words or phrases that stood out. First, a table was created that showed what each participant said for each question. Additionally, the words or phrases that stood out to the researcher were placed in a separate column labeled key words. These statements were highlighted to understand how the participants experienced the implementation (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Additionally, patterns were determined that showed themes amongst the participants' experiences (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). Finally, themes were analyzed to determine the overall meaning of the participants' experiences so that the research questions were answered.

Following the questionnaire analysis, the researcher selected participants who completed the questionnaire to participate in a semi-structured focus group interview (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The participants were selected based on having similar views and being from various grade levels to provide the researcher with a balanced representation of the school. The focus group interview was recorded using two devices to ensure accuracy and validity.

After conducting the interview, the discussions were transcribed. Each line of the script was labeled numerically, which was used later for identification purposes. Once all data was transcribed, the researcher sent the transcript to the participants of the interview to review for member checking. If they wanted to add additional information or revise a response, the researcher noted it in the transcript following the original interview. This process allowed the researcher to get to know the data more and the participants to adjust their responses if needed (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003).

Following member checking, the researcher used the same process to analyze the transcription as the questionnaire. The researcher analyzed each question for common statements, phrases, or feelings. These statements were highlighted, so the researcher understood how the participants experienced the implementation (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Notes were taken for each specific question and analyzed to find emergent categories, that led to a theme (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). Themes were analyzed to determine the overall meaning of the experience of implementing an SEL program. The questionnaire and the focus group interview data allowed the researcher to answer all research questions. The findings also allowed the researcher to provide educational leaders with an understanding of how shared leadership practices impact the implementation of an SEL program, the culture of the school, and teachers themselves.

## Sample Demographics

Fourteen teachers of students in kindergarten to sixth grade completed a questionnaire through Google Forms and six of these teachers participated in a focus group interview. By gathering a wide range of participants from various grade levels in the school (prekindergarten to sixth grade), the data better represented the school's experience as a whole. Additionally, it was important to gather participants with a wide variety of experience (zero to 30 years) in the grade level they were teaching during the implementation of SEL.

## Results

When analyzing the data, three themes were identified that correlated with the three research questions. Below, Table One provides a graphical representation of the themes that emerged.

**Table 1**  
*Themes and Patterns*

<b>Implementation of SEL: Themes and Patterns</b>			
<i>Research Question</i>	RQ1: What were the teachers' experiences with implementing a social-emotional learning program through shared leadership?	RQ2: What were the teachers' perceptions of the school culture during the implementation of the social-emotional learning program?	RQ3: What were the teachers' prior learnings, and experiences of the implementation of a social-emotional learning program?
<i>Theme</i>	Most teachers found shared leadership to bring a positive impact on implementing a social-emotional learning program.	Most teachers felt that the culture as a whole did not change but stayed positive as it was before.	Most teachers' experiences allowed for positive implementation of SEL because they found it important through their training and lessons.

<i>Pattern</i> <i>PTN=Pattern</i>	PTN 1. Shared leadership allowed for all voices to be heard.	PTN 1. Lack of changes in school culture.	PTN 1. Most teachers taught SEL in an informal practice prior to this SEL program implementation.
	PTN 2. Shared leadership allowed all stakeholders to collaborate.	PTN 2. SEL's impact on the school.	PTN 2. SEL's impacts teachers' well-being for the better.  PTN 3. Students are positively impacted by the implementation of the SEL program.  PTN 4. Teachers had mixed feelings about the overall process of implementing the program.

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The three research questions were addressed, and insight was provided through the questionnaire and the focus group interview as data collection tools. After analyzing all the data, the researcher found trends to the research questions and determined sub-patterns, which led to the patterns shown, and ultimately the themes for each question.

### **Research Question 1**

The first theme to emerge, *Most teachers found shared leadership to bring a positive impact on implementing a social-emotional learning program*, answered the first research question. This theme stemmed from two patterns: shared leadership allowed for all voices to be heard and individuals to collaborate. When analyzing the data from both the questionnaire and focus group interviews, there was an overwhelming number of individuals that found the shared leadership approach to be beneficial to the implementation process of the social-emotional learning program.

The first few moments of the focus group interview were spent discussing the voting process that took place. During the focus group interview, one teacher shared,

“...With the buy-in especially because I know that there were some people that did not vote for choose love, but because it was your colleagues you know kind of getting you on board. It was easier to get on board, even though that wasn't necessarily the one that you wanted if that makes sense.”

Another participant felt similarly to this teacher but had a different outlook on the experience. In the questionnaire the participant stated, “There was a committee but I feel that

the choice of the SEL program was selected based on what other schools are doing, not necessarily what is best or what all of our staff was on board with.” Therefore, despite the favoring opinions of having their voices heard, not all participants felt that the voices that were shared during the voting were accurate to their own beliefs.

When diving deeper into the collaboration component, two participants specifically stated that shared leadership allowed for collaboration. Participant 11 shared that with the shared leadership approach they were able to go to others for guidance or gain new ideas.

Additionally, six participants shared that they appreciated being able to share their ideas and thoughts with their colleagues. Participant 3 said,

After adopting the Choose Love program and creating an SEL committee, many of our teachers and faculty members have taken the initiative to share their lessons/activities with the rest of the staff during our monthly meetings.” and “We got resources to use to help us teach our students about social and emotional learning and the leadership team is always available for extra support, whether if it's for our students or for ourselves.

The response of Participant 3 showed that shared leadership allowed for all stakeholders to collaborate and share ideas with one another. Additionally, this approach allowed for this specific individual to feel that they have extra support if needed. Therefore, shared leadership brought a positive impact on implementing a social-emotional learning program.

## Research Question 2

The second theme, *Most teachers felt that the culture as a whole did not change but stayed positive as it was before*, was found through the analysis of the second research question. When analyzing the data from both the questionnaire and focus group interviews, many participants had a hard time sharing their experiences and thoughts about the school culture. Due to COVID-19, it was difficult for teachers to share how the school culture changed since implementation. Despite this, two participants specifically stated that the culture of the school was positive before the implementation of SEL. However, one teacher shared in the focus group interview,

I do see a benefit in students, you know, like just their coping mechanism, how they treat others, you know, like and how to apologize. I think it stopped there. I don't see a difference within the faculty and then admin, and the culture of our school. I was really hoping that it was going to happen.

Likewise, Participant 11 shared, “The school’s culture is definitely going to change for the better with more implementation.” Therefore, a majority of participants shared that the positive school culture that existed prior to the implementation of SEL is still positive. Additionally, one individual feels that it is only going to get better through the continuation of the SEL program.

Throughout the questionnaire analysis and focus group interview, participants shared how they felt that the implementation of the SEL program impacted the school itself. One participant shared in the questionnaire that,

The school as a whole was empathetic for the most part, but since implementation, more students are stepping up to show that they care about others. They are especially standing up for kids by those who are new to the school and may not have had SEL program.



Other participants shared this same perception. Additionally, they stated that the implementation of the program impacted the teachers as well,

It seems as though the lessons that we teach the students are carrying on into the personal lives of the teachers because the teachers seem to be coping well and "choosing love" during this highly stressful time.

Through the perception of these teachers, the implementation of the program not only impacted the students, but the adults as well. Therefore, although it was not the purpose of this study, the researcher found that based on the teachers' perceptions the implementation of this SEL program did improve the school's culture.

### Research Question 3

The final theme found was *Most teachers' experiences allowed for positive implementation of SEL because they found it important through their training and lessons*. One reason behind this may be due to the fact that many of the teachers were already teaching SEL in the past, but not through a formal curriculum. This instruction by all but one teacher showed that they already found SEL to be important.

Several of the participants shared that they found that the SEL program implementation impacted their students and their own well-being. Six teachers stated that teaching SEL to their students helped themselves have an open, positive mindset and to reflect on their own well-being. Five participants shared that the implementation of the SEL program helped them manage negative emotions as well. One shared, "I truly feel that the lessons being taught to our students opened my eyes as well, as to how to handle everyday worries and stress". While another stated,

They are excited to put vocabulary and names to certain feelings and actions that they didn't have before. Words like "passive aggressive" or "Mindful meditation" to help them understand their own styles of anger, comprehension and how to deal with it. This program also gives students who have a higher emotional IQ a chance to engage and be more confident where in academics they may shy away from participation."

Through both of these teachers' perceptions, it is clear that the implementation of SEL impacts their students positively.

Despite the positive comments and experiences of these teachers, it should be noted that there were some conflicting emotions. Table 2 shows the conflicting feelings of three participants.

**Table 4**  
*Conflicting Feelings*

Participant #	Positive Feeling Key: P1.Q1.1= Participant 1.Question1.Line 1	Negative Feeling Key: P1.Q1.1= Participant 1.Question1.Line 1
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2	P2.Q7.3 The implementation I think was very smooth.	P2.Q7.5 Maybe if we had done breakout groups to collaborate with other members of the same grade level to take ideas from each other.
3	P3.Q7.1 I feel more comfortable teaching it as I do it using our Choose Love program.	P3.Q7.2 At first I didn't know where to begin, I was honestly overwhelmed with all the information I received, but once I got an idea of what to teach and how to teach it, it's definitely getting easier.
6	P6.Q7.1 I feel that it is important to cover, however I struggle with having the time to teach all the standards that are required and to cover the SEL lessons to its fullest.	P6.Q7.1 I feel that it is important to cover, however I struggle with having the time to teach all the standards that are required and to cover the SEL lessons to its fullest.

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These three participants when asked, “If you could change anything about this experience, what would you change?” had conflicted emotions. Participant 2 felt that the implementation was smooth but felt that there should have been more collaboration between teammates. Participant 3 shared that they felt more comfortable with the program now that they have started teaching it but was overwhelmed in the beginning. Lastly, participant 6 shared that they felt it was important to teach the SEL program but struggled to find time for it with the short time teachers have to teach. These specific individuals show how the implementation of the program caused conflicting emotions within themselves. However, it was also shown by all participants.

Additionally, three participants shared how the implementation process went well and five shared how the implementation process had some blemishes. Of the five participants that shared their thoughts on the blemishes of the implementation, none stated that the implementation process was done wrong. They did share ways that it could improve. For example, Participant 5 shared:

There is always room for improvement. I think, because of when our implementation rolled out (pretty much pandemic times), it would have been helpful to not only give us ideas but to maybe have "packaged" lessons - like, pretty much, everything ready to go (lesson plan, materials, etc.). With all that we've already got on our plates, to plan and prep one more thing added just a little bit more stress. I appreciate that we had the flexibility to implement and tailor to our specific situations/students but, sometimes it's easier to just be given something ready-made, ready-to-go. Also, I think gen. ed. is usually where the activities are geared in terms of where/when to implement the suggestions so,

if it was a shared activity, I would have to think of something similar but different enough that the kids wouldn't say, "I did this already."

This participant's experience shows that they appreciated the flexibility of the implementation process and how each class was able to tailor it to their students' needs. However, the blemishes that were recognized could easily be addressed.

### **Conclusion**

Through a qualitative approach, this study described teachers' perceptions of shared leadership on the implementation of a social-emotional learning program. The study also examined how teacher experiences and school culture impacted the implementation of a new educational program. The findings showed that shared leadership had a positive impact on the implementation of the SEL program because teachers felt that their voices were heard and enjoyed collaborating and sharing ideas with one another. Due to a majority of the teachers previously teaching SEL in an informal style, it can be assumed that this helped them implement the SEL program more effectively. Although the researcher's goal was not to see the impact on teachers and students, the data collected did show this pattern. Both teachers and students were positively impacted by the implementation of the SEL program, validating the literature. Through this study's findings, educational leaders can learn from the teachers' perceptions on how shared leadership, school culture, and teacher experiences can impact the implementation of a new program in the school setting.

### **Implications of the Research**

Several studies have shown that shared leadership can have a tremendous impact on school culture and climate (Naiker & Mestry, 2013; Tanrıöğen & İşcan, 2016; Ward & Graham-Brown, 2018), school commitment (Naiker & Mestry, 2013; Ward & Graham-Brown, 2018), and student achievement (Naiker & Mestry, 2013). Concerning social-emotional learning, studies show the impacts of implementing social-emotional learning programs in schools (Ahmed et al., 2020; Neth et al., 2020; Perryman et al., 2020; and Thompson, 2020). However, the literature did not provide a variety of studies that used qualitative methods to study these concepts.

This research brought to light that shared leadership, school culture, and teachers' experiences can impact the implementation of a social-emotional learning program through qualitative methods. Using qualitative methods was essential. It not only added a new approach to the literature, but also allowed the researcher to gain deeper understanding of what teachers experienced that could not have been achieved through quantitative methods. This study highlights how shared leadership, school culture, and teachers' experiences intertwine when implementing an SEL program. Educational leaders must keep in mind that these three components can positively, or negatively, impact the implementation of any program at their school. Therefore, when implementing new programs in a school setting educational leaders need to remember that their leadership practices, school culture, and the teachers' experiences can impact the implementation process.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Through this study significant evidence was gathered to answer the three research questions. However, due to COVID-19 restrictions, the exploration as to how school culture impacts the implementation process was not adequately conducted. Therefore, it is recommended that future researchers who are interested in this topic keep in mind the restrictions that were brought forth by the pandemic. These restrictions can impact an adequate analysis of an organization's culture. Additionally, it may be beneficial to gather data on the perceptions of members in an organization prior to the implementation of the program. This would allow the researcher to reference participants' previous perceptions on the culture when analyzing how the culture was impacted with the implementation of the program.

Another recommendation for future research is to continue using qualitative methods in various schools. Researchers are better able to understand an experience that an individual, or group, has through qualitative methods. Using qualitative research will allow the researcher to share examples and experiences of the various schools, different leadership practices, and school culture impacted each school differently. This would add to the literature about all three concepts when analyzing the impacts of implementing a social emotional learning program, or any program. When conducting the research, it would be important to meet with the teachers prior to the implementation process to learn what their current feelings are about the given program. Meeting with the teachers prior, during, and after the implementation process will provide other educational leaders with the ideas on how to effectively implement a social emotional learning program.

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