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Interpreting Social-Emotional Learning: How School Leaders Make Sense of SEL Skills for Themselves and Others

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Interpreting Social-Emotional Learning: How School Leaders Make Sense of SEL Skills for Themselves and Others

Social-emotional learning (SEL) has become a leading topic for school leaders supported by organizations like CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning), whose SEL competencies are used in many schools across the US. The need for social-emotional learning for adults has also emerged due to the Covid-19 pandemic, with a much higher percentage of teachers reporting frequent higher job-related stress and symptoms of depression than the general adult population. As a result, calls for adult SEL development in schools abound (Steiner & Woo, 2021). However, recent surveys show that few school leaders have plans for implementing SEL for their staff or understand the impact of working conditions on teachers' mental health during the pandemic (Steiner & Woo, 2021; Carver-Thomas et al., 2021).

While many school leaders believe in SEL, major disconnects exist between their understanding and belief in SEL and their plans to implement it, including principals' 1) lack of understanding of the role that emotions play within the context of their leadership practice (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015); 2) possible lack of understanding of what SEL competencies or skills mean or how to use them in the context of their particular roles; 3) lack of understanding of the role of social-emotional learning in their self-care (see Berkovich & Eyal, 2015 metanalysis many of these findings); and 4) a "knowing-doing "gap in how school leaders change and use SEL skills themselves, even when they understand the necessity of these skills (Kegan & Lahey, 2010).

Although these disconnects apply to many leaders and schools, there are notable exceptions across the United States of schools known for their SEL approach to developing students *and* adults. Some schools, public, charter and private, have developed systems to expand the social and emotional competencies of all members of their community. The overarching purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study was to explore how school leaders in schools known for their SEL focus make sense of, define and use SEL skills for their leadership with their staff. This study is significant in that by more clearly understanding how school leaders make sense of their own SEL skills and how they practice emotional leadership (Berkovich & Eyal, 2021), more and better supports may be developed for other school leaders.

Background

School leadership is a people-driven enterprise that relies on numerous social and emotional skills to achieve positive outcomes for students and adults (Berkovich & Eyal, 2021). According to Leithwood & Seashore-Louis (2012), *leadership* may be defined as one's exercise of influence on what people do, how they do it, and how they think and feel about their successes. Thus, leaders demonstrate leadership (or not) via the impact of their influence directly on the people with whom they work. One form of influence is emotional leadership, or "a way to influence teachers that morally supports their emotional wellness, producing subsequent affect-related outcomes relevant to effective teaching and work in educational organizations" (Berkovich & Eyal, 2021). This form of influence requires social and emotional skills that have an extensive theoretical background in such areas as emotional intelligence (Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, 2002). This popular notion of leadership asserts that the primary role of leaders is “driving the collective emotions in a positive direction, and clearing the smog of toxic emotions” ((Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, 2002).

Within an emotional frame for leadership, how leaders seek to deliver indirect influence on teacher emotions to impact their work experience becomes a critical overall problem to investigate (Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, K., 2012; Leithwood et al. 2017; Leithwood, et al., 2019).

The Impact of Leadership on Teachers

In the No Child Left Behind era, most of the investigation on the influence of school leadership focused on the role of instructional leadership. Researchers sought to understand how school leaders could influence the primary elements of curriculum and instruction and included a strong emphasis on understanding and using data to influence teaching and learning.

However, many researchers argue that school leaders also influence teaching and learning through four distinct paths, three of which do not expressly focus on instruction (Leithwood et al., 2017; Leithwood, et al. 2019).

- The Rational path or the path that includes the technical core of curriculum, teaching, and learning
- The Organizational path or the path that includes structures, policies, standard operating procedures and culture
- The Family path or the path that includes how a school includes and works with parents and the community
- The Emotional path or the path that directs individuals' attention, cognition, and perceptions

Over the past 20 years of the standards-based testing accountability era, most of the emphasis for leadership development has focused on the rational path (Leithwood & Beatty, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2017) or instructional leadership. This focus suggested that if school leaders spend most of their time aligning curriculum and giving feedback to teachers on their instruction or evaluating teachers more strictly, learning would improve. Other organizational strategies focused on the rational path in many schools, such as professional learning communities, data teams, and intervention systems.

However, the over-reliance on the rational and organizational path for improving teaching and learning led to unintended consequences. For example, since 2014, teachers' attrition rate before retirement age has risen to 8% annually, mainly due to challenging teaching conditions like a lack of collegiality in the workplace, input, and support (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Moreover, this attrition rate costs upwards of 8 billion dollars per year due to attracting, hiring, and onboarding (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Similarly, there has been a 35% reduction in college students entering teacher preparation since 2014 (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Moreover, during the Covid-19 pandemic, national surveys of teachers suggest the attrition rate could increase as one in four teachers said they were likely to leave their jobs by the end of the school year (Steiner & Woo, 2021).

Surveys of teachers who remain in the teaching profession also illustrate that the field suffers from an over-reliance on the rational and organizational leadership paths for improving achievement. For instance, in the 2017 Educators Quality of Life Survey (AFT, 2017), teachers rated their working conditions on a 1-5 scale, from highly disagree to highly agree. Only 50% of teachers in this national survey agreed or highly agreed they had full administrative support. Similarly, 58% of teachers in the Educators Quality of Life Survey (AFT, 2017) rated their mental health as not good. Teachers who were likely to leave their teaching position at the end of the 2020-2021 school year also experienced working conditions linked to higher stress and burnout levels (Steiner & Woo, 2021).

Another indicator of the health of the teaching force in the era of rational and organizational leadership is visible in surveys of engagement, or how willing a teacher is to exert extra energy to their job. In Gallup's latest survey, only 30% of educators responded as "fully engaged on a daily basis" (Hodges, 2018 & Clifton & Harter, 2019, p. 313). Another survey done by K12 Insights found similar engagement, with only 28% of educators responding that they were highly engaged (Knoblach, 2019). More striking still, of those teachers with five or more years of experience, only 25% responded that they were highly engaged

(Knoblach, 2019). Respondents also rated the overall work environment and lack of feedback and recognition as the lowest drivers of engagement in their schools (Knoblach, 2019). Similarly, during the pandemic, 50% of teachers providing remote instruction reported experiencing daily technology issues, and 32% of teachers reported that they were the main person responsible for the care and learning support of their children while teaching, leading to a sense of overwhelm, stress, and burnout (Steiner & Woo, 2021).

The emotional leadership path may be the least utilized and most underdeveloped path in influencing teachers. In a review of over 90 empirical studies of teacher emotions and their impact on teaching and learning, Leithwood and Beatty (2008) found a significant relationship between teachers' thoughts and feelings - their internal states- and classroom practice, engagement, and student learning. Since emotions are a key psychological element in directing attention, perception, motivation, and behavior in the workplace, better understanding this path may be a promising approach to increasing school quality. However, given the suboptimal working conditions in which some teachers are operating, and, given the repeated finding that teachers are the number one influence on students' educational outcomes (Hattie, 2012), school leaders who fail to adopt leadership practices that positively address teachers' emotional states may use what some authors refer to as mistreatment or non-supportive behaviors which are associated with anxiety, anger, and depression (Wu & Hu, 2009; Aguino & Thau, 2009; Berkovich & Eyal, 2015; Ansley et al., 2019).

In contrast, other findings suggest that a high level of relationship-oriented support for others and promoting their well-being can affect followers' emotions and reduce anxiety and fear (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015). School leadership models often fail to account for the outsized impact emotional states contribute to teachers' overall productivity, efficacy, and well-being.

Leaders' Social-Emotional Competence

Fortunately, the leadership field does not lack possible explanations for why the emotional leadership path remains infrequently used or implemented. In the larger leadership literature, social-emotional competence is a frequent area of discussion.

For example, the trappings of positional power have been shown to limit leaders' use of social-emotional competencies. For instance, in the executive leadership coaching field, researchers (Goldsmith & Reiter 2015; Goldsmith & Reiter, 2007) have studied how leaders in all fields, including education, climb the hierarchy of success while becoming less and less aware of their habits and personas and how

they impact others. As leaders attain more power, the accuracy of their self-perceptions of the value of their contributions, skills, and influence decreases. Leaders also tend to want to do more and accept more responsibilities, equating being busy with eventual impact. That leadership decision can lead to burnout of teaching staff, turnover, and weaker teams (Goldsmith & Reiter 2015; Goldsmith & Reiter, 2007).

In studying leaders and power, Keltner (2016) describes power as the structure through which leaders and followers relate. Leaders are given power by others who expect those leaders to advance the organization's status and the greater good. However, Keltner (2016) also points out that power can lead to leaders developing self-serving impulsivity and disrespect toward those they lead *without the leader realizing it*. Keltner labels this as the power paradox. He writes, "… the seductions of power induce (leaders) to lose the very skills that enabled (leaders) to gain power in the first place." This use of power causes others to feel threatened, unsupported and stressed. These perceptions, in turn, impact the effort, productivity, and wellness of employees.

School Leaders' Social-Emotional Competence

Like the larger research literature on leaders' social-emotional competence, the literature on school leaders also helps explain why the emotional leadership path remains infrequently used. Many school leaders may not have the social-emotional competence in which to influence the emotional path. This aspect of the problem is significant in that without these skills or the willingness to develop them, leaders will continue to overuse and overstress other paths, which may continue to exacerbate teacher burnout, stress, and turnover.

For example, some researchers suggest that standards-oriented reforms drove schools to an extensive focus on rational solutions to the problem of increasing achievement (Leithwood & Beatty, 2008). Others suggest leaders do not use the emotional path -- even if they are aware that they should -- because they are not equipped or willing to do so (see Berkovich & Eyal, 2015 for a review of evidence). For example, research indicates that school leaders do not show any greater empathetic skills on average than leaders in other fields and that because of their position, school leaders tend to disengage emotionally from negative situations as a personal protective measure (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015). However, this act of disengagement can come at a great cost, as it limits the ability to influence others and limits the ability to practice these skills.

Research from other English-speaking countries shows that a significant number of principals in these countries also demonstrate insufficient social and emotional

skills to influence their teachers. For example, using a 360-feedback rating system, findings from Genos and BTS-Spark (Palmer & Connor, 2018) report that 58% of principals, in a sample of over 400, score just average to low social-emotional competence, with 70% of first-year principals, in particular, showing average to low social-emotional competence. In addition, principals in this study scored poorly on skills such as self-awareness, authenticity, emotional reasoning, and positive influence (Palmer & Connor, 2018).

CASEL Framework Description

The most widely known and used SEL framework comes from CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning). Conceived in 1994, CASEL sought to deliver high-quality SEL from preschool through high school. The CASEL Framework of Core Competencies was created to help guide school curriculum and instruction for SEL, applying extensive research from numerous academic fields and workplace skills analysis.

The CASEL framework's competencies and skills include:

- Self-awareness, including skills such as identifying emotions, developing an accurate self-perception, recognizing strengths, developing self-confidence and self-efficacy
- Self-management, including skills such as impulse control, stress management, self-discipline, self-motivation, goal-setting, and organizational skills
- Social-awareness, including skills such as perspective-taking, empathy, appreciating diversity, respect for others
- Relationship skills, including skills such as communication, social engagement, Relationship-building Teamwork
- Responsible decision-making, including skills such as identifying problems, analyzing situations, solving problems, evaluating, reflecting, and developing ethical responsibility (CASEL, n.d.)

Notably, however, CASEL did not develop its framework to support adult or school leaders. Thus, another primary reason school leaders may not attend to emotional leadership is a lack of accessible knowledge of what SEL competencies mean or look like in practice for themselves if they seek to drive school improvement and connect with teachers emotionally. Since these competencies, as illustrated above, directly impact teacher efficacy and student achievement, increasing school leaders' SEL competency and skill levels is critical and requires better guidance and resources.

The Problem for the Research Study

Above, we described two primary background issues related to SEL for school leaders:

- Over the past two decades, the emphasis on test scores drove school leaders to over-utilize the rational and organizational leadership paths, producing unintended consequences for the teaching profession.
- Many leaders, including school leaders, do not possess the social-emotional competencies necessary to effectively use the emotional leadership path, the path arguably most aligned to meeting teachers' needs, especially following the Covid-19 pandemic.

Although there is much guidance on implementing social-emotional learning for students, little guidance exists for school leaders to develop these skills for themselves or other adults. The field of educational leadership discusses the nature and role of emotional leadership (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015; Berkovich & Eyal, 2021; Leithwood et al., 2017), but the field has not defined what emotional leadership concretely means or looks like in the context of leading schools or SEL initiatives today.

Therefore, the main problem this research sought to address integrates two ideas in the affective world of school leaders:

- Research literature does not describe what the CASEL competencies mean concerning school leadership.
- Research literature does not describe how school leaders explicitly develop SEL skills and operationalize these competencies to influence teachers' SEL.

This study is relevant and significant to the field of educational leadership because if the emotional path is a path of high leverage for greater teacher success, and if the field can learn how to better use this path, then opportunities to stem the tide of teacher attrition, burnout and disengagement along with stemming the same issues in the principalship may present themselves more immediately. As there has been a lack of attention given to the social-emotional learning of school leaders, this study can build upon the current movement and interest in SEL and give leaders the knowledge and tools to better use the emotional path in their schools. School leadership matters a lot, but it is shifting in the ways it matters.

Research Design and Methods

Considering the phenomenon of this study is school leaders' understanding and use of SEL skills, the overarching purpose for this study was to explore how school leaders in schools known for their SEL focus make sense of, define and use SEL skills in their leadership practice.

Since this is a relatively new phenomenon of interest, this study utilized a more modern form of grounded theory research called Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014). This method of inquiry was most appropriate as it predicates on:

- Surfacing participants' implicit meanings and experiential views
- Understanding people as active agents in creating meaning
- Allowing theoretical analysis and development of new theoretical concepts as the study proceeds to help build cumulatively
- Stressing social contexts, interaction, and interpretive understandings
- Acknowledging the subjective meaning of ideas within different contexts (Charmaz, 2014, p. 18)

Research Question

The overarching research question for this proposed study was:

RQ: How do school leaders in schools well known for a deliberate focus on SEL: 1) make sense of and define SEL skills, 2) apply these skills to themselves, and 3) use them in their work with staff?

Recruitment and Sampling of Participants

Although many schools use various forms of social-emotional learning, only recently has the focus on this broader set of outcomes become more prevalent. Specific models of schools have made the development of social and emotional skills the primary mission of their schools. Schools with this primary aim, and their leaderswere the primary participants in this study.

To solicit participation, we focused on purposive sampling reaching out to various networks of which we are members and solicited nominations of schools with a central SEL focus. Schools could self-nominate to be part of this sampling based on the criteria of having a focused SEL mission with students and having this focus over three years or more. As a result, we received 11 nominations and interviewed all 11 of these leaders.

Data Collection

For this study, we used semi-structured interview data as the primary form of data to see school leaders' lives from the inside regarding how they make sense of and use SEL skills. The primary form of collected data was what Charmaz (2014) refers to as "intensive interviews," which defines a way of generating data that explores participants' perspectives and experiences on research phenomena. Interviews were done via the Zoom platform and recorded. The audio versions of each interview were then exported to artificial intelligence transcription software. Interviews lasted between 45-60 minutes, and in total 11 school leaders were interviewed.

Data collection began with developing an initial interview guide based on sensitizing concepts. A sensitizing concept is a broad term without definite characteristics and helps researchers determine ideas to pursue and questions to ask (Charmaz, 2014). For this study, we used the CASEL framework and competencies as the sensitizing concepts. These competency terms, such as self-awareness or relationship management, acted as tentative concepts for developing questions and a loose frame to start data collection and analysis. The interview guide acted as a flexible tool that was revised based on ongoing analysis and reflexivity.

Data Analysis

In our initial coding, we studied words, lines, segments, or incidents for their "analytic import" (Charmaz, 2014). In the first coding phase we started with the larger CASEL competencies as a guide to understand how leaders construe the meaning and use of these competencies in their roles and how they labeled their specific actions or skills within each competency. Each essential data segment was named concisely to help develop abstract meanings and processes from leader interviews. In this phase we used memoing to track our initial thoughts on how codes could fit together and how they helped answer our research questions.

In the second coding phase, we looked for the most used initial codes and opportunities to subsume initial codes into broader categories based on competencies and emergent ideas. We used this method to sort, organize, and synthesize initial coding to reassemble the codes into categories based on the initial sensitizing concepts from the CASEL Framework. Because data analysis is an iterative process, we constantly compared emerging categories to our initial codes to see if the categories had a relation to the larger CASEL competency.

Findings

Through our study and analysis of data, we created six categories connected to how principals interpret the CASEL competencies for themselves. Because we focused on the overall CASEL competencies, these five competencies acted as the categories from which other subthemes or definitions emerged. In addition, one other category emerged about how leaders develop these skills and use them with their staff.

Category 1: Self-awareness

In contrast to the skills CASEL defines for self-awareness, including identifying one's cultural strengths, identifying one's emotions, and demonstrating honesty, two different sub-categories emerged from our data about what self-awareness means to school leaders interviewed, including self-awareness as identity, and self-awareness as strengths and growth opportunities.

Identity

One primary way school leaders defined what self-awareness meant for leading their schools was to focus on their identity as a leader. In regards to leadership, one school leader referenced the notion of identity by stating, "I think on one level, it (self-awareness) goes to identity and building positive identity, and being self-aware of who you are, and being proud of it not accepting kind of a subordinate role of your awareness."

Notably, others discussed the role of identity as a part of self-awareness but for students and teachers. For example, in talking about her students, one leader said, "What do they know about themselves? And what has been their experience that might have colored how they are approaching learning now. So we do a lot of identity work, and what they find joy in school." In discussing the self-awareness of her staff, another leader suggested, "I think we are trying to do a lot of work for self-awareness with people understanding their own identities first before they can do this work with students."

The role of identity as self-awareness also emerged as the work style of leaders. For instance, one leader suggested awareness is "like work style awareness," while another alluded to the emotional content of their work style by suggesting about self-awareness "... it really puts the onus on me to take care of myself, and be mindful of the, you know, emotional baggage let's say that I can bring into a space when trying to lead, for example."

This leader went on to say about work style as part of her identity, "What it means for me is to also, and this is very difficult, but it's to prioritize without feeling

guilty, the needs that I have." Another leader pointed out for work style that, "So I think that consistency is probably the component for me that self-awareness is the more important through-line."

Strengths and Growth Opportunities

A second way that school leaders defined what self-awareness meant for them in leading their schools centered on how leaders can understand their strengths and opportunities for growth. For instance, one leader stated,

> I think that's line one is really aware of, you know, where you bring value in terms of all the things that need to happen for a school to operate smoothly. And then recognizing your limitations as well, just like where you can best leverage your strengths.

Another school leader said about strengths,

> I think that self-awareness is recognizing, I think your strengths as well as your stretches as a leader and sort of like where you also need to enlist other people and sort of like mobilize a team around you that might have complementary strengths and complementary challenges and stretches.

Other leaders pointed out the role of self-awareness in growing as a leader. For instance, one leader mentioned, "… knowing when you are like in balance and knowing when you're out of balance, and what sort of helps you maintain and balance and what helps what will knock you out of your compass." Another pointed out that the focus on self-actualization in their school is a part of everybody, including all adults, including leaders. She said of self-awareness,

> Like, that's a subtle nuance that I can't just sprinkle on somebody when they walk in the door. I mean, really, and maybe the truth is, that actualization is a deep and long process inside any one of us. And that I should expect that anyone that comes in knew it will be that deep and long process for them.

For some leaders, the ability to become more self-aware and grow as a leader required a sense of vulnerability and learning from failure. 'I also think that self-awareness can occur, and in sort of, develop and take place, when people have the courage to be vulnerable, to make themselves you know vulnerable." Another stated, "I also think too, I am afraid to ask for help. As well as fall, I think it's okay to fall. In fact, I encourage failure…"

Category 2: Self-management

Per CASEL, self-management defines as "the abilities to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and to achieve goals and aspirations" (CASEL, n.d.).

The often-overwhelming environment in which school leaders function challenges their present self-management skills and, perhaps more importantly, their opportunity to grow and develop these skills. In particular, leaders' reflections on self-management centered on three sub-topics, including emotions, self-care and structures.

Emotions

Awareness of your own and others' emotions is essential to productive self-management. Leaders' comments during our interviews referred to this in various dimensions, most notably concerning impulse control, their ability to manage their feelings and adjust their responses to those feelings.

Leaders often face a stark reality when the call to impulse control arises. For instance, one leader articulated, "You know, in its most extreme form, (self-) management knows when you need to walk away when you need to step out."

Impulse control is especially essential during times of extreme stress, as exemplified by leaders' experience during the pandemic. One leader recognized the importance of authentically demonstrating impulse control while still being able to acknowledge others who may or may not be able to demonstrate impulse control:

> Even if you are really stressed, or even if you are overwhelmed, you have to be able to sort of check that and be able to show up in spaces in ways that people need you to sort of project a sense of, like, calmness and strength, and not just projecting it and sense of like, faking it, but in the sense of being able to hold that perspective of "yes, this is really stressful. And, there are other perspectives here that, ultimately, we can navigate this ambiguity, or whatever it is.

Not surprisingly, leaders also referenced managing feelings alongside comments relating to impulse control. While discussing self-management, one leader shared an insight about making their feelings management process visible to staff and students:

> Right, like giving them (staff) ideas of when I'm feeling this, when I'm aware of this feeling, I manage it in this way. "Do you think that

> something that would work for you right now?"; so just kind of externalizing that process in interactions with kids, this notion of how you live it.

And, as an overall umbrella concept for emotions in the context of self-management, leaders see the need for the skill, sometimes substituting the notion of moderation for self-management while also calling back to the self-awareness competency, as was the case in this leader's comment: "I guess that's the that's listening to the the self-awareness again, so it's, it's moderating my response. making efforts to keep balance."

Self-Care

Self-care appeared as a second key theme within the self-management competency. Leaders' reflections on this theme ranged from referencing practices or routines to wondering what self-care could or should look like. In one leader's case, home life met part of the leader's self-care needs: "I think for me, it goes back to the structures that I had in place with my wife and my own family, that set me up, for the most part, for the best possible success during the pandemic."

In another illuminating statement on self-management, one leader shared how valuable a very specific intervention has been to surviving, if not thriving, in a school leadership role: "I had been seeing (a therapist) on a on a weekly basis for my own personal counseling because there was some big things that came up in my family a few years ago."

Another leader reflected what may be one of the biggest obstacles to more leaders engaging in self-care by asking, "You know, what, how do I take care of myself?" This type of wondering speaks to the ongoing need to provide leaders with concrete, actionable and impactful answers to this very question.

Structures

Leaders also cited the value and utility of creating structures and means of response to emergent issues that reflect the intention to self-manage. For example, one leader observed that shared norms are one way to use structures to a community's self-management advantage:

> I am of the belief that if you can have a group of shared norms when you're trying to brainstorm, problem-solve, make decisions, create protocols, improve protocols, etc., that you will be more productive and effective.

Here, the implication is that shared norms provide a uniform structure to support a group in understanding what behaviors are and are not desirable when working in particular ways or on particular topics.

However, self-management structures can also introduce inequitable conditions, as that is to be considered necessary to be self-managed can vary across difference. For example, a leader observed that by asking for increased self-management in the community, one might also end up asking "people to limit the authenticity of how they might communicate".

Category 3: Social-awareness

Relative to the competency of *Social Awareness*, which CASEL defines as "The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts," three sub-categories emerged about what this competency meant to school leaders, including empathy, the role of collaboration, and understanding contexts.

Empathy

The awareness of staff needs and emotions was highly evident in discussing social awareness, and one skill that many leaders alluded to was the use of empathy. For instance, one school leader stated,

> I think one of the models that I've used to try and get a sense of, to start with that empathy check of just checking in with folks to say, you know, what's up, how's it going? Before I dive in with my own agenda, and I think what that tends to do is give people permission to not have to get right down to business.

Another school leader further defined the role of empathy as being aware of the needs of others,

> It's having a sense of the needs of my team and our students and faculty and staff, when I'm entering a space with them… You know what other folks are feeling, you know what is on their plate, what sort of climate and environment they're walking into when they come to work each day.

Another leader discussed the role of matching energy with her staff, both high and low, as a form of empathy.

> It's being able to modulate your emotion and response to another person's emotion to sort of communicate empathy and communicate excitement,

> like shared excitement, I think is really important as a school leader, because it makes them feel like you really care about them.

This same school leader went on to suggest that "I feel like a big part of my job with staff is being able to tend to the constantly oscillating and vacillating, like emotions, motivations, like energy on the team." This same leader also suggested that empathy as a school leader is "really being able to read people's motivations and what they are needing and what they're craving, and then being able to respond to that."

Collaboration and Community

A second sub-category for understanding how school leaders define and understand social awareness centered around the role of social awareness in the school's collective efforts. One school leader pointed out that "…the fact we work collaboratively on all things creates a need and infrastructure for social-emotional learning… being aware of one another."

Another school leader pointed to the need for social awareness in a community setting like a school.

> This is really key one that they are recognizing how others face and center school in their mindset and identity. And I think this one though is really understanding the community that they're serving. We talked a lot about that, as well as, you know how we are making connections with families, particularly right now.

Last, helping staff members become more collaborative and community-oriented through better social awareness also emerged for some leaders as important to understand. One leader stated,

> But I'm really investing in that in order for us to have quality communication, be self-aware of our own actions and how they socially impact others… So you go to that self-awareness and social awareness, that's the conversation. Not okay, how did that impact us? Like we are doing the same kind of SEL coaching when someone is not and name it … but let's actually talk about the why and where you're at and what you need to get there.

Awareness of Context

A third sub-category that emerged from the data about the meaning of social awareness was the skill of school leaders in understanding the different contexts in which they worked and the implications of those varied contexts. One leader

suggested that "social awareness as being a bigger context than just the interpersonal face-to-face relationships. "

Another school leader pointed out that

> … to deepen in my work just with our staff and the recognition that we are often each others' villages here, we have the opportunity to be each others' village. And that you know doing so was only going to improve our quality of life and set the stage for students.

Other school leaders discussed the role of their whiteness and understanding the context of race in their schools. In trying to understand differences as a part of being socially aware, one school leader discussed,

> So this is my experience in my whiteness, and in my working with other white people in our community is quite diverse. And what I am consistently learning from some of my colleagues who don't identify as white is that in their home communities, that idea of expressing yourself loudly in a way that is bantering way, in a way that includes laughter and joking, or just like the raw truth that's put out there on the table might be more of the norm than like the professional white.

Last, another school leader suggested the larger community, national and world context in which schools must now function.

> I think that no one, no one has ever existed in a vacuum, you know, like historical and cultural context, and social context as always a huge part of the pressure cooker that we live in. And so if you don't acknowledge that, especially as a leader of human beings, you know you're really, you're missing the boat.

Category 4: Relationship Skills

Effective leadership demands strong relationship skills, which CASEL defines as "The abilities to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups."

In our interviews, trust, deep listening, and threat removal emerged as high-frequency sub-categories in leaders' thoughts.

Trust

School leaders seeking to gain the trust of their entire community, especially across difference, are likely to face one of their greatest challenges. Even if a leader says and does all the right things, traditionally marginalized groups may not be willing to extend trust to leadership. Keeping that oft-overlooked context in

mind, the interviewed leaders shared various instructive experiences regarding trust-building obstacles.

One leader, in particular, spoke to both the successes and failures,

> I would say overall, we do have a good amount of trust because, you know, we've established ourselves as leaders who are open to being called out and open to being part of difficult conversations and discussions. But I would be, you know, not truthful to say that there haven't been some folks, you know, versus others (with whom) we have had a difficult time establishing trusting relationships.

Another leader alluded to the importance of and implicit challenges in needing to build trust with new teachers regularly, noting, "I think it's also then having the trust with new teachers in particular, which we have at our school quite often, to be able to dive into those types of conversations ..."

The hope of establishing trust is largely based on relationship skills predicated on the leader's self-and social-awareness skills. Here, a school leader reflects the interrelationships of the CASEL competencies as core to what it means to be able to build meaningful relationships:

> I think it's about knowing how to show up in spaces, and read the room and sort of read the participants and being able to then be inclusive of different voices; including ones that might be like less vocal or active, or anticipate reservations or anticipate fears or anxieties, and be able to sort of like speak to those things in a way to make it less anxious.

Deep Listening

Leaders sit at the nexus of nearly every stakeholder in a local school community, ranging from student to superintendent. A leader's capacity to listen deeply, to truly value and seek to understand another's experience and perspective is core to building strong relationships. As such, leaders spoke to this skill repeatedly. For example, one leader shared

> I think there's a big piece (of developing relationship skills) that's around listening deeply, having a lot of empathy, and even if you disagree, being able to articulate a rationale for things and being able to demonstrate that you put in an incredible amount of thoughtfulness and intentionality into your work.

Another leader spoke plainly about the importance of demonstrating authentic care for just listening to another person as part of the relationship-building process. Here, the leader expresses this sentiment, "Are you genuinely listening to how this person is doing? And it's not just, it's not just to like, do the thing and check a box."

Leaders who can demonstrate that they are not seeking to build transactional relationships based upon inauthentic interactions are likely to possess and continue to develop increasingly sophisticated relationship skills.

Threat Removal

Building better relationships, especially across power dynamics which is nearly always the case for school leaders, can often require the capacity to remove or reduce real and perceived threats. Necessary to building trust and requiring deep listening, threat removal also calls upon a leader's empathy skills to help manage relationships. For example, one school leader related a scenario common to any school leader: playing the role of diplomat between parties at odds with each other:

> I'll often act as a filtration system. So it might be a parent that's like, "Hey, you know, the right hand in that class, she said something to my daughter, and my daughter came home, and she told me what she said, and I don't think it's appropriate." And I (as the leader), you know, work with that person to be like, "Oh, my gosh, absolutely, I'm going to get to the bottom of this. Because if that's the kind of thing that you know, she would say to your child, I want to make sure that that kind of thing doesn't happen again, right, so that her needs are met.
>
> So I have removed the threat for her (the student), right?

Category 5: Responsible Decision Making

CASEL defines *Responsible Decision Making* as "The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations" (CASEL, n.d.) School leaders often see the skill of decision making as a primary function for their roles, and in the context of SEL, two sub-categories emerged from our data, including considering the people side of decisions and focusing on goals and resources.

The People Side of Decisions

When asked to define responsible decision-making, many school leaders acknowledged considering the needs of the numerous stakeholders involved in a school. For example, when asked to define responsible decision making as a social-emotional skill, one school leader defined it as

> The listening to the concerns and needs of people in the community, and making decisions, or like using that to inform the decisions or plans that are made so you know, in many ways we call that like seeking a diversity of perspective…

Another leader suggested a similar process that allowed an equal sharing of power.

> And I think for me, it's taking time to make sure that before decisions are made, to decide and to figure out, are there any that can be done collaboratively? Are there any decisions that can be done through the use of, you know, feedback obtained from others, for example? So I think, you know, I would say that it's a combination too of bringing things to a full group, to as many stakeholders as possible, so that folks aren't surprised or blindsided by it by something that happens.

While another school leader highly emphasized the role of students in the decision-making process while supporting staff

> I think it's always starting from a place of like, you know, what's, what's ultimately best for sort of the whole students and for all the different demographics, graphics of students that we serve. And it's not about sort of adult convenience, but it's also about like, you know, taking care of your staff so that they feel like if they feel cared for and nourished, they're more likely to show up in a way that can be caring, and nourishing of students.

Goals & Resources

Other school leaders defined responsible decision-making through more conventional means, like making decisions based on goals and effective use of resources. For example, a school leader defined responsible decision making as "…weighing cons, pros and cons and making the decision that meets your needs and best reflects your overall goals."

While another stated responsible decision making

> … it's also about like, just thought, you know, thoughtful strategic resource allocation. And that resource includes not just like financial resources but time, and sort of people's energy and bandwidth and being really responsible and how you manage that because I think that educators

> burnout from, you know, being overwhelmed because there is always so much need.

Category 6: How SEL is Built with Teachers

During our interviews, leaders also referenced a wide range of structures and tools to support the development of staff SEL skills. Again, sub-categories emerged, including modeling behaviors, establishing routines and schedules and providing teachers with several concrete tools and protocols.

Modeling

Leaders highlighted the value of demonstrating what impactful use of SEL skills should look like. Of particular note, one leader observed that such modeling is necessary because it is not safe to assume that all schools or school leaders are supporting the development of teacher SEL skills: "We're modeling this kind of supportive, collaborative skill sets that sometimes people have not experienced in previous work settings."

A different kind of modeling involves using, essentially, case studies. For example, one leader described the use of what the leader referred to as "cautionary tales":

> We do a training in our retreat that uses what we call cautionary tales. One of the cautionary tales is about the 24-hour rule, that rather than letting something simmer and fester, (it is important to) go and approach a person (with whom you are in conflict) within 24 hours.

Routines

Over and over, leaders identified establishing routines for developing teachers' SEL skills as core to how leaders address this challenge. Some leaders also spoke to the value of sharing the experience of adult SEL skill development with their staff, often concerning the self-awareness competency, in particular:

> I think going through a process together where folks are able to examine their own unconscious bias, and really go through a process to understand their own identity and the things that they bring to the profession is hugely important.

Leaders repeatedly cited intentionally creating time and space for this work to occur, as well. For example, the same leader who spoke above about the value of shared experiences continued to share that, "I do believe that for (shared SEL development experiences) to happen, schools need to prioritize just creating space

for that to happen, for people to get to become familiar with themselves and what they bring."

Other leaders noted when and where they allocate time to adult SEL development:

We have time to do that during our full group meetings, but it's more effective, I think, when it's personal when it's one on one when the trust can be established in a space like a one-on-one meeting to talk about (SEL development).

Weekly check-ins, consistent engagement with staff SEL development in staff meetings, for example, also appeared frequently in leaders' comments. One school connected consistency to the self-management competency: "So the more you're able as a school leader to simplify and routinize dedicated time and space and mental energy. . . I think that helps a lot with self-management."

Another leader shared that providing daily opportunities for staff to engage in developing their SEL skills can be highly beneficial:

> Also, you know, giving teachers permission within the school day, as part of their curriculum to spend time on and to carve time out to utilize (SEL skills) on a daily basis, as part of classroom, community building and relationship building.

Concrete Protocols and Tools

Leaders explained that direct instruction on and identifying a wide range of very specific practices is necessary to develop staff SEL skills. According to the leaders we interviewed, assuming staff will have a robust toolbox for their personal SEL development is unwise.

One leader mentioned the importance of consistently asking the same questions following key events in the school community, whether those events explicitly had to do with developing SEL skills or not. This leader stated that

> (Debriefing is) so important because part of the debrief is where you say things like whose voices do we hear more of? Whose voices do we hear less of, you know, what could we have done differently to be more inclusive of different voices in this conversation?

Restorative practices often came up for leaders as examples of specific protocols that involve SEL skills and that require adult restorative circle leaders to have at least some degree of SEL skills proficiency.

One leader also named the importance of providing structure to conversations between adults via a range of protocols. The following excerpt illustrates the complexity implicit in many conversations and implies how that complexity might be missed without structures to bring it forward in the name of developing adult SEL.

> Conversation structures allow us to slow down and to be metacognitive about things, and to hear our words repeated back to us. We use the crucial conversations framework quite a bit. I just facilitated a very difficult conversation last week between two people who were both very fired up about their opinions and feel really strongly that they're right. Having to use a framework where one of the tenets is to talk tentatively, you know that's just not something I think (we're used to) in a society where we're used to being more polemical or more polarized. Having explicit norms and conversation structures that facilitate people understanding that there are your facts, but the story you're telling from your facts may not be the only story, so I encourage that kind of self-awareness. I also constructivist listening dyads, using equity prompts where you're having to explore identity and where you're having to do the work of connecting your identity with your purpose as an educator and then how you show up in spaces. All of those things, I think, ultimately promote self-awareness.

Other SEL development protocols surfaced during leader interviews building on the specificity illustrated above:

> I think that the more that you have structures, like a fishbone analysis and root cause analysis, and the more tools that you give people to help them understand that just jumping to a solution or that whoever the loudest voice is that says something is not a way to go, but that there are different cool tools that you can use to bring together the best thinking of the group. Things like dilemma consultancies to show that there are oftentimes a multitude of perspectives, and that you need to go through a thoughtful process with those things before you get to a solution.

Discussion

The overall research question that framed this study was:

How do school leaders in schools well known for a deliberate focus on SEL: 1) make sense of and define SEL skills, 2) apply these skills to themselves, and 3) use them in their work with staff?

Using the larger domains from the CASEL framework of SEL competencies, we discovered different meanings and skills that school leaders constructed about SEL in their school leadership (see Table 1). Our findings suggest that relative to the first and third parts of the research question, the school leaders interviewed translated most of these competencies into how to relate to and support others, which is encouraging. However, relative to the second question, we saw very little deliberate emphasis on the continual growth of SEL skills for school leaders themselves. Without understanding how their self-awareness or self-management can and does influence the SEL of teachers, school leaders may be minimizing their influence on their own well-being, teacher efficacy, and other important affective states experienced by teachers.

Insert Table 1 Here

Although some emerging work is looking at the emotional leadership of school leaders (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015; Berkovich & Eyal, 2021), our findings suggest eight specific challenges that make it difficult for leaders to integrate the vision of SEL into leading the emotional path in schools today.

Diffuse and generalized definitions of SEL comprise the first challenge to leadership practice that more completely integrates the CASEL competencies. School leaders discussed their definitions within their specific, local and personal understanding of SEL, reflecting the specific needs or issues facing them insofar as their SEL competency allowed. That is, the leader's SEL understanding either propelled them towards maximizing or minimizing their ability to see and name the needs of their school community in terms of the leader's own SEL capacity. Because some of the local definitions given by leaders were broad in their intent, leaders may often miss critical SEL skills that could be considered foundational to modern leadership practice.

Ongoing reference to the needs of the local context for SEL raises a second major challenge that arises from generalized understandings of SEL. While the CASEL framework alludes to contexts in the self-awareness definition, they do not list skills for understanding different contexts which is critical for leaders who need to

lead across varying contexts in their schools. We can define understanding contexts as the skill of understanding the social and emotional needs of all stakeholders including students, staff, parents, community and the district or organization in which the principal leads. Possibly because the CASEL framework is focused primarily on students, the need to understand contexts is not as important, but this omission in their framework may be a gap that leaders have to discover and learn on their own. Many of the school leaders we talked to said that being constantly aware of different contexts of people, students, staff, and parents plus school or district dynamics and issues of race and diversity mattered tremendously in how they understood social awareness versus as part of their self-awareness. This gap may point to a major difference between how CASEL defines SEL and what SEL means in school leadership practice.

The third challenge we note made plain that leaders tend to focus primarily on others' development and not their own. Many of the leaders in our study constantly referred to their staff or their students as they discussed the meaning of SEL skills. As they considered definitions of CASEL competencies in their contexts, these leaders often mentioned or defined their skills from the perspective of how they impact others but rarely about how they impact themselves. This lack of self-reflection was especially noticeable in the lack of discussion around the role of leader emotions in the self-awareness competency. While some leaders alluded to the challenge of leading others during the pandemic, none discussed the role of their emotions or emotional challenges when trying to support others in these times.

A fourth and similar challenge is that many principals only considered social-emotional learning to be for students but did not consider the work they do with teachers or anything about themselves to fit into this view. Notably, this approach isolates self-awareness and self-management --arguably the first two CASEL competencies leaders should develop in themselves -- as the least aligned- to-the-CASEL-definitions areas of their practice. The implication of this challenge suggests school leaders, and the support provided to them, needs to center on helping leaders understand how their self-awareness and self-management may impact others.

Fifth, many leaders discussed their identity as leaders under self-awareness but did not consider SEL skills or the need for further development of those skills as a part of that leadership identity. Without considering their own SEL needs, school leaders may underestimate or fail to recognize their impact in this area. Leaders understood the necessity of strong relationships and the need to support their staff and students, especially during the ongoing Covid-19 crisis. However, many of

the leaders we interviewed again did not see developing their SEL skills as a primary focus for their work with teachers. Even though most of these leaders understood their roles in being more socially aware of their staff, students and community, few articulated awareness of how aspects of SEL in their leadership identity could play a role in developing deeper relationships for support. In essence, the focus on others was highly evident, but most leaders were challenged to understand how their own social and emotional skills could or should be developed further to enhance their identities as emotional leaders.

Sixth, the insistence on focusing primarily on the needs of students and teachers leads to an associated challenge: the overall lack of emphasis placed on the development of school leaders' SEL by those who can support school leaders. The need for some ongoing support for leaders was evident in leader discussions. One leader who supports SEL in schools said of leaders, "I think people are hungry for this right now to talk about this to have that relationship building because they do feel so disconnected."

Another acknowledged, however, that

> ...one of the biggest drawbacks is like how leaders are developed right now, it's all a bunch of technical stuff. It's not like let me train you about adaptive problem solving or how to get in touch with your own inner compass."

And another pointed to

> ... there's no real institutional structure or support for leaders to kind of develop that. So you know, when you are on your own, I think, for the most part, you know, this is work that is pretty personal and private that you kind of have to do and not rely on work to provide it for you.

Without SEL support structures in place within districts or organizations, school leaders may not feel warranted in expressing their needs or taking care of themselves.

Seventh, the extensive focus on empathy raises another challenge. Empathy as part of social awareness was described by many of the leaders in this study as a major skill employed, especially during the pandemic. This skill and category of social awareness were the most aligned to the CASEL definition. The subcategory of empathy began to hint at the role of emotional leadership in schools (Berkovich & Eyal, 2021) as a leadership tool. If emotions are the "main lens through which people interpret and measure the significance of ambient events" (Berkovich & Eyal, 2021), then empathy is one such way to exercise that form of leadership.

Beyond empathy, however, there are other skills leaders need to help direct or manage teacher emotions and other important affective states such as helping teachers emotionally regulate after a conflict or recover from the emotional labor endemic to teaching. These more nuanced skills fall into the category of relationship skills which seemed only partially aligned to the CASEL definition. We know that emotive school leadership can help improve teacher affect (Leithwood & Beatty, 2008; Berkovich & Eyal, 2021), but our findings did not surface in-depth skills or how they can specifically influence the affective states of teachers, which is based in relationship skills. Without more in-depth and nuanced skills that extend beyond empathy, leaders may lack the awareness necessary to influence other important affective states of teachers.

The eighth and final challenge to a leadership practice that more fully integrates SEL skills for the emotional path is the challenge of implicit versus explicit use of concrete tools and strategies and the long-term impact of their use with teachers. Although these tangible strategies like the use of discussion protocols or check in protocols may influence the SEL development of teachers, we were left wondering whether and how these routines over time do or do not enhance SEL skills. Do teachers see them as activities they do in staff meetings, or do they see them as ways to develop their SEL skills? And are there more intentional routines, tools and protocols that could be used with SEL in mind? Many leaders mentioned tools, but did not discuss how they helped with adult SEL development but as ways to have more productive conversations or solve school problems. Seemingly, these tools seem to be a technical solution for SEL versus the adaptive work (Heifitz,1998) that needs to be done to deepen awareness of SEL and ways of growth. Concrete tools and strategies that aren't explicitly named around developing adult SEL skills may go unnoticed by educators and may be at risk of being ignored as a long-term tool for personal SEL development.

Conclusion

Previously, discussed were four major disconnects between school leaders' belief in the vision of social-emotional learning and their plans for implementation. From our interview data, while limited in scope, we can substantiate these disconnects. For example, first, we see that these leaders did not discuss the role of emotions in their leadership practice or their importance. Second, we also see that leaders defined SEL skills in different ways than the CASEL definitions, but did demonstrate the awareness of the need for other SEL skills. Third, and most concerning was leaders' lack of focus on the role of SEL in their self-care putting almost all emphasis on the needs of others. And fourth, the knowing-doing gap was substantiated in that most leaders gave coherent and meaningful definitions

of each competency and its importance for their teachers, but ways to support individual and self SEL development were not as clear.

Why can these SEL skills and competencies be so hard for school leaders to develop?

First, few school leadership programs require a focus on growing your own social-emotional skills or the actual skills needed to become more socially aware and build better relationship skills with staff or community members. This lack of focus on developing one's own social-emotional skills may be because of tradition, pedagogy based on information versus transformation, or possibly a focus on preparing leaders for accountability demands inherent in the current system.

Second, even when such courses are required, they typically focus on informational knowledge without transformative learning designs (Drago-Severson, 2016). This over-reliance on informational learning may be one cause of the knowing-doing gap for school leaders or the difference between having information about an idea versus actually using it in your practice.

Third, once school leaders begin to lead and manage their schools, the demand for developing a more nuanced set of social-emotional skills may be lacking because of an academics only culture that perpetuates the false notion that SEL skills are separate and non-contributory to student outcomes. Correspondingly, many school leaders may not want to focus on developing their SEL skills or leading the emotional path.

Fourth, school leaders may also not want to develop their SEL skills because of their inherent vulnerability. Brown (2018) discusses the role of vulnerability in leadership, defining it as "uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure". Vulnerability may trigger considerable and understandable discomfort in educational leaders who have been socialized to minimize such discomfort and avoid conflict. Leaders have internalized social biases that being vulnerable, asking for help, or letting people know what they are working on emotionally limits their effectiveness. This lack of vulnerability may be another type of the knowing-doing gap for school leaders.

However, in contrast to the image many leaders want to create and hold onto, many teachers are looking for leaders who ask for input, develop collegial relationships, and support and recognize them. The contrast between what

leadership traditionally values and what teachers explicitly need is stark, requiring different forms of learning and development of school leaders.

Adults, including school leaders, show many challenges when continuing to develop as humans. Keegan and Lahey (2010, 2016) write about how the complexity of our world is increasing exponentially, requiring leaders to continue working on their internal capacities to support others within the increasing demands of our society. Adult development and leadership development deepen not just through more informational learning but through transformational learning that changes how we make sense of our experiences (Drago-Severson, 2016; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2020).

Transformational learning changes the structure of a person's meaning-making system or how school leaders can broaden their perspectives. This transformational form of learning, if done well, however, asks school leaders to focus more on the self-competencies, becoming more self-aware and self-managed as they strive to enhance the SEL of their staff and students. From our findings, it is evident that this set of school leaders in these schools known for SEL care deeply about the SEL of educators and students in their care. However, we conclude that more transformational SEL skill development for leaders is imperative for any hope of transformational SEL taking root in our school system.

The significance of this study lies in its desire to expand the field's understanding of how leaders focused on social and emotional learning in their schools make sense of and practice their craft or how they develop and practice emotional leadership (Berkovich & Eyal, 2021). Although contextually bound and limited by the size of our sample, our initial findings point to the need for more research in this area and a larger focus on initial training in emotional leadership plus ongoing school leader SEL development to help influence the emotional path.

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Table 1

Comparison of CASEL and School Leader Meanings of SEL Competencies

CASEL Competency/ Categories	CASEL Definition	Meanings Leaders Gave to the Competency/Category
Self-awareness	The abilities to understand one's own emotions, thoughts and values and how they influence behavior across contexts. This includes capacities to recognize one's strengths and limitations with a well-grounded sense of confidence and purpose	Understanding identity Recognizing strengths and growth opportunities
Self-management	The abilities to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and to achieve goals and aspirations. This includes the capacities to delay gratification, manage stress and feel motivation and agency to accomplish personal and collective goals	Recognizing emotions Performing self-care Creating structures
Social-awareness	The abilities to understand the perspectives of an empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts. This includes the capacities to feel compassion for others, understand broader historical and social norms for behavior in different settings, and recognize supports	Demonstrating empathy Developing collaboration and Being aware of context
Relationship Skills	The abilities to establish and and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups. This includes the capacities to communicate clearly, listen actively cooperate, work collaboratively to problem solve and negotiate conflict constructively, navigate settings with differing social and cultural demands and opportunities, provide leadership, and seek or offer help when needed	Developing trust Using deep listening Removing threats

Responsible decision making	The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations. This includes the capacities to consider ethical standards and safety	Considering the people-side Comparing to goals and resources