

**Social Emotional Learning and Preservice Teachers:
Assessing Capacity to Provide SEL Instruction**

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Abstract: A critical element in achieving desired SEL outcomes in schools is the professional capacity of the implementer, in most cases, the classroom teacher. Teacher capacities related to SEL knowledge varies widely, and thus, their perceptions toward SEL implementation often does as well. As the SEL movement in education continues to gain momentum, it is critical to understand the capacity of preservice teachers surrounding their future implementation of SEL initiatives. This mixed methods study examined preservice teachers' professional capacity surrounding SEL, specifically their perceived knowledge, need, and benefit of SEL, perceived confidence in providing SEL instruction, and perceptions of their own SEL competence. PreK-12 senior level teacher education majors at a Midwestern university completed a Qualtrics-based survey consisting of demographic questions, along with Likert scales and open-ended responses. Thematic analysis, along with descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze data. Quantitative results indicated that elementary teacher education majors had higher overall scores for all scales including benefits, confidence, and competence of SEL than their secondary teacher education major counterparts; however, there were no significant differences between groups. While scales were generally high, the lowest scale was confidence in their ability to provide SEL instruction. Qualitative analysis revealed that most preservice teachers can broadly define SEL, but lack a comprehensive understanding of the SEL competencies, along with limited awareness of and experience with the Illinois SEL Standards. Results of this study are meant to inform teacher preparation programs by providing insight as to how to best support and prepare preservice teachers for the implementation of SEL-related initiatives.

Social emotional learning (SEL) is defined as the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2012). Five interrelated competencies have been

identified that provide a foundation for better emotional well-being, positive peer relationships, fewer discipline problems, and improved academic performance (CASEL, 2012). These competencies include (1) self-awareness, (2) self-management, (3) social awareness, (4) relationship skills, and (5) responsible decision-making (Bridgeland et al., 2013). In 2004, Illinois became the first state to establish stand-alone K-12 SEL standards (Dusenbury et al., 2014). The development of these standards helped propel the SEL movement within the broader standards-based education within the United States. As such, every Illinois public school is required to develop and adopt a policy to teach and assess SEL within their curriculum (Philippe, 2017).

Importance of SEL in the Classroom

In recent years, SEL and SEL programming have received increased attention in the field of education as academic achievement declines and social, emotional, and behavioral problems are on the rise (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). These issues have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Data indicate that post-pandemic mental health emergency room visits for both elementary and secondary-aged children have increased dramatically, 24% and 31% respectively (Ghandi & Noble, 2021), while one in four teens report feeling depressed and a loss of confidence (America's Promise, 2020). As teachers, administrators, parents, and policy makers seek solutions to these problems, an emphasis on empirically supported interventions and SEL school-based programming has occurred. In their book, *The Missing Piece: A national teacher survey on how social and emotional learning can empower children and transform schools*, Bridgeland et al. (2013) indicate that SEL programming is based on the idea that the best learning occurs in the presence of supportive relationships and that SEL skills are critical to academic success, citizenship, and prevention of risky behaviors. The authors describe how learning is accomplished through effective classroom instruction, student engagement in and out of the classroom, and parent/community involvement. They also discuss how linkages exist among SEL programming, positive student outcomes, school performance, and overall student emotional well-being. Thus, attention to promoting students' SEL has become a central aim within schools across the country (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015).

Successful and Sustainable SEL Implementation

A meta-analysis of SEL efficacy studies was conducted by Durlak et al. (2011). Among several key findings, Durlak and colleagues noted that SEL program effectiveness and achievement of desired SEL outcomes is largely dependent upon successful SEL implementation, which is largely dependent on the implementer. In school-based SEL initiatives, the classroom teacher is often tasked with implementing SEL instruction. However, knowledge and comprehensive understanding of SEL varies greatly from teacher to teacher. Lack of SEL familiarity can impact teachers' attitudes and perceptions towards SEL and, in turn, their overall capacity to successfully implement SEL instruction (Humphrey, 2013; Phillippe, 2017).

Although substantial progress has been made surrounding SEL school-based initiatives, understanding factors that facilitate or impede successful implementation is needed. Teacher capacity surrounding SEL, particularly teacher knowledge of SEL, perception of the need and benefit of SEL, and confidence in SEL delivery are factors to understand more deeply. A national study of more than 600 PreK-12 teachers examined the value that teachers place on the need and benefit of SEL. Of those surveyed, 95% believe that SEL skills are teachable, 97% believe teaching SEL skills benefits students regardless of their backgrounds, and 77% believe that teaching SEL skills improves student academic performance (Bridgeland et al., 2013).

Teachers' confidence towards integrating SEL into their teaching is an additional influencing factor in the success of SEL programming in schools. The level at which teachers commit to infusing SEL into their classrooms is dependent upon their beliefs about how the SEL program aligns with their own teaching approach, their level of comfort with the SEL curriculum, their belief about classroom management strategies, and their commitment to developing their students SEL skills (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). In a 2012 study conducted by Reyes et al. (2012), the effect of social emotional learning programs was evaluated. Among key findings, teachers that were classified as "low-quality implementers" reported lower teaching efficacy in motivating students than their "high-quality implementer" counterparts. This study indicated that in addition to teacher SEL training, SEL interventions should consider a teachers' self-efficacy when assessing students' SEL outcomes.

Although most teachers express the need and value for SEL in schools, many also express having limited training and consequently, limited confidence in responding to and supporting students' SEL needs and development (Reinke et al., 2011; Walter et al., 2006). It is not uncommon for early career teachers to often feel unprepared to handle issues surrounding classroom management, student discipline, and mental health issues (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). However, in a study conducted by Koller et al. (2004), both experienced and first year teachers reported that they did not receive adequate training in their preservice teaching programs regarding SEL related topics. On the contrary, teachers receiving training in SEL report feeling more prepared to handle these issues and better equipped to implement strategies that promote a positive classroom environment (Alvarez, 2007). This further emphasizes the idea that for SEL programming to be successful, and for teachers to be able to successfully integrate SEL into practice, they must first possess the mindset and skillset to accomplish this task (Phillipe, 2017).

Another influencing factor is a teachers' own SEL competence. Those teachers with high SEL competence are more self-aware, can use their emotions to positively motivate others, demonstrate prosocial values, feel more efficacious, and find teaching more rewarding (Aldrup et al., 2020; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Furthermore, teachers' own SEL competence affect such things as their classroom management strategies, relationships formed with students, and ability to implement SEL practices (Aldrup et al., 2020). Thus, teachers can positively impact their students' socio-emotional development by working on their own social-emotional skills (Raver et al., 2008). This was demonstrated during the Chicago Readiness Project where teachers participated in behavior management training and received coaching from mental health professionals regarding behavior management strategies. This intervention improved emotional classroom climate, increased teacher enthusiasm and responsiveness, and lowered teachers' use of emotionally negative practices (Raver et al., 2008; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). According to Schonert-Reichl (2017), it is not enough to simply teach preservice teachers SEL knowledge and skills. Teachers' own SEL competence and well-being appear to be essential in promoting SEL among their students. Despite the established relationship noted above, little to no consideration has been given to preservice teacher capacity surrounding their own SEL competence, and thus, the ability to translate SEL competence to their students (Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

As the SEL movement continues to gain momentum and prove essential for student success, the need to understand the level at which preservice teachers possess the capacity to implement future school-based SEL initiatives is critical. Few studies have comprehensively examined current practicing teacher capacity surrounding SEL, with none known to date examining preservice teacher capacity among the multiple domains identified in this study, including preservice teacher capacity regarding state level SEL standards. Furthermore, the majority of existing studies on the topic focus on elementary grade levels with limited research focusing on teacher capacity at the secondary grade levels (Bridgeland et al., 2013; Phillipe, 2017). The purpose of this study was to explore the capacity that preservice teachers possess in implementing future SEL initiatives among the following domains: (1) perception of knowledge of SEL, (2) perceived need for SEL, (3) perceived benefit of SEL, (4) perceived confidence in providing SEL instruction, and (5) perceptions regarding their own SEL. Additionally, preservice teacher capacity based on intended teaching grade level was explored.

The present study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What is preservice teachers' perception of their knowledge related to SEL and Illinois SEL?
2. What are preservice teachers' perceptions regarding the need for SEL?
 - 2a. What are the differences among preservice teachers focusing on elementary education as opposed to secondary education regarding the need for SEL?

3. What are preservice teachers' perceptions regarding the benefit of SEL?
 - 3a. What are the differences among preservice teachers focusing on elementary education as opposed to secondary education regarding the benefit of SEL?
4. What are preservice teachers' perceptions regarding their confidence in providing SEL?
 - 4a. What are the differences among preservice teachers focusing on elementary education as opposed to secondary education regarding their confidence in providing SEL?
5. What are preservice teachers' perceptions regarding their own SEL competence?
 - 5a. What are the differences among preservice teachers focusing on elementary education as opposed to secondary education regarding their own SEL competence?

Results of this study are meant to inform teacher preparation programs by providing insight as to how to best support and prepare preservice teachers for the implementation of SEL-related initiatives, while addressing the previously mentioned gaps in the literature.

Methods

Participants

This mixed methods descriptive case study examined preservice teachers' perceived knowledge, need, and benefit of SEL, perceived confidence in providing SEL instruction, and perceptions of their own SEL competence. PreK-12 ($N = 38$) senior level teacher education majors at a Midwestern university participated in a Qualtrics-based survey in the Fall 2020 consisting of demographic questions, along with Likert scales and open-ended responses. Most of the participants were female (57.9%), with 42.1% of students being middle/high school (secondary) education majors and 36.8% being PreK-5 (elementary) education majors. Some students self-identified teaching multiple age groups; therefore, their data was included in the total scores, but not in group comparisons.

Recruitment

After IRB approval was obtained, the researcher contacted all teacher education preparation program department heads via email and asked them to distribute the survey. A reminder email to all department heads was sent one week after the initial email request. Potential participants recruited for the study were provided with a hyperlink to the survey after being invited to participate through an electronic recruitment letter. Upon accessing the survey through this hyperlink, participants were first directed to a page that included an informed consent form.

Instruments

Development of the survey instrument was formed by combining two previously validated instruments, The Survey of Teacher Capacity for SEL (Philippe, 2017) and the Social Emotional Competence Teacher Rating Scale (Tom, 2012). No single instrument found addressed all research questions. The Survey of Teacher Capacity for SEL measures teachers' capacity for SEL and familiarity with the Illinois SEL Standards (Philippe, 2017). The Social Emotional Competence Teacher Rating Scale measures the social emotional competence of teachers. After combining relevant questions from both surveys, the final survey consisted of seven broad sections: informed consent, SEL capacity (knowledge related to SEL), perceptions regarding need for SEL, perceptions regarding benefit of SEL, confidence in providing SEL instruction to future students, preservice teacher's perceptions of their own SEL competence, and demographics. The survey included six demographic questions, as well 44 Likert scale questions. Using a 5-point Likert Scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree), three scales focused on perception/benefit of SEL (10 questions, attainable score of 50), Confidence/Self-Efficacy (5 questions, attainable score of 25), and Competence (20 questions, attainable score of 100). Remaining scale questions focused on familiarity with SEL and importance of incorporating SEL for future students. Two additional open-ended response questions were included pertaining to preservice teachers' knowledge of SEL and the Illinois SEL learning standards in order to triangulate data.

Analyses

Use of both quantitative and qualitative analyses were used following a concurrent triangulation approach (Creswell, 2018) that collected both forms of data at the same time. Quantitative data was analyzed using *IBM SPSS Statistics 26*. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for all questions and descriptive statistics were conducted for the scales. Analytical tests were conducted using an independent t-test comparing two groups (elementary and secondary teacher education majors) with each scale. Pearson correlations were used to compare the relationship between the scales and Chi-Square tests were conducted on the comparison of importance of SEL in the classroom by grade level of focus. Two items allowed for a qualitative, extended response; participants were asked 1) what they know about SEL, and 2) what they know about the Illinois SEL Standards. Thematic analysis using Braun's and Clarke's 6-step framework (2006) was employed to analyze qualitative data: (1) the researcher became familiar with the data, (2) initial codes were generated, (3) an initial search for themes was conducted, (4) themes were reviewed, (5) the researcher defined the themes, and (6) the researcher wrote up the results.

Results

The following section provides results from both quantitative and qualitative findings based on each of the research questions.

Research question 1: What is preservice teacher's perception of their knowledge related to SEL and the Illinois SEL Standards?

Participants rated their familiarity with the concepts of SEL and with the Illinois SEL Standards both on a 4-point scale (not at all familiar, somewhat familiar, familiar, and extremely familiar). Both quantitative questions were followed by extended response items asking participants to describe what they know about SEL and the Illinois SEL Learning Standards. Only just over one-third of participants (34.2%) were familiar/extremely familiar with the concepts of SEL, and a slightly lower number (28.9%) of participants were familiar/extremely familiar with the Illinois SEL Standards. Although participants planning to teach at the secondary level had higher familiarity of the standards (40% vs. 21.4), there were no significant differences between groups (elementary compared to secondary).

Participants were asked to briefly describe how familiar they are with SEL concepts in order to provide a deeper understanding their SEL capacity. A total of 34 participants responded, with 14 being elementary education majors, 19 being secondary education majors, and one indicating that they will teach multiple grade levels. Themes were identified and statements were categorized according to identified themes. Five primary themes emerged from the data: broad definitions of SEL, specific SEL competencies, experience implementing SEL, methods of SEL instruction, and the perceived need/benefit of SEL.

What is Preservice Teacher's Knowledge Related to National SEL Standards?

Theme one: SEL Broadly Defined. Almost one-third of respondents ($N = 11$) provided brief statements broadly defining SEL or its' purpose. Responses included such statements as SEL is "being more conscious of a student's social emotional learning state during the learning process" and "the cognitive wellbeing of the learner" along with "SEL focuses on learning new ways we can be mentally and emotionally healthy."

Theme Two: Specific SEL Competencies. More than half of respondents ($N = 15$) provided some variation of a definition of SEL according to one of CASEL's established five core competencies (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making). Many of the responses provided words and phrases, such as "inter and intra communication," "regulating emotions," "learning self-awareness, social awareness, how to have a positive relationship, and good decision-making skills," "helping students cope, identify, and work through their emotions and life situations." However, no response included a comprehensive listing of all five SEL competencies.

Theme Three: Experience Implementing SEL. Only one respondent indicated that they have had some experience implementing SEL stating, “I’ve used some SEL while writing goals for students.” However, three respondents explicitly indicated that they had no experience implementing SEL.

Theme Four: Methods of SEL Instruction. Formal and informal methods of SEL instruction were referenced by six respondents. Informal SEL techniques mentioned included such practices as “yoga, breathing, and calming exercises,” while another participant mentioned that SEL can be instructed more formally by “providing structured lessons to help students cope, identify, and work through their emotions and life situations.” One participant felt that SEL can be provided to students both formally and informally, stating “SEL can be taught through lessons and activities solely focused on SEL topics, or implemented into various lessons.”

Theme Five: Need/Benefit of SEL. Although only three participants provided statements pertaining to the need and/or benefit of SEL, those that did felt that “SEL is very important for students to develop” and that “SEL is the most important thing taught in the classroom. All students need to be informed about SEL and how it is modeled in the classroom before you can move on to content.

What is Preservice Teacher’s Knowledge Related to Illinois SEL Standards?

Participants were asked to briefly describe how familiar they are with the Illinois SEL Standards. A total of 30 participants responded, with 13 participants being elementary education majors, 16 being secondary education majors, and one indicating that they will teach multiple grade levels. Three primary themes emerged from the data: broad definitions of Illinois SEL standards, specific Illinois SEL goals, and statements pertaining to knowledge or experience with the Illinois SEL standards.

Theme One: IL SEL Standards Broadly Defined. More than one-third of respondents ($N = 11$) provided brief statements broadly defining the Illinois SEL Standards, including such responses as “there are three SEL standards laid out by the ISBE” and “they are a set of standards Illinois uses to guide teachers in incorporating SEL into their lessons”.

Theme Two: Specific Illinois SEL Goals. Fewer respondents ($N = 4$) provided statements specifically identifying at least one component of the three Illinois SEL Goals; developing self-awareness and self-management skills, using social-awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships, and demonstrating decision-making skills and responsible behaviors. Statements such as, “it has different stages starting with self-awareness”,

“maintaining positive relationships”, and “they talk about working in peers, managing your emotions, and how to talk to others respectfully” were provided.

Theme Three: Knowledge and/or Experience with Illinois SEL Standards. Over half of the respondents ($N = 16$) provided statements pertaining to their knowledge and/or experience with the Illinois SEL Standards, ranging from minimal or no familiarity/experience to some familiarity/experience. The majority ($N = 13$) of responses were categorized as minimal or no familiarity statements, including such statements as, “I didn’t know there was any”, and “I have no idea what the standards are.” Only three responses were categorized as some familiarity and included statements such as, “I created SEL lessons so I have looked at the standards”, “I have been shown them in a course or two but have never developed a lesson surrounding the Illinois SEL standards”, and “I have used the standards in my PE methods class, but not in any other education classes.” No respondents provided statements indicating that they had substantive familiarity with the Illinois SEL learning standards.

Research Question 2: What are Preservice Teachers’ Perceptions Regarding the Need for SEL?

Participants rated how important it is for them to provide SEL to their future students, how important providing SEL is at the following grade levels: preschool, early elementary, late elementary, middle school, and high school, and how important of a role the Illinois SEL Standards will play when planning future lessons. Approximately 86.9% of participants felt that SEL, in general, was important to incorporate in their future teaching, while 78.9% felt that incorporating the Illinois SEL Standards were some-what to very important.

Research Questions 2a) What are the Differences among Perceptions of Preservice Teachers Focusing on Elementary Education as Opposed to Secondary Education?

While participants collectively agreed that SEL is important for all grade levels, the highest level of consensus for SEL’s importance was with Early Elementary teacher education majors (K-2) (81.6%) and the lowest with secondary (9-12) teacher education majors (52.6%). Elementary focused (K-5) education majors (100%) were more likely to state that the Illinois SEL standards will play an important role in their planning for future lessons as opposed to 68.8% of secondary education majors. All the elementary majors agreed that SEL (in general) was important to provide to their future students, whereas only 62% of secondary majors felt this was important ($t_{(28)} = 2.32, p = 0.028$).

Research Question 3: What are Preservice Teachers’ Perceptions Regarding the Benefit of SEL?

Participants rated their level of agreement or disagreement regarding SEL and student outcomes. Preservice teachers strongly agreed that SEL had many benefits, including regulating emotions (73.7%), enhancing empathy (73.7%), and improving relationships with teachers

(65.8%) and peers (71.1%). Regarding bullying, however, only 36.8% strongly agreed that SEL could both decrease bullying and assist with students’ emotional distress. Although the benefits of SEL were valued highly among participants, 71% of preservice teachers agreed to strongly agreed they should focus more on academic skills rather than devote instructional time to SEL.

Research Question 3a. What are the Differences among Preservice Teachers Focusing on Elementary Education as Opposed to Secondary Education Regarding the Benefit of SEL?

In comparing the elementary and secondary education majors, elementary had higher perceptions of the benefits of SEL ($M=44.2$ vs. $M=42.1$, respectively), however there were no significant differences between the groups.

Research Question 4: What are Preservice Teachers’ Perceptions Regarding their Confidence in Providing SEL?

Participants rated their level of agreement with various statements surrounding their perceived confidence in their ability to provide SEL to their future students. While all scales were collectively above 70% for all respondents, the lowest scoring scale was confidence ($M = 18.68$ out of 25). The average score for each of the questions was ($M= 3.76$) and focused on their ability to provide SEL instruction ($M=3.55$), taking care of students’ needs will come naturally ($M=3.87$), knowing enough about SEL to teach to future students ($M=3.26$), and feeling they possess sufficient skills to teach SEL ($M=3.76$) (see Table 1). Preservice teachers' motivation to learn, however, was high ($M=4.24$).

Table 1

Pre-service teachers (by group) and their confidence in SEL instruction

	All Pre-Service Teachers (n/%)	Elementary Pre-service Teachers (n/%)	Secondary School Pre-Service Teachers (n/%)
I feel confident in my ability to provide SEL instruction.	5/13.2	2/14.3	3/18.7
Taking care of my future students’ social and emotional needs will come naturally to me.	8/21.1	5/35.7	1/6.3
	All Pre-Service Teachers (n/%)	Elementary Pre-service Teachers (n/%)	Secondary School Pre-Service Teachers (n/%)

I know enough about SEL to teach it to my future students.	4/10.5	2/14.3	1/6.3
I feel I possess sufficient personal SEL skills to teach SEL to my future students.	11/28.9	3/21.4	5/31.3
I consider myself motivated to provide SEL instruction to my future students.	17/44.7	5/35.7	8/50.0

Research Question 4a. What are the Differences among Preservice Teachers Focusing on Elementary Education as Opposed to Secondary Education Regarding their Confidence in Providing SEL?

Elementary education majors again had higher overall scores for confidence (M=19.71) vs. Secondary education majors (M=17.94); there were no significant differences between scores.

Research Question 5: What are Preservice Teachers' Perceptions Regarding Their Own SEL Competence?

Participants rated their level of agreement with various statements surrounding their own SEL competence. Collectively, preservice teachers indicated they felt competent in their abilities to consider students well-being before making decisions (73.7%), to factor in student safety in decision making (76.3%) and consider of other's emotions before they make decisions (60.5%). However, when questions focused on their own social-emotional health, participants reported lower percentages for strong agreement as demonstrated in the following questions: "it's easy for me to tell people how I feel" (26.3%), "I always stay calm when other people upset me" (18.4%), and "I manage my emotions and feelings in healthy ways" (21.1%) (see Table 2).

Table 2

Pre-service teachers (by group) and their competence in SEL instruction

	All Pre-Service Teachers (n/%)	Elementary Pre-service Teachers (n/%)	Secondary School Pre-Service Teachers (n/%)
It is easy for me to tell people how I feel.	10/26.3	2/14.3	4/25.0
Other professionals at my university and/or school placement sites respect me.	18/47.4	5/35.7	8/50.0
In conflict situations with my peers or professors, I can effectively negotiate solutions.	13/34.2	4/28.6	4/25.0
I nearly always stay calm when other people upset me.	7/18.4	2/14.2	4/25.0
I will be able to remain calm when addressing student misbehavior.	12/31.6	3/21.4	6/37.5
I am able to manage my emotions and feelings in healthy ways.	8/21.1	2/14.2	4/25.0
I appreciate individual and group differences in culture, language, ethnicity, and socio-economic status.	28/73.7	9/64.3	13/81.3
I problem solve with others when there is a problem or argument.	16/42.1	7/50.0	5/31.3
Culturally sensitive instruction is important to me.	30/78.9	11/78.6	12/75.0
I will know how my emotional expressions affect my interactions with students.	18/47.4	6/42.9	7/43.8
I will be able to build positive relationships with my students' families.	22/57.9	8/57.1	10/62.5
Colleagues seek my advice when resolving a problem.	11/28.9	4/28.6	3/18.8

	All Pre-Service Teachers (n/%)	Elementary Pre-service Teachers (n/%)	Secondary School Pre-Service Teachers (n/%)
I will have the ability to be aware of how my students are feeling.	11/28.9	4/28.6	3/18.8
Students will come to me for help with their problems.	15/39.5	6/42.9	5/31.1
I am good at creating a sense of community.	15/39.5	7/50.0	4/25.0
Most of the time, I think before I act.	13/34.2	3/21.4	7/43.8
I will consider my students' well-being while making decisions.	28/73.7	13/92.9	11/68.8
My students' safety will be an important factor in the decisions I make.	29/76.3	13/92.9	11/68.8
When making decisions, I consider the emotions of others.	23/60.5	10/71.4	10/62.5
I will feel comfortable talking to parents, administrators, and community leaders.	16/42.1	5/35.7	7/43.8

Research Question 5a: What are the differences among preservice teachers focusing on elementary education as opposed to secondary education regarding their own SEL competence?

In following the same themes from the previous two scales (perceived benefits and confidence), elementary education majors had higher scores ($M=86.29$ vs. $M=84.73$), however, there were no significant differences between groups.

Discussion

The present study aimed to gain greater insight into preservice teachers' capacity surrounding SEL, specifically their perceived knowledge, need, and benefit of SEL, perceived confidence in providing SEL instruction, and perceptions of their own SEL competence. In addition, comparisons of SEL capacity across intended teaching grade levels (elementary vs. secondary) were made. In general, preservice teachers at all levels in this sample reported a limited degree of comprehensive understanding of SEL concepts and the Illinois SEL Standards. Contrary to

Phillipe's 2017 study, secondary teacher education majors in the current study reported higher familiarity with SEL and the Illinois SEL Standards than their elementary education major counterparts. However, this difference was not reflected in the qualitative responses, as approximately an equal number of elementary and secondary majors were able to broadly define and/or identify specific SEL competencies and Illinois SEL Standards. Given that every Illinois public school teacher is required to teach and assess SEL, it is reasonable to believe that preservice teachers should have a solid foundation of knowledge regarding SEL competencies and specific Illinois SEL standards before they begin their formal teaching. As schools across the country shift focus to a more SEL prominent curriculum, it's important to recognize that preservice teachers may not have the strong foundational knowledge regarding SEL and, specifically their states' SEL standards. As teacher preparation program educators look for ways to improve, incorporation of courses and field-based experiences focused on SEL competencies and state-level SEL standards should be a compulsory component of the curriculum (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017).

Preservice teachers at all levels in this study valued the role that SEL plays in student academic and emotional development, had high motivation to learn more about SEL, and for the most part, believed that SEL benefits student outcomes. Consistent with the literature, those students majoring in elementary education reported higher levels of perceived need and benefit for SEL than their secondary education major peers (Phillipe, 2017). These results suggest that the capacity of secondary teacher education majors to provide SEL instruction, the motivation to learn about, and the value placed on SEL may be limited compared to the capacity of teachers at lower grade levels. Further research is needed to explore why this difference exists among secondary teaching majors.

Although the benefits of SEL were valued highly among participants, an overwhelming majority (71%) felt that more instructional time should be devoted to acquiring academic skills, rather than the development of SEL in their future students. This finding was interesting to note as research indicates that evidence based SEL programs are directly linked to improved academic performance, graduation rates, reduced absenteeism, and overall positive student outcomes (Keltner, 2020). Prioritizing student SEL development is the foundation for academic success; it does not seem possible to have one without the other.

In the context of this study, preservice teachers were asked to rate their perceived confidence to effectively provide SEL instruction to their future students. Although overall confidence was high (70%), it was the lowest of all three scales (perceived benefit, confidence, and competence). Motivation to learn was also high, with elementary majors scoring higher than secondary education majors. These findings suggests that preservice teachers are motivated and

confident to provide SEL instruction to their future students if given opportunities to develop knowledge and skillsets surrounding SEL instruction and the Illinois SEL Standards.

Preservice teachers in this study reported higher levels of their own SEL competence in two of CASEL's established SEL competencies, responsible decision-making, and social awareness. However, lower levels of competence were reported in the area of self-management. These findings support the value of developing SEL competence among preservice teacher education students. Teachers' own SEL competence strongly influences the infusion of SEL into their classrooms (Jones et al., 2013). Those teachers with high SEL competence are more self-aware, can use their emotions to positively motivate others, demonstrate prosocial values, feel more efficacious, and find teaching more rewarding (Aldrup et al., 2020; Jennings and Greenberg, 2009). According to Schonert-Reichl (2017), it is not enough to simply teach preservice teachers SEL knowledge and skills. Teachers' own SEL competence and well-being appear to be critical in promoting SEL among their students.

Limitations

This case study was limited to a sample of senior level teacher education majors at one Midwest university, therefore generalizability to the broader preservice teacher populations should be made with caution. In addition, another limitation involves the sample size. The relatively small sample of 38 participants utilizes a case study approach in order to gain a deeper understanding of the topic at hand. However, the small sample size in this study limits the power of inferential statistics to determine if a significant difference existed between groups of preservice teachers. Future research directions could include expanding perceptions surveys, such as this one, to include a greater number of participants across more varied cultural and regional contexts.

Recommendations

The findings of this study present several implications regarding preservice teacher capacity surrounding SEL, and thus, the implementation of SEL initiatives in their future teaching. In addition, the results from this study can help to inform teacher education preparation programs how to best support and prepare preservice teachers for the implementation of SEL-related initiatives. First, it is essential to provide SEL instruction to preservice teachers that increases familiarity with concepts of SEL, state level SEL standards, and various approaches through which SEL can be provided. As the findings of this study indicate, preservice teachers recognize the value and importance of SEL, therefore significant time need not be devoted to emphasizing why SEL is needed, but rather how SEL can be provided to their future students at various grade levels. Second, the incorporation of SEL performance criteria in coursework and student teaching could be a valuable addition to teacher education programs. In doing so,

university instructors and preservice teachers could place more value on the inclusion of SEL and evaluating preservice teacher success surrounding it. Last, there appears to be a greater need to support the capacity to provide SEL instruction and emphasize the importance of SEL for secondary teacher education majors within teacher preparation programs.

Teachers are uniquely positioned to foster positive student-teacher relationships and when they effectively implement SEL programs in their classrooms, their students have better outcomes (Schonert-Reichel, 2017). Considering that the effectiveness of SEL implementation at the Prek-12 level is largely dependent upon the SEL capacity of teachers, critically assessing the level at which preservice teachers possess SEL capacity and making intentional efforts to develop the most effective educational practices that promote SEL capacity is essential for teacher education programs (Schonert-Reichel et al., 2015).

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