Teacher Perceptions of Approaches to SEL and Cultural Competence in Private Schools

A Comparative Study of Private School SEL Teachers in the San Francisco Bay Area and Silicon Valley, California

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Abstract

The current study is a master’s thesis aimed at exploring and comparing private school teacher’s perceptions of their preparation for and approach to teaching social and emotional learning (SEL) skills with cultural competence to a diverse group of learners. The study also explores how teachers perceive their approach to involving students’ families in the process and how they measure success. Interviews were conducted with 21 teachers in four schools in the San Francisco Bay Area of California in the United States with a particular but not exclusive focus on the Silicon Valley region. The current study found an alignment in perceptions of teachers from the two academics-focused schools and alignment in perceptions from the two SEL-centered schools, specifically that the former perceived more challenges in teaching SEL skills and the latter perceived a more successful structure and culture. The study also found a complementary relationship between SEL instruction/school structure and cultural competence that the SEL-centered schools benefitted from and that the academic-focused schools did not. The study then found that the SEL-centered schools created reciprocal, community building relationships with families, and the academics-focused schools kept families more at a distance. Finally, the study found that all teachers perceived their preparation to teach SEL skills with cultural competence to have come from life experience, and they measured success informally through student observations and the quality of their relationships with students. The study declares its limitations, discusses the findings and suggests directions for further research.

Keywords: Social and emotional learning, cultural competence, teacher perceptions, private schools
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1. Introduction

Social and emotional learning (SEL) has a strong footing in schools in economically advantaged western nations, particularly English speaking ones like the U.S., Canada, the U.K., Australia and New Zealand. The concept is used either as a targeted intervention to address behavioral issues or undesired social trends in a school community, a universal-programming implement infused into curricula in all of a school’s classes, or as a holistic model for building school culture and shaping classroom management. When applied in schools, SEL programming and interventions have proven to be quite successful in helping students build social and emotional skills and behavioral outcomes as well as improve academic achievement. A recent meta-analysis of SEL programming across the United States confirms this success (Durlak et. al., 2011).

So successful is SEL programming at addressing behavior, building social and emotional skills, improving academic performance and building positive relationships between students, their peers and adults that its prevalence is spreading globally. Another recent meta-analysis and other research show that SEL programs have been successful at improving social and emotional outcomes for students in international contexts in the western world and beyond (Diekstra, 2008; Sheard, Ross, & Chung, 2012; Coelho, Marchante, & Sousa, 2015). Programs in all affected countries are successfully addressing social and emotional needs in pre-schools, primary schools, middle schools and secondary schools. It is no wonder that SEL programs are gaining in popularity in the current academic environment, one that is being pulled in many directions by globalization and becoming increasingly pressurized by competition for higher standardized test scores and increasingly more exclusive university admissions standards. It is challenging to survive in the current environment without well-functioning social and emotional competencies, much less to succeed. There is much value in learning to appreciate perspectives different than one’s own when facing rapidly changing demographics (NCCCa, n.d.; Moule, 2012, pp. 8-10). To accompany that skill, it is also useful to be able to relate to a diversity of people, be aware of one’s own prejudices and biases, identify and manage one’s own emotions that may arise in this fluctuating landscape and effectively manage conflicts that may arise. The United States is the site of significant demographic shifts in the past 40 years (Goode & Jones, 2008; PolicyLink &
PERE, 2015). Students in schools from rural regions in the middle of the country to large coastal cities come from more of a blend of different socio-cultural contexts, races and ethnicities, and socio-economic backgrounds than ever before. The children of recent immigrants who speak Spanish or Vietnamese at home, are non-White, and whose parents do not speak English attend the same schools as children from White and African-American families who have attended that school for generations. One can imagine the cultural and linguistic obstacles that get in the way of these students’ efforts to form positive healthy relationships with each other and build a welcoming community. These obstacles stemming from prejudices, biases or simple inexperience can be emotionally challenging for all involved. Amidst the whirlwind such efforts to integrate and adjust to new people creates, academic success and social and emotional health are paramount. These elements must be attended to by the schools incoming populations attend and the communities they inhabit. The school must meet students’ individual needs and address their interests to both empower students when social and emotional difficulties and conflicts arise and to establish a level playing field for them to achieve academic success (CASEL, 2017). Teachers are at the forefront of this effort and are charged with the mighty task of helping diverse students collaborate to learn, make responsible decisions, and build a positive supportive community.

Teachers of all backgrounds will benefit from preparation to take on these challenges; this includes training and commitment to proficiency in working with students from diverse backgrounds other than their own (Tinkler & Tinkler, 2013). They will also benefit from a commitment to involving student and family concerns and identities in lesson planning and building classroom culture. The knowledge teachers need to serve students from diverse backgrounds comes most reliably from the families themselves, creating an impetus for teachers to work with students and families to address their needs and build inclusive classrooms and school communities (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Dinallo, 2016). Schools benefit from combining teachers, students, and families in multicultural environments in order to address issues of social justice, engage with the community at-large, and train teachers in contextually relevant ways (Howard, 2007).

A supportive learning community that is safe for all students is a laudable goal that all students deserve. Integrating all the different perspectives, experiences and backgrounds of a diversity of students to achieve that goal takes skilled teaching (Learning First Alliance, 2001).
The current study concerns itself with the challenges of teaching SEL skills to a diversity of students in culturally competent ways and how teachers perceive their preparation for and approach to these challenges. The study focuses on the unique challenges of private school teachers in the San Francisco Bay Area of California in the United States, including how those teachers involve families in their approach to teaching SEL and how they measure success.

2. Background

The introduction touched upon the concept of shifting populations that are changing American demographics in almost all regions of the country. More specifically these demographics changes manifest themselves in significant increases in minority populations, including Black, Asian or Pacific Islander, Hispanic, Latino/a, as compared to the majority White population in American classrooms. By 2008 the share of Whites (non-Hispanic) enrolled in primary, middle and secondary schools was 59%, down from 79% in 1970 (US Census, 2011). The number of recent immigrants has also shot up to almost 25% of Americans being first- or second-generation residents (CPE, 2012).

There are unprecedented strains on the educational systems of American states. Schools and their teachers and administrators have to adjust to ever-changing populations of diverse families and students who may not be native English speakers and come from different cultures, backgrounds and states of economic privilege. This is a marked change in the educational systems of the United States which, until 1954, legally discriminated against non-White students by segregating students of color – particularly African-American students – into their own schools. These schools were contained in racially segregated neighborhoods created intentionally by discriminatory real estate practices and federal home loan policies that separated Black and White life and kept African-Americans from accumulating wealth from property ownership in the same way the Whites could and did (Madrigal, 2014; Coates, 2014). These policies had devastating effects on African American communities and communities of color over time while simultaneously creating a privileged class of White American homeowners who then sent their children to privileged schools funded by the higher tax revenues in their more economically affluent neighborhoods. This left communities of color to do as best they could with underfunded schools, overcrowded classrooms, and grossly diminished access to higher education and the jobs and social status that come with it. Schools were officially de-segregated in 1954, and racist
home loan policies from the Federal Housing Administration officially ended in 1968. However, African-American communities and other communities of color continue to suffer from economic and educational disparities directly attributable to these malicious policies perpetrated by the government of the United States and the school systems and communities that supported them. Indeed, after a period of forced de-segregation, schools today remain as segregated as they were 60 or 70 years ago (Hannah-Jones, 2014). Though the reasons for this are under debate (Fiel, 2013), research suggests that the more Black students in a school, the less likely White families are to enroll their children in those schools and that Black students are even less likely to be enrolled in majority White schools because of pro-White stereotype biases (Billingham & Hunt, 2016).

Some legacies of these disparities can be seen in the San Francisco Bay Area of California, the region on which the current study focuses. A recent demographic study of equity in the region finds that students of color (particularly Blacks and Latinos) are far less likely to complete secondary school than White students and that the share of jobs requiring higher education is much higher than the proportion of people of color with those degrees. These discrepancies also extend to immigrant populations in the region. The study also shows a dramatic educational attainment difference among immigrant groups with South and East Asians having significantly higher education levels than Southeast Asian, Mexican and Central American immigrants who have very low attainment levels compared to their White counterparts (PolicyLink & PERE, 2015).

There is increasing evidence that school choice – the possibility to choose which public, charter or private school one’s child attends – contributes to segregation in schools and therefore inequity in educational quality (Hannah-Jones, 2017). There is no more exclusive educational domain than the private or independent school, which has an opaque and selective admissions process and can charge upwards of USD $45,000 per year or higher to attend. Echoing the disparities that arose from segregation and discrimination, private schools in the United States rarely reflect the demographics of the larger community they inhabit; their enrollments typically over-represent White students and families from privileged socio-economic backgrounds. In an environment in which almost 90% U.S. public school teachers are White and were trained in White and economically advantaged socio-cultural contexts (Howard, 2007), private schools’ faculties are likely also to over-represent the White and perhaps privileged population.
Private schools are under pressure just as public schools are to respond to the changing demographics that are making classrooms full of students from more diverse backgrounds than ever before. Communities demand more inclusion and equal opportunities to take advantage of private school quality, and the schools themselves often take initiative from a social justice perspective to admit more minority students and students from underserved communities in order to more accurately reflect the surrounding community. Those efforts are unfortunately often not enough to create equity, particularly in private school education, for all populations (Olds, 2017; Mitchell, 2016). The front line on both sides of the private school access theater seems to be manned by teachers, students and students’ families. Despite gross inequities in education, they are the parties most able to affect change from within, particularly long-term changes including building trust between students and teachers, engaging all members of the wider community, addressing discrimination and segregation, and building a school community based on evidenced-based training and instruction that values knowledge from the community it serves (Howard, 2007). All of this is best achieved by engaging the social and emotional development of students within private schools in ways that respect and take into account their socio-cultural contexts and diverse backgrounds (Garner et. al., 2014). The current study aims to explore and compare private school teacher perceptions of: how prepared they feel they are to teach SEL skills in culturally competent ways, how they approach teaching SEL and meeting student needs, involving families in the process and measuring success. The study aims to explore the challenges private school teachers face when teaching SEL to diverse students and involving their families in the process, hoping to contribute to an understanding of where those approaches fit in the process of addressing the disparities that exist in the San Francisco Bay Area community at large with a particular focus on the Silicon Valley region.

3. Aims and Objectives

The research in this study aims to explore teachers’ perceptions and experiences of facing the challenges posed by teaching SEL skills in ways that are adaptive to the socio-cultural contexts of individual students in order to meet their needs. This study focuses on private school teachers of all levels – primary, middle and secondary – teaching in the San Francisco Bay Area of Northern California in the United States of America. It additionally aims to compare how those experiences and perceptions differ between schools with different institutional approaches and
values. Finally, this study aims to contribute to research that couples cultural competence with SEL training, instruction, curricular planning, and didactic application among teachers and administrators in private and public schools in the United States and beyond.

To pursue these aims, this study’s objectives are as follows:

- Explore teacher perceptions of their preparation to teach SEL skills and how it influences SEL planning, instruction and student engagement.
- Explore teachers’ perceptions and experiences of the challenges involved in meeting individual needs of students from different gender, cultures, ethnicities, socio-economic status, abilities, etc. while teaching SEL skills.
- Compare the experiences and perspectives of SEL preparation and instruction and meeting individual student needs of teachers from private schools with different values, stated missions, and approaches to instruction and community building.
- Consider how the findings of this study may inform future SEL training and instruction that integrates culturally competent practices in a private school context.

4. Research Questions

In keeping with Bryman’s evaluation of effective research questions, the questions listed below seek to add an “original contribution” to the intersecting topics of SEL pedagogy and cultural competence (Bryman, 2012, p.90). Every year brings an increasingly wide selection of literature on SEL programming, training, and instruction, that connects explicitly to cultural competence in limited ways. The research questions that follow hope to narrow the focus (Bryman, 2012, p.89) of topics relating to SEL instruction to a private school context. They also hope to narrow the focus even further to consider SEL instructional experiences in private schools comparatively with attention to how cultural competence is considered and applied in the process. Furthermore, principles of cultural competence are implemented in the formation of the following research questions in that they aim to record data about students and teachers in culturally diverse populations while paying particular attention to the socio-cultural contexts of participants of the study (Goode & Jones, 2008). This is done both in an attempt to respect the context of each individual participant in the pursuit of richer data as well as to make a connection between
current theoretical approaches to research of this topic and the research questions (Bryman, 2012, p.90).

- Where do teachers feel their preparation to teach SEL skills comes from, and how do they measure success?
- How do teachers approach teaching SEL skills and meeting diverse students’ and families’ needs? What challenges them?
- How does school context affect teaching SEL skills, meeting individual student needs, and involving students and families?

5. Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the extant but less robust body of comparative SEL literature that focuses on cultural competence and both informal and informal SEL instruction. In comparing the experiences and perceptions of educators teaching SEL skills in schools that may or may not be implementing fully coordinated SEL curricula, the study adds another dimension to extant literature that focuses largely on how SEL interventions and fully formed SEL curricula affect student outcomes. SEL is a topic relevant to both academic and non-academic student outcomes in and out of the school setting. The primary facilitator of SEL skill acquisition for students in the school and classroom setting is the teacher, whose role in teaching SEL skills has the biggest impact on positive behavioral outcomes for students as well as their achieving improved academic performance (Weissberg et. al., 2015; Williford & Wolcott, 2015). Thus, this study gathers data on a variety of teacher experiences and focuses on how they affect culturally competent SEL instruction.

This study pays particular attention to how students’ and teachers’ different socio-cultural contexts affect SEL instruction. Students undergo significant social and emotional development in their transitions from primary to middle or middle to secondary levels, and their individual socio-cultural contexts are integral in how they experience that development. Developmental tasks such as self-esteem formation, developing friendships, membership in a peer group, having social competence, performing concrete operational thought, evaluating one’s self, identifying with a sex role, and the beginnings of moral development all occur during these years, with particular concentration in the middle years. During that critical period, students are expected to
develop coping skills, have appropriate social relationships that satisfy them, and have secure attachments to people they trust (Goode & Jones, 2008, pp. 86-89). These tasks and expectations are a tall order for any child or adolescent without proper emotional support, skilled guidance, and environmental security. Considering socio-cultural context and adjusting instruction and rapport to fit it seems a common-sense approach to such a consequential process. As adults, teachers are expected to model SEL skills as an instructive tool for younger learners (CASEL, 2017). Their socio-cultural context is an inseparable portion of how teachers model that behavior, and students’ socio-cultural contexts are an essential component of how they regard and receive it. As American communities and classrooms diversify more quickly than the teachers staffed within them (DeRuy, 2013), it is incumbent upon teachers to consider disparities in the socio-cultural experiences between students and between themselves and their students when planning and teaching SEL.

Lastly, this study contributes research conducted on participants who teach SEL skills with or without the guidance of formal SEL programming or the training to implement it. Whether through formal SEL programming or by other means, teachers are students’ point person, their primary support, guiding them on the road toward acquiring SEL skills and developing core social and emotional competencies. Without a formal structure, schoolwide collaboration, or curricular mandate to guide them in SEL expertise or instruction, a considerable number of teachers are left to meet the challenge of addressing student needs in their individual and diverse contexts using whatever means and resources available. They often engage students and their parents as additional resources in planning and implementing their SEL instruction. In documenting their experiences and perceptions of what counts as preparation and how their schools as institutions aid or hinder their efforts to teach SEL skills with cultural competence, the current study hopes to add to a discussion about how administrators and educators can provide students with culturally competent SEL programming. How teachers involve students and their parents in bolstering students’ social and emotional competencies like social awareness, relationship management, self-awareness, responsible decision making, and self-management (CASEL, 2017a) may be particularly helpful in such discussions. Positive student outcomes from SEL instruction have been shown to be longer lasting when teachers engage with students using SEL principles every day and with all interactions and when parents and families support students by doing the same at home (Jones & Bouffard, 2012).
This particular aspect of the study is a potential opportunity to stimulate further collaboration between teachers, students and families in infusing SEL principles in their school communities with cultural competence. By cooperating and fostering a mutually respectful environment, these stakeholders may be better equipped to tackle the challenges that come from more rapidly diversifying populations of students and families entering school communities. It is potentially more efficient and effective to adapt to new changes as a unified group of educators, parents, and students rather than to approach them from separate camps.

6. Limitations of the Study

An initial limitation of the study is the asymmetrical amount of data gathered from each participating school. School 3 contains data from two educators for example while School 2 contains data from eleven educators. While it was possible to reach a data-saturation point with School 2, the reliability of information gathered from School 3 would have benefitted from more interviews that were not possible to attain in the limited time allotted for this study as a Master’s thesis. This disparity in sample size makes data from some schools less representative of the spread as others, thus affecting generalizability of that data to the entire school for purposes of comparison to other schools (Bryman, 2012, p. 390). The researcher attempts to de-limit this limitation by gathering as much data about schoolwide practices surrounding SEL and cultural competence as possible in individual interviews and focus groups to increase fairness in representation (Bryman, 2012, p.393).

Another limitation of the current study is its reliance on the trustworthiness of participant descriptions of their experiences with students and colleagues. The researcher was limited by time and did not have the opportunity to corroborate what accounts of their experiences by observing their interactions with students, colleagues, or parents and families. The researcher attempts to de-limit this limitation by gathering data on participant perceptions as well as experiences, as their perceptions require similar verification only under the assumption that they are not being truthful.

The next limitation is also associated with participant truthfulness. This study is limited by the willingness of each participant to speak openly about the institution that employs them, even if they may say unfavorable things about it. This was a particularly acute limitation in focus
groups where personal perceptions and experiences are necessarily shared with colleagues. One of the focus groups had a participant who held a supervisory administrative position over the other participants. It is possible that participants may have felt the need to withhold criticism or frankness about difficulties or other sensitive issues in front of a supervisor. In other instances where participants were alone with the researcher or with non-supervisory colleagues, it is also possible that loyalty to the institution may guide their comments towards more positive and uncritical reflections. The researcher attempts to de-limit this effect by providing absolute anonymity to participants and their school, and by continuing the focus group after the supervisory administrator left the room. Coupled with this issue is social desirability bias that may have some influence on participants’ responses in those interviews in which the researcher is acquainted with or was a former colleague of the participant (Bryman, 2012, pp. 227-228). The researcher’s friendship with some participants may influence them to respond in ways that prioritize friendly relations over in-depth experience and perspective. The researcher attempts to de-limit this limitation by re-directing discussion and stressing an interest in the participant’s expertise on his/her own experiences and perceptions, so as to redirect their focus inward towards reflection as opposed to outward toward socialization.

7. Relevance to International and Comparative Education

This is a comparative study of four schools and the perceptions and experiences of SEL teachers within them. It conducts a comparative and holistic analysis of multiple levels including: teachers from multiple schools, their socio-cultural contexts, cultural, racial and ethnic affiliations, and their SEL skill instruction with attention to culturally competent practices (Bray, Adamson, & Mason, 2007, pp. 8-9). This comparative approach offers the study an opportunity to join the body of comparative literature on SEL conducted with cultural competence.

In the current climate of shifting populations, it is paramount to fortify students’ preparedness to learn about, interact with, and contribute innovatively to their increasingly fluid communities. These students will need strong interpersonal skills, an ability to manage relationships, a keen awareness of their own emotions, and an empathy to understand the positions and feelings of people with different experiences and perspectives than their own. This is particularly relevant in the case of refugee populations shifting from South Asia and the Middle East to Europe and other parts of the world, but it is not limited to those regions. The
western hemisphere is experiencing significant migration due to violent and economically depressed conditions in Central America and the Caribbean. Much of this migration flows to North America via Mexico. Children and their families are suddenly required to adjust to English-speaking communities and foreign cultures with which they may have no experience at all, after leaving their homes and homelands to escape or avoid trauma. Even if migration is economic or social in nature, families likely experience similar obstacles in new lands and communities. These families are in a particularly vulnerable position to support their children in school (Sugarman, 2015) and require an empathetic, open-minded, and supportive school community for emotionally healthy and socially productive adjustment. A school community that teaches SEL skills coupled with culturally competent principles and practices to build a culture of acceptance is a critical asset for both the incoming families’ and the established community’s integration.

Similarly, children and families who are returning to and rebuilding school communities in post-conflict regions will also benefit from an empathetic and emotionally supportive environment that prioritizes physical safety in the reintegration of different cultures. SEL programming and curricular approach and the incorporation of cultural competence into school structure, values and culture may be an attractive model that adds to the academic priorities of such schools. UNICEF has already begun to promote the international value of SEL models to the Pacific and East Asia regions that draw on western school trends, particularly in the U.S. and the U.K. (Ruiz, n.d.). Recent literature has highlighted SEL programming in educational systems of many countries around the world, from China to Croatia to Guatemala and beyond (Wang et. al., 2016; Novak et. al., 2017; Clinton et. al., 2015; Coelho et. al., 2017). The current study, though focused on data collected in the U.S., offers two potential points of interest to the Asia, Near East, pan-African regions among others that much of current western-focused research that mainly highlights SEL intervention work does not (Diekstra, 2008). First, the current study discusses the experiences of teaching SEL skills without an intervention or formal schoolwide curriculum and second, it discusses the possibility of doing so with culturally competent principles and practices. It may be necessary to begin adopting SEL principles of instruction and planning before a school plans a formal curriculum, trains faculty to competently teach it, and then implements it. And it will almost certainly be necessary to strive for cultural
8. Ethical Considerations of the Study

The current study adheres to ethical standards set forth by Stockholm University. It assures that participants will not be harmed in any way. It provides complete anonymity to schools and participants involved. The researcher obtained permission from school administrators and from all participants before conducting research. The researcher explained the aims and objectives of the study to participants before they participate and informs them of their right to end participation or rescind information given to the research at any point. It was important for the researcher that participants not feel pressured or threatened in any way. Participants’ personhood and privacy were carefully considered and respected at all times. The researcher did not engage in deception of the participants or approving administrators in any way. The researcher readily admits that his own bias of perspective and values are present in the interview questions and discussions with participants. To that end, the researcher strives to be reflexive at each stage of the study in order to be transparent about his motives and the formation of the study.

9. Conceptual Framework and Related Theories

This section reviews key concepts pertaining to the focus of this study and provides additional information about the theories related to those concepts. The current study aims to explore teacher perceptions and experiences of the challenges surrounding teaching SEL skills with cultural competence. It also aims to compare teachers in their schools to teachers in other schools facing similar challenges. The research is exploratory and inductive in nature and therefore seeks to understand relationships between teachers and schools based on the data that arises (Charmaz, 2015). The schools and the teachers within them represent a variety of different institutional and individual contexts. The researcher prioritizes respect for the integrity and singular nature of each of these contexts and compares them to seek a clearer picture of how teachers meet individual student needs with cultural competence using varying structures and levels of support. The following concepts and their related theories guide the researcher’s approach to comparing the data and provide a foundation for the discussion of the findings.
9.1 Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

SEL describes the process of learning a set of skills that all people have occasion to use every day. People apply these skills when they interact with others, assess their own feelings, organize their priorities, and engage in relationships. These skills are applied everywhere from home, to work, to school, to the civic arena. Almost all definitions of SEL describe it as a process of learning. Zins et al. (2004) describe SEL as a process designed to improve how people apply their thoughts, feelings and behavior and combine them to tackle challenging tasks in their lives. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has a more robust definition of the SEL process likely stemming from its role in developing the term “social and emotional learning” and the research, advocacy, resources and training it has promoted on behalf of it for two decades (CASEL, 2017a). CASEL defines the process as not just skill and knowledge acquisition but of adopting new attitudes as well. According to CASEL this process leads students towards proficiency or mastery of five core competencies: 1) self-management, 2) self-awareness, 3) social awareness, 4) relationship skills, and 5) responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2017b). The following are brief elaborations of the competencies (in relative order): 1) regulating one’s emotions; controlling one’s behavior, 2) understanding one’s emotions; forming goals and values, 3) empathizing with people from different backgrounds than one’s own, 4) making relationships that are positive and healthy for one’s life, and 5) behaving ethically and cooperating constructively in one’s social engagements with others (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich & Gulotta, 2015). Jones & Bouffard (2012) simplify these competencies in to a statement of SEL’s purpose in people’s lives by first grouping it into only three concepts: emotional processes, cognitive regulation and interpersonal skills. People use these processes and skill development regularly to relate to others, have positive interactions, regulate their responses and attention and manage their behavior and feelings.

Teachers have a direct and indispensable role in the SEL process and in students’ SEL skill development within the school context. Though a school may structure myriad supports for SEL instruction and create a school culture that respects SEL principles, it is the teacher that must have the pedagogic skill to instruct and the self-awareness to model SEL skills to her students. A teacher’s skills, self-awareness, and abilities to create responsive routines and structures are particularly important to help students acquire SEL skills (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Those good practices are especially useful in schools that struggle to create an SEL-
aligned culture or have values that prioritize other elements, such as academic performance, standardized testing, or university admission rates. High-stakes testing in particular can have damaging effects on student and teacher morale and make it difficult for teachers to create an environment that makes significant space for simultaneous non-academic and academic learning processes (Mora, 2011; Kearns, 2011; Bulgar, 2012; Musoleno & White, 2010). Whether they move on to university after secondary school or not, all students must have the opportunity to learn skills that prepare them for democratic participation, cooperation with fellow citizens, and empathizing with those different from them. Social norms and the perpetuation of social welfare depend on the social and emotional skills of all students, as citizens and members of local communities. It is in this regard that society benefits from schools placing equal importance in teaching students not only the fundamentals of math, science and literature, but also from helping students acquire the skills necessary to contribute to the common good, approach disagreements from a conflict resolution stance, and to work through obstacles that may stand in the way of progress (Darling-Hammond, 2015). If schools fall short in creating an environment or culture that facilitates teaching SEL skills, the effectively pass on their portion of the responsibility to the other stakeholders involved in the process. It then falls largely on teachers, students and their families to lead themselves and their communities (including their schools) in forming healthy relationships and seeking emotional well-being.

Holistic, long-term approaches to building a school culture on SEL principles and a school community that supports SEL instruction is somewhat different than implementing an intervention, a common approach to SEL programming. SEL interventions are often sought by schools experiencing an acute problem they want to address such as substance abuse, violence, cyber-bullying or truancy that harms students’ academic performance and psycho-emotional health (Zins & Elias, 2006). The scope of these interventions is short-term by design; they are, by and large, stand-alone curricula implemented to address a problem until it diminishes sufficiently or disappears altogether. The supposition of an intervention is that the issues it addresses have arisen anomalously, not as a result of structural or entrenched cultural elements of the school. Universal SEL programming encourages schools to structure around SEL principles and prepares teachers to include SEL skill instruction throughout their curricula. By contrast to intervention, universal SEL programming approaches undesirable student behavior from a different direction. Universal SEL programming is an attempt to equip students with skills and create an
environment conducive to the safe practice of skills that help students learn to manage difficult behaviors internally and together with peers and adults. Universal programs that are implemented schoolwide on a long-term basis are more effective than interventions in positively affecting academic and behavioral student outcomes (Elias, 2010).

Holistic SEL programming seems to advantage students more than interventions, but the teachers who implement that programming seem to play an even more critical role in student success. Students benefit most from SEL instruction by teachers who are trained to do so and know their students well (Durlak et. al., 2011). As previously touched upon, teachers modeling those SEL skills is a key element in students developing them. Teachers can improve efficacy by modeling skills in different contexts and giving students opportunities to practice them regularly and in multiple contexts with their skilled supervision and guidance. The most effective, student-centered extension of SEL programming views students’ opportunities to practice SEL skills in a broad scope. Such programming encourages teachers to collaborate with parents and families to try to create consistent values and expectations as students move from setting to setting (Weissberg et. al., 2015). It also aims to facilitate internalized values in students that are more likely to change behavior and attitude in the long-term (Bear & Watkins, 2006). Part of those behavioral and attitudinal shifts demand students to be tolerant and accepting of difference.

Considering context is a key strategy for teachers looking to promote tolerance and acceptance of difference through SEL instruction. Modeling, of course, is an essential way of teaching students how to work with people who are different from them and to accept tolerance of difference as a feature of a healthy communities and selves. This modeling must take into account the cultural influences students and teachers are subject to. Features such as native language, ethnicity and race, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status all affect how individuals perceive and even define SEL’s core competencies (Hecht & Shin, 2015). This effect highlights the relevance of modeling and creating all other accompanying features of SEL programming in a way that considers and suits the specific context of a school’s culture, it’s community’s needs and interests, and the individual needs and socio-cultural contexts of each student (Durlak, 2016). This imposes upon effective SEL teachers yet another mandate: to be intimately aware of students’, their families’ and the communities where they live.

Three approaches from teachers engender long-term student success in SEL skill development: continuous professional development, identifying the most relevant skills to target
for a particular group of students, and maintaining a working collaboration with students and their families (CASEL, 2017c; Garbacz, Swanger-Gagné & Sheridan, 2015). It is not surprising then that behavioral, social-emotional, and academic improvements in students are correlated with high school teachers who have close enough relationships and personal connections with students to know their individual needs and then shape their SEL instruction to meet them (Rutledge et. al., 2015). An effective SEL instructor then has a considerable amount of responsibilities that fall far outside of the classroom, strict pedagogical training, and academic content lesson planning. The goal of SEL programming after all is human development in a social and emotional context. Its effects have been shown to have positive academic outcomes for students that can arguably be seen as a result of the decreased emotional distress and improved conduct SEL programming has been shown to produce (Durlak et. al., 2011; Diekstra, 2008). It takes a considerable amount of self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, and relationship skills in teachers to be able to teach these same competencies to students.

To that end, professional teacher development, though advised in virtually all SEL programming, is not the only road to building expertise in the core social and emotional competencies. After all, students spend at least as much time with their families and/or community members as they do with their teachers. If these supports are effective guides at all they must have found other ways in their lives to develop skills along and understand the functioning of core social and emotional competencies. Sound SEL practice in part relies on ostensibly untrained people to support SEL skill building in students when they are outside of school. Relatedly, teachers with varying levels of experience who underwent a two-year SEL training identify one of its biggest benefits as helping them to better understand behavior in themselves which helped them more easily recognize behaviors in students and form a closer relationship with them built on empathy and shared experiences (Dolev & Leshem, 2016). On the other hand, pre-service teachers who underwent a 30-hour SEL training course had some increases in emotional competencies but no increase in empathy (Kasler, Hen, & Nov, 2013). Whether the teachers benefitted from more opportunities to practice empathizing with students than the pre-service teacher group is possible but ultimately unknown. In any case, disposition, temperament, willingness to have new experiences, and one’s life situation among other factors may all influence one’s development of social-emotional competencies. For teachers these factors, aside from their SEL training, may also influence their capacity as SEL instructors.
Social-emotional capacities like empathy and self-awareness, no matter how teachers develop them, are essential when figuring out how to meet student needs in their individual socio-cultural contexts.

The following subsections will review some theories that underpin SEL. As the current study concerns itself with teaching SEL skills with attention to individual contexts, the following theories focus on the role contexts play in human social-emotional development.

**Ecological/Bioecological Systems Theory (EST/BST)**

EST is a theory of human development that uses people’s interaction with their surrounding context or environment as the prominent lens through which to understand the process (Rivers et al., 2013). Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) first wrote about EST to explain the reciprocal relationship a developing human being has with its environment, namely that one’s environment influences one’s development, but at the same time one’s development affects one’s environment (p. 21). With the premise that people and their environments mutually influence each other – people and the spaces where they live, work, and play create unique effects on each other when they interact – Bronfenbrenner used the term ‘ecology’ to describe the developmental contexts that they create (Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

EST considers context in terms of four levels, according to their proximity to the developing person. From closest to furthest from the developing person, Bronfenbrenner labelled those contexts: microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems and macrosystems (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). One can picture them as concentric circles (or nested dolls) with microsystems innermost, macrosystems outermost, and the developing person at the center. Microsystems include a person’s immediate surroundings, eg. home, school, or workplace, and all of the people in them, eg. family, teachers, peers, co-workers. Because a person has multiple microsystems functioning at all times, the mesosystem combines them all as a way to refer to one’s current stage in development as one moves from setting to setting. Less familiar settings widen one’s mesosystem. The exosystem begins to move further away from the developing person but not so far away that it loses influence on a person’s feelings or sense of self. Some examples of exosystems are one’s parent’s church or mosque or a spouse’s workplace and colleagues. The macrosystem has the furthest proximity to the developing person and consists of largely abstract
phenomena such as culture, government, beliefs or ideologies. Macrosystems mainly influence how the other more proximal ecological levels interact.

EST posits that because all four ecological levels are interdependent a person’s choices or relationships in a classroom for example cannot be fully understood without considering the climate, events and relationships made in the other levels (Lerner, 2002, p.238; Rosa & Tudge, 2013). This concept reflects SEL principles fairly closely. Bronfenbrenner contended practically that rich and supportive proximal processes (micro and meso) result in the healthy development of social and emotional skills as well as good cognitive regulation which may lead to stronger academic achievement (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The next incarnation of ecological theory stemming from these concepts aligns even more closely with SEL principles as it considers perhaps the most intimate contexts experienced by developing human beings.

In 1998, Bronfenbrenner and Morris incorporated how a person’s biological development affects the ecological levels and interacts with contexts and environments. Biological elements like physiology, behavior, and psychology were significant new inputs that brought more balance to the person-context interaction paradigm, so much so that the moniker ‘ecological’ was changed to ‘bioecological’. Bioecological systems theory (BST) changes the way it considers interaction between the circular, proximal ecological levels in the following ways: 1) the person-context relationship is constantly in flux and human development is inseparable from it, 2) personal characteristics influence this development, 3) the nested ecological levels from EST are affected by the passage of time (Lerner, 2002, p. 239). More practically, it can be said that the vast possibilities of different types of abilities, dispositions, symbolic and linguistic interaction, and ways people relate to their emotions and the way they make decisions all change over time as they age, interact with their environment and gain more experiences (Lerner, 2002, p. 240; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The addition of more personal aspects of the individual as well as time to the proximal processes was labeled the Proximal-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model of human development and research associated with it (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Lerner, 2002, p. 239; Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

Giving more weight to an individual’s personal aspects and how they change over time in the interaction between their social, emotional, and physical development and their environment is central to how BST can be used as a theoretical model to shape SEL programming, training and instruction. Adolescents and pre-adolescents undergo tremendous biological changes during
their schooling years, perhaps the most visibly dramatic and emotionally challenging changes of their lives. A teacher is wise to consider these changes in tandem with the individual needs they target for SEL differentiated instruction when planning and delivering instruction as well as when collaborating with parents to meet individual needs (Burns et al., 2015). It may also be prudent for teachers to consider physical changes such as puberty and the cognitive and emotional dynamics that accompany it when modeling behavior and socio-emotional skills for students in the short and long term. Students’ limitations, abilities, temperament, and self-esteem will likely undergo changes from year to year, at some stages perhaps from month to month. Teachers whose expectations change along with a student’s development may be more successful at targeting their individual needs in real time, thus improving instruction and giving students a safe and comfortable environment in which to practice SEL skills and make constructive mistakes. The private school environment in the United States is typically high-stress and often quite competitive academically, athletically and socially. Students stand to benefit from an environment where they feel safe not being top performers, where they learn SEL competencies that help them manage insecurities through individually responsive instruction from teachers aware of how their ever-changing bodies interact with their environment (Yoder, 2014; Romasz, Kantor, & Elias, 2004).

**Theory of Multiple Intelligences**

Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences defines intelligence as an ability to create something that people in different cultures can appreciate. This broke from traditional views of intelligence at the time that considered it an inborn characteristic that could be applied in all places in the same way and thus be reliably measured (Gardner, 1993). He laid out eight different ways of having (modalities of) intelligence: 1) verbal-linguistic, 2) logical-mathematical, 3) visual-spatial, 4) bodily-kinesthetic, 5) musical-rhythmic, 6) social-individual, 7) personal-intrapersonal, and 8) natural-naturalist (Baş, 2016). This widened view of intelligence has direct benefits to both teachers and students of SEL. Teachers may be able to assist students in more granularly identifying their strengths and areas that need improvement (Hanafin, 2014). Students may then in turn understand their own strengths and weaknesses with more precision. This has the potential to empower them to call out and use their strengths and regard their weaknesses as approachable and malleable with the use of these self-acknowledged strengths. This confidence
and support from teachers and potentially peers who also acknowledge their strengths may bolster their capacity to develop self-awareness and to manage their own feelings, relationships and responsibilities, all critical and core SEL competencies.

**Emotional Intelligence Theory (EI)**

EI can be divided into several branches of theory. The following is a brief description of the difference between two prominent branches, EI as a trait and EI as an ability. Trait-based EI theories characterize and measure EI as a mix of personality traits and cognitive and intellectual skills and abilities, not as a cohesive set of cognitive abilities (Chapin, 2015). Consequently, trait-based EI theories largely measure EI using self-report scales that rely on self-assessments of personality traits. It has been argued that relying on self-reported personality constructs somewhat weakens the validity of an EI assessment across groups of participants (Skar & Williams, 2012). Ability-based theories expand on information processing theories of intelligence, stemming more from Gardner’s theory of Multiple Intelligences in that they consider EI to be a specific type of intelligence (Chapin, 2015). Ability-based theories therefore measure EI with a universal assessment tool (MSCEIT) that shows somewhat higher incremental validity than trait-based theory assessment (Skaar & Williams, 2012).

Mayer & Salovey, who originally constructed the concept of emotional intelligence (Skaar & Williams, 2012), argue that it is an ability. In their conceptualization, EI, as an ability to use reason to grasp emotions as well as an ability to use emotions to enhance thinking, helps clear the way for other abilities to arise, such as regulating emotions for intellectual growth, accurately perceiving emotions, and generating emotions in order to assist thinking (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). In short, EI is meant to represent the juncture of emotion and cognition – the cognition of events a person finds personally and emotionally relevant. Like SEL, there are core competencies of ability-based EI: 1) perceiving emotions, 2) using emotions to facilitate thought, 3) understanding emotions, and 4) managing emotions (Mayer, Salovey & Caruso, 2004). These competencies match closely to self-awareness and self-management in the SEL framework (CASEL, 2017a). Considering these skills to be abilities gives credence to the capacity both of students to develop them and of teachers to facilitate their development in students.
**Social Learning Theory**

Social learning theory proposes that students have the ability to learn by internalizing the value of what they observe and thus being incentivized to practice it. This has obvious implications for the SEL framework of teachers modeling behaviors and attitudes and creating opportunities for students to practice them in order to acquire social and emotional skills. Social learning theory says that students learn in a social context from other people (teachers, peers, parents) by observing their behavior and actions, feeling pride and a sense of accomplishment for understanding what they observe, and motivating themselves to internalize their understanding with repetition and practice (Bandura, 1977). Social learning theory particularly supports the benefits of developing school culture around universal schoolwide SEL programming. An environment structured to promote emotional awareness and healthy social interactions gives students opportunities to learn not only from formal lessons and their teachers but also from unstructured conversations with peers and adults in and out of the classroom (Bandura, Adams & Beyer, 1977). Teachers that recognize the validity of social learning theory during SEL instruction assume the capacity in students to internalize social-emotional skills and thus use them to shape their attitudes and values (Brackett, Elbertson & Rivers, 2015).

**Social Cognitive Theory**

Social cognitive theory is closely associated with social learning theory. It extends the power of observation as a learning modality to more abstract concepts, like beliefs. Social cognitive theory states that how people behave and changes in their behavior are influenced not only by what they observe, internalize and practice but also by what they believe and what expectations they have about those observations (Bandura, 1986). Considering students’ beliefs can deepen SEL educators’ toolboxes to encourage self-motivation and self-belief in their students. It is important to discuss students’ beliefs about their abilities and their choices responsibly, transparently, and with respect to their individual contexts and needs. By presenting students with new information about phenomena they are familiar with, for example brain development or the prevalence of adolescent alcohol use, teachers show students reasons to desire new outcomes for themselves. In turn students may develop a new understanding of their brain’s plasticity and choose to adopt a growth-mindset (Dweck, 2012) or view adolescent drinking as an option instead of an inevitability (Brackett, Elbertson & Rivers, 2015) and therefore develop new beliefs that
motivate them to internalize and practice new behaviors and attitudes. The applications for SEL programming are significant. Teachers who collaborate with students and parents to identify specific SEL skills to target in instruction can use social cognitive theory in part to frame their collaboration and come to specific desired behavioral or attitudinal outcomes that match students’ beliefs and values.

9.2 Cultural Competence

This sub-section moves on to the second concept that frames how the current study considers the data gathered from educators. Following a presentation of cultural competence as a concept are a few concepts closely related to cultural competence that help lay a foundation to the later discussion of the findings.

Cultural competence was first expressed as a framework to improve the way organizations, institutions, and even larger regional agencies or systems communicated to their clients or customers. As the name implies, the concept of cultural competence was first formulated to express a need for a baseline or foundational capacity to deliver services to people of all cultures. A fixed and stable definition of ‘culture’ is needed to contain the meaning and purpose of cultural competence. This is a challenging task, considering that, historically, how people understand culture constantly evolves and that we tend to define culture in immediately practical and therefore unchallenging ways (Fong & Tanaka, 2013; Hoffman, 1996). When Cross et. al. (1989) first formulated their cultural competence framework, they defined culture as a pattern of human behavior that pulls together the, “thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of a racial, ethnic or social group” (p. 13). ‘Competence’ proved less challenging to define, “a capacity to function effectively” (Cross et. al., 1989, p.13) This initial framework was written in response to systemic failures in the mental health care sector to appropriately serve minority children. It directly addressed historic discrimination in the United States against African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans (Latinos/Latinas), and Native Americans (American Indians) but left its intentions open to improve services to all cultures and individuals (Cross et. al., 1989, pp. 2-3).

Cross et. al. (1989) initially defined cultural competence as a process, asserting that it will always require further development, will need to be constantly evaluated for efficacy, and
will need to be adaptable to changes pertinent to cultural awareness. Brach & Fraser (2000) specify that organizations can carry out their self-evaluations of cultural competence by placing themselves on a continuum of effectiveness for those they serve. Cross et. al. (1989) suggest a six-category array of stages that may guide such a continuum and give a more practical picture of whether an organization practices cultural competence or not. On one end of the range lies cultural destructiveness where an organization presumably promotes institutional genocide, and on the other end is cultural proficiency where an organization has a strong appreciation for culture and innovates or researches based on cultural knowledge (Cross et. al., 1989, pp. 14-17).

The National Center for Cultural Competence (NCCC) at the Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development uses Cross et. al. (1989) to develop 5 standards for culturally competent organizations: 1) value diversity and difference, 2) self-assess cultural competence level, 3) understand the dynamics of difference and manage them effectively, 4) acquire cultural knowledge and institute it throughout the organization, and 5) adapt to contextual diversity in communities they serve (NCCC, n.d.; Cross et al., 1989, p. 18). NCCC follows from the footsteps of Cross et. al. (1989) and other cultural competence models (Yang & Montgomery, 2011), in that it works to educate, research, and advocate for cultural competence in health care and mental health care institutions but makes its cultural competence models accessible to any other institution or organization. Schools are certainly included in that grouping, and ones with SEL programming may find cultural competence a particularly useful framework for planning and instruction.

Insomuch as schools with SEL programing and the teachers who teach SEL skills need to collaborate with students and families and understand their communities in order to address their individual needs in context (Garbacz et. al., 2015), seeking cultural competence seems to advantage their goals. Linguistic competence is an important component to culturally competent community engagement as well because of the inseparability of language and the culture in which it is spoken. Linguistic competence includes functional communication with people not proficient in the dominant language, people with low literacy skills, and people with disabilities or hearing impairments that affect their ability to communicate (NCCC, n.d.; Makarova & Makarova, 2014). Approaching communities, families, and students as valuable resources of contextual information for use in planning instruction and building school culture can be quite effective if done with cultural and linguistic competence. This might look like a teacher
considering what academic success means in the context of a students’ culture or admitting ignorance about a student’s knowledge that is inextricably connected to her native language or multilingualism (Moule, 2012, p.17). A teacher working towards cultural and linguistic competence in communications with students and families arguably has a stronger chance of building informed, respectful partnerships built on trust and mutual reliance. Such partnerships may improve the likelihood of identifying the most relevant socio-emotional skills to target for individual students and help build a rapport between teachers and students that makes modeling SEL skills and creating safe spaces to practice them considerably easier.

There are other concepts associated with cultural competence that were developed specifically to apply to the educational context. The ideas in the concept of cultural competence are so prevalent in several other concepts, like cultural intelligence and cultural effectiveness, that the terms are at times used interchangeably and are taken to be applied identically (Goh, 2012). The following is a presentation of a few of those closely-related concepts.

**Culturally Relevant Pedagogy/Culturally Responsive Instruction or Teaching**

Culturally relevant pedagogy/teaching was, like cultural competence, also formulated as a response to disparities in service – a product of institutionally discriminatory practices – to a minority group. Ladson-Billings’ (1995) idea of culturally relevant teachers is those that: 1) use collaborative learning to help students’ academic development, 2) work towards cultural competence, 3) orient curriculum and instruction around social justice, 4) respect and seeks out student and family knowledge, and 5) presume to be a member of the community they serve. Culturally responsive teaching conceives of teachers in a similar way but puts an additional emphasis on how teachers’ self-awareness affects their instruction (Gay, 2010). Any instruction fit to be deemed culturally responsive must have as its guiding principle that students’ cultural identities matter, must in some way shape instructional content, and must inform how students are expected to work together on assignments (Au, 2007; Averill, Anderson & Drake, 2015). Both culturally responsive and culturally relevant teaching thrive in supportive and collaborative learning environments that seek to shape student attitudes and behaviors in ways that compliment SEL programming. Indeed, SEL instruction shares the same goals, as culturally responsive teachers share a need to form healthy and positive relationships with their students
and to have empathy with those from backgrounds different than their own (CASEL, 2017a; CASEL, 2017b). In this way, culturally responsive and relevant teaching seems to make modeling SEL skills more effective as culturally responsive and relevant teachers must model core competencies in their interactions with students themselves. Considering social learning theory and emotional intelligence theory, teaching SEL skills while adhering to culturally relevant and responsive teaching principles gives students a direct opportunity to observe and internalize behavior from teachers that is emotionally relevant to their cognition.

**Cultural Humility**

Cultural humility can be said to be an active part of the cultural competence process. Put simply, when practicing cultural humility teachers pay attention to their own background and take into account how their identity influences their teaching, lesson planning, and classroom management. It is to be noted that this occurs as teachers are consciously working towards cultural competence. During the cultural competence process that includes cultural humility, teachers will: 1) encourage students to be cognizant of their personal biases and assumptions, 2) teach content with abundant cultural knowledge that avoids stereotypes, and 3) understand how social systems and institutions help shape how they understanding themselves and others (Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004). Cultural humility may go a long way towards helping SEL teachers from the majority/dominant social group teach students in classrooms with few students from minority groups and many students from the majority/dominant group. It couples well with the culturally relevant/responsive principles of seeking out knowledge from students and families of other cultures and considering that knowledge when planning content and managing the classroom. In combination, these approaches may help teachers to gain the knowledge needed to target specific skills that address individual student needs.

**Multicultural Education**

Multicultural education is yet another concept that arose in response to systemic discrimination in the education of marginalized social groups in the United States. In this case, multicultural education manifested itself as a movement to address the consistent lack of representation of minority groups in educational content and instruction. It did so by supporting ethnic, racial, cultural, and gender diversity in institutional staffing, curriculum building, and classroom
planning (Banks, 1989). As a movement and not a concept generated by one or a small set of scholars, multicultural education separated into factions with different approaches to addressing educational inequities. Liberal multiculturalism seeks equal opportunities for all students while valuing their differences. Conservative multiculturalism approaches the injustice by assuming all people are equal and therefore seeks student assimilation to an ostensibly egalitarian mainstream culture. Critical multiculturalism is, unsurprisingly, critical of both latter approaches. It criticizes liberal multiculturalism for being Pollyannaish in celebrating diversity instead of fighting for equal opportunities for all students. It criticizes conservative multiculturalism for naively assuming that equal opportunity by law will necessarily stop all people and institutions from having discriminatory attitudes and sometimes even practicing discrimination (Alismail, 2016).

For the SEL instructor who works towards cultural competence, practices the cultural curiosity of socially relevant teaching and cultural humility, and uses emotional intelligence and social learning theory as a framework to respect and empower the ability of students from any background, critical multiculturalism in education likely nestles snugly into their expectation of social justice for the communities they take part in and serve. SEL educators that assume a critical multiculturalist approach have the added advantage of taking on the topic of social injustice at full speed. Such discussions are ripe opportunities to reflect with students and soak up their knowledge about how oppressive power structures and the dominant culture are relevant in their context (Alismail, 2016).

9.3 Relevance of SEL and Cultural Competence Together

As previously mentioned, culture is quite a slippery concept to define, yet its fingers extend to every group of human beings on this planet. Perhaps it is the sheer volume of existing cultural expressions that makes definers hesitant and unsure. In their exploration of cultural influences on child development, Goode & Jones (2008) find it useful to point out some features that all cultures appear to have in common: culture tells group members how to behave, it structures perceptions and shapes behaviors, it is based on a values and belief-systems, it changes over time, it applies to all people in a culture and touches every aspect of their lives (p.69). Given the complexity Goode & Jones begin to touch upon, it likely takes a tremendous skill base to be proficient in even one culture other than the one in which one was raised. This points to the relevance of SEL and cultural competence in use together as a conceptual practice. The
permutations of the cultural elements identified above are astronomical in number. If students are expected to communicate and collaborate meaningfully, productively, and peacefully with people from other socio-cultural contexts, they will certainly benefit from core SEL competencies and skills. SEL teachers prioritize skills that specifically serve that purpose, like: understanding social cues, correctly interpreting the intent of the behavior of others, positive interactions, curbing impulses inappropriate to a specific social context, empathizing with other people’s perspectives (Jones, Bouffard, & Weissbourd, 2013).

Having teachers, students, and a school community working towards acquiring social and emotional competencies and cultural competency may be essential to forging an environment where students feel supported enough to engage people from diverse backgrounds and safe enough to work through social and emotional miscues with them in the process. It is not just students that require that safety and support, it is teachers and administrators as well. Teachers who include cultural competence in their SEL programming do so for the benefit of their own socio-emotional skill building as well as their students’ (Ming & Dukes, 2006). Educators, in their outreach to include students and families in SEL programming, strive for cultural competence outside in the community as well (NCCC, n.d.). SEL practice and a cultural competence framework appear to pair naturally in many practical respects. The current study approaches its findings within a framework that considers how the two function together in a joint context and how teachers perceive and experience their juncture in each teacher’s and their school’s individual context.

10. Methodology of the Study

The following sections detail the methods used by the researcher to meet the stated aims of exploring teacher perceptions and experiences of teaching SEL while meeting student needs in their socio-cultural contexts and comparing how they are affected in different school contexts. The topic of this study was motivated by the researcher’s experience (Bryman, 2012, p.20) as a teacher of SEL skills in a specific context in Northern California. This study is inductive in and exploratory in nature, designed to record teacher perceptions in their school contexts at a moment in time. The data was then analyzed inductively and categorized for school comparison.
10.1 Research Strategy and Ontological and Epistemological Considerations

The current study uses a qualitative research approach to collecting data through semi-structured interviews and focus groups in four case studies. The approach is idiographic in that the data collected are unique to the four separate cases studied and not applicable in other places or times (Bryman, 2012, p.69) The primary data sought by the study are words, not quantities, and are approached with a qualitative principle that the teachers providing data participate in creating their own social reality within their school contexts (Bryman, 2012, p. 36). In that regard, the study takes an interpretivist epistemological position by respecting and regarding the participants’ individual contexts as authoritative sources and social constructors of knowledge. It also takes this position by acknowledging the researcher’s own biases of theoretical approach in interpreting data (Bryman, 2012, pp. 30-31). The current study also adopts an accompanying constructivist ontology that views the act of teachers sharing their perspectives as part of their creating a unique context in concert with their students and school environment. These perceptions and contexts are interactive and constantly ‘under construction’ by those within them and do not exist in a separate or fixed way. Therefore, the participants’ socio-cultural contexts and the meanings participants ascribe to them are considered changeable and self-generated (Bryman, 2012, p.33; Neuman, 2000).

10.2 Sampling and Participants

Participants in the case studies were chosen using generic purposive sampling, with some additional participants interviewed through opportunistic sampling. A non-probability sampling method was chosen in the current study in order to match participant experience and knowledge with the research questions (Bryman, 2012, p. 418). To that end, teachers were selected through the a priori criterion of self-identifying as SEL instructors of formal or informal SEL programming. It is on this basis that participants were selected to participate in the current study.

Generic sampling was chosen largely due to the short and fixed amount of time the researcher had to travel to the United States from Sweden to collect data. This sample style kept open the possibility of generating theories or concepts mid-process while recognizing the tight
Interview schedule that prevented iterative movement between theorizing and sampling typical of grounded theory (Bryman, 2012, p.422).

Participants were recruited by the researcher either directly through personal relationships with former colleagues who volunteered to participate, by professional acquaintances who agreed to participate, or by colleagues of professional acquaintances who were willing to participate. An email requesting participation was sent to some teachers who then consented to participate in the current study. Those recruited participants then helped to recruit a few more of their colleagues as participants, all of whom contacted the researcher through email and gave consent to participate in the current study. Before each interview or focus group, the researcher restated participant’s rights to retract information given or end participation at any point and that their personal and school identities would remain anonymous in the study. The researcher also re-confirmed the consent of each participant according to those terms before beginning all interviews or focus groups. More consent information may be found in the Appendix to this study.

10.3 Data Collection

Semi-Structured Interviews
The majority of teachers underwent qualitative, semi-structured interviews that documented their perspectives and experiences teaching SEL skills and meeting individual student needs. The semi-structured format was chosen to provide topical guidance during interviews but also to allow the researcher to probe deeper in to unexpected responses in order to address the research questions in-depth (Bryman, 2012, p. 476, p. 478). The researcher also benefitted from the freedom of asking questions and having conversations that built rapport with participants and encouraged trust and candor (Patton, 2002, p. 343-344). The interview guide used by the researcher included brief background questions to gauge respondents’ level of experience and training and focused mainly on their perceptions and experiences teaching SEL skills and meeting individual student needs. All interviews took place in a single day’s visit to each school except for one that took place in a coffee shop near a participant’s home. Interview times ranged between approximately 20-60 minutes and were conducted in private spaces where no one else was privy to what respondents shared. All interviews were recorded with participant permission. One interview was excluded from the study because of poor recording quality and insufficient
information reported by the participant that stayed on topic. The interview guide used by the researcher may be found in the Appendix of this study.

Focus Groups
A smaller number of teachers participated in focus groups instead of one-on-one interviews. The researcher conducted focus groups using the same questions from the interview guide as a foundation and allowed as much leeway in deviating from the guide in focus groups as in interviews. All teachers participating in focus groups volunteered to do so when the researcher mentioned the possibility. In all cases but one, the focus group became the only time teachers could spare to participate, thus eliminating them from one-on-one interviews. The current study initially planned to conduct focus groups with as many teachers as possible who had already participated in a one-on-one interview. The intended purpose was to explore how the group dynamic affected what or how teachers shared perceptions and experiences (Bryman, 2012, p. 501). Tight scheduling however prevented almost all teachers from participating in more than one discussion. One focus group of two teachers occurred opportunistically; the second participant shared an office with the first participant who asked then asked him to stay and share. He consented, and the researcher continued to interview the first participant after the second had to leave to teach a class. Another focus group of four had a participant leave after 20 minutes and another come in for the final 10 minutes of a 60-minute session. All participants were familiar with each other as close colleagues which presumably limited discomfort with participant comings and goings. A possible limitation in that particular focus group was that the teacher who left after 20 minutes was also an administrator and supervisor of the other three participants in the room. His supervisory status may have affected the other three teachers’ candor. The researcher believed the dynamic to be yet another source of data that reflected a functioning climate in the school between teachers and their supervisors, an opportunity to compare teacher responses before and after the supervisor left the room.

The researcher moderated all group discussions and asked both topic-steering and follow-up questions with the goal of encouraging participants to respond to one another and feel comfortable agreeing or disagreeing with their colleagues’ comments. The research questions are perhaps most effectively explored when participants find the most comfortable ways to share their perceptions, opinions, and experiences. The group itself adds another dimension to
individual perceptions as it interprets and makes meaning of each and multiple perceptions together (Bryman, 2012, p. 504). Focus group sessions were audio recorded with permission from all participants. The interview guide used for on-on-one interviews was the same use for focus groups and can be found in the Appendix to this study.

10.4 Data Analysis
Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were transcribed and analyzed thematically. The researcher was able to discern themes and subthemes after forming groups of codes in the data (Bryman, 2012, p. 578). Initial code identification was an intuitive process for the researcher that broadly allowed data related to teacher training, cultural difference, socio-cultural context, instructional choices, difficulties, successes, self-assessment, etc. to be coded without a more structured plan. Themes emerged after several readings from which subthemes could be discerned. School #2 which had 11 participants produced some redundant data, suggested data saturation of its themes. School #1 with its 5 participants experienced similar redundancies but to a lesser extent. Schools #3 and #4 were coded and thematically analyzed in their entirety. Once themes and subthemes emerged, comparisons were possible between the schools and the teacher perceptions and experiences contained within.

11. Setting of the Study
The following section is designed to familiarize the reader with the larger and more detailed contexts in which the study was conducted. It first provides an overview of the region and some social and economic conditions relevant to the study topic. The section then provides a brief description of current efforts in the area to include SEL and cultural competence in educational programming. Finally, after a contextual overview of factors relevant to the research topics, this section provides descriptions of each school that participated in the study.

11.1 Northern California and the San Francisco Bay Area
At almost 40,000,000 residents, California is the most populous state in the United States of America (USCB, n.d.). As of July 2016, with a GDP of USD 2.5 trillion, California surpassed France on the World Bank gross domestic product ranking to hypothetically become the world’s
sixth largest economy (World Bank, 2017; Vekshin, 2016). Purchasing Power Parity rankings from 2015 place California as the 11th largest economy in the world (Sisney & Garosi, 2015). Northern California contains a massive, nearly contiguous metropolitan area surrounding the San Francisco Bay that contains 3 of the top 8 most populous cities in the state: San Jose, San Francisco, and Oakland. This region has played a significant role in California’s economic prowess. Although the California Central Valley produces two-thirds of the nation’s agriculture, 80% of the world’s almonds, and is considered by some to be the most productive tract of agricultural land in the world (Geiling, 2015), the technology industry in the San Francisco Bay Area is currently the most powerful economic force in the state, in the country, and one of the most powerful in the world. San Francisco and Silicon Valley, an area between San Francisco and San Jose, host most of the world’s leading technology companies (Twitter, Facebook, Yahoo, Google, Apple, etc.). Recent successes in internet and mobile technologies have created an economic boom in the industry and driven corporate valuations to soaring heights. Technology industry salaries have risen sharply (starting salaries commonly at USD $120,000) been the primary cause of making housing prices in the area the most expensive in the nation (41% above national average), and contributed to many services being more expensive for all residents, regardless of whether they financially benefit from the tech boom (Yu, 2016; The Economist, 2016). This phenomenon has contributed to the exclusivity, high costs, and competitive nature of the region’s private school market.

Economic growth has also affected Bay Area population and racial demographics. Population is increasing and racial diversity along with it. An Equity Profile of the San Francisco Bay area Region conducted by PolicyLink & PERE (2015) reports that the Bay Area was the second most racially diverse region in the nation, with 58% of residents identifying as non-white, people of color on census reports. The largest group reporting as non-white are Asian/Pacific Islanders at 24% followed by Latinos at 21%. These two groups also contribute most to the region’s population growth. Black populations are declining region-wide as White populations are becoming a smaller proportion of the demographic spread in general. All people of color in general are more likely to be in poverty regardless of their level of education, and unemployment levels are highest in communities with a majority of people of color (PolicyLink & PERE, 2015). The effect on schooling from these trends has become that public schools are becoming less and less white in communities receiving more and more people of color. In San Francisco, though
Whites have remained (43%) in higher numbers than most other areas of the region, they send their children to public school less and less. Almost 30% of San Francisco’s children attend private school – the highest rate in the state and the third highest in the nation (Lorgerie & Smith, 2015). Public schools have consequently been filled more with people of color and private schools with white students whose families are more likely to be able to afford fees. Moreover, their willingness to pay often significant annual fees to educate their children, a service they subsidize when paying taxes and receive free of charge, suggests that White families and other families that pay for private schooling want additional benefits for their children, whether they be improved achievement rates, smaller class sizes, or philosophical approach.

These demographic and economic trends are creating community landscapes that are more racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse. They are also contributing to a high-pressure, competitive environment in which income inequality is increasing along with racial disparities in employment and racial segregation of schools both public and private. Latinos and African Americans have significantly less access to high-quality jobs with high wage growth (PolicyLink & PERE, 2015). More diversity in the San Francisco Bay Area likely entails more collaboration in schools, workplaces and civic arenas to take advantage of the additional resources such plurality offers. Increased segregation and inequity puts schools under pressure to help students acquire social and emotional skills in a way that meets their needs and prepares them to meet the needs of their new and less familiar neighbors. Schools that provide such programming are becoming hotter commodities in the region. Private schools have the resources, the logistical freedom and the market incentive to invest in adopting SEL and cultural competence in to their curricular and cultural frameworks.

11.2 San Francisco Bay Area Private Schools

Niche, a private school ranking organization, identifies the San Francisco Bay Area as having the majority of the highest ranked private schools in California and 11 of the top private schools in the nation (NICHE, 2017a). These rankings consider factors such as standardized testing scores, percentage of students admitted to and enrolled in top colleges, student and parent cultural and racial diversity (more diversity = higher rank), parent/student opinion of overall experience and student-teacher ratios (NICHE, 2017b). Tuition for private schools varies in the area from just below USD $10,000 per year to just above $40,000 per year. The heart of Silicon Valley is a
particularly high-tuition region for private schools but does not monopolize high tuition prices for the region. The city of San Francisco and the North and East Bay areas of the region also contain pricier schools. All schools offer some form of financial aid in consideration of an admitted family’s income; some schools offer to waive tuition for some families altogether based on financial need and other internally decided factors that are not always shared publicly. Many of these private schools, particularly on the Peninsula in Silicon Valley, have very competitive admissions processes, some admitting as low as 15% of all applicants (PSR, 2017). Private school parents and those aspiring to be private school parents continue to pay high annual fees despite the region containing some of the nation’s top performing and most competitive public high schools, like Gunn and Palo Alto High Schools, that send comparable numbers of students to top colleges as private schools in the area (Rossin, 2015). This suggests that other factors besides university admission, including different educational approaches and specific contexts private schools offer, affect families’ decisions to send students to private schools. San Francisco Bay Area private schools offer a range of approaches to students and families, from religious to international to primary language (French, Chinese) to Waldorf and Montessori to college preparatory to athletic and extra-curricular to diversity and social and emotional learning to gender specific to outdoor learning to online only. These approaches are typically spelled out in a public statement of mission and values that schools display on their websites and on placards around the school.

11.3 SEL and Cultural Competence in San Francisco Bay Area Private Schools

Social and emotional learning principles increasingly appear on mission and value placards as well as in curricular development and school culture building in Bay Area private schools. Some of it has taken the form of intervention programming in response to problematic patterns, like a rash of student suicides in response to the high-pressure, high-school environment on the Peninsula south of San Francisco in Silicon Valley (Mattson, 2015; Rossin, 2015). Some schools have adopted universal SEL programming of one sort or another as a philosophical approach to teaching, learning and community building. The Nueva School for example, a private school in Silicon Valley, has had an SEL educational model since it was founded 50 years ago and now
offers professional development institutes for other educators several times a year (Nueva, 2016). There are consultants willing to advise schools for a fee on how to establish SEL programming, as well as professional development from collaborations of community organizations that provide after-school programming for SEL skill building for youth.

The Bay Area also hosts organizations like the National Equity Project that provide resources and teacher education towards cultural competence in teaching, like the Teaching With A Cultural Eye framework (NEP, 2012). Consultants also offer for-fee guidance in helping schools appreciate and include a diversity of students and consider equity and justice when planning curriculum and structuring school culture (BLINK, 2017). These SEL and cultural competence consultancies suggest that there is a viable market for SEL and cultural competence initiative building in Bay Area schools, with a presumably larger private school market because of the affordability and practicality of a consultation for one school to change programming and structure as opposed to a municipality hiring for consultation towards a district-wide change. Cultural competence when considered in the private school context often falls under the rubric of diversity. Bay Area private schools commonly hire a diversity director to lead the school’s efforts of inclusiveness, equity, and meeting individual student and family needs. This is a position more typical for individual private schools than individual public schools in the area, perhaps due to different salary and hiring limitations.

11.4 Description of Schools

Below is a brief contextual picture of the four schools that participated in the current study. The study compares teacher perceptions and experiences in four private schools in the San Francisco Bay Area. Descriptions include school geographical contexts, the schools’ missions and values, culture and structure and any relevant information about school history and current teachers and students. School names and teacher names remain anonymous in ethical respect for their privacy.

School #1

This is a K-8 coeducational day school in the city of San Francisco straddling the border of a middle-to-high income neighborhood and a lower income neighborhood that is rapidly gentrifying and developing economically. Residents in the area are culturally diverse, representing almost proportional citywide demographics. It is a fairly safe neighborhood in
which children and adolescents walk around without significant fear of crime. The school is situated on a corner of a city block and takes up one quarter of it. It is contained within a single building with exposed courtyards and is attached to a recently-built gymnasium. It is a coeducational day school founded in 1981. Tuition for the 2016-17 school year is USD $31,074 per year with significant tuition discounts offered to about 20% of students. Average class size is 22, it has two teachers per classroom in grades K-5 (1 teacher/classroom in 6-8) which helps to create a low 6:1 student to teacher ratio. The school has at least one full-time counselor and multiple learning resource teachers who help classroom teachers with curricula co-curricular planning. Enrollment is 400 students, 43% of which identify as students of color. Faculty and staff of color comprise 25% of total. The cornerstones of its mission and philosophy are: academic excellence, diversity and inclusiveness in its community, strong partnership between school and family, shared compassion of values, integrity and responsibility, and active involvement with the city. The school has several programs designed to connect its students and the institution itself with the community, including cleaning up the local park and training aspiring educators from the community. They claim to embrace diversity and cultural competence by providing a list of resources based on practitioners they curate. The school website has the following values scrolling across its home page: curiosity, commitment, friendship, reflection, and creativity.

School #2
The school is located in a small municipality surrounded by other larger municipalities that border the city of Palo Alto in Silicon Valley. Its postal code has been called the most affluent and its real estate the most expensive in the U.S. The school is situated amongst fenced and gated mansions nearby a private country club with horse-riding grounds. The school grounds share a bit less than half of a 62-acre plot of land with a higher learning institution with which it was once affiliated. Together these institutions were founded in the 1920’s and were single sex, boys/young men only. In 1981 the school became coeducational, and in 1994 it split from the college to become a grades 6-12, independent institution. The school consists of a complex of buildings on the grounds among large oak and redwood trees. A mansion that houses all administrative offices, an upper school student center and lounge, and the school library separates the middle and upper school campuses. Among the other buildings are a new, large
indoor athletic facility, a new, large creative arts center, science laboratories, classrooms and individual upper school teacher offices and a swimming pool. The school is in the process of building a new complex at the center of its campus that houses a new dining facility, student center, library, technology center and outdoor plaza. This construction as well as the two recently built athletic and arts centers total in the tens of millions of dollars to build. Its middle school enrollment is 221 students, and upper school is 574. Student-to-teacher ratios are 11:1 in the middle school and 10:1 in the upper school. The school employs a full-time middle school counselor, a full-time upper school counselor, a consulting upper school counselor, and a diversity director. It advertises that 100% of students participate in creative arts and 80% of upper school students play a team sport. Tuition for the 2016-17 school year is USD $42,830.

The school describes itself as “challenging, engaging, and joyful” and its teachers as “innovative”. It prioritizes academics, creative arts, and athletics and purports to help students develop positive values and character and high ethical and moral standards. The school’s mission for its students involves: expanding their interests, developing skills for success in college, being ethical and responsible, and engaging with the larger community. Some of its values encourage students to: have high academic standards, think creatively and independently, commit to purposes larger than themselves, and appreciate diversity. The school claims a commitment to being diverse and inclusive of people from different racial, cultural, economic and religious backgrounds. It offers no public information about how much of its student body or faculty are people of color. The researcher having worked at the school for five years and recently observed students and spoken to faculty on campus estimates the student body to be 15-20% people of color and roughly the same percentage of faculty members.

School #3

The school is located on an isolated road in a rural, hilly and scenic section of Silicon Valley. The school was founded in the 1950’s by Benedictine monks from an abbey in Hungary who later affiliated themselves with an abbey in the state of New Hampshire in the United States. Three of the original group of founding monks continue to live on 51-acre ranch style campus situated on grassy hills amongst towering redwood trees. It was founded as a boarding school for boys. The number of boarders has decreased over the years; 15% of students currently board there. It changed to a grade 6-12 coeducational school in the 1990’s and allowed girls to board in
The campus includes state-of-the-art athletic facilities and fields, full service dining and boarding facilities, arts and technology centers, a large garden that grows fruits and vegetables, and distinct but connected middle and upper school classroom and faculty facilities. Tuition for the 2016-17 school year not including books is USD $42,275 for non-boarding students and $65,275 for boarders. Approximately 20% of families receive financial aid that pays for a significant portion of tuition and expenses. Enrollment is 385 students which includes local and international students, 43% of whom identify as students of color. Approximately 30% of faculty identify as people of color with 3% of faculty emigrating from abroad. Student to teacher ratio is 8.2:1. The academic program focuses on college preparation and encourages collaboration, creativity, communication, critical thinking and resilience in problem solving. The school lists its values as Benedictine: spirituality, hospitality, integrity, individuality and community. The community is said to know and love each student. Students are required to take 6 semesters of theology to graduate, and students and faculty gather for a weekly “prayer” assembly for reflection and community building in which pertinent school and social issues are discussed. The school has a diversity mission focused on equity and inclusion of faculty and students from underrepresented backgrounds including ethnic, gender, religious, sexual orientation and racial diversity. It states that it wants faculty and students to “thrive within their own identities”. The school employs a full-time counselor for students and a diversity director.

School #4
This school is an all-girls middle school (6-8) located in a small-to-medium sized city in Silicon Valley. It is situated on a road along a highway near the edge of town and is housed in what appears to be a converted office building adjacent to other office buildings with which it shares a parking lot. It is surrounded by a middle class residential neighborhood whose real estate value has increased significantly in the past 5 years. This school is entirely contained within the office building; it has no significant outdoor facilities. The school was founded in 1998 to be an inclusive school that nurtures girls during the crucial middle years of adolescent development. Its mission is to promote academic growth and encourage girls to discover their strength and express their voice while respecting the voices of others. Part of their guiding principles are to address girls’ social and emotional needs and prepare them to live in a diverse cultural environment. They employ a network of faculty to support social and emotional growth and include those
principles in curricula, school culture, and community involvement. Girls attend an SEL class once a week and those principles are infused throughout other content curricula and classroom management. Most schoolwork takes place in small groups that give students opportunities to practice the SEL skills they learn in SEL classes. These classes provide accurate information on sexuality, body image, substance abuse, and media messages amongst other issues pertinent to girls’ social and emotional development. Its SEL instructional goals are: self-awareness/intrapersonal skills, social-awareness/interpersonal skills, cross-cultural competence, sexual education, and drug education. The school practices diversity education, the principles of which are: justice, freedom, equity, and equality. Part of their commitment to diversity is to expose students to content highlighting the experiences of people from diverse populations in a belief that student backgrounds and experiences must be considered in pedagogical planning to address multiple ways of thinking, respecting each student’s individual context. They also prioritize creating opportunities for families to connect with each other and faculty in order to appreciate the diversity in the community, involve parents in their daughters’ education, and take advantage of family knowledge to plan programming and build school culture. The school requires families to commit to 15 volunteer hours each year in some capacity at the school or with school events. This could come in the form of teaching courses, being involved with classroom activities, or chaperoning field trips or events. The school has an enrollment of 200 students. Tuition for the 2016-17 school year is USD $31,500. Financial aid and scholarships are available for those who qualify, funded by donations from the community.

12. Findings

The findings are presented in relation to topics in the research questions. Schools are compared according to themes found within teacher interviews and how they differ or share similarities. To re-acclimate the reader to the contexts of each school, the findings will begin first with a brief report outlining teacher respondents then with an analysis of how teachers perceived that school context affected SEL instruction.
Respondents

A total of 21 teachers participated from four different schools. The researcher expected perhaps half this total and attributes the final amount to the researcher’s acquaintances in the community which unexpectedly facilitated opportunistic sampling on short notice. This number pushes the limit of striking a balance between a sample small enough to allow for in-depth analysis and large enough to be representative of each case, and indeed in some cases this balance was poorly struck (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007 as cited in Bryman, 2012, p. 425).

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Table #1: Number of Participants per School

The researcher was able to reach redundancy in data collection for Schools #1 and #2. This includes one focus group with two teachers in School #1 and two separate focus groups with two and five teachers respectively in School #2. The numbers in Schools #3 and #4 represent the only participants available to the researcher at the time, in part because School #3 only produced two teachers who both volunteered to participate and self-identified as SEL instructors. It is therefore plausible to consider this low number relatively representative of that school’s SEL staff. School #4 only had three available SEL instructors, but the institution practices schoolwide universal SEL programming of which these three educators were representative. The researcher does not equate the asymmetrical numbers represented in each school but considers the data gathered from teachers within them to be comparable as individual case studies.

How School Context Affects SEL Instruction

Teachers perceived their schools to fall into two categories in this regard: schools designed around SEL or that strongly value non-academic instruction and schools that prioritize academics and consider SEL significantly less.
The SEL-centered schools (#1, #4) reported that their collaborative and supportive contexts made it comfortable and easier for them to teach SEL skills. Both schools prioritize to varying degrees surrounding students with opportunities to develop social and emotional skills as a community building strategy and both an academic and a human development support. School #1 (K-8) reported to value SEL structurally and across grades and to build SEL skills cumulatively. Multiple teachers reported comfort with a consistent vocabulary and grade by grade explicit social and emotional skill level expectations, and all teachers reported feeling supported by a strong team around them. School #4 (grades 6-8) reported an environment of total support – from faculty to parents to administration – of their SEL designed school. A teacher from School #4 reported:

“I feel lucky to be a part of a team. So when something comes up in my classroom where a kid is upset, I know I can go to my guidance advisor, I can go to my 6th grade team, we have a shared 6th grade office. We have grade level meetings every other week and at those meetings we have time to discuss each individual student and any needs that are popping up. Those notes are shared with anyone who comes in contact with those students and the guidance advisor/counselor is part of that team. We discuss all steps that have been taken to address a kid’s needs. So I don’t feel alone if there’s a situation where I don’t know quite how to deal.”

Teachers from Schools #2 and #3 reported discomfort and difficulty teaching SEL skills in their school contexts. Difficulties stemmed from a lack of SEL prioritizing, uncertain capacity, conflicting aims, and a lack of consistency and follow through from colleagues and administration. Both schools reported difficulties coming from the fact that many teachers were either not comfortable with or had not “bought-in” to the merits of teaching SEL. Both schools also reported being in a transition period of re-arranging priorities from a purely academic focus to including SEL skill instruction in curricula and structural planning. In the meantime, however, teachers in School #2 (grades 6-12) reported structural barriers to: collaborating with colleagues to teach SEL skills, addressing the needs of underserved students, and teaching SEL skills in general. Moreover, School #2 reported significant faculty resistance to being SEL instructors particularly in the upper school (9-12), viewing themselves as content experts not SEL teachers. A respondent in School #2 reported hearing teachers saying, “Why are we doing mindfulness?
Why are we doing SEL stuff? We should be focusing on academics’. Even the teachers say, 'Why are we doing all this advocacy stuff? I wasn’t trained in this. I’m an intellect.’ Some people get it. But some people question it, from faculty to parents to students.” A re-current theme explaining the school’s ambiguity of institutional direction was explained by an upper school teacher:

“When you have a school that costs $42,000 a year or whatever it is now, what needs to be talked about is the transactional relationship of that. Here’s your check and I’m going to send my kid to your school. What do I get back? Is it that I get greater access to these 15 colleges? Or 10 colleges? Does it improve my chance to go to those places or are we really communicating what we’re trying to get at the end of that.”

Meanwhile, School #3 reported a desire amongst faculty for more capacity and school and curricular structure to teach SEL skills with little administrative impetus to put a plan in place. The result is a piecemeal non-academic focus in an otherwise academically focused school that relies on the chance skill of individual teachers to find their own opportunities to teach SEL skills to students.

**Preparation to Teach SEL Skills and Measuring SEL Success**

Every school reported informal training as the primary source of preparation to teach SEL skills. Consequently, teachers’ perceptions of their level of preparedness depended upon one or a combination of: personal life experiences, mentor guidance, observational skill, and accumulated skills over time. School #2 notably reported sporadic in-house professional development related to SEL and lamented its lack of continuity and reliance on its own faculty to present.

All schools also reported measuring successful SEL instruction using one or a combination of: informal student observations, noting when students reach concrete goals, and receiving feedback from students (not School #3). Notable also was that schools #1 and #4 that identify as designed around SEL or strongly value SEL measured success by their perception of happy, interactive students (School #1) and if a student felt connected to someone else on campus. A teacher at School #4 explained about her students, “In order for them to be successful
academically they have to have that social emotional connection with at least somebody here on campus. So, I look out to see if that happens by the end of their first year.”

**Approaches to Teaching SEL Skills**

Responses in this topic tended also to follow the division of schools that identify as strongly valuing or structured around SEL (Schools #1 and #4) and those that identified as academics-focused (Schools #2 and #3). Teachers in the SEL-centered schools prioritized: connecting with each student, building a kind and safe community, being trustworthy and listening to students and adjusting/teaching to student needs. A learning resource teacher in School #1 explained about the importance of building trust and connection with students and creating a safe environment in order to curb undesired behavior, “Kids are going to be unpredictable at times, and you can’t always manage their behavior. It’s just that, the more trust you develop with them, the more safe they’ll feel with me and with the environment. And I’m wanting to say the less they’ll exhibit those kinds of behaviors.”

Besides a shared goal of decreasing student stress, teachers in the academics-focused schools had quite different approaches to teaching SEL skills shaped by their contexts. School #3 admitted to an anemic SEL presence on campus, with some formal classes in 8th grade for a quarter of the school year and “short meetings every four or five weeks” to check-in on upper school students. Otherwise School #3 relied on friends or family or teachers of a student having a social or emotional issue to report it to the counselor who then pulls that student out of class for a chat. School #2 identified as being in a period of transition from a strictly academic focus to balance in more of an SEL focus. The transition resulted in a split identity; some teachers modeled SEL skills and were responsive to non-academic student needs, and some were not. It also resulted in wishes for safe spaces and a sense of belonging for all students as well as a lack of consistent follow through and collaboration amongst teachers to manifest it. Lack of administrative oversight and support of SEL initiatives was also a source of frustration that shaped approaches to SEL instruction. A respondent reports:

“I’ve been doing SEL in my classroom for 12 years and I’ve been observed twice. I’ve had no formal review. Not one administrator has really combed through my curriculum and said ‘You
need to improve here or we need you to change this.’ Maybe that’s good because they trust me, but I don’t know. Innovating SEL is left up to me to do. 100%.”

The attempted transition away from a strictly academic focus at School #2 results in the following frustration from another respondent, “Not helping students to add worth, value, strength and understanding their incredible human qualities before being judged on college acceptance or rejections doesn’t serve them as people or in the college application process.” The school’s limbo status also produces the following process for yet another respondent and a minority student form an underserved community:

“We talk through, you were meant to be here, you earned this spot. You deserve it. When students find their resources, they get it, become more comfortable. But it’s a hard process and can be gut wrenching to watch. We feel like we want to dive in and make them have a sense of belonging more than they do. Because that affects their academics. Always second guessing yourself means you’re not realizing the type of student you’re capable of.”

Another strong and notable theme that appeared from School #2 is its commitment to promoting leadership as an SEL strategy.

**Approaches to Cultural Competence**

Themes in this topic again fall mostly into either the SEL-centered school side or the academic-focused school side.

Teachers perceived their approach to cultural competence in the SEL-centered schools (#1, #4) as: creating safe spaces for students to share details about themselves and their families, getting to know families and including them, valuing and adjusting to student needs and listening and trying to understand others’ perspectives. School #4 made a point to emphasize their efforts to constantly consider and specifically include underprivileged and underrepresented members of their community. They prioritized “being conscious” of equity and inclusion and that it is an ongoing process of self-evaluation. Part of inclusion was integrating issues of race, class, and difference into curricula. A respondent described the focus of and effort needed in this approach:
“In SEL we outright talk about white privilege. Like when we come back from summer we’ve learned not to say what did you do on your vacation. So there’s a consciousness. And yet there’s still... we’re not going to diminish that. But how do you help girls feel good. It’s an ongoing conversation, question, fight, battle I think, within ourselves.”

Teachers in school #4 also reported their approach encouraged diverse student groups to collaborate and create activities to advance inclusivity in the community. A respondent explained:

“We have a diversity club, gender and sexuality alliance, Girls Learn International which is sort of an international education and women’s rights alliance. And this year they have been getting together and talking to each other about ways to make this place more inclusive and to have it come from the kids. So the diversity group is going to propose an activity for everyone to do in advisory and they are going to shape it and plan it.”

Teachers in the academic-focused schools (#2, #3) perceived their approach to cultural competence as: unprepared, individual, reliant on diversity director, and reliant on a few adults looking out for the needs of underserved, underprivileged minority students. School #2 reported their approach to cultural competence to be shaped and challenged by the needs of students who don’t feel included or welcome on campus because of racial/cultural, socio-economic, or familial differences from the predominantly privileged, wealthy, and White student population and culture. A very small number of teachers felt comfortable addressing difference and had strategies to meet individual student needs, but felt unsupported by the school. A respondent explains, “The school creates the space but does not go the extra step to pull students together who would benefit from having a conversation about identity and culture.” Those teachers reported feeling supported in their approach to cultural competence by a small number of proactive, vocal minority students who demand equity and that the school address their needs, but all teachers acknowledged that most minority students do not feel so empowered. An upper school teacher described a small group advisory session with all privileged students from the majority culture except one:
“…one student was talking about who was taking them to the dance but the other student had a disabled brother and lived in a single parent non-English speaking home. I’ve never heard that student raise those issues in open session or class discussion once. Not ever. Even though the other students know that’s her situation. It’s just not a safe space for her to bring that up.”

School #3 reported less complexities in their approach to cultural competence. The school reported relying entirely on the few teachers who feel any capacity to identify and support the needs of a diversity of students. One respondent reported feeling “haunted” by a deep uncertainty in his capacity to serve a diversity of students and know if he’s meeting their needs. Meanwhile, another respondent reported regular check-ins with the few minority students in his grade, learning a lot about them, discovering their individual needs and being a trusted adult for them to come to on campus.

**Approaches to Involving Families**

Once again, teachers’ perceptions of how they approached involving families in SEL instruction largely fell onto either side of the SEL-centered schools versus academics-focused schools binary.

Teachers in the SEL-centered schools (#1, #4) wanted families close. They reported approaching family involvement by: forming a child-centered relationship, having open and transparent communication, and valuing family knowledge. School #1 tended more toward establishing a predictable and reliable communication system between teachers and families whereas School #4 reported more of an open-door policy that encourages and supports intimate family involvement, joint vigilance of students, and a tight-knit, nurturing community.

The academics-focused schools (#2, #3) wanted families more at a distance. Teachers reported approaching family involvement by: contacting parents only when necessary and allowing parents to contact them when they suspect a problem at home with their child. Teachers at School #2 largely reported being available for families while encouraging them to step back from the school and allow their children more autonomy in forming relationships and self-advocating. Practically this approach translated to teachers’ desire for limited family interactions and almost no use of family knowledge in teaching, with the notable exception of one respondent who is charged with reaching out to families from underserved minority groups. This respondent
tries to bring parents into the community as much as possible. Another respondent explained her approach in her school context:

“...the focus in public schools is on traditionally marginalized groups with parents who feel like they’re not part of the system. So it’s about bringing parents in to the system. But then when you’re coming from private schools environment you’re trying to get parents out of the system. It’s a totally different approach to parent partnerships. Sometimes they reach out with resources or ideas like articles or films, but we don’t have a formal outreach relationship. Unlike our diversity inclusion outreach group.”

School #3 reported sharing a similar philosophy of phasing parents out of the equation as much as is feasible and for similar reasons as School #2. School #3 has the added dimension of no uniform structure for parent contact, including no advisors for students who would serve as a liaison between parent and school. As a result, teachers contact parents as individuals, not as a part of a collaborative teaching team. This often makes parent contact piecemeal and uncoordinated.

13. Discussion

SEL-Centered vs. Academics-Focused

Perceptions, and to a lesser extent experiences, of the SEL-centered schools (#1, #4) were mostly aligned, as were those of the academic-focused schools (#2, #3). Though this is not to imply a causal relationship as this study examines only specific contexts, it is a grounding point that facilitates comparison of findings concerning school-context effect on teaching SEL skills and meeting diverse student and family needs.

The academics-focused Schools #2 and #3 have priorities and structures that challenge the SEL process for both teachers and students, including inadequate modeling of SEL skills, high-pressure/high-stress environments, and lack of responsiveness to non-academic student needs (Weissberg et. al., 2015; Williford & Wolcott, 2015). This stressful environment that prioritizes individual success models many self-interested behaviors and structures that are not concerned with the needs of others. If, according to social cognitive and learning theories,
students learn by observing, internalizing, practicing, and possibly augmenting their beliefs and expectations, the academic-focused schools have a decreased capacity to model empathy, positive and healthy relationships, and constructive cooperation with others. Given that these skills among other SEL skills are associated with improved academic outcomes, the academic-focused schools may be limiting their efficacy by not prioritizing teaching them (Durlak et. al., 2011).

Schools #1 and #4, who strongly valued SEL and designed their school around SEL respectively, set-up their SEL instructors and students for success. Both schools integrate SEL into academic learning, prioritize getting to know students, prioritize caring relationships between students and adults, and have targeted strategies to involve parents. In integrating these qualities, these schools are more likely to be effective in both SEL and academic learning (Rutledge et. al. 2015). Indeed, both schools report a general sense that students are thriving as individuals and as community members. Practiced consistently and modeled over time, SEL skills build on each other in a process of maturation. From a bioecological systems perspective, students’ proximal processes outside of school (home, extra-curricular, sport, community, etc.) are affected by how an individual interacts with the people and events in one’s school in a process that changes as the individual’s body, mind, and emotions change over time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Receiving SEL instruction in a context like the SEL-centered schools where SEL skills are taught consistently from year to year, students strengthen their capacity to manage their own emotions, be aware of the emotions of others, and form healthy and positive relationships across contexts and over time (Coelho, Marchante & Sousa, 2015; Jones & Bouffard, 2012). That teachers reported students in the academics-focused schools did not have this opportunity is a significant statement about the different experiences of teachers and students in the academic-focused and SEL-centered schools.

**SEL-Focus and Cultural Competence Go Together**

The findings are clear in that the SEL-centered schools (#1, #4) have a more comfortable and productive relationship with cultural competence than the academic-focused schools (#2, #3). Teachers and students at the schools embracing the cultural competence process were practicing cultural humility more frequently. This is not surprising given that cultural humility, a step along the cultural competence continuum, is theoretically embedded in the SEL instruction process.
When teachers listen to student stories, value them, and use that information to shape relevant SEL instruction, they put their own cultural perspectives on hold, giving themselves a chance to prioritize another person’s cultural perspective and knowledge (Brown, Vesely & Dallman, 2016). Teachers in School #2 for example had fewer opportunities to do just that and expressed frustration. The structure of their weekly non-academic student check-ins limited discussions to themes set by three SEL curricular coordinators before the school year even began. As a result, teachers could not adapt the only SEL programming the school offers to what’s most relevant to students at the moment. At the same time, they missed an opportunity to practice and model cultural humility. In addition to this structural barrier, School #2 had a widespread lack of teacher investment in SEL programming and instructional capacity. This diminishes the amount and quality of social awareness and interpersonal skill modeling. This in turn diminishes the opportunities for the majority of students as well as for minority students and students from underprivileged communities to appreciate and practice cultural humility. Acquiring cultural knowledge about students and adapting to student contexts are critical steps along the road towards cultural competence (NCCC, n.d.; Cross et al., 1989, p. 18; Moule, 2012, p.6; Au, 2007). Administrative focus, school culture, and teacher incapacity and disinterest hinder the academics-focused schools from taking those steps. A community such as School #2’s, where students of color and students from underserved communities at some point in their time at the school overwhelmingly report feeling unwelcome by their White and more privileged peers and that they don’t belong at the school, can scarcely afford to pass up chances to learn and practice cultural humility. The researcher also argues that those environments also stymied opportunities for students to develop and practice self- and social-awareness and inter- and intra-personal skills critical to the SEL process.

The findings can be viewed conversely to address that argument; the schools that approached cultural competence with a collective and conscious effort towards including a diversity of families and students were more structurally prepared to teach SEL skills and build their communities around SEL principles. The SEL-centered schools (#1, #4) feature multicultural education as a selling point to prospective parents. Valuing families from diverse cultures and the knowledge they bring to the classroom and community encouraged those schools to invite all families and students to share unique details about their individual contexts in a community or classroom setting (Alismail, 2016). Teachers used information gleaned from
families and students to shape SEL instruction and target specific skills to develop in the most relevant context and time possible for each student. So, when a 5th grade teacher in School #1 received a new girl in her class mid-year, she invited the family to come in and speak to the class about anything that interests them. The goal was to introduce the family to the community on their own terms, acknowledging qualities the family identifies as most important, not the school. When they chose to present about their respective home countries and cultures therein, the teacher augmented a current student project to incorporate that new information.

In this case, the teacher’s culturally responsive instruction that prioritizes using student and family cultural identities and knowledge (Au, 2007; Averill, Anderson & Drake, 2015) gave rise to new opportunities for SEL instruction. In her approach to cultural competence in introducing the new family, the 5th grade teacher at School #1 modeled and allowed the new student’s parents to model social awareness. At the same time, it gave students an opportunity to practice social awareness and relationship skills by welcoming the new girl, getting to know her, and asking her and her parents about their background for use in their project (CASEL, 2017a). Responsive SEL programming of this sort that adapts to student/family cultures has been shown to help students develop lasting social and emotional competencies (Cramer & Castro-Olivo, 2016).

A 6th grade teacher from School #4 used the same tactic of allowing her approach to cultural competence to enhance her SEL instruction. Her classroom and school culture encourages personal stories and cultural identity to help shape discussion and guide curricula. One of her students came to her in that spirit and asked if she could present to the 6th grade how and why she would be celebrating Ramadan in the coming weeks. The ascent of islamophobic sentiment in national and political conversations make this a particularly tense and emotionally charged topic to discuss (McCollum, 2017). SEL skills are useful tools in such discussions, particularly for young students who are likely to have less experience with emotional discussions about identity and would benefit from skilled guidance that also helps shape a sense of classroom community (Cefai & Cavioni, 2014, p.19). Because this was at the end of the school year, the teacher attributed the student’s preparedness to share an emotionally sensitive and personal story to the social-justice-centered academic and SEL curricula, “...she just felt more comfortable with her peers because of SEL, because of different experiences. [She was] pretty willing and open to talk about things that are hard.” The 6th grade teacher’s culturally relevant approach to
instruction that prioritizes social justice and student knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 1995) opened the door to new opportunities for students to practice SEL skills like understanding and regulating emotions, forming values, and empathizing with people from different backgrounds (Weissberg et al., 2015). This approach to cultural competence both facilitates expanded SEL programming and meets several standards of culturally responsive classroom management, a strategy inherently designed to build caring classroom communities (Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke & Curran, 2004; Cefai & Cavioni, 2014, pp. 18-19).

The academics-focused schools (#2, #3) approached SEL and cultural competence more as desired goals than ingrained structural practices, thus preventing them from interacting and benefiting one another. School #2 approached cultural competence institutionally by relying on a few individual teachers and the impetus of empowered students to identify and address the needs of minority students and students from underserved communities. The diversity director (who is also a teacher and a participant in the current study) reaches out to those students and leads/teaches many of them in a diversity group that discusses issues of identity, belonging, socio-economic justice, and racial discrimination. These personal and emotionally charged discussions are wonderful opportunities for modeling and practicing self-awareness (being aware of and regulating intensity of emotions), emotional expression, and relationship management skills (understanding social situations and value of relationships) (McCabe and Altamura, 2011). Indeed, minority students build social and emotional skills SEL during these sessions. Teachers reported that many minority students do not feel safe having those same discussions in small advisory meetings with White peers from the dominant culture. They also reported that emotionally challenging conversations about race, identity and social justice were largely not had in the larger school context.

School #3 also left meeting minority students’ needs to their diversity director and the few teachers and students who take the responsibility upon themselves. From a bioecological systems perspective, students who do not engage in these topics with minority students constrain their proximal processes and thus the way they engage concretely and abstractly with the world at large to a limited variety of the socio-emotional interactions accessible to them (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Dreyer & Singh, 2016). From an emotional intelligence perspective, this majority of students – and teachers for that matter – limit the variety of ways
they can use their emotions to enhance their thinking and thus their intellectual growth (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Dolev & Leshem, 2016).

In summary, the researcher hypothesizes that by approaching cultural competence and SEL with considerably less import than academic achievement and top-college admission rates, the academics-focused schools missed out on the mutually enhancing benefits of both. In contrast, by approaching SEL and cultural competence as nearly or equally important as academic rigor in curricula and structure, Schools #1 and #4 benefitted from the interaction of all three which includes a community that collaborates to be inclusive and welcoming of diverse students and families.

**Active vs. Passive Family Involvement**

The academics-focused schools (#2, #3) reported approaching involving families in the community more passively and on the school’s terms, whereas the SEL-focused schools (#1, #4) reported approaching involving families more actively and on the family’s terms. In most cases, teachers at the SEL-focused schools simply have more contact with their students’ families than the academics-focused schools. They gather more contextual information about their students through their families, and they encourage families to decide what information about themselves is important for the school and community to know. This is a very useful habit in creating inclusive classrooms and learning environments that serve diverse student needs, and it takes considerable teacher effort to do so (Kumashiro, 2015; Diller & Moule, 2005, p.5). There is evidence to suggest that this effort pays off in the journey towards cultural competence. Having cross-cultural experiences – like getting to know families of different cultures in their contexts – is critical in the development of institutional and individual cultural competence (Lopes-Murphy & Murphy, 2016). The academics-focused schools (#2, #3) choose to keep families at a distance in order to promote student autonomy. They allow family contact mainly in school-structured, quasi-interactive information sessions, conferences about student progress 3-4 times per year, and by appointment if there is an important issue to discuss about their child. At most, one of these three structures (conferences) allows families to somewhat dictate the flow of the contact and share information about themselves of their own choosing, an opportunity families have at most four times per year.
It is difficult to be culturally responsive to a family’s needs with such little opportunity to get to know them under informal conditions. This may be particularly true with families who fall outside of the dominant or majority culture, are socio-economically disadvantaged or who are non-native English speakers (North American context). Teachers and schools that empower families and students who face racial, stereotype, socio-economic or language barriers to integrating into a school community and engage it on their own terms, afford them greater equity in building healthy and welcoming school cultures and developing SEL skills (Slaten et. al., 2016; Dinallo, 2016).

The family role is critical in the child’s development, particularly of social and emotional skills, because it is a center point to which a child returns, physically and emotionally, after engaging with external systems like school, religious communities, peer groups, sports and activities, etc. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It is important then for the family to inform the school and for the school to inform the family about how best to serve a child’s social and emotional development (Dinallo, 2016). School #4 approaches this challenge by adopting true school-family partnerships (Garbacz, Swanger-Gagné & Sheridan, 2015) that not only invite family involvement in shaping or running school activities, lessons, and outings, it requires it as a condition of admission to the school. It also provides Spanish-to-English interpreters as well as child-care for evening meetings and events. By contrast teachers described the bulk of School #2’s parent involvement as volunteer chaperoning of field trips in the middle of the work day, positions that are overwhelmingly taken up by mothers who do not work. The approaches to family involvement taken by the two types of schools in the current study significantly influence those schools’ cultures and capacity to deliver SEL instruction that meets individual student needs, a finding that concurs with some extant literature on the subject (McCormick et. al., 2016; Dinallo, 2016).

**Experience Trains and Students Know Best**

Teachers in all schools were unified; they perceived their preparation to teach SEL skills to have come from personal life experience over time. Only one teacher cited an interesting combination of insights gained from personal experience and the training she received as a counselor, “I think both life experience and training taught me to teach SEL. I have life experiences but my training taught me to not project my own belief system on to it and to be aware when I am.” This is
perhaps the most complexed and nuanced perspective on preparation the researcher received in the current study. School type (academics-focused or SEL-centered) had no correlation to perceptions of preparation to teach SEL skills, though teachers in two schools reported having helpful guidance from an experienced mentor and wanting continuous training over the course of their career. The desire for continuous training is corroborated by extant literature (Waaajid, Garner & Owen, 2013), but the almost complete lack of formal training in SEL instruction is not. This is perhaps attributable to the heavy focus in extant research on public school teachers and pre-service teachers who require state mandated training to be employed. The private and independent school sphere is more akin to a private company; their hiring standards are not beholden to teacher licensure requirements. However, all schools that participated in this study require professional development and continuous learning as a condition of teacher employment, and all participants embraced the concept as professionals. Accompanying this unanimity was another universal perception that informal observation of student behavior and unplanned interactions with students were the best gauges of student progress in developing SEL skills. Taken together, the reliance on gaining life experiences (observing experts, trial and error, gaining wisdom over time) to prepare to teach SEL skills and watching students have life experiences as a way of evaluating how they develop those skills infused SEL instruction in the context of the participating schools with an air of informality.

The binding agent holding the training-assessment continuum strands together seems to be the quality of relationships with students. There is evidence to suggest that, as teacher social and emotional competencies are necessary to impart effective SEL skills in student instruction, teachers benefit from consistent SEL skill building as well (Dolev & Leshem, 2016; Jennings & Frank, 2015). Indeed, teachers in the current study all reported that forming and maintaining strong and trusting relationships with students was compulsory for any SEL instruction or assessment. Social and emotional skills are integral to forming and maintaining healthy relationships, as are culturally competent principles when considering friendships with people from diverse backgrounds and cultures. This was a tall order for teachers in the study, who felt stretched fairly thin between their responsibilities to get to know students (and families in the cases of the SEL-focused schools), being expected to build their own social and emotional competencies and modeling, instructing and assessing SEL skills in their students. Almost all teachers cited a need for structural space to gather and replenish their own emotional stock so
they won’t burnout on the job. This need aligns with recent literature (Kasler, Hen & Nov, 2013; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Even those who perceived themselves as competent at SEL instruction in culturally competent ways felt as though they got no relief, as a respondent explained, “...more and more things get piled on my plate to the point where if I want relief I have to leave the institution. How do I handle that? I don’t handle it very well at all. I keep doing it to the point of exhaustion and I want to quit my job.”

Teacher stress and feeling overworked was also common in all schools. School #2 had recently adopted a mindfulness initiative complete with professional development and an elective upper school mindfulness class aimed at reducing student stress. One teacher expressed her desire for faculty to “practice what they preach” and model better behavior and choices for students. Faculty in School #4 relied on each other for support to relieve stress and vent. Though a respondent at School #4 said that “Every adult is available to any student in this building. At the drop of a hat.”, she also reported that her door was always open to colleagues who often wander in, sit on her chair and unload for half an hour or more. She felt the service was reciprocal and necessary to maintain the energy and wherewithal to serve students and families at expected levels. Finding inner resources to be at one’s best is no easy challenge to solve. Even teachers who undergo pervasive training in cultural responsive teaching and the social and emotional skills it requires can be overcome by lack of time to prepare and succumb to apathy to implement what they’ve learned (Mette, Nieuwenhuizen, & Hvidston, 2016; Schonert-Reichl, Hanson-Peterson, & Hymel, 2015). All of this suggests the strength of community as a viable and renewable resource for maintaining capacity for SEL instruction and modeling. Indeed, School #4 relies on itself for support and finds comfort in extending their community to diverse populations. In this instance diversity of support for teachers may have enhanced preparedness for SEL instruction. Following this hypothesis, the academics-focused schools limit their preparedness and thereby their SEL instructional efficacy, whose success has well-established positive effects on academic outcomes (Durlak et. al., 2011; Diekstra, 2008).

**Limitations**

The current study is limited in several ways. Its private-school focus reduces its validity significantly; most students, families, and teachers in the United States and beyond do not ever experience private or independent schools. The comparative individual case nature of the current
study is interested in context and therefore may only be applicable for relevant comparison to other schools in similar geographical, socio-cultural and economic contexts. The researcher also, as an African-American heterosexual male who taught for 5 years at a school in the study, is aware of biases of approach and intent that are inherent in the discussion of the findings and in writing the findings and research questions that inspired them. Contextual experience was a double-edged sword for the researcher in that it allowed access to the schools and insight into the challenges they face around teaching SEL and meeting individual student needs while making unbiased analysis impossible. The researcher fully admits a constructivist-interpretivist approach to data that at one point the researcher experienced, albeit in a context separated from the current one by time. The current study is also limited by lower participation from Schools #3 and #4 than from #1 and particularly from #2. A representative spread was not achieved for School #3 and should be considered only partially representative of teacher perceptions at the school.

Finally, the academics-focused schools had secondary school components whereas the SEL-centered schools did not. It is possible that the pressures of college admissions affected the structure and cultures of the two types of schools in ways that affected the findings. A wider spread of private schools in the study’s chosen geographical region from all age groups may enhance further research in this context, perhaps broadening the validity of comparisons made by the current study between SEL-Centered and academics-focused schools. The current study may well have missed additional categories of private schools that do not fit the academics-focused/SEL-centered binary. Further research in this area may consider allowing the possibility for uniqueness of context and how that affects comparison, including the cultural, structural and logistical differences between primary, middle and secondary schools and schools that combine levels, as many private schools do.

14. Conclusion
The current study set out to explore teacher perceptions of preparedness for and approaches to SEL instruction and assessment and cultural competence in meeting student and family needs specifically in private school settings in the San Francisco Bay Area of California. The study employed qualitative methodology in an inductive approach and conducted interviews and focus groups of 21 teachers across four schools. The current study found an alignment in perceptions
of teachers from the two academics-focused schools and alignment in perceptions from the two SEL-centered schools. The contexts and structures of the academics-focused schools made SEL instruction challenging for teachers and SEL skill building challenging for students while the contexts and structures of the SEL-centered schools set teachers and students up for successful SEL skill building and instruction. The study then found that the SEL-centered schools had a more comfortable relationship with the cultural competence process than the academics-focused schools and that conversely, the schools that approached cultural competence more holistically and inclusively had created structures that facilitated SEL skill building and instruction. In effect, SEL and cultural competence as strategies of constructing school culture seemed to be complementary, adding to each other’s efficacy as teachers, students, and families collaborated to strengthen each component.

As regards meeting family needs, the academics-focused schools took a passive approach in involving families whereas the SEL-centered schools took an active approach to involving families in their communities. Effectively, the SEL-focused schools relied on family involvement and included their participation and knowledge in both SEL and academic instruction while the academics-focused schools discouraged most family involvement not borne of school initiative. Finally, the study found that teachers from all schools felt that life experience prepares them most to teach SEL and that informal observations and interactions based on relationships were the best measure of assessing SEL progress in students.

The findings suggest an interesting and perhaps unique set of patterns in private schools that deserves further attention in research. The private school phenomenon is fascinating in that it is a paid service for an almost universally cost-free institution in its public incarnation. Parents and families are paying often exorbitant amounts of money every year for their children to get an ostensibly different kind of education than is available to them free of charge. How does the competitive nature of the American college admissions landscape affect parents’ decision to do so? Are there philosophical reasons pertaining to their child’s specific needs that steer them towards private schooling? Is there a concern that public schools don’t have the capacity to serve their children to an expected standard? How do socio-cultural and economic factors play into these decisions? Exploring these questions may contribute to an understanding of how individual private school cultures and communities that serve their families are formed and maintained. Any SEL instruction within them will necessarily be shaped by their unique cultures and
structures. Cultural competence then becomes a prerequisite framework for understanding the inner workings of such institutions, and for those institutions to understand themselves reflexively and to have awareness of their place in the larger community.

Future research in this area may consider the role SEL plays in private schools as a function of their journey towards cultural competence. SEL may indeed have a place on the cultural competence continuum itself (Cross et. al., 1989), making these two concepts integral and co-dependent elements of school structure and culture.
15. References


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Appendix

Interview Guide

1. What is your position and responsibilities at this school and how long have you been a teacher, both at this school and others?

2. What are some typical social and emotional issues you help students with?

3. What are some ways the school climate affects your ability to address them?

4. How do you measure success when teaching social and emotional skills?

5. How do you collaborate with colleagues to help students learn social and emotional skills?

6. How do you collaborate with parents and students to help identify relevant social and emotional issues to address in your instruction?

7. What challenges do you face serving a diversity of students and working with a diversity of families?

8. Do you feel trained or prepared to teach social and emotional skills and to serve a diversity of students?
Consent Form

Name:
Date:

I hereby consent to participate in an interview to provide information towards a Master’s Thesis in International and Comparative Education at Stockholm University, Sweden (30 ECTS, advanced level). The interview and the study are conducted by Kalin Taylor, a Master’s level student in the above-mentioned program.

The research investigates aspects of social and emotional learning and cultural competence in private schools in Northern California, United States of America. All ethical aspects have been taken into serious consideration following Stockholm University ethical standards, which follow standards from the Swedish Research Council’s expert group on ethics. No information shall be published about a certain school or individual that would make it possible to identify them without that person’s explicit consent. All information gathered from participants is available for retraction from the current study at any point in time and for any reason. Such information will not be published.

______________________________
Signature