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South African teachers' perceptions and experience of social emotional learning

Summary

The role of the teacher in South Africa is often complex and overwhelming. Many children were orphaned because of the AIDS pandemic and as a result, teachers often played the role of primary caregiver for many child-headed households. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated problems for the teachers who are already overburdened. This paper is a review of two qualitative studies which reveal how teachers in South Africa, perceive the relevance of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) skills. The first study uses grounded theory approach to understand perceptions of teachers and the second study explores the perceptions of teachers from public and private schools who, during the COVID-19 pandemic participated in an online intervention focusing on SEL skills. The three dominant themes which emerged from the meta-analysis were: the importance of interpersonal relationships; the benefit of SEL skills for both teachers and learners; improved learning environment. These themes illustrate the collectivist culture which prevails in South Africa. The results can be used to advocate the value of SEL training and promote culturally and contextually appropriate implementation of SEL interventions.

Keywords: teachers' perceptions, Social Emotional Learning (SEL), South Africa

Introduction

The intention of this paper is to review two studies and generate relevant and useful conversations regarding teachers' perceptions and experiences of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in the South African context. The first study (Marsay, 2022) was part of a larger international research network study, recognised by World Education Research Association, in which eighteen countries participated. This study revealed teachers' perceptions of SEL skills in the learning environment regarding

future readiness. The second study (Ndou, 2024) explored teachers' experience and perceptions of an intervention which they experienced. The intervention, implemented during Covid lockdown, aimed to support teachers during this difficult time and develop SEL skills for teachers to use personally and professionally. This paper is a "snapshot" in a trajectory of a much broader work being undertaken in the South African context to understand theory and practice of SEL skills. Research in this field is still in its initial stages.

Background

Many countries on the African continent were colonised by Britain or European countries during the last century. Colonisation had a profound impact on education, because policies and systems were imported from various imperial powers. When an educational system is transferred in its purest form from one cultural environment to another, changes are bound to occur due to cultural, social, and economic imperatives (Fafunwa, 1974). During colonisation, there was a disconnect between indigenous education and the imposed Westernised systems. Consequently, many African countries struggle with significant disparities in education. The implications of Young's (2008) five faces of oppression (exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence) still prevail in South Africa.

According to Fafunwa (1974, p. 286) the education of African people is viewed as "the aggregate of all processes by which a child or young adult develops the abilities, attitudes, and other forms of behaviour which are of positive value to the society in which he lives". Decolonising education is an important part of creating a more relevant future for South Africans. Transformation of social inequality can be addressed through educational interventions.

The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET, 2019) identified a triad of inexorably intertwined challenges: poverty, inequality, and unemployment exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and State Capture (Kleptocracy) resulting in serious economic difficulties. Poverty is rife, with a negative impact on the provision of quality education (Du Plessis, 2021). There is a bidirectional correlation between poverty and low-quality education (Dagume, 2021; Walker et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on education worldwide. In South Africa, school leadership faced challenges due to confusing government decisions. The anxiety of dealing with the uncertainty of the pandemic was overwhelming. Problems in rural schools were exacerbated by distance from facilities and difficulties with connectivity.

Schools, especially those in rural areas and peri urban informal settlements, lack basic infrastructure such as water, sanitation, electricity, and adequate classrooms. The learning environment is fraught with difficulties and both learners and

teachers face adversity daily (Jansen, 2019; Matoti, 2010). The mental health and well-being of teachers is negatively impacted by the overwhelming roles they play in the learning environment, and they are at risk for compassion fatigue. Palmer et al. (2021) suggest that SEL may strengthen teachers' emotional functioning.

Given the adversities that children and adolescents in South Africa face, it is important to identify protective factors that buffer the impact of adversity and develop interventions to build resilience. In South Africa a collectivistic culture prevails emphasising the individual person in relation to others, focusing on well-being for all within the community. In collective cultures, people often base their identities heavily on their roles and positions in social groups (Pelham et al., 2022). The community is important, and resilience is drawn from the community (Ungar & Theron 2020).

Life Orientation (LO) is a compulsory subject which aims to build resilience by equipping children and adolescents with necessary life skills for the future (Department of Basic Education, 2011). LO is the study of the self in relation to others and to society, which mirrors the collectivist approach to life. It addresses 6 core areas: skills, knowledge, and values about the self, the environment, responsible citizenship, a healthy and productive life, social engagement, recreation and physical activity, careers and career choices. Despite good intentions, of this subject in the curriculum, there is evidence that the implementation has difficulties (Swarts, De Sousa & Rens, 2019).

The LO curriculum, whilst addressing self and social awareness, does not place much emphasis on emotion regulation, communication skills and responsible decision-making. Self-management (emotion regulation) teaches how to deal with difficulty emotions like anger, frustration hurt disappointment etc. Communication and relationship building skills emphasise how to be discerning in relationships, develops healthy feelings of empathy and respect for cultural diversity. Responsible decision making assists people to make choices which will benefit themselves and others, weighing up the pros and cons of reactions to various situations and is particularly useful when one is confronted by adversity.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL https://casel.org/) asserts that SEL skills could help address various forms of inequity, empower young people and adults to co-create thriving schools and contribute to safe, healthy, and equitable communities. According to Chakreborty et al (2024), SEL is:

> a process of acquiring the competencies to recognize and manage emotions, develop care and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging situations effectively. It is a holistic process of learning grounded in an ethic of care that links the cognitive with the social, emotional, and relational aspects of learning—supporting learner well-being, academic attainment, and active global citizenship for positive social change (Chakreborty et al., 2024, p. 16).

CASEL have a structured framework which describes five core competencies, namely self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Studies worldwide show evidence of the efficacy of SEL skills to create safe learning environments and to equip learners with future ready skills (Durlak et al., 2011; Durlak et al., 2015; Haynes, 2021; Jagers et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2019; OECD, 2018; Zins, Elias & Greenberg, 2003).

The responsibility to impart life skills for the future to the youth often lies with the teachers, who may be primary caregivers (Marsay, 1996; Theron & Theron, 2010). Psychosocial support in schools is limited (Khumalo, 2025). Hence, the need to assist teachers with skills that are useful to them as teachers, and so that teachers can model and develop social and emotional learning skills in learners with whom they work. Jagers et al. (2019) emphasise how transformative SEL skills are for addressing equity among a culturally diverse youth. The approach to social and emotional learning is intersubjective.

Purpose of the paper

The intention of this paper is to highlight the similarities of teachers' perceptions regarding their understanding and experience of the value of SEL in the learning environment, giving voice to teachers from culturally diverse populations. The research question posed for this synthesis of ideas is:

What is the teacher's perception and experience of SEL in the learning environment?

Methodology

Theoretical and conceptual co-construction is always required in the Global South due to the diversity of culture and should be carried out contextually in a dialogical manner (Freire, 1992). Thus, qualitative research allowing the voices of participants to be heard is preferable. Meta-ethnography is a useful method for synthesising qualitative research and developing models that interpret findings across multiple studies (Atkins et al., 2008). Interpretive meta ethnography is a systematic approach that enables comparison, analysis, and interpretations to be made that can inform both theory and practice. This approach allows for the study of interconnectedness through a process consistent with the interpretative nature of qualitative research. The seven steps described by Noblit and Hare (1988) were used to make meaning of this meta-ethnographic synthesis.

While there are several studies which examine SEL in countries from the Global South, the specific interest of this paper was to explain the South African con-

text. A search using ERIC and Google scholar was conducted using the following keywords: SEL and South Africa. Due to the dearth of studies conducted in South Africa (Hayashi et al., 2022) using ERIC, Google scholar was engaged. Two studies which fit the criteria of exploring teachers' perception and experience of SEL were found. The results of two studies Marsay (2022) and Ndou (2024) are discussed and recommendations are made.

The studies were read and the findings compared to extract themes which are similar. Using an iterative process and thematic content analysis similar themes emerged. Researcher bias was recognised and acknowledged. Two independent researchers who are familiar with the research approach read the studies identifying common themes. Agreement was reached regarding the three specific similar themes.

Ethics clearance for both studies was granted through the relevant universities. This paper is a desktop review of these two studies and does not require ethical approval.

Discussion

The first study (Marsay, 2022)

To gain a rich understanding of teachers' perceptions regarding SEL skills, a global study was undertaken under the guidance of Solberg and Park from Boston University and Ferrari from University of Padova. The study, recognised by WERA, aimed to understand perceptions of teachers from global north, global south and Asia, regarding SEL skills for future readiness. The results of this extensive qualitative grounded theory investigation indicated that teachers in countries from the Global South (South Africa, Togo, Uganda, Burkina Faso and Guatemala) were unfamiliar with the CASEL framework (https://casel.org/) for SEL skills, but they understood the value of the specific constructs (Marsay et al., 2021).

In South Africa, data were collected using open-ended questionnaires. There were 68 participants. The results of this extensive qualitative grounded theory investigation indicated that teachers in countries from the Global South (South Africa, Togo, Uganda, Burkina Faso and Guatemala) were unfamiliar with the CASEL framework (https://casel.org/) for SEL skills, but they understood the value of the specific constructs. 32 of the 68 teachers (17 from urban and 15 from rural schools) stated SEL skills were not taught in their schools. 31 teachers (24 from urban and 7 from rural schools) answered that some SEL skills were taught, either in the compulsory Life-Orientation curriculum or in the Religious Studies curriculum. Five teachers did not answer the question.

Participating teachers regarded the following three skills as most important for both a more effective learning environment and for future success. Interpersonal Relationships, Self-management, and Social Awareness. These findings give testimony to the collectivist attitude which prevails as discussed previously, and to the difficulties experienced in the South African learning environment. Furthermore, it was revealed that globally, language in different contexts can be interpreted in different ways.

Participating teachers' perspective is that SEL skills are indeed important in the learning environment, and teachers felt that SEL skills would be beneficial for future success. The following response from a teacher in a rural school illustrates the importance of SEL skills generally: "Young people need this kind of learning to prepare them for the challenges and adversities/diversities outside of school".

Teachers identified relationship-building, self-management and social awareness most frequently as important skills for both creating more positive learning environment. See Table 1 below.

Table 1. Percentage of teachers who perceive the skill as important for learning environment

SEL skills	Percentage of Teachers
Interpersonal relationships	32
Self-management	19
Social awareness	18
Positive impact on learning	16
Improved teacher efficacy	7
Self-awareness	4
Decision making	3
Other	2

Source: Author's own work.

The high interpersonal relationships percentage, and low self-awareness percentage illustrates the collectivist attitude which prevails. This finding is significant to understanding the impact of SEL in context.

The two responses: positive classroom environment and improved teacher efficacy and well-being illustrate the need for improved learning environments. Schools, where these interventions are implemented, may become places of safety and growth for young people

Table 2. Percentage of teachers who perceive the skill as important for successful transition of learners from education into the world of work

SEL skills	Percentage of teachers
Self-management	25
Interpersonal relationships	21
Social awareness	20
Self-awareness	19
Decision making	17

Source: Author's own work.

The three higher percentages confirm the collectivist attitude which prevails in the learning environment.

A teacher from an urban school in KwaZulu Natal (a province in South Africa) illustrates how pivotal teachers' social awareness is. This teacher explains: "knowing more about social and economic background. If you are able to listen and know what learners are going through and where they come from it is much easier to interact with them. This will in turn create healthy relationships conducive to teaching and learning".

In summary, the response from the teachers emphasises how SEL skills are critical for a more positive learning environment as well as for future readiness and life after school. Learners are not only future workers; they are also future adults, parents, role models, citizens, and future decision-makers. This finding resonates with the findings of other studies worldwide as discussed earlier.

The second study

A qualitative study (Ndou, 2024) using a qualitative research approach captures the experiences and perceptions of teachers who participated in the online training during Covid lockdown. The intervention was an interactive experiential learning of hope based social emotional learning. The intention was to assist teachers in their personal and professional capacity as teachers to deal with the difficulties that lockdown brought to the learning environment. Data were gathered using open-ended questions. Thematic content analysis revealed emerging subthemes which were clustered into three major themes:

- *Personal benefit*: Teachers expressed that the SEL skills would assist them in relationships with both colleagues and learners. They experienced the intervention as a safe space where they could express themselves – which was a valuable way of learning social-emotional skills through an experiential approach.

- *Challenges*: Teachers express overwhelming social issues, the lack of resources in schools and lack of privacy.
- *Strategies to implement SEL*: Teachers' comments spoke to a multi-tiered approach. They were motivated to implement interventions in schools and discussed strategies that could be used to do this effectively in context, given the cultural and economic diversity.

Synthesis of findings

Meta-ethnography is a useful method for synthesising qualitative research and for interpreting findings across multiple studies. Having explored both studies, the author wishes to highlight the following interpretations as common in both studies: Importance of interpersonal relationships; SEL skills benefit both teachers and learners; and, Improved learning environment.

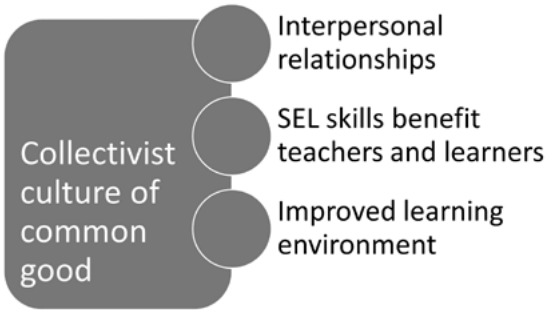


Figure 1. Conceptual diagram summarising the key themes which emerged in relation to collectivist culture.

Source: Author's own work.

Coherent themes became evident in both studies. The meta-synthesis reveals that teachers feel SEL has benefits for themselves as teachers, personally and professionally resonating with the collectivist approach. The importance of interpersonal relationship between teachers and their learners would facilitate the modelling of empathy and learners would feel more "heard". Teachers expressed how they felt the relief of being allowed to express themselves in a safe environment where they would be respected. Teachers expressed how important improved interpersonal relationships would be for their own personal well-being and for their interactions with learners and colleagues.

Being in a safe learning environment would facilitate learning, and the learners would be able to achieve more. Teachers express that all stake holders in

the learning environment would benefit from SEL skills, which resonates with the suggestions made by global scholars (Durlak et al., 2011; Durlak et al., 2015; Jagers et al., 2019; Zins et al., 2003). This finding highlights the need for interventions to improve the learning environment given the adversities teachers and learners face discussed earlier in this paper. (Jansen, 2019; Matoti, 2020; Theron & Theron, 2010).

Both studies reveal the importance of a multi-tiered approach and suggested key roles players in education should all be exposed to interventions and be trained to implement SEL skills. This finding resonates with suggestions by Ungar and Theron (2020).

Cultural patterns represented by individualism and collectivism, lead people to view their worlds through different lenses, attaching different meanings to life events. Triandis and Gelfand (2012) challenge the view that psychology is universal, offering evidence for culture-specific influences on thought and action. They explain collectivism as a social pattern consisting of closely linked individuals who see themselves as parts of one or more collectives; are primarily motivated by the norms of and duties imposed by those collectives; are willing to give priority to collective goals over their own personal goals; and emphasis their connectedness to members of these collectives.

Limitations

The results of this synthesis cannot be generalised because the number of participants is small and only two studies were reviewed. There is recognition of researcher bias since the researcher was involved in both studies. However, this means that there is a rich understanding of the studies. This bias was addressed by engaging other researchers to confirm common themes.

The strength of this paper is that it creates a platform for conversation to raise the voice of teachers and to understand their experience and perspective offering important insights for both theory and practice.

Recommendations

The discussion that is elicited from this study has implications for all stakeholders including policy makers regarding teacher training and curriculum. There is a desperate need to explore multi-faceted interventions that ameliorate the adversities learners and teachers face, and to equip them with appropriate future ready skills for themselves and for the community.

The advantage of creating a nurturing learning environment is highlighted. The following recommendations are made:

- Teachers are not always aware of the structured framework of SEL skills as suggested by CASEL. Thus, training using a structured framework which is contextually and culturally appropriate will facilitate the development of SEL skills interventions creating a more optimal learning environment.
- These interventions should be developed collaboratively and implemented in culturally and contextually appropriate ways.
- A multi-tiered approach involving all stakeholders (policy makers, curriculum developers, principals, school staff and parents) can be used. The well-being of both learners and teachers is vital to academic success.
- Culturally and contextually appropriate approach facilitates the acknowledgement rather than buy in of policy makers who are responsible for curriculum development for both teachers and learners.
- Further research will enhance understanding and give greater clarity to the value of SEL in *context*. It may be interesting to explore the difference between the perceptions and experiences of teachers from individualistic cultures vs collectivist cultures.

Conclusion

In the South African context where youth are not always guided by their families. Both teachers and learners are often overwhelmed by ubiquitous feelings of helplessness and hopelessness due to prevailing disempowering negative discourses. Hence, the process of equipping teachers and learners with future ready SEL skills is of paramount importance.

Teachers' perceptions and experiences are important when considering the implementation of learning programmes and pedagogical approach, especially in a post-colonial context. The transformation of communities should be an integral part of learning programs for all, including teachers in training, support for teachers in service, as well as for learners in the post-colonial environment of the global south.

Developing SEL skills could help address various forms of inequity, empower young people and adults to co-create thriving schools and contribute to safe, healthy, and equitable communities, making provision for well-being of all involved in the learning environment, making education transformative.

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