

DISSERTATION

TEACHERS WORKING WITH SOCIAL EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE:  
STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE POSITIVE EFFECTS

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## ABSTRACT

### TEACHERS WORKING WITH SOCIAL EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE: STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE POSITIVE EFFECTS

Research has shown that social emotional learning (SEL) skills help reduce violence, enhance cooperation and problem solving, and foster academic achievement. Teachers with social emotional competence (SEC) develop supportive relationships with students, build on student strengths and abilities, establish behavioral guidelines, coach students through conflicts, encourage cooperation, and model respect and appropriate communication.

This qualitative document analysis describes the perceived experience of students positively impacted by a teacher coded as using SEC. Analysis of the traits or qualities of the persons and classrooms they described may impact teacher training and hiring of qualified individuals in the educational setting. Using abductive coding processes, education autobiographies written by 28 undergraduate students at a university in the Midwest were coded for the presence of SEL constructs and traits and attributes of teachers they admired in order to give voice to the perceived experience of students regarding the people and practices that positively impacted them.

All of the core constructs of SEL were found to be in evidence and 75% of students cited three or more of the constructs in their documents. Known SEC traits were confirmed by the students' perceived experiences as being impactful as well as opportunities to grapple with issues of social awareness and diversity and teacher investment in the daily activities. Implications on teacher training and hiring of individuals that are capable in creating environments inclusive of safety and belonging,

as well as those who are adept at developing relationships both with and among students emerged.

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I thank the teachers and colleagues in my lifetime of learning who made me feel that this was a valuable and worthwhile career pursuit. They spoke wisdom and hope, resilience and tenacity into me and believed that I would be something special. I believe there are those who would agree with you.

I thank the students in my lifetime of teaching that made me better with each passing day and year. The ones who challenged me to improve, who drove me to seek more knowledge and skill, and the ones whose stories melted my heart into believing that teaching is the finest calling in the world.

I thank the support base my family has been to me; my kids who put up with a missing mom for a few years, my parents who provided care and meals for those languishing children, and my precious husband who floated the financial boat, cleaned, did laundry, cooked, and more while I studied, learned, and grew. Thank you for your support and belief that what I could be was worth the wait. I hope you were right.

*“Who knows if perhaps you were made for just such a time as this?” Esther 4:14*

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### Background

In reflecting upon 20 years of teaching in public schools, I came to the realization that a chasm had developed between the aims of education and my personal philosophy of teaching. Whereas I had always been able to find satisfaction and reward through the relationships I developed between my students, their families, and myself that seemed to lead to high regard and improved academic achievement, the purposes of schooling now seemed to dictate that teachers spend less time building relationships and caring connections between students and themselves, and focus solely on the academic content required to produce the highest possible test scores.

In my personal quest to come to terms with this disconnect, and perhaps find a new slant on a career in education that might still enable the relationship building that I found so gratifying, I pursued solutions in higher education at my local university. The research that I began to study involved the determination of *emotional intelligence (EI)* as a valid form of mental ability and its place alongside academic achievement (Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), 2007a; Goleman, 1995; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2008). The lead researchers who coined the term using a four-branch model have defined EI this way:

These [branches] include the abilities to (a) perceive emotions in oneself and others accurately, (b) use emotions to facilitate thinking, (c) understand emotions, emotional language, and the signals conveyed by emotions, and (d) manage emotions so as to attain specific goals. (Mayer et al., 2008, p. 459)

I found that a movement begun in the past 25 years and known as *social emotional learning (SEL)* sought to validate the personal-growth areas of social and emotional development, and to develop standards and benchmarks for acquisition of

these skills in the general education curriculum. SEL refers to a student's "ability to recognize and manage emotions, develop caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging situations constructively" (CASEL, 2007a). SEL consists of the purposeful adaptation of EI building blocks into carefully constructed programs intended to enhance students' social and emotional skills through careful attention to explicit teaching, modeling, and opportunities for practice. The aim is to incorporate these SEL skills into the academic content areas that educators teach in a developmentally appropriate sequence. Numerous programs have been developed and tested over the past 25 years for teachers and school districts to use in their efforts to explicitly teach, model, and provide opportunities for students to practice the development of higher EI in the social setting of schooling (CASEL, 2010b; Opengart, 2007).

Proponents of SEL would assert that its benefits include improving social interactions, social-emotional skills, and attitudes about self and others; reducing negative behavior in students; preparing young people for success in school; and bringing about significant improvements in students' academic performance and attitudes toward school (CASEL, 2007b). But some core concepts and practices must be present in order to see these benefits. These include (a) reflectiveness, (b) problem solving, (c) creative learning, (d) safe and responsive classrooms, and (e) school-home-community collaboration (Cohen, 2001). When these elements are present and a natural incorporation of the learning environment and there is a natural interaction between teachers and students, the results can produce improved outcomes in both academic

achievement and adult success (Cohen, 2001; CASEL, 2007b; Humphrey, Curran, Morris, Farrell, & Woods, 2007; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Opengart, 2007).

Although eight states currently mandate social and emotional learning standards in their K-12 public schools, the vast majority of states do not. For public-school students in the remaining 42 states, the pressure on teachers to comply with the push for high-stakes testing to prove the value of their education and their teachers' ability to educate them can be overwhelming (Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2000; Nichols, 2005). Newspaper and media accounts continue to report on the failure of schools to adequately equip young Americans for success in the adult workplace (Newseditor, 2011; Nichols, 2005), as well as isolated accounts of cheating and inappropriate procedures among individuals and districts that have succumbed to the pressure to find value only in the academic testing of content areas deemed appropriate for the state tests (Press, 2011; Spencer, 2004).

These reactions to policy may cause us, as an educational community, to reassess what the role of the educational process is, or should be. Challengers to social emotional education would argue that a school's job is only to educate students (Humphrey et al., 2007). However, many educators and community members alike, when asked to clarify the term *educate*, would include not only academic content areas, but also social abilities. We can address and improve these social abilities by giving attention to explicit teaching of social emotional development skills that are derived from the framework of EI (Coryn, Spybrook, Evergreen, & Blinkiewicz, 2009; Humphrey et al., 2007).

Much research in recent years has focused on identifying what is included in the development of healthy EI. A framework of social and emotional literacy standards can

create the opportunity to address the important elements of student development that “academics only” curricula and band-aid programs meant to solve what has gone wrong with students socially and emotionally (such as bully-proofing, violence prevention, etc.). Proponents would argue that embedding social skills and emotional competence directly into our academic curricula, and delivering strategies as we train our students through a method of holistic child development will address their social, emotional, and academic achievement (Humphrey et al., 2007). This approach benefits all children as they learn to wend their way through society; but it can be especially impactful on such disenfranchised populations as children of single-parent homes, children in poverty, and children from racial and cultural minorities as we give training in social norms that they may not learn in their primary home, and as we teach and model tolerance from a culturally responsive perspective.

Despite these pressures and the general public’s knowledge of underpaid, undervalued teachers in a system that faces ongoing funding cuts, hundreds of students are currently enrolled in the first education course offered at a university in the Midwest to begin their journey toward becoming licensed public-school teachers. In one of their preliminary assignments, these students outline their personal education autobiography, which includes naming the identifying factors and individuals who led them to pursue their current professional interest in teaching.

As a teaching assistant in the fall of 2010, my experience reading these assignments caused me to become curious about the possible phenomenon of particular teachers whose lives and personal philosophies seemed to impact these undergraduate students heavily. I noticed that the students seemed drawn far more strongly to the ability

of their teachers to connect with them and show them they cared about them in a personal way than to the teachers' ability to get content across to them. This collective experience showed itself in all but a few of the education autobiographies I read. It caused me to wonder whether, within this common experience, there are common teacher behaviors or classroom environments that positively affect students.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative document analysis was to describe the attributes and impact of influential teachers on students in their classroom who are pursuing teaching as a career. In the education autobiography assignment of the referenced Midwestern University's undergraduate course on the history of schooling, the students account for their personal history in schooling and what has brought them to the university to pursue a career in teaching. I propose that the analytical study of a purposeful sample of these documents may enable us to describe the attributes of teachers who use social emotional competence.

Social and emotionally competent teachers develop supportive relationships with students, build on student strengths and abilities, establish behavioral guidelines, coach students through conflicts, encourage cooperation, and model respect and appropriate communication (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Jennings and Greenberg (2009) call this paradigm the *prosocial classroom model*, and assert that a teacher who has *social emotional competence (SEC)* can design and implement a classroom based upon these elements of SEL. This model includes recognizing student emotions and responding to their individual needs. It involves proactively and skillfully using enthusiasm and enjoyment to effectively manage classroom behaviors.

Use of a document protocol (Huddersfield, 2006; King, 1998) will identify whether these student assignments depict a teacher's demeanor and classroom environment in a way that will include description of five core constructs of SEL; namely, the concepts of (a) reflectiveness, (b) safe and responsive environments, (c) creative and authentic learning activities, (d) a problem-solving atmosphere, and (e) the building of community/school/home connections (Cohen, 2001).

### **The Research Questions**

The research questions that I feel are significant to understanding this shared experience of students are: What is the perceived experience for a student positively impacted by a teacher coded as using social-emotional competence? What elements of social emotional learning (SEL) were displayed (i.e., reflectiveness, safe and belonging environment, creative and authentic learning activities, a problem-solving atmosphere, and the building of community/school/home connections)? Further questions include What traits or qualities did this teacher or classroom model that were different from others the students experienced? What was motivating or influential in the student's decision to become a teacher? How did SEC/SEL affect students' effort or ability to achieve academically?

### **Philosophical Assumptions of Qualitative Research**

This proposal is for research that is qualitative and interpretive in nature. I believe that humans have relationships with the world that change and can be changed by various interactions, such as those that occur between teacher and student, and between students within a classroom environment. These interactions and their interpretation are subjective in nature and require much thoughtful analysis to understand. The purpose of



this research study is to interpret and understand the commonalities of experience that bring students to the preliminary course in teacher preparation.

I have based this study upon the ontological assumption that the document analysis will describe the reality of the experience of the students in the class, and that the SEC of the teacher affects this reality (Altheide, Coyle, DeVriese, & Schneider, 2008). I believe that the education autobiographies students have written for the undergraduate class will provide a documented ethnographic experience, and that the emergence of relationships in the data may show the importance of the SEC of teachers with respect to their having a positive impact on students who pursue teaching as a career. I also believe that, as a researcher in this type of methodology, I will benefit from having an understanding of teaching and learning, and from becoming intimately involved in the document narrative in order to understand the students' descriptions, and to ascribe meaning and purpose to the actions of the teachers being described.

In qualitative document analysis, the proposed method for this study, it is key that researchers understand the nature of the experience they are studying (Altheide et al., 2008). In this case, as a teacher who has taught with heightened SEC (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009), I follow this epistemological assumption. I have observed many types of classroom management styles, and I believe that, like researchers and subjects, teachers and their students must have an interactive and respectful relationship with one another. For these reasons, I further believe that I as the researcher and the participants in this study have a clear connection.

Included in this relationship between teacher and student, researcher and subject, is the axiological question of values. In a way, one could interpret the traits the document

protocol describes as social emotional development values. With that in mind, the role of values was very much present in this study. The core values of the SEL movement are the very core of the document protocol in use; they also are the traits and qualities of the individual teachers the students describe in their education autobiographies who have had significant impact on them.

The rhetorical assumption noted above and present in ethnographic research is evident throughout the documents I have analyzed and my interpretive coding of them. I believe that the student narratives describing the teachers and classroom environments that positively impacted them are useful to inform this study. I further believe that these narratives will define and produce valuable results regarding the importance and impact of a teacher's ability to build relationships with and between her students. This study may provide words and wisdom to inform the previously mentioned personal disconnect between my educational philosophy and that which many in public education are currently rewarding and valuing.

### **Qualitative Research Strategy**

I proposed a document analysis to study this experience of students and their reaction to teachers who work with SEC. Using an educational autobiography document students authored as an assignment in class, I sought to interpret the reflective reactions to their educational history, and I coded for the presence of social emotional constructs in the classrooms they describe. Students' descriptions also included their reasons for pursuing the teaching profession. I interpreted these combined reflections as describing a level of SEC in the teachers whose classrooms they describe. I accomplished the coding through use of a template analysis, or document protocol (Huddersfield, 2006; King,

1998) I initially designed deductively to include the five SEL program-designated core constructs (which I present later in the dissertation), along with questions about why students want to be teachers and the possible impact of their responses upon their academic achievement. This protocol was subject to inductive alterations as the iterative process of coding and interpreting the documents warranted. As the iterative process occurred during data analysis, I was conscious of my reflexive role in this process and kept records of protocol revisions and document recoding. (See Appendices A and B.)

### **Researcher's Perspective**

In this study, my role as researcher was to give a summative forum for students who have experienced positive influence by a significant teacher. I was conscious of my bias and belief that the teachers who have made this significant impact on students have an elevated sense of SEC. Using *a priori* codes, I was conscious of the issues of reflexivity as I recorded and interpreted the reflections of students as they described their experience with their favorite teachers. To reflect the student authors' honest and most accurate meaning, my willingness to read the documents multiple times in order to remain flexible as I interpret the data was important. Follow-up interviews may shed more light on the shared experience of these students; I gathered information and consent initially to allow for that possibility.

### **Significance**

Much research is available in quantitative form to support the value of SEL, so we know that such learning has a powerful impact on academic achievement of students and their success in adult life (CASEL, 2007b; Justice & Espinoza, 2007; Opengart, 2007). The goal of great educational practice, then, becomes to develop appropriate instruction

for and practice of both academics and social emotional skills in our core curriculum.

There should be a shared language, consistency, and a sequential building of skills across grade levels. This combination becomes a fit in the daily classroom schedule because it is not a replacement of, but a vehicle for teaching, linked to core academics already being taught (Elias, Bruene-Butler, Blum, & Schuyler, 2000).

Some researchers suggest that teachers design programs that connect academic skills and efficacy by building bonding to school, creating smaller learning communities, establishing student choice and voice in the classroom, and using curricula that speak to diverse student interests and ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Developing such competence, care, community, and responsive curricula may be the most effective way to engage students in their own learning (Roeser, Strobel, & Quihuis, 2002). These components become the core constructs upon which SEL thrives.

What we have yet to learn is what the experience has been like from the student perspective. This study seeks to narrate the experience of the students themselves, to describe the classroom environment and teaching practice of individuals who not only delivered academic content, but also infused an element of SEC into their classroom. To derive positive impact from an individual with SEC may prove to be possible when that individual attends to a few constructs that match those the SEL program research describes and defines. If this is the case, implications regarding the inclusion of teaching these core SEL constructs in pre-service and in-service training for teachers may result (Elias et al., 2000; Fernandez-Berrocal & Ruiz, 2008; Justice & Espinoza, 2007; Palomera, Fernandez-Berrocal, & Brackett, 2008).

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

For the past 30 years, policy makers, taxpayers, parents, and community members have harshly criticized America's schools with regard to accountability and critique of how they have used money and materials. Students seem to do more poorly on standardized tests with each successive year. In some states, threats and new laws link teachers' job security with student-tested outcomes (Olson, 2011). Yet, many would debate the definition of educators as simply distributors of knowledge. Proponents of the social emotional education movement would argue that training teachers in the concepts of EI, and using its framework as an application for schooling will impact not only students' emotional development, relationship skills, and responsible decision making, but also their academic achievement and adult success.

Schools are not just dispensaries of preexisting knowledge, social emotional educators would argue; they also must teach students *how to learn*, to apply skills for problem solving and critical thinking to new situations that will arise in the course of their work and personal lives. Schools, because of the social nature of their organization, are a natural setting for social training. In the past two decades, a new educational approach now known as SEL has evolved that applies just such a socially constructed framework. The goal of SEL is to train and support teachers and students in social constructs based on EI and its application to social, emotional, and academic work in the classroom.

Educators are in a position to positively impact the social and emotional development of the whole child as they address the academic standards of their curriculum and student age group. The literature review that follows seeks to investigate

the connections between EI, SEL, and academic achievement or adult success. I used these key terms to search Academic Search Premier, PsycInfo, and Web of Science databases, as well as the ERIC database. I searched the intersections of each of the following pairs of terms: *EI* and *SEL*, *EI* and *academic achievement*, and *SEL* and *academic achievement*. I also replaced *academic achievement* with *academic success* and *adult success* in the database search process. Because the topic is an emerging one in education, I harvested all English-language articles from these searches for further deliberation.

The outline that emerged as I sorted and chose the articles for this literature review developed as follows:

- First, I determined the best working definition for EI in an educational context. For this study, I explored EI as a measurable ability construct.
- I then investigated testing and purposes of EI.
- Next, I explored policies and approaches that encourage attention to the development of EI. From this exploration, important issues regarding SEL as a means of enhancing emotional and social skills within the social constructs of a classroom emerged.
- I did an analysis of the emotional-development constructs connected to prosocial, general-education classrooms; and I investigated how social and emotional constructs might impact special populations such as online learners, learning-disabled persons, multiple-age groups, and different genders.
- Last, I explored studies that report the impacts of EI on student academic achievement, and of SEL programs on achievement and success.

A review of the literature on these topics revealed positive outcomes for policies that support training teachers to use an EI framework as they teach within the cooperative interactions and relationship-building strategies of an SEL program. Such policies and approaches engage and direct America's students toward increased academic achievement and increased adult happiness and success. Some questions that emerge, then, involve understanding the perceived experience for a student who receives this socially and emotionally enhanced education: When persons with SEC deliver elements of SEL, is the experience of the student enhanced? How can we determine that? What differences become apparent in the teachers' demeanor, the environment of the classroom, and the experience of the student? How does this affect students' ability to achieve academically? I will try to make clear the answers to these questions in the paper that follows.

### **The Dual Purposes of Education—Academics and Socialization**

Traditionally in America, the purposes of education have been linked both to fostering academic achievement and to socializing youth toward improved citizenship (Huerta, 2009). Students benefitted from family support at home that encouraged a strong work ethic, with school being considered the provider of equal access to the potential rewards of their hard work (Huerta, 2009). However, a breakdown is apparent in both the academic and social efforts schools have made (Education, 1983). For example, David Orr (1994), an eminent ecologist, has argued that some US government policies have been enacted to build up the academic efforts of schools in order to make the American workforce more globally competitive, and, as a result, the social nature of school has been neglected. However, research on the benefits of formalized SEL

programs based on the constructs of EI has been growing for the past 20 years.

Numerous studies show the impact of SEL in terms not only of student behavioral improvements, but also of its link to academic achievement (CASEL, 2007a).

### **Defining EI**

The lead researchers who coined the term using a four-branch model have defined EI this way:

These [branches] include the abilities to (a) perceive emotions in oneself and others accurately, (b) use emotions to facilitate thinking, (c) understand emotions, emotional language, and the signals conveyed by emotions, and (d) manage emotions so as to attain specific goals. (Mayer et al., 2008, p. 459)

Scholars often compare this definition with other models of EI that were adapted in a more journalistic fashion, such as the one Daniel Goleman (1995) made popular; and that are more a description of personality traits, such as the definition attributed to Ruven Bar-On (1997), called a mixed model or trait style of EI. Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso (2008) have argued strongly for a definition of EI that describes it as an ability, rather than a trait, value, or personality type.

Despite the variance in EI definitions, a functional role of emotions as a method of communication has become universally accepted. If we define EI as an ability, it could then “address (a) the capacity to reason with and about emotions and/or (b) the contribution of the emotions system to enhancing intelligence” (Mayer et al., 2008, p. 505). If the theory of EI as an intelligence fits within the general definition of intelligences as a mental ability, then, some would argue, it must pass the test of measurement. Devices intended to measure mental abilities must involve asking test takers relevant questions and evaluating their responses in terms of correctness. To this end, Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso have devised a test known as the Mayer-Salovey-



Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT) (Peters, Kranzler, & Rossen, 2009) that does just this; it leaves out variables such as personality traits, character values, and such.

Further, researchers believe that to prove that EI underlies SEL, one must be able to accurately measure and define EI. Mayer and Cobb believe that an alternate test to the MSCEIT for measuring EI, the Multifactor Emotional Intelligence Scale (MEIS) (2000), can do this. They believe that, with the MEIS, one can test and certify an individual's accuracy of perception of emotion, ability to understand emotional meaning, ability to regulate emotion, and ability to integrate emotion in thought. Thus, they believe that "the MEIS argues strongly for the existence of an emotional intelligence" (Mayer & Cobb, 2000, p. 173).

If the existence of emotional intelligence as a part of personality becomes widely accepted within the scientific community, then such statements as the one opening this section—that emotional intelligence underlies socioemotional learning—will be reasonable. If evidence against the intelligence mounts, then this connection will no longer remain. (Mayer & Cobb, 2000, pp. 173-174)

### **Connecting EI and SEL**

If educators accept that emotional intelligence underlies socio-emotional learning, they must then determine whether it is appropriate or advantageous to use ability EI to predict academic achievement and success; if so, they must then develop policy and practice to promote further research. Humphrey (2007, p. 236) states, "Education should encompass both the rational and the emotional to best prepare our children for adult life." Schools have become institutions that focus on the academic arm of education, rather than the emotional; but both brain and other research now exists that encourages us to consider how emotions might play a role in improved academic success, as well (Humphrey et al., 2007).

Because the term *intelligence* carries with it the concept that it refers to an innate and fixed capacity, justifying its consideration as something we can teach or influence in an educational setting has been difficult. However, some scholars, in a more modern view, see the notion of intelligence as something more fluid that develops in an individual over time (Humphrey et al., 2007). There is evidence that intelligence increases somewhat with age. But the question for educators is whether they can teach this skill, or a series of awareness, regulation, and decision-making skills to students to help them increase their positive resolution of problems and set goals that will enhance their academic and social goals and success. Humphrey (2007) reviewed some of the measures of EI, making sure to note the differences in the various views, to see whether there are effective measurement tools. He found that the attribute tests (MEIS, MSCEIT) do seem to be valid and measure ability, while the trait and personality forms mostly rely on self-report, are strongly tied to other variables such as personality, and have less reliability and validity.

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Web site (2007b), SEL refers to a child's "ability to recognize and manage emotions, develop caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging situations constructively" (p. 1). It consists of the purposeful adaptation of EI building blocks into carefully constructed programs that are intended to enhance students' social and emotional skill through careful attention to explicit teaching, modeling, and opportunities for practice.

The original EI researchers (Mayer & Cobb, 2000) also believe that although talking about acquiring higher EI doesn't make sense, the change in language to include

socio-emotional learning is acceptable. This subtle change implies that it is possible to improve emotional perception and understanding. With regard to incorporating EI into education, Mayer and Cobb believe that the acceptance of EI in education broadens our understanding of what it means to be smart. EI “may help educators better grasp the whole learner—that the information we convey as educators is both cognitive and emotional” (2000, p. 178).

### **EI in Education**

Thus, because of EI’s potential link to improved social interaction, it has gained notice in the educational community in the past 20 years. Educators and social scientists began to adapt the concepts and framework of EI into educational settings as consideration increased that this was a factor that affected personal success and needed research and measurement (Coryn et al., 2009). Educators have incorporated a set of personal-awareness/regulation skills and competencies as a framework into SEL. SEL programs provide training in a set of concepts devised to frame a socially and emotionally responsive classroom climate, which has been linked both to improved social interactions and increased academic achievement.

In the educational setting, we can argue that EI has a number of important uses. One is the study of accurate emotional perception and how it affects a student’s ability to respond to classroom social stimuli, and the other is a measurable model of the mental abilities affected by emotions, which pertains to a student’s cognitive response (Mayer et al., 2008). Higher EI seems to promote better mental health, better accuracy in detecting physical responses to stimuli, and a stronger ability to understand the emotional consequences of events (Mayer et al., 2008). Research on EI has indicated that

individuals with high EI are more socially competent and have better work and familial relationships (Mayer et al., 2008). They are often viewed as more interpersonally sensitive than those with low EI (Mayer et al., 2008).

In her literature review of the K-12 workplace, Opengart (2007) identified the framework of EI and then outlined some of the more popular SEL programs, highlighting their alignment with the EI framework. Her purpose was specifically to look for gaps between the needs of the adult workplace and the training provided through SEL programs. She found that, although SEL programs include many components that are based on acquisition and practice applying SEL skills, cultural relevance, and developmentally appropriate instruction, they do not address not all of the skills needed for the adult workplace. She did applaud the efforts SEL programs have made, and suggested that more focused effort toward the goals of the adult workplace could be addressed through better teacher training (Opengart, 2007).

As educators and specialists, we increase our effectiveness in the educational setting by increasing our knowledge and ability to communicate. Proponents of SEL believe that it can do those things by helping us to become more adept at recognizing and managing our own emotions, which will allow us to express our feelings accurately and appropriately. For example, Robertson (2007) ties the concepts of SEL to Howard Gardner's work with multiple intelligences, a widely influential body of work within the field of education. She cites the concepts of interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence, and asserts that capability with these areas allows individuals to perceive their own feelings and triggers, and to regulate them to meet personal goals. Robertson ties the idea of emotional competency to her role of being a culturally competent speech and language

clinician. She describes the building blocks of EI and how they apply to her field, facial expressions and interpretations, willingness to invest effort in developing interpersonal relationships, developing empathy for clients, and successfully communicating with clarity and control.

Jonathan Cohen, a leading voice in the field of social and emotional education, suggests that socio-emotional skills and abilities provide the foundation for democracy and improved quality of life (2006). The creation of safe and caring school climates and home-school partnerships provides a sound partnership between community members that will impact society at large. “Social, emotional, academic, and ethical education can help children reach the goals their parents and teachers have for them: learning to ‘read’ themselves and others, and learning to solve social, emotional, and ethical problems” (p. 202). Cohen goes on to argue that part of the discourse needs to include a question about the purpose of schooling. According to a Gallup poll, “over the past thirty-two years, Americans have said the single most important purpose of public schooling was to prepare people to become responsible citizens” (Cohen, 2006, p. 203).

Cohen purports that some best practices he has found during research in recent years speak to what needs to happen in our schools: (a) SEL competencies are predictive of children’s ability to learn and solve problems peacefully; (b) SEL capacities are just as brain-based as linguistic and mathematical competencies; (c) the majority of children can learn to become more socially and emotionally competent; and (d) creating partnerships and explicitly teaching children to be more competent is core to effective SEL and academic educational efforts (Cohen, 2006).

One challenge in incorporating SEL as half of education's dual purpose is teacher preparation and professional development. If we do, in fact, value the social-emotional development of children as one purpose, we should train American teachers in how to do it well. And we must support ongoing assessment and sustainability to maintain that it is done well. A second challenge is that policymakers need to address the lack of required effort to develop standards, policies, and practices to assist our teachers in learning and implementing such standards. We must develop facilities to provide the needed training. Cohen (2006) ends by saying that it is essential that all children have the opportunity to develop SEL skills as a basic foundation for life. He goes so far as to say, "If federal and state policymakers and education schools continue to ignore the importance of social-emotional competencies, I believe that this amounts to a violation of human rights. Our children deserve better" (p. 228).

Proponents of SEL would argue that its benefits include improving social interactions, social-emotional skills, and attitudes about self and others; reducing negative behavior in students; preparing young people for success in school; and making significant improvements in students' academic performance and attitudes toward school (CASEL, 2007b). Many SEL programs have been created and tested to show their efficacy in increasing the social and emotional growth of students and their impact on improving academic achievement (CASEL, 2010b). Educators can seek out, purchase, and implement these designated programs; but proponents strongly urge practitioners to put them into practice on a school- or districtwide scale, in order to see the impacts that the research supports (Cohen, 2001).

## **The Current SEL Policy Situation**

A growing body of research links the effects of a positive classroom climate with teacher and student self-efficacy and academic achievement. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), in conjunction with a few national leaders in SEL and some key legislators from pioneering states that include Ohio, Illinois, and New York, have taken the lead in proposing policies and programs to address these concerns. In December 2009, Congressman Dale E. Kildee (D-MI), Congresswoman Judy Biggert (R-IL), and Congressman Tim Ryan (D-OH) introduced the Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Act (HR 4223) (CASEL, 2010a). These leaders are now working to include this legislation in the bipartisan overhaul of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

The sponsors of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and SEL supporters are encouraging lawmakers to cosponsor the newly renamed Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Act of 2011, HR 2437 and authorize the US Department of Education to address three main objectives. The first objective is to award competitive grants to states and school districts to develop and implement social and emotional learning. The second is to study the impact of funded programs on student achievement, attainment, and behavior. The third objective is to establish a national SEL assistance and training center to support teachers, school districts, and states as they provide high quality information, professional development, and tools to make these important changes in their delivery and focus (CASEL, 2010a).

## **Impact of Social-Emotional Development on Schooling**

The enactment of policy I have described above, intended to drive the research and implementation of social and emotional education into national learning standards, is sure to have a powerful impact on schooling. Such policy causes us, as educators, to reassess what the role of the educational process is, or should be. Challengers to the policy, however, would argue that a school's job is only to educate students (Humphrey et al., 2007). In time, many educators and community members alike, when asked to clarify the term *educate*, would include not only academic content areas, but also social abilities.

**Social context of the classroom.** Some US educators believe that because school is primarily a social entity, it is imperative to promote social and emotional learning in order to promote primary prevention (Elias & Weissberg, 2000). Because of the social context of school, every classroom has a set of social norms that students must learn. These norms change from subject to subject, teacher to teacher, and within the context of various groupings each teacher might use in the course of a school day. Learning to navigate their way through the social norms and expectations of developing relationships and schooling can be difficult work for students.

To that end, we can consider a series of core concepts as the constructs of a soundly devised SEL environment (Cohen, 2001). With these constructs in place, teachers and students can work on building relationships in safe environments that allow for deep, rich engagement and authentic learning to take place. Cohen (2001) describes these concepts, and the connection between the concepts of EI and SEL this way:

1. Reflective capacities or an enhanced awareness of ourselves and others – is the foundation for all learning and development.



2. A developing awareness of self and others needs to be used to enhance our ability to solve problems flexibly.
3. A developing awareness of self and others needs to be used to enhance our ability to learn and to be creative in a wide range of ways.
4. The creation of safe, caring, and responsive environments in which learning can take place is of essential importance.
5. Collaboration between school, home, and community needs to be a part of long-term implementation planning. (pp. 13-14)

In this way, the concepts of EI—self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, social awareness, and relationship management—are incorporated into the daily activities of interactive relationship building and curricular content acquisition as the teacher and students, and even parents and community members interact with each other during the course of daily school activities.

**Educational approaches.** Weinstein (1991) sought to explore the various social-behavior norms students encountered in an elementary school day, and she suggested that students' ability to participate effectively influences their academic success. Because learning is heavily dependent on communication, school lessons and a student's ability to navigate the individual and cultural differences represented in that context are dependent on the student's ability to communicate competently. Weinstein (1991) defines and describes five unique social segments in this study ; she gives attention to the variety of subtle differences in communication and comprehension students need to navigate the social segments well. These segments—recitation, teacher-directed small groups, sharing time, seatwork, and student-directed small groups—depict varied amounts of teacher or student control; and with those variations come a variety of social and emotional skills that students must use to interact or comply successfully. According to Weinstein

(1991), sometimes cultural backgrounds inhibit student success in their various social roles in the classroom day. She suggested that cooperative learning strategies can be taught and learned to improve relationships and promote cross-ethnic interactions.

Cooperative group strategies are a major component of SEL classrooms.

*Primary prevention* refers to the interventions available to reduce potentially harmful circumstances such as violence, substance abuse, and other destructive social behaviors. Researchers including Elias and Weissberg (2000) believe that SEL provides the opportunity to build decision-making, problem-solving, and communication skills. “Social and emotional skills are essential for building and sustaining learning relationships necessary for academic success, a safe and civilized classroom, and inclusive communities” (p. 187). They believe that the approaches SEL endorses include opportunities for both explicit skill instruction and practice, and that these opportunities allow the students to receive feedback and learn cues and prompts to increase the transfer of skills to situations outside the classroom. They also endorse coordinating within the curriculum activities that support and build on SEL learnings, and linking many subjects and concepts together with common language and understanding. “It is the combination of these elements that yields positive student outcomes and significant behavior change” (p. 188).

Accordingly, many scholars believe it is vital for teachers to be able to skillfully create a community of learners in which students can safely express, take risks, make mistakes, and still be welcome. This environment allows students to become emotionally attached to teachers and schools, and helps students learn to make and keep supportive peer relationships.

**Emotional development.** Growing research supports the evidence of connection between the cognitive and emotive interactions of the brain. Current research and literature has recently challenged the historical conflict that was raised between reason and emotion. Human-resource research, psychology, and leadership studies, as well as many educational research studies with students in both undergraduate and K-12 settings, promote the argument that there is validity to the premise of the interconnectedness of emotion and reason (Ashkanasy & Dasborough, 2003; Humphrey et al., 2007). Research has identified a strong scientific connection between the limbic (emotional) system in the brain and the release of dopamine, a chemical that is central to our cognitive and attention systems (Humphrey et al., 2007). This connection allows us to use our emotions to recognize, understand, and inform our decision making, and to establish appropriate goals toward which our intellectual reasoning can work. Further, when emotions go uncontrolled, the amygdala can cause our cognitive brain centers to short-circuit and interfere with intellectual performance (Humphrey et al., 2007). Because some researchers believe “that humans think with these two minds, one rational and the other experiential,” they are convinced that “EI is the most important variable that influences success in life” (Cox & Nelson, 2008, p. 11).

To begin to impact further use and understanding of EI, proponents of SEL believe that social skills and emotional perceptions can be taught and modeled for students through explicit teaching, mentoring, and coaching. The theory is that, in improving one’s EI, one would gain powerful control over otherwise natural, reactionary physical responses to emotional stimuli. If emotion is tied this strongly to rational thought processes, as Humphrey’s review of the recent brain science findings has shown,

then to teach students and adults alike how to improve their EI through some form of social and emotional education becomes valid reasoning. This approach would have great cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, and even societal advantages.

### **SEL's Scope of Impact**

Many scholars believe that we can have a huge impact on our society if we alter our current predisposition to focus only on academic education and value its achievement above that of helping young men and women become independent, creative thinkers, empathetic listeners, and powerful problem-solvers. These are considered 21st century skills, and we can suitably address them not only in our academic curriculum, but also through our social and emotional standards. Whether they are teaching a prescribed SEL program, or simply seeking to embed social and emotional development skills into daily academics, teachers can make positive use of combining objectives when they create activities to address both learning goals. I will highlight this principle by some examples that follow.

### **Specifics of SEL Implementation**

There is research that supports that not only are children happy, safe, and more likely to achieve in schools that work to improve emotional intelligence, but teachers also teach better in this kind of environment (Cherniss, Extein, Goleman, & Weissberg, 2006; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Norris, 2003). In a positive piece from the United Kingdom, headmaster Sir John Jones and teacher Nick Hutchins (2004) suggested that parents prefer schools that value their children, and that examples of poor behavior and exclusion diminish in this kind of environment; stress is reduced, and effective learning is

more likely to be achieved. They also assert that the community of the school is strengthened when children and adults feel acceptance (Jones & Hutchins, 2004).

**Effects on schools as social systems.** Elementary school teachers, simply by nature of the socialization processes required to make a group out of a collection of individuals, must attend to the social systems required in a classroom. They can successfully incorporate SEL processes and constructs in the classroom with attention to and training in what SEL programs include:

SEL is defined as the process of acquiring a set of social and emotional skills—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making—within the context of a safe, supportive environment that encourages social, emotional, and cognitive development and provides opportunities for practicing social-emotional skill. (Cherniss et al., 2006, p. 243)

With older students, educational psychologists have long espoused the time spent on climate-building. Despite short class periods and large numbers of students who move through a teacher's classroom, SEL proponents would encourage time spent on creating safety and belonging as time well spent (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Norris, 2003; Roeser et al., 2002; Ryan, Gheen, & Midgley, 1998).

**Effects on classroom management.** Teachers display various levels of skill and value on the importance of establishing a positive classroom climate in their own personal environment. Some researchers have investigated methods of changing a school climate through schoolwide attention to classroom management techniques that are derived from the constructs of an SEL program (Norris, 2003). Based on these constructs, suggestions for teachers include use of reflective techniques, democratic management and decision-making, and teaching to the whole child. "Fortunately, unlike IQ, the abilities that comprise 'emotional intelligence' can be acquired and/or

strengthened. SEL skills are designed to create attitudes, behaviors, and cognitions that promote healthy social relationships, personal well-being, and academic achievement” (Norris, 2003, p. 314).

According to Norris (2003), purposeful, well thought-out actions and activities on the part of teachers can result in classrooms where students feel safe to take risks and know they are valuable community members. “SEL is seen not as an add-on for the teacher, but the way that relationships, routines, and procedures are established so everyone feels cared for, respected, and valued” (p. 315). Teachers and students can build social skills through ongoing classroom meetings and by connecting to curriculum instruction in these same meetings and gatherings. Teachers can make it clear that all emotions are normal, but that handling them has both better and worse methods. In the realm of social skills, the flexible use of active listening, I-messages, empathy, and goal-setting is all part of the normal classroom design. Decision making and problem solving skills are the centerpieces of SEL, and they have implications for life-long behavioral success. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2007a) reports that the use of SEL offers great potential to address multiculturalism, cultural relevance, the achievement gap, and gender equity because solutions are embedded in this type of classroom management. This reality presents a viable avenue for teaching and maintaining a culture and climate that supports civility and respect.

Hughes and Zhang (2007), in a study of 84 classrooms with more than 1,000 student participants, report that highly differentiating practices in classrooms show that teachers who manage by providing more emotional support, praise, and opportunity for high achievers and more criticism and direction to low achievers affect the way students

perform and connect with each other. The researchers found that children as young as first grade were aware of teachers' differential behavior toward classmates. They also found that where students had adopted a performance-goal orientation, they were motivated to maintain self-worth through demonstrated ability. In a mastery orientation, the focus is on individual improvement, wherein the emphasis is on understanding and mistakes are viewed as part of learning. In a second study, Hughes and Zhang (2007) conclude that these classroom differences had implications for both students' academic motivation and perceived competence, and the structure, distribution, and perception of their classmates' abilities. In classrooms with ability grouping, the students' perception was that peers were less accepting of those in the lower ability group.

Ryan (1998) reported on the academic self-efficacy of adolescent students in a research study of 63 math classrooms that included 516 students. This study of research investigated how the classroom context related to student avoidance of help seeking, and what variables were associated with academic self-efficacy (Ryan et al., 1998). Again, as in the Hughes and Zhang articles, in classrooms where the focus was on understanding and effort, students felt that they could seek help. In an environment in which students felt that others knew and related to them beyond their academic abilities, they were less likely to feel that asking for help would incur negative judgments. "The distressing situation where low-efficacy adolescents avoid seeking help more than do their high-efficacy peers is ameliorated when teachers are concerned with their students' social-emotional needs. This suggests that warm, supportive relationships empower low-efficacy students to risk asking for help" (Ryan et al., 1998, p. 533). Moreover, the "social climate of the classroom is important in understanding students' help-seeking

behavior. Positive relationships that encompass both academic and social concerns are likely to support students' efforts to seek aid when it is needed" (p. 534).

According to Roeser et al. (2002), research involving 97 adolescents in two middle schools in San Francisco that was investigating the connection between SEL and engagement in adolescents found that three things affect student motivation to learn. One factor is when students believe that they are academically competent; another is when students find the academic subject intrinsically interesting; and the third is the students' personal goal of self-improvement or mastery. An additional finding was that adolescents who felt helpless to achieve not only reported a tendency to withdraw from the learning activities, but also admitted that they were more likely to disrupt or refuse to cooperate. These researchers suggested that teachers design programs that connect academic skills and efficacy by building bonding to school, creating smaller learning communities, establishing student choice and voice in the classroom, and using curricula that speak to diverse student interests and ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Developing competence, care, community and responsive curricula, the researchers concluded, may be the most effective way to engage these adolescents in their own learning.

### **Importance of Teacher Competence in SEL**

In a review of current research related to SEL, Jennings and Greenberg (2009) reported that socially and emotionally competent teachers develop supportive relationships with students, build on student strengths and abilities, establish behavioral guidelines, coach students through conflicts, encourage cooperation, and model respect and appropriate communication. Jennings calls this combination the *prosocial classroom model* and asserts that a teacher who has SEC can design and implement a classroom



based upon these elements of SEL. The model includes recognizing student emotions and responding to their individual needs. It involves proactively and skillfully using enthusiasm and enjoyment to effectively manage classroom behaviors.

**Current teachers.** As a role model and facilitator of an SEL curriculum, a teacher can recognize what student and teacher support is needed and available from a schoolwide community. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) base their SEC definition on the constructs of EI and SEL as defined on the CASEL Web site, recognizing that teachers who embody and model these EI traits will have more prosocial classrooms. “Teacher social emotional competence contributes to healthy classroom climate through the development of supportive teacher-student relationships, effective classroom management, and quality SEL program implementation” (p. 499). Such competence increases bonding, helps establish higher motivation and fewer behavior problems, and promotes feelings of safety and connectedness among students.

Kaufhold and Johnson (2005) reported research on the skill level of 15 elementary school teachers in a rural community in south Texas, with the assumption that EI skills are integral components of strong mental health and should therefore be important traits in teachers. The purpose of the testing was to help teachers self-evaluate their needs and pursue professional development opportunities as a result. This review of literature found that little research had been done specifically with elementary educators. Most was done on corporate employees, and on elementary and high-school students. This result begs the question of the qualifications of those administering and implementing the interventions to strengthen SEL competence if our teachers are not adequately trained and assessed themselves.

**Preservice teacher training.** In Spain, as a result of much research having been done there on EI and its effect on the health and well-being of children, and because of “scientific evidence for the predictive validity of EI and its relation to educational objectives” (Palomera et al., 2008, p. 438), researchers have proposed preservice teaching training in EI as a priority. Citing the many studies done in America and the United Kingdom, and the necessity of competence for teachers’ own health and the teaching-learning process in the classroom, the authors’ conclusion was to recommend explicit training and development of social and emotional competencies in schools and institutions that train teachers. Citing the positive outcomes that research supports, these authors outlined behaviors such as higher quality social relationships, better academic performance, prosocial behavior, better mental health, and many more examples of research-based outcomes. They referred to these outcomes as *basic competencies* and considered the development of these competencies beneficial for all children and teachers. They called for adequate preservice and ongoing teacher training in order to encourage effective teaching and to generate a suitable environment for learning, collaboration, and the emotional development of children.

Justice and Espinoza (2007), in a research study of 160 preservice teachers, examined what a student needs to be a quality teacher; they found that the answer was more than just the academic factors. These researchers suggested that the content areas are well covered in preservice teacher training, and that undergraduate students demonstrate their knowledge by taking and passing content-area exams. Students also must have completed approved teacher-training internships certified by the state institutions issuing their teaching certification; but Justice and Espinoza questioned

whether these qualifications prove the emotional preparation that teachers must have to successfully complete their years of service. They cited references that suggest that the most important variable in achievement, success, leadership, and life satisfaction is to be “an emotionally fit person, able to identify, understand, experience, and express human emotions in a healthy and productive way” (p. 457). Additionally, one review of EI mentoring among preservice teachers cited research that suggests teachers don’t feel comfortable promoting emotional development of students because they are not trained in how to do it (Hawkey, 2006). This outcome brings to light both questions and concerns regarding American teacher competency and whether we are currently providing sufficient training in SEL or EI, and where and when it would be appropriate to pursue and provide such training for it to be most effective and advantageous.

### **General Population**

Several studies report on the ways in which SEL can impact the general population of a classroom, and they suggest students can be strongly influenced by attentiveness to EI and an SEL approach. The following studies are examples from the SEL research that show the usefulness of SEL at all age levels of public school, from primary through the transition from high school to higher education.

The first example involves a second-grade study in citizenship (Nielsen, Finkelstein, Schmidt, & Duncan, 2008). Based on the constructs of SEL, two classes of second graders at an elementary school in northern Iowa used an inquiry-style methodology in their classroom work. The foundation of community building in the classroom unit was based on a celebration of the family as the child’s first teachers. The study outlined the basics of how to flesh out a unit on citizenship with democratic and

dialogical pedagogy, and student choice. Reflection, explicit teaching, discovery, and social action were included in the application of knowledge gained. Teachers integrated the curricula in a transdisciplinary fashion with authentic assessment and learning.

Another research study of 154 students during their fifth and sixth grade years in an urban, low socioeconomic school district in Northern New Jersey evaluated SEL programming on a larger scale (Rosenblatt & Elias, 2008). When teachers gave fifth-grade students preventive SEL intervention through a prescribed program, researchers observed dosage effects that showed significant differences in the loss of academic grade-point average (GPA) during the transition between elementary and middle school (Rosenblatt & Elias, 2008). They determined dosage by hours of class time devoted to the lessons in the program, and they noted significant differences between high- and low-dosage groups. They found that the high-dosage groups dropped only .5 GPA points during the first year of transition to middle school, while low-dosage recipients dropped more than 1.0 GPA points during the same transition year.

When asked why they did not maintain fidelity to the lessons in the program, teachers stated that they felt the time would be better spent on academic preparations. In fact, the scores showed the opposite: that the time dedicated to the SEL and coping skills of the program better prepared their students to be resilient during this tumultuous year of transition (Rosenblatt & Elias, 2008). The research determined that

Concurrent life changes (school transition, pubertal development, onset of dating behavior, and family disruption) pose an additive risk for academic decline; the greater the number of transitions that occur simultaneously with school transition, the greater the decline in academic grade point average. (p. 537)

Rosenblatt and Elias cited research that supports that position that, even with little or no academic intervention, students who receive SEL instruction show better

academic outcomes than their peers. In this study, the program used was part of district-mandated curriculum. Teachers were trained, supported with ongoing mentors, and provided with all the materials. They were asked to administer/implement the program weekly and support the instruction with ongoing words and visuals. The researchers compared beginning and ending scores using an emotional intelligence test, two standards performance tests, and the recorded GPAs.

That the scores varied significantly from classroom to classroom became apparent in the outcomes. When Rosenblatt and Elias inspected further, it became apparent to them that grouping the teachers into three units based on the dosage of treatment would add information to the research. So they ran a further correlation, which showed the results I quoted earlier—that those receiving higher dosages showed significantly less drop in GPA during the transition year from fifth to sixth grade than those receiving middle or low dosages of the same coping/problem-solving SEL program. “This study joins others in suggesting that the strategy of abandoning SEL to ‘make up’ for missing academic work may not be the most effective way to improve grades for low-achieving students” (Rosenblatt & Elias, 2008, p. 552).

Another study with 667 high school students in Huntsville, AL also researched the value of EI. In this research, findings were that in an examination of the relationship between academic success and EI, EI was a significant predictor of academic success (Parker et al., 2004). Scores on adaptability and stress management showed that students with higher scores on these abilities were more successful with GPA than students in the lower EI ability range (Parker et al., 2004). This study shows evidence that acquisition of

skills such as adaptability and stress management, which are indicative of EI, may be valuable to the academic success of students in later years.

In another study, Parker et al. (2005) studied how EI affects the choice to persist in the transition of 1,426 students from high school to higher education at four different universities. In this case, being able to adjust to new tasks such as forming new relationships, learning new study habits, adjusting to increased academic demands, and learning to live independently may have determined whether or not students dropped out. The suggestion here is that mastering these tasks is linked to emotional and social competencies. When students were given a trait emotional intelligence test, “the results revealed that the academic groups differed, with the successful group scoring significantly higher than the other two groups on the interpersonal abilities, adaptability, and stress management dimensions” (p. 69). This study suggests that increased ability in EI may increase students’ success in the early transition to higher education from high school.

In the United Kingdom, Qualter et al. (2009) studied a similar group of 332 participants and suggested that the “particular ability to accurately perceive others’ emotions, is related to successful social integration (adjustment) into university” (p. 220). The authors of this study felt that being unaware of one’s EI abilities might prevent a person from finding and using appropriate resources when one needed them, and from recognizing the self-management techniques that lead toward success in an independent academic situation. The researchers compared incoming scores on an EI inventory for students who persisted with those who withdrew from their course of study; they found that not only did students who persisted score higher overall, but they also did so on each

of the four separate subsections of the inventory. These sections included emotion perception, mood regulation, regulation of others' emotions, and utilization of emotions. One suggestion in the conclusion of this study was to "highlight the need to provide interventions that support the building of confidence in using EI abilities. Interventions that increase feelings of control and competence should lead to more effective coping and to better use of support mechanisms available" (p. 227).

### **Special-Education Populations**

According to some researchers, the use of SEL programs and approaches can transform special-education populations (Elias & Weissberg, 2000). As the government moves education more and more toward inclusive environments for all students, it becomes vital to use a supportive, inclusive approach to developing classroom climate. The special-education subgroup tends not to be well accepted by peers based on observations of how they interact with peers and adults. Their difficulty reading nonverbal cues is the reason for this poor acceptance. A successful response to intervention needs for this population requires a more consistent and inclusive structure, which involves more classroom work to address the social structures that are intrinsically missing. Improving social relationships requires explicit skill building and a pattern of instruction, practice, and feedback with regard to these social interactions.

SEL's basic constructs include the building of caring relationships and helping students to develop the skills they need to create and enact these relationships with others. For this population, the efforts invested in addressing their learning challenges can be draining on the energy and perception of social elements of the classroom. Elias (2004) reports that some of these students may not even have the cognitive ability to link

or connect daily interactions. In the classroom, SEL includes the explicit teaching of self-awareness, including feelings vocabulary, and encourages opportunities for students to practice relationship skills in the classroom setting.

Promoting self-regulation is another building block of SEL that can be very helpful for learning-disabled (LD) students. “From an SEL point of view, interventions that are comprehensive and link academic and social-emotional learning have the greatest likelihood of helping students with LD” (p. 59).

### **Critics of SEL or EI in Schooling**

Although I have reviewed many articles and studies in support of SEL and its use of the EI ability framework that Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso proposed, there are also critics of this concept. Philosophical issues they have raised with the idea of schools including and embracing a purpose that incorporates social and emotional development include the concern over values. At question is who chooses the values? Are they societal, cultural, ethnically, or racially generated, and therefore exclusive of diverse people (Rietti, 2008)?

### **EI Definition Issues**

One criticism surrounding the EI issue has been the difficulty of determining one usable definition of it. As I discussed at the onset of this literature review, the definition of EI has been difficult to pin down, and various EI proponents have championed various meanings. A related criticism focuses on uncertainty about whether EI is an ability or a trait tied to personality.



## **Training in EI**

Questions about who teaches EI and what training they have received to do so reflect another criticism that challengers to EI instruction have advanced. Also at issue is what the best methods and the proper forum are for its instruction. As with so many other educational subjects, are there standards that address this need? Many proponents of both EI and SEL also have cited issues with these last two criticisms. They are working hard to establish an overall definition of EI that works for the educational setting, and to develop controlled constructs for the training and testing of both teacher competence in and student acquisition of the SEL concepts.

## **The Forum of Public School**

In this area of analysis, the question becomes whether it is morally right to teach SEL to a captive audience. For an answer, we must return to the question of the purpose of schooling. If we are of the mind that schooling has dual purposes, both academic and social, then we would have no issue with this criticism. If we believe that educational facilities are only for academic skill acquisition, then we will not be able to support SEL as an appropriate skill to be placed within the educational curriculum.

Rietti's arguments against EI in public schooling at times, in fact, support careful teaching of it (2008), as evidenced when she argues that "[children] can also be taught that particular emotional reactions and habits, and ways of managing their own and others' emotions, will be met with approval and others not" (p. 637). And later, when she notes that

Emotional knowledge that is, the body of information to which EI applies, can be taught: so one might teach children how to put words to their feelings, read facial and other expression in others, how different emotions relate to each other, and techniques for managing emotions in oneself or others. (p. 637)

Rietti's issue is that what we teach can't be EI because EI is an ability you either have or don't, unless you call it by another name. SEL proponents would argue that EI *is* called by another name: social emotional learning.

### **Whose Values Are Being Taught?**

Kristjansson (2006) has argued, in another review, in favor of moral and value issues, as well. His main criticism of EI was with the highly values-laden premises of EI Goleman has espoused. Kristjansson argued that EI doesn't offer enough proof of brain function and lacks a good definition, ability tests, and empirical evidence of academic improvement. He claimed that the morality is missing because our applications could embody all the constructs of EI and still be evil rather than good. He also argued against handling conflict resolution in a way that teaches that anger or hostile feelings are negative. He argued that doing this goes against the early Greek philosophers who believed we should be emotionally cognizant, but not that certain emotions are bad and that some emotions are more acceptable than others.

EI and SEL proponents would counter these arguments by recognizing that these have been early criticisms, and that EI is still a new and emerging topic. More empirical evidence is published every year with regard to the connection between rational and emotional brain activity, and the connections of EI to academic achievement.

Waterhouse also addressed these apparent faults (2006a, 2006b), and Cherniss, Extein, Goleman, and Weissberg (2006) published a rebuttal that spoke to her criticisms. In their rebuttal of Waterhouse's critique of EI in the school setting, Cherniss et al. (2006) suggested that Waterhouse overlooked a large body of research that supports the position that EI competencies can be taught and have contributed to important social,

emotional, and academic gains for children. The authors admitted that the definition of EI is still not always clear, but that the same goes for the definition and best measurement technique for IQ, some hundred years after its recognized scientific value. He also cited the continual refinement in the definition of the term *EI* as the field of research widens. In addition, he cited many peer-reviewed studies that connect EI with leadership success, military success, and performance in the educational setting, as well as the increase of tools that are now available to successfully measure EI. Last, he cited many SEL studies now published that indicate improvements in social bonding, attendance, and even academic achievement with the application of SEL.

### **Conclusion**

The value of exploring the benefits of SEL as a set of constructs valuable to the social emotional development of children of school age is well documented from the perspective of socialization being a purpose in schooling. When we consider the teaching of SEL, we must take into account the SEC of the teacher, as well. Most SEL programs involve teaching teachers how to teach students to raise their SEL; but such programs don't necessarily confirm or teach the basic EI skills in teachers themselves. Yet some of the studies done in SEL programming have shown that the quality of teacher implementation was related to the improvements that students made (Hawkey, 2006; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Kaufhold & Johnson, 2005; Palomera et al., 2008; Rosenblatt & Elias, 2008).

This chapter reflects the core of the study that follows. As we continue to recognize the impact of a teacher on the daily life and development of students, we question whether there is a call for SEC among teaching professionals. Can students be

identified who have experienced this kind of classroom? And does their story give substance to the impact of those who teach with SEC? In the next chapters, I will seek to address the evidence that accompanies both EI and SEL regarding their impact on academic achievement and perceived adult success. These examples are additional supports to the argument in favor of including SEL in a dual-purpose approach to schooling in the United States of America.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### Research Design and Rationale

*Qualitative document analysis (QDA)* is a research methodology based on the interpretation of data as it emerges from documents during an interactive examination by a researcher (Altheide et al., 2008). Also known as *ethnographic content analysis (ECA)*, this approach is based on the foundations of qualitative methods and involves the study of documents to uncover some meaningful expression of the subjects' lives. Using this methodology will allow me to explore the description of teacher qualities and classroom environment authored by students to determine commonalities of their experiences. QDA rests in the belief that the documents that humans read and write reflect social meaning and understanding. We can use these documents to describe and track the experience of participants in like circumstances.

I began this study with the close inspection of original documents authored by each participant. A document protocol (or template) that I created deductively aided in the coding of teacher demeanor and classroom environment in a way that included description of the five core constructs of SEL; namely, the concepts of reflectiveness, safe and responsive environments, creative and authentic learning activities, a cooperative problem-solving atmosphere, and the building of community/school/home connections (Cohen, 2001; King, 1998). The study progressed with the continual design and readjustment of the template or protocol to adequately capture words or references used to describe the five core constructs of SEL; readjustments also enabled me to refine questions surrounding the description about why these participants are pursuing a career in teaching, and the traits of a teacher they admire (Huddersfield, 2006, 2007; King,

1998). This template was under constant revision as more themes emerged that described the environment and qualities of each student's experience. This process has given the research a degree of reliability and validity because the constant comparative process added descriptive power to the communal experience described by each successive case.

*Constant comparative analysis* is a process of moving back and forth between documents or cases in a sample, which allows researchers to apply emerging themes to previously coded documents. This process allows them to compare incidents that are applicable within each coded section to other cross-case samples. As Goetz and LeCompte (1981) described it, this method "combines inductive category coding with a simultaneous comparison of all social incidents observed" (p. 58). As they code themes, researchers can compare them across cases and can describe the shared nature of the experience of the participants.

QDA is strongly connected to ethnography: QDA treated these documents as representative of a community with which I, as the researcher, would become immersed as I read and coded the descriptions (Altheide et al., 2008). My emerging interpretations mimicked those of an ethnographer, as I engaged and tracked the descriptions in an iterative style that would let me connect with and become intimate with the experiences the students shared through documents in the sample. The themes and interpretations that emerged in my reading of the data describe the social meanings or significance of the shared experience, rather than simply uncovering the phenomenon itself.

QDA is a reflexive methodology, which means that I, as the researcher, must remain aware that my interpretations were intertwined with the participants' responses. I was mindful that this was the case during the discovery and description of readings, as

well as when I was searching for contexts and underlying meanings, and for patterns and processes described in the documents.

This method required that I remain systematic and analytic, but still flexible (Altheide et al., 2008). I could change template and recode the previously coded documents based on the changed template as new information and descriptive phrases become evident (Huddersfield, 2006; King, 1998). The original variables, meant to guide the study, (the five core constructs of SEL) could change as the coding process continued, which allowed the true and full description of the experience to emerge (Altheide et al., 2008; Huddersfield, 2006).

### **Participants and Site**

A written assignment in one Midwestern University's undergraduate course provided the documents to be studied. The course, of which there were seven sections in fall 2011, all required the same assignments, one of which was an education autobiography. The directions for writing this assignment were relatively generic, regardless of instructor (See Appendix C). I gathered the purposeful sample from work turned in to one section of this course. This document was submitted and graded by the time of collection, and students incurred no advantage or disadvantage from participation in this study. I obtained consent through an Institutional Review Board (IRB) review to gain access to a purposeful sample of one section of the course. Of this sample, I used only those documents written by students who had given informed consent.

### **Data Collection and Analysis Procedures**

As noted, QDA is a process that uses a number of steps in an iterative cycle (Altheide et al., 2008). The steps are as follows:

1. Pursue a problem to be investigated.

2. Become familiar with the context of the information source (document).
3. Become familiar with several examples of relevant documents (from six to 10).
4. List several items or categories (variables) to guide data collection and draft a protocol (data collection sheet or template).
5. Test the protocol by collecting data from several documents.
6. Revise the protocol and select several additional cases to further refine the protocol (Altheide et al., 2008, p. 130).

I had already become involved in Step 1 by reading the education autobiographies from a previous semester of this course. My reading 15 of these documents while I helped to grade the course revealed a common, shared experience that students seemed to disclose within the confines of the required writing for this assignment. I accomplished Step 2 by reading the new sample of documents for the semester's course section. I accomplished Step 3 in part as I set about completing a document protocol tool. I designed this tool, called a *template analysis*, to allow space to record descriptions of the five core concepts of SEL as well as the qualities of an admired teacher and the reasons offered for pursuit of teaching as a profession. These last areas emerged in the initial reading of the documents and appeared to be part of the phenomenon students described in this document. I initially coded a sample of three of the fall 2010 documents to see whether the template would adequately capture the rich description of the variables I sought. The process seemed to work well, bearing some slight revisions, and I felt that the document protocol would be a useful tool for the research study I proposed, recognizing that there would likely be further revisions to the template as the description of the shared experience emerged.



Using this template analysis that I designed originally with *a priori* codes, I engaged in steps 3 through 6 of the process by seeking phrases and words written by each student author that described the five basic constructs of an SEL program. (See Appendix A for sample template.) I also looked for descriptions of why each participant wanted to be a teacher, and whether the classroom experiences he or she described had affected his or her academic accomplishments and intentions. I initially cut and pasted the participant's actual words into the template under the sections of these questions, thereby using *in vivo* coding.

I used the template to work with each document, revising and updating as became necessary to capture all the elements the participants described in their experiences (Huddersfield, 2006; King, 1998). With each revision, recoding of previously coded documents occurred to ensure that I extracted the full experience from each participant (Altheide et al., 2008; Huddersfield, 2007; King, 1998). This iterative process demanded flexibility and reflexivity as I sought to keep an open mind to new elements of the experience that emerged, and I was careful not to allow any bias of what I expected to see creep into the coding process (Huddersfield, 2006).

Second-level coding involved my interpretation to find common terms or descriptions that fit each of the constructs I had identified in the documents. This process involved the constant comparative-analysis process of moving from the literal words of the participants to the more abstract as I saw themes develop. This was an abductive coding process as the deductive codes of the document protocol became combined with the inductive codes of the interpretive process. I used matrices to organize the actual quotes and themes to be able to see the similarities both within-case and cross-case (in

context with each other) (Miles & Huberman, 1994). It was interesting to see how these codes and themes emerged as I read the data. The codes included a combination of situation description codes, personal description codes, perspectives held by participants, and activity codes.

Third-level coding involved the use of these rich descriptions to produce interpretive coding. I looked for patterns, themes, plausibility and clustering (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I looked for any relationships among and between variables, and I looked to be able to assemble a logical chain of evidence toward interpretative conclusions or summations. I looked for outlier cases or descriptions because these are possible in QDA, and they represent a possibility with purposeful sampling. This process led to an interpretation and summarization of what the admired teachers' qualities looked like in each of the classrooms and each teaching experience the participants described. These interpretations provided a sense for me of what the classroom experience was like that helped young people determine that they wanted to model their professional endeavors after those of a significant teacher in their personal history.

During the second- and third-level coding procedures, I designed tables, charts, and graphs to organize and depict the emerging information and to provide a means of tracking the interpretive process as it emerged (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To choose how to visually display the information, I relied on the very simple definition of use that I give third-graders as I created these graphics: A graph/table/chart is a visual description of the information you have. It should make the information easier to understand and display in a smaller space than if you are writing out the narrative. Graphics are like *the picture that paints a thousand words*.

## **Interpreting and Writing Up Results**

My interpretation and writing up of the study results reflects careful attention to published works that describe how to do this properly (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Huddersfield, 2006, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994). In interpretation, I paid careful attention to patterns that developed within and between cases. I looked at prioritizing these themes while remaining open to subtleties and interesting revelations as I sought to understand the experiences of participants in the study. In writing up the results, I remained aware of the responsibility to represent the experience of the subjects. I used “principled decisions” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 137) to represent the data in an unbiased and honest manner. I wrote up the results as a summarization of themes, highlighting them with quotes and excerpts from the transcripts as appropriate. In this way I was able to use the themes to produce a clear overview, while attempting to avoid wordiness. I was mindful of the cons of overgeneralization and the potential of losing sight of the individual experiences within the overall picture (Huddersfield, 2007).

## **Strategies for Validating Findings**

I continued to quality-check the development of the template in order to be aware of my own preconceptions about SEC and its effect on student development and learning. I also had the template independently scrutinized by another teacher trained in SEL competencies. This person served as an outside expert to corroborate that the template was complete in its ability to capture the rich description I desired, and this expert interpreted a few samples to show consistency. I kept a careful audit trail of the changes in the documentation and interpretation of the responses. Also, I kept a series of templates to document the changes and reasons for change to the document-analysis

template. The iterative nature of this process required me to recode previously coded documents, and I did this with consistency. I kept research notes to track all changes and thought processes in the template-analysis construction and change process and in the iterative interpretation cycles (Huddersfield, 2006; King, 1998).

### **Ethical Issues**

One potential ethical issue was that I collected a sample from one of the sections of the undergraduate course that I teach. The reason for seeking the participation of these students was that I believed they would gladly give informed consent and trust that there was no threat to their grade or status in doing so. I collected this sample after the course grades were posted in December, and I gathered informed consent documentation.

Determining which course section to use could have suggested an ethical dilemma if it appeared that my use of only one section of the course confirmed an emerging theory rather than allowing for the range of experiences, but I relied on the theory of purposeful sampling as justification. Purposeful sampling is a procedure that has long been established in qualitative research (Miles & Huberman, 1994), and the bounding of this study to just one section of this course produced a reasonable number of cases to compare when I looked for the emergence of themes in the proposed document analysis (Altheide et al., 2008). Clarifying researcher bias could have been a concern, but I have a very strong sense of integrity and worked to report the truthful interpretation of what the documents showed, regardless of whether that interpretation corroborated my anticipated result.

### **Expected Outcomes**

I believe that this study, housed in rich description using the actual words of the students impacted by teachers whom they describe, gives validation to the impact of the five core constructs of SEL on students. The examples suggest whether SEC impacts students positively as they work toward school success and beyond in their pursuit of a teaching career. These outcomes provide the prose that helps us to analyze the theory that students not only want more from an educator than mere content knowledge, but also that they will work harder for these teachers and potentially achieve more. I believe that the proposed research may support the claims that students are willing to invest more and attain more academic prowess in classrooms that have been built on the concepts of reflection, safe and responsive environments, creative and authentic learning activities, and problem-solving atmosphere, wherein community/school/home connections are built (Cohen, 2001).

## **CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS**

This chapter contains a description and analysis of the results I obtained from a document analysis of the education autobiography assignment written by 28 students in an undergraduate teacher-training course at a university in the Midwest. Following a review of the purpose and particulars of the research study, I will describe the sample population and review the initial coding process designed to enable me to analyze the documents. Using a template protocol I will seek deductive codes that describe the five constructs of SEL that are contained in the documents (King, 1998). Then I will describe the process of the emergence of themes during the second-level coding process. I have included tables and figures to make this information clear and accessible. Results that describe the meaning of the findings of this section of the template protocol follow. I then repeat this process for a second set of codes in the template protocol; those codes describe the traits and attributes of teachers perceived to have a positive impact on students. The final set of codes and results will describe the outcomes that emerged through the combined deductive and inductive nature of the coding and analysis process. I will wrap these analyses up with a reflective section in which I describe third-level coding themes that emerged during my coding and analysis of the documents.

### **Purpose and Assignment**

The purpose of this qualitative document analysis is to describe the attributes and impact of influential teachers on students in their classrooms. In the education autobiography assignment of one Midwestern university's undergraduate course on the history of schooling in the US, the students account for their personal history in schooling

and what has influenced them to pursue a career in teaching. The instructions for this portion of the assignment were as follows:

Please reflect on your own education history and consider your past and present experiences in schools, especially through a critical examination. Write an education autobiography that tells your story.

**Part C:**

- Discuss past teachers who had an impact on you, your learning, and your decision to pursue the profession. What specifically did they do, say, organize, teach, etc. that made their approach to teaching excellent?
- **Life Changing Experiences:** Any life-changing experiences in your past? Give examples of people and/or situations that were instrumental to your interest in becoming a teacher.

Use examples, stories, and/or illustrations to make your story personal and memorable. (McCuin, 2011)

I have proposed that the analytical study of a purposeful sample of these documents may describe the attributes of teachers who use SEC along with the core constructs of SEL.

**Document Protocol, Including Definitions of SEC and SEL**

Socially and emotionally competent teachers develop supportive relationships with students, build on student strengths and abilities, establish behavioral guidelines, coach students through conflicts, encourage cooperation, and model respect and appropriate communication (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Jennings and Greenberg (2009) called this combination the *prosocial classroom model* and asserted that a teacher who has SEC can design and implement a classroom based upon these elements of SEL. The model also includes the teacher behaviors of recognizing student emotions and responding to their individual needs. It involves educators who proactively and skillfully use enthusiasm and enjoyment to effectively manage classroom behaviors.

Having designed a document protocol (Huddersfield, 2006; King, 1998), I have attempted to identify whether the sample student autobiography assignments depict a teacher's demeanor and classroom environment in a way that includes description of the five core constructs of SEL—i.e., (a) reflectiveness, (b) safe and responsive environments, (c) creative and authentic learning activities, (d) a cooperative problem-solving atmosphere, and (e) the building of community/school/home connections (Cohen, 2001). With these constructs in place, teachers and students can work to build relationships in safe environments that allow for deep, rich engagement and authentic learning to occur. In this way, the concepts of EI—self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, social awareness, and relationship management—are incorporated into the daily activities of interactive relationship building and curricular content acquisition as the teacher and students and even parents and community members interact with each other during the course of daily school activities.

In addition to my identification and deductive coding of these five core constructs from the template protocol, students had the opportunity within the parameters of the assignment to describe the traits and attributes of teachers who have positively impacted them. We can consider these combined constructs, traits, and attributes the traits and attributes of socially and emotionally competent teachers. The following is a detailed accounting of my analysis of the documents using a deductively coded document protocol; I added inductive codes as they emerged.

### **Sample Population**

Following the posting of grades at the end of an undergraduate course in education, and upon receiving IRB approval to do so, I collected education autobiography



documents from 28 students to determine whether they described traits common to the SEL experience. As Table 1 shows, the subjects differed by gender and age, ranging from 19 years to 50 years; they were of various socioeconomic backgrounds. There was little variety in racial background, with no one claiming African American heritage, and three claiming Asian or Mexican American roots. Participants also differed by the content areas they were pursuing in their college career. The students in this sample came from content areas of agriculture, English, math and science, music and art, and human growth and development. Two students whom I had offered the chance to participate in the study declined, with no reason sought or given.

Table 1

*Description of Subjects*

Total number offered participation	Female	Male	Age 25+	Declined
30	19	11	6 (female)	2 (male)

**Description of Process for SEL Coding**

I gave each document in the study a number and assigned each a pseudonym to protect the confidentiality of the participants. I used NVivo 9, a qualitative software program, to complete initial coding. This process involved coding for the five constructs of SEL: creating a safe and belonging environment; providing creative, thought-inspiring, and authentic learning activities; creating an engaging and cooperative atmosphere; building community/school/home connections; and creating opportunities

for reflectiveness or self-improvement. Cohen (2001) describes these concepts, and the connection between the concepts of EI and SEL in this manner:

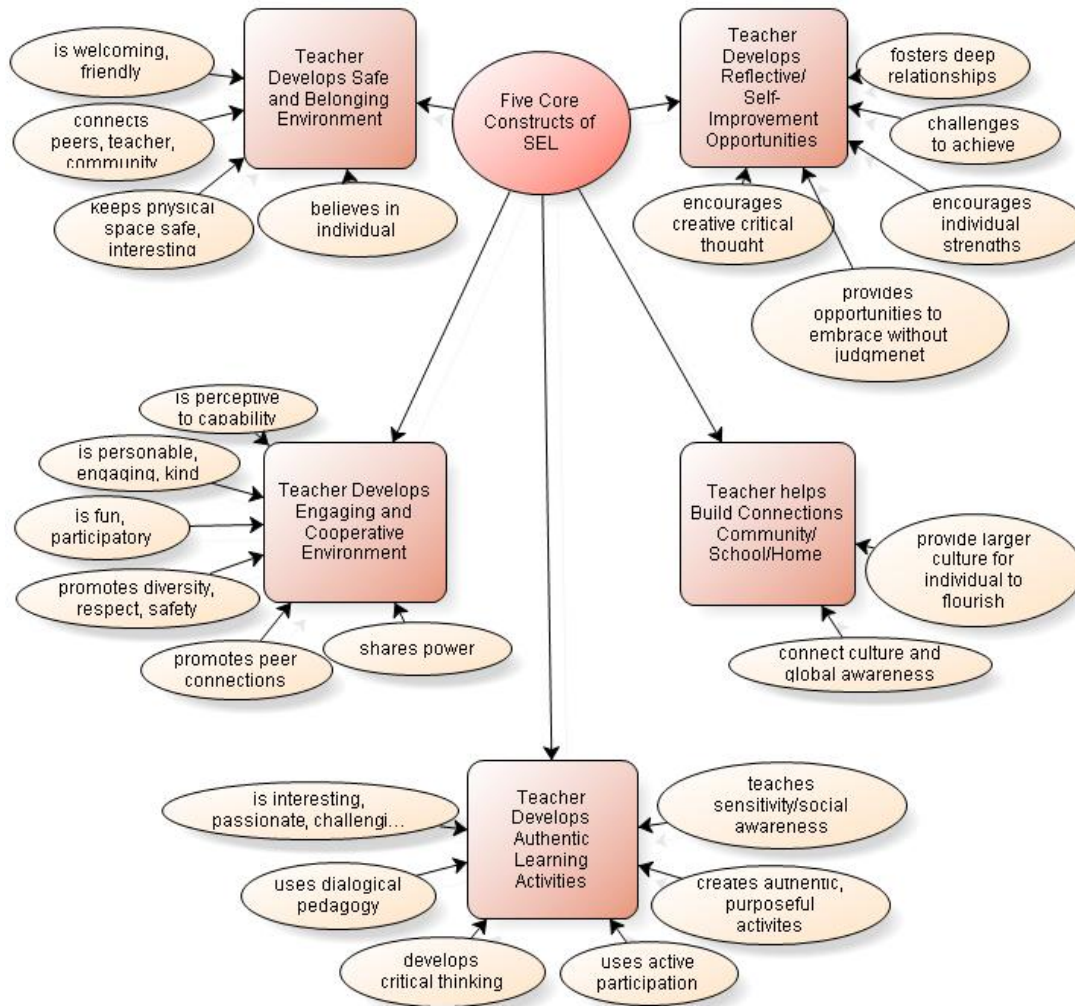
1. Reflective capacities or an enhanced awareness of ourselves and others is the foundation for all learning and development.
2. A developing awareness of self and others needs to be used to enhance our ability to solve problems flexibly.
3. A developing awareness of self and others needs to be used to enhance our ability to learn and to be creative in a wide range of ways.
4. The creation of safe, caring, and responsive environments in which learning can take place is of essential importance.
5. Collaboration between school, home, and community needs to be a part of long-term implementation planning. (pp. 13-14)

I looked for wording or examples of these five constructs in the document analysis.

### **First and Second Level Coding**

With this coding process in mind, I began reading the documents in their entirety, seeking any mention of the deductive codes identified on the template analysis protocol (see Appendix B for complete template protocol), and coding for the presence of the five core constructs of SEL. As I read, I engaged in constant comparative analysis between documents to be sure that what I noticed in later documents I had accounted for in the earlier ones, as well. After the initial coding, I printed each subject's document with the codes highlighted in the text. Doing this allowed me to continue the constant comparative analysis as I reread each subject's coded document, reducing the comment during the second reading to a theme or phrase that generalized the comment. From the handwritten list of themes within each deductive code, I created a typed coding matrix in which I copied each text citation into columns by theme. I did this within each of the deductive codes for the five SEL constructs.

At times an individual student mentioned a new theme that was not corroborated by other subjects. Although these comments were valid reflections of the schooling experience, I did not use any theme in this data analysis that was not corroborated by at least three different subjects. The themes that emerged for each of the five core constructs of SEL, as well as textual citations from each, follow (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* Themes within SEL constructs in second-level coding.

**Creating a safe and belonging environment.** Student responses that fell within this deductive code expressed four main themes. The largest, with seven citations, was

the ability of the teacher to make individuals feel welcome. Students also described this construct as friendliness. These participants described a feeling of being welcome that alleviated their fear and anonymity. Mary described the importance of feeling safe and welcome in this way: “Combined with my experience of southern history and enthusiasm about history in general, I was confident in adding to conversation in class... [The teacher] did this by creating a safe classroom space that enabled students to produce introspective, thoughtful writing.” Ellie described the feeling as knowing she was within the “realm of attention” of her teacher. Other participants recalled that, within the atmosphere of safety and knowledge, “there wasn’t the fear of being made fun of.”

Students appreciated having help building connections to peers, teachers, and their community. As Devin described, “the kind of atmosphere we had really made [for] a community where each learner could feel he or she had great potential to succeed, and just as importantly, to be understood.” Although many students cited the teacher aiding them by providing opportunities for them to interact with other classmates or community members, many just appreciated the relationship with the teacher. Dara spoke of “the teacher that people feel comfortable around; she was always smiling and would never say no.” I was especially struck by the description of one negative experience, in which Mary described the absence of this core SEL construct:

As I think back now, I did not want to be called on and I never raised my hand to add thought to classroom conversations. I did not pass the special test I needed to get into the Talented and Gifted program. I clearly remember thinking that school was not easy, I did not like it, and I did not feel good at what I was doing.

Students in this study found that a physical environment in the classroom that promoted connection and safety, and was built on student interest and work was important. Martha recalled, “the way [the teacher] physically set up his room, this

atmosphere [that] fostered deep, personal, and intense conversations.” Others recounted that the room was “decorated with students’ work,” and “her classroom was always welcoming and bright,” which created a sense of being valued and feeling comfortable.

And finally, numerous students cited the impact of knowing that the teacher held what Nancy called an “undying belief in each individual.” Students appreciated teachers who were “enthusiastic about our thoughts and opinions” and who treated them with an inferred belief in their responsibility. As Emily stated, “she told us that we were all adults, and that she won’t take attendance.” She described this perspective as a belief that the high school students, who made it a point never to miss this teacher’s class, did not treat lightly.

**Creating an engaging and cooperative learning environment.** Students in their education autobiographies frequently cited this second construct of SEL programming. Predominantly, the subjects mentioned that the teacher was perceptive about student capabilities and altered the curriculum or instruction to reflect that observation. In some instances, teachers provided more challenge, as Sierra, Kyle, Dirk, and Kelly noted. Sierra noted, “She was always challenging the class to think above and beyond, empowering students to leave their comfort zone and try.” In other instances, teachers took extra time with students to support their needs, as Kara, Martha, and Nancy cited. Kara said simply, “My teacher took extra time with her,” noting the special needs of one particular student in class. Sometimes the teacher just seemed to recognize the uniqueness of the individual. As Kyle noted, “I remember the teachers who called me to my potential as a student and made me a better student”; and Martha remembered, “Mrs. M saw that I was excelling in things like reading and math and dedicated herself to

committing time to making sure that I was not just idly sitting while she taught things I already knew.” Sue recalled a teacher who “often commented on my prowess as a blossoming writer ... offering the encouragement I needed to continue to hone my skills. She encouraged each student’s individual strengths.”

A second theme within this construct was the connection and involvement of the teacher as personable, engaging, and kind. These teachers seemed to set themselves apart from the masses through their engaging personalities, extraordinary acts of compassion, investment in the personal life of the student, and even acts of love. As Kaila recalled, “She engaged in not only her students studies but also invested in their lives and future.” Earnest reflected that “Mr. F was like a friend . . . I realized that I was more than just another student to him . . . I was a unique individual in his eyes.”

Employing fun and active participation was another important theme students expressed within this construct. Students appreciated having “fun and something to look forward to every day.” Ethan cited that these teachers had them “do projects, group discussions, presentations, and many other things to increase student participation.” As Zach said, “These teachers showed me that learning can be fun.”

Students noticed and appreciated when teachers chose to share the power of decision making with them. Lee described these feelings well when she said, “He taught me how to give and gain respect based off of [*sic*] mutual understanding.” Dirk recollected a teacher who “put a large value on the input of students.” Earnest seemed to sum it up when he said, “She wanted us to be more active in educating ourselves, [to] engage us, ask us to activate prior knowledge of the subject and think about ways we could use this in our own lives.”

Connecting students to one another is another important aspect of this SEL construct that students in this research study noticed and highlighted. Devin remembered one classroom wherein “every moment was a learning opportunity about life and the relationships that come about in our lives.” Mary recalled a teacher who “paired me up with [another student] and this level playing field was one I experienced as I watched lots of friend groups meld together.”

The final theme that emerged within this construct of creating an engaging and cooperative learning environment is that it encourages and promotes acceptance of diversity and respect. As Jackie stated, “They taught us to embrace our culture and the cultures of our peers.” Martha noted that one teacher “provided a safe, respectful atmosphere in his classroom, both through his attitude and the way he physically set up his room”; while Mary recalled that “She, and those like her, demanded that there be no division, that our school community be inclusive of everyone.”

**Creating authentic learning activities.** Students named six main themes relating to this construct of SEL programming. The first was that the activities were challenging and interesting, and were delivered with passion and a meaningful application. Dirk testified that “for the first time we had extensive homework that really challenged me, it made me have to work harder than I usually did, gave me a good work ethic at a young age.” Earnest noted that his teacher “would engage us, ask us to activate prior knowledge of the subject and think about ways we could use this in our own lives.” Steve related a time when a teacher “shocked us with a poem he had written that day.” Sadly, Ellie spoke of a time when the absence of this characteristic in a classroom was

apparent. “This lack of challenging work made it difficult to keep myself motivated to do well when I was not on the teacher’s radar.”

Similarly, active participation, involvement, and hands-on activities had high impact for the students. Many students cited memories of eventful years and activities, but Amy summed up one very motivating year when she said,

Each activity was hands on and after we had created something great we were able to find a place to apply our creativity. A moment that really sticks out in my mind was when my fourth grade teacher, Mrs. E. taught us about creating an ecosystem. I will never forget the activity where we each brought in a two-liter soda bottle and [we] worked hard to create our very own ecosystem.

Amy went on to describe how the fish that she placed in this mini-ecosystem become her first pet when she was able to take it home at the end of the unit. This was a meaningful and significant event in the life of a young child. Lee gave us this advice:

As you create your curriculum be sure that it gives their minds enough of a job to do to remain stimulated. Make the material you teach relatable to a part of the students’ lives they love [and in] that way they can intertwine their enthusiasm for the two. Finally, embrace the students’ dreams and encourage the development of new ones so that they always have a reason to keep hoping. If you can achieve that, you will have created a progressive and positive learning environment that truly does leave no child behind.

The participants spoke compellingly about the impact of having sensitivity and awareness modeled and taught. Earnest spoke of teachers who, as they were “telling both groups’ stories, ...did their best to make sure all view-points were validated.” Steve, in describing one significant teacher, said, “The teacher asked us if King’s dream came true. I didn’t know. I had never thought that critically about the Civil Rights movement before that class.” Libby noted, “With teachers like these, we learned to be aware of our words and the way they can sound, even without harmful intent.” She went on to say, “I



became aware of just how sensitive people can be to certain issues and I was reminded how important diversity is in the classroom.”

A fourth theme within this construct was a learning environment in which the teacher allowed student voices to be spoken and heard. Students cited teachers who allowed them to dictate what they described as “the speed of the classroom,” or those who put value on the input of students in class.

A fifth theme was the authenticity of purpose in the curricula, in which students cited including community members as guest speakers, taking field trips into the world around them, and teaching songs and meaningful activities. Emily recounted the teacher who “sold snacks to give money to the local homeless or women protection centers.” These examples were all significant in the recollections of the student participants in this research study.

The last theme in this construct was critical thinking through discussion. Students cited times when they had been charged to think and consider the actions of themselves or others. As Earnest recalled, “She would ask us to think of the examples or come up with real world application. She would give us an assignment generally a writing prompt, and allow us to prove and justify our knowledge.” Students appreciated being “consistently challenged with discussion and critical thinking,” as Dirk remembered.

**Building community/school/home connections.** A number of students identified this core construct of SEL, and their citations fell into two main themes. One theme is the impact of connecting activities and sensitivity between the home culture and global awareness. Jackie stated this when she recalled, “Teachers would have us participate in activities, like dancing, to make those cultures fun for us to learn about.

They taught us to embrace our culture and the cultures of our peers.” Likewise, Amy, an international exchange student, remembered, “How passionately the teachers wanted us to learn about the European culture. Each class period welcomed someone from the community who possessed a skill or could provide insight into the true nature of the culture.” Emily said it quite succinctly when she stated, “she not only taught us about various parts of the world, she made them real to us.”

The second theme that emerged in my coding of this construct was that of using the classroom to provide a larger culture for the individual to flourish. Devin, an international student new to American schooling, saw this concept as being “given a second chance at making friends and developing an identity for myself.” Dara was devastated by having to leave such a carefully constructed culture, and she described it like this: “When I had to move it felt like I left part of myself behind—that is where most of my great childhood experiences took place.” Earnest described the valedictorian’s speech at his high-school graduation, given by an international student who had moved there during high school. He reflected on both the international student’s connection and how it felt to be a *significant other* in that connection:

He [the student] told us how much he appreciated our school culture, that school was the first place he felt like he was fitting into his new society and [that] allowed him to create his identity. It made me very proud that something I had been apart [*sic*] of had such an impact on a person.”

**Creating opportunities for reflectiveness or self-improvement.** Student participants in this research study also noted the presence of the fifth core construct of SEL programs. The most significant way they noted it was in their experiences of being challenged to achieve higher levels. As Hazel reflected on her education, she noted, “I am sure that my eagerness to learn is a factor but the students who value their education

can get a good one today.” Emily recalled teachers who “taught me that with discipline and focus I could excel at subjects that didn’t come naturally to me.”

A second theme within this construct was that students appreciated opportunities to embrace differences without judgment, to smooth out differences. This was evident when Jackie recalled teachers who “taught us to embrace our culture but never pointed out differences in a way that was judgmental or discriminatory.” Steve reflected that he learned that “sometimes I’m afraid I really can’t understand or empathize, it is work to understand other people. I may not be able to use my background as a precise measuring stick.” Libby recognized the impact of the classroom providing this opportunity when she said, “Our teachers were very sensitive to our diversity and differences, allowing us to share our differences, but also providing a safe environment where we could feel hurt when someone went too far.”

Again, these students cited teachers who exposed them to creative and critical thought as having significant impact on them. They cited examples such as teachers who “made us think for ourselves,” and those who made them “think about ways we could use this in our own lives” and “shocked” them into critical thinking through exposure to difficult concepts and personal experiences. Mary noted, “The positive reinforcement from my teachers made it safe to try lots of different things.”

Teachers who encouraged individual strengths seemed to increase students’ feeling of reflectiveness and self-improvement. Sierra spoke of the teacher “who was the first person to see my potential away from these kids and help me to realize it.” Sue spoke of a teacher who “encouraged me in private to do more outside reading and develop my critical thinking skills.” Mary spoke of how the combination of a “natural

understanding,” the creativity of the classroom, and the “positive reinforcement from my teachers made it safe to try lots of different things.”

The final theme that emerged within the coding of reflection and self-improvement was that of the fostering of deep, personal connections between individuals. Inclusion of individuals into a class culture seems to have promoted these connections, as noted earlier in the case of international students; but also, as Steve noted, there “was an awareness in our classrooms that we should expand our sensitivities to problems of race and inequity” and so reach outside the classroom to society at large.

During the initial coding process, there were times when I used the same text segment to describe more than one code. For example, I cited Kara’s quote, “the classroom itself was decorated with students’ work,” as a way to build safe and belonging connection in the physical environment of the classroom; and I used the same text to describe authentic learning activities, a different SEL construct. Likewise, I used Jackie’s description of learning to dance ethnic dances to describe active participation in authentic learning activities, and then again to describe the use of connecting activities to build sensitivity and cultural awareness.

## **Displaying Results**

To get a feeling for what the results would display, I first looked at a within-case analysis. I created a checklist matrix to compare the occurrences of each template protocol item. This matrix allowed me to see and compare the actual text each subject cited within each deductive code. I built this matrix within NVivo9.2 as a framework matrix, which included rows of students as compared to columns of deductive codes. I noted further queries that deserved analysis from this display, such as: How many

deductive codes did each student cite? Did any students cite all the elements of SEL classrooms? Also, did any deductive codes have numerous or few citations?

I then made a Coding Summary in NVivo; I used this summary to look at which deductive codes were present and how frequently each student cited them. This process did not give me the actual text, but just the number of times each subject cited the code. I used this summary to create tables and develop an understanding of how frequently the various template protocol items were cited, and to identify which students seemed to display a *high frequency* of codes within their reflective document and which students displayed a *low frequency* of codes. This analysis allowed me to make a comparison by group to see whether any patterns were evident with regard to students' pursuit of a teaching career or their citation of various outcomes, such as improved academic achievement, personal development, or negative experiences.

**What elements of SEL were displayed?** This was one of the key research questions I sought to answer through this research study. I found that, of 28 subjects, 24, or 86% noted the presence of at least one SEL construct, while six subjects (21%) noted the presence of all five constructs. Table 2 shows a description of how many of the five SEL constructs I identified within a document.

Table 2

*Number of SEL Constructs Cited in Documents*

Number of SEL Constructs	Number of Documents
0	2
1	2
2	1
3	7
4	8
5	6

This data indicates that 21 out of 28 students, or 75% of students in this research sample, recalled in their educational history the presence of three or more SEL constructs in classes that they perceived to have a positive impact on them. It also illustrates the frequency with which students within this sample named all five constructs. I would propose that this data shows evidence that 86% of students in this research sample recorded memories that support the presence of one or more from the range of all five constructs of SEL.

Table 3 is a descriptive display of how many times I recorded each SEL construct in my analysis of the student educational history documents in this study. I identified each construct in at least 50% of the documents I analyzed; this result suggests some qualitative support for the importance of each of these five specific constructs in the development of the SEL environment.

Table 3

*Descriptive Display of Occurrence of SEL Constructs*

SEL Construct	Citations	Students Reporting
Safe and belonging environment	29	19
Engaging and cooperative atmosphere	43	21
Creative, authentic learning opportunities	33	17
Building community/school/home connections	20	14
Reflectiveness and self-improvement	28	19

**Description of Process for Traits and Attributes (SEC) Coding**

I now return to the initial coding process for a different deductive code on the template protocol. I designed this deductive code to identify the traits and attributes that students perceived to be valuable to them and that pertained to the person of the teacher. These traits and attributes may or may not have been part of the descriptions of the five SEL constructs; instead, they had to do with the teacher's ability to personally facilitate the classroom environment. Some overlap of qualities may appear to be present, but the difference was in the students' perception of the personal connection of the quality to the teacher.

During initial coding, using the template protocol as a guide, I looked for the students' descriptions of the traits and attributes the teachers possessed that positively influenced them. Once the initial code was deductively identified, second level coding was used to hand code the text into themes.

**Traits and attributes the teachers possessed.** The first and most important research question that I wished to address with this document analysis was: What is the perceived experience for a student positively impacted by a teacher who coded as using SEC? In order to define that, I considered that a teacher whose classroom showed evidence of the five core constructs of SEL as described above, and/or who was described with traits and attributes in keeping with the values and themes of these SEL constructs, could be designated as a teacher with SEC.

It seems significant to recognize that there were only ten traits and attributes that were repeatedly mentioned by the subjects in this research study to refer to the teachers who positively impacted them. (See Figure 2.) The strongest mention was of the qualities of observant, attentive perception and effort extended toward students. This was followed by encouragement and support, which included praise and love; and compassionate care and understanding. Teachers who were creative and invested in the learning experience also positively impacted students. The next most commonly cited were when teachers cared about learning and provided opportunity, and when they were fair, unbiased, and inclusive. The remaining traits and attributes that were mentioned by multiple students were enthusiasm and passion, approachability, and fun. Individual students named individual traits that were important to them, but I did not mention them in this report unless there were more than three citations of the trait by different subjects.



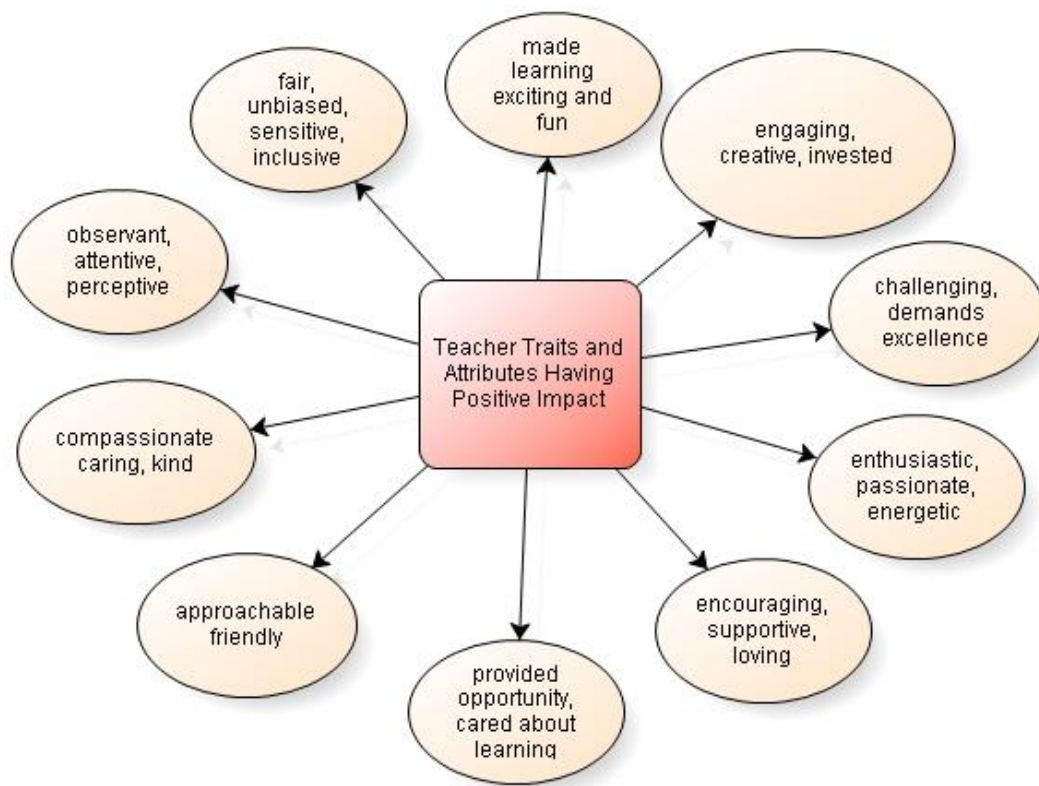


Figure 2. Traits and attributes of teachers perceived by students to have positive impact

**Tying description of traits to SEC and SEL.** The 10 traits the students perceived to be important to them could be tied to the established qualities of social and emotionally competent teachers and the basic constructs of SEL. The distinction is that tying the traits to SEC ties them to the individual presence of the teacher, whereas tying them to SEL constructs ties them to the classroom environment that the teacher develops. The individual teacher emerges as the core of the experience for the students. Figure 3 details the connections of the ten traits and attributes from Figure 2 to the SEC traits and SEL constructs.

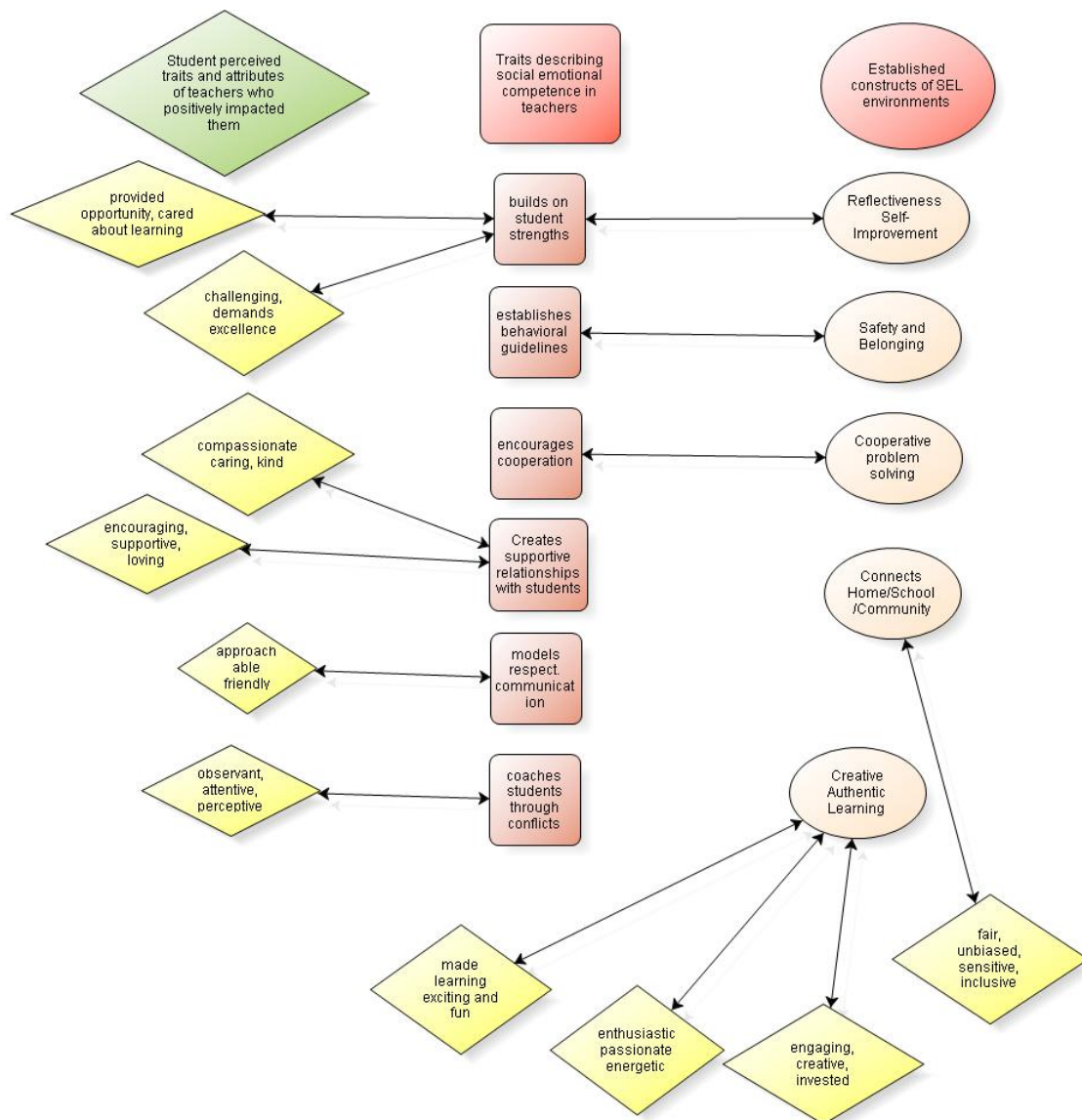


Figure 3. Student-perceived traits and attributes of teachers tied to SEC/SEL.

Figure 3 details the connection of the teacher as the central figure in the establishment of the core constructs of SEL as well as the individual whose personal qualities connect the students to themselves and the classroom environment.

## **Results within SEC**

Again, I first looked at a within-case analysis. Using the checklist matrix, I compared the occurrences of this template protocol item. This allowed me to see and compare the actual text cited by each subject for the code I was analyzing. I wondered what the students would say about the SEL environment and how they perceived themselves as learners within it when it was connected to the individual of the teacher.

**What is the perceived experience for a student positively impacted by a teacher coded as using SEC?** This was the first and most important research question that I wished to address with this document analysis. The previous text gave verbal description of this perceived experience, but there were some descriptive comparisons I was interested in finding as well.

Following the previously described portion of the data analysis, I ran queries in NVivo relating to teachers coded with SEC, those coded as having traits and attributes of teachers who positively impacted students, and found that 25/28 students, or 89%, who noted some traits and qualities of teachers as having a positive impact on them. Specifically, there were 65 references in 25 sources. When these were combined with the five constructs of SEL, there were 20/28 sources that noted both the presence of traits and attributes of teachers with SEC and classrooms that display evidence of the five core constructs of SEL. This amounts to 71% of students who noted a connection between the constructs of an SEL classroom environment and traits and attributes of teachers whom they perceived as positively impacting them.

**What traits or qualities did this teacher or classroom model that were different from others the students experienced?** There were ten main themes

describing traits and qualities that were perceived by students to positively impact them, as shown by Figure 2. These are the traits named and corroborated by at least three different sources in the document analysis of 28 students.

No specific evidence emerged explaining the difference between the modeling of these positive traits and qualities and those of other teachers the students experienced as the research question indicated. There were, however, some citations of negative experiences, enough for me to inductively code for them and begin to wonder what role they played on student desire to pursue teaching, positive feelings about school, and issues like self-confidence, independence and purpose.

### **Description of Inductively Coded Outcomes**

It became clear that some of the template protocol items were emerging as outcomes. These included citations originally coded deductively identifying the reason why the student was pursuing teaching as a career and while looking for implications that academic achievement was enhanced. As the coding process commenced, it became clear that the deductive codes were not written to accommodate the wording of the students' voice. There were other pieces of the puzzle that were emerging. Additional inductive codes were created and these deductive codes were altered during the initial coding process, as the process of constant comparative analysis continued and the previous documents were re-examined for any mention of the emerging inductive codes. The inductive codes that emerged as outcomes were classified as effects on academic achievement, impacts on personal development, students identifying a *career calling*, and the description of negative schooling experiences. (Appendix B)

### **How did SEC or SEL affect students' effort or ability to achieve**

**academically?** Two outcomes seemed to emerge from this question through inductive coding that required a change in the template protocol. The first was the effect on academic achievement. Within this inductive code, two themes seemed to emerge as well. The first was the impact of teacher interest and encouragement on students to achieve levels above and beyond coursework. Indeed, Martha noted, "She was even willing to read the novel I was writing at the time, offering the encouragement I needed to continue to hone my skills." Ethan simply recalled, "The extra attention they gave me was not unrequited, but was needed desperately." The second theme that emerged when considering the effects on academic achievement was the overall belief in the capability of students, and with that, high expectations. Denise, a student who struggled with learning disabilities throughout school, recounted, "Due to the fact that she had so much belief in me I was able to show how much I could do in a normal English class."

**Personal development.** The second outcome that emerged from this research question and was added to the template protocol was the implication for personal development. Jackie recounted that teachers were "Crucial in the development of my outlook on the students around me." The development of social awareness emerged from this outcome as a highly cited theme. This element of emotional intelligence is defined as the ability to perceive how actions and words of others impact your perceptions and those of people around you. Many students cited a special teacher's ability to help them to recognize the value of those around them. As Libby said, "They made each individual feel special and how to be aware of the other students' special diverse qualities." Also cited heavily was the impact of teachers providing opportunities for personal growth and

development that were not content related. Other themes that developed across participants were the idea that this person significantly shaped the rest of their lives, was a role model, and showed that he or she valued the student as an individual.

**How I knew I wanted to be a teacher.** This research question started at the top of my template protocol, and was cited by 21/28, or 75% of students, yet seemed, in the end, to be more of an outcome than a predictor or indicator. There were five main themes that emerged inductively in coding this outcome. The first two differ only in the person the subject wished to honor most. In one, the subject wished to pursue teaching in order to be inspirational and encouraging and supportive for the sake of the child's nourishment. The second theme was that they wished to do the same thing in honor of the legacy of the inspirational teacher who impacted them. As Kaila said, "I hope to one day do her legacy justice."

A third theme was the desire to sculpt the child or impact the student through a hands-on type of molding. Denise expressed that she "wanted to see them grow." While another theme was the idea of giving to children and students for their own benefit, the reward of the experience being bestowed on the teacher. They expressed desire to help others, to help them overcome their obstacles, and to help students gain all these skills, among other things.

The final theme that emerged leads me to a "darker" side, that of the negative experience. There were a number of students who related crushing stories, and yet some emerged as teaching candidates because they desired to fix the wrongs of the past. Denise wanted to "create an environment where school isn't the enemy." Zach, having

described numerous personal offences left uncorrected during his education history, desired “to make a difference in the way issues are dealt with.”

**Negative Experiences.** The last outcome that was coded inductively and added to the template protocol emerged after a few documents had been read and continued to show up through many of the remaining documents in the analysis. The recording of negative experiences was an opportunity to look at a number of different things. Some of the text was usable in reverse, as evidence of the absence of one of the SEL constructs and was added to the deductive codes for these constructs. For example, Kyle’s quote - “I was scared as a young student to say what I believed, answer questions and be open out of fear of being made fun of” - was used as a reverse indication of the need to create a safe and belonging environment, one of the core constructs of SEL. Other examples were simply heart breaking, as when Amy shared, “My self-esteem took a plunge because of how stupid the teachers made me feel.” Ethan recalled, “I quit (music) when I found the instruction to be very abrasive and slightly demeaning.”

In all, four main themes emerged around the idea of negative experiences. The two with the strongest support were the idea that teachers made students feel dumb, and that there was a lack of safety and classroom management that significantly impacted the overall experience in the classroom. The two remaining themes were when teachers imposed top-down relationships of power over students and were insensitive to diversity needs in the classroom. As Abby sorrowfully shared, “I remember feeling dumbfounded, offended, and betrayed when my favorite teacher, my beloved mentor, and my educational inspiration barred a disabled student from participating in the school musical because accommodating her needs was too much of an inconvenience.”

This outcome led to an interesting piece in analysis, as I looked to see if there was a connection between the positive or negative intensity and the presence or absence of SEL constructs or depictions of teachers with positive traits and attributes. I found that in two cases, Sue and Jason, their education autobiography had no positive experiences and anecdotes. By this I mean that in neither of these cases were there any citations of SEL core constructs or the traits and attributes of teachers who had a positive impact on them. Both of these students have decided not to pursue a teaching career, and one has since dropped out of college and returned home.

This led me to wonder if the intensity of SEL impacts, coming from both the core constructs of SEL and the SEC of teachers, affects the outcomes of academic achievement and/or personal development? In taking another look at the data I found that there were eight instances in which students attributed SEL and SEC as directly impacting their academic achievement. This amounts to just over 29% of the students in this study. There were 14 subjects who connected SEL and SEC to their personal development, or 50% of the participants in this study. Furthermore, there were 21 subjects who attributed SEL and SEC impacts to their desire to pursue the teacher career. This value represents 75% of the students in this research study.

**Attribute answer – will you pursue teaching as a career?** I collected the answers to one attribute question, “Are you pursuing a teaching career?” The most interesting finding with regard to this question is that the two students who reported no evidence in their education reflections of the positive impact of either SEL or SEC have both decided not to pursue a teaching career. At the time of this writing, there were 22 students who responded to a query as to their career pursuit status, and only one other



person decided not to pursue teaching. When asked to elaborate, she said she was only fifty percent interested in teaching in the first place, and has decided to pursue counseling and therapy as a career choice instead.

Figure 4 illustrates the themes I have just summarized by outcomes.

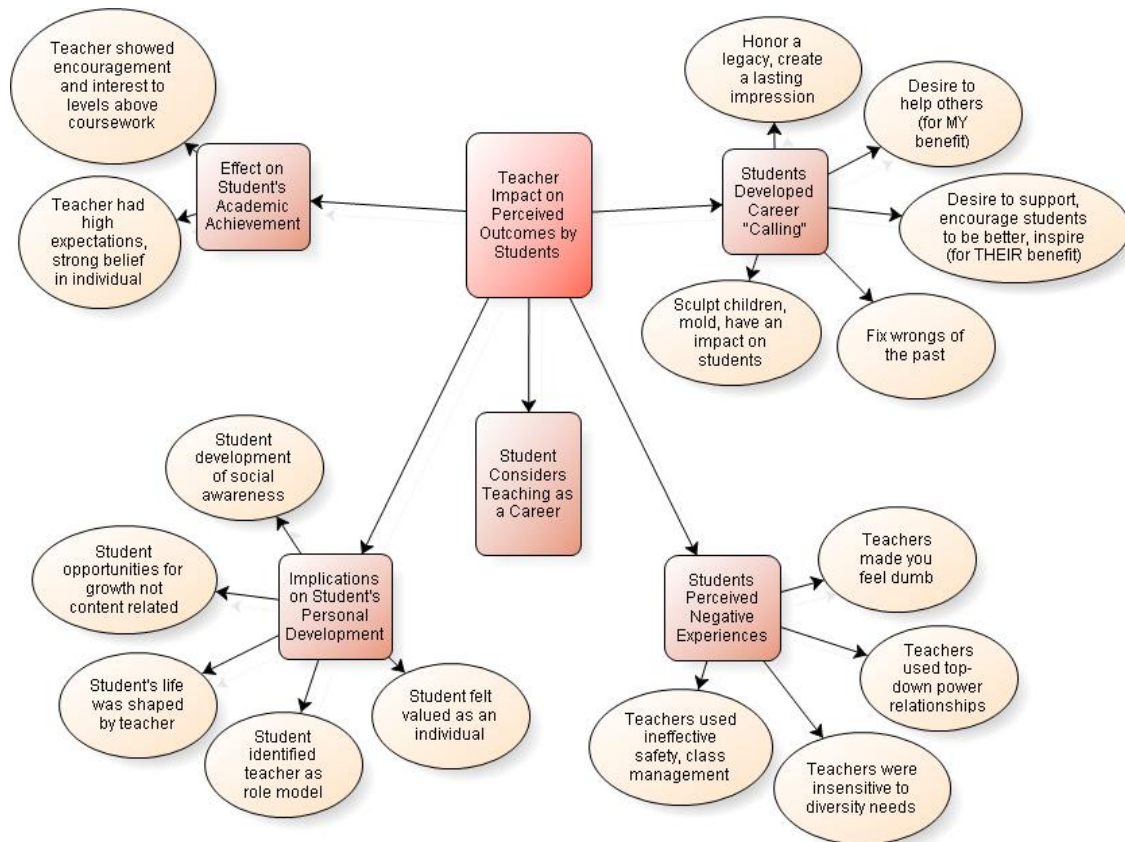


Figure 4. Teacher impact on perceived outcomes by students.

### A Reflection on Major Themes—Third-Level Coding

As a teacher for over twenty years, predominantly with primary aged children, there are certain elements of the experience of teaching that I learned to pay close attention to. It started, probably, as a survival technique, in order to make sure I would survive 36 weeks with the same group of thirty students as we tried to cover all the

required course content of the grade level. I believe that when anyone works with young children, a sense of protection and care emerges naturally with the realization of how much time you will be together. In many ways, with the youngest of these students, a teacher often takes on the role of a caretaker.

In seeking to bring attention to the most significant experiences and persons in their growth and development as young learners, what has become apparent in the analysis of these documents of adult students is that students don't really outgrow that need for care-taking. The overall findings of this research can be reduced to three main themes.

### **Safety and Belonging**

Providing safety and belonging in the classroom is significant and memorable, both in the positive and the negative. As Lee said, "The best learning environments are the ones with an even flow of respect that circulates interchangeably between the teacher and the class." These participants expressed comfort and a joyful love of learning in the positive environments, but they expressed fear and bitterness about the negative ones. As Sue wrote, "I lost respect for the teachers not willing to keep students safe . . . Physical and emotional safety of the students should be every teachers' number one priority." We know that Abraham Maslow's pyramid of basic human needs expresses the need for safety and security as one of the basic needs of society, with it becoming a mandatory building block toward the highest level of self-actualization (Henson, 2010). The perception of the students in this study corroborated that assertion, that when a teacher established safety and belonging in the classroom, students recognized it and were

willing to engage freely and openly with the students around them and the curriculum content presented.

### **Relationship Building**

Relationship building and providing the means to connect to others is essential. When the teacher shows care, concern, support, love and warmth, a student responds with increased effort and engagement. Devin stated that he appreciated “the kind of atmosphere we had [that] really made that a community where each learner could feel he or she had great potential to succeed, and just as importantly, to be understood.” Lee recalled, “He taught us how to give and gain respect based [on] mutual understanding.”

By providing opportunities for building connections with peers, a teacher can provide the platform and activities that build common experiences and level the playing field between students from different backgrounds. Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, and Walberg (2004), in studying the positive effects of SEL, found that when students become socially aware they move toward higher levels of EI. Martha appreciated the teacher who provided “the atmosphere [that] fostered deep, personal, and intense conversations.”

Teachers connect home to school and then to the expanding community beyond when they teach and model accepting and affirming diversity, and provide opportunities for sensitivity and social awareness from within the safety of the classroom walls. As Libby put it:

From Mr. W I find myself relating things to bits and pieces of Eastern culture, that I think many of my peers are not even aware of. It’s amazing the things that diversity and awareness can bring to our education.

Kelly summed it up when she said; “One of the purposes of schooling is to expose students to a variety of different people and lifestyles so they can be prepared for the real world.”

### **Significant Teachers Change Lives**

Teachers, like parents, by nature of the esteem with which they are regarded due to the position they hold in the life of a student, are significant figures. They have the power to provide great opportunities beyond simple passing of course content. Devin recalled that he “Enjoyed the friendships and the care that my teachers gave me and I really felt valued as a child.” Kelly, reflecting on her years in school, said, “I have had many wonderful teachers throughout my years of school, and they have taught me so much on how to achieve not only in class, but in life.”

### **Summary**

The findings of this research study have involved the creation of a template protocol that would help identify the five core constructs of SEL as well as provide a picture, based on student perception, of what traits and qualities describe a teacher who has positively impacted them. The outcomes give us information about the value that these constructs and qualities play in the perception of students in the classroom. Findings include positive effects on academic achievement, personal development, and a sense of career calling to the teaching profession. It also became clear that the existence of negative experiences in education have impacted students, as well.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION**

As I reflect on a twenty-year career in public education, I am amazed at what I recall as the similarities and differences from beginning to end. In the late 1980's when I began teaching, the educational movement was to bring psychology into the classroom, even with primary aged children. I remember being coached by our school psychologist and counselor to determine what the personal issues were that were facing my students in order to develop curricula and teaching strategies that would be most effective for them. I recall my go-to book for time filler lessons was one that helped develop self-esteem in students. When I consider the last few years of teaching, I am amazed at the differences. I never lost the sense of how important it was to connect personally to my students and their parents, or to work collaboratively with my teaching colleagues to assess and administer learning in our students, but so much academia was added to our school day that I had to work hard to find time for my self-esteem lessons. We were encouraged to fill those extra half hour time slots with an additional reading group, or a math remediation lesson, but spent little time discussing and thinking about the personal growth of our students.

The study of the social emotional learning movement, from the late 1980's until now, has revealed that there are a whole group of educators such as myself, for whom the holistic development of children as people and students has never wavered in importance. The national movement has carefully built itself on the foundations of solid research and a measured political agenda that seeks to include the importance of standards and benchmarks of social and emotional growth of children alongside those of academic achievement in traditional assessment and curricular requirements.

The research that has been published on the topics of emotional intelligence, social emotional learning, and academic achievement has shown a strong connection between the growths of all areas toward healthy, successful adulthood. Tools for measuring EI and its connection to academic achievement have been carefully designed and tested (Mayer & Cobb, 2000; Peters et al., 2009).

Humphrey (2007, p. 236) states, “Education should encompass both the rational and the emotional to best prepare our children for adult life.” Schools have become institutions that focus on the academic arm of education, rather than the emotional but there is now brain research and other research that encourages us to consider how emotions might play a role in improved academic success as well (Humphrey et al., 2007, p. 237).

States and school districts nationwide have begun to work toward the establishment and requirement of attention to the social and emotional development of children within the efforts and time constraints of the school day. Yet what has seemed to be missing has been the voice of the students. Did it make a difference to them? Is the effort worth the work and the time commitment? How does it feel to be in the classroom? What are the differences between teachers who attend to your social emotional needs and those who do not?

These are some of the questions that I sought to answer in this research study. In building a template protocol based on the deductive codes that are established as the core constructs of the SEL environment, I sought to determine if these constructs were recognizable in the reflections of students on their educational history. In asking students to describe the traits and attributes of teachers they perceived as having a positive impact

on them, I sought to determine the concept of social emotional competence in teachers. By inductively coding for outcomes, I sought to allow the student voice to determine what was presented as the differences from their perspective.

The results were profoundly moving for me. Social emotional competence matters. Students notice when teachers care. Their perception is that they work harder and develop self-confidence in their own abilities. Students appreciate opportunities and training in how to be socially aware of those around them. They recognize their own lack of expertise in social areas and rely on teachers to help smooth over differences and increase understanding of things outside their realm of knowledge. Students thrive in environments that have been developed to provide safety and a sense of belonging. When they feel comfortable it allows them to share, to participate more fully, and to accept new learnings and perspectives.

### **Theoretical Implications**

#### **Five Core Constructs**

The information obtained through this document analysis has revealed confirmation of the research that has been published previously on the subjects of SEL and SEC of teachers. It indicates that the presence of the five core constructs of SEL, as described by Jonathan Cohen (2001) are important in the establishment of comfort and safety among students. It also suggests that the building of relationships between the teacher and students, between students as peers, and connecting the students to the larger community are an important aspect of the role of the teacher.

The five core constructs of SEL, as depicted by Jonathan Cohen (2001) include the concepts of (a) reflectiveness, (b) safe and responsive environments, (c) creative and

authentic learning activities, (d) a collaborative, problem-solving atmosphere, and (e) building community/school/home connections. While this research sample size was small, the document analysis indicates that the range of these five concepts was found to be important in 86% of the autobiographical reflections of undergraduate students about their education history. It has also shown that for 75% of students, three or more of these concepts were present and mentioned as important in their autobiographical reflections.

### **How do These Findings Relate to the SEL Literature?**

In the educational setting, it can be argued that there are a number of important uses of EI. One is the study of accurate emotional perception and how it affects a student's ability to respond to classroom social stimuli, and the other is a measurable model of the mental abilities affected by emotions, which pertains to a student's cognitive response. Higher EI seems to promote better mental health, better accuracy in detecting physical responses to stimuli, and a stronger ability to understand the emotional consequences of events (Mayer et al., 2008). Developing EI for use in adult life is found to be important and this was corroborated by student perception of teachers they valued and skills they learned.

Students spoke of the long-term meaning and impact of classrooms that taught them competence through use of the range of the five core constructs of SEL. As mentioned in the literature review of this dissertation, incorporation of SEL processes and constructs in the classroom can be achieved with attention and training to what SEL programs include.

SEL is defined as the process of acquiring a set of social and emotional skills – self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making – within the context of a safe, supportive environment that encourages social, emotional, and cognitive development and



provides opportunities for practicing social-emotional skill. (Cherniss et al., 2006, p. 243)

Time spent on climate-building and creating safety and belonging is considered time well spent. (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Norris, 2003; Roeser et al., 2002; Ryan et al., 1998).

According to Norris (2003) purposeful, well thought-out actions and activities on the part of teachers can result in classrooms where students feel safe to take risks, and know they are valuable community members . “SEL is seen not as an add-on for the teacher, but the way that relationships, routines, and procedures are established so everyone feels cared for, respected, and valued” (p. 315). Teachers can make it clear that all emotions are normal, but handling them can be done in better or worse ways.

Decision-making and problem solving are the centerpiece of SEL and have implications for life-long behavioral success. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2007a) reports that through the use of SEL, there is great potential to address multiculturalism, cultural relevance, the achievement gap and gender equity, as solutions are embedded in this type of classroom management (CASEL, 2007a). This presents a viable avenue for teaching and maintaining a culture and climate that supports civility and respect.

### **Social Emotional Competence**

In describing the attributes of a teacher in a pro-social classroom, Jennings and Greenberg (2009) suggested that social and emotionally competent teachers develop supportive relationships with students, build on student strengths and abilities, establish behavioral guidelines, coach students through conflicts, encourage cooperation, and model respect and appropriate communication. The information uncovered in this document analysis affirms these concepts. The traits and attributes of teachers and the

classroom environments that they created, when described by students in their autobiographical documents, suggested that all of these things are true.

Some of the attributes of teachers with SEC described by Jennings and Greenberg (2009) in their research include teacher coaching and conflict resolution skills. While students did not cite teachers coaching them through conflicts and encouraging cooperation as traits and attributes they perceived as positively impacting them in the classroom, they did note these constructs in the classroom as being important, thus supporting the SEL construct of creating an engaging and cooperative atmosphere. Here, one can see the overlap of SEL constructs with the SEC of the teachers who develop the classroom environment. There seems to be confirmation of a connection between social emotional constructs and the competence of a teacher to create the learning environment.

A further consideration is the importance of students having access to modeling of these skills by socially emotionally competent adults. Cohen (2006), when discussing the training of students in social emotional competencies, purports that there are some best practices found during research in recent years that speak to what needs to happen in our schools.

1. SE Competencies are predictive of children's ability to learn and solve problems peacefully. 2. SEL capacities are just as brain-based as linguistic and mathematical competencies. 3. The majority of children can learn to become more socially and emotionally competent. 4. Creating partnerships and explicitly teaching children to be more competent is core to effective SEL and academic educational efforts (Cohen, 2006).

Students recalled teachers and classrooms in which problem solving were key elements, as Kaila recounted when she said, “She made us think for ourselves, allowed creative thought and encouraged it.” Devin spoke of the development of SEC within himself when he said, “He taught me a valuable lesson in humility and respect for others.” The partnerships developed between students as a result of academic educational efforts were spoken of repeatedly, as when Martha recalled, “the atmosphere fostered deep, personal, and intense conversations,” and when Steve cited that there “was an awareness in our classroom that we should expand our sensitivities to problems of race and inequity.”

Does this mean that the traits and attributes of an SEC teacher become a key marker of the school experience? How does that notion relate to those students who didn’t experience it, and instead related negative experiences? I cannot claim to have the answers, as the documents used in this analysis are the experiences related by a small number of students, however, it seems reasonable to wonder.

### **Additional Elements in Teacher Competence**

**Social awareness and diversity.** I propose that this document analysis suggests that in addition to these attributes of SEC teachers, it is important for teachers to include opportunities for students to grapple with issues of social awareness and diversity in the classroom and beyond. Lee summarized her learning by saying, “If you listen, they have the ability to teach you self-awareness and with that, endless life lessons.” There is research (Roeser et al., 2002) that supports both SEL and SEC as it actively engages learning and increases appeal to a diverse classroom audience and perspective. There were specific examples cited numerous times by numerous different students attesting to

this fact. Hazel, in reflecting on the changes in education over the course of her education, said “I can see evidence of growth in awareness of diversity issues, environmental issues and a focus on preparation of its students for a real world application of their skills.” Numerous students in this research cited inclusive practices and social awareness teachings as significant in their personal development, ranging across codes and outcomes.

Research cited earlier in the literature review suggests that teachers design programs connecting academic skills and efficacy through the building of bonding to school, creation of smaller learning communities, establishment of student choice and voice in the classroom, and use of curricula that speaks to diverse student interests, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Developing competence, care, community and responsive curricula may be the most effective way to engage students in their own learning (Roeser et al., 2002). These become the core constructs upon which SEC is built.

**Teacher investment in the learning opportunities.** I also suggest that the students in this study perceived a teacher’s engaging, creative investment in the daily activities to be a factor that positively impacted them and their academic and personal outcomes. Students perceived enthusiasm and passion as having a positive impact on their learning experience. Kaila and Amy both used the word “passionate” to describe teachers who “were passionate about that [they] taught and that made the students engage and care as well.” Zach even tied it to academic growth, asserting “His class grew so much in their knowledge of algebra because he got so involved and into what he was preaching.”

Figure 5 illustrates the connection of SEC and emergence of these two additional areas of competence that were perceived as important by students in this research study.

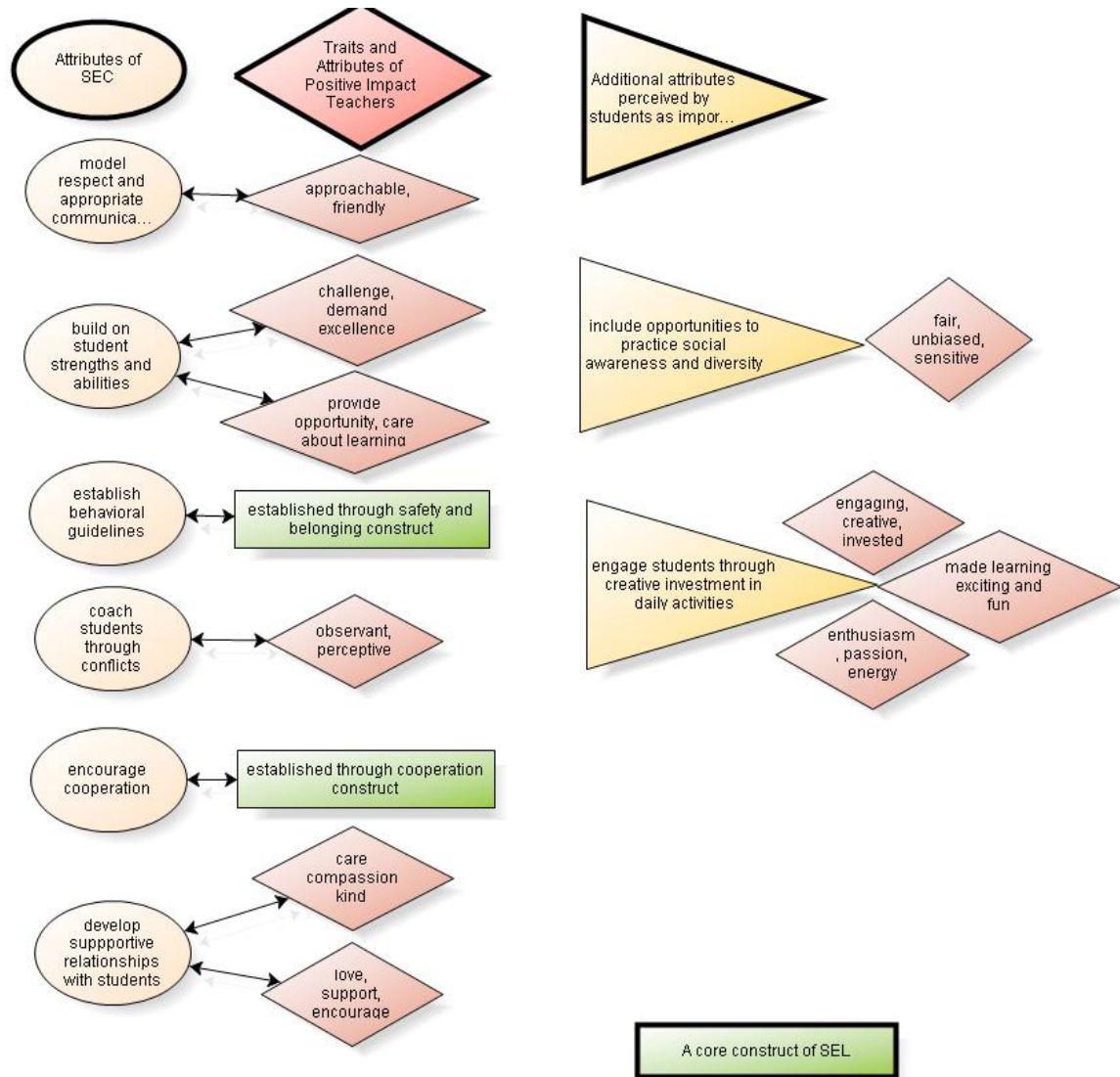


Figure 5. SEC and connection to traits and attributes showing emergence of two additional competence areas.

## **Summarized Results for each Research Question**

**What is the perceived experience for a student significantly impacted by a teacher coded as using SEC?** The students' text gave verbal description of this perceived experience that included the range of all five core constructs of SEL as well as a list of traits and attributes perceived by the students to have a positive impact on them. Queries run in NVivo found that 25/28 students noted some traits and qualities of teachers as having a positive impact on them. Specifically, there were 65 references in 25 sources. When these were combined with the five constructs of SEL, there were 20/28 sources that noted both the presence of traits and attributes of teachers with SEC and classrooms that display evidence of the five core constructs of SEL. This amounts to 71% of students who noted a connection between the constructs of an SEL classroom environment and traits and attributes of teachers whom they perceived as positively impacting them.

**What elements of SEL were displayed?** I found there were also 24/28 subjects who noted the presence of at least one SEL construct, and six noted all five. Each of the constructs was found in at least 50% of the documents analyzed, thus suggesting some qualitative support of the value of these specific constructs as important in SEL environment development.

There were 21 out of 28 students, or 75% of students in this research sample, who recalled the presence of three or more SEL constructs in classes in their educational history that they perceived to have a positive impact on them. Evidence suggests that 86% of students in this research sample recorded memories supporting the range of all five of the constructs of SEL. For instance, Ethan spoke of a classroom in which students

would “do projects, group discussions, presentations, and many other things to increase students’ participation,” showing evidence of an engaging cooperative learning environment, authentic learning activities, and reflectiveness leading toward self-improvement in the citations he named in his autobiography.

**What traits or qualities did this teacher or classroom model that were different from others the students experienced?** There were ten main themes within the description of traits and attributes perceived as having a positive impact on students. They included personal traits such as being compassionate and kind, approachable, and encouraging, as well as encouraging excellence by being challenging, providing opportunity, and being perceptive and observant. Other traits and attributes that were cited were being fair and inclusive, making learning fun, being creative and engaging, and using enthusiasm and passion. No evidence emerged regarding the difference between the modeling of these positive traits and qualities and other teachers the student experienced. There were, however, some citations of negative experiences perceived by students in classrooms where the deductive codes were absent.

**How did SEC/SEL affect students’ effort or ability to achieve academically?** Two separate outcomes seemed to emerge from this question through inductive coding. The first was the effect on academic achievement. Within this code, two themes emerged as well. The first was the impact of teacher interest and encouragement on students to achieve levels above and beyond coursework. Mary noted “More than once I was encouraged to keep pursuing my interests, the combination of these two and the positive reinforcement from my teachers made it safe to try lots of different things in my writing.” The second theme that emerged when considering the effects on academic achievement

was the overall belief in the capability of students, and with that, high expectations. This was recalled by Nancy when she spoke of a teacher who “Would always say that every single student her class was capable of doing honors or AP classes.”

The second outcome that emerged from this research question was the implication on personal development. One of the highest cited themes emerging from this outcome was the development of social awareness. Also cited heavily was the impact of teachers providing opportunities for personal growth and development that were not content related. Denise took this to heart when she said, “I want to make a difference in a student’s life and allow for students that may find struggles in the classroom that I had to find their own drive to success.” Other themes that developed across participants were the idea that this person significantly shaped the rest of their lives, was a role model, and showed that he or she valued the student as an individual. Sierra said simply, “Mrs. O has changed my life,” and Dirk stated, “He was much more than a teacher to me, but a true friend and role model.”

**How I knew I wanted to be a teacher.** There were five main themes that emerged inductively in coding this outcome. In one, the subject wished to pursue teaching in order to be inspirational and encouraging and supportive for the sake of the child’s nourishment. The second theme was that they wished to do the same thing in honor of the legacy of the inspirational teacher who impacted them.

A third theme was the desire to sculpt the child or impact the student through a hands-on type of molding. While another theme was the idea of giving to children and students for their own benefit, the reward of the experience being bestowed on the teacher. They expressed desire to help others, to help them overcome their obstacles, and



to help students gain all these skills, among other things. Jason stated that he, “Wanted to be part of something greater than myself.”

The final theme that emerged was that of the negative experience. There were a number of students who related crushing stories, and yet some emerged as teaching candidates because they desired to fix the wrongs of the past.

### **Additional Themes and Questions that Emerged**

**The cases of negative experiences.** 12 of the 28 documents noted some instance of a negative experience in their reflections on their personal education history. They recall instances of injustice, loss of self-control, poor decision-making, poor classroom management, and other specific citations. But what struck me most is that in this class of undergraduate students trying to determine if they wanted to pursue teaching as a career, there were two students who wrote only about their negative experiences. They did not cite traits and attributes of teachers whom they perceived to positively impact them, or any of the five core constructs of SEL, except in reverse, when these constructs were absent. Both of these students decided not to become teachers, and one has abandoned higher education since last semester. Sue recalled school as a place with “An overall negative educational environment wrought with violence and frequent evacuations due to bomb threats.” She found her teachers “Not equipped to handle integrating the inner city kids and for fear of being called racist, [they] didn’t discipline any minority student that misbehaved.” There were also two students who are determined to become teachers, yet cited no references of SEL constructs in their reflections. Each of these wrote about their disappointment with their educational history or an individual in it, and has determined to fix the wrongs of the past

**“High incidence” of citations of traits and attributes perceived as positive by students and the presence of all five core constructs.** There were six cases of *high incidence*. Five of the six had the highest citation records for evidence of the constructs with 18, 15, 14, 13, and 12 citations in each document. These students have all decided to teach, and also showed a moderate to high incidence of positive outcomes of career calling, personal development, and academic achievement, although there were other students who showed higher incidence of positive outcomes in these areas who did not show as much record of SEL and SEC influence during their reflections on schooling. Of the two students who showed no SEL and SEC influence in their documents, they also both showed evidence of no positive outcomes in career calling, personal development, and academic achievement.

Is there a tie between the presence of the SEL constructs and SEC traits and the outcome variables from this study: academic achievement, personal development, and relationship to “calling” decisions? Students with high incidences of coding for SEL also noted high incidences of positive traits and attributes of teachers, but their positive outcomes in career calling, personal development and academic achievement were average. There does seem to be a correlation between a lack of the presence of these constructs and traits and positive outcomes. Students who coded low in recollections of SEL and SEC showed little to no evidence of positive outcomes of career calling, personal development and academic achievement.

### **Limitations**

**Sample size and content area.** Thus I am brought to consider the limitations of this study. The sample size is small, and may be unique to this particular class or course

of study. It would be interesting to ask these same questions or gather documents to analyze from a number of different disciplines and a variety of places to compare. Would a study of some other content area; such as forestry, or math, or English for instance, reveal the same regard for teachers as reflections on educational history in an education class?

**Education autobiography assignment.** Another question that I wonder about is whether these recordings could be tied to the limitations of the assignment itself. Perhaps more evidence did not emerge connecting SEC to SEL constructs because there was no specific charge to look for such a connection. This template analysis protocol was developed long after the construction of the education autobiography assignment. Would the results have been different if the template protocol had been used to construct the assignment? Would it have brought different results to light if the students had been trained in the constructs of SEL or SEC prior to the assignment's explanation? These would be interesting things to consider in future data collections.

**Trustworthiness.** With regard to the issues of trustworthiness in a data analysis that requires researcher opinion as she evaluates participants' experiences, I used a second rater to quality check both my template protocol and the validity of my coding. The quality checker was sent three documents to analyze along with directions. She was also sent the template protocol. This is what she had to say about the procedure: "I found the template very clear. It was easy to use and was aligned with the social emotional learning. It was easy to read student essays and place the described teacher traits into the template."

In comparing the templates she returned with my coding, the coded documents were found to be very similar. I sent her one with high incidence coding, one with low, and one in the middle. She returned documents with about a 78% consistency rate between the way she coded and the way I did. In closely comparing the actual text coded, some of the inconsistency was between my coding long phrases as one instance of the code and her coding it as multiple occurrences of the same code.

The other validity assumptions discussed in chapter 3 were kept with care.

**Teacher preparation and professional development.** One challenge in incorporating SEL as a dual purpose of education is teacher preparation and professional development. If we do, in fact, value the social emotional development of children as one of the purposes of education, American teachers should be trained in how to do it well. Numerous researchers have highlighted the notion that for teachers to be able to work with EI and SEC, they must be trained to do so (Hawkey, 2006; Justice & Espinoza, 2007; Kaufhold & Johnson, 2005; Palomera et al., 2008). Ongoing assessment and sustainability must be supported to maintain that it is done well. A second challenge is that policymakers need to address the lack of required effort to develop standards, policies and practices to assist our teachers in learning and implementing such standards. Facilities must be developed to provide the needed training.

### **Significance**

**Grounded in the actual person of the teacher.** I believe that there are some areas to consider with regard to the significance of this research study. I believe that it is significant that most of the students' recollections are grounded in the actual person of the teacher. Students cited the personal traits and attributes of teachers who positively

impacted 88 times. The teacher is the builder of the relationships in the classroom, and the designer of the class environment itself, making the role of facilitation of a classroom far more important than it appears on the surface. It seems that these qualities may be important in the hiring of individuals to fill these jobs. Yet I am not sure how frequently questions that would ascertain the ability to build relationships or design a classroom community are included in the teacher interview and hiring process. Hiring committees and interview panels may find these results of interest.

**Teacher job description lacks relationship focus.** It also seems to make sense to include training for teachers in the need and indeed requirement of this relationship focus as part of their job description. In my experience, I cannot recall being told that my ability to build rapport or relationships with my students and/or their parents was a necessary part of my role as a teacher. In fact, I have met many teachers, both as a parent and a colleague, who were very poor in this regard. Yet the ability to encourage, support, care, love, take interest in, etc. was cited countless times in the documents I analyzed. Human Resource departments may want to consider this quality in their teaching candidates, along with ways to measure and include it in the interview and ongoing teacher evaluation process.

**Attend to personal development in students.** This study also brings focus to the importance of attending to outcomes of personal development in students. These are areas outside content knowledge, and perhaps not deemed important in the current political climate in which student test scores and state standards for curriculum seem to predominate. Yet, the young men and women who have submitted their documents for scrutiny for this research stated clearly that these are areas of impact that teachers have

had on them. Perhaps there is room for revision in the standards for teacher conduct and performance that include the ability to positively influence and impact the personal development of students. Perhaps it is equally as important to add standards and benchmarks to student expectations and teacher evaluations that include descriptions of personal development in students at various ages and stages of development.

### **Practical Implications**

There are some practical implications that emerge from the outcomes derived from this research study. These will be highlighted in the paragraph that follows.

#### **Teacher Training**

One practical implication falls within the category of teacher training, both pre- and in-service. One of the core beliefs of SEL is that it can and should be explicitly taught and modeled. Based on the premises of EI, it includes the building blocks of self-awareness, self-management, responsible social decision-making, social awareness, and relationship management. Social emotional programs which often include training and mentorship can be purchased district wide, and professional development of the skills and constructs is available from many sources nationwide, and even internationally.

References for programs and trainings can be obtained through CASEL.org, a national storehouse of information on the topic of social emotional learning.

Proponents of SEL would argue that its benefits include: improving social interactions; social-emotional skills, and attitudes about self and others; reducing negative behavior in students; preparing young people for success in school; and significant improvements in students' academic performance and attitudes toward school (CASEL, 2007b). Many SEL programs have been created and tested to show their

efficacy in increasing the social and emotional growth of students as well as the impact on improving academic achievement (CASEL, 2010b). These designated programs can be sought, purchased, and implemented; and proponents strongly urge practitioners to put them into practice on a school-or district-wide scale, in order to see the impacts that were supported by research (Cohen, 2001).

With regard to SEC, there is need for training and professional development as well. Teachers must be sound in their ability to know and use EI in their personal life before they can be asked or expected to model it in the classroom. As Kaufhold (2005), Justice & Espinoza (2007), and Palomera, et.al. (2008) suggested, training in EI must be a mandatory part of teacher training programs. Hawkey (2006) rightly suggested that teachers don't want to teach what they don't know. They must be made comfortable with the skills and competencies of SEC teachers before they can model the traits and qualities that these students perceived as valuable.

### **Social Awareness/Diversity Issues**

Another practical implication emerging from this study is that there appears to be a need expressed by the students participants to include grappling with issues of social awareness and diversity. They seemed to express specific instances when a teacher was able to help them widen their perspective or understand something outside their known social realm, and they appreciated it. Libby recalled teachers who “made each individual feel special and [taught us] how to be aware of the other students’ special diverse qualities.” Requiring teachers to develop an agenda to increase social awareness and diversity issues seems complicated and as if it belongs in certain areas of the content curriculum, yet I would assert that it is an area that should be modeled and explicitly

taught in every classroom. What is the appropriate reaction to religious diversity or multi-cultural perspectives? Is this only something we discuss in AP Geography, or does it happen in the lunchroom and on the bus stop? I would propose that to create an environment school-wide that models and allows students to practice affirming diversity and perspective-taking is far more valuable than teaching it in a unit on Civil Rights.

### **Track and Remedy Negative Experiences**

There also appears to be enough of an occurrence of negative experiences that there are some practical implications that emerge from that disclosure. When 43% of a student population recalls the impact of negative experiences as having an effect on their reflection of schooling, it must signify something. From Kyle who said, “I was scared as a young student to say what I believed, to answer questions, and be open out of fear of being made fun of,” to Amy who reflected, “I feel like the older I got the less teachers cared about the actual students and more about the grades.” Some students, like Sue, recall, “The focus was less on the curriculum and more on the fear of day-to-day hallway and classroom interactions.” Do we need to track these negative experiences on a school level? Should there be exit surveys for graduates to identify where attention needs to be focused in teacher-to-student and student-to-student relationship building? When school climate surveys are tallied and recorded, is there any effort made to use them to effect change? I return to Mary’s reflection about school, where she said:

As I think back now, I did not want to be called on and I never raised my hand to add thought to classroom conversation. I did not pass the special test I needed to get into the Talented and Gifted program. I clearly remember thinking that school was not easy, I did not like it, and I did not feel good at what I was doing.



## **Implications for Future Research**

This research study brings a few implications for future research to light. While many questions have emerged for me along the way, some of them are bound in how we can ensure that this research study speaks for a loud enough population, and others are tied to how we, as educators, can effectively what has been gleaned from the students' experiences relayed here.

### **Increase Sample Size**

I can think of three implications for future research. One is that of increasing the sample size in order to gain a larger set of data to see how that compares with these initial findings. Further sample populations might include students from courses taught in other content areas, to see if the traits and attributes that are important to teaching candidates are the same as those of English students, or chemistry students, or students in other disciplines who pursue other careers. Another alternative is to sample a larger portion of the students enrolled in this same undergraduate course.

### **Build SEC in Individual Practitioners**

A second implication for future research is to look more at the issues of the individual teacher practitioner. Because the findings of this research study seem to be tied inextricably to the facilitator, the questions become: What is the best way to determine how to increase SEC among teachers? Could the traits and attributes described in this research be program based, resulting from training to use SEL programs or more along the lines of EI, which ties to the SEC of the facilitator of the classroom? What are some ways to increase SEC and support teachers who attempt to use both SEL and SEC in their classrooms? Designing research to answer these questions would give valuable

information that could be used in the planning and training of teaching candidates and in-service teachers.

### **Embed in Teacher Training Agendas**

A third implication for future research is surrounded by the problem of getting it to fit into current teacher training programs and professional development agendas for in-service teachers. Is there enough evidence supporting SEC as a vital element in teacher demeanor to consider it one of the “best practices” of teaching? Where does it rightfully fit in the training process: as a curriculum, a classroom management theory, or a philosophy of education?

### **Summary**

When asked about their reasons for entering the teaching field, students will commonly respond with a phrase like “to make a difference with kids.” Yet when they take courses in their teacher training programs, they never seem to be taught how to do that. Rather, they are taught their course content, how to find and read the state academic standards, how to develop a good lesson plan, the history of the educational system, and how to manage a classroom. They are rarely taught how to connect with students, in fact, they are often taught to remain distant and “professional.”

The results of this examination into the perceived experience of students through reflections on their own education history would point to this advice as being far from the mark of what students want from their teachers. Students value and are respectful of relationship building with teachers. They often respond with greater effort in their academic achievement and self-confidence and focus in their personal development. They attribute much of their success and motivation to the inspiration of individual

teachers who have positively impacted them during their formative years. Students both desire and need to feel safe, emotionally and physically, during sensitive periods of growth in order to learn to be socially aware and respond appropriately to diverse stimuli and perspectives different from their own.

### **Researcher's Reflection**

As I reflect on not just this dissertation journey of three years, but also the journey of a career in education, I think back on what seems to be most important. We, as educators, have the ability to model and increase EI when it is taught through the environment and the set-up of the classroom in which we teach. We can model and explicitly teach EI through our own traits and attributes as teacher. We can also explicitly teach it and assess our own progress by paying attention and giving as much regard for the progress of our students in areas of personal development as we do in academic achievement.

The course I teach at a university in the Midwest is one that covers the history of schooling in the US. One of our overarching questions is to determine what is the purpose of schools? This is followed by pondering what, then, is the role of the teacher as facilitator in these schools? This document analysis of education autobiographies of students in this very class has brought great enlightenment to me as to what, in the student perception, is most important.

The student perspective, in looking at the answer to these questions seems to clearly say (a) we want to feel safe and as if we belong, (b) we want to develop a relationship with our teachers and our peers, and (c) it matters to us who guides us along the journey.

I know this is true for me. So I say thanks to those who have been so instrumental in my life:

- I thank my mom and dad, my first teachers, who encouraged me to set goals and pursue dreams, whose little sacrifices all my life have worked to provide a place of safety and belonging, where I could dream and grow and fail, each as the case might have been.
- I thank Mrs. Watson, my third grade teacher, who wheeled in the piano on St. Patrick's Day and sang, "When Irish Eyes are Smiling." I can't remember much of what she taught, but I know she made me unafraid to make mistakes and brave enough to excel.
- I thank Dr. Steve Cook, at Westmont College, who invited me out to dinner as an undergraduate student and hosted our class in his living room to watch "*Apocalypse Now*" when we were reading *Heart of Darkness* – modeling the building of relationships with students and connecting us to him and also to our peers.
- I thank Mike Oliver, the principal who called me "the Maverick" and encouraged me to swim upstream, and continue doing what was right for students instead of what everyone else was doing.
- Then finally, I thank Dr. Bill Timpson, who sent me out to "go guerilla" on the first day he met me, introducing me to Centennial High School, the Discovery program, and Eric Larsen, who gave me the words "social emotional education."

Each student's journey is unique, but I believe we must never be shaken from the knowledge and in fact the mission, that teachers can and do make a difference. I believe that the words of the students who spoke through their documents in this analysis, in part, confirm this. I also believe that this means that it is important for teachers to be trained and empowered to be the kind of people who can do this successfully. For this, we must

alter the academics-only course of training that our teachers are embarked on and make available programs and professional development that teaches them to do so.

In the perceived experience of students participating in this research study, teachers are given credit for life-changing experiences and points of decision. Students are malleable and sensitive. They are seeking what is important and interested in what they can become. As Abby reflected:

School is the environment where students grow up. The experiences that take place impact and shape the adult that they are going to become. With such a monumental effect comes an equally monumental responsibility to provide an environment that promotes the most valuable lessons.

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## APPENDIX A

### Template analysis – Draft 4

#### Impact on career choice

How I knew I wanted to be a teacher

Traits/attributes the teachers possessed that positively influenced me

#### What did teachers do that made it feel that way? (five core constructs of SEL programs)

Create a safe and belonging environment

Creative, thought-inspiring, and authentic learning activities

Create an engaging and cooperative atmosphere – sometimes teacher-to-student, sometimes student-to-student:

Building community/school/home connections

Create opportunities for reflection or self-improvement

Implications that academic achievement was enhanced

## APPENDIX B

### Template analysis – Draft 5

#### Impact on career choice

Traits/attributes the teachers possessed that positively influenced me

#### What did teachers do that made it feel that way? (five core constructs of SEL programs)

Create a safe and belonging environment

Creative, thought-inspiring, and authentic learning activities

Create an engaging and cooperative atmosphere – sometimes teacher-to-student, sometimes student-to-student:

Building community/school/home connections

Create opportunities for reflection or self-improvement

#### Outcomes

Implications that academic achievement was enhanced

Implications on personal development

How I knew I wanted to be a teacher

## APPENDIX C

### **EDUC: 275 Personal Education Autobiography**

*Students will produce an education autobiography, analyze core principles integral to their own emergent education philosophy, and reflect on their cultural positionality and how that shapes their views of schooling.*

*30 points, 15% of total grade.*

*Colorado Standard (8.2)*

### **Assignment Description**

Please reflect on your own education history and consider your past and present experiences in schools. Write an education autobiography that tells your story. Your paper should be 4 -pages, double spaced in length, and word processed. This is a personal narrative, but should also be somewhat formal in its tone. If you would like to include in-text citations to course content or authors who were important in shaping who you are and how you think, that would be appropriate. Please use proper APA format and a reference page if you do so.

### **Paper Organization**

**Introduction:** Attention Getter, Thesis, Preview of your main points.

**Body:** \_\_\_\_\_

***Impact of Your Personal Cultural Background and Reflection:***

**Part A:**

**Childhood Experiences:**

**Adolescence:**

**Adulthood:**

Use the following to shape your discussion in the paper:

- How did your own cultural positionality (race/ethnicity, class, gender, ability, sexual orientation, etc...) impact your schooling experience?
- Examine privilege, oppression, power, and difference and how they operated in your school. Whose stories did teachers and the curriculum tell? What was the epistemology?
- Was your school homogenous, diverse, integrated, or segregated? Did/does that matter with regard to your experience and the way you view the purpose of schooling? Share personal stories here.

**Part B:**

- Identify critical incidents involving diversity and difference (race/ethnicity, gender, class, ability, religious differences, urban/rural, language differences, geographic origins, sexual orientation, non-conformist individuals).
- What impact did these incidents have on you as a learner and on your overall education? (interpretation)
- Identify and describe educational philosophies of education used over the course of your history that impacted you in some way.

**Impact of Past Teachers:****Part C:**

- Discuss past teachers who had an impact on you, your learning, and your decision to pursue the profession. What specifically did they do, say, organize, teach, etc...that made their approach to teaching excellent?
- Life Changing Experiences: Any life-changing experiences in your past? Give examples of people and/or situations that were instrumental to your interest in becoming a teacher.

\*\*\*\*\*Use examples, stories, and/or illustrations to make your story personal and memorable.

Connect to course content whenever possible / applicable. Cite in-text and use a reference page if appropriate.

**Conclusion:** Summary statements, then so what? How will your history in schools influence your future approach as a potential teacher?