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'I'm more than a PE teacher': teachers' perspectives of social and emotional learning in PE and classroom at a rural elementary school

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ABSTRACT

Despite a growing attention on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in Physical Education (PE), there has been limited literature on how PE can provide SEL experiences in continuity with other subjects within a specific school context. This study aimed to investigate perspectives and experiences of teachers in PE and classroom for a school-wide SEL implementation at a rural elementary school. Adopting a qualitative case study design, four types of data were collected with 13 teachers. Inductive qualitative data analysis was implemented with constant comparison. Four themes were generated in this study: *Learning how to support personal and cultural differences; Promoting an inclusive learning environment; Building a whole school community with care; Shared understandings with school-wide interactions*. This study provided in-depth qualitative evidence that PE can be positioned as an effective and collaborative setting for a school-wide SEL implementation.

KEYWORDS

Social and emotional learning; elementary physical education; rural education; teacher perspective; school-wide program

There has been a growing interest on school-based Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) implementations in different subjects including Physical Education (PE) (Taylor et al., 2017; Wright & Richards, 2021). SEL has been proposed as one of the most essential initiatives to determine student success especially at the elementary school stage along with a broad range of positive student outcomes (Brackett et al., 2012; Denham et al., 2014; Goldberg et al., 2019). However, despite the increased attention on SEL, there still remain unanswered questions regarding how SEL is being perceived and implemented by teachers in the reality of schools (Dyson et al., 2021b; Humphrey, 2013). Furthermore, even though recent studies have started to provide empirical evidence on SEL implementation in school PE programs and their benefits (Hemphill et al., 2021; Howley et al., 2021; Rivera-Pérez et al., 2021), there has been a dearth of empirical research on how PE and other subjects can work in collaboration to enhance students' SEL development through school-wide endeavors.

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As John Dewey (1963) noted the importance of organizing educational experiences in continuity, SEL experience in PE should be supported and revisited in other subject settings within a school to make it more meaningful for students (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Especially, considering the unique characteristic of elementary school contexts where students spend most of their school day in classroom for academic learning (Roth et al., 2003), the importance of examining pedagogical connections in SEL between PE and classroom cannot be overemphasized for successful SEL implementation. Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate the perspectives and experiences of teachers in PE and classroom for a school-wide SEL implementation at a rural elementary school. The guiding research questions were 'What pedagogies do teachers perceive important in PE and classroom settings for a school-wide SEL implementation at a rural elementary school?' and 'How do teachers perceive PE can be positioned for a school-wide SEL implementation at a rural elementary school?'

Theoretical framework

SEL frameworks

Schools today are expected to provide more than academic learning experiences (Meyers et al., 2019; Oberle et al., 2016) to better support diverse student populations, especially the ones who are situated in socio-emotionally challenging situations (Kirk, 2020; National Research Council, 2012). Despite the claim that 'making SEL the primary learning domain for school PE programs is problematic' (Lund & van der Mars, 2022, p. 5), we still perceive PE as an important settingwhich can cultivate socially and emotionally competent students and support their well-being (Dyson et al., 2021b; Howley et al., 2022).

Endorsing our argument, the significance of enhancing SEL in PE is also reflected in the National PE standards by the Society of Health and Physical Educators (SHAPE) America (Richards et al., 2019; Winn et al., 2022). This can be further advocated by the accumulated empirical evidence on the social and affective domains of learning in different school-based PE programs (Hemphill et al., 2021; Howley et al., 2021; Teraoka et al., 2021). A considerable amount of scholarly works has long maintained that PE can help students learn how to cooperate with others in a respectful way, maintain safe and healthy behaviors based on personal and social responsibility, and develop a wide range of skills needed for their lives outside the gym (Ciotto & Gagnon, 2018; Cronin et al., 2018; Dyson et al., 2021; Martinek & Hellison, 2016; Richards & Shiver, 2020). However, the current understanding of SEL in PE, especially at elementary level, is quite restricted due to a limited amount of empirical research conducted based on SEL framework (Dyson et al., 2021a).

Generally speaking, SEL can be defined as 'the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions' (CASEL, 2020, p. 1). Based on the definition, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) introduced five essential SEL competencies, which include *self-awareness*, *social awareness*, *self-management*, *relationship skills*, and *responsible decision-making* (CASEL, 2020). The CASEL's SEL framework has been

widely used as a major guiding theory in the recent school-based SEL research not only in PE (Wright & Richards, 2021) but also in other subjects and general education (Bennett et al., 2023; Elias, 2019).

However, even though the CASEL's approach to SEL can be useful to understand what SEL is and what constitutes SEL, our attention is also centered on different contextual factors which may influence school-based SEL implementation (Stoiber, 2011). For example, these factors can include teacher's understanding and experiences related to SEL (Schonert-Reichl, 2017) as well as socio-cultural and geographical contexts which a school is located in. In this regard, we adopted the SEL framework by Jones and Bouffard (2012) to better understand different layers around SEL implementation in school, which are often called '*black-box*' (Dyson et al., 2019) (See Figure 1). The SEL framework by Jones and Bouffard (2012) suggested more specific and diverse contextual factors related to SEL: (1) Teacher-level aspects (Backgrounds, pedagogical skills, and SEL competence of teachers), (2) School-level aspects (School culture, climate, and norms), and (3) Out-of-school aspects (Home environments, local and socio-cultural community) (p.5). We contend that the SEL framework by Jones and Bouffard (2012)can be useful in this study since it can help us to identify teachers' pedagogical approach to SEL in general, specific pedagogical skills that they use for SEL, and any external factors coming in and outside of their class or school. This SEL framework was also used in the school-based research by Dyson et al. (2019, 2021a) which investigated students' perspectives of Cooperative Learning (CL) for SEL implementations in the primary PE program in Aotearoa, New Zealand.

Furthermore, the SEL framework by Jones and Bouffard (2012) can be useful to explore how PE can be positioned within a school-wide SEL implementation. This is because PE does not sit alone in real-time school settings, especially when a program or intervention is being implemented school-wide (Faber et al., 2007). Rather, PE is often expected to collaborate and interact with other subjects, most notably with classrooms in elementary school contexts. In this regard, we as physical educators contend that SEL in PE is not just about what is happening within the gym

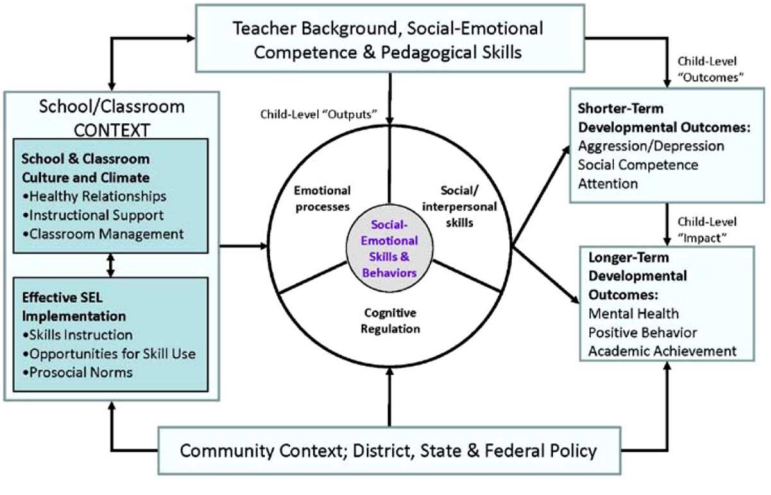


Figure 1. The SEL framework by Jones and Bouffard (2012).

but also about what is happening outside of the gym. Students' SEL development and their behaviors in PE class will be influenced not just by what and how they learn in PE but also by what they experience outside of PE. Therefore, this study explored what pedagogies teacher perceive important in PE and classrooms for a school-wide SEL implementation at a rural elementary school, addressing any commonalities and differences between these two settings. Additionally, this study explored how PE can be positioned in the whole school endeavors for SEL from the teachers' perspectives to better identify the potential strengths of PE as an effective setting for SEL implementation.

School-wide SEL based on socio-ecological theory

The SEL framework by Jones and Bouffard (2012) is grounded in the socio-ecological theory by Bronfenbrenner (1979). The socio-ecological theory maintains that human development occurs from the complex interplay between individuals and the multi-level environments around them (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Reicher, 2010). Bronfenbrenner (1979) identified four different environmental layers which can affect pedagogical practices and outcomes (*Microsystem; Mesosystem; Exosystem; Macrosystem*) (See Table 1). In the field of this study, the socio-ecological theory has been emplyed as a theoretical framework in the previous literature not only regarding social and affective domains of learning (Dyson et al., 2021a; 2021b; Lee & Martinek, 2013) but also related to understanding physical activity and health in a multi-dimensional lens (Casey et al., 2009; O'Connor et al., 2012).

Despite a growing number of empirical studies on SEL implementation in school-based PE programs, there has been limited explanation regarding how SEL in PE can influence or be influenced by the surrounding environments. Based on the socio-ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), we argue that promoting SEL in PE needs to be well-aligned with SEL practices outside of PE, which can ultimately affect students' social and emotional behaviors in PE. In other words, teachers' SEL implementation and students' SEL development in PE can be highly influenced by the external factors associated with their home, classroom, school, and local community as well as the broader societal factors such as policies (Dyson et al., 2021a). Even though recent studies corroborated that PE can be an effective learning for SEL (Dyson et al., 2019, 2021a; Hemphill et al., 2021; Howley et al., 2021; 2022), there has also been a claim that school-based SEL

Table 1. Four layers of socio-ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Environmental layer	Definition
Microsystem	A pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics (*p*.22)
Mesosystem	Interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates (*p*.25)
Exosystem	One or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person (*p*.25)
Macrosystem	Consistencies, in the form and content of lower-order systems that exist, or could exist, at the level of the subculture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies (*p*.26)

implementation can be more successful when it is supported by a whole school, not just one specific subject (Bear et al., 2017; Stoiber, 2011).

Additionally, understanding SEL and the different contextual factors through a socio-ecological theory can be significant for SEL research in rural school settings. Previous literature has maintained that rural schools and their local community have encountered unique challenges, for example, insufficient infrastructure and population (Bridgeforth et al., 2021; Petrin et al., 2014; Tuters, 2015). However, rural schools have not received enough academic attention in the American curricular discourse with limited empirical evidence (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Cicchinelli & Beesley, 2017; Showalter et al., 2023). Considering the majority of students in rural schools who have been historically and socio-culturally underrepresented (Biddle & Azzano, 2016; Cicchinelli & Beesley, 2017), utilizing a socio-ecological theory in this study can possibly allow us to examine how the various contextual factors in and outside of the school can influence teacher's perspectives and experiences of SEL in PE and classrooms at a rural elementary school. In this regard, this study may add in-depth evidence of SEL implementation at a historically underserved rural school to a growing body of SEL literature.

Understanding a school-based SEL implementation through a socio-ecological lens implies that SEL should not be treated as an add-on or 'isolated initiative' (Chu & DeArmond, 2021, p. 3) to make SEL more sustainable and meaningful for a school community (Meyers et al., 2019). If a structured SEL program is merely given to a school in a top-down manner without proper contextualization, the school community is less likely to perceive the SEL program as suitable for their students developmentally and culturally (Jones et al., 2018, 2019). To address this pitfall, the importance of a school-wide SEL implementation, also known as a whole school approach to SEL, has long been acknowledged by different scholars in education (Cefai & Cavioni, 2014; Li et al., 2023; Meyers et al., 2019; Oberle et al., 2016; Romasz et al., 2004; Weissberg et al., 2015). The previous studies commonly maintained that school-wide SEL implementation requires a whole school community to be invested in SEL by incorporating SEL into their everyday practices, interactions, school structure and culture rather than teaching SEL only in class (Goldberg et al., 2019; Oberle et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2018).

However, despite the increased attention on a whole school approach to SEL, there has been a lack of consensus in the recent studies on the main aspects or components of school-wide SEL implementation. For instance, Yang et al. (2018) identified two main aspects for a quality school-wide SEL implementation as systematic SEL instruction and a whole school environment conducive to SEL, while Goldberg et al. (2019) proposed 'family and community partnerships' adding on to 'curriculum, teaching, and learning' and 'school ethos and environment' (p.756). More specifically, Li et al. (2023) and Meyers et al. (2019) suggested six key activities in school-wide SEL implementation based on the CASEL (2020)'s School Theory of Action (Establish a shared vision of school-wide SEL; Assess resources and needs; Provide ongoing professional learning; Adopt evidence-based SEL programs; Integrate SEL into the core functioning of the school; Use data and a cycle of inquiry to improve SEL practice and student outcomes). Considering the lack of clarity in the previous literature, we need to address that our understanding of school-wide SEL implementation in this study was centered on three main aspects: (1) Class-based SEL instruction (SEL curriculum, integration, and related activities), (2) Supportive school environment for SEL (Culture, norms, and

everyday interactions), and (3) Ongoing support for SEL (Resources, professional development, and school-wide communication for SEL). The elements mentioned above were not only commonly recognized as crucial for implementing school-wide SEL in recent studies, but also exclusively concentrating on these aspects can aid in exploring the role of PE as a key environment for promoting school-wide SEL within a specific school context.

Methods

Study design

This study was conducted based on Merriam (1995)'s view of a case study design. In her approach to a case study design, researchers are allowed to 'specify the phenomenon of the interest and draw its boundaries' comprehensively (Yazan, 2015, p.139). As she indicated that case studies in education are 'more likely to be qualitative' (Merriam, 1995, p. 19), intensive and holistic description of the phenomena in inquiry is highly significant, which is often called as thick description (Brown, 2008; Yazan, 2015). Adopting her view of a case study design, the phenomena of the interest in this study were shared experiences of different educators who implemented and experienced SEL by collaborative efforts across the school, majorly in PE and classroom contexts. Various qualitative data were collected over an extended period of time to generate a rich description of the phenomena, which will be discussed further in the data collection section.

Contexts and participants

This research was conducted at Marigold elementary school (Pseudonym), a Title I school located in a rural area of North Carolina, the United States. 80% of the students at the Marigold were reported as ethnic minorities (59% African American; 20% Caucasian; 11% Hispanic; 10% Multi-Racial) while 98% of the total students received free and reduce-priced meals coming from low-income families. The Marigold operated as a lab school in partnership with the nearby university in North Carolina (The University of North Carolina System, n.d.).

Since the school first opened in 2018, there have been different types of whole-school SEL initiatives. First of all, an SEL curriculum called *Second Step* has been implemented to promote SEL in K-5 classroom settings throughout the 2021–2022 academic year. The Second Step curriculum was adopted by the school leaders and teachers since it is well-aligned with the CASEL's five SEL core competencies (Low et al., 2016). The Second Step is designed to teach each of these SEL competencies repetitively across multiple units, for example, relationship skills covered in Unit 3 Empathy & Kindness and Unit 4 Problem-solving (Committees for Children, 2023). The lessons in each unit usually consist of four learning steps, which are (1) Brain builder, (2) Story and discussions, (3) Activity/skill practice, and (4) Reinforcing skills (Committees for Children, 2023). Classroom teachers at the Marigold were encouraged to teach the lesson once a week or split one lesson into multiple days based on the needs of their class. Their implementation of the SEL curriculum was consistently monitored and supported by one of the school leaders who has a terminal degree in educational psychology.

Teachers' SEL implementation was also accompanied by seven social and emotional essentials called *CHOICES (Collaboration; Honesty; Ownership; Integrity; Consequences; Expectations; Solutions*). These were first introduced by the school leaders and widely used by teachers for five years since the Marigold first opened in 2018. These seven social and emotional essentials were consistently presented to students visually and verbally, for instance, through visual aids and posters at the Marigold.

Additionally, the teachers at the Marigold have been continuously participating in both school-wide and teacher-driven professional developments for SEL and restorative practices. Especially in 2021–2022 academic year, two school-wide professional developments for SEL were implemented, one of which was conducted over a duration of two weeks. Along with the school-wide professional development opportunities, there were ongoing mini conferences and book studies related to SEL and restorative practices. They were organized and implemented on a smaller scale by teachers, school leaders, and other professionals from the nearby university.

Using purposive sampling methods (Patton, 2003), 13 educators (One PE teacher; Nine classroom teachers; Three school leaders) participated in this study. The PE teacher is the one and only PE specialist at the Marigold who had been working there for four years. He was identified as an essential member of the teacher-led SEL team and relevant professional development by himself, school leaders and university professionals. The classroom teachers were recruited from each grade level. The school leaders who supervised SEL across different subjects and grade levels were recruited to provide a whole-school perspective regarding SEL implementation at the Marigold. The background information on the participants can be found in Table 2. Pseudonyms were used to protect their privacy.

Data collection

Four types of qualitative data sources were collected in this study (Observations; In-depth interviews; Photovoice; Reflexive journals). Observation is an effective tool for researchers to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the research participants and contexts by locating themselves in the native environments, which may not be obtained in the self-reported data (Smit & Onwuegbuzie, 2018; Takyi, 2015). In this study, observations were conducted with field notes in PE and classroom settings 46 times in the 2021–2022 academic year. The observations were mainly focused on what pedagogical

Table 2. The participants' background information.

Name	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Position	Years at Marygold
Alicia	F	African American	Principal	5 years
Dale	M	African American	Assistant principal	4 years
Zion	M	African American	School counselor	3 years
Steven	M	Caucasian	PE teacher	4 years
Mia	F	African American	Kindergarten classroom teacher	4 years
Emily	F	African American	Kindergarten classroom teacher	2 years
Abigail	F	Caucasian	1st grade classroom teacher	4 years
Grace	F	Caucasian	2nd grade classroom teacher	4 years
Zoey	F	Caucasian	3rd grade classroom teacher	4 years
Maya	F	Multi-racial	4th-grade classroom teacher	3 years
Claire	F	Asian American	4th-grade classroom teacher	4 years
Elena	F	Caucasian	4th-grade classroom teacher	4 years

practices teachers used related to SEL and how they interacted with their students during class.

An interview can help researchers to acquire in-depth information on participants' lived experiences and subjective perspectives (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Tracy, 2019). Especially with semi-structured interviews, an organized and iterative data collection can be conducted with a pre-arranged interview protocol and follow-up questions (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In this study, 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted regarding the teachers' perspectives and experiences of SEL implementation in PE and classroom settings at the Marigold (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The interview questions were focused on individual teachers' SEL experiences in their own teaching contexts as well as their perspectives on how PE can be positioned within a whole-school approach to SEL at the Marigold. An overview of the interview questions can be found in the supplementary file.

Photovoice can help participants, especially underrepresented groups, to unfold their experiences and perspectives by taking photos of certain events or phenomena (Tracy, 2019; Walton et al., 2012). It can not only allow researchers to understand the research contexts through the first-person viewpoints (Walton et al., 2012, p. 171) but also works as a powerful visual method to present images and emotions (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In this study, 20 photos were collected from the teachers to illuminate their experiences and perspectives regarding SEL implementation in PE and classroom settings (Walton et al., 2012). The participants were asked to provide one to three photos that could possibly encapsulate their perspectives and experiences related to SEL at the Marigold before the individual interviews. Their photovoice were verbalized and discussed by the participants in detail during the individual interviews (Kolb, 2008; Shaw, 2021) to better describe their understandings and experiences of SEL in PE and classroom settings at the school.

Writing reflective journals can be useful for recording any ideas, notes, and memos, which may influence the research process, for instance, researchers' own experiences, perspectives, and how the researcher comes to discover the findings of the research (Berger, 2015; Watt, 2015). In this study, the first author who have worked at the Marigold as a full-time graduate assistant over two years wrote 24 reflexive journal entries mainly about her experiences in the rural school context, how she interpreted the experiences, and any potential bias in the research process (Anderson, 1989; Watt, 2015).

Data analysis

Inductive qualitative data analysis with constant comparison was implemented in this study (Miles et al., 2014). Once collected, the data were transcribed, organized, and reviewed multiple times with analytic memos by the first author (Saldaña, 2013). Since the photovoice were discussed during the individual interviews, the photovoice data were organized with the relevant interview quotes in the initial phase of the data analysis. The analytic memos included the first author's immediate interpretations or remaining questions about the data, which were continuously challenged and interrogated by the second author (Saldaña, 2013). Referring to the reflexive journals, the first author also recorded how her interpretations have changed or corroborated after continuously discussing the memos with the second author. Using open coding, the reviewed data

were clustered and assigned with meaning units to discover initial patterns and key ideas (Elliott & Timulak, 2005; Tracy, 2019). As a second-cycle coding, axial coding was followed to reassemble the data based on their commonalities and differences (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In the axial coding process, the authors consistently compared the initial codes generated in the open coding process and identified more logical connections among them (Richards & Hemphill, 2018; Scott & Howell, 2008).

Trustworthiness of this study was enhanced by triangulation, peer debriefing, member checks, and clarification of researcher positionality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles et al., 2014). Our data triangulation process was conducted by checking and interrogating the four different data sources (Observations; In-depth interviews; Photovoice; Reflexive journals) (Shenton, 2004). Peer debriefing was consistently conducted with the second author, who is an experienced school-based qualitative researcher, to obtain feedback on the data collection, analysis, and interpretation phase (Tracy, 2019). Rather than asking the participants to merely review the transcripts, member checks were conducted with five participants (One PE teacher; Three classroom teachers; One school leader) through a presentation followed by interactive discussions. After the first author delivered brief presentations to share the generated themes in a participant-friendly language, there were two-way interactions between the first author and the participants about any further thoughts and ideas about the findings. Clarification of the research positionality can be understood as researchers' reflection on their own personal histories, experiences, perspectives, and ideas which may have influenced any research process (Chamaz et al., 2018; Pillow, 2003). The first author consistently clarified her researcher positionality through writing 24 self-reflexive journals. Articulating her experiences and perspectives as a full-time graduate assistant at the Marigold, the second author critically analyzed how she viewed, approached, and interpreted SEL in PE and classroom within the specific school context (Berger, 2015; Watt, 2015).

Positionality statement of the primary researcher

As Luttrell (2000) argued, 'we listen and make sense of what we hear according to particular theoretical, ontological, personal, and cultural frameworks' (p. 499). I as the primary researcher should be critically reflexive on and address my own positionality, which may have influences on the research process (Berger, 2015; Watt, 2015).

I am Seunghyun Baek who recently received Ph.D. in Kinesiology at University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Born and raised in South Korea, I have about four years of teaching experiences as a classroom teacher in elementary schools in South Korea. While teaching a wide range of subjects including PE, I observed students' words and behaviors in and outside of PE class. I witnessed how confusing it can be for elementary school students when they have different expectations and emphasis on their behaviors in PE and classroom settings. These prior experiences as a classroom teacher were developed into my academic attention on investigating how PE can be positioned as an effective setting for SEL to work collaboratively with classroom settings.

I worked as a full-time graduate student at the Marigold over two years during my Ph.D. program. I have engaged in a broad range of teaching, research, and school duties. During regular semesters, I taught a school-wide SEL curriculum called *Second Step* to kindergartners and fourth graders with classroom teachers and helped PE

teachers with SEL implementations. During summer learning programs, I worked as a PE teacher, a STEM teacher, and a classroom teaching assistant. I also communicated with school leaders and even parents when helping with daily school duties, for instance, car rides. Spending a considerable amount of time at the school helped me to enter the research setting as well as to have a useful amount of real-time experiences, where I can better understand the viewpoints of the participants.

Findings

Four themes were generated from the data analysis in this study: *Learning how to support personal and cultural differences; Promoting an inclusive learning environment; Building a whole school community with care; Shared understandings with school-wide interactions.*

Learning how to support personal and cultural differences

One of the pedagogies that was prioritized for SEL in both PE and classroom settings was learning how to understand and respect differences. In classroom settings, Zoey (3rd) identified a morning circle as an effective setting where her whole class could learn about other's feelings and thoughts: 'That happens a lot in the circle and just cultivate that understanding of each other like, oh, we are different, and it's okay'. Her account was further supported by her photo of a carpet and a talking piece that she used for the morning circle with her students everyday (See Figure 2): 'I'm gonna take a picture of the rug with our talking piece … .[Turning the talking piece inside out] He turned sad … .Sometimes we actually use it like, how are you starting your day feeling? … This shows emotion'. Maya (4^{th}) further shared an example that the circle time worked as an open space where students could share and discuss their cultural differences with others: 'One of my students celebrates Kwanzaa. I had her around Christmas time talking to us about what Kwanzaa meant. … She really enjoyed being able to teach the class about her culture and things that her cultural practices'. As the teachers overall indicated, students at the Marigold were given opportunities to show who they are, what they think, and how they feel on a daily basis through a morning circle in classroom settings.

When it comes to PE settings, learning about differences started from the moment when students enter the gym as it can be seen from Steven (PE)'s photovoice (See Figure 3). Students were given choices to say hello to their PE teacher in their own ways, which was also observed and corroborated by Alicia (principal): 'When you enter a classroom, how would you like to be greeted? … There are several different ways that I've noticed that kids transition into physical education'. Along the same line, students were also encouraged by Steven (PE) to choose where they want to sit and start their PE class: 'I can let them choose spots' (Steven, PE, Interview); 'Once students came into the gym after greetings with Steven, each of them chose one colored dot and sat on it' (Observation, 4^{th}grade PE).

Building on their experiences in PE and classrooms, teachers agreed that students can learn how to positively support the differences in PE settings more effectively. Classroom teachers shared their viewpoints that differences in physical competences among students become more visible in PE than classroom settings, which can be good learning



Figure 2. Photovoice from Zoey (3rd grade classroom teacher).

opportunities for their students: 'Having other people play with them that aren't as athletic or haven't played as long. Just how can you be more empathetic, show more kindness towards them' (Maya, 4th); 'Being able to listen to each other and understand that everybody does not have to agree, but we still need to work together' (Madelyn, 5th). Steven (PE) also echoed the importance of PE in learning how to accommodate individual differences in real-time situations: 'While they're doing their team activities … instead of being a downer … why don't we try to build that person up?'; 'Steven emphasized "Make sure that you are your partner look after each other when you are playing" in his instructions' (Observation, 4th-grade PE).

The PE teacher, classroom teachers, and school leaders all claimed that learning how to support personal and cultural differences was one of the most emphasized aspects of SEL implementation at the Marigold. However, the finding also indicates that, even though they had a consistent pedagogical goal, different activities were recognized as useful and effective to achieve the goal in PE and classroom settings, for example, different ways of greetings and morning circle. Furthermore, PE was recognized especially important for promoting awareness and actions for supporting differences among individual students.



Figure 3. Photovoice from Steven (PE teacher).

Promoting an inclusive learning environment

Considering the unique school setting as an underserved rural elementary school, teachers at the Marigold interpreted SEL not just as social skills but as an important avenue to promoting inclusion in their teaching contexts as well as across the whole school: 'Social Emotional Learning just really kind of goes beyond that whole "How are you feeling today?"' (Zion, Counselor, Interview); 'Whatever materials you have, you have to have enough for every student, so no one can be left out' (Claire, 4th, Interview). However, even though having an inclusive learning environment was perceived important by the teachers, Elena (4th)'s account as a classroom teacher indicated that teaching inclusion was not always easy for herself and her students especially when she incorporated physical activity into her classroom teaching or recess: 'If somebody does something … disruptive or frustrating for them … if they are physically able … it was not an automatic empathy kind of thing. They had to learn how to accept everybody'.

Due to this difficulty and complexity of teaching inclusion in classroom settings, understanding diversity and inclusion was one of the most important SEL skills that the classroom teachers want the students to learn more in-depth through cooperative activities in PE settings: 'Listen[ing] to everybody's ideas for solutions would be

important. … They're not giving anybody else the chance to speak. … Because somebody's just kind of dominating' (Elena, 2nd, Interview); 'Whoever is put on your team, no matter what their skill level is, and whatever activity you're playing … .Maybe you can teach them, like, be that positive influence to get them going on football'(Zoey, 3rd, Interview). Although Steven (PE) also acknowledged the importance of enhancing inclusion among individual students in PE class, his perspective of inclusive SEL was more attributed to his understanding of the local community from which the students come:

> I try to let these kids see that … success can happen in all forms and in all areas. … When I bring up the culturally relevant things that are close to them, I see a kind of a spark. … That's my goal is to make every kid feel that they have a chance to do whatever they put their mind to.

His account on having equitable learning environments for success was also advocated by Alicia (Principal) who highlighted the socio-economic conditions where the students are situated: 'As a Title I school … the opportunities available for people in that socio-economic range, it's a big deal'.

The PE teacher, classroom teachers, and school leaders shared that SEL pedagogies at the Marigold were overall focused on promoting an inclusive learning environment where every single student can feel engaged and valued. However, even though they were all aware of its importance, classroom teachers found it much harder to teach inclusion especially in physical activity settings.

Building a whole school community with care

Teachers at the Marigold commented that their understanding of SEL in general was grounded in a holistic approach towards individual students: 'It's learning that kind of takes into account the whole kid and not just the academic' (Madelyn, 5th, Interview); '… recognizing students as individuals, … demographics, … something about their living condition, … what they may be bringing to the school' (Alicia, Principal, Interview). In this sense, they overall advocated the importance of building a whole school community with genuine care for school-wide SEL implementation. Not only did they look after what was happening in their own contexts, but also were they attentive to what was happening outside: 'But when you're actually here, you can see that there are difficulties that students face every single day, that may be a little more than other students from other schools' (Abigail, 1st, Interview); 'I pay attention to what they wear. I pay attention to what they read. I visit classrooms' (Steven, PE, Interview); 'School leaders, teachers, and staff are greeting and welcoming the students every morning at the front door. They check in with kids about how they start their day' (Reflexive journal).

Additionally, the PE and classroom teachers did not limit attention to their own settings because they viewed SEL as learning life skills that the students can bring to their lives outside school: 'Team building is important in life, not just in sports. So, I try to incorporate life skills into my lessons as much as possible' (Steven, PE, Interview); 'I like to make it relatable to home. … Your parents have expectations you need to do the same thing at home. … Absolutely life skills' (Mia, K, Interview). As the teachers

take the lives of students into account in their SEL practices, SEL was more than teaching skills and knowledge for the teachers at Marigold. Rather, it was grounded in their sincere care for students: 'I think to be successful in life, you have to have life skills. And caring is central' (Claire, 4th, Interview) (See Figure 4).

Along with the same line, Steven (PE) shared his experience of showing his care for the students even outside of PE class as a part of the whole school community:

> Going to a classroom … they expected me to be in the gym. … Why are you helping me with math? … I've become part of that community. … Because I try to make it exciting. But also, it's just showing that I'm more than a PE teacher (Interview).

He further explained his commitment to showing care for students even outside of PE class-based on the strong relationship that he has built with the students for a long time: 'I've had so many kids call me like their school dad'; 'These fifth graders look at me as more than just some guy spitting rules out … .They know that I care about them, and they know that I have their best interests in mind' (Interview).

The PE teacher and classroom teachers advocated that caring is one of the most important pedagogies for SEL at the Marigold. Their care was not only limited to their teaching contexts but was extended to their student's home environments and local communities which they come from. This theme also revealed that PE teacher worked and



Figure 4. Photovoice from Claire (4th-grade classroom teacher).

viewed himself as a significant part of building a whole school community with humanistic care for students.

Shared understandings for SEL with school-wide interactions

The teachers at the Marigold reported that there have been continuous and active communications especially between PE and classroom settings on students' SEL behaviors: 'I communicate daily. … A lot of times when I tell them that behavior, it's not new to that teacher. That teacher already experienced that day' (Steven, PE, Interview); 'One of my students … anytime she didn't get her way, she would take off run. … Just knowing kind of the different behaviors [that] you already see, that way things can be de-escalated before they happen' (Emily, K, Interview). As the consistent interactions between two settings helped the teachers' SEL practices in their own teaching contexts, they highlighted the importance of having collaborative efforts for SEL across the whole school in the long run: 'I think having everybody on the same page is super important … Be more proactive with that group instead of reacting when situations arise' (Madelyn, 5th, Interview); 'I've also checked in and touched base with other CAPE [Creative Arts and PE] teachers … just because you know, we're all in it together, we really are. And that's the only way this works' (Claire, 4th, Interview). Adding on the teachers' account about being more proactive towards SEL, Zion (Counselor) also strongly emphasized the importance of having every single teacher at Marigold embody SEL pedagogies on daily basis: 'Everyone has to be on board, everyone. I don't want people to buy in, I want people to be. And there's a difference … .They have to really embrace restorative practices, Second Step, CHOICES, and live it' (Interview).

Furthermore, the participants delineated that the first step of their school-wide SEL implementation is sharing common languages and goals across the school. The teachers advocated SEL should happen consistently across different subject settings as well as grade levels: 'They're [students are] hearing the same thing over and over. And so they think, Oh, Ms. Smith [herself] thinks it's important … .Oh, Mr. Keith [Music teacher] values this too' (Grace, 2nd, Interview; 'They've heard this verbiage before. So, as they move up … we can focus on like, the deeper topics' (Maya, 4th, Interview)). Indeed, their strong belief towards the school-wide action for SEL was also represented in their actual teaching practices with the social and emotional essentials, *CHOICES,* in both PE and classroom settings: 'Steven explained "*Integrity* is like you do the right thing even when nobody is watching"' (Reflexive journal); 'She asked the students if she can share the experiences where one student made mistake and he immediately said "Sorry, my bad" to his friend. She said that the *ownership* was powerful' (Observation, 4th-grade morning circle). Presence of common languages for SEL was also represented in Steven's (PE) photovoice, where he incorporated *CHOICES* into his PE expectations (See Figure 5).

Overall, teachers at the Marigold reported that continuous, frequent, and active interactions between classroom and PE settings are important to support students' SEL development effectively and sustainably across the whole school. Furthermore, their accounts were extended to having a school-wide buy-in and shared languages toward SEL implementation in order to achieve a long-term success in students' SEL development.



Figure 5. Photovoice from Steven (PE teacher).

Discussion

This study examined (1) what pedagogies teachers perceive important for school-wide SEL implementation at a rural elementary school and (2) how PE can be positioned within the school-wide SEL implementation at a rural elementary school. Collecting four types of qualitative data sources from 13 participants, four findings were generated from the inductive data analysis (*Learning how to support personal and cultural differences; Promoting an inclusive learning environment; Building a whole school community with care; Shared understandings with school-wide interactions*).

Adopting the socio-ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and the SEL framework by Jones and Bouffard (2012), we maintain that school-based SEL implementation can be impacted by various external factors (Dyson et al., 2021a; 2021b; Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Stoiber, 2011). In this sense, the first, second, and third themes illustrated how the out-of-school aspects, for instance, home and community environments (Jones & Bouffard, 2012), have influenced the teachers' pedagogical approach toward SEL at the Marigold. Given that the Marigold was a Title I rural school with culturally diverse student populations, the data overall indicated that the SEL implementation at the Marigold was not just focused on teaching knowledge and skills for SEL in class but also on addressing various social and emotional needs of their students.

The students at the Marigold were continuously exposed to learning various cultural backgrounds and perspectives by having restorative circles in classrooms (Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018; Parker & Bickmore, 2020) as well as having different choices (Iannucci & Parker, 2022) and cooperative activities in PE (Dyson et al., 2021a; 2021b) (The first theme). Additionally, the PE and classroom teachers provided opportunities where their students could learn how to include others with different viewpoints and skill levels, especially through incorporating culturally responsive topics in PE (The second theme). The teachers also acknowledged the presence of emotional struggles that their students were experiencing in the home and community environments, which allowed them to provide emotional care for the students in their everyday practices (The third theme). Especially when it comes to PE, the PE teacher at the Marigold specifically shared his experiences of extending his care and building trusting relationships with students even beyond the gym. Considering that care has been emphasized in the whole school culture and climate, the third theme also provided empirical evidence on how the out-of-school aspects could have impacts on the school-level aspects of SEL implementation (Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

Exploring perspectives of the PE teacher, classroom teachers, and school leaders at the Marigold, this study called attention to having school-wide collaborative efforts for a more effective and sustainable SEL implementation (Goldberg et al., 2019; Oberle et al., 2016; Todd et al., 2022). The third and the fourth themes in this study especially corroborated the importance of developing more nuanced and collaborative pedagogical endeavors across the whole school to make SEL more meaningful for their students. Having consistent school norms and supportive school culture for SEL (Yang et al., 2018) helped the PE and classroom teachers to incorporate the essential SEL elements into their daily teaching practices, for instance, integrating *CHOICES* in their conversations and class expectations as common SEL languages (The fourth theme). These findings corroborate the claim in the previous literature that SEL should be implemented in such a way that it can be reflected in everyday interactions/practices, academic instruction, and school culture, rather than merely following a prescribed program (Horner et al., 2010; Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Stillman et al., 2018). Moving forward, we suggest that more research needs to explore what expectations classroom and PE teachers have for one another and how those expectations are shared and agreed upon to elevate their collaborative efforts for SEL implementation in various school contexts.

More focused on how PE can be positioned within a whole school approach to SEL, the findings in this study overall suggest that PE can work as an effective and collaborative setting for school-wide SEL implementation, especially in elementary school contexts. To be specific, the teachers at the Marigold perceived PE as a highly potential learning site, where students can learn different SEL skills, most notably, how to support differences and enhance inclusion. The findings in this study are consistent with the pervious literature, which argued that PE is capable of generating various social and emotional outcomes (Dyson et al., 2019; 2021a; 2021b; Teraoka et al., 2021; Teraoka & Kirk, 2022) as well as promoting diversity and inclusion (Baek et al., 2022; Lynch & Curtner-Smith, 2019). However, to fully legitimize these findings, it is important to clarify if students *learn* SEL skills in PE with teacher's explicit instruction or if PE provides appropriate opportunities that they can *apply* SEL skills. In this regard, we recommend that future research should generate a more detailed picture of how SEL

skills can be more explicitly and intentionally taught in PE and to what extent it can promote students' SEL development. Additionally, examining students' perspectives and experiences of SEL in PE can possibly allow future researchers to identify connections between teachers' SEL instructions and students' SEL outcomes.

We also argue that the findings in this study can possibly contribute to broadening the scope of professionalism for pre-service and in-service PE teachers. As illustrated in this study, PE teachers in elementary school are highly likely to be positioned with other teachers, especially classroom teachers. The findings in this study suggest that elementary PE teachers are expected and able to work in cooperation with other subjects and classroom settings for effective school-wide SEL implementation. As one of the important contributors for students' SEL development, we maintain that working collaboratively and interacting continuously with other teachers within and beyond the gym should be more emphasized as one of the professional dispositions for in-service and pre-service PE teachers. Given that collaboration with other teachers already has been considered important for content integration in elementary PE (Graham et al., 2020), this study provided useful empirical evidence that PE teachers should develop their capacity and willingness to work jointly with teachers outside of our field for students' SEL development.

This study has two limitations that need to be discussed. The first limitation of this study lies in the limited empirical evidence on teacher-level aspects in the SEL framework by Jones and Bouffard (2012). Even though the findings in this study provided in-depth information about various SEL practices that the teachers used in classroom and PE settings, the findings did not address how teachers' own SEL competence and personal/professional backgrounds influenced their pedagogical approach and practices for SEL at the Marigold. Given that teachers' own SEL skills can play an important role in teaching SEL (Jones et al., 2018: Katz et al., 2020), we propose that future research should focus more on the relationship between teacher-level aspects and their engagement in the school-wide SEL implementation (Collie et al., 2012; Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

The second limitation of this study is related to family and community partnership. As mentioned in the methods, the Marigold worked in partnership with a nearby university in North Carolina, which allowed the school to utilize various pedagogical support from the university. The findings in this study also addressed how the home and community environments of their students influenced the teachers' viewpoints and pedagogical approaches towards SEL. However, this study did not present specific data about how family and community have been engaged in the school-wide SEL implementation, which can be one of the main components in school-wide SEL implementation (Goldberg et al., 2019). In this regard, we encourage future research to further examine partnership with family and community to better support a whole school approach to SEL (Jones et al., 2018) in elementary school settings.

Conclusion

This study was conducted in a rural school setting, which has received little attention in previous school-based research (Cicchinelli & Beesley, 2017). Four different types of qualitative data sources were collected with a prolonged engagement (Morse, 2015) to illustrate how PE and classroom settings can put concerted efforts for school-wide SEL

implementation at a rural elementary school. The findings in this study overall infer that having safe, inclusive, and culturally relevant learning experiences should be prioritized in SEL practices in PE and classrooms (Jagers et al., 2019), especially for those who have been historically underrepresented in American education systems (Nieto, 2009). Furthermore, this study advocates that PE can work closely and collaboratively with classroom settings to enhance students' SEL development. The importance of PE as an effective setting for SEL development was acknowledged not just by the PE teacher but also by other stakeholders outside of PE – the classroom teachers and school leaders – in this study.

Based on these findings, we emphasize that PE teachers and researchers need to move beyond the gym to see what is happening outside our field of study. This will allow more interdisciplinary collaborations between PE and other subjects to identify a wider range of pedagogies for school-wide SEL implementation in diverse school contexts. It is also important because PE teachers as educators should genuinely care about their students' social and emotional well-being even beyond their class, as Steven (PE) mentioned, 'I'm more than a PE teacher'.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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