

The Centrality of Social-Emotional Learning for Educators during Crisis: The Role of the Principal

*This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the
North American Community: Uniting for Equity.*



North American Community: Uniting for Equity

Journal of Interdisciplinary Education

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Abstract

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is crucial to human development because SEL helps us maintain supportive relationships and make responsible and caring decisions. This qualitative study aimed at understanding how, if at all, public school educators looked after their social-emotional health in times of crisis, during COVID-19. The sample consisted of 24 educators in three school districts in a Midwestern state of the United States. Findings indicated that participants used several strategies to take care of their emotional health. These strategies included making time for non-school related activities, connecting with colleagues, engaging in small acts of kindness, and providing professional development to equip faculty and staff to manage their anxiety and mental health issues. The relevance of this research is three-fold: (1) At the school's level, this study supports both teachers and leaders' well-being and retention. Additionally, this study promotes equity because SEL minded adults help create healthy and safe communities for peers and students; (2) This study sheds light on the best practices to adopt when caring for the social-emotional health of adult educators; and (3) this empirical study contributes to the literature on adult SEL, which is currently limited because the focus of SEL has largely been on and for students.

Introduction

Many days, I was burnt out. I have been burnt out for 18 months. I have to take care of my children, my students, my ill mother-in-law, and have little support at home because my husband is an essential worker. During COVID-19, I had no time for me, not time to decompress, no time to just be me. I became exhausted, irritable, angry, and quite frankly depressed to the point that I truly considered quitting my job as a teacher. I love my job, but it was too much. The school made a nurse available to us, but she also was overwhelmed, so it was not helpful. I felt I had my back against the wall.

The above quote, from a participant in this study, represents what a teacher felt and experienced during COVID-19. Unfortunately, these types of situations were far too common among educators when the health pandemic struck the United States in March 2020. In the graduate classes the lead researcher taught, she heard similar stories weekly. In fact, because of her students' need to talk about their social emotional health, a large portion of her classes was dedicated to the teachers' and leaders' social emotional health rather than what was listed on the syllabus. It was at that time that the lead researcher kept thinking about what one hears when traveling by plane: "Should the cabin lose pressure, oxygen masks will drop from the overhead area. Please place the mask over your own mouth and nose before assisting others." Although this analogy pertains to the physical health of passengers, we believe that the same concept applies to the social emotional health of our educators, particularly during and after a crisis.

When adults do not pay attention to their emotional health, they are not able to take care of the emotional well-being of others (Aguilar, 2018; Newman, 2020). In education, strides have been made in providing students with social emotional learning (SEL) skills, however, to date there is a limited number of empirical studies that explore how adult educators watch out for

their social emotional health. This study aimed to close the knowledge gap by contributing to the social emotional learning literature for educators while also providing practical recommendations for teachers and school leaders. Specifically, this qualitative study examined the time when remote learning was abruptly mandated and educators were asked to work from home while also teaching their own children, and/or taking care of family members.

Literature Review

Operational Definition

The Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), whose mission is to ensure that SEL becomes an integral part of PK-12 schools' curriculum and practices, contends that SEL is key to human development. As such SEL plays a significant role in the emotional health of both adults and students. CASEL defines SEL 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. (n.d.b, p 1).

The global health pandemic was emotionally challenging for educators as they often became their children's teachers while also instructing their students online, caring for their families, and running their home, leaving them with little to no time to take care of their own social emotional health. Educational leaders faced an additional challenge because they suddenly had to adapt their leadership style to one incorporating crisis leadership.

Leading in Times of Crisis

As a long-term, unpredictable, and infectious crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has been particularly challenging for school leaders because remote learning became the mandated mode of instruction with very little notice. In times of crisis, leaders "frame the meaning of a crisis

event, expressing appropriate concern and support, overseeing mitigation, coordinating support and facilitating timely, open communication” (Seeger et al., 2003, p. 241). During a crisis, educational leaders need to ensure that teachers, staff, and students alike feel safe and have a clear sense of belonging so that they can flourish (Boudreau, 2020). Smith and Riley (2012) affirmed that responding to crisis in general involves five key steps: 1) getting quality and reliable facts; 2) implementing the relevant contingency plan, or quickly adapting one to meet the crisis situation. The implementation of a rigorously pre-considered contingency plan means that key staff and other stakeholders immediately know what has to be done, and who has to do it; 3) making decisions swiftly before the level of damage escalates; 4) showing genuine concern for the welfare of others; 5) communicating clearly, openly, and regularly to limit confusion, rumors, and misinformation. In the case of COVID-19, educators had to swiftly learn how to switch to remote learning while also re-assuring their teachers and stakeholders, and responding to the federal and state guidelines, among other tasks.

Leadership in times of crisis is about managing events and emotions in ways that minimize personal and organizational harm. Smith and Riley (2012) identified key attributes that effective educational leaders possess during a crisis. These dispositions include having excellent communication skills, being able to make quick decisions, thinking creatively, showing empathy, and being flexible, intuitive, optimistic, and tenacious. Additional traits relate to promoting social-emotional health of stakeholders.

SEL for Educators

While research focusing on SEL for educators is limited, France (2019) asserted that there is a need for schools to be emotionally safe environments for teachers to grow and develop as individuals and professionals. The current literature provides three main reasons as to why

social and emotional skills are vital for educators (Brackett, Bailey, Hoffman & Simmons, 2019; Jennings & Greenburg, 2009; Stickle, Bailey, Brion-Meisels, & Jones, 2019; Zinsser, Shewark, Denham, & Curby,., 2014). First, the social and emotional skills of teachers influence their students' learning of SEL because socially and emotionally healthy educators foster healthy classroom environments (Jennings & Greenburg, 2009; Zinsser et al., 2014). Second, teachers and leaders in education have social and emotional needs that need to be satisfied to be able to adequately meet the expectations for implementing SEL methods within their own classrooms (Berg, 2018; Brion, 2021). Finally, teachers experience large amounts of stress with their job (Gallup, 2014; Goodwin, 2019). This stress can often lead to high levels of burnout. Prior to COVID-19, 20% of educators reported feeling extremely burnt-out, but after COVID-19, this percentage doubled to 40% (Fagell, 2021). Zinsser, Zulauf, Nair Das, & Silver, (2019) showed that SEL can be utilized to minimize the level of the stress experienced by teachers, which often leads to fewer discipline issues and fewer student expulsions.

Recent studies have begun to examine methods to improve the social-emotional skills of educators. Certain methods of SEL designed for the classroom setting target the SEL of both teachers and students, which benefits both groups. Using methods of SEL that focus on building the social emotional competence (SEC) of both students and teachers caused teachers to be more likely to have emotion focused interactions with students (Rivers, Brackett, Reyes, Elbertson,., 2013). In addition to this benefit, some teachers found that applying the SEL methods for their students to their own lives improved the quality of their interpersonal relationships and emotional responses (Carstarphen & Graff, 2018).

Various factors contribute to the emotional wellness of educators. Mielke (2018) proposed five methods teachers can implement to help them destress, improving their emotional

wellness: 1) distract their thoughts from dwelling on the source of stress, 2) face the problem and deal with it rather than practicing avoidance, 3) examine the situation for a distorted perspective built on frustration, 4) process through the stressful issue by journaling or discussing it, and 5) practice mindfulness techniques to build control over stress. Kuebel (2019) proposed self-care as one method of improving emotional wellness that helps teachers avoid burnout and handle stress. Experts in the field of education view self-care as one of the best ways to handle the stressors in education and avoid burnout, especially in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic (Johnson, 2020a; Fisher & Frey 2020). Miller and Flint-Stipp (2019) found that preservice teachers rarely see self-care as integral to offsetting the emotional stress that comes with teaching, which they believe points to the need for professional development opportunities centered on self-care. Harper (2020) proposes five ways teachers can practice self-care: 1) take time to stop and engage in non-school related activities, 2) embrace vulnerability with fellow educators, 3) create a reasonable, manageable to-do list, 4) reach out to others for help rather than trying to figure everything out alone, and 5) reach out to others for help when a break for self-care is necessary. Another suggestion for improving wellness for teachers focused on the importance of building relationships with colleagues (Goodwin & Shebby, 2020; Rodman, Farias, & Szymczak, 2020). In addition, Johnson (2020b) emphasized being able to openly share struggles with fellow educators along with a need for support from leaders in their school.

While there are pre-service teacher education programs that include some training in teacher SEL competencies, many of them focus on implementing SEL for the benefit of the students rather than the individual educators. Schonert-Reichl, Kitil, & Hanson-Peterson, (2017) discovered that many states fail to incorporate all aspects of SEL education into their curriculum, with many states focusing on social awareness and responsible decision-making at the expense

of self-awareness and self-management for educators. This approach, used by the states to educate future educators in SEL, emphasized focusing on others while neglecting aspects important to self-care, such as self-awareness. As a result of this gap in training for educators, school leaders play a pivotal role in ensuring that teachers continually receive support and professional development related to enhancing their own social-emotional learning and self-care skills.

The Role of School Leaders in Promoting SEL for Educators

School leaders are responsible for the physical and emotional safety of their students and adults. Hess (2013) suggested that effective educational leaders foster a positive school culture. In this way, they empower teachers to be more effective, and through them, they improve student learning. CASEL (n.d.a) recommended that leaders:

- Create opportunities for staff to learn about and strengthen SEL professional skills and their own social and emotional competence.
- Create structures that foster trust and collaboration among staff.
- Identify ways to explicitly model SEL in interactions with staff, families, and students.

Successful SEL implementation depends on how well staff work together to facilitate SEL instruction, foster a positive school community, and model social and emotional competence. School leaders should focus on their teachers and staff's professional growth as well as their own social and emotional learning (Jones, Bouffard & Weissbound, 2013). CASEL (n.d.b) proposed a model (See Table 1) that aims to promote SEL among adults and educators. The model focuses on learning and collaborating, as well as modeling, and aims to create a

Table 1

SEL for Adults. CASEL (n.d.b)

Learn	Collaborate	Model
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reflecting on Personal Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Skills ● Collaboration ● Examining Biases for Cultural Competence ● Growth Mindset for Staff ● Self-Care and Re-energizing ● Personalized Professional Learning Plans for SEL 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) ● Peer Mentoring and Partnership ● Integrating SEL into Staff Meetings Peer Consultancy Protocols 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Model SEL as a Staff ● Create a Culture of Appreciation Practices for Leaders

supportive staff environment that cultivates adult social and emotional competence. Based on CASEL’s SEL model for adults, learning includes reflecting on personal SEL skills, engaging in self-care, and developing a professional learning plan for SEL. Collaborate entails peer mentorship, professional learning communities, the integration of SEL into staff meetings, and peer consultancy. Lastly, this model combines creating a culture of appreciation for one another, reflecting on personal SEL skills, and modeling SEL for others.

School leaders who support SEL for educators are better able to build and maintain positive and trusting relationships, a critical component of creating a positive, supportive, and effective school culture (Patti & Tobin, 2003, Purkey & Novack, 1988). In addition, by consistently modeling and fostering SEL for educators and focusing on relationships with all adults regardless of race, gender, abilities, sexual orientation, religion, or ethnicity, leaders create intentionally inviting schools that foster equity.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is based on Purkey and Novack's (1988) invitational education model which focuses on the importance of creating an invitational educational environment to better student learning. An invitational education means that the school is intentionally inviting as opposed to being unintentionally inviting, inviting by chance, or disinviting (See Table 2).

An intentionally inviting school is created when leaders purposefully create an environment in which adults and students are comfortable and safe to learn, parents are invited to participate and be engaged in the school's life, and teachers feel supported. Purkey and Novack (1988) theorized that four main areas need to be intentionally inviting in a school. The 4Ps describe the four areas as People, Places, Programs and Policies. During crises, it is crucial that school leaders focus on creating inviting schools in all four dimensions of the quadrant. However, Purkey and Novack (1988) posit that people should always be the priority because they affect all other dimensions.

Table 2

Invitational Education: The Four Quadrants

<p>Intentionally Inviting School</p> <p>You are purposefully—on purpose--welcoming to children, families, etc.</p>	<p>Unintentionally Inviting School</p> <p>You aren't purposefully welcoming to families and students—you are unaware. You are, just by accident, inviting.</p>
<p>Intentionally Disinviting School</p> <p>You are purposefully disinviting to others.</p>	<p>Unintentionally Disinviting School</p> <p>You are unaware that you/the school is disinviting. You are, just by accident, disinviting. (Perhaps you have just not thought about it before, you have habits that are disinviting to others—your blind side).</p>

People

People-oriented schools are easy to identify. They are the schools where principals and teachers care for each other and prioritize SEL. In these schools, employees know the likes and dislikes of their colleagues, and there is a general atmosphere of warmth and respect. In intentionally inviting schools that focus on SEL, principals offer to their staff and teachers professional development events that are centered on self-care and social emotional education. SEL-focused principals communicate often, validate people's experiences, embrace

vulnerability, address inequities, and foster collegiality (Harper, 2020; Kafele, 2020). They also listen intently and intentionally to people’s worries, stresses, and struggles. In these schools, principals learn to say no and prioritize the health of his/her teachers over other tasks. These leaders model time away from school with friends and family and constantly exemplify work-life balance (Kafele, 2020). Finally, SEL-minded leaders focus on the six categories of self-care of their staff and institute programs and policies to support all aspects of self-care. Wolpov, Johnson, Hertel & Kincaid (2011) define the six categories of self-care as being physical, emotional, social, cognitive, financial, and spiritual.

Places

Places are visible, and as such, can easily be made intentionally inviting. Purkey and Novack (1988) noted, “If hallways are littered, paint is peeling, restrooms are smelly, classrooms dusty, offices cluttered, and cafeteria grimy, one can assume that the school's policies, programs, and people are the same” (p. 21). Places are the most obvious element in any school and the easiest to change. They provide an opportunity for immediate improvement. To promote SEL, principals can display posters that reflect care for one another, strategies for self-care, or organize mindfulness events. These can be organized online or face to face. SEL-minded leaders also create spaces for support through networks, restorative circles, or a physical space for “sharing is caring” types of gathering where people feel safe to relax, share, and be vulnerable. These spaces can be virtual or not.

Programs

Sometimes well-intentioned programs are harmful to individuals or groups because they focus on narrow goals and neglect the wider scope of human needs. Leaders need to ask themselves whether programs welcome everyone or just some educators or students. An SEL-oriented leader organizes programs that support social-emotional health of not only students, but also educators. These programs can be delivered through mandatory or optional professional development events, groups, clubs, daily email messages, mindful minutes, videos, and/or external professional help and resources.

Policies

Schools operate based on many policies. Such policies include discipline, dress code, personnel selection, bus routes, snow days, attendance, and visitation procedures. These formal or informal policies communicate a strong message to people in the school and the community about how things are to be done and where each person fits in. They also communicate values such as equity, diversity, and inclusion. These policies should reflect the focus on SEL for all stakeholders (Johnson, 2020b). Such policies could include topics such as an unplanned and undocumented short leave of absence, substitute request, and request for someone to watch the class while the teacher takes an unplanned but needed break.

The 4Ps are critical to creating intentionally inviting school cultures, but the people dimension is paramount (Purkey & Novack, 1988). People develop best in inviting environments. If educational leaders understand how to promote SEL among adults, there will be less teacher attrition, teachers' self-efficacy will be boosted, students will perform better, and schools will become more equitable.

Method

This qualitative study sought to answer the following research question: How, if at all, did public school educators take care of their social-emotional health during COVID-19? The goal of qualitative research is to gather rich description data on the topic investigated (Patton, 2014). This richness can be facilitated by selecting participants who provide the greatest opportunity for discovery (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In responding to and investigating this research question, the researchers aim to add to the existing body of literature regarding adult SEL in general and, more specifically, the application of SEL for educators in schools.

Selection of Participants

The researchers identified participants using convenience and snowball sampling strategies (Saldaña, 2009). Convenience sampling is a nonrandom method of recruiting participants which draws upon the pool of individuals who are readily accessible to the researcher, and snowball sampling is a nonrandom method of recruiting participants in which participants put the researcher in contact with individuals whom they believe would be willing to participate in the study (Neuman, 2011).

The lead researcher identified schools for this study through her work with principals in the community. After receiving IRB approval, researchers contacted PK-12 public schools in four different school districts in the Midwest of the United States of America. Participants were recruited from the school districts through email to gauge interest in participation in this study.

The researchers contacted a total of 38 full-time educators from three different public-school systems located in the Midwest region of the United States. Of the 38 faculty members contacted, 24 educators were interviewed. Of the 24 participants, four of them were principals, four were school counselors, 12 were teachers, and four held staff positions. These 24

participants (See Table 3) were an average of 44 years old with a range of 27 years old to 58 years old. Seventeen of the participants were female, and 7 were male. The highest level of education for the participants was as follows: three participants had a doctorate, 12 had a master's degree, two had a bachelor's degree with teaching certificates, one had a bachelor's degree, and six had an unknown level of education. The participants had an average of 15.5 years of experience in their field with a range of two years to 32 years.

Table 3

Participant Demographics

Demographic Variable	<i>n</i>
Position Held	
Principal	4
Teacher	12
Counselor	4
Staff	4
Age	
Mean	44
Range	27-58
Gender	
Male	7
Female	17
Level of Education	
Doctorate	3
Master's Degree	12

Bachelor's Degree with Teaching Certificates	2
Bachelor's Degree	1
Unknown	6
Years of Experience	
Mean	15.5
Range	2-32

Data Analysis

Each of these recordings was transcribed verbatim for ongoing data analysis. The transcripts were analyzed using the established method of open coding to identify themes throughout the data (Maxwell, 2013). Upon identifying codes such as taking time for non-work-related activities and connecting with colleagues, the researchers went through the transcripts another time using inductive coding to create a data audit. Examples of identified themes included making time for activities outside of work which participants enjoy and connecting with colleagues through being available to listen.

Trustworthiness

Throughout each step of conducting the study, precautions were taken to strengthen the internal validity of the study in each stage of the protocol. The following methods were used to improve the validity: generating a data audit, regular strategic meetings, and the use of low inference descriptors. First, the use of a data audit strengthens internal validity (Rodgers, 2008). In qualitative research, a data audit creates a trail of the data connecting the findings of the study back to the original data in the transcripts. Data audits improve qualitative projects by reducing the risk of research fraud, providing a framework for future studies, and detailing a clear path from the data in the transcriptions to the results in the manuscript.

Second, the researchers engaged in frequent team meetings during which they discussed possible codes, themes, and methods for improvement as the study progressed. Qualitative research can be conducted by a single individual, but there are benefits to internal validity through using a collaborative approach as a research team. Some of the ways this approach strengthens internal validity include the discussion of potential biases and the identification of alternate explanations for themes (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008).

Finally, the researchers strengthened the internal validity of this study through the use of low inference descriptors (Chenail, 2012). In qualitative research, low inference descriptors are used during the writing process to add accounts of the participants' experiences in their own words. For this study, low inference descriptors have been incorporated into the manuscript through the use of quotes by participating faculty members during their interviews in order to show a clear connection between the words of the participants and the results of the study.

Findings

In reporting the findings, the researchers used the participants' quotes verbatim, however, to ensure the anonymity of our interviewees, the research team used pseudonyms. Findings indicated that participants took care of their emotional health by (1) making time for non-school related activities, (2) connecting with colleagues to help create an environment in the school in which people can talk to each other easily and in which people engage in small acts of kindness and (3) providing professional development opportunities to equip faculty and staff to manage anxiety and mental health issues.

Time for Activities

Each participant reported the importance of making time for activities outside of work/school. They shared that they have to be intentional about setting aside time to focus on

these non-work-related activities. The participants did not all report the same type of activity as being beneficial, but they reported common characteristics such as (a) making sure that they do something other than schoolwork/being intentional about “shutting off” work, (b) connecting with people who are important to them, and (c) doing an activity that they enjoy.

Shutting off Work

Participants indicated the importance of setting aside time each week in which they did not do schoolwork, especially in light of COVID-19. Even if it was only for half of a day during the weekend, they “shut off” work and did something else. Counselor Angie illustrated this point when she stated:

I would say my self-care is trying to find one day a week, it’s usually Saturday, and it ends up usually being about a half day where I don’t, you know, that I don’t do schoolwork, and then I try to do another half day on Sunday where I don’t do schoolwork.

In general, participants tended to explain that it is important for them to be able to have a separation between work and relaxation, and there seemed to be a general sense that if they allowed it to happen, they would work all the time or at least almost all the time. April, an elementary principal, explained this when she said, “In my self-care, I learned very quickly that I needed to be able to figure out a way to shut off work like when I got home.”

Interestingly, with the addition of COVID-19 into participant’s lives, they found it even more important to set aside time for self-care apart from work. Alex, another principal at the high school level summarized this aspect of post-COVID-19 life when he said:

I tend to be a workaholic and so before COVID, very much so I kept my plate very full. After COVID, I have learned to say ‘no’, and it’s a hard thing but just learning to have

down time, learning to just be still and be quiet and do things that don't take a lot of energy. That's the biggest change I've made, but the main way I prioritize self-care is I made sure I get my workout in.

They reported that finding time for themselves has never been easy, and COVID-19 did not help this effort. So, at the same time that self-care became more important, it also became more difficult to achieve especially since the separation between work and home became less defined. Teacher Melanie communicated this dynamic when she explained:

Practicing self-care is still something I struggle with. I tend to put my students first and my family first and always myself last. So, I guess I try to give myself permission to, like, take the day off but not do any work and try not to feel guilty when I have to, you know. Before COVID, I would, you know, go out maybe on Friday happy hour and more for the social aspect, not for being all crazy or whatever, so that would be something I would do for self-care is just doing something with friends outside of work, you know.

COVID-19 changed the way individuals, such as Melanie, were able to interact with other individuals as part of their self-care. In spite of these changes, some individuals have been able to adjust their self-care to reflect these necessary changes in order to still connect with others.

Connecting with People

Participants explained that one important aspect of non-school-related activities was the opportunity to connect with people they care about. They explained that it does not have to be a long time or an extravagant activity, but it is important for them to connect with people. Mary, a teacher at the middle school, explained,

So that kind of really helped just like, you know, again, it sounds so simple but my husband and I, just once a month, we need to go on a date night, just do something just for us and just kind of eating with my friends, at least once a month.

Sometimes participants emphasized that they want to be sure to connect with their families, and other times, they said that it is important for them to connect with friends. David, another teacher said:

So, the best thing that I did for myself, and it's hard because I have two kids at home, but I made sure to reconnect with my college friends. We haven't seen each other in a really long time, and one friend reached out to me and we Zoomed, and then I was like 'Wow that was really cool!' so then I connected with a bunch of others.

The use of technology, such as Zoom, allowed participants to connect with others safely in accordance with the health restrictions in place.

Doing an Activity They Enjoy

Finally, in terms of making time for activities, participants reported that they not only put work aside but also chose to participate in activities they enjoyed. Many expressed that exercise helps them feel better, so they are sure to prioritize it. Others mentioned coaching, taking walks or going on hikes, fostering dogs, etc. Teacher Mark illustrated how this practice helped him when he said:

So, I think the biggest thing for me that has been most helpful is, I actually coach club soccer and so I started coaching three or four years ago. I first started at coaching at high school and now I coach club, and I think, I say this is self-care because it forces me to end my day at my contract hours because I have to go to soccer practice, and it takes up at, you know, it gives me something else to do in the evenings instead of, you know,

feeling like I can just keep working on my lessons or keep answering emails or things like that. So, I think that's honestly been the biggest thing that's helped me is kind of having something else to turn teaching off and go into my personal life.

As Mark noted, doing activities that they enjoy served as a way to protect teachers from working all the time and neglecting self-care. Shutting off work, connecting with others, and engaging in enjoyable activities were methods implemented outside of the work environment for participants to practice self-care. Within the work environment, participants valued connecting with colleagues to improve their social and emotional wellbeing.

Connecting with Colleagues

The other two related themes involved the way that the teachers, staff, and leaders experience and relate to their work environment and colleagues. As participants described their practices for emotional and social learning, they emphasized the importance of investing in relationships with people at work.

Being Available to Listen to Colleagues

Teachers noted that they and their colleagues are under more stress than usual right now because of COVID-19 and the expectations to take care of students remotely. In addition, some are stressed because they feel that students are not performing as well academically as they should be. So, participants reported how important it is for them to be available to listen to one another because it helps keep one another calm and to help each other feel supported. As David stated,

I would classify myself as more of an expert just at listening, and I think a lot of adults that's what they need right now, somebody to listen, and I know that there's things that are out of our control that we can't change because from the teacher's standpoint, you know, they're stressed right now because students aren't performing academically to the point that teachers think they should be.

Principals also learned to listen more intently and more frequently. Alex exemplified this sentiment when he said “I never thought I would spend so much time listening to my teachers unpack their day, my counselor’s frustrations when she could not reach the students, or parents angry at the situation. Then I got home and listened some more!” Being available to listen to colleagues can be a vital part of connecting with them. In addition to listening, doing small acts of kindness also aided educators to connect with peers.

Doing Small Acts of Kindness

Another way that teachers and principals managed stress was to express kindness towards one another. Sometimes this was in the form of extending kindness to students in the form of extended deadlines. Other times, it was bringing in dinners or treats for each other on long days such as parent-teacher conference days. One teacher, Mary, reported, “During COVID-19, I started making tons and tons of masks, so I spent a lot of time focusing on something that I could do, that felt like I was making a difference.” In another example, principal Grace explained:

I would try to like, the last day I remember teasing him, I was like, “Well, we can’t have a beer, but I got you some coffees,” you know, like bringing my secretaries and stuff like that, figuring out what, you know, one’s a vanilla latte, one’s a caramel macchiato. I need to know what they drink. My counselor, he’s up, I think it’s important to know those things, and make sure people feel appreciated. My janitor is a snack guy, so I’ll try to bring him a donut here and there.

Discussion and Recommendations

Just as plane passengers are instructed to place the oxygen mask over their own noses and mouths before assisting others, the researchers believe that this study is relevant to all educators who seek to improve their own social-emotional well-being so that they, in turn, can help their students and together create intentionally inviting schools. In this study, participants used several strategies to regulate their stress and burnout. Our participants were well aware that teaching is one of the most stressful occupations in the United States. (Gallup, 2014) and were intentionally putting time aside to participate in activities in order to manage their stress levels. Specifically, participants talked about “shutting off work,” participating in activities, connecting with colleagues, and doing small acts of kindness. These findings are in agreement with Jennings and Greenberg (2009) who asserted that possessing and using social and emotional skills and strategies are necessary to regulate stress, maintain healthy personal and professional lives, and thrive as teachers and leaders. Furthermore, these findings provided empirical support for the methods of relaxation and self-care proposed by Mielke (2018), Harper (2020), and others who stated that educators needed to find extracurricular activities to stay healthy and prevent the accumulation of stress and burnout (Rodman et al., 2020; Goodwin & Shebby, 2020).

The Role of Leaders in Creating Intentionally Inviting School cultures that support SEL

School leaders play a crucial role in creating inviting school cultures. SEL-minded leaders spend ample time listening to others in need of talking and they model kindness. The findings indicated that leaders in this study focused on modeling SEL, the third element of CASEL’s (n.d.b) model. Principal Grace, for example, modeled kindness, appreciation, and care for her teachers and staff members by getting to know them well enough to know the kinds of treats that would make her staff feel appreciated, cared for, and valued. Alex modeled listening

while Melanie and some of her principal colleagues modeled shutting off work in the hope of creating a separation between work and home life.

Findings also revealed that principals did not focus on learning and collaborating, the first two elements of the CASEL's (n.d.b) model. This may be explained by the fact that COVID-19 was an unpredictable, and infectious crisis that forced leaders to rapidly pivot their priorities and switch to mandated remote learning with very little notice. COVID-19 has reminded leaders to focus on relationships with teachers before programs and academics because if teachers are not well, teaching and learning will not occur. This finding is in line with Brion (2021) who asserted that the emotional well-being of teachers does not only affect their teaching and relationships with others, but also the school culture.

Additionally, this study's findings showed that principals and other informal leaders with strong social and emotional competencies are better able to build and maintain positive and trusting relationships, a critical component of creating a positive, supportive, and effective school culture. This finding is in line with Patti and Tobin (2003) and Purkey and Novack (1988). By consistently modeling SEL and intentionally working to build relationships with all school staff, these SEL-minded administrators foster equity. Specifically, SEL offers a way for adults to examine their own practices, including how their own social and emotional competencies and the policies and practices in place may impact equity. In this study, by being purposeful in their actions, by modeling listening, and creating boundaries between their professional and personal lives, principals exemplified how to create an inviting school culture focused on SEL for educators. It is our hope that after COVID-19, school leaders will make SEL a priority rather than a reaction to a crisis and that they will focus on providing professional development on SEL to their teachers and staff. Miller and Flint-Stipp (2019) advocated for

professional development opportunities for adults centered on self-care. The researchers recommend that districts and principals use CASEL's SEL model for adults as a basis for educators to frame their work, align their budgets, and plan their professional learning.

The findings from the current study add to Purkey and Novack's (1988) 4Ps in that they provide a roadmap on how to create intentionally inviting school cultures that are focused on SEL for adults. Specifically, this study provides ideas on how to create intentionally inviting school cultures by focusing on developing people's social-emotional skills and competencies. For some educators, this may not require an intentional effort because they always are people-driven and oriented. For others, they may have to reorganize, re-strategize, and learn how to become better SEL-minded persons. The 4Ps can help frame the work of educators, reminding leaders of the importance of intentional and inviting leadership. Purkey and Novack's (1988) framework can be used to reflect on the self and on the school as a system. Leaders could ask themselves daily: "In what ways was I intentionally inviting in providing SEL for the adults in my building today?" Similarly, leaders can provide professional development for teachers to help them use this tool to reflect on their SEL practices and themselves.

Limitations and Future Research

Limitations of the study pertained to sample size and profile, geographical location, data collection, and method used. First, the sample was limited to 24 educators who all worked in the public school system. Additionally, the study participants were all working in one district located in a midwestern state of the United States. For this study, the researchers did not have access to other districts or to educators working in charter or private schools. Further limitations involve the methodology used. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the researchers were able to only conduct interviews. Although classroom observations were originally planned, the pandemic prevented

those. Additionally, the interviews that took place on Zoom, possibly preventing full consideration of the body language and non-verbal communication that accompanied the educators' words. Finally, this study used a qualitative approach, limiting the generalization of the findings to other contexts. However, these findings should be relevant for school districts, charter and private schools that do not currently focus on SEL for educators.

Future research should continue to examine SEL for educators in various districts, states, and school systems using qualitative and quantitative approaches. Specifically, further studies could focus on SEL for educators within each school level, to have a more thorough understanding of the phenomenon at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Additionally, further comparative studies could be conducted within public, charter, and private schools to understand if and how each of these systems implement SEL for educators in their settings and within their school cultures. Finally, researchers could use the comparative case study approach to comprehend how other countries take care of their educators' social emotional needs.

Conclusion

This qualitative study sought to understand how, if at all, public school educators took care of their social emotional health during COVID-19. Findings indicated that participants used several strategies to look after their emotional health. These strategies included making time for non-school related activities, connecting with colleagues to help create an environment within the school in which people can talk to each other easily and in which people engage in small acts of kindness, and providing professional development to equip faculty and staff to manage anxiety and mental health issues. The relevance of this study is three-fold: (1) At the school level, this study supports both teachers and leaders' well-being and retention. Additionally, this

study promotes equity because SEL-minded educators help create healthy and safe communities for peers and students; (2) This study sheds light on the best practices to adopt when caring for the social-emotional health of adult educators; and (3) this empirical study contributes to the literature on adult SEL, which is currently limited because the focus of SEL has largely been on and for students.

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