

Navigating Accountability: A Hermeneutic Transcendental Study on Teachers' Responsibility in Integrating Social and Emotional Learning in Mathematics Education

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the dynamics of accountability and responsibility among mathematics educators as they integrate Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) into their teaching practices. Utilizing a hermeneutic transcendental approach, the research examines the lived experiences of teachers, their challenges, and the strategies they employ to balance academic rigor with SEL objectives. This case study captures the voices of educators who are at the forefront of this integration. It examines their pedagogical adjustments, collaborative efforts with colleagues and administrators, and the reflective practices they engage in to enhance their teaching. The research also sheds light on the systemic barriers that hinder the seamless integration of SEL, such as limited resources, lack of training, and lack of accountability measures. The study focuses on teacher connectedness, exploring how strong relationships with students and peers influence the successful integration of SEL. The study highlights how connectedness fosters a supportive and empathetic classroom environment, enhances student engagement, and promotes students' sense of belonging and well-being. Ultimately, this study advocates for a more comprehensive approach to teacher accountability, one that recognizes the multifaceted role of educators in shaping both the educational and emotional needs of their students. This research aims to inform policymakers, educational leaders, and teacher training programs about the critical need for balanced and holistic educational practices, by providing insights into the practical realities of SEL integration in mathematics education.

INTRODUCTION

Integrating social and emotional learning (SEL) into math curriculums is increasingly critical in fostering student success. SEL encompasses essential skills such as emotional regulation, empathy, relationship-building, and responsible decision-making, which are pivotal for students' overall development and academic achievement. Despite its recognized importance, the integration of SEL into mathematics education remains a challenging endeavor, often hindered by a lack of accountability and increasing behavioral issues among students. Teachers who incorporate SEL competencies into their academic curriculum have been shown to have increased student achievement and engagement. However, there is not much research on how to create or ensure teacher ownership.

RESEARCH PROBLEM AND PURPOSE

The integration of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in mathematics classrooms faces significant challenges due to a lack of responsibility and accountability among educators. Many teachers report insufficient training and professional development opportunities on how to effectively incorporate SEL into their mathematics instruction (Sami, 2024). Consequently, some educators need to take ownership of the SEL components within their academic teaching. While some teachers independently develop SEL supports within their classrooms, they often feel they need more support to integrate these competencies effectively. Even before the pandemic, teachers have consistently expressed a need for Support and training in classroom management and positive behavior interventions (Franks, 2020; Pignatiello, 2020). There are currently no formal mechanisms to hold teachers accountable for incorporating SEL into their teaching practices (Hwa, 2022; Skedsmo & Herber, 2019). Unlike academic performance, which is frequently assessed through standardized tests and evaluations, SEL integration is rarely monitored or evaluated in a way that can be quantified (Berg et al., 2021; Martinson et al., 2020). This lack of accountability can result in inconsistent and non-committal SEL practices among educators.

This study aims to investigate teacher responsibility and accountability in integrating Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) into mathematics education. The hermeneutic phenomenological research case study aims to explore teacher experiences, interpret the potential impact teachers have when they take responsibility for SEL integration within the classroom, and highlight the importance and effectiveness of teacher connectedness in relation to teacher ownership.

BACKGROUND

Historically, the issue of student behavior or the importance of character education stemmed from an educational system that prioritized cognitive development at the expense of students' holistic well-being (Demetriou et al.,

2022; Govorova et al., 2020). The approach to putting cognitive development ahead of all else in education is deeply rooted in traditional educational structures that emphasize acquiring knowledge and intellectual skills while often neglecting the social and emotional dimensions of learning. As a result, educational policies and practices were primarily designed to enhance academic performance, with little consideration for students' emotional and social needs (Ye & Shih, 2021; Tyler, 1919). This narrow focus on cognitive development created an environment where the holistic well-being of students was overlooked, leading to gaps in their overall development and preparedness for real-world challenges (Borowiec et al., 2021; Norozi, 2023; Stodden et al., 2023;).

Socially, schools and communities are struggling with teachers managing student behaviors due to student emotional unrest and student trauma that COVID-19 brought to light (Herrera et al., 2022; Stratford et al., 2020). The period of the COVID–heightened levels of stress marked 19 pandemic a noticeable decline in overall mental health, and a surge in negative behaviors among students ((Hanetz-Gamliel et al., 2021; Phelps & Sperry, 2020). These changes have been attributed to the disruptions caused by the pandemic, including prolonged isolation, uncertainty, and the shift to remote learning environments (Cipriano et al., 2023; McCabe, 2024). The compounded effects of these stressors have left many students struggling to cope, highlighting the urgent need for enhanced mental health support and interventions in educational settings (Hanetz-Gamliel et al., 2021; Phelps & Sperry, 2020). Teachers cannot take responsibility for student behaviors due to a lack of training and understanding of what character education or social and emotional support is for students (Kurniawan et al., 2022; Martinez & Partin, 2023). Something that has been proven to make a difference in teacher connectedness is the degree to which students feel personally accepted, valued, involved, and supported by their teachers (Garcia-Moya et al., 2021; Mohd Khatib et al., 2022).

Teacher connectedness theory serves as the foundational theoretical framework for this case study on teacher responsibility in integrating social and emotional learning within mathematical education. Teacher connectedness theory emphasizes the importance of strong, positive relationships between teachers and students in fostering a supportive and effective learning environment (Maloney & Matthews, 2020; Tranchina & Zambak, 2021). Grounded in the foundation that when students feel connected to their teachers, they are more likely to engage in the learning process and exhibit positive behaviors, this theory has the potential to help students achieve academic success (Arslan, 2021; Ferreira et al., 2020). An important health asset during the adolescent years is the degree of connectedness students have to their school and their teachers, which positively impacts educational outcomes (Brookings, 2022; CDC, 2021; Springer, 2021) Leaning on several educational theories such as attachment theory, self-determination theory, and social Support models by using teacher connectedness theory, supports both the academic and social-emotional development of students while trying to create an inclusive environment.

ATTACHMENT THEORY

Attachment theory, as proposed by Bowlby (1969), poses that students' internal working models of their relationships with teachers significantly influence their perceptions of peer interactions, their capacity to trust others, and their overall social competence within their peer groups (Van Rosmalen et al., 2016). Within a school setting, attachment relationships are established throughout the educational process (Hicks & Korbel, 2024; Forslund & Duschinsky, 2021). The teacher-student relationship acts as a crucial mediator in this context. A positive and supportive relationship with teachers can help students navigate conflicts more effectively, promoting healthier coping mechanisms and emotional regulation (Main & Ellerbrock, 2023; Robledo et al., 2022). Teachers who provide a secure and nurturing environment can help students internalize positive behaviors and attitudes, fostering resilience and social competence. The degree of conflict experienced during this period influences students' externalization and internalization processes, which are mediated by the teacher-student relationship (Ahmadi et al., 2023; Guay, 2022).

SELF- DETERMINATION THEORY

Research conducted by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (2021) highlights the intrinsic human desire for growth and fulfillment. Their self-determination theory (SDT) elucidates how social environments can either facilitate or impede an individual's motivation to achieve success (Koestner & Holding, 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2024; Vallerand, 2021). According to SDT, fulfilling the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness is essential for fostering intrinsic motivation (Koestner & Holding, 2021; Vallerand, 2021). The concept of relatedness refers to the need to form close social relationships and was initially defined as the desire to feel a sense of belonging and connection with others (Roza et al., 2012; Saxer et al., 2024). This fundamental human need is crucial for emotional well-being and personal development (Mosewich et al., 2022; Perkins et al., 2021; Saxer et al., 2024). When individuals experience a sense of relatedness are prone to feeling valued and supported, within their social circles (Schmidt et al., 2021; Van Petegem et al., 2023). This sense of connection can enhance motivation, engagement, and overall satisfaction in various aspects of life, including educational and professional settings (Núñez-Regueiro et al., 2024). Understanding and fostering relatedness can lead to more cohesive and

supportive communities, ultimately contributing to the holistic development of individuals (Collie et al., 2020; Jiménez et al., 2021). Furthermore, adverse classroom behaviors significantly affect educators and students, underscoring the importance of addressing these issues to create a conducive learning environment (Chang & Taxer, 2021; Glock & Pit-ten Cate, 2021; Granger et al., 2021).

SOCIAL SUPPORT MODELS

Social support models for education refer to frameworks that describe how social networks and relationships provide emotional, informational, and practical assistance to individuals (Cooper et al., 2024; Lewis & Foye, 2022). These models emphasize the importance of supportive interactions in promoting mental health, well-being, and resilience (Gillard, 2019; De Beer et al., 2022). By building strong, supportive relationships with students, teachers can significantly impact their motivation, engagement, and overall success (Tineo et al., 2024; Wachs et al., 2022). This support can manifest in various forms, such as providing encouragement, offering constructive feedback, and being available to listen to students' concerns (Fullerton et al., 2021; Grapin & Sulkowski, 2022). Social support can come from various sources, including family, friends, teachers, and peers, and is essential to help people cope with stress and challenges (Cooper et al., 2024; Heberle et al., 2021). By leveraging attachment theory and self-determination theories, teachers are committed to creating an inclusive learning environment that supports both math goals and the social-emotional development of their students.

MATH ANXIETY

Math anxiety is a widespread phenomenon characterized by a profound sense of dread or apprehension when individuals face mathematical tasks, often leading to diminished performance and obstructed learning trajectories (Cheung et al., 2023; Szczygiel, 2020). This psychological barrier can significantly impede one's ability to engage with mathematical concepts, creating an environment where the fear of mathematical challenges overshadows the potential for academic achievement. However, math anxiety is not insurmountable. Research by Aldrup et al. (2020) and Samuel & Warner (2021) highlights effective strategies to mitigate its adverse effects. A critical approach involves identifying and understanding the specific triggers that evoke anxiety in mathematical contexts. By pinpointing these triggers, individuals can proactively address anxiety issues while creating and maintaining positive relationships and creating mathematical concepts.

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Teachers need the knowledge and tools to create a loving atmosphere where students are valued, understood, and supported in their emotional growth and social interactions (Orgel, 2022; Sears et al., 2022). Empowered teachers who navigate the complex dynamics of the modern classroom foster a more conducive learning environment (Filderman et al., 2023; Von der Embse et al., 2020). Teachers who implement SEL competencies within the classroom remain attuned to students' evolving needs and challenges, adapting their teaching approaches accordingly. The benefits of this training extend beyond immediate student impact, encompassing a transformative effect on educators themselves. Supporting teachers with strategies to embed SEL training, schools are empowered to deftly navigate the intricate and dynamic landscape of the modern classroom (Filderman et al., 2023; Von der Embse et al., 2020). This empowerment translates into a multifaceted enhancement of the teaching profession, influencing instructional methodologies and the overall classroom atmosphere. Thus, investing in robust SEL training for teachers is a fundamental step toward enhancing students' overall educational experience and well-being (Orgel, 2022; Sears et al., 2022).

GAPS IN LITERATURE

There needs to be more empirical data focus on mathematics teachers' perceptions of integrating SEL. Most existing research tends to be broader, encompassing general teacher attitudes toward SEL without delving into subject-specific nuances.

There is a gap in understanding the effectiveness of professional development programs aimed at equipping mathematics teachers with resources on integrating SEL into their teaching practices. How these programs impact teachers' perceptions and accountability remains underexplored.

Limited research connects mathematics teachers' integration of SEL with specific student outcomes in mathematics. Studies often focus on general academic or behavioral outcomes without isolating the impact on mathematics achievement and engagement.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The central research question was: How do mathematics teachers perceive their responsibility and accountability in integrating SEL into their teaching practices?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A research design was a single-case study that required a group of participants with specific characteristics. The participants were novice and veteran teachers with three to twenty-five years of teaching experience from urban and suburban school districts. All teachers were math teachers teaching math to students in grades three through eight; however, the study did not take place on an actual site as everything was conducted via the computer. Researchers collected qualitative data from the open-ended interview questions, open-ended open-ended focus group questions, and a written prompt after the focus group experience. The sample was selected based on their willingness to participate in the study and their ability to provide access to students who meet the study's criteria. Purposive sampling was used when selecting individuals for this study. Purposeful sampling entails intentionally selecting individuals with information relevant to the research problem (Bassot, 2022). The recruitment process, spanning approximately two months, involved reaching out to superintendents and school principals to gauge a teacher's interest in joining the study and reaching out to participants. Recruitment letters were sent within school districts and posted on online social media.

While the original data collection was in a transcendental phenomenology study that consisted of interviews, focus groups, and a written prompt (Aguas, 2022; Meihami & Rashidi, 2022), this study included a hermeneutic element. The validity of the findings was reinforced by triangulating the data, which involved the use of multiple sources to obtain rich experiential descriptions from participants. This study involved a reflective interpretation of texts or experiences to uncover deeper meanings (Dangal & Joshi, 2020). The study was completed by the researcher engaging in interpreting and reinterpreting data to reveal the phenomenon's essence. Interviews and focus group questions were analyzed and grouped based on the interpretation of teacher ownership as a strong result of interpreting data along with the answers from written prompts.

FINDINGS

This hermeneutic phenomenological study aimed to look at the lived experiences of elementary and middle school math teachers with social and emotional learning (SEL) and math achievement teacher connectedness through a lens of teacher connectedness. Data was collected through interviews, focus groups, and written prompts. The analysis involved organizing and interpreting the data through a hermeneutic lens, emphasizing the contextual and historical backgrounds of the participants. The researcher engaged in a cyclical process of interpretation, known as the hermeneutic circle, to uncover deeper meanings and insights (Dangal & Joshi, 2020). Themes were identified through an iterative review of transcripts, considering the interplay between the parts and the whole of the data. The researcher then examined the underlying structures and contexts that influenced participants' thoughts and emotions, providing a rich, contextual understanding of their experiences.

Multiple themes emerged from this study, highlighting critical aspects of the educational environment. School responsibility was a prominent theme, emphasizing the role of schools in fostering a supportive and accountable atmosphere for both teachers and students. Emotional resilience emerged as another critical theme, underscoring the importance of helping students and teachers develop ways to deal with stress and anxiety. The theme of SEL education accountability focused on the need for schools to ensure that social and emotional learning (SEL) programs are effectively implemented and evaluated. Finally, effective communication was identified as essential for building solid relationships and facilitating collaboration among students, teachers, and administrators. These themes collectively illustrate the multifaceted nature of educational experiences and the interconnectedness of various factors in ensuring a positive learning community and environment.

SCHOOL RESPONSIBILITY

School responsibility involves being accountable for students' outcomes and ensuring that the administration's actions are reliable and trustworthy. The codes of administration support, school support, leadership, and teacher self-efficacy appeared 39 times within the documents during the data analyzation process. Combined with the codes of student engagement, student responsibility, and student ownership, which fall under the school's theme of taking responsibility for student learning and behavior, teachers felt strongly that this contributed to the connection they create with students.

Beth stated, "I am an authority figure and in a position where I actually have to tell if something too off base is going on in the classroom and make adjustments. I make sure I am attentive with students, you know, so just sitting and listening. I have to create a sense of belonging and like connection and all of that, you know, we have had to have some come to Jesus' moments because of teasing and bullying, and all of that in the classroom needs to be addressed. I have had actually to take action, you know." Beth's statement conveys a sense of responsibility and vigilance. She feels the weight of her role as an authority figure, emphasizing the importance of being attentive, creating a sense of belonging, and proactively addressing issues like teasing and bullying.

Within the study, Eric, Beth Isabella, Sarah, Rebecca, and Emma displayed the common thought of the importance of being proactive and assertive in their roles as math teachers. These teachers had a strong sense of self and a strong sense of what needed to be done to support students. A strong sense of self-efficacy and a responsibility to empower students was evident.

EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE

Emotional resilience seen in this study as the ability to adapt to stressful situations and effectively manage and recover from emotional challenges is a strong theme in the importance of teacher connectedness and teachers taking responsibility for the SEL education of their students. Involves the codes of sense of belonging, perseverance, compassion, empathy, connection, classroom community building, emotional intelligence, emotional regulation, math self-confidence, positive classroom environment, real-life connection, sense of community, student collaboration, student motive, and student trauma, this theme held over 421 codes, the strongest of which being empathy, emotional intelligence of students and connection. According to teachers, the quality of having emotional intelligence allows students to bounce back and continue growing despite difficulties. Isabella stated, “But if I were to select one quality students are getting better at, I would say the responsible choices. I think that they are aware of themselves and each other, and I think it's just kind of gauging when to do what, how, and what would be best for whatever the circumstances are at that time. I think they are hyperaware of each other. They love to check each other. They gotta check themselves, and that is one of the things I mean they, I mean they give wonderful feedback, and I applaud them for it.” Isabella felt that the students who could regulate themselves or learned to regulate their own emotions were more successful in class.

Within the study, Janet, Olivia, and Linda emphasize the importance of creating a supportive and inclusive classroom environment. The participants conveyed that focusing on rewarding positive behavior, addressing and normalizing struggles, and fostering a sense of belonging and family among students strengthens the sense of community within the classroom.

SEL EDUCATION RESPONSIBILITY

SEL Education's responsibility within the study is when teachers see the importance of implementing an SEL program within the class and take steps to ensure the program's success. Within the code of trauma training, teaching kindness, SEL training, positive behavior incentives, and adjusting based on student behaviors, 112 instances were cited within the document. Including codes of adjusting classroom norms and other cooperative strategies, teachers felt responsibility had to be taken to support SEL learning in the classroom.

Fran spoke on the importance of SEL education responsibility as a teacher but also from Support from admin, "I feel like my we have a brand new principal this year, and she is awesome, and she what she did was at the beginning of the year, she surveyed all the staff and said what do you feel like your biggest struggle is and what would help you the most? And then she has sought other professional development just specifically for what we said. They also gave us specific training on the things that we said were hardest for us. So I am blessed in that area because she has been doing such a good job really trying to give us Support. However, I agree with what Emma said: " unless you are gonna take it and run with it and make it your own, it is just an hour that you sat there and listened to professionals tell you how to do it." Fran spoke about how to take responsibility for emotional and social care in your classroom. Ava, Sofia, and Mona emphasized the need to use evidence, whether through data, attentiveness, or effective lesson planning, to make informed decisions and positively impact their educational environments.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

According to participant responses, effective communication can be seen as the process of exchanging information, ideas, thoughts, and feelings in a way that is received well and understood by all parties involved. Falling under the codes heaviest in relation building, growth mindset, and open communication with 347 codes, teachers felt that effective communication was vital in teacher connectedness when implementing a strong SEL program. Codes under this umbrella also included communication skills, family partnership, honesty in making mistakes, parent involvement, trust building, and social aspects of teaching.

Jennifer expressed the importance of setting high expectations and communicating effectively with students to promote equity and increase growth; she stated, "I don't expect anything from my students that I would not expect from myself. Umm. If they need to move, I let them move, but they know the parameters. When I was in a first-grade classroom, I taped off a rectangle in the back of the room, and it was their wiggle spot. I do not get angry if they are angry. Typically, I do not. You know, sometimes I'm having big feelings that day too. I am, but no, I just let them be human because they have to learn somewhere, and if they do not know, they are obviously missing something.”

Open communication was highlighted by 17 of the 18 participants in the study. It was frequently mentioned in the context of peer-to-peer interactions, teacher-to-student interactions, and teacher-to-parent interactions. Participants who appeared to be successful in their classrooms consistently referenced the importance of transparency and kindness in their communication. They emphasized that these qualities are essential for building solid relationships within the school and classroom, fostering a supportive and collaborative environment that benefits both students and educators. Additionally, open communication was seen as a critical factor in addressing and resolving conflicts effectively, ensuring a positive and inclusive learning atmosphere.

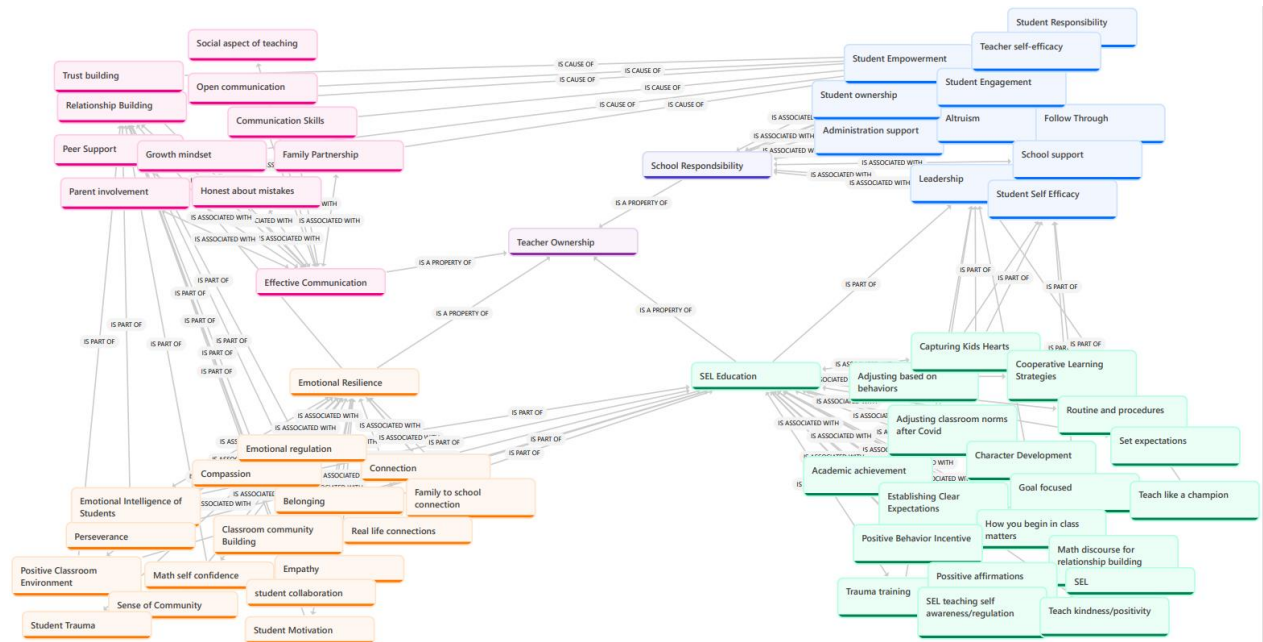


Figure 1: Teacher Ownership codes

CONCLUSION

The central research question of this study explored how mathematics teachers perceive their responsibility and accountability in embedding SEL teaching practices within the curriculum. The findings revealed that an overwhelming number of teachers showed the importance of teacher ownership as the decisive factor in successfully incorporating SEL. Although teachers did not state outright that they see teacher ownership as a deciding factor, based on their responses and the interpretation of their answers, this strongly felt unknown factor makes teachers successful. Teachers expressed their sense of ownership over their teaching methods and the SEL curriculum, significantly influencing their commitment to and effectiveness in integrating SEL. This sense of ownership was shown by their personal investment in students' holistic development, their confidence in implementing SEL strategies, making up their own SEL strategies to support students, and their belief in the positive impact of SEL on students' academic and emotional growth. The responses highlighted that when teachers feel a strong sense of responsibility and accountability, they are more likely to take proactive steps to embed SEL into their daily teaching practices, thereby fostering a supportive and emotionally resilient classroom environment.

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