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### Engaging in Art to Support Social-Emotional Learning (EASSEL): A Classroom-Based Approach

Hailey McAfee-Scimone

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ENGAGING IN ART TO SUPPORT SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING (EASSEL):  
A CLASSROOM-BASED APPROACH

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of  
Antioch University New England

In partial fulfillment for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

by

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April 2024

ENGAGING IN ART TO SUPPORT SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING (EASSEL):  
A CLASSROOM-BASED APPROACH

This dissertation, by Hailey McAfee-Scimone, has  
been approved by the committee members signed below  
who recommend that it be accepted by the faculty of the  
Antioch University New England  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **ENGAGING IN ART TO SUPPORT SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING (EASSEL): A CLASSROOM-BASED APPROACH**

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This dissertation describes a project to develop an art-based curriculum to teach young elementary school-age children social and emotional skills in the classroom based on the experiences of experts in the field of elementary education. Social-emotional learning (SEL) focuses on several key concepts including skills in interpersonal relationships, emotion regulation, and mindfulness (McClelland et al., 2017). By addressing SEL early within the education curriculum, children are exposed to resources that will help them to develop strong regulation skills, engage in identity exploration, and practice healthy relationship skills (Jones et al., 2017). The integration of SEL and art creates a learning format that embraces the characteristics of creativity and play that are engaging for children, while teaching important skills, such as communication and emotion regulation, in a manner that meets students where they are developmentally (Alfonso & DuPaul, 2020). Nine elementary education professionals were interviewed to collect information about social-emotional learning in schools. The interviews were conducted with a primary focus on the questions: what makes SEL programs effective, what are the roles of school in providing SEL, and what skills are most impactful at the first-grade level? Interviews identified observed positive impacts of social-emotional lessons in first-grade classrooms, preferences for brief lessons that can be easily incorporated into classroom schedules, and a need for creative expression in learning. Using the themes identified in each interview, a classroom-based curriculum was developed. This curriculum focuses on

working with first-grade students to develop strong social-emotional skills through art instruction and projects. This dissertation is available in open access at AURA, <https://aura.antioch.edu/> and OhioLink ETD Center, <https://etd.ohiolink.edu>.

*Keywords:* social-emotional learning, thematic analysis, art, qualitative research, school-based development, elementary education, child development

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education plays a critical role in the rudimentary development of social-emotional, psychological, and relational growth (Jones et al., 2017). Social-emotional learning (SEL) programs are evidenced-based interventions that demonstrate effectiveness in cultivating social, emotional, and interpersonal development (McClelland et al., 2017). Studies on implemented SEL programs in early education curricula indicated positive outcomes on young children's development of emotional and behavioral regulation, identity exploration, and healthy relationship skills (Jones et al., 2017). These results were widely successful across socioeconomic status, gender, race, and ethnicity.

Correspondingly, creativity, art, and play are instrumental experiences for children's emotional, intellectual, and social growth as they are heavily incorporated in early educational curriculum and programs (Alfonso & DuPaul, 2020). Previous research conducted on the benefits of art therapy suggest that engagement in therapeutic art activities is associated with positive outcomes in the development of social-emotional skills (Emery, 2004; Makridis et al., 2022; Stuckey & Nobel, 2010; Van Lith et al., 2013). Additionally, the act of play during childhood supports children in expressing themselves freely and engaging in self-development (Brems & Rasmussen, 2019). However, there are limitations to solely implementing art therapy for socioemotional development (Dunn & D'Amelio, 2000).

As a way to expand SEL in the early education curriculum, this paper describes the development of an SEL curriculum that integrates SEL and art based on suggestions from experts in the field of elementary art education. The synergy of an SEL program and art learning format may provide an approach that embraces creativity and play while teaching

communication and emotional regulation skills (Alfonso & DuPaul, 2020). Based on information collected on the need, challenges, accessibility, application, and key SEL topics for young elementary school children from interviews with six experts, this dissertation culminates in the description of an original art-based SEL curriculum.

## **CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **What is Social-Emotional Learning?**

Social-emotional learning focuses on developing foundational social and emotional skills in children based on five core competencies: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (Collaborative for the Advancement of Social and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2005). A key quality of SEL programs is the integration of, rather than the separation of, the skills involved in these five core competencies (Durlak et al., 2011). By emphasizing the integration of these areas, SEL programs aim to support individuals in improving their psychological, emotional, and interpersonal experiences using emotion regulation, social skills, and mindfulness techniques. Research has suggested that introducing these concepts during childhood has a significant positive impact on the overall wellbeing of individuals across the lifespan (Jones et al., 2017).

### **Five Core Competencies**

#### ***Self-Awareness***

Self-awareness is constructed from the ability to understand what you are feeling and thinking, what is important to you, and to have self-confidence (CASEL, 2003). The ability to recognize your internal states and think about how they are impacted by thoughts, feelings, and values, are skills that play a critical role in regulating emotions, practicing social awareness, developing strong relationship skills, and engaging in critical decision making. By practicing self-awareness, individuals may experience an increased ability to identify their emotions and thoughts, recognize personal values and interests, and experience increased self-efficacy (CASEL, 2003). Silva (2002) studied the relationship between self-awareness and views of

self-regulation. Participants who identified a belief that emotions should be inhibited and strongly regulated reported higher levels of distress as compared to participants who believed that emotions should be expressed. In fact, individuals who believed emotions should be experienced naturally and in an uninhibited manner reported higher levels of happiness that were consistent across testing conditions. This suggests that developing an openness and acceptance of emotions, more than self-awareness, decreases negative impacts of self-focus, as individuals are more accepting of their own internal experiences. As a result, strong skills for understanding and accepting one's own thoughts and emotional experiences have implications for self-management, social awareness, and responsible decision making (Silva, 2002).

### **Self-Management**

Self-management encompasses conscientiousness, perseverance, and the ability to regulate emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations. Examples of self-management are using coping skills, exhibiting self-motivation, setting goals, and using organizational skills (CASEL, 2003). This skill set has a strong connection with an individual's level of self-awareness (Galla et al., 2016). As an individual becomes better able to recognize how they are feeling and assess their own abilities, they increase their ability to practice emotion regulation, act responsibly, and engage in self-control. Emotion regulation includes the ability to recognize one's emotions and control how one responds to their emotions. Self-control encapsulates the ability to avoid impulsive reactions by first engaging in thoughtful reflection. Self-management also requires the regulation of attention and behavior in the service of personally valued, higher-order goals (Galla et al., 2016). Children with strong self-management skills have been found to exhibit better social functioning and physical health, and fewer mental health problems, as compared to children with less developed self-management skills. Children

who have higher self-management abilities have also been found to earn higher incomes, save more for retirement, and are less likely to be incarcerated during their lifetime than children who do not have strong self-management skills (Galla et al., 2016). The development of self-management is associated with children being better able to engage in effective emotion regulation.

### **Social Awareness and Social Skills**

Social awareness is the ability to understand what others are feeling, take their perspective, and interact positively with a variety of groups (CASEL, 2003). Social skills are skills used to interact and communicate with others such as cooperation, respect, kindness, responsibility, the ability to listen, and the ability to share (CASEL, 2003). Both social skills and social awareness correspond to the individual's ability to appropriately respond to how others are feeling and acting (Doré et al., 2017). Doré and colleagues (2017) examined participant behavior during a 3-week training about using social relationships and social skills to regulate emotions. Their research found that by developing both social awareness and social skills, individuals improve their ability to both regulate their behaviors in social situations and to be mindful of the experiences of others (Doré et al., 2017).

Social awareness and social skills taught in SEL programs encourage students to engage in positive interactions with others and simultaneously take care of themselves. When individuals engage in positive social behaviors, research has indicated a decrease in depressive symptoms correlated to increased positive outlook in their daily life (Doré et al., 2017). This suggests that learning to use social awareness and positive social skills helps children develop and maintain healthy relationships.



**Relationship Skills**

Relationship skills encompass the ability to facilitate healthy and supportive relationships, particularly with diverse individuals and groups (CASEL, 2003). These skills are closely related to social skills and social awareness, which include effective communication, teamwork and collaborative problem-solving, and standing up for the rights of others (CASEL, 2003). However, relationship skills differ from social skills as they necessitate evaluation and regulation of the relationship in order to maintain healthy connections. SEL programs have been found to help individuals develop relationship skills including conflict resolution, refusal skills, and decision making (Durlak et al., 2011; Mahoney et al., 2018). The development of stronger relationship skills is associated with an increase in confidence in the ability to develop positive interpersonal relationships (Slayton et al., 2010).

**Responsible Decision Making**

Responsible decision making is one's ability to accurately consider all relevant factors including any possible consequences of decisions and to take accountability for their decisions (CASEL, 2003). Children's ability to make responsible decisions is influenced by social judgments which include the other four SEL competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship skills (Jacobs & Klaczynski, 2002). Making a responsible decision requires awareness of one's internal feelings, management of these feelings and considering the consequences of these decisions for self and others.

Moreover, research in developmental psychology suggests that early education is a valuable time for the introduction of systematic problem solving and responsible decision-making skills, particularly regarding concepts about social norms, personal judgment,

and privacy (Nucci & Turiel, 2009). During this time, children begin to learn about fairness and moral expectations. As a result, early childhood is an important time for introducing foundational components of problem solving, and responsible decision-making skills (Nucci & Turiel, 2009).

### **History of SEL Program Development**

As the need to support healthy psychological development started to move to the forefront of society following World War II, social-emotional learning arose as a way to address a new understanding of the impact of psychosocial factors on the individual (Nolan, 1998). Following the loss and despair many experienced during World Wars I and II, the idea of SEL presented a sense of hope and belief in the growth and healing of society. However, the end of World War II saw the rise of social psychology, as psychologists sought to better understand the behaviors and obedience displayed by so many to the German military. This increase in awareness and knowledge allowed psychologists to identify qualities and traits that impacted an individual's behaviors and choices and shown a light on methods for encouraging positive social traits (Strangor et al., 2015). By creating a means for children to learn about their emotions and navigate social interactions in a healthy manner, a belief that society could heal and improve was presented. The inclusion of social and emotional development in the school system began in the 1960s with the development of the Comer School Development Program and the Head Start Program (Beaty, 2018; Nolan, 1998). The goal of these programs was to help children to develop psychologically, and to encourage the development of healthy relationships with peers and adults (Beaty, 2018; Nolan, 1998). As these programs started to show positive results in the development of their students, more SEL programs began to appear in schools across the country.

By 1992, the W.T. Grant Consortium on the School-Based Promotion of Social Competence was founded and produced an outline for including SEL in schools. This outline identified skills such as controlling impulses, delaying gratification, assessing feelings, reducing stress, and being able to express, identify, label, and manage emotions in order to have emotional competence (Beaty, 2018). This consortium led to the development of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) in 1994. Since its inception, CASEL has led the charge for providing evidence-based research to schools and supporting the inclusion of SEL lessons in the classroom. CASEL's research has created the standards by which SEL programs in schools across the United States develop their instruction, such as specific goals and benchmarks for students by grade levels, and what students should be able to know and do by the end of the program (Beaty, 2018). It was not until 2004 that the first state developed a standardized practice for integrating an SEL framework into its curriculum. At this time, Illinois developed a framework that included SEL-based goals, learning standards, and benchmarks for students from kindergarten through high school (Beaty, 2018). These goals included: 1) develop self-awareness and self-management skills to achieve school and life success; 2) use social awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships; and 3) demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts (Beaty, 2018).

The continued promotion of social-emotional development in the classroom since the 1960s has created an environment in which students are given an opportunity to grow academically, socially, and psychologically. Following Illinois's adoption of standardized SEL practices in 2004, other U.S. states have developed similar standards of education. As of 2022, all 50 states have adopted preschool and kindergarten SEL policies and programs to support

early childhood development. In 27 out of 50 states, SEL competencies have been implemented in grades kindergarten through high school. This marks a 50% increase in states requiring SEL competencies between the years of 2020 and 2022 (Gross & Hamilton, 2023).

The COVID-19 global pandemic has played a major role in the advancement and importance of SEL in schools. With the closure of schools and limited access to socialization, students experienced heightened levels of stress and isolation (Gross & Hamilton, 2023). Research following the pandemic has found that 70% of public schools report a significant increase in students seeking mental health services at school, a 50% increase in suicide attempts in girls aged 12 to 17 years between spring 2019 and spring 2021, and in 2021, 1 in 7 adolescents reported experiencing a “major depressive episode” (Gross & Hamilton, 2023). It is unclear at this time how the pandemic impacted the well-being of children ages 5 to 10, as research efforts primarily focused on adolescent students (Gross & Hamilton, 2023). Despite the growing need for mental health support in schools following the COVID-19 pandemic, responses to the inclusion of social-emotional learning in schools have included both positive and negative perspectives. Parents across the United States have expressed concern that SEL lessons will be used to teach their children about racial inequality, gender identity, and sexual orientation in a manner that is not consistent with their views on these matters (Abrams, 2023). Supporters of this perspective highlight the potential for indoctrination of students through SEL and advocate that it is the job of the parents to teach these topics to their children. Despite these perspectives, a survey found that 90% of parents surveyed agree that students should learn skills and lessons related to social-emotional learning while in school, and more than 80% supported schools teaching children social-emotional skills (Abrams, 2023).

## **Current SEL Programs**

At this time, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has approved 85 SEL programs for use between preschool and twelfth grade, with 18 having been found to be effective at the first-grade level. The following are several first-grade programs with a review of their approach and effectiveness.

### **Open Circle**

The Open Circle Program is a school-based SEL model that encourages students and school staff alike to learn and practice communication, self-control, and social problem solving skills. Open Circle began in 1987 in Framingham, Massachusetts and has been used in hundreds of elementary schools throughout New England, New York, and New Jersey in the years since (Hennessey, 2007). This program is designed for grades K-5, emphasizes the promotion of SEL across home, school, and the classroom, and has been found to lead to improved social behaviors (CASEL). A study conducted by Beth A. Hennessey in 2007 assessed the impact of Open Circle on eight fourth grade classrooms in urban and suburban areas. This study revealed that children who were exposed to the Open Circle program for a full academic year were presented as more skilled and displayed fewer problem behaviors than those who were not exposed to this program. By emphasizing the development of communication and social skills in the classroom, students who were exposed to this curriculum were more likely to exhibit prosocial behaviors such as cooperation, inclusion, listening, perspective taking and problem solving (Hennessey, 2007).

The talk-based nature of the Open Circle program poses the potential to alienate children who may find it difficult to communicate with peers for a variety of reasons. Students at the first-grade level who are still building their vocabulary, who feel uncomfortable and anxious in group settings, or whose first language is different from that of their peers, may struggle to

engage in the Open Circle program. By placing the emphasis of learning on one modality, students may feel unable to fully engage in the curriculum. By offering lessons through a variety of modalities, a wider range of student learning styles and abilities are addressed (Alfonso & DuPaul, 2020).

## **Second Step**

The Second Step program is one of the most popular and widely used SEL curriculum in schools and was developed by the Committee for Children (CfC). Second Step emphasizes teaching students skills that strengthen their ability to solve problems, regulate their emotions, have empathy, and learn in the classroom (Low et al., 2015). This program focuses on grade-specific skills to provide developmentally appropriate and relevant information to its students. Included in the teaching kit are scripted, teacher-friendly lesson cards, posters that outline skills, and DVDs that illustrate skills, brain builder games, and a binder that includes materials on teaching and reinforcing skills, skills for learning cards, and letters for families (Low et al., 2019). Second Step divides its curriculum into 22 lessons that are organized across four units: 1) Skills for Learning, 2) Empathy, 3) Emotion Management, and 4) Problem Solving. Each lesson is designed to take 25 to 40 minutes to complete and is intended to be done one time per week (Low et al., 2015).

A 2015 study conducted by Low, Cook, Smolkowski, and Buntain-Ricklefs sought to assess the effectiveness of Second Step by evaluating its outcome across 61 schools spread across 7 districts. This study found that children with lower baseline competencies benefited from the curriculum significantly more than those at baseline or above. The Second Step curriculum was found to have positive effects on conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer

problems, prosocial skills, SEL skills, skills for academic learning, emotion management, and problem solving (Low et al., 2015).

In a follow-up study conducted in 2018, Low, Cook, Smolkowski, and Desfosses assessed student social-emotional and academic outcomes following 2 years of implementation. Compared to students in control schools, this study found that Second Step students performed better on measures of emotional symptoms and hyperactivity, regardless of pretest levels. Additionally, Second Step students who initially presented with lower pretest scores scored higher than their control group counterparts in areas of learning and emotion management, problem solving, conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer problems, and prosocial behaviors (Low et al., 2019). Overall, Second Step has been found to have a significant positive effect on the social and emotional development of young children.

Although data collected on the effectiveness of Second Step suggests positive effects on social and emotional development, the duration of time for each lesson, 25 to 40 minutes, may create a barrier to application. Many schools experience a lack of time and resources to provide structured SEL classes. As a result, the time demand of these lessons may act as a barrier to utilization, preventing schools from being able to use an effective curriculum (Low et al., 2019). Additionally, research suggests that students often experience a regression in skills over the summer, when they are not able to access lessons (Low et al., 2019). This suggests that the inclusion of additional skills to practice at home or including a parent component in the curriculum may encourage year-round student growth. By informing parents of lessons and skills, an opportunity is created to encourage student social and emotional development both in and out of school.

## **Positive Action**

The Positive Action (PA) program was first developed by Carol Gerber Allred in 1977 and has been adapted to grades kindergarten through twelfth, showing effectiveness in grades one through five. Positive Action is grounded in the theory that people's self-concept is developed through actions, rather than thoughts or feelings, and that healthy behavioral choices result in positive feelings of self-worth (Flay et al., 2001). The program aims to teach children what positive actions look like, to identify how they feel when they engage in positive actions, and that they have the ability to engage in positive thoughts and actions. A detailed curriculum includes almost daily lessons, strategies for developing a school wide climate, and family and community involvement practices to support growth outside of the classroom. The kindergarten through sixth grade curriculum is made up of 140 lessons per grade, each lasting 15 to 20 minutes per day, which are broken into seven units. These units include self-concept, positive actions for body and mind, social-emotional positive actions for managing yourself responsibly, social-emotional positive actions for getting along with others, social-emotional positive actions for being honest with yourself and others, social-emotional positive actions for improving yourself continually, and a review of all units (Flay et al., 2001). In addition to supporting children's growth and self-concept, Positive Action provides training to teachers, school staff, and parents in how to identify and reinforce positive actions, thoughts, and feelings to create a more cohesive and positive environment (Flay et al., 2001).

A 2001 study conducted by Flay, Allred, and Ordway sought to assess the effectiveness of the Positive Action (PA) program for grades kindergarten through sixth grade. By comparing Positive Action schools with similar non-Positive Actions schools, this study found that PA produced significant increases in self-concept, improvements in overall school performance, and reductions in problematic behaviors. Additionally, PA schools were found to have lower rates of



suspensions and referrals for behavioral interventions (Flay et al., 2001). A 2009 study aimed to replicate the findings of previous studies that had assessed the effectiveness of PA. Li and colleagues conducted a review of the effectiveness of PA in Chicago Public Schools using a matched-pair, randomized control design with 14 elementary schools (Li et al., 2011). During the 2004–2005 through 2006–2007 academic years, a cohort of students was followed in seven control and seven intervention schools. The main focus of the study was to assess the impact of PA on negative behaviors, self-efficacy, aggression, and prosocial behaviors. This long-term study found that fifth grade students reported 31% reduction in substance use, 36% reduction in violence, 41% reduction in bullying behaviors, and 27% reduction in disruptive behaviors after three years of PA (Li et al., 2011). While these data suggest a decrease in behaviors, they were not found to be statistically significant. Additionally, a comparison of students who were present for the entirety of the study with students who joined during showed that newcomers experienced similar positive outcomes, despite spending less time in the program (Li et al., 2011). These findings suggest that exposure to PA, regardless of duration, has potential positive effects on students and their prosocial behavior.

Positive Action's positive impacts on student behaviors suggest that students may benefit from learning about alternative and positive behaviors to support their social and emotional development. This program may be limited by its focus on behavioral concerns, as it does not create space to learn more about the factors that may contribute to a student's behaviors, such as negative emotions, harmful thoughts, or personal experiences. While it may be beneficial to learn about the impact of behaviors, the interconnected nature of thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and life experiences highlights a need to understand one's own experience in all areas of life (Alfonso & DuPaul, 2020).

## **The Impact of SEL on Development**

### **Short-Term Effectiveness of SEL Programs**

The use of SEL programs in school settings presents the opportunity to aid in the development of social and emotional skills for young students (Durlak et al., 2011). A meta-analysis of 213 studies evaluating the effectiveness of traditional school-based SEL programs revealed significant positive effects from kindergarten to high school after engaging in SEL education (Durlak et al., 2011). Durlak et al. (2011) found 33 studies that included follow-up data collection at least six months after the intervention ended. These follow-up studies revealed lasting significant positive effects of training on SEL skills, attitudes, positive social behavior, conduct problems, emotional distress, conflict resolution, emotion regulation, problem solving, self-management, decision making and academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011). By helping children to develop these skills early on, a solid foundation is established to prevent significant psychological distress later in life. Additionally, this study found that SEL curricula taught by school personnel produced significantly more effective results compared to curricula taught by non-school personnel. Structures in which multiple school personnel taught in collaborative, cross-departmental methods were not assessed. Due to the variety of ecological settings children exist within, it is important to consider the impact of these variables on social-emotional development.

### **Long-Term Effectiveness of SEL Programs**

Long-term studies suggest that utilizing SEL interventions during early education may aid in children's psychosocial development. Early interventions such as SEL were correlated with increased rates of academic achievement, decreased levels of mental illness, and strengthening socioemotional skills (Jones et al., 2017). Implemented interventions were found

to be most effective by the age of eight as children in these studies and reported less clinical levels of depression, anxiety, negative self-concept, and other symptoms of mental illness during adolescence (Jones et al., 2017).

Early childhood development and traits present important indicators for later development and wellbeing. By looking at attachment with the primary caregiver by the age of three years and family stress between the ages of three and five years, it is possible to predict the social-emotional experiences of kindergarten-aged students (Schmidt et al., 2002). One study found that children with less secure attachment styles were more likely to be aggressive and struggle with social competence (Schmidt et al., 2002). High levels of stress were associated with more aggressive behavior, higher anxiety, and lower social competence in kindergarten as compared to children who experience lower levels of stress (Schmidt et al., 2002). For children in at-risk conditions, such as family systems with increased stress or insecure attachments with their primary caregivers, SEL programs present an opportunity to develop skills to help regulate anxiety and aggression that can occur as a result of stress within the home (Rougeaux et al., 2020). This can be seen in the long-term benefits of early childhood SEL which include lower rates of conduct problems, better emotional and mental health, and better academic performance when compared to adolescents who were not exposed to SEL skills earlier in childhood (Mahoney et al., 2018).

### **Impact of SEL Beyond Childhood: Mental Health Competence**

Developing social-emotional competence during childhood has a significant impact on mental health during adolescence. The mental health competence (MHC) is used by the United Kingdom Millennium Cohort Study to examine adolescent mental health (Rougeaux et al.,

2020). SEL skills closely relate to MHC criteria as both SEL and MHC emphasize an individual's strengths and skills such as self-knowledge, control over behavior, self-esteem, self-acceptance, social skills, and an ability to form positive relationships (Rougeaux et al., 2020). SEL skills related to developing one's ability to regulate their experiences, socializing, and engaging in social relationships are abilities that persist throughout one's lifetime including adolescence (Mahoney et al., 2018). Rougeaux and colleagues (2020) studied how mental health competence measured at the end of elementary school relates to risk-taking behaviors by the age of 14 years. This study found that MHC at age 11 predicted rates of high-risk behaviors by age 14 (Rougeaux et al., 2020). Children with low MHC were found to be twice as likely to take part in binge drinking by age 14, three times as likely to have tried smoking cigarettes, and more likely to display antisocial behaviors and try illegal drugs as compared to children identified as having high MHC (Rougeaux et al., 2020). Students with high MHC were found to have significant social and emotional assets that support self-regulation, problem solving, and relationship skills into adulthood, although the impacts of high MHC were not assessed in this study (Rougeaux et al., 2020). These findings suggest that providing young children with an introduction to SEL programs in elementary school have the potential to significantly decrease risk behaviors in adolescence. Although this study sheds important light on the positive impact of SEL in elementary school curricula in reducing the prevalence of risk-taking behaviors in adolescence, the question of how to introduce these skills remains. Due to the variety of ways in which students learn most effectively, the method of instruction may impact the retention and development of skills to enhance mental health competence.

### **SEL & Marginalized Communities**

Early childhood programs such as SEL may provide a protective preventative measure for children and adolescent mental health. As Jones and colleagues (2017) found early childhood programs to correlate with lower levels of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and other symptoms of mental illness during adolescence, these programs may serve as preventative mental health factors for low-income and marginalized communities.

The growing population in the United States poses one of many barriers to providing equal access to mental health resources. Research conducted by the National Center for Health Workforce Analysis (2019) projects a shortage of up to 14,300 clinical, counseling, and school psychologists nationwide by 2030. The creation of universal access to SEL programs administered in public schools can help address this growing need for support by providing a protective preventative resource to children in a cost-effective and stigma-free manner.

The act of integrating SEL into public education must be done with an awareness of sociocultural factors. Preexisting SEL programs have failed to focus on specific sociocultural characteristics of the children that they aim to support (Garner et al., 2014). By providing sociocultural-informed programs within a public education setting, an opportunity is created to support children from various backgrounds, as well as to educate students about other backgrounds. In low socioeconomic status families, children may experience deficits in self-regulatory competence and elevated levels of psychological distress and learned helplessness (Evans et al., 2005). The impact that various sociocultural backgrounds have on early childhood social-emotional development highlights the impact of diversity, as well as the need for widely accessible SEL programs that can be flexible in meeting the needs of all students.

### **School-Based Intervention**

Schools play a critical role in the socialization and development of children. Universal access to SEL programs in early elementary education has been associated with several positive outcomes. Programs that include elements of SEL like Head Start and CASEL have shown both short-term growth and long-term benefits (Mahoney et al., 2018). Mahoney and colleagues (2018) conducted a review of four meta-analyses of school-based SEL programs. Their review revealed statistically significant improvements in SEL skills, positive social behaviors, emotional distress, and academic achievement in all four analyses, and statistically significant improvements in attitudes in three out of four analyses. Additionally, these meta-analyses revealed that SEL programs that result in strong short-term results are significantly likely to create positive long-term benefits (Mahoney et al., 2018). The inclusion of SEL programs in the classroom increases the opportunity for access to mental health information and skills that students and families may be unable to access otherwise. Mahoney and colleagues propose continued research to gain a stronger understanding of what traits make an SEL curriculum effective. While this study identified several positive effects of introducing elementary students to social-emotional skills and values, a review of curriculum traits was not conducted. As research continues to suggest a significant benefit for social-emotional learning in early childhood, the necessity for SEL programs within the school continues to become more evident.

In addition to the benefits of universal access to SEL-based early intervention programs, learning about social-emotional skills in schools provides students with real-life context for their lessons. By learning this information in an environment where the skills can be directly applied, students are able to access a deeper level of learning. Due to the interpersonal nature of school settings and the social construction of emotions, students are inherently offered opportunities to

strengthen interpersonal, emotion regulation, and self-awareness skills in a structured setting. As they learn to navigate the school environment, including peer and staff relationships, students learn how different experiences impact them, what interests them, what a positive relationship looks and feels like, and who they want to be.

In 2007, a study was conducted by Stallard and colleagues to investigate the effectiveness of a cognitive behavioral therapy-based SEL program, FRIENDS, for students between the ages of nine and ten years. Trained school nurses delivered the program to students who had previously been identified as having high rates of emotional and behavioral problems. The study found that levels of anxiety significantly decreased, and self-esteem significantly increased following participation in the program. These effects were present at a three-month follow-up (Stallard et al., 2007). Practicing how to use social skills, emotion regulation in interpersonal relationships, and moral reasoning skills in a classroom environment allows students to relate this information to their own experiences (Stallard et al., 2007). As students learn these skills together, they are able to work alongside each other to practice social and emotional skills while having the support of teachers in the classroom. The classroom setting also helps students to learn how to have conversations about social-emotional skills in a way that may minimize the stigma around these topics as compared to providing the lessons in a therapeutic group setting (Stallard et al., 2007). Informal information collected from instructors suggested that the inclusion of SEL in the classroom created a supportive environment that helped students to feel comfortable talking about their thoughts and feelings with peers. The researchers hypothesized that having a curriculum teacher who is separate from the classroom teacher allowed students to engage on a greater level as they were able to recognize a difference between these classes and more academically focused classes where right and wrong answers exist (Stallard et al., 2007).

The influence of an SEL teacher on student comfort and ability to engage in lessons poses a significantly important question regarding the effectiveness of SEL programs.

### **Role of Art, Play, and Creativity in Development**

Art and play allow young children to actively engage with the world around them in a manner that emphasizes age-appropriate skills and development, as it minimizes the emphasis placed on verbal communication. Due to the early development of verbal language during childhood, play and art have historically been viewed as children's "most effective" form of communication (Ray, 2010). Psychotherapy often uses play- and art-based interventions during childhood to allow children to engage in therapy using their primary and natural form of self-expression (Axline, 1947). By using modalities of psychological treatment that minimize the need for strong verbal communication, children are able to engage in exploration of the inner worlds, relationship dynamics, and personal interests and preferences at a developmentally appropriate level (Blalock et al., 2019).

Vygotsky suggested that play and creativity present three major functions including the creation of the zones of proximal development, supporting the child in separating thought and action, and facilitating self-regulation (Ray, 2010). The zone of proximal development emphasizes the ability for children to act above their age and practice developing skills without the pressures of reality as they engage in imaginative play and creation. The process of separating thought from action occurs as the child engages in imaginary play and is released from social norms as they navigate emotion regulation and interpersonal interactions. Finally, play has been found to facilitate self-regulation by creating a space in which children explore the roles of rules and impulsive action while working out what they want to do and how they should move forward (Ray, 2010). Vygotsky's theory suggests that the use of play and creativity during



early childhood in both therapeutic and social settings allow children to navigate the role of emotions, self-expression, and relationships within their developmental abilities. By creating developmentally appropriate pathways for children to engage in self-expression and exploration, students have the opportunity to learn more about their emotions, relationships, and selves (Ray, 2010).

Art has been found to evoke strong emotional responses, providing an effective way to begin to teach students how to regulate their emotions and internal experiences (Holmes & Matthews, 2010). Creative expression has been found to positively impact emotional wellbeing. Art and play are often used as developmentally appropriate methods of engaging young children in psychotherapy, as they allow children to engage in their natural and primary form of self-expression without the use of strong verbal communication skills.

Art creates a unique ability to extend across language barriers, including helping those who experience nonverbal tendencies. A case study involving a 6-year-old boy with Autism found that art therapy helped the child to develop a sense of object constancy by encouraging him to draw objects from memory, rather than simply viewing an image, and to place himself within his drawing (Emery, 2004). This work revealed improvements in language development as well. When asked about his work, the client showed greater understanding about the subtleties of jokes and tone of voice that the boy did not show prior to the use of art therapy (Emery, 2004). Emery (2004) hypothesizes that this individual's growth may have been related to an increased sense of self, as "children create art because it is rooted in the need to relate to their world" (p. 147). It is important to consider the potential impacts of an individual setting and differences that may occur had this individual received similar interventions in a group setting that create expectations of interpersonal relationships. The growth experienced by this client suggests that

using art-based interventions may result in substantial positive development in the areas of social-awareness, self-image, and communication skills. However, the benefits of art go beyond single case studies.

By reviewing 23 studies that evaluated the benefits of art-based practices for mental health recovery, Van Lith and colleagues (2013) were able to identify several key positive outcomes that occur when art is used to support mental health development. In a randomized control study, art-based practices were found to create significant improvements in self-image as compared to the control group where no significant improvements were made in this area (Van Lith et al., 2013). Each study in this review focused on therapeutically focused art practices and did not assess the impact of outside environments, such as family, work, and peers on outcomes. This review also identified art-based practices as having the ability to produce growth in the areas of empowerment, self-expression, self-validation, motivation, sense of purpose, focus, and cognition. Self-expression was found to be positively impacted as it was identified that the process of making art allowed individuals to release tensions and unresolved feelings in a positive manner (Van Lith et al., 2013). In addition to individualized benefits, art-based practices were found to positively impact social interactions in 16 out of the 23 studies reviewed. Art-based practices resulted in the development of social skills such as supporting others, learning from others, relationship building, and maintaining friendships through relationship development and social inclusion. Social inclusion was found to be positively impacted by a sense of social wellbeing, acceptance within the group, and the development of social identity as participants learned to share resources and ideas, engage in group activities, and practice social skills (Van Lith et al., 2013). By learning mental health skills through art-based practices,

individuals have been found to experience significant growth in self-expression, empowerment, motivation, and social skills.

### **Teaching Social and Emotional Development Through Art: A Rationale**

By using art to teach SEL practices, schools have the opportunity to provide young children with a way to enhance personal and social skills by using creative expression (Dunn-Snow & D'Amelio, 2000). School-based SEL art classes present an easily accessible form of early intervention for many children who may not otherwise have access to psychological services. From a contemplative education perspective, it is the role of the public school system to assist in encouraging the well-rounded development of the student, which includes both the educational and social-emotional development of the child (Lawlor, 2016). The integration of SEL and art creates a unique approach to elementary education in which children may experience simultaneous growth in psychological, interpersonal, and creative development (Dunn-Snow & D'Amelio, 2000).

The placement of an art-based SEL class in the first-grade curriculum presents an opportunity to have a significant positive impact on the overall wellbeing of individuals across the lifespan (Jones et al., 2017). For children as young as five years of age, SEL concepts may be difficult to understand due to language and cognitive development. By teaching them in a way that does not demand strong verbal skills, children are provided with the ability to build a solid foundation for their psychological, emotional, and physical health (Alfonso & DuPaul, 2020). By providing SEL lessons through a medium that places less emphasis on language and verbal skills compared to traditional classroom lessons that rely heavily on language skills, students have the opportunity to interpret and create meaning using their own communication styles and abilities (Eubanks, 1997). When teaching students about ways to recognize anger or sadness, first-grade

students may struggle to find the words to describe these feelings. By asking students to draw how they feel inside when they are angry, they are given the ability to interpret the feeling in their own manner. Not only does this approach help to communicate difficult concepts across language barriers, but it allows the student to find a deeper meaning from their own experiences as they attempt to learn more about social-emotional and mental health skills that will support them across their lifespan (Eubanks, 1997). Interventions and strategies that correspond to students at their developmental levels have the potential to benefit their physical and psychological wellbeing throughout their lives.

### **Objectives**

In this study, I gathered information with an emphasis on the perspectives of experts in elementary education. This information was used to create an art-based program designed to enhance the social-emotional development of young children that can be implemented in the classroom. The proposed program introduces key psychological, emotional, and relationship skills using art based on expert suggestions, and includes proposed methods for evaluating the effectiveness of this program. This study sought to answer the following questions:

- (1) How do elementary school professionals view the role of SEL in schools?
- (2) What methods of instruction do elementary school professionals view as the most effective for teaching SEL in first-grade?
- (3) What skills do elementary school professionals view as the SEL content that is most important at the first-grade level?

## CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

### Method

#### Study Design

Interviews with elementary art teachers, guidance counselors, and first-grade teachers were conducted to collect information about the need, challenges, accessibility, application, and key SEL topics for first-grade students. Data collected during the interviews were then used to create the design and structure of a proposed curriculum for teaching young students about SEL through art activities.

#### Participants

##### *Purposeful Sampling Strategy*

Thematic analysis suggests an ideal sample size for small projects is between six and 10 participants, with 10 to 50 participants being ideal for large scale studies (Braun & Clarke, 2013). A smaller sample size is recommended for qualitative data collection, as it allows for a greater focus on the experiences and self-reports of participants, while simultaneously providing enough data to demonstrate patterns. Due to the small sample size, my sampling method was purposive to ensure that interested participants met my requirements for participation in the study.

##### *Eligibility*

The inclusion criteria for participants in this study included having: (a) worked as a general education teacher, elementary art teacher, or mental health professional in an elementary school; (b) taught or worked with first-grade students; (c) at least one year of experience in their position; and (d) experience with social-emotional learning. Participants must have been willing to share their personal impressions of social-emotional learning in the classroom and their

experiences of working in an elementary school setting. Schools were selected based on location, to allow for in-person interviews at participants' request, focusing primarily on New Hampshire. One school in New York City and one school in Rhode Island were contacted based on teacher interest in the study. Schools were not required to have an SEL program in place at the time of participation.

### ***Recruitment***

Before contacting participants, I requested and received permission from the principals of four elementary schools to collaborate with teachers within each school via email (see Appendix A). Principals then assisted in the recruitment process by providing me with the names and contact information of individuals who met my inclusion criteria. In total, these four principals connected me with 11 participants. Seven of these participants agreed to participate in interviews. Once permission and contact information were received, I sent an email to the identified teachers to ask for their participation (see Appendix B). As this method of recruitment did not yield enough participants, two participants were recruited via a public Facebook post. The post requested a guidance counselor and elementary art teacher and contained the recruitment email for teachers (see Appendix B). These additional participants were located in the Northeast region, with one guidance counselor in Rhode Island and one art teacher in New York City.

### **Participants**

Nine elementary school professionals, including three first-grade general classroom teachers, three elementary school art teachers, two elementary school guidance counselors, and one elementary school psychologist were interviewed as part of this study. Two participants were recruited via Facebook groups for elementary professionals. The participants' ages ranged from

38 to 62 years ( $m = 50.56$ ). All participants identified themselves as female. The average length of experience for classroom teachers was 10.67 years, ranging from 6 years to 17 years. The average length of experience for guidance counselors and the school psychologist was 13.67, ranging from 11 to 16 years. The average length of experience for art teachers was 17.33, ranging from 16 to 19 years.

## **Interviews**

Using domains for SEL from prior literature, I created a semistructured interview to gather as much relevant information as possible, while allowing for flexibility within the discussion. This protocol was developed by reviewing preexisting SEL programs, their curriculum topics, and the method of teaching within the program. The primary focus of the interview questions was to collect data to understand teachers' thoughts on the role of SEL in elementary education, how to format curricula in a way that is helpful, and their experiences of social and emotional development and needs in their students. Interviews were conducted one-on-one and either virtually, or in-person based on the participant's preference. Questions included topics such as: "What are your thoughts about the inclusion of SEL in schools?" "If a new model for teaching these skills were developed, what would you like to see included for topics or skills?" "What would you like to see included in the presentation or format?" "Are there any other details that you might find important in an SEL curriculum?" "If you were to use my idea for a curriculum in your classroom, what do you see as some of its benefits? Challenges? What would help it be able to be implemented? What factors do you think would contribute to its success? Any difficulties with it being implemented?" The full interview protocol can be found in Appendix C and interviews took an average of 35 minutes to complete.

### **Data Analysis**

To analyze the data, I used thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach to thematic analysis emphasizes the individual's experiences and motivations by focusing on what is explicitly shared in the communication, rather than inferring a deeper meaning in the participant's words (Braun & Clarke, 2006). By focusing only on the explicit, surface-level communication, I was able to ensure that any themes used in this study focused on the views and beliefs of participants. Additionally, this approach helped to minimize the influence of any assumptions I may have held about what might be inferred by the participants' words.

The thematic analysis involved identifying and defining themes in each interview that were then used to identify trends in themes across the data. I first read and reread each transcript to familiarize myself with the data and noted initial ideas about patterns and key words. I then reviewed the topics and words that appeared in each interview to code interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion. Next, I reviewed the codes to search for and name themes that appear in each interview. Once the preliminary themes were identified, I reviewed the themes that appeared in each data set in order to define and name themes. At this stage, I defined the specifics of each theme and generated clear definitions and names. After completing the thematic analysis, I compared the identified topics that appeared in the interviews, particularly those in the responses to Question 6, to topics identified in the preliminary list of key topics for SEL curricula. The themes from all nine interviews were then organized into groups that informed the development of the proposed curriculum. The information was interpreted in a straightforward manner and used to identify lesson topics, style of teaching, and environments for the proposed



curriculum. Finally, I used the information gathered in this study to develop the structure, curriculum, method of instruction, and overall design of the proposed program.

### **Verification Procedures**

Given the nature of this qualitative study, I recognized that my own assumptions and biases may impact how data is gathered, analyzed, and interpreted. As I approached this study, I held an assumption around the role of social-emotional learning in child development. While developing this study, I was aware that I was working with an assumption that it is important to include SEL in schools and that it would benefit students to have it included. A second assumption is that teachers and school staff would be supportive of the program and its placement within the school. I also assumed that teachers would be willing to engage in my research and be open about their thoughts and opinions around SEL, its role in school, and their experiences of using other curricula. Additionally, I assumed that school principals would support teachers in participating in my study. I used self-reflection, peer review, and transparency to acknowledge the role of these assumptions in conducting my study and to minimize any influence on the data and results. To assess the validity, reliability, and authenticity of my thematic analysis, findings were reviewed and assessed by a peer for any errors or omissions in my results, as well as the authenticity of the data. This volunteer was also a doctoral-level psychology student with experience in child and school psychology. They reviewed my data collection process, assessed my interpretations and completed their own review of the data. Most of their findings were similar to mine and any discrepancies were reviewed and found to have similar understandings, such as the use of different wording to code a theme.

## CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

In this section, I reviewed data collected from semistructured interviews conducted with nine elementary school professionals, including three first-grade classroom teachers, three art teachers, two guidance counselors, and a school psychologist. These interviews aimed to learn about their experiences with social-emotional learning in the classroom, effective models of various curricula, and their perceptions of student needs. Data were interpreted using thematic analysis to identify surface level themes and emphasize the participants' unique experiences. The following information is categorized based on major themes and participant's responses to these topics. Major themes include thoughts about SEL in schools; effective methods of SEL instruction, and challenges to use of SEL curricula. Discussion of each major topic includes a table that displays the themes and responses of each participant. Each table includes comments from all nine participants. Participant responses appear in the same location across tables one, two, and four.

**Table 1**

*Major Topics and Associated Themes*

Topic	Themes
Role of SEL in Schools	<u>Theme 1:</u> SEL Should Be Taught in Schools <u>Theme 2:</u> SEL Should Be Taught Throughout Schools <u>Theme 3:</u> SEL is Currently Present in Schools <u>Theme 4:</u> Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic
Effective Methods of Teaching SEL	<u>Theme 5:</u> Brief Lessons are Critically Important <u>Theme 6:</u> Important to Consider Developmental Needs and Diverse Learning Styles <u>Theme 7:</u> Importance of Effective Communication <u>Theme 8:</u> Benefits of Art-Based Instruction <u>Theme 9:</u> SEL Topics for First-Grade Students
Challenges to Teaching SEL	<u>Theme 10:</u> Time and Resources <u>Theme 11:</u> Teacher, Administration, and Parent Buy-In <u>Theme 12:</u> Teacher Need for Training and Support

### **Role of SEL Schools**

The first topic addressed participants' perception that SEL should be included and taught throughout schools. This topic included four key themes: (1) SEL should be taught in schools, (2) SEL should be taught throughout schools, (3) SEL is currently present in schools, and (4) impact of COVID-19 pandemic. Table 2 includes participant responses related to the role of SEL in schools.

#### **Theme 1: SEL Should Be Taught in Schools**

Participant responses to the inclusion of social-emotional learning in the classroom were positive and highlighted the observed benefits of this inclusion in the school. All interviewees stated that it was important to include SEL in schools to support child development. Due to the social development of first-grade students, many participants reflected on the growing need to support students in learning how to identify skills for interacting with their peers and understanding their emotional experiences. As one art teacher stated:

I feel like it's just about the only thing I do anymore, to be quite honest with you. I've been teaching for almost 20 years and when I first started teaching, I felt like I was teaching 20% community building or SEL, 80% art. And at this point, I feel like it's pretty much the reverse. It's like 80% I'm managing behaviors, and not just managing behaviors, but processing with kids why they're doing what they're doing, what's happening with them.

In regard to the importance of developing social-emotional skills at the first-grade level, one classroom teacher shared her observations:

If you don't start here, it's harder to pick up in second grade or third grade, fourth grade. So, I think first-grade is such an instrumental part of the rest of their schooling career, that they learn how to be nice. They learn expectations. They learn how to work with each other. They learn all these things in first-grade. ... I think in first-grade, they're more aware of how they feel, they can express themselves a bit more. And I really wish that every teacher would just continue with it every year.

## **Theme 2: SEL Should be Taught Throughout Schools**

The importance of SEL being integrated into the culture and environment of the school was present in all nine interviews, ranging across all three areas of practice. By including these skills and lessons throughout the school environment and not limiting it to one room, participants found that students were better able to access and internalize the lessons. Three participants expressed interest in a collaborative approach across several disciplines in order to expose students to these skills in a variety of environments and reinforce messaging. One art teacher shared:

I think it has to be everywhere. ... I think it would be really important for students to see it everywhere because I also find if students are seeing it in just one place, then it's like 'oh, I only have to do that here. I don't have to do that everywhere in my life. I don't have to be a good human being everywhere, just in that classroom.' You know? Like no, no, life doesn't work that way.

Based on this teacher's experience, students are better able to utilize skills and lessons in a variety of areas and recognize the importance of such skills by increasing the environments where SEL conversations are held. Additionally, one participant highlighted the importance of open communication throughout the school to increase teacher and staff awareness of messaging and values to help reinforce what students are learning in the classroom.

While eight participants identified the need for a school-wide, collaborative approach, three participants expressed a need for lessons to be based out of the classroom, and two participants identified a need for guidance to be involved to support social-emotional learning. In relation to the inclusion of guidance, one art teacher shared, "I think where your emphasis and orientation might be would be towards more like in the guidance office because that's where you've got people really working in a targeted way with kids that have been identified." By ensuring that guidance, with their knowledge in student social-emotional development, is

involved, participants expressed a belief that information would be communicated effectively and accurately throughout the school.

### **Theme 3: SEL is Currently Present in Schools**

All nine participants reported that their school included social-emotional concepts and curricula. Current curricula included Second Step, Yoga for Classroom, Open Circle, Resilient Kids, and the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA) Aperture System. Seven participants identified an emphasis on SEL values throughout their school. A classroom teacher shared that her school had instituted a daily “work habit skill” as part of their morning announcements to encourage teachers, staff, and students to work collaboratively on an SEL-informed skill each day. This teacher shared:

So our school, what we do is we have PES News each morning. Our principal goes on and each month we have a Work Habit Skill that we focus on. We’ve got teamwork, collaboration, self- and social awareness, accountability, and innovative thinking. They kind of dive into the social-emotional piece and they talk about it on the PES News.

By using this method, this teacher’s school encouraged all members of the school community to work together to build and strengthen these skills each day. In regard to placement of SEL classes, four participants reported that these classes are often based in the classroom and are taught collaboratively between the classroom teacher and guidance counselors or school psychologists.

### **Theme 4: Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic**

Five participants addressed themes related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, as interviews were conducted during spring and summer of 2023. The 2022–2023 academic year was the second full year of in-person school since the pandemic began in March 2020, following one and a half to two years of online learning. Participants highlighted the impact of this global pandemic on the need for social-emotional learning for young children. One guidance counselor

shared: “I think we neglect the whole child if we do not address SEL and I think it’s been highlighted, thankfully, with COVID. But you know, it was always there.” A classroom teacher highlighted a similar concern and reported:

I think it is extremely important. I think kids are coming in these days with more, it’s the wrong word, but baggage than they used to. I think that kids have been put through so much trauma. We also went through a pandemic. Families are not your typical families that used to be and we just have to adjust our thinking and our approach to helping these kids.

Five participants additionally noted that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic increased their schools’ awareness of the need for SEL due to decreases in students’ social, emotional, and academic functioning. In each of these instances, schools increased funding for SEL programs and resources in order to better support student growth and development. One school psychologist shared, “I think overall everybody, especially since COVID, everybody definitely sees that there’s a huge need for it, even before then too.” An art teacher reflected on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on an increase in the presence of SEL lessons within her school:

I believe we got kind of flagged after the pandemic for needing to focus more on SEL. ... Because after the pandemic, it was really clear that kids really needed this extra layer and this extra kind of scaffold of sort for understanding how to be in school.

These teachers highlighted the ability for their schools to recognize the impact that the global pandemic had on students’ ability to develop social and emotional skills, how this deficit impacted their academic abilities and responded to the increased need.

**Table 2***Examples of Participant Responses Related to Role of SEL in Schools*

<b>Classroom Teachers (CT)</b>	<b>Art Teachers (AT)</b>	<b>Guidance Counselors and School Psychologist (GC)</b>
CT 1: “100% imperative,” Important to apply skills in the moment, School-wide approach, Multiple perspectives and approaches, Flexible approach, Emphasis on values throughout schools, Based in classroom	AT 1: Big part of teaching, School-wide approach, Important for students to be exposed across Environments, Emphasis on SEL values throughout school, SEL as classroom management, United approach among educators	GC 1: “Really important,” COVID-19 increased awareness of need, Emphasis on SEL values throughout school, School-wide approach, Collaborative approach, Approach varies based on administration’s goals, Increase in SEL funding
CT 2: “Really important,” Social interactions at first-grade level highlight need for SEL, Need for foundational skills, Collaborative approach, School-wide approach, Need for therapeutic activities for art, Positive impact on child development	AT 2: “Important to have in the classroom,” COVID-19 increased awareness of need, School-wide approach, Include instructions of application in different settings, Open communication throughout School, Emphasis on SEL values throughout school, Relaxation and spontaneity in art classroom	GC 2: “Absolutely vital to whole development, COVID-19 increased awareness of need, Benefits of SEL, Important to express emotions, School-wide approach, Collaborative approach, Often responsibility of guidance, Important for guidance to be involved, COVID-19 created deficit in social skills
CT 3: “Extremely important,” Need for common language, COVID-19 increased awareness of need for SEL, School-wide approach, Could be included in Physical Education, Based in classroom, Emphasis on SEL values throughout school	AT 3: “Critically important,” COVID-19 increased awareness of need, School-wide approach, Emphasis on guidance and classroom teachers to address individual student need, Desire for art-specific SEL curriculum, Emphasis on SEL values throughout school, Art teachers reinforce classroom lessons	GC 3: “Important to facilitate SEL conversations,” Positive impact on development, Need for common language, Normalize conversations about emotions, Based in classroom, Collaborative approach, Positive response to SEL

### **Effective Methods of Teaching SEL**

The second topic addressed effective methods of teaching SEL curricula. This topic included five key themes: (1) brief lessons are critically important, (2) important to consider developmental needs and diverse learning styles, (3) importance of effective communication, (4) benefits of art-based instruction, and (5) SEL topics for first-grade students. Table 3 includes SEL topics identified by participants that were identified as important for first-grade students. Table 4 includes participant responses to themes 4 through 8.

#### **Theme 4: Brief Lessons are Critically Important**

The most commonly identified subtheme of effective methods of instruction was providing brief lessons and using small, supplemental lessons and activities to reinforce the lesson throughout the week. These supplemental lessons might include small activities, teachable moments to be look for, or reflective questions to facilitate further student learning. Seven participants addressed the need for lessons to be brief and direct to increase effective instruction and ability to be incorporated into a classroom schedule. One participant reported, “it has to take up a short amount of time, not a lot of prep work for the teacher. And easy to follow checkboxes.” Another teacher shared that she has found students “get more out of a shorter lesson” due to attention spans and student engagement. Additionally, five participants identified these aspects of teaching social-emotional skills as significantly important to both student growth and classroom management. A classroom teacher expressed difficulty in creating time in the classroom curriculum due to the demands of academic classes and the prioritization of academic success in schools. This teacher shared:

We’re supposed to have space for it, but in all honesty, it’s so hard. We have to teach them so much. I don’t have a problem moving things around, but it’s like I said, it’s first-grade so I can do that. ... I haven’t been able to do as much with the kids in the Choose Love and in the social-emotional learning, officially, that I would like to.



One art teacher expressed difficulty balancing demands of the art education curriculum with building pressure for art teachers to include SEL components from administration:

‘Do you want me to teach art or do you want me to teach this?’ And yes, SEL stuff is important, but like I said, it’s already embedded in what we do. I think short snippets that can be incorporated, or just a two-minute activity during the opening of class.

While teachers and guidance counselors have identified SEL as having significant benefits for student growth, as referenced in Table 1, the demands of academic learning minimize time in the classroom for social-emotional learning to occur. As stated by one participant, “the more that they’re doing and participating there, it’s going to be meaningful to them.” Providing sufficient time for effective teaching and learning is a challenge identified by participants.

### **Theme 5: Important to Consider Developmental Needs and Diverse Learning Styles**

The role of developmentally appropriate methods of teaching and different styles of learning arose as a subtheme. Four out of nine participants identified lessons that can be taught using multiple modalities, such as visual or tactile learning, and lessons that are fun and interactive were mentioned as beneficial at the first-grade level. By creating an environment where students are eager to learn and engage, students are more likely to maintain focus and understand the information. A school psychologist shared:

I think using different modes of getting it to kids. So not every kid is super verbal, right? So they’re not going to sit there and have a conversation to be like, ‘I feel like I have butterflies in my stomach.’ So maybe they’re drawing, maybe they’re making something out of clay, maybe there’s a song. ... It’s the different modalities of getting to them I think and letting them participate in different ways.

One art teacher highlighted the historical progression of perspectives of learning and the importance of creating space for different ways of learning. She shared,

come at things through different senses and think in terms of, way back in the day, we used to talk about multiple intelligences and Howard Gardner, and all that. And that’s kind of backstage now. It’s not what’s front and center, but it’ll come back in education. That you want to try to get in different access points.

Another teacher reflected on the additional benefits of ensuring that lessons are fun and interactive for students, as she has found that when students enjoy lessons, they are “reminding the teacher to do it.” To support fun and interactive lessons, three participants identified opportunities for students to engage in role plays to practice skills as an effective method of instruction.

### **Theme 6: Importance of Effective Communication**

Subthemes related to classroom management and the importance of effective methods of communication emerged in several interviews. The use of common language and a collaborative approach throughout school systems were identified in three interviews. By utilizing a collaborative approach throughout the school environment and creating a common language to be used in the school, students experience consistency and repetition. One art teacher shared:

[the school has] the communication. They send around this flier saying, ‘you need to make sure you catch kids doing this, being good and accepting of other people.’ ... The communication of it all, just kind of flows through the school so that everyone is on the same page.

Open communication and common language were reported to effectively reinforce student growth. Two interviews addressed the importance of parent-teacher communication and visual aids in the classroom. One teacher identified the role of parents in social-emotional learning, as they “can try to follow up with that at home, or at least know what the language of that is.” Similar to the reported need for a collaborative approach within the school, two interview participants identified the importance of working with parents to reinforce lessons and skills learned by students at school. Additionally, visual aids in the classroom have been found to offer students reminders of lessons, and to limit the need for language skills. One classroom teacher shared, “more pictures for this age than words. I’ve noticed that some of them can read it, and some are trying to learn to read and they’re going to just focus on reading it.”

## **Theme 7: Benefits of Art-Based Instruction**

Potential benefits of incorporating SEL lessons in the classroom were discussed by eight participants. Based on responses from six participants, the inclusion of SEL in the classroom poses several potential benefits to students. Potential benefits include improved academic functioning (2), creating a way for students to engage in self-expression (2), a framework for students to better understand emotions (1), encouragement to build values into habits (1), normalizing emotions (1), and increased learning of skills (1). The potential benefits of the proposed curriculum were described as “just lifelong.” Another participant shared, “it would definitely be helpful for all students. It’s about being human. It’s about being able to manage our emotions. It’s about being able to express yourself.”

Five participants identified potential benefits of learning through art due to the ability to learn through play (3), engage in creative expression (2), decreasing the impact of language (1), and having additional time to process information throughout the art process (1). One art teacher spoke to her perceived importance of learning throughout play:

We’ve gotten too far away from learning through play. I think there’s too much emphasis on learning to read in kindergarten. ... So I say, bring that all back is really what I say. If you make a curriculum and you get buy-in, make sure kids are learning through play because that’s what’s missing.

The potential benefits of the use of art in minimizing the need for English language skills were highlighted by one participant, who suggested that this would create a “more equal playing field” for students to engage and learn. In addition to the potential benefits of art, three participants referenced the benefits of the various forms of art, such as acting, movement, and play. One participant shared “Maybe there’s room to collaborate with the arts teacher and the music teacher, and even the PE teacher, as far as movement, if you’re looking at that kind of art too.”

While reflecting on student engagement, a classroom teacher suggested the use of the performing arts as a beneficial method of engagement. She shared, “kids really love videos. They also love acting things out. So we do skits.” By addressing various forms of art, these participants highlighted the importance of providing children with a variety of methods for engaging in learning.

### **Theme 8: SEL Topics for First-Grade Students**

Participants were asked to reflect on areas of social-emotional development they have found to be particularly important at the first-grade level based on their professional experiences. Table 9 includes responses from interviewees about important SEL topics at the first-grade level. A total of 41 topics were identified across nine interviews. Eight out of nine participants identified emotions as a critically important SEL skill for students to learn at the first-grade level. Topics related to emotions included emotion regulation, emotions, and emotional vocabulary. One guidance counselor shared:

I think about having people being able to express their emotions, recognize and express their emotions. We have a lot of kids right now who it's so easy for them to be dysregulated. So, understanding what's happening and then developing the strategies to cope with it too. I think those are absolutely vital.

By supporting first-grade students to recognize and regulate their emotions, participants identified greater regulation in the classroom and improved student growth.

Several topics were identified in four participant interviews. These topics included collaboration, body awareness, calming and coping strategies, and problem solving. Three participants identified topics of conflict resolution, bullying, self-regulation, strength identification, and self-esteem as being important at the first-grade level. In regard to the inclusion of self-esteem in SEL curricula, one guidance counselor shared:

Now they're coming into school and kindergarten, or first-grade and they're sort of seeing, 'wow, there's all these different kinds of kids. And that kid seems to know more answers than I do.' Or 'this kid runs faster than I do. And Who am I? What am I good at? Where do I fit into everything?'

Present in at least two interviews were topics related to communication skills, relationships and relationship skills, empathy, gratitude, social awareness, respect, acceptance, growth mindset, and identity development. In addition to these topics, participants identified 21 topics in only one interview. The range and volume of the above topics suggests an importance of providing first-grade students with a variety of information and skills in order to best support their development and overall well-being. Topics ranged across areas of expertise and were not confined to one category of participants.

**Table 3***Examples of Participant-Identified Important SEL Topics for First-Grade Students*

<b>Classroom Teachers (CT)</b>	<b>Art Teachers (AT)</b>	<b>Guidance Counselors and School Psychologist (GC)</b>
CT 1: Body awareness, Bullying, Collaboration, Emotions, Friendship, Self-awareness, Social awareness, Teamwork	AT 1: Body awareness, Communication, Emotion regulation, Self-regulation, Social awareness,	GC 1: Bullying, CBT skills, Conflict resolution, Emotions, Emotional vocabulary, Identity development, Self-esteem, Self-regulation,
CT 2: Advocacy, Bullying, Calming strategies, Communication skills, Conflict resolution, Emotions, Healthy relationships, Leadership skills, Problem solving, Relationship skills, Self-regulation	AT 2: Acceptance, Collaboration, Conflict Resolution, Coping skills, Fairness, Patience, Positivity, Problem Solving, Respect	GC 2: Coping strategies, Critical thinking, Emotions, Gender identity, Growth mindset, Problem solving, Self-esteem, Self-image, Social awareness, Strengths and weaknesses identification
CT 3: Body awareness, Bucket filling, Compassion, Decision making, Empathy, Emotions, Forgiveness, Golden Rule, Gratitude, Perspective taking, Strengths Identification	AT 3: Acceptance, Collaboration, Coping Skills, Decision making, Emotions, Gratitude, Growth mindset, Strengths Identification, Self-esteem, Using “kind words”	GC 3: Anxiety, Biological basis of emotions, Body regulation, Collaboration, Compromise, Diversity, Emotion regulation, Empathy, Family dynamics, Flexible thinking, Mindfulness, Positive friendship, Problem Solving, Telling the truth

**Table 4***Examples of Participant Responses Related to Effective Methods of Teaching SEL*

<b>Classroom Teachers (CT)</b>	<b>Art Teachers (AT)</b>	<b>Guidance Counselors and School Psychologist (GC)</b>
CT 1: Video lessons for teacher training, Role playing/Skits, Main topic each month with supplemental topics and activities, Brief lessons, Fun and interactive, Instructor in the classroom, Increased learning of SEL skills throughout the day	AT 1: Supplemental activities and lessons, Lesson as introduction to rest of class, Video to introduce concept with question after, Brief lesson, Multiple modalities for teaching, Visual organization, Simple concepts, Clear connection to skills, Parent involvement, Learning through play, “Can only benefit students,” Development of common language, Builds values into habits	GC 1: Supplemental activities and lessons, Multiple modalities for implementation, Fun and interactive, Consistent structure, Parent-school communication, Culturally sensitive, Brief lessons, Community support, Predictable and consistent, Self-expression, Ability to engage without strong language skills, Crosses language barriers, Applicable in multiple classrooms
CT 2: Visual for the classroom, Management techniques, Fun and interactive, Use of common language, Brief lessons, Supplemental activities and lessons, Parent-school communication, Drawing helps give time to process internal experiences, Increase teacher-student connection, Improve academic functioning, Create foundation for future growth	AT 2: Use of common language, Collaborative approach, Sequential topics, “Shout-out cards”, Flexible curriculum, Multiple modalities of teaching, Creates space for understanding impact of home life, Helpful to students, Normalize emotions, Self-expression	GC 2: Emphasis on skills, Supplemental activities and lessons, Teacher models skills, Engaging approach, Validation of students, Brief lessons, Videos for students, Role play/Skits, Flexible structure, Morning check-ins, Learning through play
CT 3: Use of common language, Role play/Skits, Teacher models skills, Fun and interactive, Multiple modalities for teaching, Short videos, Visuals for classroom, Student check-ins, Instructor	AT 3: Structure allows for independent work before reviewing with the group, Multiple modalities for implementation, Possible to teach as formal or informal lessons, Consistent approach,	GC 3: Brief, Supplemental lessons and activities, Flexible structure, Basic lesson plan with access to additional information, Online component, Variety of topics, CASEL standards, Continuity

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in classroom, Scaffolding for teaching across ages, Improve academic functioning, Provide framework to understand emotions	Story telling, Brief lessons, Develop SEL-friendly classroom environment, Use of technology, “Difficult to know without more information,” Creates space for play and creativity in classroom, Child-centered, Learning through play	through grades, Multiple lessons through the week, Useful topics, Brief lessons
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### **Challenges to Teaching SEL**

The third topic addressed challenges to teaching SEL curricula. This topic included three key themes: (1) time and resources, (2) teacher, administration, and parent buy-in, and (3) teacher need for training and support. Table 5 includes participant responses to themes 10 through 12.

#### **Theme 10: Time and Resources**

Time and resources were identified as a significant challenge when incorporating SEL curricula into the classroom and was addressed by six participants. Due to the demand and necessity of state and school mandated activities and lessons, many professionals have found that there is not consistently time for a full SEL-focused lesson to occur. In addition to time for lessons, two participants reflected on the impact of time for lesson planning and preparation. One guidance counselor shared, “the more cumbersome, or the more that a teacher has to do, I think the less likely they’re going to take a chunk of their day and apply it to.” Similar to time, access to supplies and space to conduct lessons was stated as an obstacle by two participants. Due to the nature of art activities, one guidance counselor shared, “I think a drawback to that program was that our school didn’t have the money to buy all the materials. So, cost can be prohibitive, especially in some urban schools.” While discussing the importance of time, one teacher shared:



I think the biggest thing is time. ... They've got to be really tight lessons because we don't have a lot of time. And it's overwhelming for kids. ... Time management is the biggest thing. Especially with SEL because I think it's something that we know is important, but we're also stressed about, it's not something we collect data on, and we're not accountable for it.

Due to the requirement for schools to ensure that students are developing strong academic skills, participants reported that there is often minimal space in their classrooms for lessons related to social-emotional learning, despite the recognition that these lessons have a positive impact on student growth and wellbeing.

### **Theme 11: Teacher, Administration, and Parent Buy-In**

The need for buy-in and commitment to the curriculum was the second theme to arise related to challenges of implementation. By finding ways to gain staff support, participants have found that curricula are more likely to be successful and have a greater impact on student growth and development. One participant reflected,

I feel like having a community to work with, as far as saying, 'let's do this together.' As opposed to maybe the principal rolling it out, or the psych rolling it out. I feel like there's got to be teacher buy-in. However, you can do that and get the whole staff on board, instead of on person saying, 'hey, now we're going to do one more thing in your classroom.'

This participant's reflection suggests that broad involvement in developing and adopting a program and good communication used to introduce a new curriculum have the ability to significantly impact how staff respond and their willingness to engage with the curriculum.

A classroom teacher reflected on her experiences of starting new curricula and teacher responses.

This participant shared:

but if we're told, because I've been teaching 20 years and I've seen countless programs come and go. If people are told, 'you have to do this and it needs to be done this way,' and we're like, there's some people who are just not, it's just not going to happen.

By having choices of multiple methods of instruction for lessons, this participant suggested that teachers will feel more comfortable using the program.

### **Theme 12: Teacher Need for Training and Support**

Due to the demands of the school schedule, participants identified a need to minimize extensive lesson planning and preparation. One teacher shared that teachers are often forced to engage in lesson planning outside of their normal work hours due to the demand of their job during the day. This participant shared, “right now, we don’t have a lot of time to do anything planning-wise. So, a lot of us plan at home, or we stay late, or whatever.” To minimize the demand on teachers and increase effectiveness, lessons should be well outlined and include details on classroom management and student support. Additionally, teachers may benefit from information about when and how to utilize supplemental lessons and activities throughout the week to reinforce student learning while engaging in other activities.

Five participants expressed finding it helpful to have online access to curriculum information, including lesson plans, additional information, and teacher support. While curricula have traditionally been available in curriculum manuals and workbooks, these five participants identified a preference for online information that is organized by topic and skill, offers additional information and resources, and minimizes the need for additional resources in the classroom that take up space. One participant shared:

I like visual organization too. And I think a lot of teachers would say, I would definitely say I like to be able to access information online. So videos just for the educators, videos for students. Having it all in one place. Papers I can’t stand, I can’t manage papers. So if it’s all in one place and super organized, by skill or concept, I love that.

Included in this online access to information, three participants identified the use of training videos to support teacher comprehension and confidence with use of the program. Two participants expressed interest in in-person training to offer the opportunity to engage in role

plays with peers and gain en vivo feedback from program developers. One participant suggested engaging in teacher training to increase teacher comfort and willingness to use a curriculum:

I think if you were able to come in and get it started, or before we even come to the kids, we talk about it and see what is your goal? Where are you seeing this go? I'd also want to see what is your approach on how you teach it? ... I think giving the teachers enough information, overloading them in the beginning and then just keep that collaboration going.

To increase teacher and administrator support, five participants identified teacher training, both in person and virtual, as an effective method of increasing comfort with curricula and seeing the potential benefits.

**Table 5**

*Examples of Participant Responses Related to Challenges of Teaching SEL*

<b>Classroom Teachers (CT)</b>	<b>Art Teachers (AT)</b>	<b>Guidance Counselors and School Psychologist (GC)</b>
CT 1: Time for lessons, Space in classroom, Level of complexity of lessons, Information organized by concept, List of resources	AT 1: Resistance to prioritizing skills, Consistency of language, Time for lessons, Need for buy-in	GC 1: Time for lessons, Space in classrooms, Funding, Space for supplies, Need for buy-in, Cultural views of SEL
CT 2: Time for lessons, Attention span of students, Online access to information, Additional information for teachers, Teacher training	AT 2: Ability to meet student's needs, Ability for students to engage due to outside factors, Need for buy-in, Classroom management, Time for lessons	GC 2: Need for teacher support and training, Access for support for classroom adaptation
CT 3: Lack of access to curricula, Limited knowledge of how to apply curricula, Time for lessons, Need for buy-in, Teacher training, Online access to additional information, Classroom management techniques	AT 3: Time for engagement and lessons	GC 3: Need for buy-in, Need for lesson preparation, Time for lessons, Teacher training, Online access to additional information

## **CHAPTER V: CURRICULUM DESIGN**

Based on the suggestions and results of the six interviews, an art-based social-emotional learning curriculum was designed to meet the developmental needs of first-grade students. This curriculum was directly informed by the themes and responses outlined in Tables 2–5 provided by experts in elementary education. The curriculum places an emphasis on learning through art and creativity, with the intention of minimizing the role of verbal language. By integrating art and SEL, a learning format is developed that embraces the characteristics of creativity and play that are interesting to children while teaching important skills for self-regulation and social engagement. Based on feedback from participants, this art-based approach includes various areas of the creative arts including visual arts, movement, and performing arts. Refer to Appendix E for a sample lesson of the curriculum and Appendix F for a classroom evaluation form. Table 6 includes a working copy of the curriculum and lesson activities directly informed by feedback and suggestions from participants.

### **Mission**

The Engaging in Art to Support Social-Emotional Learning (EASSEL) curriculum aims to support early childhood social-emotional growth by encouraging students to engage in creative activity and self-expression in the classroom. The target population of this curriculum is first-grade students in both public and private school settings, as well as rural, urban, or suburban environments. This curriculum places an emphasis on both teaching and learning through art in order to: (1) foster self-expression through creative outlets; (2) minimize the necessity of skill with verbal language; and (3) positively influence students' empowerment, self-expression, self-validation, and sense of purpose. The goal of EASSEL is to: (1) support student development of positive social behavior, conflict resolution skills, emotion regulation, problem solving skills, self-management, decision making, and academic performance; (2) support

development of a school-wide culture aimed at offering support and validation to all members; and (3) positively influence students' lifelong learning and mental health through skills development.

### **Structure**

The EASSEL curriculum is grouped into five units of instruction, each corresponding to the five components of SEL as outlined by the CASEL foundation. These areas include self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2003). The length, frequency, format, and methods of implementation were directly informed by participant responses outlined in Tables 2 through 5. As the average length of a school year in the United States is 36 weeks, this curriculum is designed to span 30 weeks of instruction, with additional lessons provided to address areas of concern shared by interview participants. These additional lessons are intended to provide further support for student development and include topics such as divorce, loss, and family structures, and may be used as substitutes for primary lessons as needed. Each unit includes six weekly lessons related to the area of instruction. Units were determined based on CASEL's five components of SEL and weekly lesson topics are determined based on themes identified by interview participants under Theme 9, Table 3. Units are depicted in a sequential manner, with topics building on one another within units, but may be used independently to address needs of the classroom. The sequential order and categorization of lessons was established based on participants' suggestions of visual organization based on skill or concept to increase ease of access to lessons based on classroom need.

Lessons are designed to take approximately 25 minutes each, beginning with a brief 5-minute review of the lesson, 15 minutes for the activity and engagement, and 5 minutes for cleanup. Themes 10 through 12, barriers to the use of SEL curricula, highlighted time as the greatest barrier to implementation. Six participants reported that due to the expansive information taught at the first-grade level, lessons that are brief are more easily implemented than longer lessons. Each lesson includes two to three supplemental lessons and activities to support teacher instruction outside of the main lesson, based on teacher suggestions for additional methods of supporting student learning throughout the school week. This was done with the intention of supporting teachers in reinforcing SEL skills in a variety of settings and events, and to engage in deeper conversations with students as needed. Additional topics include divorce, loss of a loved one or pet, diverse family systems, and mindfulness, as these topics were suggested as important by participants based on first-hand experiences. Lesson outlines are available, with the opportunity to access more detailed information, on an online platform to ensure that teachers of various levels of experience and comfort have access to supportive information. Five participants, in response to Theme 12, identified online access to program information such as lesson plans, teacher support, and additional information as helpful features of effective curricula. In addition to weekly lesson plans, each lesson includes a weekly handout to be sent home to update parents on SEL skills and topics discussed in class, as two participants identified a need for parent-teacher communication in response to the theme of “aspects of effective instruction.” These handouts may be emailed or sent home with students and are intended to encourage reinforcement of skills and lessons at home to support student growth in multiple settings.

**Table 6***Curriculum Structure Based on Participant Responses in Table 3*

<b>Unit</b>	<b>Weekly Topics</b>	<b>Lesson Activity</b>
Self-Awareness	Week 1: What Are Emotions? Week 2: How Do Your Emotions Appear?* Week 3: Biological Basis of Emotions* Week 4: Body Awareness Week 5: Strengths and Weaknesses Week 6: What Makes You, You?*	Week 1: Emotion Creatures Week 2: Acting Out Emotions Week 3: Brain Maps Week 4: Body Maps Week 5: Strengths Portraits Week 6: Three Animals
Self-Management	Week 1: Window of Tolerance (Siegel, 2020) Week 2: Coping Skills: Anxiety & Anger* Week 3: Coping Skills: Sadness Week 4: Self-Esteem Week 5: Growth Mindset Week 6: Mindfulness	Week 1: Window Portraits Week 2: Create putty/glitter jar Week 3: Nature Suncatchers (Reimer, 2023) Week 4: Name Poster (Guzman, 2020) Week 5: Destress Scribble Scramble (Curtis, 2022) Week 6: Breathing Beads (Driscoll, 2023)
Social Awareness	Week 1: The Golden Rule Week 2: Perspective Taking* Week 3: Active Listening* Week 4: Empathy and Compassion Week 5: Seeing Others' Strengths Week 6: Gratitude	Week 1: Classroom Paper Chain Week 2: Perspective Drawings Week 3: Draw Someone's Story Week 4: Band-aid Buddies (Curtis, 2022) Week 5: Draw a Friend as a Superhero Week 6: Gratitude Tree
Relationship Skills	Week 1: Meaningful Relationships* Week 2: Positive Friendships Week 3: Bullying: What is it? Week 4: Communication Skills* Week 5: Turn Taking and Collaboration Week 6: Conflict Resolution	Week 1: Relationship Map (Shapiro, 2014) Week 2: Kindness Rocks (Participant Recommendation) Week 3: Apology Paths (Curtis, 2022) Week 4: Guided Drawing Week 5: Rotating Drawings Week 6: Decision Wheel (Berg, 2022)
Decision Making	Week 1: Flexible Thinking Week 2: Problem Solving Week 3: Personal Values* Week 4: Check the Facts*	Week 1: Mindful Mountains (Curtis, 2022) Week 2: Size of the Problem Week 3: Values Vision Board

	Week 5: Pros and Cons Week 6: Teamwork	(Krajewski, 2023) Week 4: Detective Role Play Week 5: Outcome Drawing Week 6: Group Creativity
Additional Lessons	1. Diverse Families 2. Divorce 3. Gender identity 4. Loss of a loved one (or pet)	1. Family Portrait 2. What Can I Control? (Krajewski, 2023) 3. Self Portrait 4. Worry Stones (Sheakoski, 2020)

\*May require additional time *or* a second session

### Implementation

The EASSEL curriculum is designed to be used in the first-grade classroom in order to encourage a classroom culture that is grounded in SEL values and was determined based on participant responses to Themes 1, 2, and 3, outlined in Table 2. By basing the course in the classroom, it is intended that any visuals such as posters or signs will be present in the space where students spend the most amount of time during the school day. This will allow students to become more familiar with the skills and lessons of the curriculum and provide teachers with greater access to the program resources. Participant responses in relation to Theme 2 highlighted a need for an SEL curriculum that occurs school-wide and is primarily based in the classroom with the support of guidance counselors. While this is the intention, EASSEL is flexible to the needs and preferences of each school and can be utilized in classroom, art, and guidance settings. It is recommended that a variety of instructors engage in teaching EASSEL lessons in order to reinforce student growth in different environments and provide different perspectives for students to learn from. This recommendation is based on the responses of three participants who expressed interest in a collaborative approach to expose students to SEL skills in a variety of environments to reinforce messaging. An integrated and collaborative approach to this program may look like lessons primarily occurring in the general classroom during the first unit in order



to establish class expectations and culture, and future lessons being taught alternately by guidance or psychology, classroom teachers, and art teachers. The placement of instruction is designed to be determined by the school to increase flexibility and prioritize the needs of the school. Regarding the placement of lessons in the week, it is recommended that lessons be taught close to the beginning of the week to allow for students to practice skills and engage in supplemental lessons and activities throughout the week. This will allow for greater student growth as lessons and skills can be reinforced over the course of several days and is based on participants' requests for supplemental lessons to support continued learning after the main lesson.

Lessons begin with a brief ice breaker question related to the week's topic, as two participants indicated that ice breaker questions have been found to help students adjust to the lesson content. An example of this is during the Body Awareness lesson in Unit 1, students might be asked, "what is one way that your body talks to you?" By starting lessons with an engaging question, students are signaled to the topic of the lesson and encouraged to think critically about what the lesson might mean for them. After the ice break, teachers will engage students in a brief review of the week's topic. Lessons are intended to last approximately 5 minutes, followed by a 10-to-15-minute activity, in order to maintain student attention. One study identified the average attention span of first-grade students to be approximately seven minutes, as compared to the anticipated 18 minutes at this age (Aspirila et al., 2020). Thus, by limiting the length of instruction time to five minutes, lessons are kept within limits of students' optimal attention span and minimize the impact on scheduling within the overall first-grade curriculum. Lessons use visual examples to supplement the use of verbal language and provide students with context for the lesson. Following instruction, students are presented with an art

activity that encourages them to apply information learned during the instruction portion (ex.: creating a map of where emotions are felt in their body during the Body Awareness lesson). Activities will be limited to 10 to 15 minutes due to the need for time-limited lessons expressed by interview participants. Finally, the lesson will end with time for clean-up and debriefing with students to discuss their art and what they have learned. The brief lesson structure is based on the suggestion of eight participants in response to Theme 5 to create lessons that are brief and easily integrated into busy first-grade schedules. Some lesson activities may require an additional class to allow students to fully engage. These lessons are indicated to allow teachers to plan based on potential time requirements.

In response to participants' requests in Theme 5 for supplemental lessons and activities to be used as needed throughout the school week, each lesson will include two to three supplemental skills, ice breakers, teachable moments, or drawing prompts for teachers. These supplemental lessons are intended to be used in brief periods of time in order to reinforce student learning, encourage continued practice of skills, and support greater development of a supportive classroom culture. Additionally, participants identified the importance of communication with parents to encourage continued learning and practice at home. In response to this, a letter home is included with each lesson. A sample letter based on the Body Awareness lesson is included in Appendix G.

### **Evaluation**

A measure of evaluation is provided in order to assess student growth and development, as well as the effectiveness of the EASSEL program. Evaluation of student growth and progress is to be evaluated by lesson instructors at the end of each week to assess students' skill development and comprehension, as well as the potential growth caused by the use of

supplemental activities and lessons. To minimize the time spent by teachers assessing student progress, evaluations will focus on classroom dynamics such as use of skills within the class and quality of peer interactions. Each evaluation measure is brief and addresses growth and competency of the class in the skills and values included in each lesson based on a likert-type scale rating. The evaluation form can be found in Appendix F. This format is intended to minimize the amount of time required by teachers to complete these evaluations while providing a method for evaluating student growth and potential areas for further development. Evaluations were developed to be brief, as participants reported minimal time for additional tasks such as lesson planning, parent communication, and evaluations.

## **CHAPTER VI: DISCUSSION**

In this qualitative study, I sought to address gaps in the literature regarding methods of supporting early childhood social and emotional development by conducting interviews with first-grade professionals. These interviews sought to gather information related to effective methods of teaching social-emotional learning and topics that are especially relevant at the first-grade level. I used thematic analysis to become familiar with, review, and identify themes in the data collected from each interview and across interviews. The following research questions were addressed: 1) How do elementary school professionals view the role of SEL in schools? 2) What methods of instruction do elementary school professionals view as the most effective for teaching SEL in first-grade? and 3) What skills do elementary school professionals view as the SEL content that is most important at the first-grade level? Participant responses indicated twelve themes including 1) SEL should be taught in schools, 2) SEL should be taught throughout schools, 3) SEL is currently present in schools, 4) impact of COVID-19 pandemic, 5) brief lessons are critically important, 6) important to consider developmental needs and diverse learning styles, 7) importance of effective communication, 8) benefits of art-based instruction, 9) SEL topics for first-grade students, 10) time and resources, 11) teacher, administration, and parent buy-in, and 12) teacher need for training and support. These recommendations and data were then integrated with literature to establish the EASSEL curriculum.

### **Key Findings**

#### **The Role of SEL in Schools**

Participants overwhelmingly agreed that supporting student growth of social and emotional skills plays a significant, positive role in child development. In response to the question “what are your thoughts about the inclusion of SEL in schools?” participants offered

responses such as, “100% imperative,” “vital, absolutely vital,” “really important,” “critically important,” “extremely important,” and “really, really important.” Although classroom schedules and teacher time may be overwhelmed by academic requirements, a need to support student growth in all areas was addressed in several themes. As students at the first-grade level often experience academics and social situations for the first time, teachers found that social and emotional skills significantly impacted positive student development.

To best support and reinforce student growth and development in the area of social-emotional skills, participants identified themes related to the importance of a school culture and environment that incorporates SEL values and lessons. Four out of nine participants identified themes related to integrating SEL into the school culture when asked about the role of SEL in schools. Additionally, eight out of nine participants expressed a need for the curriculum to occur in multiple classrooms. One participant shared, “I think it has to be everywhere. ... I think it would be really important for students to see it everywhere.” By interweaving SEL values and lessons into the structure of the school community, participants found that students learn to see positive interpersonal skills and emotion regulation as important in all areas of life.

### **Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

A major theme related to the importance of SEL in elementary schools highlighted the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student emotional wellbeing and ability to navigate social interactions. Interviews were conducted at the conclusion of the 2022–2023 academic year, the second full year of in-person teaching following the initial closure of schools in March 2020. At the time of this study, participants were working with students who had not previously attended in-person learning or experienced classroom-based peer interactions due to the pandemic. The lockdowns and social isolation caused by the pandemic caused many young children to become

isolated from their same-aged peers, which limited the ability for children to develop strong social skills with peers and unrelated adults, like teachers. Due to the diminished ability to interact with other children, teachers found that once back in school, many of their students experienced difficulty engaging in conflict resolution, relationship building, and emotion regulation in the school setting. These diminished skills may have been impacted by the lack of relational experiences afforded to students while attending school remotely. As students were unable to engage in play with peers, receive direct attention from teachers, or learn in a group setting, they were unable to develop the skills that are acquired during these experiences. During a discussion about students' ability to engage in social interactions, one participant noted, "some of them, especially postcovid, have nothing coming in, nothing. And they seem way behind right at the beginning, and yet once they get in, they're catching up." Another participant identified a need for students to gain "this extra layer and this extra kind of scaffold of sort of understanding how to be in school" to support their transition from home to school as compared to students prior to the pandemic.

Although many schools across the United States have created approaches to help students develop social-emotional skills, the COVID-19 pandemic saw a significant rise in the number of children and adolescents who experienced mental health concerns and sought treatment (Gross & Hamilton, 2023). Research has found that youth in the United States have experienced a 50% increase in suicide attempts compared to just before the onset of the pandemic. Additionally, schools across the country have reported a 70% increase in students seeking mental health services at school (Gross & Hamilton, 2023). In addition to the stress and fear caused by the pandemic, student mental health may have been impacted by the restriction of relational experiences and distance from peer groups. The significant increase in student need for mental

health services in schools following the COVID-19 pandemic suggests an increased need for supporting student social-emotional growth to introduce and reinforce skills related to emotion regulation, self-awareness, decision making, social awareness, and interpersonal skills. Research suggests that students who are exposed to SEL experience significant positive effects on attitudes, positive social behavior, conduct problems, emotional distress, conflict resolution, emotion regulation, problem solving, self-management, decision making and academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011).

In addition to addressing the need that has arisen as a result of the stress experienced across the globe due to the pandemic, several participants identified the role of the pandemic in highlighting the needs of young students. One guidance counselor reflected, “I think [the need] has been highlighted, thankfully, with COVID. But you know, it was always there,” while discussing the importance of addressing SEL in supporting child development. The impact of the pandemic on the wellbeing and stress of students shed light on the need to support children to develop skills to care for themselves and interact in effective and healthy ways with those around them. Although little research has evaluated the impact of the pandemic on children under the age of 10 years, research has shown that 1 in 7 adolescents met criteria for a major depressive episode during the pandemic based on data collected in 2021 (Gross & Hamilton, 2023). The stress of the pandemic impacted many individuals and families, creating ripple effects throughout our society. As one classroom teacher shared, “families are not your typical families that used to be, and we just have to adjust our thinking and our approach to helping these kids.”

### **Effective Methods of Instruction**

Access to time was the most significant barrier to implementation identified by participants. When asked about barriers, two participants did not offer responses. Six out of the

remaining seven participants referred to the theme of “time” in preventing them from including explicit SEL programming in their classroom schedules. This theme was reiterated when participants were asked to identify qualities that made a program accessible and able to be easily implemented in their classrooms. In response to this question, five out of nine participants expressed a desire for lessons that are brief, require minimal preparation, and include supplemental lessons as important for both student engagement and usability. One participant shared, “it has to take up a short amount of time. Not a lot of prep work for the teacher.” The ability for students to maintain focus during lessons was an additional area of concern for one participant who shared, “Time is the hardest thing. Our day is so crammed, and we think about all these important things. But I think it’s important to keep the lessons short because they get more out of a shorter lesson.” This participant highlighted the importance of considering students’ developmental needs when creating school curricula. For students to learn best, they must be able to engage, focus, and retain the information taught to them. The lessons in this proposed curriculum are designed to last approximately 20 minutes, consisting of a 5-minute lesson, 15-minute activity, and 5-minute clean-up. This structure is designed to address participants’ need for short lessons and to increase student ability to engage and maintain focus throughout the lesson.

In addition to the importance of brief lessons, participants highlighted the necessity of creating methods of learning that allowed students to engage in fun and interactive learning that utilizes a variety of learning methods such as visual, tactile, body-based, or auditory. By creating a curriculum centered around learning through play and creativity, students are provided with the opportunity to have an enjoyable learning experience that supports learning through visual, kinesthetic, and auditory methods. While this dissertation began with a focus on visual arts, this



theme of learning through multiple modalities suggests a place for both visual and performing arts. One participant addressed the importance of including multiple modalities of learning by sharing:

I think using different modes of getting it to kids. So not every kid is super verbal, right? So they're not going to sit there and have a conversation to be like, 'I feel like I have butterflies in my stomach.' So maybe they're drawing, maybe they're making something out of clay, maybe there's a song. ... It's the different modalities of getting to them I think and letting them participate in different ways.

The inclusion of multiple methods of learning increases the opportunity for all students to learn in a manner that best meets their needs and skills. An example of this is a brief period of instruction at the start of each lesson, incorporating visual and auditory learning through the use of PowerPoint presentations. Space is then created for kinesthetic learning due to the hands-on nature of art and encouragement to move through the classroom.

Participants' suggestions regarding effective methods of instruction and implementation were heavily valued in the development of the proposed curriculum in Chapter V. Based on participant concerns about both space and student engagement, lessons for the EASSEL program were designed to keep lessons to approximately 20 minutes with instruction for 5 minutes and activity for 15 minutes. Additionally, participants expressed a desire for multiple methods of learning to support all students. In response to this, a key part of the EASSEL mission is to create a developmentally appropriate approach to student learning at the first-grade level that includes multiple methods of instruction such as auditory, visual, tactile, and kinesthetic learning. At the suggestion of three participants in response to a question of effective methods of instruction, several activities are included throughout the program that utilize role play and collaboration in order to provide students with additional ways of engaging with peers. The development of a curriculum based on the experiences of experts in elementary education is aimed at addressing

developmentally appropriate methods of instruction at the first-grade level and to create lessons that include common day-to-day experiences of students, such as divorce and identity development.

### **Art and SEL**

It was important to assess participants' initial responses to the initial ideas of an art-based SEL curriculum, as such a curriculum had not yet been developed. A theme of learning through play appeared in five participant interviews and highlighted the importance of allowing children to learn and engage at a developmentally appropriate level. While traditional school classrooms maintain an expectation that children sit quietly and engage in classroom lessons, children at the first-grade level experience short attention spans and a heightened energy level that require different expectations and approaches. As one participant stated:

I think we've gotten too far away from learning through play. I think there's too much emphasis on learning to read in kindergarten, and assessment in kindergarten. And there aren't enough social-emotional avenues that used to be just sort of a normal part of the classroom. The pretend areas. I mean, play, choice. I mean, it's crazy.

In addition to creating environments that prioritize time and space for social-emotional learning, this participant highlighted the importance of considering children's developmental levels and developing curricula that allow them to learn through creativity and movement.

One art teacher expressed significant interest in the development of a social-emotional learning curriculum that could be used in the art classroom. This participant shared, "I would love a social-emotional curriculum that's specifically geared towards art. That would be fantastic. That's what I would love. But I think certain things are something that's usable for art could also be usable for guidance." A second art teacher reported that while their school requires

the integration of SEL into the art classroom, there is often little time to include such lessons. To address this concern, this participant shared that she often “incorporates just like a two-minute activity during the opening of class.” In order to address the need for additional social-emotional development in childhood, we must create programs and methods that meet the needs of the student, as well as the classroom the learning occurs in.

### **Relevant SEL Topics**

When asked to identify important skills and lessons to be introduced at the first-grade level, participants identified a total of 41 topics. Out of these topics, 36 can be categorized under CASEL’s five categories of social-emotional skills: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and decision making. Topics related to emotions, emotion regulation, and the ability to recognize emotions were addressed by eight out of nine participants. The frequency at which emotion regulation was identified suggested that first-grade students experience significant difficulty understanding and managing emotions without support from adults and peers. By aiding children in learning to understand their emotions and the emotions of others, children may be better able to engage in social interactions in an effective and supportive manner. To address this significance, the self-awareness unit, with an emphasis on emotion regulation, was placed at the start of the EASSEL curriculum. In addition to CASEL’s standard areas of social-emotional learning, several participants identified a desire to have lessons that address current events in students’ lives, such as parental divorce, diverse families, gender identity, advocacy, and the loss of a loved one or pet. One teacher shared:

Because sometimes you need to teach about divorce. You don’t know that you’re going to need to, but when you’re at morning meeting and you have three kids that just shared that their parents just split up, you need a social-emotional learning lesson, right then and there.

By providing teachers with lessons that address individualized and unique circumstances that arise in the lives of students, children are offered support, understanding, and validation during difficult times. The above quote highlights teachers' need for resources to support students during uncertain times and in navigating identity exploration.

### **Limitations and Future Considerations**

Regional perspectives and experiences presented as a limitation for this study. Due to a desire to offer in-person interviews, participants were initially recruited from within New Hampshire. Due to difficulty contacting potential participants outside of the school year, two participants were recruited from outside of New Hampshire, but remained in the Northeast region, with one participant being from Rhode Island and the second from New York City. Additionally, all participants worked in schools that emphasized SEL values and incorporated SEL curricula prior to this study. While perspectives of the role of SEL in schools remained consistent across locations, it is possible that a wider range of perspectives may have been identified if participants worked in schools where SEL learning was not already included. Additionally, it is important to note that the geographic location of the participants is largely politically liberal. Conversely, regions that are more politically conservative have been found to have stronger opposition to the inclusion of SEL in elementary schools. It is possible that teachers in schools that do not utilize an SEL curriculum or work in geographical locations with different political values may have offered different perspectives about the role of SEL in schools and effective methods of instruction.

Another limitation was the limited number of participants and perspectives included in the study. Due to the nature of thematic analysis, only nine participants were recruited. These nine participants were based in the same geographic region and worked at schools that

emphasized SEL values. A larger number of participants may have resulted in a wider array of perspectives related to SEL in schools and effective methods of instruction. As all participants agreed about the importance of SEL in schools, a different perspective may have offered alternative views to SEL and instruction. This may have been made possible by the use of a quantitative study, such as a survey seeking to measure the experienced effectiveness of preidentified methods of instruction and manners of introducing new programs to school administrators and teachers.

Finally, the inability to administer and evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed curriculum is a notable limitation of this dissertation. Further research might focus on assessing the effectiveness and weaknesses of the overall curriculum and each of the lessons by applying the curriculum in a classroom. Any future research should seek to include both teacher and student experiences of engaging in the curriculum. By including teachers and students, it would be possible to address methods of instruction and improve student experiences and engagement, increasing the effectiveness of the curriculum.

### **Conclusion**

In today's United States society, students, even at the early elementary level, are expected to remain quietly seated while listening to classroom instruction. This expectation requires that students maintain the ability to sit quietly and understand the verbal and written language used in instruction. At the first-grade level, students begin to learn written language and have an attention span that may make it difficult to fully engage in lessons. This dissertation sought to collect information about the role of social-emotional learning in schools, developmentally appropriate and effective methods of instruction, and what SEL skills are most impactful at the first-grade level. To address the developmental needs of first-grade students in relation to

effective methods of classroom instruction, social skills, and self-growth, a social-emotional curriculum grounded in the use of art activities was developed. This curriculum was developed using information collected during interviews with experts in elementary education. Further research is needed to assess the effectiveness of the proposed program and to identify any areas for improvement. By using expert experiences to develop an art-based SEL curriculum, I hope that the curriculum will help first-grade students to engage in social-emotional development in a way that emphasizes creativity, self-expression, and personal growth. The inclusion of first-hand experiences from teachers and school staff offers an important perspective on student growth and needs, and by creating space for these voices in curriculum development, I hope to create a more tailored and effective approach to student learning.

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**APPENDIX A: PRINCIPAL CONTACT EMAIL**

Hello,

My name is Hailey McAfee-Scimone, and I am a fourth-year doctoral candidate in the Clinical Psychology program at Antioch University New England. I am contacting you to request permission to reach out to teachers within your school to ask for their participation in my research. I am seeking participants to take part in a 45- to 60-minute discussion-based interview about teachers' thoughts pertaining to social-emotional learnings (SEL) in schools and what their experiences have been with using curricula created by others. These interviews would be conducted outside of school hours either in person or via Zoom at teacher preference.

My dissertation aims to explore the use of art to teach first-grade students about social-emotional skills by developing an early intervention curriculum. These skills may include managing and identifying their emotions, creating and maintaining relationships with others, self-awareness, and responsible decision making. It is important to me that the voices of teachers be heard in developing any programs designed to be implemented in schools as you are the professionals whose role it would be to deliver these lessons to students.

Please do not hesitate to ask any questions or express any concerns that you may have.

I very much appreciate you taking the time to consider aiding me in my research. Thank you and I look forward to hearing from you!

Sincerely,

Hailey McAfee-Scimone, MS

**APPENDIX B: TEACHER RECRUITMENT EMAIL**

Hello,

My name is Hailey McAfee-Scimone, and I am a fourth-year doctoral candidate in the Clinical Psychology program at Antioch University New England. My dissertation aims to explore the use of art to teach first-grade students about social-emotional skills by developing an early intervention curriculum. These skills may include managing and identifying their emotions, creating and maintaining relationships with others, self-awareness, and responsible decision making. It is important to me that the voices of teachers be heard in developing any programs designed to be implemented in schools as you are the professionals whose role it would be to deliver these lessons to students. These interviews will be conducted outside of school hours at a time that is convenient for you and either in person or via Zoom at your preference.

I am currently seeking participants to take part in a 45- to 60-minute discussion-based interview during which we would discuss your thoughts about social-emotional learnings (SEL) in schools and what your experiences have been with using curricula created by others. If you are interested in participating, please let me know by responding to this email and we can work together to arrange a time to connect. Please do not hesitate to ask any questions or express any concerns that you may have.

I very much appreciate you taking the time to consider aiding me in my research. Thank you and I look forward to hearing from you!

Sincerely,

Hailey McAfee-Scimone, MS

## **APPENDIX C: SEMISTRUCTURED INTERVIEW FORMAT**

Introduction: During this interview I will ask you some open-ended questions about the use of social-emotional learning, or SEL, in schools and your experience of using curricula designed by others in your classrooms. As a reminder, SEL addresses the social and emotional growth of students by helping them build skills for creating and growing relationships with others, managing their emotions, self-awareness, and decision making. My goal is for this interview to be a discussion about your thoughts and experiences to help me in developing an accessible and effective curriculum for teaching first-grade students about SEL through art. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Question 1: What are your thoughts about the inclusion of SEL in schools?

- What does SEL look like in your school currently/is it addressed?
- In an ideal world where there was plenty of resources/time/space, do you think it should be taught in schools?

Question 2: If a new model for teaching these skills were developed, what would you like to see included for topics or skills? What would you like to see included in the presentation or format? Are there any other details that you might find important in an SEL curriculum?

Question 3: One of my goals for this program is for it to be accessible to teachers. What barriers make teaching programs or models feel inaccessible or unable to be applied in the classroom? What are some qualities that help other programs to feel usable?

Question 4: If you were to use the proposed program in your classroom, what do you see as some of its benefits? Challenges? What would help it be able to be implemented? What factors do you think would contribute to its success?

Question 5: Given the intersectionality of my research, I have been considering the most fitting environment for this program to be taught. Because it focuses on student growth and lessons, I have thought about developing it to be taught in the general classroom. Because the curriculum uses art as the method of teaching, I can imagine it occurring in the art classroom as well. Given your experience, what are your thoughts on where a curriculum such as this might best fit?

Question 6: Common topics in SEL programs include emotions, coping skills, identifying strengths, practicing gratitude, and decision making. Are there any topics you feel would be important or helpful to include in the lessons? Anything you think should not be in it?

## APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT PRIOR TO INTERVIEW

Dear Participant,

This is an interview about the use of art to teach first-grade students about social-emotional skills in first-grade education. The survey will give you the opportunity to discuss your thoughts about social-emotional learnings (SEL) in schools and what your experiences have been with using curricula created by others.

There are minimal, if any, risks from participating. Your identity will be anonymous, and any information will be referred to using a fake name. You will not be asked for your name or any other personally identifiable information. The interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes.

Your participation is voluntary, and you may discontinue your participation at any time. If you decide to stop the interview at any time, there will be no consequences.

This survey is a part of my dissertation research project at Antioch University New England in the Clinical Psychology department. If you have any questions about this survey or the research project, please contact me at xxxxxxxxxxxx@xxxxx.xxx or Kathi Borden at xxxxxxxx@xxxxxxxx.xxx.

The Institutional Review Board at Antioch University have approved this project. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Kevin Lyness, chair of Antioch University New England Institutional Review Board, at xxxxxxxx@xxxxxxxx.xxx or Dr. Shawn Fitzgerald, Antioch University New England provost and campus CEO at xxxxxxxx@xxxxxxxx.xxx.

By signing below, you are indicating that you have read and understood this consent form and agree to participate in this research study.

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Participant Signature

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Date

Thank you for your help and participation,

Hailey McAfee-Scimone, MS



## APPENDIX E: SAMPLE LESSON

### Week 4: Body Awareness

Goals: Increase knowledge of emotions; Develop understanding of how emotions present in the body

Total Lesson Time: 20 minutes

Activity Time: 15 minutes

Activity Materials: - Worksheet

- Markers, crayons, and/or colored pencils

Ice Breaker: “What is one way that your body talks to you?”

Lesson: A brief slide presentation is included to provide visuals. Using the following information as lesson instructions.

1. Slide 1: Slide includes brief recap of information from the “biological basis of emotions.”

Last week we talked about how our brains help us to experience different emotions and understand our environment. This week, we’re going to learn about how we feel emotions in our bodies. As a quick reminder, our emotions are not good or bad, they’re just part of what makes us human.

Our emotions create energy and chemicals in our bodies that make us feel different things. Remember how we talked about how our bodies talk to us a little bit ago? Those are some of the ways that our bodies might tell us that something hurts, or that we’re hungry, or even tired. Our emotions can do the same thing.

2. Slide 2: Slide includes an example of body maps showing happiness and anger.

As an example, happiness might look like this. Can someone share how their body feels when they feel really happy? See how there is energy all throughout the body? When we feel happy, our bodies feel relaxed and energized, ready to enjoy life and be in the moment.

Do you see any differences between happiness and anger? When we feel angry, sometimes our bodies feel ready to fight and we might have a harder time thinking. See how bright the hands and chest are? Sometimes when I’m angry, I feel really tense and make my hands into fists like I’m ready to fight.

3. Slide 3: Slide includes an example of a body map showing fear and sadness.

Now we’re looking at where we feel fear and sadness. When we’re scared, our heart

might start pounding and our body goes still. Our energy goes to our head, chest, and belly. Maybe our thoughts get cloudy and it's hard to focus. What do you all feel like when you're scared or anxious? Do any of you ever feel shaky?

See how the legs and arms are blue? When we feel sad, our head sometimes hurts, and our body slows down. It doesn't want to do anything, just rest. The body kind of shuts down to rest. Do any of you ever feel like that? Like when you're sad you want to lay down or sleep?

4. Slide 4: Slide includes information about a box breathing graphic.

When our bodies are telling us what emotion we're feeling and what it needs to feel better, mindfulness can help us pause and rest our bodies. By deep breathing and paying attention to our bodies, we can return to feeling calm. Let's take a moment to do some box breathing today. When I say to start, we will all take a deep breath in through our noses for four beats, hold it for four beats, breath out through our mouths for four beats, and hold our breath for four beats before taking the next breath. Ready? Deep breath in, 1 .. 2 .. 3.. 4. Hold, 1 .. 2.. 3.. 4.. Breath out through your mouth 1 .. 2 .. 3.. 4.. Hold 1.. 2.. 3.. 4... Great job! Let's do two more box breaths for practice. Deep breath in, 1 .. 2 .. 3.. 4. Hold, 1 .. 2.. 3.. 4.. Breath out through your mouth 1 .. 2 .. 3.. 4.. Hold 1.. 2.. 3.. 4... One more time, deep breath in, hold, deep breath out.

Activity: Students will be provided with an outline of a body. Students will then be instructed to assign the emotions sad, happy, mad, worried, and tired with different colors. Encourage students to use textures or patterns as well to personalize their drawing and explore the feeling. Students will create their body maps with where they experience these emotions in their body.

\*Tips for Teachers: While checking in with students throughout the activity, support students in thinking about how they experience their emotions. For students who struggle to understand the activity, offer examples such as feeling butterflies in your stomach when anxious, arms and legs feeling heavy when sad or tired, or feeling hot in your chest when angry. Emphasize validating students' experiences and feelings.

\*Discussion Questions:

- Where do you feel [happy, love, sad, angry, fear] in your body? How does your body tell you when you feel this way?
- What does your heartbeat feel like when you feel [emotion]? What do you think it might feel like if you felt [sad, worried, angry, annoyed, etc.]? Would it be tense or relaxed? Are you thinking certain thoughts when your body feels this way?
- What is something you can do to help your body relax when it feels this way?

Brief Follow-Up Activity: Continue to facilitate conversations with students throughout the week to assess how their bodies feel as their emotions shift. For example, if a student struggles to understand what may have led to a conflict, ask them to think about how their body felt when the problem started. How could they have taken care of their body in that moment to calm their feelings?

## APPENDIX F: EVALUATION MEASURE

### Teacher Weekly Evaluation

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Weekly Lesson: \_\_\_\_\_

Unit: \_\_\_\_\_

Measure classroom growth using the following scale:

5: Occurs primarily independently with some teacher support

4: Occurs often with teacher support and independently

3: Several times only with teacher support

2: Once or twice with teacher support

1: Does not occur

1. Students practice identifying their own feelings.

1      2      3      4      5

2. Students identify and understand the feelings of peers.

1      2      3      4      5

3. Students use coping skills from the lesson.

1      2      3      4      5

4. Resolved problems with peers using problem solving skills.

1      2      3      4      5

5. Students make safe decisions on their own or with the help of others.

1      2      3      4      5

## **APPENDIX G: PARENT LETTER HOME**

### **This week in EASSEL!**

Hi care givers!

This week during EASSEL, your student learned about body awareness. This topic focused on learning about how our emotions show up in our bodies. Just like when we get tired after running around on the playground, we might feel butterflies in our bellies when we get nervous, feel tension in our bodies when we're angry, or feel tired when we're sad.

Students learned about different ways that our emotions show up in people's bodies and engaged in a body map activity. During this activity, students were given a blank outline of a body and encouraged to color it in based on how they feel in their body based on the emotion they chose. You may ask your student about the emotion they chose and why they chose their colors. While students were only asked to make a map of one emotion, different emotions may feel differently in their body. If you and your student are interested, you may continue to explore how they feel their emotions in their body and what it means for them. When we know how our emotions feel in our body, it makes it a little easier to find ways to help us cope with the emotion. A blank body map is included just in case!

Until next time!

## APPENDIX H: ACTIVITY DESCRIPTIONS

**SeA: Self-Awareness, SM: Self-Management, SoA: Social Awareness, RS: Relationship Skills, DM: Decision Making**

Unit and Activity	Activity Description
SeA1: Emotion Creatures	Students will be instructed to pick two emotions from the list developed during the lesson portion of class. Students will then draw an image of what that emotion would look like to them if it was a living creature. These creatures can be real or imagined, such as a monster under the bed or their favorite dog.
SeA 2: Acting Out Emotions	Working in small groups, students will be instructed to act out what two emotions look like. Students will be assigned emotions and then encouraged to act out their skits in front of the class.
SeA 3: Brain Maps	Following the lesson on the biological basis of emotions, students will be provided with the outline of a brain. The brain will be labeled with different regions that were reviewed during the lesson. Students are instructed to
SeA 4: Body Maps	After learning about how emotions appear in the body, students will be provided with an outline of a body. Students will then be instructed to assign the emotions sad, happy, mad, worried, and tired with different colors. Using these colors, students will color their body maps with where they experience these emotions in their body.
SeA 5: Strengths Portraits	Students will be instructed to identify at least two personal strengths. Using these strengths, students will then draw or paint a portrait of themselves that highlights their strengths. For example, if a student sees their two strengths as playing soccer and sharing, they might draw themselves passing to a friend during a soccer game.
SeA 6: Two Animals	Using a clay-like material (Model Magic, Play Dough, clay, etc.), students will create three animals that represent different parts of themselves. The first will be an animal that represents how they see themselves. The second will be an animal that represents how a friend sees them.
SM 1: Windows Portraits	Following the lesson on Window of Tolerance, students will be given a paper with three windows labeled “hyperarousal,” “safe and calm,” hypoarousal.” In each window, students will be instructed to create an image of how they feel or what they look like in the respective window. Students may also be encouraged to draw something they can do to get back to the calm window.

SM 2: Create putty or glitter jar	After reviewing coping skills for anxiety and anger, instructors will work with students to create their own putty or glitter jar. The activity can be chosen at the instructors preference based on access to materials and classroom needs. The final product will be presented as an effective coping skill for students when experiencing anger or anxiety.
SM 3: Nature Suncatchers (Reimer, 2023)	Using paper plates with a large circle cut in the middle, contact paper, tape, and flowers or leaves, students are encouraged to make a nature suncatcher. Students will place their nature items (flowers, leaves sticks) onto the contact paper to create a suncatcher. Students may decorate their paper plates to create a personalized frame as well. The goal of this activity is to connect students with nature, as this has been found to be an effective coping skill for sadness.
SM 4: Name Poster (Guzman, 2020)	Students will be instructed to pick a positive or encouraging word that starts with the same letter of their name (ex: Sally might pick the word “strong”). Students will then be given art supplies and encouraged to create a poster with their chosen word as the central concept as a reminder of their own positive attributes.
SM 5: Destress Scribble Unscramble (Curtis, 2022)	The goal of this activity is to help students to think slowly, use problem solving, and feel empowered to change how they feel. Students will be given drawing paper and drawing utensils. Students will then be encouraged to think of a time when they felt upset or frustrated and to scribble out their feelings on the paper. When they are done, encourage students to think creatively and “unscramble their scribble.” Encourage students to look for pictures, patterns, or shapes in their drawing and add details to make a design in their scribbles.
SM 6: Breathing Stick (Driscoll, 2023)	After reviewing mindfulness, students will create their own breathing beads. Using plastic beads and pipe cleaners, students will make a loop on one end of the pipe cleaner, add two colors of beads in an alternating pattern (approximately 10 beads), and create a loop at the other end of the pipe cleaner. Students can then use the breathing beads by taking a deep breath as they move one bead across the pipe cleaner, and exhale as they move the next bead.
SoA 1: Classroom Paper Chain	Prior to the lesson, instructors will cut strips of paper to be used to make paper chains. Students will each be given 1 or 2 strips and encouraged to make a kind drawing or write a kind reminder for their peers on the paper. The strips will then be put together to create a paper chain for the classroom as a reminder to be kind to each other and create a kind community.
SoA 2: Perspective Drawings	Students will be encouraged to draw an object of their choosing from two different perspectives: a bird flying above and an ant standing next

	to it. Students will be encouraged to notice the differences in how the object might look, or even feel, from these perspectives.
SoA 3: Draw Someone's Story	Students will be grouped into pairs for this activity. Taking turns, one student will tell a story about something they have experienced while the other student draws what they imagine happening. The students will then switch roles and repeat the activity. Students are then encouraged to reflect on how their partner imagined their experience.
SoA 4: Band-aid Buddies (Curtis, 2022)	The goal is to support students in identifying ways or things to make a peer feel better when they are upset. Students will be given adhesive bandages, colored paper, and markers. Using the band-aids, students will create a picture in which the band-aids are characters. Students will begin by drawing a symbol of something that hurts, such as a broken heart or a sad face. The band-aid will then be placed over what "hurts" and students will be encouraged to make it into a character by giving it other features such as a face, arms, legs, or a costume. Encourage students to reflect on how this makes them feel better and how it could help them make a friend feel better.
SoA 5: Draw a Friend as a Superhero	Students will be grouped into pairs. Students will then be instructed to imagine their partner as a superhero, thinking about what their suit might look like, and what superpower they might have based on their strengths. Students will then draw their partner as a superhero to help them see their strengths and positively impact them.
SoA 6: Gratitude Tree	This activity can be done either as a classroom activity or individually. As an individual activity, students will be instructed to draw a tree with no leaves. Students will then cut out leaves from tissue paper or construction paper and draw, or write, things that they are grateful for on the leaves. The leaves will then be glued to the tree. As a classroom activity, the instructor should draw a tree with no leaves on a poster or bulletin board. Students will then cut out leaves for the size of the tree from tissue paper and draw or write things that they are grateful for. The leaves will then be attached to the classroom tree.
RS 1: Relationship Map (Shapiro, 2014)	(Instructors may draw an example on the board first) Using a square piece of paper, students will write their name in the middle and put a heart (or other shape) around it. Then, students will be instructed to write qualities they like about themselves and draw a line between their name and each trait. Next, students will draw a circle around what they have drawn so far, and a bigger circle around that one, with space between. On the big circle, students should draw small x's to represent barbed wire. Inside the big circle, students are encouraged to write or draw people they feel safe with and enjoy spending time. Outside the big circle, students can add people they don't feel safe with, or things they don't like people to do to them (ex: make fun of

	them, leave them out).
RS 2: Kindness Rocks (Classroom Teacher Interview)	Students will be encouraged to paint rocks with motivational words, phrases, or pictures. Each student will be given two rocks to paint: one to make for themselves, and one to give another student.
RS 3: Apology Paths (Curtis, 2022)	This lesson aims to consider how to apologize after a disagreement and how hard it can be. Students will be given paper, cardboard shapes, or other objects to act as “stepping stones” in the classroom. As a class, students will use the “stepping stones” to make a path across the classroom. Each student will create a stepping stone by writing or drawing an apology, how someone might feel after being bullied, and a way to make it better.
RS 4: Guided Drawings	Students will be grouped into pairs and switch roles after the task is finished. Student A will have a picture that they describe to Student B. Without showing Student B the picture, Student A will tell Student B what to draw to recreate the picture. After the picture is drawn, students will switch roles and work on the second picture. The goal of this activity is to support students in practicing effective communication skills.
RS 5: Rotating Drawings	Students at each table will start drawing on a piece of paper (instructors can choose for how long). At the end of time, students will pass their paper to the person to their left. Students will then continue the drawing started by the person before them, without asking the peer what their goal was. Continue passing the drawings until each student has their original drawing back. The goal of this activity is to encourage students to practice taking turns at an activity and to work together to create something unique.
RS 6: Decision Wheel (Berg, 2022)	As a group, the class will determine a problem to focus on, such as “my friend is being mean to me.” Individually, students will then fill in a blank decision wheel with five spaces. Students will be encouraged to draw or write about five possible ways to resolve the conflict.
DM 1: Mindful Mountains (Curtis, 2022)	Instructors should begin by explaining what it means to think flexibly. Students will be given a long piece of drawing paper and drawing utensils. Students will then be told to draw a mountain range, using their breath to guide how tall the mountain will be. When they breathe in, they will move the drawing utensil up, making one side, and when they breathe out, they will move it down, making the other side. As they breathe in and out, they will make the mountain range across the paper. Students may be encouraged to think about how long or short each breath is naturally, and may make a second row of mountains if they wish. Finally, students will be invited to add details and colors to their mountain scenes. The goal is for students to explore mindfulness



	and how to focus on the moment, rather than right or wrong.
DM 2: Size of the Problem	Students will be given a handout with circles in four different sizes and four prompts with a brief problem. Inside each circle, students will draw the problem that fits the size of the circle. The goal of this activity is for students to practice identifying the severity of a problem and how to approach the problem based on the size.
DM 3: Values Vision Board (Krajewski, 2023)	Students will be provided with a small poster board, glue, scissors, and magazines. After a review of personal values, students will be encouraged to think about what they value, or enjoy, in their lives. Using the magazines, students will be encouraged to create a collage values vision board. Students will cut out pictures and words that symbolize things they value and glue them on their vision board.
DM 4: Detective Role Play	Working in small groups, students will be given a scenario to identify the facts in. Students will be instructed to act as “detectives” and identify the facts in the situation in order to resolve the problem. After identifying the problems as a group, students will act out their problem-solving journey in front of their peers.
DM 5: Outcome Drawing	After reviewing pros and cons, students will be given a brief decision point, for example “I decide to color instead of clean my room.” Students will then draw what might happen as a positive outcome of the decision point, and a second drawing for what a negative outcome might be.
DM 6: Group Creativity	This activity will be completed as a classroom activity. Using bulletin board paper, students will be instructed to work together to create a positive affirmations board for the classroom. Students may choose to draw positive pictures, write reassuring words, or use decorations that make them happy. The goal is for students to work together to create something that will act as a reminder to be kind to oneself and others, as well as a reminder that students are able to work together.
Diverse Families: Family Portraits	Students will be encouraged to create a family portrait of anyone they see as their family. This may include parents, siblings, pets, grandparents, close friends, aunts, uncles, or cousins. Family portraits may be hung up, if students are comfortable, to create a visual reminder that all families look different.
Divorce: What Can I Control? (Krajewski, 2023)	Start by discussing situations you can or cannot control. Students will be instructed to create a piece of art with a circle on it. Then, inside the circle, students will be encouraged to draw and write things they can control. Outside the circle, students will be instructed to write or draw situations they cannot control. The goal of this activity is to help calm students who may experience anxiety during uncertain times, by

	finding ways to help manage their anxiety and navigate the situation.
Gender Identity: Self Portrait	Students will be given an outline of a silhouette. Inside the head of the silhouette will be labeled “how I see myself”, and outside will be labeled, “how others see me.” Students will then be instructed to draw or write things that make them who they are on the inside, and what they think others see, or what they let others see, on the outside.
Loss: Worry Stones (Sheakoski, 2020)	Using salt, flour, warm water, gel food coloring, and glitter (optional), instructors will support students in creating their own worry stone. Instructors can explain the role of worry stones as a source of comfort. Students may be encouraged to name their worry stone after a loved one, and that it’s okay to see the stone as a friend they can talk to or have as a source of comfort.