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Approval Sheet

Educators' Perceptions of Constructivist Teaching Practices for The SEE Learning Program: A Qualitative Study

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Educators' Perceptions of Constructivist Teaching Practices for The SEE Learning Program: A Qualitative Study

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An abstract of A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Rollins School of Public Health of Emory University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

Educators' Perceptions of Constructivist Teaching Practices for The SEE Learning Program: A Qualitative Study

By Salina D. Parigini

Background:

Social, Emotional, and Ethical (SEE) Learning is a prosocial education program designed to teach social, emotional, and ethical competencies. The program favors a constructivist approach to teaching and learning, which focuses on the learners constructing their knowledge. Creating this type of learning environment relies heavily on the teacher. As the primary deliverers of SEE Learning, how they implement the program impacts students' social and emotional development. Understanding how teachers perceive select, constructivist teaching practices, that are important for the delivery of the SEE Learning program, help to inform program training materials and readiness to implement SEE Learning in schools in Atlanta, Georgia.

Methods:

In collaboration with the Emory Center for Contemplative Science and Compassion-Based Ethics, in-depth interviews were conducted with K-12 educators in Atlanta, Georgia, who were unexposed to the SEE Learning program. The transcripts were coded using MAXqda 10 software to assess how teachers perceived and promoted autonomy, student interactions, and student-centeredness in their classrooms. Descriptive analyses were prepared for perceptions and examples used for each domain, as well as factors that aided and hindered their ability to promote these constructivist teaching methods.

Results:

Teachers described their perception of student interactions and autonomy and provided examples used in the classroom. Participants also mentioned examples used to create a more student-centered classroom, such as incorporating student interests and applying relevant experiences to academic material. The school culture and the student-teacher relationship emerged as factors that impact their ability to promote and support constructivist teaching practices for both elementary and middle-level educators.

Discussion:

Overall, perceptions and methods to promote constructivist teaching were consistent with those defined by Taylor and Fraser (1994). To further explore teachers' constructivist pedagogy, the SEE Learning program would benefit from investigating how teachers support critical thinking among students and define autonomous students. The study recommends investigating the use of any school-wide behavioral management or social-emotional learning programs before implementing SEE Learning in classrooms. Additionally, exploring the perceived importance of the student-teacher relationship and teachers' social-emotional competence would be useful for readiness to implement SEE Learning.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

The field of social and emotional learning (SEL) continues to grow as schools around the world are using SEL as a public health approach to education (Durlak et al., 2011). SEL refers to a process for developing the skills and competencies related to recognizing and managing emotions, making responsible decisions, and handling challenging situations (CASEL, 2013). Studies have shown that implementing SEL programs in classrooms reduces problem behavior as well as improves academic outcomes (Wanless & Domitrovich, 2015). However, using evidence-based SEL programs is not enough to ensure positive student outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011; Durlak & DuPre, 2008). Evidence has found that the success of an intervention heavily relies on program implementation (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). As the primary deliverers of SEL programs, teachers' social and emotional competence (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009) and beliefs and attitudes towards an SEL program moderate program fidelity and its intended impact on students (Brackett et al., 2011; Durlak & DuPre, 2008).

Social, Emotional, and Ethical (SEE) Learning is a prosocial education program designed by Emory University in partnership with the Dalai Lama (CCSCBE, 2017). SEE Learning builds on SEL programming, developing and adding components that are often not found in SEL, including attention, ethics, and interdependence (CCSCBE, 2017). The purpose of SEE Learning is to create an inclusive and comprehensive framework to teach social, emotional, and ethical competencies in any educational setting (CCSCBE, 2017).

SEE learning favors a constructivist approach to teaching and learning, which focuses on the learners constructing their knowledge (CCSCBE, 2017; Yıldırım, 2014). A constructivist learning environment differs from a traditional classroom in that active, rather than passive,

learning methods are favored, and the teacher creates an environment that allows students to create meaning through their experiences rather than directly relay information (Brooks & Brooks, 1999). Similar to SEL programs, creating a constructivist learning environment relies heavily on the teacher and their teaching practice (Brooks & Brooks, 1999). Since beliefs are action agendas and the teacher is thought to be central to the educational change process, identifying and understanding the beliefs of teachers regarding any educational reform idea becomes critical (Haney & Mcarthur, 2002; Pajares, 1992).

Researchers have developed various tools to measure constructivist teaching in the classroom (Yıldırım, 2014). The most commonly used scale is the Constructivist Learning Environment Survey (CLES) developed by Taylor and Fraser (1991) to assess the extent to which opportunities exist for students to interact with one another, develop autonomy, apply relevant experiences, and question teaching methods (Taylor et al., 1997). Other scales have assessed teacher efficiency in constructivist learning and constructivist learning environment management skills (Yıldırım, 2014). However, the CLES domains are most similar to teaching practices favored by the SEE Learning program.

1.2 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to understand how elementary and middle school educators in Atlanta, GA, perceive select, constructivist teaching practices that are important for the delivery of the SEE learning program. Specifically, educators who have not been trained in SEE Learning implementation to inform program training materials and readiness to implement SEE Learning in schools in Atlanta, GA.

1.3 Research Question

How do educators perceive and support their students' autonomy, student-student interactions, and student-centeredness in the classroom?

1.4 Significance

This qualitative research project is part of a broader mixed-method investigation through the Emory Center for Contemplative Science and Compassion-Based Ethics to understand how educators understand the core aspects of the SEE Learning program.

The current study will allow the program to better understand patterns of constructivist teaching methods, from the educators' perspective, that will contribute to an assessment of SEE-specific educator characteristics that affect program delivery. This information will inform future program monitoring and evaluation tools by helping the program understand how to develop measures to track changes in educators' teaching practices.

The study will also contribute to the limited literature on implementation readiness before teachers prepare to implement a new intervention (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). Precisely, for SEE program developers to determine readiness to implement SEE Learning in schools in Atlanta, GA, and design training materials for educators.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Programs

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2013). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) classifies SEL outcomes around five competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2013). SEL aims to develop these competencies through various educational strategies, including direct instruction and student-centered practices that create engaging learning environments (CASEL, 2013; Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

Evidence has shown that school-wide SEL programming had a positive impact on children's social and emotional competence abilities, academic performances, and prosocial behaviors (Durlak et al., 2011; Rimm-Kaufman & Sawyer, 2004). A meta-analysis found students who participated in an SEL program had an 11% increase in academic achievement compared to those children who did not receive SEL programming in grades K-12 (Durlak et al., 2011). Lower social and emotional competence among students was also related to less academic engagement and lower academic achievement (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). However, using evidence-based SEL programs is not enough to ensure positive student outcomes (Durlak & DuPre, 2008).

Studies have shown that the success of an intervention on children's SEL competence depends on program implementation (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Wanless & Domitrovich, 2015). Researchers have identified several factors that impact

implementation success, including the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of the individuals delivering the program, the classroom environment, and the school climate or leadership characteristics (Wanless & Domitrovich, 2015).

Teachers are not only the primary deliverers of SEL programming, but they also create the environment in which students develop and practice their prosocial skills (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Wanless & Domitrovich, 2015). It has been shown that teachers with greater social and emotional competence, develop a classroom environment that encourages positive student-relationships, capitalizes on students' strengths, promotes students' intrinsic motivation, and fosters communication and cooperation (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Furthermore, their attitudes and beliefs regarding SEL can moderate the extent to which a program is delivered as intended by program developments and has the intended impact on students (Brackett et al., 2011; Durlak & DuPre, 2008).

In summary, teachers are the primary deliverers of SEL programs, and their perceptions and attitudes around SEL influence program adoption, implementation, and fidelity (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). Their own social and emotional competence also influences the classroom environment where students develop and practice their prosocial skills (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). However, few studies have assessed implementation readiness before teachers prepare to implement a new intervention (Wanless & Domitrovich, 2015).

2.2 SEE Learning Program

Social, Emotional, and Ethical (SEE) Learning is a prosocial education program designed by Emory University in partnership with the Dalai Lama (CCSCBE, 2017). SEE Learning builds on SEL programming, developing and adding components that are often not found in SEL, like attention, ethics, and interdependence (CCSCBE, 2017).

As defined by The Center for Contemplative Sciences and Compassion-Based Ethics (CCSCBE) (2017), the intention behind SEE Learning is to create an inclusive and comprehensive framework that can be used in any educational environment and at all levels of education to teach social, emotional, and ethical competencies. The CCSCBE (2017), developed a framework to help guide the development of these competencies in the classroom while remaining broad enough for teachers and schools can adapt it to suit the needs of their particular environment (CCSCBE, 2017).

SEE Learning favors a constructivist approach to teaching or 'teaching and learning that focuses on the students gradually coming to their conclusions and insights through a process of inquiry and discovery, rather than through passively receiving information (CCSCBE, 2017).' In order to achieve this, the framework provides pedagogical components to help teachers guide their students through the three levels of understanding above (CCSCBE, 2017). One of these pedagogical components is 'engaged learning,' which refers to learning strategies and methods that are more active, participatory, and embodied for students, in contrast to approaches where students are presented with material more passively (CCSCBE, 2017). These include cooperative learning (group projects, student-led discussion, collaborative games); creative expression (arts, music, writing, performance); community engagement projects (such as service projects); and ecological learning (such as engaging directly with the natural world) (CCSCBE, 2017).

Similar to other SEL programs, teachers are the primary deliverers of SEE Learning and how they implement the curriculum impacts student outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011). The program favors a constructivist teaching model where the teacher's role is to introduce the material, help students deepen their understanding, and reinforce this knowledge through active and participatory learning methods that promote relationship building and autonomous learners

(CCSCBE, 2017). Teachers are a critical component to reform as they are the deciding factor as to whether or not constructivist teaching methods will be used (Beck et al., 2000). Exploring their perceptions of teaching methods is valuable for attempting to understand factors that impact implementation fidelity (Durlak & DuPre, 2008).

2.3 Constructivism

Constructivism is a learning approach that encourages learners to construct knowledge (Brooks & Brooks, 1999; CCSCBE, 2017). The constructivist approach to education is related to teaching, and the learning process, and teachers who implement this approach are responsible for creating an environment that encourages students to create meaning and construct knowledge (Kaufman & Brooks, 1996). As defined by Brooks and Brooks (1999), a constructivist learning environment is different from a classroom environment where traditional teaching methods are used (Brooks & Brooks, 1999). For instance, active rather than passive learning methods are at the core of the constructivist learning environment (Yıldırım, 2014). The role of the teacher changes from someone who typically provides information to someone who orchestrates the environment and provides opportunities for students to create meaning through relevant experiences (Brooks & Brooks, 1999).

2.4 Teachers and Constructivism

Similar to SEL programs, creating a constructivist learning environment relies heavily on the teacher and their teaching practice (Brooks & Brooks, 1999; Kaufman & Brooks, 1996). Since beliefs are action agendas and the teacher is thought to be central to the educational change process, identifying and understanding the beliefs of teachers regarding any educational reform idea becomes critical (Haney & Mcarthur, 2002; Pajares, 1992).

Taylor and Fraser (1991) developed the Constructivist Learning Environment Survey (CLES) to enable teachers to monitor their development of constructivist approaches to teaching school science (Taylor, P.C., 1991). Taylor, Fraser, and White (1994) later revised the CLES to supports a constructivist theoretical framework that includes prior knowledge and interpersonal negotiation of meaning as fundamental components to creating opportunities for students to construct meaning (Taylor et al., 1997). Two different versions of the instrument exist for both teachers and students; and measure the degree to which the following components are perceived to be present in the classroom (Taylor et al., 1997).

Table 1

CLES Scales and Sample Item Beliefs Used in Haney and McArthur (2002) Study

CLES Subscale	**Description**	**Belief**
Personal Relevance	Assessing if teachers are making use of students' everyday experiences as a meaningful context for the development of students' academic knowledge	The teacher believes it is vital to use students' prior knowledge and out-of-school experiences to develop the meaning of academic material. As well as, for students to have some personal interest in the context.
Student Negotiation	Assesses the context to which opportunities exist for students to explain and justify to other students their newly developing ideas, to listen attentively, and reflect on other students' ideas. As well as to self-reflect their ideas	The teacher believes students should be encouraged to interact socially to develop the meaning of information
Shared Control	Assesses the degree in which students can develop as autonomous learners by providing opportunities for students to exercise a degree of control over their learning beyond working 'independently' of the teacher assigned problems.	The teacher believes students should have some decision making in the course curriculum.

Critical Voice	Assesses the extent to which students feel it is legitimate and beneficial to question the teacher's plans and methods and express concerns about any impediments to their learning	The teacher believes that students are free to question their teaching practice

Haney and McArthur (2002) used the CLES to understand better the relationship between prospective teachers' constructivist beliefs and classroom practices. They used four case studies to assess the beliefs of constructivist teaching practices and whether or not these beliefs were consistent with the subsequent classroom practices (Haney & Mcarthur, 2002). In doing so, they found teachers' beliefs regarding the domains of student negotiation, scientific uncertainty, and personal relevance were core beliefs that teachers were able to put into practice during their teaching experiences (Haney & Mcarthur, 2002). All four cases acknowledged that enabling students to be involved in decision-making was useful, but none implemented the idea of shared control (Haney & Mcarthur, 2002). The belief to adhere to the existing local science curriculum was also an obstacle for enabling classroom students to make decisions as well (Haney & Mcarthur, 2002). Researchers were able to show teachers' beliefs, and attitudes towards teaching practices are indicators for implementation of that practice, but they did not account for contextual factors like the school administration, classroom resources, or class size, which can affect constructivist teaching (Beck et al., 2000)

Beck et al. (2000) used the CLES to identify factors influencing teacher's implementation of constructivism in their classrooms and the relationship between teacher beliefs and perceived implementation of the CLES domains in their classrooms. They found several themes about teachers' beliefs regarding the implementation of constructivism in their classrooms, which

included staff development, planning and class time, and curriculum materials (Beck et al., 2000). To be effective, researchers found that staff must be long term, have colleagues that model constructivist-based activities, and have support from their administration (Beck et al., 2000). Lack of planning and class time were significant concerns regarding the implementation of constructivism (Beck et al., 2000). This study adds to the limited research on factors affecting constructivist teaching, but due to lack of reliability, any conclusions are considered questionable (Beck et al., 2000).

Chapter 3: Methods

3.1 Introduction

This qualitative research project is part of a broader mixed-method investigation through the Emory Center for Contemplative Science and Compassion-Based Ethics to understand how educators understand the core aspects of the SEE Learning program.

The study utilized qualitative, in-depth interviews to better understand teachers' perspectives of constructivist teaching practices that are relevant to the SEE learning program. This methodology allowed researchers to comprehend patterns of constructivist teaching methods from the educators' perspective and to understand how to develop measures to track changes in educators' teaching practices.

3.2 Population and Sample

The eligible population for in-depth interviews was K-12 teachers at any institution in the Atlanta metropolitan area. Teachers were eligible for enrollment if they met the following criteria: currently teaching a K-12 grade, had no previous exposure to the SEE Learning program, and over the age of 18 years. Researchers used this population in order to understand how teachers, untrained in SEE Learning, perceive preferable teaching practices for the curriculum. This information will help guide SEE Learning staff in preparing educators in Atlanta, GA, to implement the curriculum across public, private, and charter schools.

Study staff partnered with teachers, who had participated in SEE Learning pilot programs, to recruit other teachers through mailers and offers of cash incentives ($25). They conducted interviews at the four schools in which the participants teach, including two private schools, one public school, and one charter school all within metropolitan Atlanta, GA. One

private school serves students from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. The other private school, located in the suburbs of Atlanta, serves students from pre-kindergarten through 6th grade. The public school serves kindergarten through 8th-grade students, and the charter school serves 8th-grade students in metropolitan Atlanta, GA.

The study's sample includes the interview transcripts of 17 teachers, one male, and 16 females. The teachers ranged in age from 27 to 51 years and varied by type of school and grade level. Ten participants were elementary school teachers, of which two were from a charter school, six from a private school, and one from a public school. Seven participants were middle school teachers, of which three were from public schools and four from a private school.

3.3 Instruments

A semi-structured, individual interview guide helped guide in-depth interviews. Focus groups with educators who implemented the SEE Learning curriculum in a summer program informed the interview guide. Study staff used the semi-structured focus groups to identify perceptions of change and critical domains of inquiry that informed the current instrument.

Researchers used the current guide to explore attitudes, knowledge, and beliefs around prosocial development in teachers. Including, their exposure to and understanding of prosocial development programs as well as key, SEE Learning concepts such as resilience, compassion, and kindness. Furthermore, researchers drafted the guide to assess teachers' orientation towards the constructivist teaching style. The guide was reviewed by both SEE Learning programmers and study staff to ensure the correct concepts were being assessed and revised during the interview process if any clarification was needed.

3.4 Data Collection Methods

Three interviewers trained in qualitative research methods, conducted 17 interviews from September 2019 to December 2019, ranging from 29 to 60 minutes long. Researchers explained the purpose of the interview to each participant and assured them they could refuse to answer questions or terminate the interview at any time. Permission was also obtained from participants to record the interview. Brief notes were written during and after each interview to document initial thoughts, ideas, and evaluations of the interview questions.

3.5 Data Analysis

Individual interviews were transcribed verbatim from the digital recordings by study staff familiar with qualitative data preparation. All transcripts were de-identified by researchers to protect the privacy of each participant and maintain confidentiality. Transcripts were entered into MAXqda10 software (Verbi GHBM, Berlin, Germany) to code and analyze the data further.

Researchers defined a set of deductive codes and applied them to the data in MAXqda. These codes represented active and participatory teaching methods described in the SEE Learning Companion, a comprehensive guide of the curriculum framework for teachers to reference while facilitating the curriculum. Supplemental codes aimed to understand the context that impacted teacher's ability to promote specific teaching methods, such as the school administration and student-teacher relationships. Codes were applied to several transcripts by study staff and assessed for intercoder reliability. The study staff completed several rounds of coding and clear code definitions as needed. After finalizing the codebook, researchers independently coded all 17 transcripts.

Coded text was then systematically reviewed by individual code and then sorted into dimensions under each theme. Summaries were provided for each dimension to describe the perception of and examples used for each theme. The researcher assessed the diversity of perceptions and examples of each domain by school type (private, public, and charter) and grade level (middle or elementary). Lastly, relevant segments of data were retrieved and reviewed to verify initial findings of the data to ensure summaries and comparisons of the data were accurate. Researchers compared results to the definitions and examples used by the CLES instrument to assess constructivist teaching as defined by Taylor and Fraser (1997).

3.6 Ethical Considerations

This study included human subjects and their personal information, so IRB approval was required. Protocol and research instruments were submitted to Emory's IRB and were approved by the Institutional Review Board of Emory University in the United States (IRB000109277).

Researchers informed participants of the study's purpose, they were allowed to terminate their participation at any time, they would record the interview, and information is confidential before participants agreed to enroll.

3.7 Limitations

This study collected data on perceptions of specific teaching practices from teachers through in-depth interviews. As a result, generalizations for this study cannot extend to a broader population due to the small sample size and sampling method used. However, teachers were able to describe their experiences in an open-ended context resulting in more abundant data.

The sampling method may have also resulted in a bias towards teachers already using teaching practices of interest. Recruitment led to a large number of elementary and middle

school educators from one private school, which employs a school-wide behavioral management program that already focuses on students' social-emotional skills.

Chapter 4: Results

4.1 Student Interactions

Teachers discussed their perception of positive student interactions, skills students needed to interact with one another positively, and ways in which teachers support positive student interactions.

Perception of Positive Student Interactions

When asked how they know their students are feeling safe in the classroom, teachers most often responded, ‘when they are engaging productively with their peers.' Responses included helping one another, listening without interrupting, and responding politely and respectfully. As well as, when students feel comfortable to speak their mind, participate in group discussions, and ask questions without feeling embarrassed. One respondent even described a safe environment and engagement as their student’s ability to work with whomever because they trust their classmates. These answers were consistent between elementary and middle school teachers at public, private, and charter schools. An elementary, public-school teacher described:

> P: Safety for me is…smiles, laughter. You know, they're productive, they're on task, but they're also having fun with what they are doing. They are engaging productively with their classmates; they are being helpful to one another, not necessarily tearing each other down or saying hurtful words. So, that's what it looks like for me.

Skills Students Need

When asked what skills students needed in order to respond more productively with their peers, teachers most often mentioned effective communication for conflict resolution. This answer was consistent across middle and elementary school teachers at public, private, and charter schools. Teachers said students needed to learn how to start a dialogue, express their

feelings and how someone made them feel, and respond appropriately. One teacher even mentioned that students need to learn self-awareness in order to understand and internalize their feelings before attempting to solve a problem with another student.

Other skills mentioned included perspective-taking and self-control; however, these skills differed between private and public-school teachers. Private school teachers often mentioned perspective taking as a skills student needed in order to empathize and communicate with other students more effectively, which public school teachers never mentioned. Nevertheless, public school teachers often said self-control was something their students needed to learn in order to empathize, communicate, and resolve conflicts. For example, one public, middle school teacher replied:

> I: what skills do you feel students need in order to respond productively to challenges with other students?
>
> P: self-control. We're building the community; this is still the early part of the year. I think we've done a great job and sometimes would still... they're just kids, they don't understand. We just have to keep reminding them. The lessons they're learning, the expectations with champs, and the schoolwide discipline thing we have. Just the expectation everywhere. Sometimes they get... they just frustrated with each other

Methods to Promote Positive Student Interactions

When probed further, respondents described ways in which they cultivate or support the skills mentioned above. The most common methods included the school's behavioral management program and modeling the expected behaviors. Both middle and elementary school teachers from all school types mentioned being a positive role model or modeling the types of behavior they want to encourage. Teachers did this by taking the perspective of their students or demonstrating how they calm themselves down. As a private, middle school teacher said:

I: How is that to be done?

P: I think that modelling is super effectively. I think it's; I think that an adult, one of their roles is to model these kinds of behaviors and I also think that they need to be able to communicate like I'm just going to pause here and I'm going to take a minute and I'm gonna think about the possibility that you might be coming to class today with some other stuff that, you know, doesn't even have to do with this class but is gonna make you difficult

Respondents from all school types mentioned the school's behavioral management program as a way of supporting student interactions. Public and charter-school teachers mentioned their respective programs as a form of community building that emphasizes respect. However, private school teachers discussed their school program as a way to encourage effective communication and cooperation among students through activities like sharing and partner work. Private school teachers also described the program as a way to teach students how to listen and respond effectively with their peers actively. One respondent even referred to it as a way for students to build trust with their peers in order to work more effectively together.

Other methods included holding classroom discussions, reminding students of the classroom rules or agreements, and referring to the classroom as a community. However, only public-school teachers mentioned getting to know their students in order to understand how to best support their social development. One public school teacher even mentioned that students need to trust and feel safe with the teacher before they will ask for or listen to advise.

While discussing ways in which to support student interactions, two teachers from the same private school mentioned technology as a hindrance to students' social development. Explaining it prevented the teachers from encouraging more group work and discussions.

4.2 Autonomy

Teachers discussed autonomy as ways in which they encourage autonomy in their students and how they know they have been successful in promoting autonomy.

Perceptions of Successful Autonomy

When asked how teachers know they have been successful in promoting autonomy, many replied when their students are self-confident. Both elementary and middle school teachers from all school types went on to describe confidence as the ability to participate in class, 'get up there' in front of their peers and be more outspoken. One public, middle school teacher, referred to this as a 'breakthrough,' when students finally see themselves differently and want to participate.

Respondents also discussed watching their students' confidence evolve. Both middle and elementary school teachers from all school types mentioned quiet and timid learners developing confidence in the classroom over time. These students become more comfortable and start to take risks, like attempting to solve a difficult problem or sharing personal stories in front of their peers.

Along with self-confidence, elementary school teachers from all school types, described successful autonomy in terms of their students' emotional development over time. One private school teacher mentioned her student's ability to make mistakes without getting upset or crying. A charter schoolteacher described her students' ability to manage painful emotions and challenges at the beginning of the year compared to the end:

> I: Is that something you look for to know if you were successful, them stepping up as a leader?
>
> P: Yeah. You can see over the course of the year the change and development of the child and the growth, not just academically, but emotionally. Like how you handle something

> at the beginning of the school year versus now. You would have been a bucket of tears, now you can say oh okay lets figure this out.

Other common answers from private, elementary school teachers included handling situations or conflict with other students or the teacher without their parents' help. Private school teachers from both elementary and middle schools mentioned students being accountable for their actions.

Some answers varied from the most common ones mentioned above. For instance, one private, middle school teacher mentioned building a stronger rapport with her students. If her students know she values them, they will want to work harder. A middle school public teacher said there is no way to measure her students' autonomy because it is too objective. She went onto describe students in her classroom know they can do hard things and feel supported, but not something she can enumerate.

Methods to Promote Autonomy

Responses varied when asked how they support their students' sense of autonomy. Both elementary and middle school teachers from private schools mentioned the school's behavioral management program as a way to encourage autonomy. The school has a 'morning meeting' which encourages public speaking during group discussions. An elementary teacher referred to the 'morning meeting' as an opportunity to encourage their students to share and talk out loud, but not to hold their hand or build dependence. One middle school teacher referred to this as a way for students to build confidence and share more about themselves with others:

> I: What do you do to support your student's courage and sense of autonomy?
>
> P: I think with morning meeting, I encourage students to share and not to use pass, I don't want to share today. In one respect I think that builds their courage. And we have talks

> about being an active listener and respectful listener. So, allowing them to become more confident in themselves

Private school teachers also mentioned giving their students choice or options, such as choosing their seats, options for books to read, or choosing an activity to demonstrate their knowledge of topics. Teachers said this was a way to give their students more ownership and control over their learning.

Many teachers also mentioned the importance of modeling the behaviors they want to cultivate in their students, including autonomy. This answer was most common among charter, elementary school teachers, but was mentioned by private, elementary, and middle school teachers as well. One teacher described modeling leadership and helping others to encourage those behaviors in her students. Another teacher mentioned pointing out her own mistakes and how she overcomes them, so her students will keep trying when they make mistakes.

Middle school teachers from both public and private schools mentioned challenging their students to sit through and overcome challenging tasks even if they do not understand the academic material or assignment, just to try.

> I: What do you do to support your students' development of courage and sense of autonomy, and how do you know when you have been successful?
>
> P: So yeah, I try to give them, like I was saying earlier, just making them sit and struggle. Giving them things I know they're gonna struggle with, that I know are gonna be challenging, and to encourage them to stay the course

Private elementary school teachers mentioned involving their students' parents when trying to promote autonomy. Responses included contacting parents at the beginning of the school year to express the importance of allowing their children to handle problems themselves

before involving their parents. One teacher described an event in which the parent encouraged the student to discuss a grade they felt was wrong, which the teacher agreed with, and acknowledged her student's ability to speak up. Another teacher described how parents can hinder their student's ability to be autonomous if they are always involved in a conflict with other students.

4.3 Student Centeredness

Address Classroom Needs

When asked what their primary goals and objectives as teachers were, both middle and elementary teachers from all school types responded with 'identifying and meeting the classroom's needs.' Responses were within the context of both academic and social-emotional needs. Teachers described the importance of the school's support and the student-teacher relationship in order to identify and address their students' needs.

Teachers discussed building relationships with their students first to determine the type of the learners they are and then identify their specific academic and social needs. One public, middle school teacher, mentioned building trust with her students before being able to challenge them academically. One private, elementary school teacher said the school prioritizes relationship building with students, which helps her get to know her students and their needs better.

Teachers also discussed described adjusting or 'tweaking' the academic curriculum in order to meet their classroom's needs. For example, a private elementary school teacher mentioned tweaking a social studies lesson to include lessons about bullying. Middle school

teachers from both public and private schools described researching activities or lessons to incorporate into their curriculum for their students.

Elementary school teachers also mentioned their schools support them in their ability to address their classroom's needs. Participants described their schools allows them to teach at the pace of their students and to be flexible with the curriculum. As one teacher mentioned:

> P: At our school we don't use textbooks, so it's a more non-traditional... in other words, it's a lot of critical thinking, teaching the whole child, and so really what that means is you are planning lessons and the conversations can vary based on the classrooms needs. So, you can make a plan of, oh I'm going to teach about dinosaurs, but that may not be where the lesson goes because we made need to do that lesson tomorrow and focus on what's happening right now in the world. Does that make sense?

Some private elementary school teachers also mentioned their school provides a classroom assistant in order to help address the needs of every student.

Incorporating Student Interests

Teachers described using classroom norms and agreements to include their students in curriculum development. Elementary, private, and charter teachers, as well as public, middle school teachers. One teacher described her students creating rules like, treat one another with respect and character skills to develop, together. These rules give her students more ownership and responsibility for the classroom.

When asked to describe their primary goals and objectives as teachers, elementary and middle school teachers from public and private schools mentioned teaching their students skills applicable to the real world. Answers included problem-solving skills, critical thinking, and conducting their research. Teachers also mentioned helping students to develop prosocial skills,

like handling conflict and self-control. Teachers also described using examples that are relatable to students or can be applied to their real-world as well.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 Constructivist Approaches

The purpose of this study was to understand how educators, unexposed to SEE Learning, perceive select, constructivist teaching practices that are important for the delivery of SEE learning. This study adds to the limited information on readiness to implement new teaching methods and programs in classrooms, despite the relationship between implementation and student outcomes (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). We assessed how teachers perceive and support students' autonomy, student-student interactions, and student-centeredness in the classroom in order to help the program better understand patterns of constructivist teaching methods, from the educators' perspective. The results will contribute to an assessment of SEE-specific educator characteristics that affect program delivery and help programmers develop markers of readiness to implement SEE Learning in Atlanta, GA schools.

The domains of interest are also found in the Constructivist Learning Environment Survey (CLES) under the subscales of student negotiation and shared control, which focuses on opportunities provided for student-student interactions and autonomous learning, respectively. Therefore, we compared domain summaries to definitions and examples of constructivist teaching as defined by the CLES. However, study participants also mentioned ways in which they support other CLES domains; personal relevance and critical voice, allowing us to assess teachers' perceptions of constructivist teaching further.

Personal Relevance:

As previously noted, this scale is interested in teachers making use of students' everyday experiences as a meaningful context for academic knowledge (Taylor et al., 1997). In the present

study, we did not probe for this domain; however, many participants described their primary goals as teaching skills applicable to the ‘real world’ and outside of school. Some even mentioned using examples relevant to students or designing lessons based on student interests. Participants from each level and school type mentioned this, except public middle school teachers.

Student Negotiation

When measuring constructivist teaching practices, there is a significant emphasis on promoting student-student negotiations as a central classroom activity (Brooks & Brooks, 1999; Taylor et al., 1997). This scale assesses the extent to which opportunities exist for students to explain and justify to other students their new ideas, listen intently, reflect on others' ideas, and self-reflect on their ideas. In the present study, participants had a very similar perception of this domain. They described productive student engagement as students helping one another, listening without interruption, and responding politely and respectfully. Teachers also mentioned students needed to develop self-awareness, perspective-taking, and self-control in order to engage more productively with their peers, which is recommended by researchers as well (Brooks & Brooks, 1999).

Researchers recommend creating an empathetic and safe environment and establish and maintain social norms around respecting others and their opinions (Taylor et al., 1997). These recommended methods were mostly used by elementary school teachers who mentioned creating classroom norms as part of the school's behavioral management program. Participants from all school types and levels also mentioned modeling respectful behavior, which is missing in constructivist teaching literature.

Shared Control

This scale assesses the degree to which students can develop as autonomous learners by being invited to share control with the teacher of the learning environment, or articulating their own goals, design and manage their activities, and determining how to apply lesson criteria (Taylor et al., 1997).

Participants' perception of autonomous students differed from the above definition, but methods to promote this type of autonomy were similar. Teachers described autonomous students as self-confident, participate in class, accountable for their actions, and able to manage conflict without parental support. Differences in perspectives may be due to the interview guide, which asked teachers to describe autonomy and courage in one question, so it was often unclear which one they were describing.

However, when describing methods to promote autonomy, teachers described methods that are consistent with the instrument. These included allowing students to design and manage their activities and lesson applications, as well as using classroom norms to give their students more ownership in the classroom. One teacher even described an instance where she let a student facilitate an art lesson on his own. Teachers also mentioned involving parents in their students' development of autonomy, which is missing in the literature, but a factor in a teacher's ability to promote this domain of constructivism (Beck et al., 2000).

In previous studies, teachers have expressed the adhering to the local curriculum as an obstacle for implementing shared control (Beck et al., 2000). In this study, teachers mentioned their schools give them the flexibility to adjust the curriculum as needed for their students, which demonstrates the importance of school support when implementing constructivist teaching.

Critical Voice

This scale assesses the extent to which students feel that it is legitimate and beneficial to question the teacher's pedagogical plan and methods and express concerns about any impediments to their Learning (Taylor et al., 1997). This scale is challenging to measure because many teachers feel contained by delivering the curriculum and covering curriculum content (Haney & Mcarthur, 2002). We did not ask or probe for examples from this domain. However, a private, elementary school teacher described a story in which she encouraged a student to challenge how she graded one of their answers on an exam by talking with the student's parent. Critical thinking skills and learning how to question information were skills teachers described as essential for their students to learn.

5.2 Factors that Affect the Implementation of Constructivist Teaching Practices

Teachers mentioned several factors that affect their ability to promote or support autonomy, student interactions, and student-centeredness. These included the school culture and the student-teacher relationship.

School Culture

Overall the school culture was the most commonly mentioned factor involved in SEE-specific, constructivist teaching practices. Classrooms and schools are dynamic, interconnected systems that are further influenced by teachers' pedagogical skills (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). These findings are consistent with other studies that demonstrated support from school administration was a crucial factor in teachers' perceived ability to provide opportunities for

students to develop as autonomous learners, make the material relevant to students' everyday experiences, and improve communication between students (Beck et al., 2000).

Both elementary and middle school teachers from all three school types mentioned the school program as a way to promote student interactions. Private school teachers described their program as a way to encourage communication and cooperation, while public and charter schools program encourage community building and respect. Another difference between private and public schools was skills students need to engage more productively with one another. Public school teachers mentioned self-control, while private school teachers mentioned perspective-taking. These differences could be from the specific program used and the specific needs of their students. Private school respondents participate in the Responsive Classroom, which is a school-wide, student-centered, social, and emotional learning approach to teaching a discipline (Rimm-Kaufman & Sawyer, 2004). Teachers from the public and charter schools did not mention specific program names.

When discussing methods to promote autonomy, private school teachers mentioned the school program encourages students to share and talk out loud, but not to hold their hand or build dependence. This difference between school types may also be due to the specific be the specific program used. Teachers mentioned that Responsive Classroom encourages students to share and talk out loud, but not to hold their hand or build dependence.

When discussing ways in which to address the needs of their students, teachers from all school types revealed that supportive schools encourage flexibility in how they present academic material, which allows them to address the needs of their students more. These examples are consistent with the importance of providing support structures for teachers to help them to teach in a constructivist manner. (Beck et al., 2000).

Student-Teacher Relationship

Participants often mentioned the importance of developing the student-teacher relationship when discussing their students' social development and addressing their individual needs. Teachers described it as essential for building trust with their students, creating a safe learning environment, and identifying individual academic and social needs. These findings are consistent with the growing body of evidence that demonstrates an association between supportive student-teacher relationships and positive social-emotional outcomes (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Studies have shown that teachers who develop warm and supportive relationships with students have greater social and emotional competence, which can also affect SEL program implementation (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Wanless & Domitrovich, 2015).

Constructivist teaching literature does not include the student-teacher relationship. However, some studies suggest establishing a respectful relationship between teacher and student, rather than one defined in terms of power, is essential for creating a constructivist learning environment (Taylor et al., 1997). For example, the CLES instrument encourages an empathetic and warm environment to foster positive student interactions between students in the classroom (Taylor et al., 1997).

5.3 Implications and Future Recommendations for the SEE Learning Program

The CLES instrument proved to be a useful tool for understanding how teachers implement constructivist teaching in the classroom, including domains that are relevant for SEE Learning. Teachers discussed examples of constructivist teaching practices that were consistent with personal relevance, student negotiation, and shared control. We did not question participants on implementing critical voice; however, some teachers described the importance of teaching their students critical thinking skills, which is an essential aspect of SEE Learning

(CCSCBE, 2017). We suggest SEE Learning programmers explore ways in which teachers cultivate critical thinking in their students, as well as exercise critical voice as defined by Taylor and Fraser (1997). There were also differences between teachers' perceptions of autonomy and those described by the shared control scale, but examples used to implement shared control were consistent. Therefore, it would be useful for SEE Learning programmers to assess educators' perceptions of autonomy, without mentioning courage, for better clarification.

As shown, understanding the school context is essential when attempting to implement a new program or teaching method in the classroom. Assessing behavioral management programs used in schools is useful because the type of program and its focus has an impact on teachers' constructivist approaches. Classrooms and school are dynamic, interconnected systems comprising characteristics of teachers, administrators, school staff, students, and the relationships among them.

Given the association between the student-teacher relationship and constructivist teaching, we recommend the program explore aspects of the student-teacher relationship. Such as the perceived importance of the student-teacher relationship and how they build relationships with their students.

Because teachers' social and emotional competencies influence their relationships with and teaching of students (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009), we recommend the program reviews teachers' social-emotional competencies as well. Especially when our findings show that teachers model behavior as a way to encourage autonomy and student interactions. Since quality SEL program implementation depends on social-emotional competence (Wanless & Domitrovich, 2015), it is recommended the program assess teachers' self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship management when assessing readiness to implement SEE Learning.

In summary, the CLES may be a useful instrument to assess constructivist teaching for SEE Learning implementation, but it would be useful to assess perceptions of autonomy and critical thinking. The school culture and context are essential for both constructivist teaching and SEL program implementation. Therefore, it would be useful for SEE programmers to assess existing school-wide programs before the implementation of SEE because it can impact how teachers perceive prosocial skills. Lastly, exploring the perceived importance of the student-teacher relationship and teachers' social-emotional competence would be useful for readiness to implement SEE Learning.

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