

# Engaging Students in Social Emotional Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Lived Experience of Three High School Teachers in the United States

Janna Jobel, University of Ottawa, Canada  
Rebecca J. Lloyd, University of Ottawa, Canada

*Abstract: Although Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is recommended for grades K-12, research suggests that what is effective in elementary and middle schools—having a separate SEL curriculum—is less effective in high schools (Yeager, 2017). Instead, engaging high school students in SEL through pedagogic practice and the subject area curriculum is encouraged. To do this, high school teachers need SEL instruction and supports, but report few available opportunities (Hamilton et al., 2019). Additionally, few SEL studies exist in the secondary context to help guide high school teachers, and the COVID-19 pandemic further emphasized the need for SEL. To begin to address this gap in SEL research, a series of classroom observations and interviews were conducted to better understand three high school teachers' lived experiences of SEL. Using an approach inspired by Max van Manen's (2016) hermeneutic phenomenology, a common theme emerged. The teachers all identified adapting the pace of curriculum during the COVID-19 pandemic as a phenomenon that inherently engaged students in SEL. The implications of this finding for teacher education and professional learning are considered.*

*Keywords: Social Emotional Learning; Phenomenology; Secondary Education; Teacher Education*

## Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted K-12 education in North America, forcing many schools to teach virtually (Trinidad, 2021). This massive shift, coupled with an international health crisis, led school systems to place greater emphasis on student health, including student mental health (Schaffer et al., 2021). As a result, research interest in Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and its classroom applications grew exponentially (Yoder et al., 2020). SEL has been researched for over two decades, and well-implemented SEL programs benefit student behavior, grades, and test scores, as well as their mental health, college-readiness, and pro-social behaviors (Corcoran et al., 2018; Greenberg et al., 2017). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2020) defines SEL as:

the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. (para. 1)

Essentially, SEL is defined as the development of the interpersonal and intrapersonal skills necessary to achieve positive health and academic outcomes. Most of the existing research and resources on SEL focus on interventions within the elementary or middle school context (Bear et al., 2017; Yeager, 2017).

In elementary and middle schools, SEL usually has its own separate curriculum, consisting of a series of mini-lessons taught by specialists (Williamson et al., 2015). This approach has been found less effective with high school students (Bear et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2018; Yeager, 2017; Williamson et al., 2015). The nascent research within the high school context suggests SEL should ideally be a part of a teacher's pedagogic practice and incorporated within their subject area curriculum, but research examining SEL in the high school classroom remains sparse (Williamson et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2018). This leaves teachers with little guidance, and they are making clear they want more SEL teacher education and professional learning opportunities (Hamilton et al., 2019).

To begin to address this gap and to identify teachers' needs while privileging their expertise, Janna, a doctoral candidate under the guidance of Dr. Rebecca Lloyd at the University of Ottawa, conducted a phenomenological inquiry to better understand high school teachers' lived experiences of engaging students in SEL. A school district (consisting of a middle and a high school) in the northeastern region of the United States (US) invited her to conduct this study at their high school. The district has approximately one thousand students across their middle and high school. Five years ago, they designed and piloted a character development curriculum (with SEL embedded) for Grades 6-8. They found the programming benefitted

students in that it helped students and their families understand the expectations of the district better, demonstrated in fewer discipline referrals and greater student and family engagement in extracurricular activities. The district volunteered to participate in this research to better understand their high school teachers' interpretation and experience of engaging students in SEL to begin the discussion on how to create a district-wide approach to SEL. The main research question is thus: *What is it like to experience engaging students in SEL within a secondary teaching practice?*

## Methodology

This study is inspired by Max van Manen's (2016) "hermeneutic phenomenology," which accounts for both Husserl's rich description of a phenomenon as it is consciously experienced through existentials (such as a felt sense of time, space, body, and other) and Heidegger's reiterative exploration of meaning. As there are few SEL resources specifically for high school teachers, an approach inspired by hermeneutic phenomenology can explore the everyday practices and experiences of engaging students in SEL and the meaning of these experiences for pedagogic practice. Teachers were invited from specific disciplines (i.e., math, English and physical education) with state-mandated SEL objectives. The curricular frameworks in each of these subjects asks teachers to consider in what ways they can improve engagement in their subject area curricula by developing students' five social emotional competencies as defined by CASEL (2020): self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Twenty-five teachers were invited via email; three volunteered to participate, including two math teachers and one health and physical education teacher from the high school. Van Manen (2016) recommends between three to five participants to allow for in-depth inquiry because hermeneutic phenomenology relies on becoming closely acquainted with participants' life-worlds, which requires not only repeated access to the individual, but an intimate understanding of the ways in which they express and interpret meaning.

During the spring of 2021, each teacher was observed in their virtual classrooms for two to three class periods. Immediately after each observation, teachers were asked to identify and describe any experiences of engaging students in SEL. These descriptions were written up into vignettes to inform later interviews. Each teacher was interviewed twice virtually, for approximately 30 minutes each time. The first interview with each teacher was structured to gather anecdotes of their experiences of engaging students in SEL in the classroom. The second interview with each teacher gathered further anecdotes and expounded upon the significance of these moments for their pedagogic practice.

In hermeneutic phenomenology, the goal of the researcher is to offer the reader a felt sense of that phenomenon, so that the phenomenon is not just considered conceptually but felt experientially. To do this, the participants' descriptions of engaging students in SEL were written, rewritten, and edited continuously to (re)present a felt sense of the existentials for the reader. Van Manen's (2016) approach to analysis was followed: (1) gather lived experience descriptions, (2) analyze experiences through the existentials of a felt sense of time, space, body, materiality and other, (3) identify commonalities across participants, (4) heuristically reach for meaning through writing, (5) question how my own assumptions and biases may impact my interpretation, and (6) (re)present the experience for readers. The transcripts were further analyzed to ensure recommendations for practice were representative of the participants' experience and interpretation of SEL by following a thematic analysis like the approach recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) of reading the transcripts as a whole, noting repeated topics, mapping the relationship of repeated topics, and reflecting on their significance to the phenomenon as described by the participants.

## Results: Descriptions of SEL-in-action

During, and prior to research collection, the entire 2020-2021 school year had been conducted virtually in the target school district. Teachers thus had to quickly develop their teaching style within a virtual environment, where they were largely unfamiliar with the medium as well as many of their students. What follows is a brief introduction of each educator, with identifying characteristics masked to cloak identities, followed by a vignette of their lived experience of engaging students in SEL within their virtual classrooms. \*All names are pseudonyms.

***Mrs. Williams, a High School Math Teacher***

Mrs. Williams had a career in business prior to becoming a math teacher 20 years ago. Mrs. Williams became a teacher “to help students.” She described, “I had those corporate years, but this is so much more impactful, so much more exciting, and working with [adolescents] every day and trying to make them equipped for a better life is fulfilling.” Each class she welcomed every student by name and asked students to engage in a brief check-in via chat. Every student was asked to speak and engage each period, and each student spoke with little prompting during observations. The following vignette, written from Mrs. Williams’s perspective, was inspired by a moment Mrs. Williams identified as engaging a student in SEL, when they struggled with a concept but persisted:

“Juan, pick an odd number to solve between 13 and 25 on the page.”

Juan chooses a question and speaks in starts and stops. His pauses grow longer.

I ask him to just focus on the third step of solving the problem. Juan solves that component. I ask Juan about the next step, but this time his shoulders slump and his eyes remain downcast. I rephrase the question. Juan nods no. I rephrase it again, slower, simpler. He shrugs. My pulse quickens. I can feel Juan lose hope.

In her interview, Mrs. Williams shared she felt hesitant in this moment, but during the observation her tone never indicated any anxiety. She remained smiling; although this moment interrupted the flow of the class, she allowed Juan to process at his own speed.

I apologize for being unclear and ask another student, Emily, to rephrase the question. Juan watches Emily on the screen. Emily uses a soft tone that makes her question sound like an invitation. Juan nods gently as he draws the answer to the problem on the screen.

“You persevered! We all stumble with new methods and learning how to push through to find the answer teaches us more than if we just memorize the process. Great job!”

Mrs. Williams identified this moment as engaging Juan in SEL because she invited him to become aware of his learning processes and emotions during problem-solving. When asked how she experienced this moment, if she felt any anxiety regarding wanting to move on to the next problem, she stated, “there is no sense of time, there is no hurry up. Because it doesn’t matter how long it takes really.” When asked if the pandemic had impacted her classroom dynamic, she stated: “the whole universe has stopped and we’re just in a bubble together, sharing this space.” Mrs. Williams did not consider the pandemic a barrier to student learning or to building student-teacher relationships.

***Mr. Smith, a Secondary Physical Education Teacher***

When asked why Mr. Smith pursued physical education, he stated, “my own positive experience with coaches that I had, and the success I had as an athlete.” Mr. Smith began teaching in a postsecondary context, but transitioned to secondary to impact his students the way his mentors inspired him. Physical education had unique challenges during the pandemic though, as it is a place-based discipline, and reliant on physically interacting with one another. The Health and Physical Education (HPE) department at the school had to reimagine their curriculum when school turned virtual. Mr. Smith claimed that the students responded well to HPE’s virtual approach of beginning with interactive questions to connect, a period of High Intensity Interval Training to get active, and then mindful cool-downs to get centered. Students’ engagement was on display during observations, and Mr. Smith experienced a class opening activity as engaging students in SEL because they practiced relationship-building with one another while managing their emotions during their virtual school day. His description of his experience inspired the following vignette:

I greet each twelfth-grader by name as they enter my PE class on Zoom™. I ask some about family members, others about sports practices, and some I tease over sports allegiances. The students are early to class, mostly smiling.

I am never quite sure what to expect from their answers to the daily question. I type, “If you could be any animal, what animal would you be?”

Sandy writes “giraffe,” I ask her if she knows they have a black tongue and give birth standing up. She laughs and says she has seen their black tongues in National Geographic. Emily types she would be a cat. Then John, another student, interjects to say that cats are the only animal that kill for fun. Several students share sadistic stories of previous pet cats leaving dead rodents as presents on doorsteps. The students are laughing and cringing. The conversation wraps up after a couple of minutes and I then share current events related to the changing weather across the country. Students comment at length in the chat box about the different locations I mention, how they have visited the areas, what their predictions for the future are, and so on. Then I start the music and spring up from my chair to begin the physical activity portion of the class.

Mr. Smith identified this interaction as engaging students in SEL because the students were actively engaging with one another in the moment. He noted most of the other teachers across subject areas claimed students were silent in their classes, disengaged, and hard to read virtually. In PE, they participated; they became excited; they shared. These skills are part of SEL as well as part of the HPE curriculum. Mr. Smith shared that the HPE department could not possibly teach all of the curriculum objectives they would normally because of physical constraints, but they could go much more deeply into different parts of the curriculum. Thus, he felt that limiting the scope of the curriculum to deepen skill practice was responsive to student needs and authentic to the subject area. Some teachers during the pandemic in other subject areas, however, wondered if limiting the scope of the curriculum in their subject area would be a detriment to student wellbeing as opposed to an asset.

#### ***Mr. Sanchez, a High School Math Teacher***

Mr. Sanchez had a successful career in engineering before becoming a math teacher “just to understand the education system better [...] for my children [...] to know how to help them be successful.” Having moved to the US from another country, Mr. Sanchez was trying to navigate the educational system to better advocate for his children, and was pleasantly surprised by how math was taught here: “The focus of this country’s education system is not just teaching what to memorize, but it is showing all of the different applications, and I like that very much.” Mr. Sanchez’s affinity for math and appreciation of the US’s education system led him to teaching, but he understood acutely that not every student had positive experiences with math, “Math is not their favorite subject sometimes, so you have to understand what has led to that. As a teacher, after that, it’s our job to make students aware of their strengths.” Mr. Sanchez was trying to help students develop all of the skills they needed to be successful in whatever goals they had. As a result, Mr. Sanchez, out of all of the participants, shared a greater sense of trying to keep his course at a similar speed to pre-pandemic conditions according to external measures of what students needed to learn. Mr. Sanchez described helping students keep pace with the curriculum as engaging them in SEL because in the pandemic, he needed them to be self-aware and recognize when they needed help more so than in-person. Mr. Sanchez’s description of one such moment in class inspired the following vignette:

I explain the new concept. It is just a different way to solve the same kind of problem we have been tackling all week. I try to remember to go slow, but I feel my pace quickening as I continue, a nagging at the corner of my mind that we need to cover a certain number of concepts before the midterm. I am explaining the concept through a problem, showing the steps as I say them.

The students seemed to understand the other way to solve these types of problems earlier this week. Their formative assessments were strong, but I struggle to read their faces in class. From my second screen, I can see all of the students’ faces. Their eyes are focused on the screen, but their mouths are set in indecipherable lines.

In some moments, it was very clear Mr. Sanchez was trying to read the students’ level of understanding through the screen and found them impassive. There was no visible or audible frustration, but sometimes Mr.

Sanchez would answer questions he posed, or halfway explain the process to get to an answer before jumping to the conclusion.

I rely on cold calls. I will start with one of my stronger students to gauge understanding and not embarrass anyone.

“Jamie, begin the next problem. What’s the first step?”

He explains the first step and provides the correct answer. A few students nod.

Next, I will ask a student who often struggles with new concepts. “Jasmine, what’s the next step?”

“Uh…”

She looks down for a brief moment, but the object she’s looking at is offscreen. Her shoulders cave inward.

She bites her lip. I feel my stomach drop. But then she outlines the next step and gives the right answer without further pause. I can move on to the next application of the concept.

Mr. Sanchez identified this moment as engaging the class in SEL because he was encouraging them to assess and be accountable for their own understanding. At the beginning of each course, he made clear he would respond same-day to any communication received before 10 pm, but that they must keep up during class or possibly be unable to learn new skills. The example provided by Mr. Sanchez stressed the importance of having staff-wide, interdisciplinary conversations on SEL, because his approach was so different from the other teachers in this study. However, Mr. Sanchez kept this demanding speed precisely because he cared and was advocating for students’ future success. Different students have different needs, and teachers will have various approaches to meeting those needs. A high school requires a flexible approach to SEL because it is necessary to have teachers who understand student needs in various ways, and because individual students will have different needs and goals.

## Analysis

The most pervasive theme, and common struggle amongst the three teachers, was the challenge to attune themselves to the pace of their students during the pandemic, whether with the class as a whole like Mr. Sanchez, or an individual student as in Mrs. Williams’ classroom. The word pace means “One’s course or way; a journey, a route, a way; passage, passing” (Oxford University Press, n.d.). It is not only how quickly one moves forward, but the way in which they move forward. The word came up several times across each participant’s interview responses. When the pace of curriculum met student needs, they felt capable and encouraged, but when the pace of curriculum moved too fast or too slow, students struggled to engage and this frustrated their sense of future possibilities (Zhang et al., 2020). Pacing curriculum to meet student needs is challenging in general, but exponentially so during a pandemic through a virtual classroom with limited preparation (Trinidad, 2021).

In these moments of pacing the curriculum, the teachers explained they were engaging students in SEL because they were asking students to become more self-aware of their learning processes. Mrs. Williams slowed the pace of the curriculum to meet Juan’s needs. When Juan understood the pace of the curriculum quickened again, the shift in pace to accommodate Juan did not adversely impact Mrs. Williams’ lesson plan. Similarly, Mr. Smith felt the pace of his curriculum slowed considerably as his students learned to interact with one another in healthy ways during a difficult time. He felt this skill set aligned with his curricular objectives and student needs; as such, he did not feel rushed or stressed. In contrast, Mr. Sanchez sensed the disruption of the pandemic acutely, and tried actively to compensate for the loss of face-time with students in-person by moving through as much of the curriculum as possible. He did this to ensure the students did not feel their goals were impeded by the pandemic.

Although all three teachers shared their experience of pacing the curriculum, their experience of the moment and their interpretation of their role in it was largely impacted by two factors, their approach to pedagogy and their understanding of curriculum. The teachers' sense of the ways in which pedagogy and curriculum relate to each other determined the ways in which they then related to and read their students' understanding, affecting how they paced their curriculum and engaged students in SEL.

### *Pace as Determined by Pedagogic Practice*

According to van Manen (2015), "Even teachers who see it mostly as their task to 'deliver' the government-mandated curriculum are inevitably relationally involved with their students" (p. 42). He recognizes that many teachers discuss curriculum as a list of objectives, as something to implement, but even if they do so, they still function as a facilitator between the subject area and the students. They are relationally connected. Next, we will examine each teacher's approach to pedagogy and curriculum, and discuss how that influenced their interpretation of SEL as experienced in pacing their curriculum during the COVID-19 pandemic.

When asked what it is like to experience engaging students in SEL in her classroom, Mrs. Williams stated, "I'm better aware of treating our learners as people, as humans, and helping them to feel confident, to ask questions," and when encouraged to put SEL specifically into the context of a high school math class, she stated "feel[ing] mathematically taken care of, [...] feeling nurtured in my learning, and that nobody's putting any constraints on me and I'm constantly being urged to reach more." Mrs. Williams demonstrated this level of concern for Juan's progression in math class, giving him the time, space, and support necessary to allow him to understand his learning process. For Mrs. Williams, she believed that pedagogy is about helping a learner feel capable and confident through building strong relationships and allowing for flexibility with pacing the curriculum in order to slow down or speed up to meet the needs of the student in the moment. With this belief, she asked her students to be self-aware of their learning processes and self-confidence while learning, which helped engage students in SEL.

Mr. Smith also espoused a very relational approach to pedagogy: "My job is to educate every child. That means that, you know, I give them what they need, and ask of them, 'Give me what I need.'" He identified gaps in knowledge or ability and highlighted the path to improvement. Mr. Smith's help was student-specific and built on a relationship where the student's skill is valued. His slowed pace of the curriculum during the pandemic honored students' needs and developed their social and emotional skills. He felt that in some ways the pandemic actually helped him to engage students in SEL more frequently, because students were more willing to question what they were feeling and what they needed. Mr. Smith was able to adjust the pace of his curriculum to accommodate their needs and students were able to in turn identify and be responsive to the curriculum's adaptations.

In this study, only Mr. Sanchez detailed feeling tension while trying to be responsive to the state-mandated curriculum, as showcased in his vignette. However, only Mr. Sanchez was detailing high-achieving students and helping them meet specific objectives to prepare them for other courses. The tension he felt was an act of service. He was not worried about job security, but worried about helping students develop the skills they needed to be successful in the future. Whereas the other teachers' pedagogical approaches focused on the student-teacher relationship, Mr. Sanchez prioritized the student-subject matter relationship where he functioned as a facilitator. All three teachers were putting students' needs first, but that student-centeredness meant different things to them depending on their student population during the COVID-19 pandemic. All teachers were showing care and concern for their students, but it led to different results in pacing their curriculum. Despite these different approaches to pacing curriculum, all of the teachers experienced the process of determining the pace of curriculum to meet student needs as engaging students in SEL.

## Conclusion

Decades of research demonstrate SEL can improve student health and academic outcomes (Corcoran et al., 2018; Greenberg et al., 2017), but a gap in resources and research concerning the high school context remains (Bear et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2018). This phenomenological study was conducted to better understand high school teachers' lived experiences of engaging students in SEL in order to identify further supports that teachers needed. The teachers in this study had state-mandated SEL curriculum objectives in their subject areas, but when asked to define SEL and their experience of engaging students in SEL, they did not mention curricular objectives or preplanned lessons. Instead, they described the ways in which they identified and responded to student needs inherently in their pedagogic practice. They described the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic made them reflect deeply on their practice of pacing curriculum to meet students' needs. The students must become aware of their own individual pace of learning and its relation to the classroom's pace. The teacher helps mediate, if necessary, but what that mediation looks like depends upon that teacher's sense of pedagogy and curriculum.

Prior research indicates that high school teachers recognize SEL is important and want more guidance (Hamilton et al., 2019), but current approaches to SEL in teacher education and professional learning are often limited to learning about specific SEL curriculum interventions, which is less effective in the high school context (Bear et al., 2017; Jennings et al., 2019). This study's findings suggest that high school teachers who are interested in engaging students in SEL may want to begin with their approach to pedagogy in general, such as in what ways they determine pace in their courses. Though the pandemic made pacing one's course more challenging, each year every teacher is called to be responsive to curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived (Aoki et al., 2005), to fulfill duties outlined by a ministry of education, as well as to meet the needs of the students. The teachers in this study shared that engaging students in SEL means helping students identify and respond to the different expectations a school has for a student, a teacher has for a student, and the expectations students have for themselves. To help teachers further develop opportunities to engage students in SEL, educators need to have time and space to question their views on pedagogy and curriculum, and in what ways their sense of these will impact their relationships with students and their daily interactions with them.

A phenomenological inquiry does not aim to solve a problem but dig more deeply into the lived experience of a phenomenon to understand it better. Teachers who volunteered for the study were already advocates of SEL, and they described engaging students in SEL as inherent to pedagogical practice, but still the presentation of the phenomenon looked very different depending on how the teacher interpreted student needs. This demonstrates what previous research in the high school context has suggested — SEL is not and should not be prescriptive for high school students and teachers (Clark, 2017). Teachers must be responsive to student needs and the needs of the subject area. To help teachers in developing a responsive, relational pedagogic practice that inherently engages students in SEL, more experiential examples would be helpful for teachers to (re)consider their own practice. Thus, more research is needed across contexts, to lend insight into ways in which cultural, socioeconomic, gender, subject area considerations and so on impact how teachers engage their students in SEL and the meaning SEL has within their practice.

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Janna Jobel** recently defended her doctoral dissertation at the University of Ottawa in the Faculty of Education. She researched in what ways Social Emotional Learning is embedded in secondary teachers' daily teaching practice. She hopes to use this research to better inform teacher education and professional learning practices.

**Rebecca Lloyd** is Full Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa who phenomenologically and qualitatively researches movement with a 'Function2Flow' interdisciplinary motion-sensing consciousness. Her research interests include partnered practices, physical education pedagogy, dance, and active aging education.