

# Mechanisms Supporting Students' Social and Emotional Learning Development: Qualitative Findings from a Teacher-Led Intervention

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## ABSTRACT

While the positive outcomes of social-emotional learning (SEL) are well documented, few studies examine the mechanisms supporting students' SEL. Seven elementary teachers participated in audio-recorded focus groups/interviews following the implementation of an evidence-based, implementation sensitive SEL intervention. The current study identifies key mechanisms for effective school-based SEL interventions: (1) a whole-class approach; (2) a new vocabulary and shared language; (3) implementation of short, easy, reliable practices; (4) emphasis on transferable SEL strategies; and (5) improvements in teachers' SEL knowledge, confidence, and behaviour. Findings support prevention and intervention practices to educate, train, and support stakeholders on the importance of classroom SEL.

**Keywords:** social emotional learning, teacher-led intervention, school-based intervention, mechanisms

## RÉSUMÉ

Alors que les résultats positifs de l'apprentissage socioémotionnel (ASE) sont bien documentés, peu d'études examinent les mécanismes qui soutiennent l'ASE des élèves. Sept enseignants du primaire ont

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participé à des groupes de discussion enregistrés après avoir mis en œuvre une intervention ASE. L'étude actuelle identifie les mécanismes clés pour des interventions efficaces de l'ASE en milieu scolaire : 1) approche universelle en classe ; 2) nouveau vocabulaire et langage partagé ; 3) mise en œuvre de pratiques courtes, simples et fiables ; 4) accent sur des stratégies ASE transférables ; 5) amélioration des connaissances, de la confiance et du comportement des enseignants en ASE. Les résultats appuient les pratiques de prévention et d'intervention pour éduquer, former et soutenir les parties prenantes sur l'importance de l'ASE en classe.

**Mots clés :** apprentissage socioémotionnel, intervention menée par l'enseignant, intervention en milieu scolaire, mécanismes

Children are highly influenced by their peers and educators (Wong et al., 2014). Teachers play a crucial role in promoting academic knowledge as well as supporting students' social-emotional competencies (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). The promotion of social-emotional development in schools is associated with improved cognitive, social, emotional, and academic outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011). While these positive outcomes are well documented, there is a dearth of research examining the mechanisms that support the acquisition of students' social and emotional learning (SEL) skills in the classroom. Therefore, it is important to understand the process through which students can learn SEL, as evidenced through teacher's strategies and intervention strategies. In examining the perspectives of elementary school teachers involved in a school-based SEL intervention, the current study considers the potential mechanisms teachers can employ to support students' SEL development. The Faith and Wellness Resource was created for and by teachers to address the need for SEL in a school setting to promote positive mental health amongst students. The Faith and Wellness Resource comprises a repository of evidence-based SEL practices that were designed to address implementation needs in busy classrooms (e.g., brief, easy-to-use, minimal training or supplies needed, minimal cost).

### **Benefits of Social and Emotional Learning for Students**

SEL is defined as the process of acquiring core competencies to set and achieve positive goals, recognize emotions, establish positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Elias et al., 1997). Growing interest in SEL is driven by its association to favourable outcomes, including improvements in mental health and academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011). Research has identified strong links between SEL and mental health (Bermejo-Matins et al., 2018; Payton et al., 2011). SEL often involves the skills necessary for individuals to set and achieve positive goals, engage in responsible decision-making, maintain positive relationships, and manage emotions (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2019). Short-term benefits include increased academic achievement, decreased problem behaviours, improved student relationships, and more positive classroom climates (Elias, 1997; Payton et al., 2008; Sklad, et al., 2012; Wigelsworth et al., 2016). SEL interventions also support positive long-term outcomes, such as resiliency, responsible decision-making, identification with prosocial peers, and emotional regulation (Panayiotou et al., 2019). These skills help individuals cope with difficulties, build resilience, and form healthy relationships to overcome life's challenges (Md-Yunus, 2019). Payton et al. (2008) found that SEL competencies predict

several mediators of mental health such as school engagement, self-concept, motivation, and relationships with others. Further, the promotion of self-esteem, social inclusion, and competence serves as a foundation for both the prevention and intervention of emotional, behavioural, and mental challenges (CASEL, 2019).

### **The Role of Teachers**

Teachers play a critical role in promoting students' SEL development. First, teachers can provide a foundation for learning SEL by establishing caring teacher-student relationships and safe environments that encourage positive behaviours. Thus, teachers have the potential to create safe, supportive, and participatory learning environments that support students' development (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). By establishing strong rapport and a safe learning environment, teachers can then provide explicit SEL instruction (Skald et al., 2012) and can implement SEL practices that match student needs (Durlak et al., 2011). Teacher approaches, such as proactive classroom management and cooperative learning, can enhance students' feelings of comfort in exploring and practicing new SEL skills (Hawkins et al., 2004). Through direct instruction, teachers can positively influence students' behaviour to meet academic, social, and emotional goals (Durlak et al., 2011).

### **Potential Mechanisms for Supporting SEL**

Formal SEL programs are often led by teachers (Durlak et al., 2011), underscoring their importance as leaders and role models in teaching SEL skills. Yet, despite the importance of understanding *how* SEL programs work to improve specific skills, most existing research focuses on outcomes (Panayiotou et al., 2019). Thus, the specific mechanisms through which teachers effectively support the adoption of SEL skills are less known. To address this gap, we explore potential mechanisms that promote and support elementary school teachers' SEL instruction to students. These mechanisms include the ways in which teachers can implement these practices such that students can learn SEL, while identifying what these key features and processes involve to best support students' learning. Indeed, from an implementation science framework, we consider the implementation-sensitive elements of the intervention itself. The intervention practices are designed to be easily implemented by teachers in their classroom settings, ranging in length from 5–15 minutes. The intervention also addresses implementation-sensitivity through the inclusion of practices that require no additional teacher training, can be modified based on student needs, and can all be found in one easy to navigate online portal which provides instructions about delivering the practices as well as the research supporting their inclusion in the resource. We also consider the ways in which teachers use and modify the SEL practices to best support their students' learning. This will also allow for identification of any potential barriers and facilitators to implementing this SEL intervention (Center for Clinical Management Research, 2014).

A common approach to school-based SEL is the adoption of a whole-class approach (Durlak et al., 2011). Teachers can create classroom norms around the use of SEL skills to reduce potential stigma regarding talking and being open with one's emotions and set positive expectations that reinforce SEL competencies (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). A common language can be introduced, allowing students to express feelings, concerns, and hopes related to their SEL development (Durlak et al., 2011). Furthermore, classroom-wide SEL practices are cost effective and time efficient (Wong et al., 2014). Considering the nature of most elementary school classrooms, wherein teachers have access to students for several hours, there is ample opportunity to

practice SEL skills. By applying SEL skills collectively and with reliable frequency, the practice of engaging in SEL can become routine, supporting students' learning as well as teachers' effective student engagement.

The benefits of school-based SEL interventions also include the potential for students to practice skills in contexts other than the classroom, such as on the playground or at home. One effective model of SEL involves teaching skills through the implementation of evidence-based practices that model social-emotional competencies and provide additional opportunities to practice these skills during classroom activities (Oberle et al., 2016). Through consistency and repetition, teachers can reinforce students' use of SEL skills, for example, through the encouragement of daily practice both at school and in other contexts.

The benefits of SEL programs are likely not limited to students. Sandell et al. (2013) found teachers who received SEL training achieved greater self-awareness and knowledge, became more aware of their importance to students, understood the need for collaboration, and experienced a positive classroom climate. Likewise, SEL may help teachers become aware of their own emotions, understand their own capacities, and recognize personal strengths and weaknesses (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Teacher benefits may translate into benefits for students, acting as an effective mechanism for school-based SEL. For instance, teachers' confidence with their own SEL skills can likely transfer to confidence in their teaching, thus modelling healthy SEL behaviours and supporting students in developing their own SEL skills.

### **Intervention**

The Faith and Wellness: A Daily Mental Health Resource is a SEL resource developed in collaboration between School Mental Health Ontario (SMH-ON) and the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA), adapted from a previous resource developed in partnership between SMH-ON and the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO). The Faith and Wellness Resource contains an online repository of evidence-informed and easy-to-learn practices intended to enhance SEL and mental health among elementary school-aged students. The original intervention was the result of a scoping literature review and content analysis of other common SEL competencies, such as CASEL (2019), that identified and refined the common elements of existing evidence-based SEL programs, which resulted in six core components of SEL. The resource includes 80 daily SEL practices across six core skill categories (stress management and coping, identification and management of emotions, positive motivation and perseverance, healthy relationship skills, self-awareness and sense of identity, critical and creative thinking [executive functioning]) that teachers can implement within their classrooms. Practices were created to ensure brevity, variety, accessibility, and minimal cost (Durlak et al., 2011).

### **THE CURRENT STUDY**

The current study explores teachers' use of the Faith and Wellness Resource and identifies potential mechanisms that promote school-based SEL. Initial evaluation indicates positive change for students and teachers, such as improved SEL confidence, school motivation and engagement, and a positive classroom climate (Andrews et al., 2020). Yet less is known regarding the mechanisms that facilitate this intervention and *how* these outcomes are supported. The current study uses a phenomenological approach to gather and analyze data. This approach highlights teachers' first-hand experiences implementing the intervention,

encouraging teachers to describe and reflect on what worked to support students' SEL and how. Specifically, the authors aim to address the following: (1) How do teachers describe their experiences implementing a school-based SEL intervention? (2) What are the mechanisms that influence the effectiveness of a school-based SEL intervention for students in elementary school? The authors suggest that teachers have a significant role, not only in implementation, but also in their ability to provide support for students' SEL.

## METHOD

### Procedures

The current study draws from a larger evaluation project that uses a waitlist randomized control trial design to evaluate the Faith and Wellness Resource in English Catholic schools across Ontario, Canada. The research team invited all English Catholic school boards in Ontario to participate. The researchers match-paired the school boards that chose to participate ( $N = 19$ ) based on urban/rural makeup and unit size. The researchers randomly assigned school boards to either Group 1 (intervention group) or Group 2 (waitlist comparison group). This study considers only teachers in the implementation group (Group 1;  $N = 125$ ). Group 1 teachers received access to the Faith and Wellness Resource. Researchers asked participating teachers to complete a minimum of 18 daily mental health practices (one from each of the six core SEL categories, repeated at least 3 times) across a three-month period (approximately October/November 2019 to February/March 2020). Each practice takes approximately 5 to 15 minutes to deliver with students. The researchers also collected quantitative data before and after the implementation period (see Andrews et al., 2020); however, only qualitative data is included in this study.

From a randomized list of teachers who remained actively participating in the study following the implementation period ( $N = 59$ ), the researchers invited 43 teachers to participate in an audio-recorded semi-structured focus group (approximately one hour in length). Retention was quite low, and many teachers chose not to participate or refrained from participation because of scheduling difficulties due to the Covid-19 global pandemic. The focus group comprised five participants. The researchers conducted one individual interview because the teacher was unable to attend the original focus group. An additional participant provided written feedback to the same focus group questions, as a scheduling disruption prevented their participation in the main focus group. Researchers facilitated the focus groups through a series of open-ended questions, encouraging teachers to reflect candidly on their experiences implementing the Faith and Wellness Resource. Participants received the focus group questions prior to facilitation, allowing time to reflect on their experiences. All procedures received approval from Brock University Research Ethics Board, as well as the research ethics boards from participating school boards.

### Participants

Participants ( $N = 7$ ) were elementary school teachers from five school boards in Ontario, including both urban population centres (71%; population of 100,000+) and small population centres (29%; population ranging from 1,000–29,999; Statistics Canada, 2016). Teachers' years of experience varied: including <10 years teaching (29%), 11–20 years (43%), and >21 years (29%). Participants included classroom teachers (71%) and specialized teachers (e.g., learning strategies, ESL; 29%), and taught children in kindergarten

(14%), Grade 2 (43%), Grade 3 (29%), Grade 5 (29%), Grade 6 (14%), Grade 7 (29%), and Grade 8 (14%; some taught multiple grade levels, so percentages sum to >100%).

### Focus Groups and Coding

The researchers conducted focus groups and applied a phenomenological approach to analysis. This approach provided a first-hand understanding of how teachers experienced the implementation of the Faith and Wellness Resource. In the focus groups, researchers asked the teachers to reflect on their use of the Faith and Wellness Resource, then discuss whether and how the resource affected students' SEL skills, as well as their own (see Appendix for focus group questions). The researchers encouraged participants to discuss their experiences honestly, including considering components of the Faith and Wellness Resource that may not have worked. The researchers transcribed focus group recordings and teacher feedback into NVivo (Patton 2002). The researchers analyzed transcripts to identify meaning units and coded using preliminary coding categories based directly on the questions asked (e.g., change for teachers [confidence, knowledge], change for students [relationships, school, self]). Research assistants (EP and EA) engaged in initial coding, discussing points of difference to ensure consistency and accuracy. The transcriptions were then divided between EP and EA with EA coding the focus group and written teacher feedback while EA coded the individual interview. The researchers conducted preliminary coding across six core SEL categories: stress management and coping, identification and management of emotions, positive motivation and perseverance, healthy relationship skills, self-awareness and sense of identity, and critical and creative thinking. In addition to coding based on the six SEL categories, EP and EA made notes regarding potential themes they identified as relating to mechanisms supporting the implementation of SEL.

After EP and EA completed the first round of coding, the principal project researcher (NA) reviewed transcriptions, the coded categories by EP and EA, and EP and EA's notes regarding initial themes. Along with her own reading, NA organized notes that represented similar elements into themes that addressed key mechanisms supporting SEL. After identifying initial themes, NA used the Provincial System Support Program Evidence Brief (PSSP, 2016) as a framework to review themes, identify whether additional themes might have been missed, and help apply meaning to these themes. The researchers identified five general themes that represent key mechanisms supporting students' SEL. The researchers include key passages that highlight the themes and provide nuanced descriptions of participants' experiences below. As a final step, a researcher who helped facilitate focus groups (TW) and a mental health professional who helped create the Faith and Wellness Resource (AF) reviewed the thematic descriptions, in conjunction with participants' statements, to further ensure the analysis was thorough, valid, and reliable.

Researcher reflexivity is important to account for the researchers as a tool in data collection and analysis and is needed to ensure credibility and rigor (Teh & Lek, 2018). Authors included academic researchers and researchers/professionals from partner organizations. Academic researchers (EA, EP, and NA) conducted initial coding and extraction of themes. TW and AF, who have direct experience collecting data in elementary classrooms and/or supporting teachers' professional development, assessed validation of themes. As such, they may have personal bias regarding the mechanisms to support SEL, but also offer real-world experience for contextualization and a deeper understanding of the themes extracted.

## RESULTS

### Mechanisms that Support SEL

Teachers described several key mechanisms that helped support SEL change for students: (1) the importance of a whole-class approach; (2) the provision of new vocabulary and a shared language; (3) the implementation of short and easy practices that were frequent and/or repeated throughout the day and provided students with predictability and routine; (4) the opportunity for students to apply SEL strategies in a variety of contexts; and (5) improvements in teachers' own SEL knowledge, confidence, and behaviour. Further information regarding changes in student SEL as a result of the Faith and Wellness Resource is discussed in Andrews et al. (2020), which supports teachers' impressions about potential mechanisms of change.

### Whole-Class Approach

Teachers touched on the benefits of engaging in the Faith and Wellness Resource practices as a class, as well as providing flexibility for students to reflect individually. Teachers noted that having specific skills and strategies as outlined in the Faith and Wellness Resource that were familiar to everyone was helpful, as they could refer to these practices as needed. By design, the intervention practices can be implemented as whole class, and allowed students to share in collective strategies and activities to promote SEL.

... [intervention practices were] more collaborative stuff, more things that we could do together as a whole group whether it was...visualizing the nature walk or you know doing body scans. (Participant 2)

After learning and practicing specific skills as a class activity where all students participated, all it took was a quick reminder for students to enact the skills themselves. One teacher described how, after implementing a practice as a class, she provided students with several minutes of quiet time to reflect on their experiences:

Recording their responses allowed kids who were shy or introverted an opportunity to think and express themselves. (Participant 4)

Another teacher noted that learning about stress management and coping strategies as a class was particularly helpful for one student, who struggled with these strategies on his own. The student began to hear about the ways others were able to calm down and what that felt like in their bodies:

This particular student, it was very interesting because he started talking to his class...He was starting to identify 'I think I should try that, I recognize that I'm [doing that].' He became more self-aware. (Participant 1)

### Vocabulary, Language, and Voice

Teachers reported how just by using the Faith and Wellness Resource practices, it naturally helped to support changes in students' behaviour by providing them with new vocabulary and language, enabling them to talk about their feelings or experiences and select a strategy for their management. Teachers used certain Faith and Wellness Resource practices frequently. For example, some teachers reported that they used practices focused on the identification and management of emotions to check in regarding students' emotions, and these check-ins became part of their regular classroom talk. The use of new vocabulary and

language stretched across grade level. Teachers reported students as young as kindergarten (4–5 years old) reporting their feelings, what strategy they were able to use, and how their feelings had changed:

Kindergarten students recognizing, “I’m feeling upset right now, I’m not happy at this time.” They’re really starting to identify how they’re feeling and what things they can do that are available for them in their classroom. (Participant 5)

One teacher noted the importance of new vocabulary with older students, suggesting that sharing experiences and using common language helped students understand that their peers might be experiencing some similar challenges:

It’s good especially with older students to hear these things because it takes the taboo away from kids thinking it’s not okay to talk about your feelings. I think [talking about your emotions] is something that’s good to just have open in your class. (Participant 3)

In addition to sharing common language, this also alludes to a broader social climate of support and feelings of safety. In conjunction with the universal instruction that comes from adopting a whole-class approach, a classroom climate that feels safe and non-judgmental might allow students to gain confidence and practice these emerging skills even in a public space.

Teachers noted particular improvements for certain students who had previously struggled with self-confidence. Specifically, they noted how the Faith and Wellness Resource practices provided students with a voice for self-expression:

Back to that one girl, trying to work on her confidence and sense of self. She was looking for help and grabbed a hold of that. Self-motivation seemed to be a big factor and she really did do well the rest of the year...it meant in the context of the classroom, [individuals could recognize] “hey, we do that here too.” So, I think it was useful and she would recognize that other people were sometimes feeling the same and she didn’t know. (Participant 4)

In general, teachers noted increased classroom discussion about SEL and students being more open in expressing themselves after using the resource.

### **Short, Predictable, Reliable**

Teachers commented on the ease of implementing the Faith and Wellness Resource, particularly for those who may be new to SEL teaching. Teachers appreciated that practices could be used with different grades, for different types of classroom-based activities, and in different schools. Teachers mentioned the brevity of the practices was helpful, particularly for classroom use. For instance, because practices were quick and easy to use, some teachers encouraged the students to take a two-minute break during a transition time, which helped them regain focus without losing instruction time. Teachers discussed how having a number of familiar practices that were frequently used helped normalize them:

They felt comfortable and instead of waiting for me to introduce what we are doing, they would ask to go and take a minute and do that. [A student would say] “I just need to go out into the hallway and do my belly breathing, are you okay if I do that?” (Participant 6)

After introducing and repeating a practice, teachers could engage in live coaching and practice; students could identify the skill needed and sought out teacher support. In the same way teachers provide support



for academic needs, the teachers in this study used the practices to facilitate the learning and application of social and emotional skills.

Many teachers talked about increasing their frequency of SEL instruction. They found that engaging in practices multiple times was effective. By repeating practices, students were able to improve their SEL competencies. For instance, in a practice focused on gratitude, students at first concentrated on being appreciative for the birds. Over time, the teacher supported students in thinking about having gratitude for others and themselves:

Having that gratitude...of yourself and the goodness that you have given to others ... as well as recognizing it in others. (Participant 5)

Some teachers described the practices as providing a short mental health break both for students and themselves. Practices were used to support transition times (e.g., coming in after recess) or sporadically throughout the day:

They were doing it every day throughout the day. So not for this period in time, but some of those breathing exercises...were [incorporated] into the actual programming of the day as transitional pieces. (Participant 5)

Several teachers mentioned the importance of predictability and the routine provided by repeating the practices:

I found that implementing the practices into my classroom on a routine basis helped with class engagement and improving their mindset about mental health, and the importance of mindfulness. (Participant 7)

One teacher mentioned the predictability of the Faith and Wellness Resource practices was very effective for some children with unique needs. She had added the practices to a visual schedule and found that having them as a daily routine worked well. Other teachers mentioned that students requested and reminded teachers of practices they had previously learned. Incorporating the practices into an everyday routine was helpful for students, and students learned to anticipate and expect them:

If I did not remember to incorporate meditation into our day, they would request the meditation. They found it calming and helped them for the rest of the day. (Participant 7)

Some practices, particularly those regarding healthy relationships, teachers found somewhat difficult to implement frequently. Given the lack of repetition of these practices, teachers felt as though, while students demonstrated new skills, these skills were not transferring into other situations. Teachers noted it might take more time focusing on healthy relationship skills (and, perhaps, repetition and practice) for those skills to transfer. Likewise, though this occurred for only a few practices, teachers did note there were some practices that took too long or could not be repeated. These practices were deemed less effective as, without repetition, students did not have a chance to practice the skills learned. These challenges highlight the importance of frequency and repetition as a mechanism for students' SEL skills.

### **Using the Strategies in Other Contexts**

Frequent and regular use of SEL practices provided students with a variety of new strategies they could use in the classroom and in other contexts. Teachers noted times when students were proactive in using their new SEL skills. After engaging in some meditation practices as a class, students began to practice

meditation themselves. In some classrooms, teachers had organized the physical space to support students' use of SEL skills:

I saw changes in that they would say, I need to go...to the pillow corner and do some deep belly breathing. (Participant 6)

If you approach them [kindergarteners] and ask them they will tell you why they were there and what they were feeling when they went there. Maybe they were sad because a friend wasn't sharing with them...and then [they can identify] how they are feeling afterwards. It's pretty remarkable that little 5-year-olds are expressing these before and after emotions and feelings. (Participant 5)

Teachers saw students implement some strategies in the hallway or school yard. Several students shared with their teachers that they were using practices at home or before bed. Through this, teachers speculated that the impact of the Faith and Wellness Resource was extending to others:

I believe this has rippled out to families as well. So, not only has the Faith and Wellness Resource taken care of little ones, but it's also taking care of extended family too. (Participant 6)

### Changes for Teachers

Students' SEL also seemed to be facilitated by the changes experienced by teachers. When teachers discussed their experiences implementing the Faith and Wellness Resource, they noted personal changes. These changes included increased awareness and confidence around SEL teaching, changes in their behaviour, and improvements to their own well-being.

**Awareness and Confidence.** Through engaging in the practices with her class, one teacher realized that, for some students, even the basic concepts could be challenging.

I had one student who was very high energy... and I realized through these activities he didn't know what it felt like to be calm. It was eye-opening for me because when I just tell him to calm down, he didn't even really understand what that felt like. (Participant 1)

This realization prompted her to increase her SEL teaching, including considering how bodies can feel in different states. Other teachers reported increased awareness of the importance of SEL. Teachers also found that seeing the impact of the practices on students helped not only to increase their confidence, but also supported the notion that taking time to focus on SEL in the classroom was necessary:

The fact that it works... I feel confident in saying it is something where time should be spent. (Participant 1)

**Behaviour Changes.** Some teachers reported changes in their behaviour, specifically how they spoke to and treated their students. One teacher noted she was engaging her students by speaking to them in a gentle, softer tone. She also reported checking in on students more frequently to see what wellness strategies they were using. Another teacher began viewing her students differently as a result of engaging in the SEL practices:

I listen more to what they're saying and what they're not saying...I take more time to read their body language. (Participant 6)

**Teacher Well-Being.** Teachers discussed how the practices helped support their own mental health and well-being:

Taking these mental health breaks throughout the day was good for them and was also good for me, because I would take those breaks when I needed them. I would demonstrate that I needed a break... just have some breathing exercises and sometimes that outlook really does affect the whole atmosphere. (Participant 2)

Some noted, in leading students through the practices, they too would self-regulate. They were able to remind students of strategies they would use themselves and encouraged students to do the same:

I really did rely on the Faith and Wellness Resource for my own sanity and for the harmony in the classroom. (Participant 6)

## DISCUSSION

School-based SEL interventions have positive outcomes for both students and teachers (Andrews et al., 2020; Panayiotou et al., 2019). Although these outcomes are critical, it is equally important to understand the mechanisms that support SEL in the classroom. Using the implementation and evaluation of the Faith and Wellness Resource, the potential mechanisms underlying positive intervention outcomes were revealed. Results from the current study point to five mechanisms that support teachers' effective delivery of SEL interventions in schools: (1) an emphasis on a whole-class approach; (2) allowing all students to develop language around SEL and practice SEL skills; (3) short, simple, and reliable practices that can be implemented frequently; (4) skills that provide opportunity for practice in varied contexts; and (5) improvements in teacher knowledge, comfort and practice of SEL skill development.

### A Whole-Class Approach and a Common Language

The Faith and Wellness Resource employs a whole-class approach by focusing on integrating malleable skill development into students' daily interactions. A whole-class approach offers classrooms, and potentially schools, a "coherent, unifying framework to promote social, emotional, and academic growth for all" (Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004, p. 95). Teachers mentioned how a whole-class approach was particularly useful for students who would have otherwise not been able to identify and practice these strategies on their own. That is, the practices outlined in the Faith and Wellness Resource such as body scans, kindness jars, or nature walks, in which all students collectively participated, resulted in many SEL skills that were then modelled by students to their classmates. When SEL skills are taught and practiced as a group, students can support one another and learn from peers, as well as their teachers, promoting a more positive overall classroom climate (Durlak et al., 2011).

Implementing the Faith and Wellness Resource provided teachers and students with a common SEL language. Through this, students were better able to vocalize feelings, discuss effective strategies, and describe how these practices made them feel. A shared understanding of SEL provides a space for open discussions where students are encouraged to share concerns and feelings, rather than internalize them (Jagers et al., 2019). As such, a whole-class approach not only provides teachers and students with a shared vocabulary, but also with a shared, designated space to gain confidence using that vocabulary (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). When every student is engaging in similar practices throughout the school day, it diminishes the taboo or embarrassment some students may feel while expressing their emotions (Hawkins et al., 2004).

Given the benefits found from a whole-class approach as a mechanism for SEL in schools, this should be considered with regard to the scalability of SEL interventions (Collie et al., 2012). That is, if a shared classroom culture around SEL seems to benefit students, there are likely opportunities for expanding classroom-based interventions to a “whole-school” approach. Engaging in SEL as a school community through a shared commitment to SEL, common language, and modelling by both school staff (teachers, administrators, etc.) and peers would likely support students’ continued SEL growth within a broader context (Wong et al., 2014).

### **Short, Simple, And Reliable Transferable Practices**

In creating the Faith and Wellness Resource, attention was paid to developing brief and simple SEL practices to offset some of the barriers often associated with SEL interventions (Durlak et al., 2011). Teachers reflected on the benefits of short and simple practices, including enhanced predictability and routine, which helped to promote SEL (Hahn et al., 2007). Classroom transition times are often difficult, as some students engage in disruptive behaviours, distract peers, have issues entering or engaging in a new activity, and show refusal to stop a preferred activity (Banerjee & Horn, 2013). In the current study, the SEL practices were found to be well-suited for transition times or at the end of the school day to help support difficult or chaotic moments within the classroom. Teachers stated how these simple, short, and easy-to-learn practices helped organize and stabilize students’ behaviours, emotions, and focus.

Importantly, there were some skills that were not as conducive to brief implementation. Certain practices, particularly those related to healthy relationship skills, demanded more time. Teachers felt students would need further opportunities to master these relationship skills. There were other practices that lent themselves well to frequent and unscheduled implementation, sometimes multiple times throughout the day (e.g., breathing exercises). Teachers discussed how students were able to apply such skills to their lives in a variety of contexts (e.g., at home, in the school yard). SEL skills that can be practiced and used in other contexts can enhance students’ SEL, as skills are encouraged within the classroom, yet can be applied and modelled not only at school, but at home and in the community, as well (Weissberg & O’Brien, 2004).

### **Improvements in Teacher’s Confidence, Learning, and Well-being**

One of the most powerful school-based predictors of students’ SEL is teachers’ confidence in implementation (Collie et al., 2012). Teachers’ confidence may lead to higher social-emotional competence, positive teacher-student relationships, and a healthier classroom environment (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Though the target audience of the Faith and Wellness Resource is students, results indicated additional impacts for teachers. Teachers reported that by implementing SEL practices and seeing students’ skills improving, they became confident in their own teaching and aware of the overall benefits of SEL. Increased confidence and awareness, in turn, encourages more frequent SEL practice implementation (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Considering the importance of teachers’ confidence as a mechanism for students’ SEL (Schonert-Reichl, 2017), it may be important to consider the ways teachers’ own SEL skills development and teaching confidence can be further supported. That is, if effective delivery of SEL interventions is predicated on teachers’ confidence with teaching the material, as well as on teachers’ own knowledge and use of SEL skills (Maras et al., 2015), our results offer support for the inclusion of SEL in teacher education programs and

professional development. Inclusion of early and ongoing training in SEL can improve not only teachers' confidence in teaching SEL to their students, but also helps to support the development of teachers' own SEL skills, potentially also promoting teachers' likelihood of supporting SEL delivery in their classrooms (i.e., teacher "buy in"; Maras et al., 2015 Sandell et al., 2013). In conjunction with other evaluation research on this intervention (Andrews et al., 2020), results from the current study support the notion that teachers play an important role in students' SEL through direct implementation (Hahn et al., 2007), as well as their own awareness of the need for SEL and confidence in their ability to adequately implement SEL practices.

When teachers were actively implementing SEL practices and seeing the benefits for their students, they also noticed changes regarding their own behaviour (e.g., increased confidence and capacity for classroom management). Teachers described being more aware of the ways they interacted with their students, which may support teachers' abilities to foster warm student-teacher relationships, understand their students' perspectives, and manage challenges in the classroom (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Teachers reflected on being able to actively remind students of the types of strategies they would do personally, which in turn encouraged students to use the same ones. While utilizing SEL practices to improve teacher overall well-being and mental health is, in and of itself, important (Schonert-Reichl, 2017), the emphasis here is how improvements in teacher SEL can also serve as an effective mechanism for student SEL change (Collie et al., 2012).

### **Strengths, Limitations and Future Research**

One of the current study's strengths is that the use of focus groups enabled in-depth insight into the mechanisms that supported students' SEL. While teachers were asked questions related to potential changes in students' behaviours (i.e., outcome evaluation) and use/implementation of the resource (i.e., process evaluation), they organically offered information about mechanisms supporting students' SEL. Due to the study being conducted in (public) Catholic elementary schools, the findings cannot necessarily be generalized to other elementary schools, such as non-Catholic or private schools. Teachers' race and ethnicity was not recorded, which acts as a limitation for this study. Further research should include this information to ensure diversity and resist any Eurocentric focuses on SEL practices. It is also important to note, the relatively small number of participants ( $n = 7$ ) in the current study. Covid-19 related school closures occurred at the end of the 3-month implementation period and, given the extreme upheaval following this national lockdown, many teachers who previously agreed to take part in the focus groups opted not to participate. As such, participants were likely the most willing to share their thoughts. Though there is no theoretical reason to expect that the mechanisms for SEL would be different with less motivated teachers, future research is needed to understand the identified mechanisms to support students from a broader range of teachers. More work is also needed to understand the mechanisms of SEL from a student perspective.

The current study outlines the importance of a common language and universal instruction. However, this mechanism may be explored further. Future research might consider how a general attitude of non-blaming or normalizing difficult behaviours or emotions can impact classroom climate. Students would likely not feel comfortable expressing times when they needed to be alone or reflect on their emotions in the absence of a non-judgmental and positive classroom climate. Future research could also explore the nuanced mechanisms occurring as teachers work with students to facilitate the use of different social-emotional competencies. For instance, the current study identified several examples where students correctly identified a necessary

skill and sought teacher support in using the skill (i.e., going to the hall to breathe). In similar ways as a teacher helps a student with a math or reading problem, the teachers in this study assisted in the learning and application of social and emotional skills. More research is needed, perhaps via fine-grained observational research, to further explore the precise mechanisms through which this type of immediate, live coaching can allow information to be contextualized, practiced, and utilized within the classroom.

Finally, the Faith and Wellness Resource was designed as a universal, Tier 1 intervention to benefit all students within the classroom. As such, it is unknown whether or how well the intervention might be for students who experience particularly challenging emotional and behavioural difficulties. However, teachers' experiences do point to the intervention benefitting students who were struggling in social-emotional development (e.g., one teacher noted that the predictability of the Faith and Wellness Resource was very effective for some students with diverse needs or exceptionalities. Specifically, by adding the practices to a visual schedule and having them be part of the classroom's daily routine). Given the shared language and practices being short, simple, and transferable, the aim is that a range of students will be able to utilize effective practices in several contexts. Yet, future research is needed to systematically test how this intervention might work differently for different students and/or in different contexts.

### **Implications for Practice**

The Faith and Wellness Resource was administered in Ontario, Canada, which raises two important implications for policy and practice. First, the Education Act outlines the responsibility of principals and teachers to provide a safe and caring learning context, in addition to helping students learn (Ministry of Education, 2019). Therefore, it is essential that both teachers and students develop a social-emotional capacity as a foundation for a safe and welcoming environment. Second, a recent report from the Ontario Office of the Chief Coroner (2021) recommended that the Ministry of Education ensure that: "All school boards to adopt a relational policy framework as a companion to 'Promoting a Positive School Climate'." (p. 29). Both of these highlight the critical role of schools and teachers in supporting children's safety and well-being. Results from the current study directly apply to these policies in indicating how SEL for both teachers and students can be central to achieving this type of safe and relational foundation.

The findings from this study can also be used to inform the design and implementation of teacher-led SEL interventions. In identifying key mechanisms that support students' SEL, results suggest that practices be designed and delivered in consideration of school settings, such as being easy to implement frequently, and providing students with skills that they can practice and use in other settings (PSSP, 2016). Likewise, the identified mechanisms signify the importance of teachers and peers in the classroom in supporting an individual's growth and development (Hough et al., 2017). These mechanisms can also be harnessed by other individuals working with young people (e.g., parents, service providers in community settings). More broadly, these mechanisms apply to critical components outlined in implementation science research; specifically those of the Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR) (Damschroder et al., 2009). That is, practices that were noted for being short, simple, and easy to adapt—as well as practice—in different contexts speaks to important intervention characteristics of adaptability, complexity, and cost (Damschroder et al., 2009). Changes in teachers' own knowledge and confidence is directly related to the consideration of individual characteristics; specifically in terms of knowledge and beliefs about the intervention topic, as well

as self-efficacy to achieve implementation goals (Damschroder et al., 2009). Somewhat similarly, the notion of involving the whole class and developing shared norms and language regarding SEL also speaks to the importance of, and potential for, changes in individuals' (both students and teachers) knowledge and attitudes toward the intervention. Thus, though we were interested in teachers' experiences with, and strategies used to implement, the Faith and Wellness Resource and the ways in which these strategies supported students' learning and growth, these mechanisms can also be viewed from the larger lens of critical implementation constructs. More research is needed to specifically and systematically assess these constructs, as well as other aspects of the implementation science framework.

## CONCLUSION

The current study has shifted the focus from understanding *what* changes as a result of SEL intervention to understanding *how* these changes occur. It is critical that teachers learn about SEL in ways that incorporate the mechanisms supporting the *how* and *why* of effective interventions (Panayiotou et al., 2019). School-based SEL interventions can promote SEL through a whole-class approach, while providing a shared set of language and vocabulary that students can adopt. Further, practices that are short, predictable, and reliable, can support students' ability to learn skills they can practice often and apply in different contexts. Ensuring teachers are well equipped to partake in easily accessible practices can enhance their own confidence and awareness of the importance of SEL for their students. Through a greater understanding of effective SEL mechanisms, we can continue to work toward enhancing students' SEL capacity, as well as their overall mental health and well-being.

**APPENDIX****FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS AND PROMPTS****Students**

1. Did students' SEL competencies change over the last three months? In what ways? Were changes different for different SEL competencies?
2. Were there some students who improved more than others? What was different about these students/ what facilitated the change in these students/what were the barriers to change for students who did not improve?
3. Did students' overall mental health and well-being change over the last three months? In what way(s)?
4. Were there some students who improved more in terms of their mental health and well-being than others? What was different about these students/what facilitated the change in these students/what were the barriers to change for students who did not improve?
5. Did the resource contribute to classroom engagement/academic engagement? Why or why not?

**Teachers**

1. Has your knowledge about social emotional learning changed over the last three months? In what ways? Were changes different for different SEL competencies?
2. Has your comfort/confidence teaching/talking to students about SEL changed over the last three months? In what ways? Where changes different for different SEL competencies?

**Implementation and Use**

1. Did you find the resource supported students' faith formation? Did you find the resource effectively linked to Catholic teachings?
2. Did you find the links to learning skills helpful when teaching and/or assessing student learning skills?
3. Were there any activities you would recommend changes to? Suggestions on how we can do anything else to make the content (activities) more effective.
4. Will you continue to use the resources after this? Why or why not?

**Optional Additional Discussion Questions**

1. Which activity(s) was your favourite? Why?
2. Which activity(s) was your least favourite? Why?
3. Were the activities easy to use? Why or why not?
4. What would have made it easier to implement the activities (or use more) (how much support to put in at the front end, buy in from principals, etc.)?



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