

# Exploration of Teachers Experiences Integrating Social-Emotional with Academic Learning in Secondary Schools

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*This study explored how secondary teachers experience and integrate social-emotional learning (SEL) in their classrooms, and how a proposed intervention can support the integration of SEL with academic learning. A design-based research (DBR) approach guided three iterative phases yielding both qualitative and quantitative results. Teachers had access to SEL resources and used them to build relationships, yet less frequently made SEL competencies explicit in instruction. Magnetic visual aids supporting social agendas proved effective in making learning relationships visible to students.*

**Keywords:** social-emotional learning (SEL) | design-based research (DBR) | universal design for learning (UDL) | secondary education | instructional integration | teacher experience

## 01 BACKGROUND

Incorporating SEL into K-12 education has improved relationships, engagement, and academic achievement. Healthy relationships contribute to essential physical, emotional, and cognitive effects that benefit learning. Adolescent brains are particularly sensitive to social interaction, with heightened neurological malleability, making the integration of SEL in academic pursuits critical in secondary schools (Immordino-Yang et al., 2019).

*Learning is triggered and organized largely via socially enabled, emotionally driven opportunities for cognitive development (Immordino-Yang et al., 2019).*

In 2011, California joined the CASEL nationwide initiative to integrate SEL throughout K-12 systems. Sonoma County secondary teachers manage 100 to 165 students with diverse needs. Professional learning ranked in the **41st percentile nationally** in the 2025 Sonoma County Youth Truth survey. This study is grounded in social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), which understands knowledge as constructed through social interactions that shape individual cognition.

## 02 PROBLEM

The growing need for accessible, contextually relevant instructional materials that provide options for integrating SEL with academic learning is well-documented. Teachers are often forced to choose between supporting students' emotional development and meeting academic demands, causing students to miss critical opportunities to develop the social and emotional skills that enhance their capacity to learn.

**<28%**

of teachers found site SEL resources easy to implement

**54%**

did not ask students to set SEL-related goals

**158**

Survey Teachers across Sonoma County, CA

**Grades 6-12**

Secondary school participants

## 03 PURPOSE

### PURPOSE A

To explore how secondary teachers in Sonoma County experience the use of SEL resources in their classrooms, including strategies for success and barriers to integration with academic learning.

## PURPOSE B

To design, implement, and refine an intervention supported by accessible, contextually relevant instructional materials that integrate SEL with academic instruction through two strategies: social agendas and social goals.

This study examined two core indicators of high-quality SEL instruction as defined by CASEL (2021): (a) **explicit SEL instruction**, and (b) the **integration of SEL into academic content**. The UDL framework guided the creation of instructional materials accessible and adaptable across diverse classroom contexts.

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## METHODOLOGY

### Methodological Approach

Design-Based Research (DBR) guided this study across three iterative phases: (a) analysis and exploration, (b) design and construction, and (c) evaluation and reflection (McKenney and Reeves, 2019). DBR bridges educational theory and classroom practice through collaborative, context-sensitive inquiry.

### Research Paradigm

Pragmatic paradigm with a social constructivist theoretical lens. The researcher maintained consistent reflexivity to identify and mitigate positionality-related biases throughout all three phases.

### Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) and provisional coding (Saldana, 2021). Likert-scale quantitative survey data, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, and teacher artifacts including photos, written reflections, and slides.

### Trustworthiness

Credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability established through triangulation, member checking, supervisor consultation, and reflexive journaling throughout all three phases.

### Conceptual Framework

- ▶ CASEL SEL core competencies framework
- ▶ UDL Guidelines 3.0 (CAST, 2024)
- ▶ Chi's (2021) four barriers: time, accessibility, relevance, theory
- ▶ d-school design thinking process (Balcaitis, 2019)
- ▶ I>C>A>P active learning theory (Chi et al., 2018)

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## DBR PHASE 1: ANALYSIS AND EXPLORATION

158

Survey Teachers (STs)

6

Reflective Teachers (RTs) Phase 1

Grades 6-12

Sonoma County, California

Phase one combined an in-depth literature review with a survey of secondary teachers across Sonoma County and unstructured interviews with reflective teachers. Survey data were gathered on SEL resource access and use, implementation frequency, goal-setting practices, social grouping, and visibility of SEL in classrooms. Reflective teachers provided collaborative insights that directly informed the construction of the intervention materials used in Phase 2.

3

Enactment Teachers (ETs)

8 weeks

Intervention enactment period

High School

Classroom settings in Sonoma County

Three enactment teachers participated in onboarding conversations and then used the intervention and instructional materials in their classrooms. The intervention comprised two complementary strategies:

### STRATEGY 1: SOCIAL AGENDAS

Visible magnetic learning relationship indicators posted alongside content agendas on whiteboards. Color-coded magnets displayed the social grouping structure (Individual, Partners, Groups, Community, Instruction, Planning, Choice) for each part of a lesson, making SEL relationships explicit and observable for students.

### STRATEGY 2: SOCIAL GOALS

A student goal-setting approach intended to help students identify and develop core social-emotional competencies connected to learning. This strategy was less successfully enacted, as teachers interpreted it as teacher-directed rather than student-directed goal setting, which became a key finding informing recommendations.

3

Enactment Teachers (same as Phase 2)

4

New Reflective Teachers

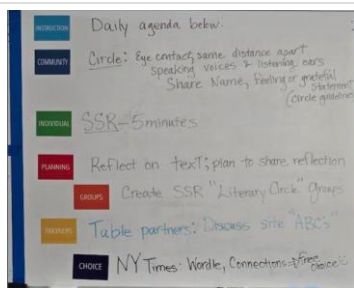
10 total

Reflective Teachers across the study

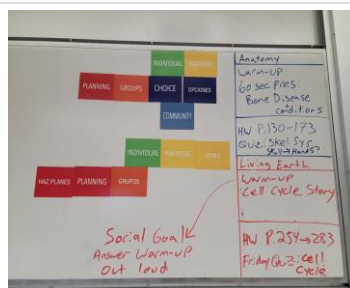
Phase 3 included semi-structured interviews with enactment teachers, review of teacher artifacts (photos of the visual aids in use, written reflections, classroom slides), and unstructured interviews with a new group of reflective teachers. Data from all three phases were triangulated to generate themes, findings, and iterative improvements to the instructional materials.

*Once the research concluded, all three enactment teachers asked to keep the magnets for continued use in their classrooms.*

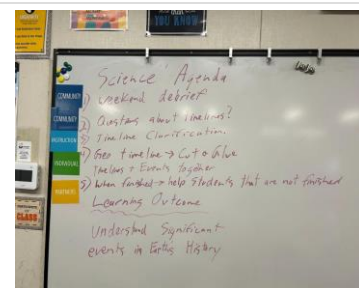
## SOCIAL AGENDAS MAGNETS: IN CLASSROOM USE



ET1: Magnets alongside handwritten social agenda



ET2: Bilingual magnets showing two class periods simultaneously



ET3: Magnets stacked vertically alongside Science Agenda

Fourteen findings emerged from six themes across all three DBR phases.

#### **FINDING 1: RELATIONSHIPS**

Building relationships with students was very important to teachers, and the implementation of SEL resources and strategies was their primary method. Most described teacher-student relationship building; fewer addressed student-to-student relationships or intrapersonal skills integration with academic content.

#### **FINDING 2: SEL RESOURCES**

Teachers had access to a wide range of site-provided and individually sourced SEL resources. Most frequently used: individual strategies (45%) and Portrait of a Graduate (34%). Most frequently provided but least used: Restorative Practices (provided 64%; used 26%) and Project Wayfinder (provided 43%; used 15%).

#### **FINDING 3: INTEGRATION WITH ACADEMIC LEARNING**

Teachers described integrating SEL primarily by eliciting empathy for people and events in academic content. More than 30% of survey teachers did not ask students to reflect on best practices for learning with others; 24% did not ask about individual learning practices.

#### **FINDING 5: GOAL SETTING**

When using goal setting, teachers used it more frequently for academic goals than SEL goals. More than 54% of survey teachers did not ask students to set SEL-related goals. None of the three enactment teachers used formal or frequent goal setting for academic or SEL purposes.

#### **FINDINGS 13 AND 14: INTERVENTION OUTCOMES**

Social agenda magnets were successfully understood and enacted by all three enactment teachers with minimal support. The strategy clarified behavioral expectations and encouraged student reflection on social learning. Social goals were interpreted differently than intended as teachers understood them as teacher-directed rather than student-directed.

#### **Category 1: Teacher Experience Implementing SEL**

Teachers actively used various SEL resources to build positive classroom relationships. Making SEL explicit through visible strategies, posting social skills, or SEL goal setting were infrequent practices across all participant groups.

#### **Category 2: Integrating SEL with Academic Learning**

Some teachers integrated SEL by connecting academic content to students' emotional experiences. Most agreed SEL is most often taught separately from academic content, and time constraints reinforce this separation.

#### **Category 3: Intervention Successes and Improvements**

Visual social agenda magnets effectively made learning relationships visible and were easily adopted. Social goals required clearer communication and were

#### **Category 4: Design of Instructional Materials**

The d-school design thinking process and UDL Guidelines effectively supported the development of instructional materials. Multiple formats (guide, slides,

misinterpreted as teacher-directed rather than student-directed goal setting.	visual aids, email support) enhanced teacher engagement with the materials.
<p><b>Category 5: Barriers to SEL Implementation</b></p> <p>Addressing barriers of time, accessibility, contextual relevance, and resistance is essential when supporting SEL implementation. Materials were insufficient in conveying the social goals strategy as intended. Clarity of audience, clearer terminology, and additional visual representations would strengthen the next iteration.</p>	

**10 RECOMMENDATIONS**

**DESIGN OF INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS**

- ▶ Define terms related to social competencies and skills; include synonyms to improve clarity
- ▶ Revise the term social goals to goal setting for SEL and provide visual aids to support understanding
- ▶ Clarify audience for each action: distinguish what the teacher does vs. what the student does
- ▶ Add more images, charts, and visual representations to supplement text in the guide
- ▶ Include more explicit information about CASEL core competencies and transformative SEL constructs
- ▶ Provide examples across diverse content areas and contexts; include teacher success stories
- ▶ Connect UDL considerations directly to the intervention strategies in the guide
- ▶ Incorporate active learning connections including summaries of I>C>A>P theory (Chi et al., 2018)

**PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

- ▶ Provide sustained, compensated time for individual and collaborative professional learning
- ▶ Create experiential learning opportunities modeling active learning, collaboration, and reflection
- ▶ Build teacher agency: empower classroom practitioners to lead SEL professional learning at their sites
- ▶ Develop adult SEL capacity: include opportunities for teachers to build their own SEL competencies
- ▶ Establish communication infrastructure between administrators, SEL leaders, and teachers
- ▶ Repeat the study using the second iteration of improved instructional materials
- ▶ Include student participants to capture student perspectives on the intervention
- ▶ Develop and study visual aids specifically designed to support student social goal setting

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