



Teachers' beliefs about social-emotional learning: Identifying teacher profiles and their relations with job stress and satisfaction



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the extent to which teachers may be grouped based on their beliefs about social-emotional learning (SEL). SEL is aimed at promoting students' social and emotional competencies (e.g., responsible decision making, social awareness). Research suggests that in addition to being relevant to student outcomes, SEL is also relevant to teachers' experiences at work. We utilized latent profile analysis to identify profiles of teachers based on three different beliefs—comfort with SEL, commitment to improving SEL skills, and perceptions of principal and school-wide support for SEL. Findings revealed three different profiles—the SEL-thrivers, SEL-strivers, and SEL-advocates—that have differential levels of comfort and perceived support for SEL, but not commitment for SEL. Findings also demonstrated that the profiles were associated with differences in several socio-demographic characteristics and two outcomes—teacher stress and job satisfaction. Combined, the findings have implications for teachers as well as students and schools.

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1. Introduction

Educators, researchers, and policy-makers in various countries are increasingly recognizing the importance of addressing students' social-emotional development in efforts to optimize educational outcomes (e.g., Banerjee, Weare, & Farr, 2014; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). One way of addressing this is through social-emotional learning (SEL), which is aimed at improving students' social and emotional competencies (e.g., self-awareness, relationship skills; Collaboration for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2014). Research has supported the value of SEL showing that it is associated with positive student outcomes such as greater prosocial behavior and academic achievement (e.g., Durlak et al., 2011). In addition, recent work has shown that SEL is also relevant for teachers' own experiences at work. Specifically, teachers' beliefs about SEL are associated with how they implement SEL (Zins, Shewark, Denham, & Curby, 2014) and their own intrapsychic experiences such as burnout and self-efficacy for teaching (Brackett, Reyes, Rivers, Elbertson, & Salovey, 2012). Thus, it appears that teachers' SEL beliefs can play

an important role in their SEL-specific and broader experiences at work—with positive beliefs tending to be associated with positive outcomes and processes (e.g., Brackett et al., 2012).

Notably though, it is possible that not all teachers have positive or identical beliefs about SEL. For example, teachers' SEL beliefs may differ depending on their teaching or subject priorities, their own social-emotional competence, and/or the overarching climate within their school, region, or country (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012). Thus, in the current study, we examine the extent to which teachers' SEL beliefs may reveal distinct teacher belief profiles and, in turn, whether these profiles can provide direction for improving knowledge of how teachers perceive SEL. We suggest that this understanding is important given that beliefs shape how teachers act, instruct, and interact with students in the classroom (e.g., Bandura, 2001; Fives & Buehl, 2012). This has ramifications for effective SEL implementation and, potentially, students' SEL-related outcomes (e.g., prosocial behavior, achievement).

1.1. A relevant framework for understanding teachers' SEL beliefs

Person-environment fit theory is a useful lens through which to conceptualize the study. This concerns the compatibility or match between an individual and his or her environment. A relevant dimension of the theory is the match between an individual's

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values and beliefs and the organizational culture and supports (Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2010). This is known as person-organizational fit (P–O fit; Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2010). Although only limited research has examined this theory amongst teachers, it has revealed that when teachers feel well-matched to their school of employment, this is associated with positive outcomes including lower stress and greater job satisfaction (e.g., Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). In the current study, we harness P–O fit theory to help explain how teachers' SEL beliefs may be combined to identify different types of teachers.

1.2. Teachers' beliefs about social-emotional learning

Beliefs play an important role in teachers' work (Bandura, 2001; Gill & Fives, 2015). They filter the information that teachers attend to, frame how a situation is conceptualized by the teacher, and guide intention and action (Fives & Buehl, 2012). There exists a long history of examining an array of teachers' beliefs such as self-efficacy, school climate, and stress (e.g., Kyriacou, 2001; Pas & Bradshaw, 2014). This has shown that teachers' beliefs are inextricably intertwined with their teaching practices and experiences (Holzberger, Philipp, & Kunter, 2014), and are also associated with student outcomes (e.g., achievement; Archambault, Janosz, & Chouinard, 2012). In the current study, we were interested in advancing understanding regarding teachers' beliefs about SEL.

SEL focuses on core social and emotional competencies such as recognizing one's emotions (self-awareness), regulating one's emotions, thoughts and behaviors (self-management), taking the perspective of others (social awareness), developing and maintaining high quality relationships (relationship skills), and making constructive choices regarding behavior and social interactions (responsible decision making; CASEL, 2014). In the classroom, SEL can take many forms. It can be embedded within different subject curricular, involve a specific classroom program where students spend time learning directly about SEL, and/or be implemented as an approach across the whole school (Durlak et al., 2011). In all three approaches, teachers play a large role in implementing SEL.

Of note, teachers' role in implementing SEL appears to be influenced by their SEL beliefs. Teachers who believe SEL is a valuable part of education embed it within the context of formal SEL curriculum, as well as in their regular interactions with students—through modeling, coaching, and scaffolding (Zins et al., 2014). In addition, positive SEL beliefs are associated with greater confidence in implementing SEL, openness to SEL programs, teacher-perceived program effectiveness (Brackett et al., 2012), and implementation of SEL content and supplementary activities (Ransford, Greenberg, Domitrovich, Small, & Jacobson, 2009). Furthermore, positive SEL beliefs are associated with burnout (negatively) and self-efficacy for teaching (positively; Brackett et al., 2012; Ransford et al., 2009). Thus, positive teacher SEL beliefs appear to be associated with teachers' perceptions of SEL, their implementation of SEL, and other important work-related experiences. However, it is possible that not all teachers have identical SEL beliefs. Beliefs may differ depending on the support, training, and experience teachers have with SEL. Indeed, teachers who work in schools where SEL is well-supported may feel more positively about it than teachers who work in schools where SEL is less supported. Similarly, teachers who have experience in SEL or who “buy-in” to the importance of SEL may feel differently than teachers who are less confident or unconvinced of the importance of SEL.

The current study seeks to advance understandings gained from previous research by examining the extent to which teachers can be grouped based on three beliefs about SEL: *SEL comfort*, which refers to comfort with and regular implementation of SEL; *SEL commitment*, which refers to commitment to improving one's skills in SEL;

and *SEL culture*, which refers to perceptions of the support and promotion of SEL in one's school (Brackett et al., 2012). We chose to focus on these three beliefs because they are implicated in effective SEL implementation. When teachers are comfortable with SEL they are more likely to implement it sustainably over time, when teachers are committed to improving their SEL skills they are more likely to “buy-in” and teach SEL, and when teachers perceive school support for SEL they are more likely to support SEL themselves and implement it sustainably over time (e.g., Brackett et al., 2012). Thus, understanding how the three beliefs might be combined for different teachers is valuable for developing knowledge about the profiles of teachers that exist within schools. In addition, SEL comfort and SEL commitment concern teachers' individual beliefs, whereas SEL culture concerns teachers' perceptions of the organizational culture. Thus, these beliefs reflect intraindividual and contextual factors that are relevant to P–O fit. More precisely, examination of how these beliefs combine for different groups of teachers may provide a preliminary idea of teachers' perceptions of the fit between their own and their organization's beliefs and values with respect to SEL.

1.3. Person-centered analysis

In order to profile teachers based on their SEL beliefs, we used a person-centered data analysis approach. Person-centered approaches identify groups of participants based on their responses to particular variables (Laursen & Hoff, 2006). Person-centered approaches can reveal major profiles of teachers as determined by key variables—such as SEL beliefs. These approaches also place more emphasis on the experiences of individuals (rather than the average experience) and they can provide information that is particularly relevant to intervention in that they can identify participants who require support and the areas in which this support is needed.

1.4. Teacher stress and job satisfaction

In addition to identifying teacher profiles of SEL beliefs, we sought to examine whether the profiles differed regarding teachers' experiences of teacher stress and job satisfaction. Teacher stress is a negative emotional reaction in response to the demands of teaching (Kyriacou, 2001). Job satisfaction involves feelings of contentment with respect to teaching (Schleicher, Hansen, & Fox, 2011). We chose to examine the two outcomes because they have been linked with significant educational implications (e.g., teaching quality; Retelsdorf, Butler, Streblow, & Schiefele, 2010). In addition, they have been well-established as important outcomes of several domain-general motivational and contextual beliefs among teachers (e.g., self-efficacy, Klassen & Chiu, 2010; school climate beliefs, Pas & Bradshaw, 2014). Importantly, several of these domain-general beliefs are conceptually related to the (domain-specific) SEL beliefs under examination here. For example, SEL comfort taps into teachers' confidence which is aligned with the well-examined construct of self-efficacy for teaching. Thus, by including stress and job satisfaction as outcomes, the study's findings may be interpreted within the broader literature base.

Stress and job satisfaction are also relevant with respect to P–O fit theory. Indeed, research suggests that incompatibility between teachers' intraindividual and contextual beliefs can result in greater stress and lower job satisfaction (e.g., Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). In the current study, different combinations of SEL beliefs (e.g., positive intraindividual, but less positive contextual beliefs) may be stressful or dissatisfying for teachers. Thus, our investigation of such combinations may reveal different types of teachers for whom further professional development might be helpful (i.e., for those

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