



## **Teacher SEL Space: Addressing Beginning Teachers' Social Emotional Learning in a Support Group Structure**

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### Abstract:

There is evidence that ongoing social emotional learning (SEL) needs among teachers negatively impact teacher retention and student learning. At the same time, teachers' SEL has been insufficiently addressed in teacher preparation. As a consequence, preservice and early-career teachers often lack the tools, perspective, and support to address their own SEL needs. The article describes a pilot project where current candidates and recent graduates in a teacher preparation program came together in an ongoing support group structure to share struggles, successes, and initiatives, support and advise each other, and reflect on their ongoing journey. After a review of the literature on teachers' SEL needs, gaps and models in teacher preparation, and the potential benefits of support groups, data from the pilot "SEL Space" meetings are presented and discussed, with an emphasis on thematic patterns, evolution over time, and participants' reflection on the process. Implications for practice and research are presented.

### Keywords:

Social Emotional Learning, Teacher Education, Teacher Retention, Teacher Effectiveness, Collaboration

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## Introduction

Although the issue is certainly not new, the need for the education world to attend to the general wellness of teachers has become increasingly acknowledged (Almerico, 2018; Katz et al., 2020). For years, teachers leaving the profession early in their careers has been a defining concern (Greenberg et al., 2016). With teaching and learning themselves in upheaval during the reality of COVID-related lockdowns and the ensuing uncertainties, we have to regard the exodus of teachers before they have fully developed their practice as one of our most pressing problems. Indeed, there is ample evidence that high stress, low morale, and burnout have become constants in the teaching profession (Cipriano & Brackett, 2020), to the point where they are almost defining characteristics.

While the realities that make teaching stressful to begin with may be deep-seated and beyond easy fixes, we have to address teachers' preparedness to work successfully, happily, and healthily in these stressful conditions to a greater degree. Indeed, while social emotional learning (SEL) in children has been increasingly recognized and targeted by schools as an area of need, the SEL needs of teachers have been largely overlooked (Donahue-Keegan et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2013). This gap is especially critical in teacher preparation. Katz et al. (2020) suggest that "SEL is sometimes called the 'missing piece' in education because it represents a part of learning that is inextricably tied to school success and positive student performance, yet it has not been explicitly addressed or given much attention until recently" (pp. 2-3). The result is that preservice teachers are not prepared to understand and manage their emotions when they urgently need to do so as they take over a classroom (Donahue-Keegan et al., 2019; Katz et al., 2020).

It is increasingly clear that one of the main problems faced by public schools in various countries is the failure to keep teachers in the profession, with clear evidence that burnout and low morale, especially, drive teachers to leave for a different career within the first few years (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022; Greenberg et al., 2016; Høigaard et al., 2012). It has also become evident that, internationally, some of the biggest concerns beginning and early-career teachers face are not just about understanding the curriculum and being able to plan and implement effective instruction, but instead about dealing with the toll their work as teachers places on their well-being (Donahue-Keegan et al., 2019; Gustems-Carnicer & Calderon, 2013; Hosotani et al., 2011; Lindqvist, et al., 2017; Väisänen et al., 2018;). Furthermore, while we know teachers are often unwell, the reasons that make teaching seem unsustainable are numerous, varied, and hard to sum up and address uniformly. Finding ways to help teachers themselves identify and address those needs and stresses that are particular to them has to become a priority as well. It is urgent that we provide teachers with the means, the space, and the voice to define and address those SEL-related issues that make it hard to keep the profession sustainable. There are a number of questions teachers need to consider. Additionally, they need a space and agency to answer those questions. For example, what are they most unhappy about? What problems do they want to solve? What solutions might they be arriving at but have difficulties implementing consistently? Also, how can this be a shared rather than a lonely, isolating exploration? As it is, however, we

are still lacking definitive blueprints on how to guide beginning and early-career teachers in this process.

This article discusses a pilot project by a Master's-level teacher education program in the United States preparing candidates for state-level certification to address some of these gaps in SEL support with current student teachers and recent graduates who were in their first and second year of teaching—in other words, early-career teachers who are at risk of leaving the profession prematurely due to struggles with stress and work-related burnout (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022). In particular, this pilot project sought to address teacher SEL challenges that are by their nature ongoing, making sure to give voice to and address truly individualized, actual teacher struggles, involving both an individual process of SEL-related reflection and planning; and a communal process whereby colleagues could share, support one another, process together, ask for and give help, problem solve, and generally feel that they were not alone. The project sought to explore how to give teachers ongoing opportunities to express and share emotions, frustrations, puzzles, discoveries, and successes with one another in ways that were honest yet still constructive and forward-looking, and ultimately help them develop a personal teaching practice that was successful, healthy, and sustainable

## **Findings from the Literature: The Need to Focus on Teachers' SEL**

### ***Teachers' Struggles and the Need for SEL Support***

There is long-standing evidence that teachers, as a group, suffer more from job-related stress and burnout than many other professions, leading to high levels of staff turnover in schools (Greenberg et al., 2016). Kiriaco (2001) defines teacher stress as “the experience by a teacher of unpleasant, negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety, tension, frustration or depression, resulting from some aspect of their work as a teacher” (p.28). The helping professions in general involve frustrations that make the risk of burnout acute (Ratliff, 1988). Research indicates that job-related stress has been steadily increasing over the years and that up to 40% to 50% of beginning teachers leave the profession within the first three years (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016). Since teacher turnover is likely to affect high-needs schools and districts to a disproportionately high degree, this crisis in teacher retention also contributes to social and economic inequities (Greenberg et al., 2016).

Chronic stress and job-related burnout have also had a significant impact on the well-being and effectiveness of teachers who continue to work in schools. Studies have found a close connection between teachers' levels of stress and a range of debilitating struggles, including decreases in motivation and professional engagement, health impairments, and challenges in self-esteem, self-confidence, efficacy, and personal relationships (Cipriano & Brackett, 2020; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Ransford et al., 2009).

Given the severity of this wellness crisis among teachers, there have been calls for a more concerted effort to provide support for teachers' SEL (Palmer et al., 2019; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). A widely referenced definition of SEL is as follows: “The process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to

understand and manage emotions, situations, set, and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make decisions” (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2019). Indeed, SEL has been found to be central to a teacher’s work, serving as a cornerstone for effective relationship building with students, classroom management, and implementation of instruction (Jones et al., 2013). Teachers’ ability to successfully regulate and make use of their own emotions during instruction is a crucial aspect of teaching (Hosotami & Imai-Matsumura, 2011). However, despite evidence that fostering and supporting teachers’ SEL is crucial, it has been largely overlooked in conversations and research around teacher quality, preparation, and professional development (Collie et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2013).

More than anything, teachers’ SEL needs to be addressed because of its impact on the well-being of students. Because teachers are “the engine that drives social and emotional learning practices in classrooms” (Schonert-Reichl, 2017, p.137), teachers’ stress has a contagious effect on students. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) describe a “burnout cascade” where “the deteriorating climate is marked by increases in troublesome student behaviors, and teachers become emotionally exhausted as they try to manage them” (p. 492). As Schonert-Reichl (2017) words it, “simply put, stressed out teachers tend to have stressed out students” (p. 137). Consequently, if teachers and schools are to support students’ SEL as part of their education, teachers’ own SEL has to be addressed and supported as well (Jennings, 2019; Poulou, 2017; Jones et al., 2013; Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Waajid et al., 2013).

Facility in emotional understanding and management has been found to be at the core of skills teachers rely on in their daily practice. Research has pointed to the centrality of SEL in helping teachers effectively exercise self-control in challenging situations, collaborate, and plan instruction for their students (Palmer et al., 2019). SEL is also instrumental for teachers to feel professionally adequate and to accept the dependence on colleagues that is central to the collaborative setup of schools (Lindqvist et al., 2017). Regarding the longer-term sustainability of teaching, it has been found that teachers who experience greater well-being in their work lives are more committed to the teaching profession as a whole (Collie et al., 2011).

Given that the social emotional challenges of teaching are situational and therefore unpredictable, Kyriacou (2001) has emphasized the importance of reliable social emotional coping skills. These are, in turn, separated into direct action coping strategies, that are meant to be proactive and allow the teacher to set up themselves and their instruction so as to minimize possible stress, and palliative coping skills that allow them to address challenges as they arise. Kyriacou (2001) argues that both are requirements for successful and sustainable teaching.

It is not surprising that preservice and early-career teachers are especially vulnerable to stress and burnout factors (Vesely et al., 2014). Studies have found that teachers in training frequently experience fear for their immediate safety during the school day, fear for the near future as effective teachers, and fear for the long-term sustainability and success of their work (Delamarter & Ewart, 2020) and a general feeling of professional inadequacy stemming from powerlessness and uncertainty (Lindqvist et al., 2017).

### *Value of Connection and Community*

While there exists a substantial body of research examining the benefit of collaboratively working on developing wellness-related abilities in group settings, much of this literature focuses on nurses and social workers (Barak et al., 2008; Gunusen & Ustun, 2010; Medland et al., 2004) and very little is targeted at teachers. This strengthens the sense that the teacher burnout crisis and accompanying social emotional needs continue to be largely overlooked.

Yet a prominent factor that can bind otherwise disconnected individuals to each other in mutually helping groups is having to cope with similar conditions of heightened anxiety (Davison et al., 2000). This is true for support groups around addiction or grief, for example, but also for members of a professional group that shares a common level of job-related stress (Barak et al., 2008). Here Rosenberg (1984) defines “support group” as “sharing one’s problem with others suffering from the same stress” (p. 173). In a study on support groups for nurses, participants reported that hearing about the concerns of others gave them a useful perspective on their own situation, helping them understand their own challenges and feel less alone (Peterson et al., 2008).

Certainly, various 12 Steps movements have demonstrated that group processes can be instrumental in providing participants in stressful situations with emotional relief. Here, there is a distinction between a therapy group, where a service provider implements a treatment, and a support group, where peers share, listen, and offer support and relief to one another (Barak et al., 2008; Peterson et al., 2008). In fact, the knowledge that one is helpful to others by listening and providing encouragement is a key benefit of being in a support group, as it allows participants to gain a sense of competence and confidence that is often lacking (Kirk & Walter, 1981; Rosenberg, 1984). The communal, peer aspect of this group process, where challenges are shared, and everyone can contribute their own insider knowledge to help one another with challenges all identify with, facilitates understanding of the common struggles, a sense of belonging and community, and an increase in self-confidence (Peterson et al., 2008).

The social support provided by a group process has been shown to be effective against the kind of burnout endemic among teachers (Um & Harrison, 1998). Indeed, the stress caused by job-related uncertainty and volatility is especially effectively addressed through the reflective process of a support group (Etzion, 1984; Medland et al., 2004). It can allow participants to find ways of organizing, reflecting on, and arriving at practical responses to their fears rather than being overwhelmed by them (Delamarter & Ewart, 2020). In the long run, having regular meetings with peers allows for important community building and opportunities for periodic check-ins that help participants to be seen, cared for, and cared for others (Korman et al., 2022). In this way, a significant impact is to break through the isolation that typically exacerbates both the anxiety and the feeling of helplessness in addressing it (Korman, et al., 2022; Rosenberg, 1984; Sononne & Rochford, 2020).

In a study specifically about teachers with such a support group, it was found that the process helped with resilience, letting them know that there were others who cared about them

and would be ready to help when things got hard (Howard & Johnson, 2004). Similarly, Kirk and Walter (2008) found it important for participants to share both their challenges and their successes in order to steer the conversations toward overcoming problems rather than merely reaffirming them. It was clearly important, above all, for participants to speak openly and to listen to one another supportively.

### ***Summing up: Support Groups to Address Teacher SEL***

As is amply documented in the research literature, there is a long-standing SEL crisis among teachers (Delamarter & Ewart, 2020; Lindqvist et al., 2017; Vesely et al., 2014) that has a substantial negative impact on both P-12 students (Cipriano & Brackett, 2020 ; Ransford, et al., 2009) and on the retention of teachers within the profession (Greenberg et al., 2016). Teachers as a group are especially subject to feelings of isolation and job-related stress, leading to a high level of burnout (Cipriano & Brackett, 2020). While this crisis is and has been acute, there has been insufficient regard given to teachers' SEL in teacher preparation and support of beginning teachers (Almerico, 2018; Hadar, et al., 2020; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). Among other approaches, it has been found that a collaborative support group process can help professionals in high-stress sectors feel less isolated and anxious and develop a sense of self-confidence, belonging, and greater resilience through an ongoing process of sharing, listening, problem-solving, and mutual support (Howard & Johnson, 2004; Kirk & Walter, 2008; Korman, 2022; Peterson et al., 2008).

### ***“SEL Space”***

The SEL crisis for teachers and the SEL-related gap in teacher preparation that are documented in the literature were also evident in the teacher education program this study focuses on and the surrounding school districts where most of the graduates of the program spend their first years as teachers. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an acknowledgment that preservice teachers' SEL, while addressed here and there in classes and advising sessions, was given insufficient space within the teacher preparation curriculum and was clearly set on a lower rung of importance than other less person-related skill areas. At the same time, a substantial amount of effort was spent trying to find ways to support student teachers who were overwhelmed with stress and found themselves in serious wellness crises, leading some to withdraw from the program with the explanation that they needed to prioritize their mental health. Furthermore, a number of recent graduates were prematurely resigning from their teaching positions to switch to “kinder” professions outside of schools.

In response to what was viewed as an entrenched crisis and a program gap, and drawing on some of the findings from the research literature, the author piloted an ongoing support group structure that would specifically address SEL areas with current student teachers and graduates who were in their first two years of teaching. Modeling the initiative after some of the promising interventions documented with healthcare workers (Gunusen & Ustun, 2010;

Korman, 2022; Medland et al., 2004; Peterson et al., 2008), the author set up a group that combined preservice and early-career teachers, all graduates from the same program, tasking them to reflect individually on their own SEL-related situations, needs, and accomplishments, and meeting on a regular basis to share, support one another, and plan and chart their own growth. The stated goals were to develop a supportive community of peers who shared and understood the struggles of being a beginning teacher, provide a space to voice and hear personal experiences and give opportunities to help, strategize, and give and receive ideas for successfully tackling the challenges at hand. The researcher hoped that these beginning teachers would help and be helped and feel less isolated in the process.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants and Structure**

The pilot project this study focuses on took place over the course of four months in the second half of the school year and involved a total of thirteen current students and recent graduates of an American graduate education program, leading to state-level teacher certification on the elementary and secondary level. Students were selected from three different cohorts that had all been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. To the extent that there really is a ‘before’ and ‘after’ the beginning of the pandemic in terms of the reality of schools, it seemed important that some of this experience was shared by all participants. The author invited students to participate based on an attempt to ensure representation across cohorts, grade levels taught, subject matter, and type of community setting. Of the thirteen invited students and graduates who agreed to participate, five were in their second year of teaching, five were in their first year, and three were current students in the second half of their culminating student teaching experience. They taught a range of content areas in high schools, middle schools, technical schools, and elementary schools in large cities, small cities, and rural areas. All aspects of the project were facilitated by the author, an Education professor who had worked extensively with each of the participants in their teacher preparation program.

At the onset of the project, participants created a personal SEL plan that addressed fundamental aspects of SEL adapted from the framework by CASEL (2020), which related to common challenges for teachers as had been identified in the literature (Cipriano & Brackett, 2020; Greenberg et al., 2016; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016). These aspects were defined as attending to personal well-being, managing own emotions, managing challenging situations, and engaging in problem-solving for students. In each case, participants defined specific areas they were focusing on, struggles and/or successes they were experiencing, specific actions they were already taking to address this area, and actions they were planning to take moving forward. In alignment with research pointing to the importance for teachers learning how to identify and approach stressors proactively (Gustems-Carniver & Calderon, 2013), participants updated their SEL plans on a monthly basis to ensure that these remained living documents, allowing for ongoing stock-taking, planning, and reflection.

Once a month, participants gathered for a two-hour online support group meeting, split into two sessions in the same week, with six or seven participants in each. Each of the sessions was structured in the same way, with an intent to provide both clarity and structure, opportunities for open self-guided conversation, and a focus on pragmatic problem solving, in keeping with research findings that ongoing training in proactive strategies for emotional regulation reduced student teachers' perceived exhaustion and feeling of inadequacy (Vaisanen et al., 2018). After initial greetings and a reminder of the general structure of the meeting, each session began with individual check-ins on current situations and open conversation on whatever topics participants were latching onto. Other than keeping time, the facilitator provided little guidance during this section to ensure that the conversation was truly about what the participants wanted to talk about. This part of the meeting was then followed by an overview of common themes that had emerged in the latest revisions of participants' individual SEL plans and a more pointed discussion of recent struggles and successes. After a break, the group was split up into smaller sessions with two or three participants in each. Each group was asked to identify one or two problems they would like to solve and discuss ideas on how to approach them, exchanging experiences and building on one another's discoveries. The whole group then reconvened, and participants were asked to share out what they had discussed. This then led to a larger and sense-making conversation where participants were asked to problem-solve together and build on each other's ideas. To end the meeting, the facilitator asked each participant to identify insights they gained from the meeting and suggested the next steps for themselves moving forward. As in all previous phases of the meeting, open conversation was encouraged, and guidance by the facilitator was kept at a minimum. Each of the four monthly meetings followed this same structure.

### **Research Questions**

In order to examine what challenges participants were facing and wanted to address, how this process helped them face SEL-related issues, and whether they found it helpful, the study defined the following three research questions:

1. What themes did participants focus on, and what problems did they try to solve?
2. How did the themes evolve from meeting to meeting?
3. What did teachers seem to gain from this process, and what evidence is there that this process was helpful to them?

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

With participants' written consent, each of the four pairs of online meetings was recorded, and written transcriptions were generated. At this point, all data was anonymized, and strict confidentiality protocols were followed. The author then broke down the transcripts into conversational turns, each delineated by a change of speaker. A conversational turn seemed a significant unit, as it indicated an instance when a given student found a particular topic point to

be important or compelling enough to introduce and weigh in on. The author then gave each of these segments a descriptive topic label, using an open coding system to allow for patterns among themes to emerge. Given that all of the first three pairs of meetings took place as the school year was proceeding and teachers were facing ongoing day-to-day challenges, similar codes were used and could be compared. The fourth pair of monthly meetings, however, took place at the very end of the school year and featured different, more summative topics of conversation, leading to a different set of codes.

Once the data from the first three pairs of meetings was coded, the author identified patterns and changes across sessions and identified and analyzed them in relation to the research questions. The fourth pair of meetings was analyzed separately. Once each turn-based segment was attributed a descriptive label, the emerging list of codes was then further sorted and combined into a smaller number of themes. These themes were, in turn, separated into the three larger categories of struggles, successes, and ongoing constructive initiatives. In the case of the struggles category, the assembled themes suggested two separate perspectives that separated the larger category into two distinct topics (overall challenges and feelings of dissatisfaction, and specific, troubling situations that teachers had difficulties addressing). The number of segments for each theme and for each larger category was tabulated, first for each meeting, and then for the combined meetings. Thus coded, organized, and tabulated, the data lent itself to a comparative analysis.

The sorted and tabulated data relating to participants' struggles, successes, and ongoing constructive initiatives were then examined in terms of their variety and the prominence of the different themes. Frequencies of code-based themes were examined to determine which of these three categories were discussed most often. Struggles, successes, and ongoing initiatives will first be examined in terms of overall codes. A second examination of the same tabulated data will pertain to how these changed over time. Finally, the author will present data to examine the participants' reflections on the SEL meeting process and where they felt it left them. Data from the last meeting and the closing sections of the previous meetings will be examined here.

## **Findings**

### **Major Topics**

Upon looking at the data overall, while the majority of conversational turns focused on struggles students were facing, it is to be noted that participants also substantially addressed the successes and initiatives they were actively working on (see Table 1).

### ***Struggles***

Within the general category of struggle, most participants' turns connected to their general feeling of challenge and unhappiness rather than specific instances or situations that needed to be negotiated. The distinction seems meaningful, as difficult situations might be talked about in terms of practical problem solving. In contrast, general statements of feeling and

**Table 1***SEL Meetings: Discussion Themes, with Frequency of Coded Turns in Total*

<b>Thematic Categories</b>
Struggle (167) General Struggle (96) Addressing Specific Difficult Situations (71)
Success (109)
Ongoing Initiatives (35)
Reflection (31)

personal situations are less obviously turned into actionable steps and are maybe more likely to feed into a sense of hopelessness.

**Table 2***General Struggle: Frequency from Combined Meetings*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Number of Turns</b>
Personal Wellness	56
School and Colleagues	25
Parents and Students	15

Breaking down this category further, it was found that participants talked most often about struggles related to personal wellness (see Table 2). They discussed not taking care of themselves physically, in terms of sleep, diet, and exercise, and feeling constantly tired. They said they felt overwhelmed with stress, struggled with feeling competent, and worried about being able to adequately prepare their students for high-stakes exams. They expressed feeling lonely and struggling with what it means to adopt a teacher identity. Often, they mentioned struggles with personal boundaries, feeling that they were working all the time and did not have a private or home life that was separate from their work life as teachers.

After personal wellness, they mentioned struggles with colleagues, administrators, the school culture, and being young teachers. Participants talked about disrespect or even abuse by more veteran colleagues, administrators they felt not supported by, and a general school culture that they thought did not welcome them or respect them because of their relative youth and

inexperience. Finally, participants talked about general unhappiness in their relationship with disrespectful or even hostile parents and with students themselves.

It was noteworthy how little of these beginning teachers' expression of general distress was related to the actual ins and outs of instruction and connected curriculum, lesson planning, and assessment, which so much of teacher preparation focuses on, and how much had to do with matters of wellness and relationships. Participants' main sources of unhappiness, it appeared, came from not feeling able to take good care of themselves and not feeling supported or respected by the people they worked with.

**Table 3**

*Struggles—Challenging Situations: Frequency from Combined Meetings*

Themes	Number of Turns
Students, Colleagues, and Chaos	56
Personal Anxiety	15

When asked more specifically about challenging situations they were facing and did not know how to address successfully, the most frequently mentioned points had to do with a lack of support and clear structures and rules that they attributed to general chaos in their schools (see Table 3). They did not know what the disciplinary protocols were, what their school expected of students, teachers, and families, or even what the rules were regarding teachers' sick and personal leave. The next most frequent type of challenging situations related to student behavior, in terms of disrespect, unruliness, and refusal to do assigned schoolwork. Participants mentioned not knowing how to address levels of student disrespect that they thought felt outside of the usual norms and that they attributed to pandemic-related home instability and being "COVID kids" who had not been socialized into school norms in the same way as students previously had. Students were anxious and, according to one participant, "easily triggered." Especially given the lack of administrative and collegial support, some teachers stated not knowing how to motivate students who were already far behind academically and knew they were likely to fail their classes. A major challenge, again, concerned difficult situations with other teachers. One participant stated that even when she was starting to feel settled and less anxious in her work, "other teachers make it hard for me, as though they want to watch the young female teacher fail." Participants mentioned not knowing how to deal with unfriendly gossip and conflict among teachers, the choice being to either participate without wanting to or stay away and have even less contact with colleagues.

Other challenging situations connected again to their own wellness. The participants wanted a stable routine they could build boundaries and sustainable habits around, yet found that the professional demands kept changing. Because of staff shortages and turnover in their buildings, they found themselves asked to take on additional extra-curricular responsibilities and

substitute assignments with little notice or preparation. It added to the chaos of the workday and made it harder to organize their time. How to address these additional demands was seen as challenging. Teachers were unclear about what they had to do, what they could say no to, and when they were being taken advantage of because they were new. Some mentioned being afraid to say no and being viewed as “not being a team player.” Three mentioned wanting to leave their placement for a district that seemed less chaotic, but they were anxious about leaving schools that were clearly in need and thus add to the general inequity. They felt a responsibility to their students and yet thought that their current work situation was not sustainable for them.

***Successes***

While participants struggled considerably, they also voiced substantial successes and reasons for hope, often in the same areas they were struggling with (See Table 4). In over one-third of all turns with this theme, teachers talked about things getting better in general. They mentioned becoming more skilled as instructors, feeling more comfortable with their teacher identity, and building a positive professional reputation. They also mentioned getting resources and interesting work opportunities and the school implementing structures they liked. The most frequently mentioned reason for positivity was presented as a general sense that things were getting better and that they were hopeful.

**Table 4**  
*Success: Frequency, Combined Meetings*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Number of Turns</b>
Generally Better--Teaching, Reputation, Identity, Hope	30
Better Relations with Teachers, Administrators, and Staff	21
Better Relations with Students	16
Better Self-Care	10
Better with Classroom Management	10
Better at Managing Time	8
More Kind to Myself	8
Less Isolated	6

The next most prominent source of feeling of success related to improved relations with other teachers, staff, and school administrators. Participants mentioned receiving support from colleagues and appreciating the fact that other teachers shared with them that they had similar struggles with students. They felt validated and comforted by veteran teachers in their buildings. Finally, some referred to feeling newly supported and appreciated by school administrators.

To a similar extent, participants found success and hopefulness in their relations and interactions with students. A number of teachers talked about connecting better with students, some pointing to the positives of being open with students about who they were and how they felt. Participants spoke of the validation they received from their students, being in tune with them, and providing them with SEL opportunities organically through improved relations. They also mentioned having students help with discipline issues because they were invested in the relationship as well. Participants acknowledged actions they had deliberately undertaken that had contributed to the relationship-building. They told of having visited students at their places of work and their sporting events and becoming better at understanding and adjusting to demands placed on students in their other classes. They felt successful in validating students, expressing empathy, and generally showing personal curiosity.

Participants also talked about improvements in how they managed their own well-being. They shared general success at self-care, some stating that they had become better at developing healthier habits, and managing their personal stress through exercise. They were getting more sleep, generally decreasing the pressure they placed on themselves, and following advice they had received in a previous group meeting to maintain a list of activities they did for fun. Participants also reported successes in managing their time. Several shared that they were becoming better at knowing what grading tasks to prioritize, as grading had often been reported as particularly time-consuming. They had become better at grading assignments right away. One teacher reported success at spending less time creating assignments and freeing themselves to instead spend more time carefully reading students' work, which they considered a more valuable use of time. Another mentioned giving students more independent work to do in class, during which time she could do work that she would otherwise have to do after school.

Participants also noted becoming kinder to themselves. Several shared that they felt better at forgiving themselves and acknowledging that they did not have to be perfect teachers at all times. Some mentioned accepting that teaching evolves and that making and correcting mistakes is an integral part of this evolution. One said a breakthrough had been taking the initiative to ask other teachers for help when she was struggling with a group of students. It was noteworthy that this was seen as a success and not as a shortcoming.

Another success area related to handling classroom discipline. Participants noted a greater understanding of students and their situation and a better appreciation for generational differences. Teachers also mentioned choosing their battles more and using humor when redirecting students. Some participants noted that they were generally more patient and less quick to react to student behavior emotionally. They had become better at giving themselves time to calm down.

A noteworthy success over the course of these meetings related to a decrease in isolation. Several participants talked about seeing the importance of finding opportunities to connect with others. One teacher mentioned participating in a group chat with peers from the same graduate school cohort. Some mentioned feeling less isolated in the school, and finding much-needed peer support among their colleagues.

### ***Ongoing Initiatives***

In addition to areas where they felt they had made tangible progress, participants also pointed to current initiatives that appeared to be promising, even if these were still works in progress (see Table 5). The most frequently mentioned area in this regard was boundary setting and time management, with various participants describing efforts they were making to establish clear personal boundaries with students and families. To this effect, one teacher said that they were in the process of building a true wall between home and work in order to protect their personal time. Two participants pointed to their ongoing efforts to have grading take less time to make it easier to end the work day early enough that they could have a life outside of it. Some teachers were still exploring what boundary setting actually involved for them, including what aspects of themselves to share with their students and what to maintain as private.

**Table 5**  
*Ongoing Initiatives: Frequency, Combined Meetings*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Number of Turns</b>
Boundaries and Time Management	10
Improving Classroom Management	8
Doing What Is Right for Me/Taking Care of Myself	5
Being Positive/Avoiding Negativity	5
Connecting with People and Asking for Help	4
Accepting My Own Learning and Growth	3

The next most frequently mentioned area is related to becoming better at classroom management. Several talked about making efforts to become more deliberate and consistent in addressing disciplinary issues. Some talked about wanting to determine when to forgive students for inappropriate behavior and when to hold them accountable. One mentioned wanting to determine when it was appropriate to actually remove a student from the classroom as a consequence of disruptive and disrespectful behavior. Two teachers talked about wanting to give students room to advocate for themselves respectfully and, in the process, give them more control over how behavioral norms were to be maintained in the classroom.

Participants also stated focusing on taking care of themselves and, more generally, trying to find ways to do what was right for them as individuals with lives beyond the classroom. Teachers mentioned wanting their next steps to involve being mindful of stepping away from their school-related tasks, making sure they also engaged in activities that brought them joy, and developing better, more healthy eating and sleeping routines. One teacher was trying to become better at advocating for themselves, prioritizing what was in their own interest. Another was

currently working on managing their emotions in difficult situations by learning from veteran colleagues.

In a similar vein, participants shared that they were working on finding ways to be positive and avoid the negativity they found themselves often slipping into and that they sensed from many of their colleagues. One teacher mentioned intentionally avoiding negative thoughts and negative talk from other teachers by avoiding eating her lunch in the teacher's lounge. One explained that she focused too much on her challenges and was disciplining herself to think more about the joy she experienced as a teacher. Another participant wanted to strategize how to bring more joy into her classroom instruction. Yet another was trying out a system to consistently hold on to positive comments by students, so she could remember them during challenging times.

Reaching out more was a goal for several of the participants. One explained that she wanted to become better at asking colleagues for help. Another added that she was working on soliciting help before finding herself in a crisis situation rather than when she was already struggling. Two teachers mentioned wanting to find, within their school buildings, other people to be open and vulnerable with, similarly to how they could be open and vulnerable during these monthly meetings.

Going along with this larger theme of wanting to find ways to be kinder to themselves and less constantly anxious, several teachers talked about becoming better at accepting their own status as beginning teachers, that they were still learning and growing in their practice. One mentioned wanting to work on not feeling incompetent. Another talked about wanting to teach herself that her lessons, in fact, didn't have to be perfect. One participant spoke about wanting to accept their learning curve and focus on how much they were learning this year in order to improve their teaching for next year.

### ***Patterns Among Struggles, Successes, and Ongoing Initiatives***

Comparing the themes that were emphasized when participants talked about struggles, successes, and ongoing initiatives, one notes a considerable overlap (see Table 6). In each of the categories, themes can be further grouped into three separate yet connected topic areas, namely, wellness, relationships, and classroom management. Participants focused considerably on the area of personal wellness, which in turn included time management and professional boundary setting, experiencing joy, self-efficacy, and concerns around loneliness. Here concerns were widespread, but participants also experienced successes and engaged in ongoing problem-solving activities. A separate area that was highlighted related to relationships and coping with the school environment. The teachers emphasized relationships with other teachers, as well as with administrators, students and families, and general structures and supports within the school. Again, participants voiced struggling significantly in these areas, yet also achieving important successes and continuing to find approaches to improve their situation. Finally, participants highlighted student behavior and classroom management as areas of struggle, success, and continuous endeavor. Based on the data, it appears as though the SEL needs and work of these

teachers was largely defined by these three interrelated areas of personal wellness, work-based relationships, and classroom management.

**Table 6**

*Main Themes: Struggles, Successes, and Ongoing Initiatives*

<b>Struggles</b>	<b>Successes</b>	<b>Ongoing Initiatives</b>
General Sense of Struggle	General Sense of Hope and Progress	
Wellness and Loneliness	Wellness	Wellness and Boundary-Setting Being Positive and Kind to Oneself
School Environment Relationships	Relationships and Connectedness	Connectedness
Student Behavior	Classroom Management	Classroom Management

**Struggles, Successes, and Ongoing Initiatives Over Time**

***Struggles***

While participants spoke about struggles, successes, and ongoing initiatives concerning the same general areas, how much they emphasized each theme/area varied considerably from meeting to meeting.

**Table 7**

*Change Over Time—General Struggle: Frequency by Meeting*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Number of Turns</b>		
	<b>Meeting 1</b>	<b>Meeting 2</b>	<b>Meeting 3</b>

Personal Wellness	19	19	18
School and Colleagues	8	13	4
Parents and Students	9	0	6

Among sources of struggle, personal wellness was a constant throughout the process, remaining the most frequently mentioned subject of concern (see Table 7). Here specific struggles with boundary-setting were the most emphasized in the first two meetings, but not in the third. Conversely, the topics of physical well-being, tiredness, and being overwhelmed or stressed became more prominent with each meeting. However, concerns with a general sense of loneliness that were prominent in the first meeting were not brought up after that. While personal wellness as a general struggle featured relatively evenly across the three meetings, other areas fluctuated. Thus, general struggles with relationships with students and their parents were mentioned frequently in the first meeting, not at all in the second meeting, and were again talked about a bit in the third meeting. General struggles related to school issues and colleagues were brought up substantially as a topic in the first meeting, spiked in prominence during the second meeting, and received little attention in the third meeting. All in all, it may not be surprising that the focus on work situations fluctuated over time, presumably based on particular events, while struggles with feeling well remained constant.

Examining the data on specific situational struggles, the extent to which participants talked about challenging situations with students, chaos, and general instability within their school was a consistent focus over the course of all three meetings (see Table 8). Regarding more narrow themes, challenges related to student behavior and home instability, on one hand, and general chaos and lack of support within the school, on the other, were consistent concerns throughout the meetings.

**Table 8**

*Change Over Time, Challenging Situations: Frequency by Meeting*

Themes	Number of Turns		
	Meeting 1	Meeting 2	Meeting 3
Students, Colleagues, and Chaos	18	16	22
Personal Anxiety	6	3	6

While the general feeling that participants struggled to be personally well remained constant from meeting to meeting, the overall sense that things were going poorly with students and colleagues fluctuated. When it came to talking about specific challenging situations,

however, teachers mentioned struggles with students and with other staff on a fairly consistent basis over time.

### ***Successes***

Regarding successes, there were very different patterns from one meeting to the next (see Table 9). Examining the frequency with which different areas of success were mentioned, one notices that, for some, there was little variation from one meeting to the next. In some cases, there was erratic fluctuation; in other cases, there was a trend of increased frequency over time, and in one category, there was considerable mention of in the first meeting, but not subsequently. Indeed, a great number of participants mentioned successes in receiving validation from other colleagues in the first meeting, but not in the second and third meetings. One might speculate that participants were worried and therefore focused on this area at the beginning, given the general anxiety of chaos in the school and a lack of supportive relations with colleagues.

**Table 9**

*Change Over Time—Success: Frequency by Meeting*

Themes	Number of Turns		
	Meeting 1	Meeting 2	Meeting 3
Generally Better--Teaching, Reputation, Identity, Hope (30)	6	14	10
Better Relations with Teachers, Administrators, and Staff	16	3	2
Better Relations with Students (16)	5	4	7
Better Self-Care (10)	0	7	3
Better at Managing Time	0	0	8
More Kind to Myself	2	1	5
Better with Classroom Management (10)	0	0	10
Less Isolated	0	6	0

Conversely, teachers did not mention having achieved success in the area of classroom management and student discipline until the third meeting. This seems especially significant given how much teachers referred to this as an area of struggle. Arguably, while success at building supportive relationships with colleagues is important early on in order to establish positive working conditions, feeling successful in terms of classroom management takes time, especially for early-career teachers, and success is likely to come later.

Similarly, participants spoke more frequently about successes in the area of time management late in the process, only mentioning by the third meeting that they had become

better at knowing when to grade assignments, working less from home, and generally becoming more time-efficient. There was also a notable increase in teachers mentioning becoming better at being kind to themselves.

There was more fluctuation and less of a clear trend from one meeting to the next in problem areas that are arguably less easily solved. Thus, mentions of successes in their actual teaching, and the feeling that their practice was improving were mentioned in each of the meetings. However, it increased significantly in the second meeting and decreased again in the third. Similarly, while no one mentioned successes in the area of self-care during the first meeting, a number of teachers did so during the second meeting, but that number decreased again for the third meeting. No one talked about achieving success in breaking through loneliness and isolation during the first and third meetings, but a number of participants did so during the second meeting.

Finally, there were consistently a substantial number of participants who mentioned experiencing success, connecting with, and feeling validated by students. Given the long-term work of establishing relationships with students, this should perhaps not seem surprising, and the fact that successes were mentioned throughout would seem encouraging. A small number of participants also mentioned successes at establishing positive relationships with administrators during each of the three meetings.

Overall, then, it seems that some of the trends regarding participants' successes, as shared in the meetings, may have been connected to what areas were most prioritized early on and which required a longer learning curve. Indeed, successes in building relationships within their schools, which was talked about as an area of concern, were mentioned early in the process. Successes in classroom management and time management, however, were only brought up in later meetings, possibly because they involved a slower growth process.

### ***Ongoing Initiatives***

While the ongoing initiatives participants were engaged in were mentioned with relative consistency, for the most part, the pattern was different in two noteworthy areas (see Table 10). A number of participants mentioned intentionally working on boundary-setting and time management in the first meeting, but this decreased in the meetings that followed. Conversely, while teachers hardly mentioned wanting to focus on becoming better at classroom management during the first two meetings, the topic was mentioned a considerable number of times during the third meeting, at which point it seemed to have become a clear priority. In the areas of self-care, being positive, finding others to connect with, and being kind to oneself, a relatively small number of participants mentioned ongoing initiatives at each of the three meetings.

### **Last Meeting: Personal State at the End of the School Year**

Whereas the initial three monthly meetings were approached as a way to connect about ongoing situations, challenges, successes, and initiatives, the final meeting at the very end of the school year had, understandably, a very different tenor. Although it followed the same structure as the previous sessions, it was clearly a summative, stock-taking meeting, where participants

**Table 10***Change Over Time—Ongoing Initiatives: Frequency by Meeting*

Themes	Number of Turns		
	Meeting 1	Meeting 2	Meeting 3
Boundaries & Time Management	5	3	2
Improving Classroom Management	1	0	7
Doing What Is Right for Me/Taking Care of Myself	0	3	2
Being Positive/Avoiding Negativity	1	2	2
Connecting with People and Asking for Help	2	0	2
Accepting My Own Learning and Growth	1	1	1

reflected on where they had arrived to close out this academic year and, in many cases, how they positioned themselves for the year to come.

Generally, what participants brought up as summative points for the school year relates to their own well-being, in terms of understanding, achievement, and ongoing work they felt they still needed to engage in (see Table 11). Indeed, the thematic categories that were clearly about teachers' own wellness were by far the most frequently mentioned. The most prevalent theme concerned the realization that teachers needed to be able to find a way to "go back to neutral" from heightened emotional conditions they found themselves in by the end of the school day, because of intense feelings of joy and excitement or, more frequently, because of strong frustration, disappointment, anger, and/or hurt that was often paralyzing and deeply disillusioning.

**Table 11***Personal State at the End of the School Year: Frequency, Last Meeting*

Themes	Number of Turns
Our Need To Go Back to Neutral	6
Coping with Being Emotionally Overwhelmed	7
Setting Goals for Next Year	7
Impact of "SEL Space" Meetings	7
Accepting That Only so Much Can Be Done	6
Ongoing Worry About Failure and Negativity	6

Teachers spoke considerably about the importance of calming themselves down and finding a way to refocus when they were emotionally overwhelmed during the school day, in order to conserve energy and be able to focus on their next teaching tasks rather than finding

themselves immobilized by the stress of the moment. Again, there seemed to be a general understanding that knowing how to affect an emotional “reset” was an important skill to develop moving forward.

Connected to this focus on making their teaching lives more emotionally sustainable, a number of participants mentioned the importance of accepting that they could only do so much to get past those problems and limitations beyond their control. They spoke about needing to acknowledge that some problems were indeed not theirs to solve. They also needed to accept that instruction does not always go according to plan and that they would inevitably have setbacks and unexpected turns. They realized that they needed to continue becoming better at not viewing this as a sign of their own incompetence or personal failure.

At the same time, several participants mentioned still being worried about failing and about “catastrophizing” when things do not seem to be going well. One teacher mentioned still getting “stuck in a cycle of negativity” that seemed unsustainable. Another added that unless she became better at breaking out of such “emotional ruts,” she didn’t think she could remain a teacher for very long. In regard to this, a substantial number of participants pointed to the impact of the “SEL Space” meetings as a way to combat the negativity. One participant contrasted the constructive tenor of these meetings with the defeatist tone of typical conversations with colleagues in their school. Teachers mentioned that while it was good to hear different perspectives within the group, they felt in sync. Their commonality, one said, didn’t feel forced. One teacher mentioned the importance of ending this school year and these meetings with the knowledge that they were not alone.

Importantly, a number of teachers talked about areas they were excited to work on moving forward on feasible tasks. One mentioned looking forward to building on lessons she created this year rather than having to create everything from scratch. Another was intent on starting the next school year with a clearer curriculum map. Another wanted to spend time noting what all went well this year so they could build on it. Teachers also talked about wanting to develop better classroom management approaches and stronger professional relationships with colleagues. Finally, one stated that they simply wanted to take a “long mental break,” which in itself was likely to solve many of their problems.

### **Reflection on the “SEL Space” Process**

Participants also reflected on the meetings’ impact (see Table 12). The most prevalent theme was that the meetings cut into their isolation and provided the relief of knowing that others were in similar situations. Several teachers stated that participating in these “SEL Space” meetings made them feel less alone. Others talked about the importance of seeing familiar faces on a regular basis and the comfort this provided. The teachers also reported feeling the relief of knowing that others were struggling with similar issues, that their difficulties were not unique to them or indicators of their own personal inadequacy. One pointed to how the sharing and collaborative problem-solving that occurred in these meetings highlighted for them the ongoing need to find peers to work with.

**Table 12***Reflection: Frequency from Combined Meetings*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Number of Turns</b>
Feeling Less Alone	13
Perspective—Helping Me Focus on Growth	5
Helping/Learning from One Another	4
This is SEL--Safe Space	4
Reminder of the Importance of Reflection	2
Comfort in Knowing Other Teachers Are Struggling	2
Value of Puzzling Together	1

Another common theme was that this process helped provide the beginning teachers with a more developmental and longer-term perspective on their professional reality and helped them focus on those areas they most needed to attend to. One mentioned the importance of understanding that the challenges she was experiencing now will not simply go away in the next year of teaching or the one after that. Another was comforted to know that how she was feeling about her day-to-day was not unusual, that it was acceptable to feel the way she did. On a more practical level, one first-year teacher valued learning from others that if the first few weeks of the school year are strong, the rest of the year will benefit. Another noted learning from others about the importance of taking time to calm down in a crisis situation. One spoke about the clear priority she needed to place on learning how to handle challenging situations with individual students and individual colleagues.

Not surprisingly, participants also talked about the benefit of having a space to help one another and be able to learn from the experiences of others. Novice teachers pointed to the importance of having teachers in their second or third year in the profession to get advice and perspective from. One mentioned the networking opportunities and the sharing of information on job openings. Another spoke about the importance of being able to puzzle over truly challenging issues together.

Teachers also pointed to the importance of having these meetings simply to have them. One teacher, describing the value of the process, stated “this is SEL.” Another mentioned that it provided a safe space to talk and be themselves in a way that they did not think was possible in their school. One participant, echoing the importance of the relationships that these meetings helped foster, mentioned how she started connecting with some of her “SEL Space” peers at other times as well, getting needed help and solidarity. Finally, teachers mentioned the sheer importance of having a place where they were brought to reflect on their lives as teachers. One phrased it as being brought back into an “ethical state of mind” where she could reflect on the big picture of what she was doing rather than get caught up in the practicalities of the day-to-day.

She wondered how she could get into this state of mind without these meetings. Another mentioned, point-blank, that she was so tired on a daily basis that she didn't know how she could engage in true reflection without these meetings.

### **Discussion**

Based on our findings, there were marked trends in topics the participating teachers talked about, how they talked about them, and how these evolved over time. In order to make sense of the data in light of the bigger issues and needs this pilot project aimed to address, each of the research questions will be taken in turn.

#### **What Teachers Talked About: Topics and Problems to Solve**

While teachers talked about a wide variety of topics during these meetings, the areas of personal wellness, work-based relationships, and classroom management were especially emphasized. Echoing what is found in the research literature (Almerico, 2018; Schonert-Reichl, 2017), a major area of focus for teachers was their own wellness. Participants repeatedly mentioned their struggles with being physically and mentally well, with particular difficulties ensuring they slept enough, exercised, and managed time and tasks well enough to lead satisfying lives outside of work. While this was also an area where participants mentioned experiencing successes, taking care of themselves, setting work-life boundaries, remaining positive, and being kind and forgiving toward themselves were discussed as ongoing growth areas that needed to remain priorities.

In a sense, the fact that participants focused on those areas that we know are issues in the teaching profession and are often linked to teachers burning out and leaving the profession (Cipriano & Brackett, 2020) points to the authenticity of the meetings and the conversations participants engaged in. Indeed, they used these opportunities to discuss areas we know are critical and that teachers are generally underprepared in. Teachers talked about broader feelings of unhappiness and loneliness, but also discussed and problem-solved around specific, practical considerations such as how to ensure they also did things that were fun, recognized their accomplishments, and spent less time grading and preparing outside of school. There was a combination of vulnerable emotional sharing and trading of practical questions, strategies, and discoveries. Given the possible truism that only other beginning teachers can fully appreciate the physical and emotional hardship of being a beginning teacher, the fact that so much time was spent discussing these areas seems to indicate that the opportunities were well-taken advantage of. Furthermore, the fact that participants mentioned struggles, successes, and ongoing initiatives also gives a sense that these concerns continued to be taken seriously, but that teachers were learning, actively trying to tackle their areas of wellness, and that they were experiencing growth. Given the danger of low morale and burnout, successes and ongoing initiatives around the area of personal wellness seemed especially significant.

Connected to emotional well-being and a struggle against loneliness was the emphasis on work-based relationships with colleagues, administrators, and students. While this area was

defined as separate from personal wellness, the two are certainly connected. Issues related to loneliness and self-confidence were affected by the quality of participants' relationships with other teachers, especially. Participants struggled with finding supportive teachers they could trust within their buildings, especially as young teachers who did not always feel that they were given adequate professional respect. Feeling supported and connected within their school buildings was talked about at length as general and situational struggles, areas of success, and ongoing areas to work on. If social emotional wellbeing has to do in part with feeling supported, validated, and understood, then it figures that the topic of work-based relationships would be central to these conversations. Again, the fact that these were major themes speaks to the authenticity, perhaps validity, of the meetings.

The third major subject area that was mentioned at length is related to classroom management. Student behavior was a significant point of struggle, but teachers also mentioned successes in terms of classroom management and ongoing initiatives they were engaging in. This, too, might not come as a surprise, linked as it is to how teachers are likely to feel about their daily work lives. Indeed, if stress and a feeling of helplessness are the basis of professional burnout, then the area of classroom management and addressing student behavior would, in all likelihood, be a critical area. Disrespectful, non-compliant, or confrontational student behavior can be personally hurtful, make it challenging to teach a lesson successfully, make teachers doubt their competence, and lead them to a level of emotional and nervous crisis that is exhausting and extremely difficult to manage given the professional setting and norms. Again, the fact that this topic was a mainstay during the meetings makes sense and confirms the relevance of the conversations.

As a whole, then, the process seemed to focus on topics that are clearly relevant and critical, and arguably areas of challenge that are difficult to prepare for or "fix," and where understanding, solidarity, and practical support are most likely to be found among peers who are effectively "in the same boat." In this way alone, the "SEL Space" process was meaningful and occupied a role that was difficult to fill otherwise.

### **The Process: How the Conversations Evolved over Time**

Not surprisingly, the data shows variation in terms of how much these topics were addressed in the various meetings. Indeed, while some of the areas of struggle, success, and/or ongoing initiative remained constant in conversations over the course of the process, others increased or decreased in prominence. Again, other topics fluctuated without a clear pattern of increase or decrease. To the extent that a dual aim of "SEL Space" was to be able to provide a reliable place to talk about certain issues and to solve problems in collaboration with peers, these evolutionary patterns are important to note. Attention here will be paid to those areas where there seemed to have been a discernible trend over time.

Strikingly, the main areas of struggle, with personal wellness, in-school relationships, and student behavior, were constants in all meetings. They were always mentioned to a similar degree, and while the specific concerns changed, they clearly remained challenges that were not

going away regardless of specific successes or initiatives. In every meeting, the struggle to be well and feel connected in their schools, especially with other teachers, was mentioned as obvious, along with the difficulties of addressing student disrespect and non-compliance. It may be that having these shared baseline struggles identified the participants as members of the same group. Ultimately, of course, there were reasons why they had all chosen to participate in this “SEL Space” process, and sharing these deep-seated challenges may well have been the common draw.

In terms of areas of success and ongoing initiatives, there were more changes between meetings. There was a decrease in mentions of success regarding relations with colleagues and initiatives to improve boundary-setting and time management. It may be that these are areas that can be addressed through specific action steps whose results will either come quickly or not at all, rather than remaining topics to build on and revisit over the course of the meetings. It is noteworthy that there was an increase in conversation around successes in the area of classroom management and important aspects of personal wellness. Indeed, as the meetings went on, there were more mentions of improvements in time management and participants being kinder to themselves. Furthermore, there was an increase in conversation about implementing targeted initiatives to help with addressing student behavior and time management. Given that wellness and addressing student behavior were discussed as constant struggles across meetings, the fact that teachers felt that some things had gotten better in this regard is important and points to growth in at least some critical SEL-related areas.

It seems significant, then, that some of the themes evolved over time while others remained constant. Importantly, participants increasingly mentioned successes in the areas of classroom management and aspects of personal wellness that related to the goal for teachers to feel less anxious and close to burnout—to feel happier—and to gain a sense of self-efficacy that failure in classroom management arguably undermines most directly. While this would be beyond the scope of the current study, it might be hypothesized that the problem-solving and strategy sharing that was engaged during the meetings contributed to some of the successes participants talked about. Underneath it all, however, the larger struggles with personal wellness, connectedness within the school, and addressing student behavior were constant. They were consistently shared and validated as important and legitimately challenging within the safe space of these meetings.

### **Outcomes: What Teachers Got out of the Process**

While the nature of the topics that teachers discussed during the meetings seemed to confirm its positive impact on their SEL, participants also pointed out how the process was valuable to them. The teachers highlighted three areas that were particularly impactful. For one, the meetings helped teachers feel less isolated and reminded them that they were not alone in experiencing the hardship they were going through. This seems particularly crucial, given how teachers struggled with feeling disconnected and unsupported by other teachers in the schools where they worked and given what is reported in the literature about the impact of isolation on

teacher burnout (Almarico, 2018). If there is a single SEL area that one would want to prioritize above all, having a sense of belonging and being supported may be the most prominent.

Another benefit mentioned was that these meetings, bringing together early-career teachers with varying amounts of professional experience, allowed brand-new teachers to learn from the experiences and perspectives of others who had a bit more experience, and for the latter to recognize that they had indeed grown as a result of their developing practice. Thus, participants were able to help—teach—one another on a practical level, while also gaining a better sense of their own development as teacher.

Finally, the participants valued the space for being safe. During these meetings, they felt that they could have a voice and be heard, without having to worry about the interpersonal complexities that they encountered in their schools. Here they felt they could be themselves. Reiterating what one participant said about the process, “this is SEL.”

In summary, participants focused on personal wellness, work-based relationships, and classroom management in their discussions across the meetings. While the topics themselves remained constant, there was a noticeable evolution as the meetings went on regarding personal successes. Indeed, while work-life boundary setting, relationships with colleagues, and addressing disrespectful student behavior continued to be discussed as struggles, there was a noteworthy increase in successes in the area of classroom management and key aspects of personal wellness. Overall, participants found the process to be valuable, helping them feel less isolated, learn from peers with different levels of experience, and feel that they could have a voice in a truly safe space.

### **Implications**

These meetings, clearly, were beneficial for participants and provided a venue where topics they found to be critical could be discussed and where they could learn from the experiences of others. On a basic level, it allowed teachers to address the different pieces that constituted their SEL challenges head-on with others who were in very similar situations. The fact that none of them had other spaces that allowed for this made it all the more impactful.

While this process seems like a promising prototype to continue to explore further, it would also be worthwhile to examine how it would work with participants with a wider range of experience. On a research level, it would be useful to study such a process on a larger scale, considering variables related to different types of schools, locations, and subject matter. The role of the facilitator might be investigated as well to see what impact different models of facilitation might have on the process itself.

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