

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING
PRACTICES AND LEARNING SPACES





September 28, 2023

Dear Reader,

Recently, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has become a hot topic in communities across Texas. For us educators, we know SEL as best practices that promote the soft skills that contribute to well-rounded students and productive citizens. For others, it has become a political platform. Because the process is crucial to teaching and learning, we decided to study what teachers might say about SEL strategies when considering the built environment, specifically flexible spaces as an intentional part of school design. We wanted to know if these types of spaces made a difference, or not, in the way teachers facilitated age-appropriate strategies that result in the intended soft skills that SEL purports. We found the results to be insightful, both to the design audience, and the educational leader audience.

Please enjoy our latest original research study, in conjunction with The University of Texas at Tyler. We continue to be proud of the work of VLK | EDGE®, remaining steadfast in contributing to the educational discourse about best practices, as well as to our design professionals. Ensuring the inclusion of design in the canon of educational literature continues to highlight the importance of the curricula and learning environment intersection, regardless of political rhetoric.

Sincerely,
VLK Architects

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dalane E. Bouillion". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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Social Emotional Learning Practices and Learning Spaces

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Daniel Goleman, journalist and author, popularized the idea of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) based on his work surrounding emotional intelligence (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2022). Although recognized as a new approach, SEL was well-established during the early 1990s in American education. Since then, SEL “has emerged as a major thematic and programmatic emphasis in American education” (Hoffman, 2009, p. 533). “Well-being in education” (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2022, p. 26) has become a succinct description of SEL. Generally, SEL is learning focused on “social, emotional, behavioral, and character skills that support success in school, the workplace, relationships, and the community” (Frey et al., 2019, p. 2). Moreover, these skills are “often considered ‘soft skills’ or personal attributes rather than explicit targets of instruction” (p. 2). For this study, teachers, in a variety of Texas educational settings were surveyed regarding their beliefs about SEL as they related to the built environment. Specifically, the researchers analyzed teachers’ perceptions about their own abilities to employ SEL strategies, and whether the learning environments in which they teach supported or inhibited their instructional practices.

Literature Review

Over 50% of U.S. states have articulated learning standards for SEL. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), defines SEL as “the process through

which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions” (CASEL, 2020). SEL involves five core competencies that can be promoted throughout the physical learning environment. These five core interrelated competencies are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and making responsible decisions. SEL environments often include three components: a supportive classroom climate, integration of SEL into academics, and explicit social, and emotional instruction (CASEL, 2020).

While teachers are aware of the societal factors that influence students and their learning, they are also aware of their own self-efficacy to facilitate learning. Teachers’ self-efficacy is related to their willingness to implement SEL strategies within their classrooms and physical learning areas (Zolkoski et al., 2021). Self-efficacy “influences self-confidence and is, in turn, influenced by one’s skills sets” (Frey et al., 2019, p. 29). A positive school climate also contributes to more advanced levels of teacher incentive and self-efficacy to implement SEL philosophies (Reaves & Cozzens, 2018). Often, teachers are implementing SEL without cognizance, as how one teaches contributes to the soft skills of SEL (Frey et al., 2019). Conversely, “recognizing SEL as an official component of curriculum allows teachers to operationalize it in their classrooms” (Frey et al., 2019, p. 7).

Students experience a variety of emotions in academic settings. Additionally, student experiences are ubiquitous, yet crucial, as emotion influences cognition. A variety of assignments ranging in difficulty produce a plethora of emotions. Homework, daily work, quizzes, and tests elicit different experiences for students. Content can be frustrating, cause anxiety, or make it

difficult for students' comprehension (Tyng et al., 2017). SEL develops "life skills that can be applied to a wide range of situations" (Frey et al., 2019, p. 8) and emotions. "Emotions influence learning and behavior . . . [and] regulate the speed at which information and experiences are processed" (p. 65).

Recent studies discuss the importance of the purposefully designed learning environment (Oliveras-Ortiz et al., 2020) "Purposeful design, aligned with a school organization's instructional intentions has the power to create feelings of pride, make students want to engage at higher levels, and suggests the improvement of student achievement" (Oliveras-Ortiz et al., 2018). By intentionally designing flexible collaboration areas for the intended use specified by the school district, additional experiences can be created for students. The environment contributes to learning. Moreover, classroom design, and the materials both teachers and students can access, contribute to "teaching and learning efficiency" (Oliveras-Ortiz et al., 2018, p. 26). Spaces designed for intentional collaboration support student interactions as well as assignments that require partners or teams. "Creating classroom atmospheres where students see each other as collaborators as opposed to competitors . . . is clearly something" (Anderson, 2019, p. 24) that should be intentional.

Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative method study was to explore the type of space, if any, that teachers perceive as supporting their ability to implement teaching practices that promote SEL. The study was conducted in collaboration with VLK Architects, a firm specialized in educational school design in Texas and focused on one research question, what kind of spaces do teachers believe support and/or hinder their ability to implement teaching practices that promote SEL?

Participants

Given that the study was requested by VLK Architects, the firm's Chief Development Officer was responsible for recruiting participating school districts either in person, by phone, or via email. The school districts that were invited to participate in the study currently or previously have worked with, and have maintained communication with, VLK Architects. Districts that agreed to be a part of the study were asked to distribute the survey link via email, inviting teachers to participate.

Out of the five districts invited to participate, four agreed to distribute the survey to their teachers. The districts represent the diverse size of independent school districts in Texas, including one urban district, as defined by the Texas Education Agency (TEA), two suburban districts, and a rural district. Table 1 illustrates the descriptive information for school districts represented in the data based on the participating teachers, and Table 2 presents the descriptive characteristics of the participants (n=34).

Table 1. Descriptive Information for School Districts Represented in the Data

District Information		
	N	%
Urban	3	8.8%
Suburban	24	70.6%
Rural	7	20.6%

Table 2. Descriptive Characteristics of Participants

Teaching Level		
	N	%
Early Childhood	1	2.9%
Early Childhood & Elementary (K-5)	2	5.9%
Elementary (K-5)	7	20.6%
Middle (6-8)	20	58.8%
High (9-12)	4	11.8%
Content		
Elementary Self-Contained (all content areas)	2	5.9%
Language Arts	5	14.7%

Language Arts/ Mathematics/ Science/ Social Studies/History	1	2.9%
Language Arts/Other	3	8.8%
Mathematics	3	8.8%
Mathematics/Physical Education & Athletics/Other	1	2.9%
Mathematics/Other	1	2.9%
Physical Education & Athletics	1	2.9%
Science	2	5.9%
Science/Social Studies & History	1	2.9%
Social Studies & History	3	8.8%
Other	11	32.4%
Years of Experience		
1-3	4	11.8%
4-9	11	32.4%
10-14	6	17.6%
15-19	6	17.6%
20-24	5	14.7%
25-29	2	5.9%
Education Level		
Doctorate (PhD or EdD)	1	2.9%
Master's Degree	14	41.2%
Bachelor's Degree	19	55.9%

Data

Qualitative data revealed the teachers' beliefs as to how and why certain spaces support their ability to implement teaching practices aligned with SEL. Teachers were asked to complete an online Qualtrics survey, designed to provide insight into their perceived adeptness to which the spaces either hinder or facilitate the identified instructional practices. Photos of both traditional and flexible spaces were included to ensure participants had a shared understanding of what were considered traditional and flexible spaces.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data was analyzed using NVivo. The authors used inductive coding to derive codes from the data. Based on the codes that emerged from the data, additional rounds of coding were conducted to identify categories and subcodes using focused and axial coding.

Authors' Positionality

The authors of this research study began their careers in education as certified teachers. Throughout the progression of their careers, they have subscribed to the belief that students' success is impacted by their academic environments, including both physical and emotional. Their experiences with teaching and learning are rooted in constructivist theory, providing for a strong sense of learning ownership as students construct their own knowledge based on the lesson design and intended experiences provided by teachers. Additionally, they each have a strong sense of SEL, and subscribe to the position that strong relationships and positive classroom culture contribute to students' probability of authentic engagement, the acquisition of soft skills, and learning success.

Findings

The focused and axial coding of all open-ended responses resulted in four themes: ownership, engagement, collaboration, and inclusiveness. Participants conveyed examples and reasons when asked about learning environment spaces and their capabilities to either help or hinder their abilities to implement strategies that promote SEL. Examples of some of those responses demonstrate the alignment of each theme with personal teaching practices, or reveal reasons why teachers feel the learning environment hinders the implementation of SEL practices. In a few cases, teachers who had strong beliefs in the support of flexible learning spaces, took the hindrance question as an opportunity to speak favorably and expand on how the flexible environment supports SEL practices.

With the themes of ownership, engagement, collaboration, and inclusiveness, the researchers applied a critical lens to determine the implications for both educational architecture design and practices associated with effective instruction. All four themes can be considered

aspects of effective instructional practices. The themes suggest aspects of a well-rounded, involved, and responsible collaborator as an intended consequence of teachers' instructional intentions. Many school district missions and core values, as well as graduate profiles, speak to these expectations, in addition to academically prepared young adults upon graduation. Furthermore, modern schools are being designed to include a variety of learning areas to promote collaboration and transparency, while accommodating learners' and project needs (Oliveras-Ortiz et al., 2018).

Ownership

The concept of ownership suggests students accept the responsibility for learning, realizing the value in understanding and skill acquisition. Teachers recounted students demonstrated strong ownership when allowed to use the intentional flexible learning spaces designed in the new school buildings. Specifically, they observed individual students and students who worked in pairs or small groups take responsibility for themselves and their learning partners. When asked about how flexibility supported their ability to implement strategies that promote SEL, one teacher stated students "take ownership of their learning spaces and how to problem solve if where they want to sit is already occupied." Because active learning requires students to move and have discussions within the classroom, ownership builds independence. Another teacher described flexible learning spaces as, "an environment where students are able to freely walk around and group according to what and who they need to help them complete tasks." One teacher also commented, "students take on more responsibility of [sic] their learning and education and groups are already formed for discussion, pair[s] or group work" with a flexible learning environment. Another participant shared, "students learn coping because there is more space, and the teacher won't be right there." In a learning environment

where teachers encourage students to take ownership of their learning, offer a voice in the process of learning, and design work tied to students' interest, engagement is likely to occur. When engagement occurs, the likelihood of student success increases.

Student choice, when appropriate, offers a level of autonomy in learning and allows students to practice independence. Although many times students do not choose their curricular content, the choice of a learning environment, or a seating arrangement, is becoming customary for many teachers. Students who prefer one type of seat over another have been known to arrive to class early, negotiate with their peers, and use problem solving techniques to take turns. Flexible seating options offer support for a variety of students' abilities and needs. This is evidenced by a teacher who stated, "It helps to provide an environment where students are able to freely walk around and group according to what and who they need to help them complete tasks." Participants were also asked how, if at all, flexible learning spaces might hinder their effectiveness in supporting their teaching ability to implement strategies that promote SEL. One teacher indicated an inability to "be in all places at one time," continuing, "It is hard to manage behavior in the classroom if I am helping a group." One teacher felt students cannot be trusted, "to do what they are to be doing for work," and that they will misuse, "technology parts they are not to be on." The teachers' statements imply the students do not take ownership of the learning and depend on the teachers to guide learning and behavior.

Engagement

When students engage in the learning process, they dedicate their time, attention, and commitment to the work designed for them by teachers. Authentic engagement suggests learning at high cognitive levels. Additionally, students who are authentically engaged persist in learning even when the task is cognitively challenging. When teachers were asked about flexible learning

spaces and their support of implementation of strategies that promote SEL, they frequently described engagement. Teachers made connections to the newly built environment and how it supports engagement. One teacher indicated that flexible learning spaces, “provide ample opportunity to engage students,” allowing creative approaches to instruction. Another teacher shared that a flexible space, “allows a relaxed environment for students to feel a sense of comfort while being engaged in the learning environment.” Attitudes about student engagement continued with “the materials and fun colors make for an engaging atmosphere” describing the new school’s flexible space opportunities.

When asked about how spaces hinder a teacher’s ability to support SEL, one teacher indicated that flexible spaces, “invite more ‘shallow play’.” Another participant believed, “open freedom can sometimes be too much for students and they just want to play.” An additional teacher agreed with the previous comment sharing, “too much liberty to roam and kind of run from work” results from flexible spaces. With regard to flexible seating, one teacher felt students are not “attentive during instruction while being allowed to sit comfortably.” This teacher went on to say, “students with behavioral concerns sometimes take advantage of the seating arrangement and are unproductive.” An additional teacher reported, “the students will walk off if they feel they are not being watched.”

Collaboration

The K-12 curricula have evolved to include problem solving that requires more than one learner in order to develop collaboration skills. Collaboration is recognized as a social skill needed for both the workplace and in today’s classrooms. When asked about flexible learning spaces and their ability to support SEL, a teacher reported the benefits of the environment by indicating, “[we] can purposefully plan groups/partners to create both academic and social conversations.” An additional teacher reported, “[students] have the ability to write on the desks.

The shapes of the desks allow for interactive groups ... allow[ing] for more space ... to have restorative groups.” Another participant indicated, “when students sit in groups, they are more likely to engage in group discussions and learn from peer modeling and interactions.” Yet another teacher shared, “everyone needs to learn to lean on others and work together at some point.”

Teachers who embrace a variety of learning areas demonstrate how the built environment assists with collaboration and instructional goals while meeting individual student needs. By maximizing the areas in which students can learn, teachers are able to facilitate learning with a multitude of methodologies. One teacher indicated flexible learning spaces give “students, of all varying abilities and needs . . . different options of where to learn and collaborate with others.”

Some teachers had ideas as to why flexible learning spaces did not support collaboration and SEL. They indicated beliefs such as, “certain groups may sit together that should not be together.” An additional attitude revealed, “if students cannot handle focusing on the learning/instructions then I end up having to take away groups and have independent work.”

Inclusiveness

When classrooms are inclusive, all students are invited to learn to their potential regardless of any classification. Needs associated with academics, social, emotional, cognitive, and physical are more likely to be met. Diversity and differences are readily accepted and appreciated. In their responses, teachers shared beliefs about how flexible learning spaces support their abilities to promote an inclusive environment. One teacher said, “students learn when they are more emotionally comfortable. This type of space allows students to sit in the

proximity to others where they feel they are more safe and this allows them to be able to learn better.”

Another teacher, aware student needs in the classroom indicated flexible learning spaces offer “options of where to learn and collab [sic] with peers.” One other teacher observed, “I love the extra collab [sic] that takes place with shy or resistant students.” One teacher’s comment indicating flexible learning spaces, “allow you to group students and allow students to learn in a variety of comfortable spaces,” demonstrates how to connect the learning environment with students’ learning needs. An additional teacher comment purporting how, “it allows a relaxed environment for students to feel a sense of comfort while being engaged in the learning environment” readily accepts the opportunity for the environment to contribute to a SEL experience.

Teacher and student relationships that foster a sense of comfort for the learner create opportunities for inclusiveness. This is necessary for deep understanding and the acquisition of skills that lead to success. Student success can be measured in many ways and can vary by student. It is multifaceted and requires a complex and comprehensive skillset. One teacher shared,

I have used flexible learning spaces in the past, and I would love the ability to go back to this arrangement. Teachers can purposefully plan groups/partners to create both academic and social conversations. Flexible grouping and seating for the students also means that I have the ability to be flexible with my own seating choice, moving to student groups to have conversations and moving out when others need scaffolded or extended learning.

This teacher understands how to utilize the various aspects of the built environment to maximize learning areas and opportunities for students while supporting the teacher's intentions of deliberate implementation of strategies that promote SEL.

Two teachers articulated their inability to use flexible learning spaces to support SEL. One reported the flexible learning environment to, "form a group that could intimidate or disrupt others." The teacher shared, "not every student thrives in unstructured environments."

Implications

The researchers found that teachers' beliefs regarding their abilities to implement teaching practices that promote SEL in the classroom vary when considering the physical learning environment. The majority of teachers indicated flexible spaces support their capabilities to use SEL strategies resulting in student ownership, engagement, collaboration, and inclusiveness. Additionally, a few teachers' perceptions indicated flexible spaces hindered their abilities.

Intentional Design and Social and Emotional Learning

The themes resulting from this study suggest intentional design for the attributes associated with SEL benefit students. Moreover, when considering ownership, engagement, collaboration, and inclusiveness, the concept of a comfortable student emerges. When students feel comfortable, they have the probability to become more "aware and active" (Kiener, Green, & Ahuna, 2014, p. 36) with their own learning. Comfort can be established through the built environment, and the use of furniture contributing to the SEL environment. Additionally, comfort is the result of the relationship between the teacher and the student. When students perceive their teachers' communication as positive, (Kiener, Green, & Ahuna, 2014) they noticed "more

positive student communication behaviors and outcomes” (p. 37). By incorporating intentional strategies, teachers create the conditions for affective learning.

Teachers detailed examples of students demonstrating ownership when given autonomy to use the intentionally designed flexible learning spaces incorporated with the design of their schools. Teachers continued to describe the effectiveness of their flexible learning spaces and their support of student engagement, indicating the spaces made it easy to engage students. They frequently described engagement when considering their instructional practices that promote SEL. The design of collaboration spaces has become prevalent, and teachers recognize the importance of their students’ social skills. They continually used the word “collaboration” when describing how they used their flexible spaces. Additionally, teachers reported the importance of their own collaboration with colleagues, and the use of intentionally designed spaces that meet their needs as professionals. Finally, teachers shared their beliefs regarding how flexible learning spaces assist them with meeting students’ needs associated with an inclusive environment. In sum, four strong themes emerged in the study that support intentional design of flexible learning spaces: ownership, engagement, collaboration, and inclusiveness.

Professional Learning

When experiences are emotional, cognition is changed (Tyng et al., 2017). This understanding makes the educator aware of the design of the lesson and the interactions that take place as he or she develops the approach for SEL. For the physical flexible space, teachers who are sensitive to SEL strategies know how to best utilize physical opportunities to connect students with both the content and one another. Expectations for procedures, content delivery methods, and appropriate etiquette and conduct are crucial for all learning environments. Responses from teachers who had a negative feeling towards flexible learning spaces gave

reasons that align with the need for general professional learning. Teachers receive professional learning on a regular basis. However, it is rare for professional learning to include how to use the built environment. One teacher shared, “I believe it is possible for all grade levels. It comes down to the types of spaces, training, and instructional strategies that make this space successful or not.” This response implies this teacher has experienced professional learning associated with the learning environment. While learning environments are modernized, professional learning must also be a priority as to how they are expected to be used.

Expectations for teaching and learning must be in place regardless of the venue. School districts utilize various student management approaches, and those should be applied to the learning environment. For example, “I am unable to monitor when a young teenager is doing something they should not be,” speaks to the need for behavior management, not a needed curricular connection to the built environment. SEL outcomes can be limited due to the absence of professional learning and/or understanding of how to incorporate strategies within the environment (Luthar & Eisenberg, 2017).

Comments such as, “If students cannot handle focusing on the learning/instructions, then I end up having to take away groups and have independent work,” suggests the groups were not established with a strong collaborative intent and interdependent roles. When school districts address annual professional learning goals, knowing how to use the designed learning environment would help increase capacity and understanding of teachers. Who delivers the expectations for the types of spaces, training, and instructional strategies to teachers? Who expects teachers to explore the environment while considering the curricula scope and sequence?

Conclusions

Teachers who have both a grasp of SEL techniques and expertise in how to use flexible spaces within the learning environment readily connect how the two can be used simultaneously. School design incorporating intentional flexible spaces for teaching and learning promotes a plethora of opportunities for students, including the intended outcomes associated with SEL. Moreover, teachers who practice SEL techniques work to make students comfortable and feel a sense of community, regardless of the environment. Self-awareness and positive behaviors are some of the intended outcomes of having a SEL approach to instruction. As with any new instructional practice, continuous, job-embedded professional development and coaching are critical to the successful implementation of the practices; the same is true for flexible spaces.

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Appendix



Example: traditional learning space



Example: flexible learning space



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