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SEL programs promote students' wellbeing and relationships: teachers experiences in a qualitative evidence synthesis

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ABSTRACT

During the past decades there has been an increase in mental ill-health problems among children. Social-emotional learning (SEL) has shown promise to promote well-being by supporting children in developing abilities to cope with everyday difficulties. Structured SEL programs can be part of the school curriculum from early age. However, teachers' positive perceptions of the values of such programs are essential for program success. The aim of this evidence synthesis was to describe and understand teachers' experiences of providing SEL programs to students and their perceived effect on students' mental well-being. We followed the ENTREQ and PRISMA guidelines. Systematic searches were conducted and we included seven studies with a moderate level of methodological limitations. We conducted a thematic meta-synthesis, and confidence in the evidence was assessed with GRADE-CERQual. Teachers perceived that students developed a higher level of coping with their feelings and created improved relationships as a result of the SEL programs. As they received new tools to support students' well-being, teachers were positive to the programs. They noted, however, that the programs needed adaptation to the local context. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first meta-synthesis on the experiences among teachers on the impact of SEL programs on students' well-being. Notably, the results suggest that SEL programs could help teachers to attend to students' mental health. After conducting extensive searches for data, only studies from high-income countries were found. Therefore, further studies are needed within low-income countries in regard to SEL programs and experiences among teachers on students' mental wellbeing. It would also be beneficial to synthesize research on the students and their experiences on how SEL programs impact their mental well-being.

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Introduction

During the past decades there has been an increase in mental ill-health among children and young people (Collishaw, 2015). Childhood is a unique and formative time, and physical, emotional, and social changes, including exposure to poverty, abuse, or violence, can make children vulnerable to mental ill-health (Naicker et al., 2022). The educational environment is not only limited to academic pursuits but encompass a broader context including social relationships, cultural dynamics, and wellbeing among students (Orlova & Shevchenko, 2023). Protecting children from adversity, promoting socio-emotional learning (SEL) and psychological well-being, and ensuring access to mental health care, is critical for their health and well-being during childhood and throughout life (World Health Organization, 2024). School is one setting in which mental health promotion could take place (Tamminen et al., 2016). This view of the educational system's role in promoting positive mental health is emphasized by the World Health Organization, school staff, and students alike (Warne, 2013; Warne et al., 2020; World health organization, 2023b). Teachers have a critical role in attending to students' mental health, for example, by supporting stressed students, and ensuring their educational accomplishments (Luthar et al., 2020).

There are numerous examples of initiatives and programs carried out in schools to break the

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negative trend of mental ill-health (Cavioni et al., 2020). Effective school mental health programs mainly target the promotion of social and emotional learning and resilience, as well as the prevention of social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties, including risky behaviors (Browne et al., 2004; Cefai, 2008; O'Reilly et al., 2018; Weare & Nind, 2011). A widely used type of programs for school-aged children are the SEL programs. SEL is broadly defined as promoting 'a set of skills that individuals need to succeed in schooling, the workplace, relationships and citizenship' (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) provides a more detailed definition of SEL: 'the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships and make responsible decisions' (CASEL).

Non-cognitive attributes, such as social and emotional skills, have a direct positive relationship to students' school performance as well as their academic outcomes (Farrington et al., 2012). Thus, to apply a comprehensive SEL framework can help improve the students' academic scores (Durlak et al., 2011), increase motivation and perseverance (Farrington et al., 2012), and at the same time decrease depression, stress, and anxiety (Brackett & Rivers, 2014). A meta-analysis showed that well-designed and well-implemented SEL programs were associated with improved emotional and social skills, attitudes, and well-being (Taylor et al., 2017).

SEL programs are usually carried out in classrooms by teachers (Esen-Aygun & Sahin-Taskin, 2017). Teachers' perceptions about the programs are vital for their success (Esen-Aygun & Sahin-Taskin, 2017). The programs must be both appreciated and feasible in order for proper implementation and program success (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Teachers may see SEL skill development as important and worthwhile but not feasible given competing demands on time, attention, and resources (Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

Research shows that in regard to promotion of SEL programs, it is important to enhance teachers' knowledge of these programs. Also the teachers' own social and emotional competence and wellbeing appear to play a crucial role for how the students' receive the SEL programs (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Therefore, it's important to synthesize qualitative studies on teachers' experiences of SEL programs. Therefore, we set out to conduct a qualitative evidence synthesis (QES) of teachers' experiences of delivering SEL programs. The aims were to describe and understand teachers' experiences of providing SEL programs and their perceived effect on students' mental well-being.

Materials and methods

This qualitative evidence synthesis of teachers' experiences of SEL programs was part of a Health Technology Assessment of universal programs to promote mental well-being in students. The full report was an assignment from the Ministry of Social Affairs in Sweden to the Swedish Agency for Health Technology Assessment and Assessment of Social Services (SBU) (Swedish Agency for Health Technology Assessment and Assessment of Social Services, 2024). The report is available in Swedish (Swedish Agency for Health Technology Assessment & Assessment of Social Services, 2022a), with a summary in English, at the SBU website. The current study is limited to the SEL programs and specifically to the teachers experiences of these programs, which allows for a scientific depth that was not possible in the full report. The current study differs in some ways to the previous report. For the first, the current study is mainly focusing on the qualitative synthesis of the SEL programs and covering more research into both the background as well as implications/conclusions, compared to the report. The Swedish report (Swedish Agency for Health Technology Assessment & Assessment of Social Services, 2022a) is written to the government and meant to be used by professionals working with these questions in Sweden in both regions and municipalities in Sweden, whether the current study is focused on researchers worldwide. The research protocol was registered in the PROSPERO database, no. CRD42021291503. This systematic review was conducted in accordance with the ENTREQ (Tong et al., 2012) and PRISMA guidelines (PRISMA, 2021).

Inclusion criteria

The present qualitative evidence synthesis was limited to qualitative studies with teachers as informants and conducted in school settings from pre-school up to high school and excluding colleges. Following the recommendations for systematic reviews (Cochrane Training, n.d.), a requirement for including a specific paper was that it focused on teachers experiences on SEL programs and its impact on students' mental wellbeing. We had two outcomes of interest. First,

experiences on if teachers perceived any changes in students' mental health. Such findings could help understand effects of SEL as found from randomized controlled studies. Second, how working with the programs were perceived by teachers. Such perceptions can be important barriers and facilitators when implementing SEL- programs. Only studies on teachers' experiences of SEL and its impact on students' mental wellbeing were chosen since that was the aim of the current review. Within a systematic review, its important and necessary to have pre-specified research questions and methods that are documented in protocols (Cochrane Training, n.d.), which in this case in pre-specified question on teachers experiences on SEL programs and its impact on students' mental wellbeing. We accepted studies in English or Scandinavian languages, published in peer-reviewed journals from 1990 and onwards.

Literature search

Comprehensive literature searches for the full report were conducted by a librarian/information specialist in dialogue with the researchers. Systematic searches were conducted in the Medline, PsycInfo, Educational Source, Scopus, Academic Search Premier, CINAHL, ERIC, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, and SocINDEX databases. Free text, MeSH and thesaurus terms were used. The last search was performed in March 2022. The full search strategy is available from the published report (Swedish Agency for Health Technology Assessment & Assessment of Social Services, 2022b).

Selection of studies

The selection of qualitive studies was conducted by the first, second, and last authors (Figure 1). The first and last authors are senior researchers with experience in the field of nursing, public health, and migration research (EM, CK), and the third author is employed by SBU and has experience from qualitative studies and from conducting QES (AP). Abstracts from the literature searches were assessed by the first and the last authors independently, followed by a consensus discussion together with the second author, after which it was decided which references should be read in full text. Full text articles were reviewed in the same way.

Assessment of methodological limitations

Next, we assessed the degree of methodological limitations in the studies that fulfilled the inclusion criteria, using the same procedure as for the selection phase. In the included studies about teachers' experiences, we used a checklist developed by SBU to facilitate the later assessment with GRADE-CERQual (Larsson-Lund et al., 2022). Studies with a high risk of findings being flawed by methodological limitations were excluded from the synthesis.

Synthesis

We synthesized findings from the studies using inductive thematic synthesis modified from Thomas and Harden (Larsson, 2009). First, we extracted relevant meaning units, line by line in all studies (first-level themes), and coded each unit. Then, we organized the codes across all studies in descriptive themes (second-level themes). Finally, we condensed the second-level themes in main themes (third-level themes). As we wanted to keep close to the original findings, the main themes were also descriptive – which is a modification of the original method.

The synthesis was conducted by the first and the last authors. All stages were validated by the second author. We actively looked for alternative themes and findings that contradicted our themes. All data was handled in Word Office 365.

Assessment of confidence in the evidence

Finally, we assessed the confidence in the themes according to GRADE-CERQual (Colvin et al., 2018; Glenton et al., 2018; Lewin et al., 2018; Munthe-Kaas et al., 2018; Noyes et al., 2018). We decided a priori that themes based on less than 50 informants should be considered to have a weakness in the domain of Data Adequacy.

Results

Overview of included studies

The full literature search yielded 9,634 abstracts (Figure 1). Out of these,108 studies with qualitative methodology were read in full text, with nine studies fulfilling our inclusion criteria. Two had major methodological limitations and were excluded from the synthesis (Aidman & Price, 2018; Gol-Guven, 2017). In one of these, the number of informants was unclear (Aidman & Price, 2018) and in the other one much information was lacking (Gol-Guven, 2017).

Thus, seven studies contributed to the synthesis, and they were conducted in the US (Kramer, 2013; Voith et al., 2020), England (Honess & Hunter, 2014),

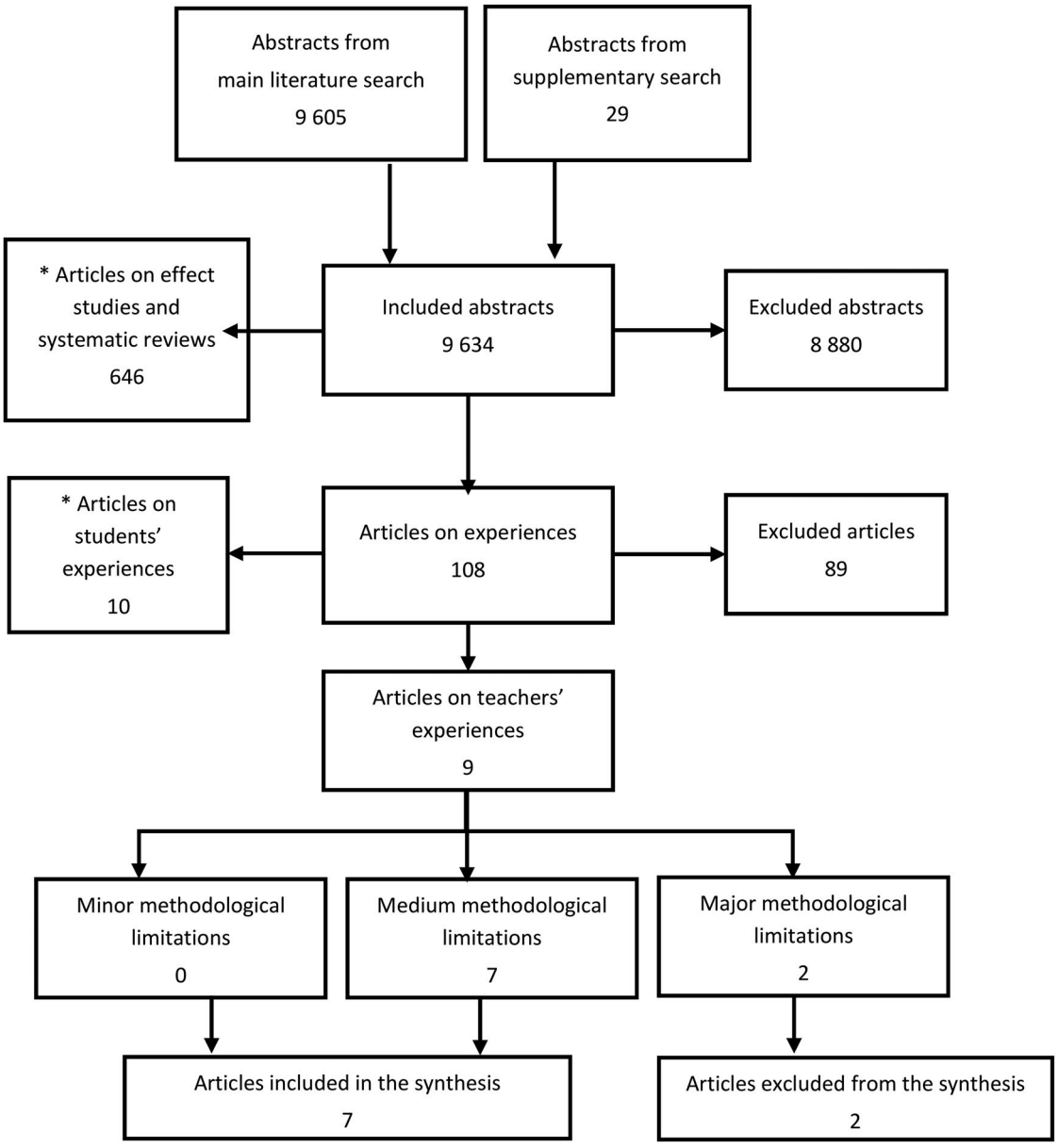

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram, which describes the process of selection of studies, from the systematic searches until the included studies are selected and assessed for risk for bias.
*These studies were included in the SBU-project as a whole [20], but were not included in the present study.

Canada (Drolet et al., 2013), Norway (Larsen & Samdal, 2007), Germany (Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021), and Malta (Ferreira et al., 2021). They included between five and 22 teachers, in total 86 teachers. Studies were conducted in pre-school and primary school (Drolet et al., 2013; Ferreira et al., 2021; Honess & Hunter, 2014), primary and secondary school (Kramer, 2013; Larsen & Samdal, 2007), and primary to high school (Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021; Voith et al., 2020). All studies except one (Kramer, 2013) included students from various socio-economic strata. Teachers' perceptions were collected with semi-structured interviews, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and concept mapping evaluation, and analyzed with thematic analysis (Drolet et al., 2013; Ferreira et al., 2021; Voith et al., 2020), framework analysis (Larsen & Samdal, 2007), inductive analysis (Honess & Hunter, 2014), check coding (Kramer, 2013), and content analysis (Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021).

The synthesis resulted in two main themes. One encompassed teachers' perceptions about changes in the behavior of the children. The other concerned the teachers' experiences of the program in terms of structure, content, etc. Each main theme comprised two sub-themes. Main themes and sub-themes, with their confidence in the evidence, are listed in Table 1. Characteristics for the studies are summarized in Table 2.

Table 1. Main themes and sub-themes, with their confidence in the evidence.

Main theme	Sub-theme	Confidence in the evidence for sub-themes
1. The teachers felt that the students developed skills to cope with their feelings and created improved relationships with support from the SEL programs	1A. Teachers thought that SEL made the students aware of their feelings and gave them tools to handle their emotions and their reactions	Moderate [1] (five studies, 55 teachers)
	1B. Teachers thought that SEL could teach students to deal with conflicts and strengthen their relationships	Moderate [1] (six studies, 72 teachers)
2. The teachers were positive towards SEL where they could adapt the program and get new tools to support students' well-being	2A. Teachers felt that SEL programs gave them new tools for helping the students to feel better	Moderate [1] (four studies, 54 teachers)
	2B. Teachers felt that the teaching about SEL could be troublesome and that it needed to be adapted to their own context	Moderate [1] (four studies, 60 teachers)

Main theme 1: the teachers felt that the students developed skills to cope with their feelings and created improved relationships with support from the SEL programs

One of the sub-themes dealt with teachers' perceptions about internal changes, i.e. students' handling of emotions and feelings. The other dealt with perceived changes in behavior between the students.

Sub-theme 1 A. Teachers thought that SEL made the students aware of their feelings and gave them tools for handling their emotions and their reactions

Five studies contributed to this theme (Drolet et al., 2013; Honess & Hunter, 2014; Kramer, 2013; Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021; Voith et al., 2020). Teachers thought that SEL was conducive to creating good self-awareness among the students and that they learned to deal with themselves and their feelings through techniques taught on how to deal with stress (Drolet et al., 2013; Kramer, 2013; Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021; Voith et al., 2020). The students also learned to share their feelings with each other (Drolet et al., 2013; Kramer, 2013; Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021). Furthermore, they became calmer, and the program strengthened their ability to calm themselves down and to express themselves, as they got an increased vocabulary to express how they felt (Honess & Hunter, 2014). Teachers also stated that students developed higher self-esteem and alternative ways to deal with anger (Drolet et al., 2013):

> The teachers also noticed a difference in relationships among the students under their daily supervision and offered several examples. One spoke of an aggressive boy who learned to verbalize feelings instead of making threatening gestures when angry. (Drolet et al., 2013)

One study (Kramer, 2013) showed positive changes regarding a student's dealing with a specific problem and how the students learned to handle their emotions. Another study noted that through the program the teachers helped the students to learn self-control (Voith et al., 2020).

Sub-theme 2B. Teachers thought that SEL could teach students to deal with conflicts and be strengthened in their relationships

Six studies contributed to this theme (Drolet et al., 2013; Honess & Hunter, 2014; Kramer, 2013; Larsen & Samdal, 2007; Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021; Voith et al., 2020). The teachers considered that SEL lessons led students to handle conflicts better than before (Larsen & Samdal, 2007; Voith et al., 2020). As expressed by one teacher*: 'We have always worked towards solving conflicts between students at the schools but think it's excellent that SEL programs prepare students for this'* (Larsen & Samdal, 2007).

The teachers perceived that the SEL program gave the students a common language and the possibility to understand each other, and that the discussions led to more students opening up in the dialogue with each other (Drolet et al., 2013; Larsen & Samdal, 2007). Another study showed that teachers became stronger in their ability to read and understand each other's facial expressions (Honess & Hunter, 2014). Teachers thought that students' capacity for having good and solid relationships and for developing social skills was heightened (Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021), and that students supported each other to a higher degree (Kramer, 2013). In one study, the teachers claimed that the students' new skills were short-lived, however, and needed repetition and continuous training (Voith et al., 2020).

Main theme 2. Teachers were positive towards SEL programs where they could adapt the program and get new tools to support students' well-being

In this theme, teachers expressed positive perceptions about SEL programs in one sub-theme. They also noted some limitations with the programs, which is described in the second sub-theme.

Table 2. Characteristics for the studies.

Author and year	Method	Number of participants/ Program	Country	Aim	Results	Risk for bias
Drolet et al. (2013)	Qualitative, semi-structured interviews	5 teachers/Lion Quest	Canada	Explore how actors involved in Lions Quest perceive the program and its implementation	Following the *Lions Quest* exercise, the teachers' observations underscored improvements in the adolescents' self-confidence, their capacity for self-assertion, and their interpersonal relationships.	Unclear
Ferreira et al. (2021)	Qualitative, in-depth interviews	13 pre-school teachers/Not described	Malta	To uncover and understand Portuguese preschool teachers' representations and practices of SEL as a contribution to filling in a perceived gap in the Portuguese empirical literature	The teachers shared that they could see that SEL involves the development of social and emotional skills, which is the ability to identify one's feelings, as well as the development of emotional, self-regulation and frustration management skills. They also shared how the program helped them build good relationships with the students and helped the students learn how to communicate their feelings better.	Unclear
Honess and Hunter (2014)	Case study, semi-structured interviews	7 teachers/ PATHS	UK	Explore teachers' perceptions of working with the curriculum and whether it has had any effect on behaviour	Results suggested that teachers found implementing the programme a positive experience with some support found for the authors' claims for improvement of children's social and emotional functioning and some limited support for improvements in children's ability to recognize others' emotions and for improvements in children's learning. The teachers also expressed that the programme could need long-term prioritization in order to be successful	Unclear
Kramer (2013)	Controlled study with focus group where topics identified from four open-ended questions in a questionnaire were addressed	7 teachers/ Strong Kids	US	Evaluate Strong Kids in the school-wide setting	Many teachers mentioned that the curriculum provided a common vocabulary between teacher and student and cited this as a primary strength of the program. They felt it very rewarding when they could see that they as teachers were not just helping them academically but also emotionally for life.	Unclear
Larsen and Samdal (2007)	Qualitative with semi structured interviews	17 teachers/ Second Step	Norway	The aim was to examine the use of the program and their perceptions of fidelity of implementation	The teachers needed to adapt the program to the Norwegian context. The teachers thought that the program well prepared the students for coming conflicts and how they could handle those.	Unclear
Schiepe-Tiska et al. (2021)	Mixed methods with convergent parallel design (questionnaire and interviews)	13 teachers/ several	Germany and Kyrgyzstan	Explore secondary school teachers' SEL familiarity, beliefs, training and perceived school culture	When defining SEL, teachers mostly explained it as a concept that fosters social skills, such as building friendships and relationships, working in teams, along with emotional learning that promotes exploring your emotions and emotional states. Further on, they talked about self-awareness as teaching the students to know themselves and building personal identity. Teachers related *self-management* mostly to skills of self-regulation and discipline. They defined this concept in relation to managing learning (behavior and school tasks) and managing lifelong goals (goal setting and regulation).	Unclear
Voith et al. (2020)	Mixed methods (quantitative with an intervention group only)	22 teachers and two principals/ PEACE	US	Explore feasibility of the program	The teachers thought that the program helped students to come up with peaceful solutions for upcoming problems. They also described something as a stoplight which could be described as self-control and how to use peace facilitators.	Unclear

Sub-theme 2A. Teachers believed that SEL programs gave them new tools for helping the students to feel better

Four studies contributed to this theme (Drolet et al., 2013; Larsen & Samdal, 2007; Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021; Voith et al., 2020). Teachers perceived that they, through SEL, got increased abilities that could help them support the students and deal with conflicts among the students. Furthermore, teachers felt that they developed their own self-awareness, self-management, and

social consciousness (Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021), and that they became more sensitive, democratic, and humble, their consciousness about the importance to train social competence, and develop their role as adviser and guide, increasing (Larsen & Samdal, 2007). Teachers also felt that they received useful tools for focusing on the students' needs and give the students abilities for self-help (Drolet et al., 2013). However, it could be difficult at the beginning of the program, to teach the students to find their own solutions and to wait patiently for that and at the same time be open to different solutions that the students had found by themselves (Larsen & Samdal, 2007).

Moreover, teachers felt that they had acquired better ways to deal with problems related to discipline and with conflicts that arose (Larsen & Samdal, 2007; Voith et al., 2020). Teachers could, for example, learn how to interact positively with the students instead of being angry with them, and that was learned through the peace program with its yellow lights:

> One teacher explained, If I'm getting frustrated, I'll just go like this [takes a deep breath] and [the students] know. I'll say that I'm using my yellow light and, you know, they can sense it in your voice… they say 'you guys stop, Ms. X is getting mad. (Voith et al., 2020)

The program also gave the teachers tools for helping students make good decisions when dealing with conflicts in their relationships with friends (Drolet et al., 2013).

Sub-theme 2B. Teachers stated that teaching about SEL could be troublesome and that it needed to be adapted to their own context

Four studies contributed to this theme (Honess & Hunter, 2014; Larsen & Samdal, 2007; Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021; Voith et al., 2020). The teachers appreciated being able to teach about social competence, something that was, furthermore, very important to teach the students about (Larsen & Samdal, 2007). In general, the teachers found that it was easier to teach at the schools after SEL had been introduced, and to receive material to use for teaching was appreciated. However, in one study, the teachers felt that they had not enough time to teach SEL or to develop the program at the school (Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021). 'The program felt a bit like following a recipe, you know what you get at the end' (Larsen & Samdal, 2007), a teacher in another study said, and as it could be a bit boring to follow the recipe, some of the teachers felt that they needed breaks from working with the program (Larsen & Samdal, 2007). It was also difficult for the teachers to use the concept for whole days (Voith et al., 2020).

Some teachers expressed that both teachers and students preferred the lessons that the teachers had created by themselves (Honess & Hunter, 2014). The teachers could add some inputs into their teaching, such as different examples, thus making their teaching more personal and varied (Larsen & Samdal, 2007). One reason that the program needed to be adapted, was the fact that it originally came from the US and therefore needed some cultural adaptation and sensitivity when used in other countries (Larsen & Samdal, 2007). Among the youngest students, the teachers could feel that the language was difficult and that an easier language would have been needed (Larsen & Samdal, 2007). Another reason for adaptation was that the program was used as a method to solve different specific problems rather than being a full-packed strategy (Larsen & Samdal, 2007). *'I adapt the program to the Norwegian context. By doing this I might abandon some parts of the program and I don't follow the progression of the program, I sort of pick what I need in my class at present. In practical terms this would be that if some students have a problem with anger management, then I choose to focus on the lessons addressing such issues. So it's more the problems at hand that decide what I choose to focus on'. (Larsen & Samdal, 2007)*

Even if the teachers did some adaptations, it was critical that they stuck with the theme of the week in order for the program to be effective (Voith et al., 2020). Continuity was also crucial, since the teachers felt that they could observe an increased level of conflicts immediately or shortly after they paused the program (Larsen & Samdal, 2007).

Discussion

Our synthesis found that teachers perceived positive changes in students' socio-emotional competence after participation in SEL program, in terms of awareness as well as application of competences. Qualitative findings inherently have limited generalizability and effects on socio-emotional competence must therefore be assessed in quantitative studies. For SEL programs, there is a broad scientific evidence base that suggests that they have beneficial effects on mental well-being as such as well as on abilities that may support well-being (Taylor et al., 2017). A systematic review of quantitative effects has found that SEL programs improved emotional and social

skills (Taylor et al., 2017). Our results can be viewed as complementary to the quantitative data. Here, we provide a descriptive and detailed insight into how improvements are perceived by important informants, namely, the teachers. Furthermore, many effects reported in quantitative studies also show up in findings from qualitative studies (Hussein, 2009), which supports the cohesiveness of the results.

One aspect brought up by teachers was that they, through the SEL programs, received new tools for supporting students' mental well-being and could observe that the students improved their relationships and their skills in handling aggressions, as well as starting to express their emotions more openly. Cavioni et al. (Cavioni et al., 2020) underline the important role that teachers have in providing mental health promotion and prevention of mental ill-health within school settings. This is crucial, as mental well-being is important in itself and since research shows an association between mental health and academic achievements among students (O'Connor et al., 2019). Therefore, we argue that by using SEL programs teachers could receive tools to support students' mental health and increase their possibility to reach academic goals (Drolet et al., 2013; Larsen & Samdal, 2007; Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021; Voith et al., 2020).

The included studies also show that teachers experienced a positive effect on the school climate, and they gave examples of how relationships developed and improved between the students (Drolet et al., 2013; Kramer, 2013; Larsen & Samdal, 2007; Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021). Healthy and supportive relationships among students can, according to Brännlund et al. (Brännlund et al., 2017), have long-lasting effects on their ability to succeed within the employment market later on in life and a positive school-climate is linked to good mental health (Kuyken et al., 2023). Furthermore, the included studies revealed that teachers saw how students were more open about sharing their emotions after participating in the SEL lessons. According to Denham et al. (Denham et al., 2009), it is beneficial for children to learn how to share their emotions with each other, as it lays a foundation for positive mental health. If emotional connection is limited or lacking in the parent-child relationship, the SEL program can possibly complement the family environment and convey such important life skills as several of the included studies in the current synthesis indicated improvement in regard to the students' sharing of their emotions (Drolet et al., 2013; Kramer, 2013; Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021).

Further on, our qualitative evidence synthesis, based on teachers' experiences, reveals that SEL programs are beneficial for students' socio-emotional competence. Teachers expressed appreciation of having a helpful new tool to support students' mental well-being and promote improvement in their relationships in the school settings (Drolet et al., 2013; Kramer, 2013; Larsen & Samdal, 2007; Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021). Based on these results, and on the World Health Organization (2023a) arguing that there is a need for a health education curriculum and in-service training for teachers, we would encourage school authorities and governmental agencies to support their schools by implementing SEL programs. This would benefit the mental well-being of the students and might also lead to long-lasting positive effects on relationships with their friends and teachers (Reicher, 2010). Another possible effect is the increase of the students' academic results, which in turn will benefit future career and job options (Farrington et al., 2012; Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

Furthermore, our synthesis found that teachers overall appreciated SEL programs. This is important, as programs with low acceptability would most likely fail even though they have high evidence for efficacy (Durlak et al., 2011). The teachers experienced some potential barriers to using the program, however (Larsen & Samdal, 2007; Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021; Voith et al., 2020). One was transferability. Most SEL programs are developed in the US for Anglo-Saxon contexts. Teachers in studies from other countries noted that the content of the program needed to be adapted to their own context (Barlas et al., 2022; Castro-Olivo et al., 2021). The need for cultural adaptation has been pointed out in several studies around the world, with regard to both certain countries and certain vulnerable communities within countries. This is important since children from varying socio-cultural backgrounds may require different sets of social-emotional skills to function within the same school culture (Garner et al., 2014), and therefore studies are needed to determine the most appropriate methods for tailoring SEL programs to meet the needs of racially and ethnically diverse children (Garner et al., 2014). This is important since when students perceive a culturally sensitive and culturally including environment, they could experience higher well-being as well as academic outcomes (Orlova & Shevchenko, 2023).

Limitations

This qualitative evidence synthesis has some notable limitations. An important aspect is that the included studies focused on teachers' experiences of the students' SEL competences as such. Thus, we found no direct evidence of whether the teachers perceived

any changes in the mental well-being of the students. However, in an earlier quantitative meta-analysis by Durlak et al., it was stated that SEL programs have a positive impact on the students' core competencies, which affects their well-being (Durlak et al., 2011).

Moreover, in terms of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), i.e. the robustness of the findings, some comments must be made. Generalizability is limited to high-income countries as all included studies were carried out in such countries. The synthesis is based on only seven studies with 86 teachers in total. However, we believe that our findings are representative, since similar aspects of the findings were described in all studies. Still, we cannot rule out that there are other important perceptions of delivering SEL programs in the classroom which need larger studies to be discovered. It would be beneficial for future research to further explore other aspects of SEL programs, for example the student's experiences of participating in SEL programs and their experiences of how it impacted their own mental well-being.

Conclusions

The aim of this qualitative evidence synthesis was to describe and understand teachers' experiences of delivering SEL programs and the perceived effect on students' mental well-being. Teachers perceived that students developed a higher level of coping with their feelings and created improved relationships as a result of the SEL programs. As they received new tools to support students' well-being, teachers were positive about the programs. They noted, however, that the programs needed adaptation to the local context. We conclude therefore that SEL programs may be used by teachers, and modified to the school context if needed, to help support students' wellbeing.

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Data availability statement

The data that is supporting our findings can be found in all the articles that we have used and that are listed on the reference list.

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