

Equitable Social-Emotional Learning and Mindfulness: Countering Systemic Oppression in Secondary Classrooms with Personal Practices and an Empowering Approach

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The Black Lives Matter Movement's revelations and Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action both challenge educators to critically examine the underpinnings of our classroom practices, including frameworks for social-emotional learning (SEL) and associated mindfulness practices. The claim is that these strategies positively influence student behaviour and readiness for learning. Proponents argue they advance equity, while critics contend that positivist perspectives instill dominant cultural values within both mindfulness practices and SEL frameworks. Using a research lens informed by hermeneutics, I analyzed interview discourse from five teachers in an urban, Western Canadian school board. Integrating perceptions of equitable SEL frameworks with current research literature, I found teachers approach SEL focusing on student deficits, maintaining implicit biases, and perpetuating systemic oppression. Notwithstanding, SEL frameworks, with mindfulness practices, have been positioned to promote equity. Articulating possibilities for an equitable SEL framework, this study advocates educators first practice mindfulness for their awareness, examine their motives for their approach to SEL, and incorporate SEL into a larger social justice framework.

Keywords: social-emotional learning, mindfulness, equity, systemic oppression, hermeneutic

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In response to progressive calls to action, educators are now compelled to critically examine implicit biases hidden within classroom practices. Equity issues surfacing during the COVID-19 pandemic, Calls to Action by Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission—especially after the discovery of unmarked graves at Indian Residential Schools across the country,

and revelations of systemic racism resulting from the Black Lives Matter Movement, each demand scrutiny of our participation with systemic oppression. As a white, male, cis-gender educator, I am complicit in perpetuating oppression via my perceived positionality, social identity, and unearned privilege. Adopted early in my career, mindfulness practices and, later, the overarching social-emotional learning (SEL) framework, each require critical analysis.

Relying on positivist evidence, I had brought mindfulness, and then SEL, into the classroom without previous critical examination of the practices and framework. What had been my intention for my classroom? What mindfulness practices did I select and why? What did I mean by SEL? Seeking strategies to support student well-being while also managing the classroom, I incorporated an approach built upon psychological and neuroscientific evidence. I introduced mindfulness techniques into the classroom by teaching meditation, boosting self-awareness through intentional reflection moments, sharing skills with students while working alongside yoga practitioners, and, in a special education setting, collaborating with counselling professionals providing group sessions teaching deeper self-reflection. In the research literature, mindfulness incorporates diverse techniques, like those carried out in my classroom, that build “awareness that emerges through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally, to the unfolding experience moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 145). Mindfulness, developed into therapeutic interventions free from the Buddhist elements that originally informed the practice, was a way to reduce stress’s detrimental impacts. In my classroom, mindfulness calmed and benefited students. This, in turn, inspired an expansive search for practices, beyond typical academic work, to increase student engagement.

I incorporated trauma-informed practice inspired by professional learning provided by school authority. I perceived that mindfulness and trauma-informed practice shared similar aims, seeking ways to calm a stressed nervous system. Trauma-informed practice, however, highlighted additional deficits that students experiencing adversity might face, leading to a wider exploration of approaches supporting social-emotional development. Moving beyond mindfulness, I incorporated other elements of SEL such as utilizing self-advocacy and problem-solving curriculum. I also provided relationship skills training and encouraged perspective-taking for empathy. Sometimes explicit teaching moments but, more often, SEL informally responded to classroom issues alongside other, more academic learning. Other times, SEL addressed key skills supporting specific tasks, like group work. This discussion implies that mindfulness and SEL are discrete entities and, while they are treated separately in some research, mindfulness addresses self-awareness and self-regulation, two areas social-emotional skills within a well-respected model of SEL (Jagers et al., 2019). In this way, SEL existed as a framework for learning a set of relationship and emotional skills valued in the classroom. Mindfulness, on the other hand, was a set of practices explicitly taught to support two aspects within this larger framework of SEL. In this way, for my study, SEL is the

process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply 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. (Jagers, 2016, p. 162).

Conversely, SEL includes a diversity of approaches and unfortunately, lack of consistency often confounds its definition (Aldenmyr, 2016; Ergas, 2019; Humphrey, 2013; Hyland, 2016; McCaw, 2020). Accordingly, I brought SEL and mindfulness into the classroom to support the development of deficient skills, supporting students' success.

After scrutinizing diverse sources, to my distress, I uncovered evidence that both SEL frameworks and mindfulness practices can perpetuate oppression, inequitably impact racialized students, promote compliance with dominant cultural norms, and that commercial interests commodify resources for educators, compromising the integrity of the approach SEL and the mindfulness practices. The current study, a deeper inquiry into the research, emerged from my personal review to answer the question: Can educators equitably engage SEL or does SEL cause too much damage in the classroom? Uniquely, applying a hermeneutic analysis to SEL, I uncovered motivations, goals, and biases of educators bringing SEL into the classroom. Below, I show, despite potential for perpetuating systemic oppression, SEL, along with specific skills of awareness developed by mindfulness practices, can advance equity, primarily, when teachers, not students, practice skills for self-awareness. SEL also advances equity when educators use the tools within a larger social justice framework creating spaces that empower students. Exploring when SEL perpetuates systemic oppression, I summarize literature-informed benefits and criticisms, I then weave together existing literature with a hermeneutic analysis. After analyzing and interpreting discourse, I address the study's limitations, and provide guidance for educators and researchers to move toward equitable SEL.

Background Information

What are the benefits of SEL that proponents articulate? As a specific strategy for awareness and regulation aspects of SEL, what do supporters of mindfulness practices articulate as positive outcomes? Vocal proponents tout several benefits. First, proponents specifically of SEL state framework contributes to the establishment of classroom norms, helping educators manage classroom behaviour and build safe, respectful learning environments (American Psychological Association, 2015). CASEL, an advocacy group for SEL, notes that SEL decreases both distress and behaviour problems (Jagers et al., 2019). SEL also develops social skills, improves attitudes, increases academic performance, and enhances skills that support learning. As a specific approach to the process of SEL, a growing number of mindfulness proponents espouse benefits including increased academic success, enhanced social skills, reduction of externalizing behaviour, and improvement of relationships in school communities (McCaw, 2020). Lastly, proponents for both SEL and mindfulness cite outcomes like reducing stress, increasing self-management, improving attentional skills, and diminishing behaviour issues (Doikou-Avliidou & Dadatsi, 2013; Ergas, 2019; Hoffman, 2009; Humphrey, 2013; Hyland, 2017; Reveley, 2015; Sellman & Buttarazzi, 2020). SEL and mindfulness draw educators hoping to create safe, supportive learning environments. According to proponents, both SEL and mindfulness hold promise for academic success and student well-being.

SEL also offers benefits for advancing equity. By integrating SEL with other transformative approaches, some scholars envision a counter to hegemonic structures, those structures of social control perpetuating dominant group ideology (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). For example, SEL increases compassion, enhances empathy, facilitates student empowerment, and encourages a strength-based lens within schools (Andolina & Conklin, 2020; McCaw, 2020). Further, weaving both SEL and mindfulness practices with social justice creates a framework promoting equity within school systems and can lead to systemic change by heightening awareness (Andolina & Conklin, 2020; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Hyland, 2016, 2017; Jagers et al., 2019; McCaw, 2020; Schlund et al., 2020; Sellman & Buttarazzi, 2020). Proponents of both SEL and mindfulness, alongside academic and wellness benefits, see benefits for equitable practice.

In light of so many potential benefits, what then are the concerns that have been raised about SEL and mindfulness? Detractors, particularly those from critical epistemologies—“perspectives that recognize that society is stratified in significant and far-reaching ways along social group lines that include race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. xviii)—question the influence of a SEL framework. Firstly, a SEL framework, including mindfulness practices, often views students with a deficit-based lens, focusing on knowledge gaps, performance deficits, or underdeveloped skills (Emery, 2016; Hoffman, 2009; Humphrey, 2013; Hyland, 2017; Schlund et al., 2020). Secondly, a SEL framework pushes overburdened educators outside the bounds of the discipline into a therapeutic role—more like counsellors than educators (Aldenmyr, 2016). Thirdly, critics note that both SEL and mindfulness fail to bring systemic and environmental change for students facing adversity (Ergas, 2019; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; McCaw, 2020; Reveley, 2015; Schlund et al., 2020; Sellman & Buttarazzi, 2020). In addition, commercial interests commodifying mindfulness practices suppress BIPOC perspectives; advance hidden, exploitive aims; and perpetuate western, individualist ideologies (Hyland, 2016, 2017; Reveley, 2015). Individualist, western ideologies centre around the idea that people are “free to make independent rational decisions that determine their own fate” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 5); that “group memberships such as our race, class, or gender are not important or relevant to our opportunities” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 103). Using a veneer of universal humanity consistent with western ideology and practices that produce calm individuals, mindfulness practices undermine diverse voices and silence opposition. Critics have contradicted benefits of both a SEL framework and mindfulness practices, raising significant concerns that both SEL and mindfulness practices work against equity promises.

Methodology

In this study, using a hermeneutic thematic approach, I analyzed interviews with educators implementing SEL and mindfulness practices. Hermeneutics is an interpretive approach that explores nuances of human experience (Gadamer, 1960/1989), uncovering hidden elements and interpreting teacher’s interpretations about SEL (Jardine, 1992; Moules et al., 2015; Shapiro, 1994). I began by selecting participants, interviewed participants, then carefully conducted analysis of the interviews.

Participants

Randomly selecting and sending emails to 36 principals in an urban, Western Canadian school division, I sought participants already engaging an approach to their classrooms that included SEL. I interviewed all willing participants who contacted me in response to information shared by supportive school principals. I conducted five, online, hour-long, and semi-structured interviews based on predetermined interview questions (see Table 1). While all five participants identify as white, two participants identify as she/her, and three identified as he/him. By coincidence, all participants worked in secondary classrooms. One participant had taught for over fifteen years, another for over ten. The remaining teachers had taught for under ten years. Three of the five participants had taught in different settings within special education, each supporting students struggling with mental illness. Preparing for the study, I collaborated with the Research

Ethics Board to mitigate ethical issues through careful processes for recruitment, obtaining informed consent, protecting participant well-being, respecting participant privacy, and addressing my role as an educator within the school board where I was conducting the research.

Table 1

Interview Questions for Equitable Social-Emotional Learning and Mindfulness

Research Question	Interview Questions
<p>How might we understand what draws teachers to SEL in the classroom?</p>	<p>What is your experience with SEL?</p>
	<p>How did you first learn about teaching social and emotional skills?</p>
	<p>How did you decide to teach social and emotional skills in your classroom?</p>
	<p>How do you talk with colleagues about SEL?</p>
<p>How might we understand the benefits that teachers perceive when SEL is used in the classroom?</p>	<p>How does your teaching of social and emotional skills impact students and teachers in the classroom?</p>
	<p>What benefits do you see?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - For which students? - When do you utilize SEL? - What does it look like in your classroom (small groups, individual, whole class)?
	<p>How does the classroom feel during and after teaching social and emotional skills?</p>
<p>How might we understand the impact of power, privilege, and systemic or implicit bias on the practice of SEL?</p>	<p>What role does SEL play in your classroom management?</p>
	<p>How does your practice of SEL change the way you interact with your students?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In what way? Can you give me an example?
	<p>What kind of preparation have you undertaken to engage these practices?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Was there training? - Did you read a book, articles, or other literature? - What did the preparation address? - What was your role? Where did the preparation originate?

	- How did you feel about the preparation?
	Are your SEL interventions targeted to specific behaviors, such as anger management, or do they reflect a general approach to teaching SEL skills?
	How do we know SEL is working and what role does assessment play in the process?

I situated my analysis within existing literature on SEL, equity, and mindfulness. Searching the ERIC database, I obtained literature using the search terms: “interpret*,” “mindfulness,” “hermeneutics,” “constructivist,” “constructivism,” “critical theory,” “self-regulation,” “emotion regulation,” “social-emotional learning,” and “critical discourse analysis.” To ensure consistency with participants’ experiences, I excluded studies older than ten years, studies from religious studies classrooms, and studies focusing on elementary classrooms. Eighteen of the remaining sources included peer-reviewed literature focusing on classroom practice. Following the practice of scholars before me (Moules et al., 2015), I wove research literature into my analysis.

Conducting Analysis

I carefully approached the rigorous process of conducting this thematic analysis. After conducting interviews, I transcribed interview discourse by hand and then manually analyzed transcripts to form reasoned judgements, attending to elements that caught my attention and revealed meaning, speculating diverse interpretations (Moules et al., 2015). As a researcher, I listened for truth in participant words, ensuring I listened to the other, rather than my own perspective; I was a seeker of knowledge and understanding, not only empathy (Moules et al., 2015). Grouping participant dialogue by themes, with my hermeneutic lens, I resisted producing themes as an analytic goal. I discerned meaning through conjectures of interpretations and reasoned judgements, choosing one interpretation over another to articulate a new understanding of equity implications of a SEL framework and mindfulness practices (Moules et al., 2015). My study explored implicit bias, systemic racism, and my positionality as a white male educator and their influence on approaches, like SEL, and practices, like mindfulness, in my classroom. The study examined participant dialogue for similar revelations. By nature, these hidden elements remain imperceptible in discourse but persist within a western worldview. Habermas illuminated hidden elements within discourse as he blended hermeneutic analysis with critical theory (Moules et al., 2015; Shapiro, 1994). Critical theory refers to “a body of scholarship that examines how society works...offer[ing] an examination and critique of society...guided by the belief that society should work toward the ideals of equality and social betterment” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 4). In honouring Habermas’s infusion of critical theory, I incorporated self-reflection into my analysis. Through the distance self-reflection creates, I examined the sociocultural context

underlying expressed language (Kennedy Schmidt, 2014). Finally, establishing the findings' validity and reliability, I compared my analysis with insights gleaned from existing SEL, equity, and mindfulness research literature, (Moules et al., 2015). Analyzing interview transcripts and research literature, I became intimately familiar with discourse, critically reflecting upon background knowledge underlying dialogue.

Although critical analysis has a diverse history across academic disciplines, applying hermeneutic analysis to both a SEL framework and mindfulness practices uniquely generates understanding of educator perspectives. Addressing a topic often explored from a positivist perspective, I did not seek to undermine “scientific knowledge in itself, nor relativiz[e] it, but [establish] a context of human understanding in which science occupies a significant space but not the whole space” (Moules et al., 2015, p. 37). Drawing on teacher perceptions of power and privilege, I interpreted participant perceptions of the SEL frameworks and mindfulness practices to uncover perspectives, expose cultural meaning, and explore hidden discourse elements (Jardine, 1992; Moules et al., 2015). Consequently, analyzing teacher perspectives on SEL and equity, I observed “beings who are speaking out of traditions that precede them, using words that are already saturated in cultural meanings” (Moules et al., 2015, p. 41). Examining educator discourse, hidden or explicit, Habermas’s expansion of Gadamer’s theoretical frameworks, structured my analysis of the interplay between SEL, mindfulness, and equity.

Interpretive Analysis

Conducting my hermeneutic analysis, I found that, although teacher perspectives revealed problematic patterns perpetuating systemic oppression, an equitable SEL approach, with supportive mindfulness practices, is possible when we focus on educators first and when we situate the approaches and practices in a larger empowering framework.

SEL Perpetuates Oppression

How and when do SEL or mindfulness perpetuate systemic oppression? Interview discourse and research literature indicate the potential for perpetuating oppression when educators incorporate a SEL framework or mindfulness practices too informally, focus on classroom management, and when they focus on “helping” students.

SEL as “social capital”

Problems with a SEL framework emerged when educators applied an unplanned, informal fashion. All participants sought guidance for a SEL framework through personal experience, scrolling through websites, addressing personal well-being, or from attending teachers’ convention sessions. There were some differences in the approach that participants took for SEL in their classrooms. Participants speaking from special education experience articulated more structured approaches to SEL than those speaking from experience in a traditional classroom. Firstly, participants with special education experience cited small group conversations, structured lessons, or specific interventions targeting student needs. Similarly, participants from a special education

background learned about SEL and mindfulness from system supports or school administrators. Despite differences, there was consistency in the framework participants used to guide their approach to SEL. A clear finding was that positivist literature guided the SEL framework participants embraced. Professional development on SEL relied heavily upon neuroscience, with four of the five participants acknowledging neuroscientists informing their approach to SEL taken in the classroom. Participants identified: Dr. Bruce Perry's (2006), Neuro-Sequential Model of Therapeutics; Blaustein and Kinniburgh's (2010) Attachment, Regulation, Competency model; the Adverse Childhood Experiences research outlined by a CDC-Kaiser Permanente (1998) study popularized in Dr. Nadine Burke Harris's TED talk (2015); and a Brain Architecture Game (2009), informed by Dr. Judy Cameron. Correspondingly, Hoffman (2009) acknowledges emerging neuroscience proliferating within SEL curriculum. Alongside neuroscience, psychological research drove the participant's approach to SEL, with one participant highlighting Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences (1983) theory, another identifying Daniel Goleman's Emotional Intelligence (1995), a third Ross Green's Collaborative Problem-Solving (2010) approach. While diverse sources informed approaches to SEL, positivist perspectives influenced all participants.

Citing either neuroscience or psychology, participants mentioned diverse practices focused on building growth, coping, empathy, awareness, problem-solving, and social skills. Accordingly, participants also spoke to specific mindfulness techniques within a broader SEL framework. Positivist perspectives infused both SEL and mindfulness with individualist references: "self-esteem," "self-advocacy," "self-regulation," "self-awareness," "self-reflection," "self-preservation," "self-determination," "self-management," and "self-understanding." Participants each embraced mindfulness and, more broadly, SEL to support students coping with adversity from complex life circumstances. Unfortunately, both SEL and mindfulness miss the mark as focusing on developing an individual's skills fails to shift ecological and oppressive forces (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Hoffman, 2009; McCaw, 2020). Congruent with participant experience, researchers' critique both SEL frameworks and mindfulness practices for perpetuating hegemonic, positivist, middle-class values (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Humphrey, 2013; Hyland, 2016; Schlund et al., 2020; Sellman & Buttarazzi, 2020). Additionally, despite broader efforts decolonizing psychological interventions, participants seeking resources outside a Western worldview, such as Indigenous Perspectives contained within Bendro, Brokenleg, and Van Beckern's (1990) *Circle of Courage*, counteracted their own efforts by amending resources using an "individualized" approach, applying a colonial lens to non-colonial ways of knowing. Participant discourse, combined with research literature, revealed foundational positivist perspectives emphasizing self.

Discourse of educators about their SEL framework or mindfulness practices revealed additional impacts on classroom culture. Participants used consumerist words like "buy-in" and "social capital," although these terms one participant labelled "icky" and said made them feel uncomfortable. Emphasis on economic terms corresponded with troubling aspects of both SEL and mindfulness in research literature. Firstly, commercial interests commodifying curriculum infuse mindfulness with capitalist bias (Hyland, 2017; Reveley, 2015; Sellman & Buttarazzi, 2020). Furthermore, a SEL framework or mindfulness practices, by reducing negative impacts, complicitly exploit young people, normalize oppressive capitalist systems, and disguise damaging consequences of students' prolific social media consumption (Ergas, 2019; Hyland, 2017; McCaw, 2020; Reveley, 2015; Sellman & Buttarazzi, 2020). Participant perspectives and research literature highlighted how, left to their own devices, educators rely on hegemonic, readily available resources that perpetuate oppression.

SEL as a disguise

The reasons educators employ SEL also led to an inequitable framework. Ambivalent about their roles, participants sought student compliance with system expectations while also facilitating classroom community. SEL becomes a way to bridge ambivalence; participants framed compliance around enhancing student progress. Strikingly, one participant placed high value on “expectations”, referencing the word thirty times. Conversely, another participant altered phrasing to suggest students entering the “learning and growth zone” still insinuating classroom expectations. Participants judged an approach SEL beneficial when it enabled student compliance by increasing attendance, decreasing swearing, reducing classroom incidents, increasing school engagement, and facilitating greater student work completion. Similarly, scholars note that SEL becomes a tool for measuring conformity, hiding this desire in positive, strength-based language (Humphrey, 2013). Participant discourse and research literature both exposed SEL employing positive language to couch educators’ desire for compliance.

Interview discourse and research literature highlighted how educators came to view student experiences. Conveying an emotionality while discussing unpleasant experiences, participants’ awkward constructions highlighted unease with strength-based phrasing. Firstly, participants paired “behaviour” with emotionally charged words like: “bad,” “other,” “trouble,” “problem,” and “challenging.” Secondly, echoing emotionally charged sentiments, participants spoke to students with “issues,” and “difficulties.” More subtly participants referred to students as “lively,” “boisterous,” and “struggling with social cues.” Notably, scholars recognized similar language patterns when educators targeted student skill deficits with SEL (Emery, 2016; Hoffman, 2009). Language patterns exposed a deficit model focusing on challenges emerging from the child (Emery, 2016) or societal failure to develop emotional literacy, particularly among boys (Hoffman, 2009; Schlund et al., 2020). Nevertheless, participants spoke hopefully that SEL would increase student regulation, leading students to overcome challenges by engaging problem-solving skills. Accordingly, SEL appears as a positive spin upon older, deficit-based interventions (Humphrey, 2013).

Some language patterns included more troubling phrases. Participants used phrases, such as “off-the-wall,” “a pain in the ass,” “giving [teachers] a hard time,” “acting out, or lashing out, or... reacting to situations,” and moments when “all hell was breaking loose” or students exhibited “fight or flight responses.” Inherited from dominant cultural values within neuroscientific perspectives, discourse connotated a wild, animal, and uncontrolled nature of students consistent with research literature (Emery, 2016; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Hoffman, 2009; Humphrey, 2013). Conversely, when educators modeled skills, a SEL framework reduced punitive interactions; thoughtful SEL approaches paired with careful mindfulness practice offered a counter to deficit-based mindsets through alternate narratives (Ergas, 2019; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Jagers et al., 2019; Reveley, 2015; Sellman & Buttarazzi, 2020). Although, language indicated problematic perspectives, scholars noted opportunities for SEL that benefit school communities. Unfortunately, both research literature and participant discourse underscored that SEL perpetuates oppression when focusing on student deficits or classroom management.

SEL as “a path and a solution”

A SEL framework paired with mindfulness practices, emphasized providing “help” to students and espoused cultural universality that perpetuated a colonial, Eurocentric mindset. A Eurocentric mindset views the world as “linear and singular, static, and objective” (Little Bear, 2014, p. 82). Participant comments indicated a model of “helping.” Firstly, recognizing fragility in students, participants spoke compassionately about students’ home and social environments. A SEL framework aided educators responding to student experiences with trauma, mental illness, gang violence, sexual violence, marginalized social identity, a disadvantageous home life, or being part of an “at-risk population.” “At-risk” connotated student fragility. Participants also spoke frequently about anxiety and stress as prominent student concerns. Moreover, a SEL framework became a solution holding classrooms together, helping “these kids.” Phrases like “baggage,” “invisible backpack,” or “carrying way more than I can” revealed a heaviness encumbering students facing issues beyond an educator’s purview. Participants hoped SEL would develop problem-solving skills, helping students escape repeating behavioural patterns. Pairing SEL with mindfulness, participants confidently responded to students with an evidence-based “path and solution.” Unfortunately, solutions highlighted white paternalism underlying responses aiming to fix students (Foucault, 2003). Likewise, packaging mindfulness too neatly and emphasizing core principles, like non-judgemental awareness, discourages critical thinking, limiting exposure to important ethical elements within authentic mindfulness practice (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Hyland, 2017; Jagers et al., 2019; Schlund et al., 2020). Problematic attitudes emerged when approaching SEL as an antidote for students’ social and emotional challenges.

SEL and mindfulness also obscured diverse cultural experiences through an emphasis on universal approaches. While participants spoke about student needs drawing them to SEL, participants viewed SEL as a foundational framework: “things that every classroom should have;” and “less of an add-on and more of... an integral part of everything that they do.” Research literature suggested caution when emphasizing universal approaches; a universal emphasis sacrifices diverse perspectives to dominant, white cultural values (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). As you can see, when educators approach SEL as a universal framework with simplistic interventions, educators impose dominant cultural values that perpetuate oppression.

Changing Educators

A SEL framework and mindfulness practices both perpetuated oppression when unguided educators used products packaged for widespread commercial distribution, when thinking about students paternalistically, and when applying adopting a SEL framework for classroom management. So, why bother with SEL approach or mindfulness practices if they potentially perpetuate oppression? Both SEL and mindfulness, while problematic, also increased equity by increasing empathy and increasing educator awareness of their own biases.

SEL and Mindfulness for “BLM and all that”

A SEL framework increased educator self-awareness. All participants addressed their social identity, expressing a duty to use their position to highlight systemic racism. Conveying an urgency to begin conversations about systemic racism, participants observed how SEL framed sensitive discussions. Concurrently, they also intimated ongoing discomfort with conversations

about race and privilege, acknowledging peers struggling, even resisting, creating space for uncomfortable conversations. Indicating discomfort, participants used generic phrases like “subtle things,” “BLM and all that,” and “things related to... past history.” As scholars noted, a SEL framework addresses discomfort while aiding educators critically examining factors driving inequity (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Jagers et al., 2019; Schlund et al., 2020). Similarly, mindfulness practices played a role in shifting adult perceptions; mindfulness practices illuminated educator biases (Ergas, 2019; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Schlund et al., 2020; Sellman & Buttarazzi, 2020). Going further, some advocated integrating SEL, including mindfulness practices, with social justice to create new, equity-promoting, transformative frameworks (Hyland, 2017; Jagers et al., 2019; Schlund et al., 2020). Conversely, educators should proceed cautiously, noting that existing approaches to SEL inadequately examine power, privilege, and cultural differences (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). Similarly, mindfulness dangerously reduced critical thinking, perpetuated systemic oppression, and increased an output submissive to growing system demands (McCaw, 2020; Sellman & Buttarazzi, 2020). Both a SEL framework and mindfulness practices, through examining bias, equipped educators to equitably engage students, but both also require a cautious approach to sustain benefits.

SEL for “curiosity and gentleness”

SEL frameworks changed educators by increasing openness to students. Participants spoke about how SEL increased empathy in school communities. One participant noted that SEL produced empathy for “complex and honest things” that students experience; instilling “curiosity and gentleness.” Other participants noted SEL helped them approach students differently. Participants described how SEL provides a framework for understanding “where a student is coming from,” while increasing “self-awareness and being aware of others.” Participants talked frequently about SEL encouraging empathy by improving participants’ “ability to identify and understand other people’s emotions” (Greater Good, n.d., para. 1). In this way, SEL supported participants in developing empathy.

Identifying themselves within student experiences, participants highlighted another aspect of empathy as an outcome of their approach to SEL, especially when incorporating mindfulness practices. Alluding to “perspective taking” (Greater Good, n.d., para 2) participants addressed struggles with sexism, poverty, anti-Semitism, and mental illness. Participants examined social identity, gaining perspective into student experiences, while sharing the impacts of systemic racism with students. Identifying barriers to appreciating student perspectives, participants mentioned the unfairness of privilege and the danger of unconsciously using power. Similarly, scholars noted approaches to SEL, including mindfulness practices, promoted perspective-taking behaviour by establishing warm, empathetic environments that foster greater collaboration (Andolina & Conklin, 2020; Doikou-Avliidou & Dadatsi, 2013; Ergas, 2019; Hyland, 2017; Sellman & Buttarazzi, 2020). Mindfulness practices specifically shifted participant practice, altering roles within the classroom, by increasing effective listening, empowering students, and reducing educator attempts at control. Practicing mindfulness calmed participants, aided emotional regulation, increased participant confidence, provided participants an internal locus of control, and helped participants become aware of their responses to students. Similarly, literature identifies that mindfulness increased educator self-awareness, leading to less punitive classrooms (Doikou-Avliidou & Dadatsi, 2013; Ergas, 2019; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Hecht & Shin, 2015; Jagers et al., 2019; Reveley, 2015; Sellman & Buttarazzi, 2020). By increasing educator self-awareness,

including highlighting social identity, mindfulness increased empathy; when educators engaged mindfulness for themselves first, the habit helped advance equity in the classroom.

Student Empowerment

Beyond benefiting school communities when educators practiced SEL and mindfulness for themselves, these approaches changed school cultures by facilitating belonging, empowering students, and changing interactions between people in school communities.

SEL to help students “feel part of things”

The approach to SEL has potential to transform classroom culture. Participants observed SEL empowering students, increasing student autonomy, and facilitating student self-advocacy. Empowering students fosters “the self-actualization or influence of” students (Merriam-Webster, n.d., para 3). Insinuating self-actualization in the educational idiom, “you’ve got to Maslow before they Bloom,” educators understand Maslow’s hierarchical zenith (Maslow, 1948) emerges in approaches, like SEL, supporting students so they can reach their full potential. SEL developed student self-advocacy, self-determination, and ownership over their circumstances. Participants described their approach to SEL as helping students influence their circumstances, see themselves in learning, and take responsibility for their education. Participants saw SEL increasing student voice by ensuring students “come to the table and, at least, have a seat at it.” Again, these comments echo frameworks that empower communities that “promote the...influence of” students (Merriam-Webster, n.d., para 3). Participants observed their approach to SEL serving students, making them “feel part of things rather than just drones that are being dictated to.” Correspondingly, feeling a sense of autonomy intrinsically motivated students (Andolina & Conklin, 2020). Likewise, power-sharing facilitated a transformative, social-justice informed slant to SEL (Jagers et al., 2019; Schlund et al., 2020). Scholars extended potential for empowering students beyond school, recognizing ethical principles central to practices, like mindfulness, that challenge oppressive pressures (Hyland, 2016). A beneficial SEL framework included powerful values that dramatically shift roles within school communities to build equitable power dynamics empowering students.

SEL for “being attuned”

Participants each spoke about mindfulness practices within a larger SEL framework. For participants, mindfulness practices facilitated stronger relationships. Mindfulness created calm, safe, and comfortable student spaces. When mindfulness worked well, participants encountered organic interactions where participants understood students, while students met classroom challenges. Acknowledging interwoven interactions, participants described relational responsiveness in musical terms like “flow,” “rhythm,” “attuned,” and “in tune.” Others described “give and take” interactions between people in a school community. Indeed, mindfulness, sometimes within a larger SEL framework, produced positive benefits for trust, relationship skills, and democratic milieu in the classroom (Andolina & Conklin, 2020; Jagers et al., 2019; McCaw, 2020). Producing positive benefits, however, required creating a culture of belonging instead of

managing behaviour (Hoffman, 2009; Schlund et al., 2020). Participant discourse and research literature revealed both a SEL framework and mindfulness practices shift power relationships, promoting an equitable space of belonging, and facilitating an equitable school climate where students see their role as change-makers.

Implications and Limitations

A poorly conceived approach to SEL, or misguided mindfulness practices, can perpetuate systemic oppression. Although problematic, educators can equitably apply SEL and mindfulness. An equitable SEL framework requires that we first practice self-reflection, then create empowering environments for students. Below, readers will find classroom implications and opportunities for further research.

What do my findings mean for classroom practice? Firstly, educators must examine our motives for our approach to SEL, including any mindfulness practices we may incorporate. Responding to discomfort and inexperience, challenging classroom experiences lead many educators to pursue SEL. Viewing a SEL framework as tools to support students, while also managing classrooms, we approach SEL, and any mindfulness practices we incorporate, from a positivist-influenced, deficit framework (Doikou-Avliidou & Dadatsi, 2013; Emery, 2016; Ergas, 2019; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Hecht & Shin, 2015; Hoffman, 2009; Humphrey, 2013; Hyland, 2017; McCaw, 2020; Schlund et al., 2020). Unfortunately, within a deficit perspective, SEL frameworks fail to address ecological contexts underlying challenges we identify and, when offered alone, perpetuate white, middle-class value systems (Doikou-Avliidou & Dadatsi, 2013; Emery, 2016; Ergas, 2019; Hecht & Shin, 2015; Hoffman, 2009; Humphrey, 2013; Jagers et al., 2019; Reveley, 2015; Sellman & Buttarazzi, 2020). Considering factors that perpetuate systemic oppression, educators must examine our motives behind our approach to SEL.

Despite potential challenges rising from our motives, SEL frameworks can advance equity. My study finds that combining SEL frameworks with social justice pedagogies can transform how educators approach students, this is further enhanced when mindfulness practices include ethical aspects of the practices (Hyland, 2016, 2017; Jagers et al., 2019; McCaw, 2020; Schlund et al., 2020; Sellman & Buttarazzi, 2020). A SEL framework that includes mindfulness practices, while calming students in classrooms, also empowers them, creating space to examine implicit bias and enhancing social skills, like empathy. In this way, although potentially problematic, SEL combined with mindfulness is a powerful approach to promoting equity when first engaged for personal reflection and shared within an empowering context.

Unexpectedly, my research revealed an informal approach to SEL. While more typical outside the United States, an informal approach runs contrary to research literature focusing upon manualized approaches to SEL (Emery, 2016; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Humphrey, 2013; Hyland, 2016, 2017; Schlund et al., 2020; Sellman & Buttarazzi, 2020). Policy counters an informal approach; however, policy requires caution, effective policy should guide us to resources that advance equity. Conversely, policy may also become restrictive, leaning upon the same commodified interventions discovered informally (Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Hyland, 2017; Jagers et al., 2019; Schlund et al., 2020). What might an effective policy look like? Effective policy informs the nature of interventions, outlines professional learning, and ensures an equitable focus. Schlund et al. (2020) identify situating SEL within equity policies rather than special education policies. Furthermore, strong policy ensures educators use SEL, and mindfulness practices, for creating empowering student spaces (Andolina & Conklin, 2020; Doikou-Avliidou & Dadatsi,

2013; Hyland, 2016, 2017; Jagers et al., 2019; Schlund et al., 2020); ensures educators, firstly, employ practices themselves to realize mindfulness’s ethical benefits (Ergas, 2019; Hyland, 2016, 2017; Jagers et al., 2019; Reveley, 2015; Schlund et al., 2020; Sellman & Buttarazzi, 2020); and facilitates an equitable SEL framework under effective leadership (Schlund et al., 2020). Advancing an equitable SEL framework requires we examine our motives, and, within thoughtful policy structure, practice mindfulness for self-reflection.

While my research highlights next steps for classroom practice, factors limit the influence of the study. For instance, the small sample size makes generalizing findings difficult. Similarly, the secondary focus excludes existing elementary research, making generalizing to younger grades challenging. Additionally, three of the five participants, plus myself, have a special education background; the unclear impact of this commonality may limit the findings’ generalizability. The findings, though insightful, may not apply consistently across these disparate settings.

The study also points to next steps for research. For instance, the impacts of special education experience upon SEL could drive further research. Researchers may consider the impacts on SEL outcomes of informal approaches to SEL, including the unstructured nature of professional learning. Lastly, researchers may explore an understanding of specific SEL and mindfulness techniques that advance equity. For instance, when teaching includes students interacting in small-groups, scholars note that SEL builds trust or facilitates belonging (Doikou-Avliidou & Dadatsi, 2013; Hoffman, 2009). What aspects of SEL or mindfulness bring forward positive outcomes that educators desire from these approaches?

Conclusion

Uniquely, a hermeneutic analysis of teacher perspectives examined aims, goals, and reflections of educators engaging SEL and mindfulness. These approaches espouse a colonial, deficit-based ideology limiting equity gains when approaching positivist-informed SEL and when utilizing commercialized SEL approaches. These risks require me, as a white, male, educator typically blinded to my privilege and ignorant of systemic oppression embedded in our institutions, to take a cautious approach to SEL lest my approach negate my equitable aims by perpetuating hegemony. Conversely, results guide us toward SEL that advances equity. Achieving positive outcomes requires engaging mindfulness for our awareness. Lastly, situating in a framework that creates spaces where students feel empowered enhances equity benefits. Equitable SEL requires caution, awareness, and intentionality; we must strive for constructive outcomes countering hegemony and creating equitable spaces, for, as stated by Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1986, as cited in Ratcliffe, 2017), “if you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.”

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