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Giving and Taking Care During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Secondary Teachers' Experiences of Social Emotional Learning

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Abstract

Keywords

Social Emotional Learning; Teacher Education; Secondary Education; Phenomenology

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) has been primarily researched in elementary schools, and within this context, SEL curriculum is often presented as an isolated, preplanned curriculum, with a list of curricular objectives to be delivered. A phenomenological inquiry was conducted to better understand the ways in which SEL and SEL curriculum are understood and experienced in a high school context. Data gathered from close phenomenological observations and interviews with three high school teachers in mathematics and physical education afforded the opportunity to orient, interpret, and describe the phenomenon of SEL-in-action. Rich descriptions of SEL as it is lived were generated and analyzed in relation to van Manen's reflections on pedagogy and curriculum. Findings reveal that SEL manifests in the pedagogical actions of teachers caring for students regardless of what subject is being taught, and often in moments where the curriculum-as-plan is disrupted. Experiential opportunities to understand SEL within the context of secondary teacher education are recommended for teacher education and ongoing professional development.

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I was first introduced to the concept of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) as a practitioner attending a professional learning workshop. The presenter defined SEL through a framework provided by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (n.d.):

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. (para. 1)

Within CASEL's SEL framework, the process of acquiring and applying such knowledge, skills, and attitudes is aligned with becoming competent in five areas: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. These five social emotional competencies form the basis of a "competence promotion" to SEL and SEL curriculum (Reeves & Le Mare, 2017). The presenter of the professional learning opportunity I attended espoused a competence promotion approach and applied this framework to a stand-alone SEL lesson from a SEL curriculum. Being introduced to SEL in this way gave me the impression that SEL was an isolated list of skills and objectives to teach students. I understood SEL as competency-based content to deliver, or in curriculum theorist Ted Aoki's terms, a curriculum-as-plan, "the origin of which [...] is outside the classroom, in the Ministry of Education or a school district office" (as cited in Pinar, 2005, p. 14). I left that workshop assuming I could only engage students in SEL through explicit SEL lessons as part of a SEL curriculum separate from my subject area.

As a researcher under the supervision of Dr. Lloyd, the second and supporting author of this inquiry, I was later re-introduced to SEL through the lens of phenomenology, specifically through the doctoral student of the late Aoki, namely professor emeritus Max van Manen, who inspired lived understandings of curriculum (Aoki, 1986/1991/2005; Lloyd, 2018; Magrini, 2015; Pinar et al., 2004). This prompted me to wonder: what does it mean to understand SEL as more than a set of objectives to achieve, but to live the curriculum of SEL in pedagogical action? With an interest in better understanding in what ways SEL may be experienced in everyday pedagogical interactions, I wanted to observe and learn what it is like for other teachers to experience SEL in their lessons. I desired to set aside and suspend my prior understanding of SEL as an objective, disembodied curriculum (Aoki, 1986/1991/2005), and open myself up to understanding what SEL is like for others. To open oneself to seeing and understanding an experience in a direct sense with no preformed judgement clouding one's vision is to engage in phenomenological bracketing (van Manen, 2016a, 2016b). Bracketing dates back to Edmund Husserl (1913/1982), who is frequently attributed with founding phenomenology as a research methodology (Luft & Overgaard, 2011). Engaging in phenomenological bracketing, however, does not imply that one enters a study naïvely. Before one suspends judgement on a phenomenon in question, in this case, how SEL is lived in pedagogical action, it is important to deeply understand how it has been researched to date. Becoming acquainted with relevant literature orients the researcher to existing taken-for-granted understandings and provides context for making sense of SEL in novel ways.

Review of Literature

SEL has been studied for over two decades, and findings indicate SEL benefits learners' behavior, grades, test scores, mental health, college-readiness, and pro-social behaviors (Corcoran et al., 2018; Greenberg et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2017). The majority of the research has been conducted within the elementary school context, though, and often involves

“implementing” an isolated SEL curriculum, “delivered” by specialists (Bear et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2018). There is a dearth of research involving high school teachers and students (Williamson et al., 2015; Yeager, 2017). Originally, researchers suggested SEL in high school should mirror the approach to SEL in elementary schools (Elias, 1997). However, high school students do not respond to pre-planned SEL curricula the way younger students do (Williamson et al., 2015; Yeager, 2017). As a result, CASEL recommends that high school teachers engage students in SEL as part of their general teaching practices and subject area curricula (Dusenbury et al., 2015). Teacher preferences align with their current recommendations (Bear et al., 2017; Hamilton et al., 2019).

Research suggests that high school teachers prefer to approach SEL informally, in a way that allows them to be responsive to their students’ needs (Clark, 2017; Yoder et al., 2020). For example, in a study including 316 high school teachers (Clark, 2017), teachers showed little faith in pre-programmed SEL curricula, with one stating: “Let the schools find their own way [to teach SEL]. Each school community has different factors that impact student well-being” (p. 25). Despite not wanting a prescriptive SEL curriculum, high school teachers do report wanting more SEL education and guidance in order to be able to best serve their unique student populations (Hamedani et al., 2015; Yoder et al., 2020). However, high school educators report far fewer pre-service and in-service SEL offerings than their elementary counterparts (Hamilton et al., 2019). High school teachers need further SEL supports now, as governments are increasingly adding SEL mandates to curriculum (Eklund et al., 2018). For example, 18 states in the USA already have statewide SEL mandates for preK–12, and the list continues to grow, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted how essential SEL is (Yoder et al., 2020).

Multiple studies indicate that SEL instruction offered in isolation (independent of subject area or individual context) leads to little or no skill transfer for secondary students (Bear et al., 2017; Williamson et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2018). Yeager (2017) states:

If we define a successful program as one that intentionally instructs adolescents in a given skill, leading them to use that skill in novel settings and thereby show greater wellbeing, then the evidence is discouraging. But if we broaden our definition to include programs that affect social-emotional outcomes by creating climates and mindsets that help adolescent cope more successfully with the challenges they encounter, then the evidence is not only encouraging but demands urgent action in schools across the country. (pp. 88-89)

Yeager suggests that for secondary students, high school teachers need to refrain from pre-programmed approaches to SEL and adopt a more student-responsive approach. Research indicates that even informal SEL practices boost secondary students’ perceptions of school climate (Bear et al., 2017), and an emphasis on student-teacher relationship building increases high school students’ academic engagement (Roorda et al., 2011; Yang et al., 2018). A systematic review of secondary SEL programs indicates that self-awareness and social awareness are the most impacted by SEL programming (van de Sande, et al., 2019). Self-awareness and social awareness are also foundational elements of a phenomenological approach to pedagogy, which asks the teacher to develop these sensitivities as they engage their students in doing the same (van Manen, 2015). CASEL acknowledges that a curriculum-as-plan approach to SEL has been less effective in secondary settings and recommends that teachers thoughtfully reflect on their pedagogical approach and subject area curricula to better align with SEL aims (Dusenbury et al., 2015).

I engaged in this study to ask what this looks like in practice and to question what the lived experience of the educator is in such moments. Additionally, the parallels between SEL and phenomenological approaches to pedagogy and curriculum may benefit future studies by further exploring in what ways phenomenological inquiry could aid SEL teacher education practices. For example, Aoki's (1983/2005) situational praxis, which he describes as a method of curriculum implementation, embodies the type of reflectivity and responsivity that researchers claim secondary school SEL needs (Williamson et al., 2015; Yeager, 2017): "The implied view of Curriculum X is that it is the text to be interpreted, and critically reflected on in an ongoing transformation of curriculum and self" (Aoki, 1983/2005, p. 118). Such an approach encourages the teacher to engage in SEL as a living curriculum.

Research Questions

High school teachers report preferring more informal practices, a more relational approach to SEL in their pedagogy, and more SEL teacher education and professional development to help them achieve their aims (Hamilton et al., 2019; Yoder et al., 2020). As such, we, as researchers, need to better understand high school teachers' lived experiences of SEL. Accordingly, the main research question of this study is: *what is it like to experience SEL within a secondary teaching practice?* To understand the different components of lived experience, Max van Manen (2016a) recommends that five existentials of experience guide the inquiry, "lived relation (relationality), lived body (corporeality), lived space (spatiality), lived time (temporality), and lived things and technology (materiality)" (p. 302). These existentials of consciousness guide the type of questions asked to help answer the main research question. Additionally, asking about these existentials also helps answer the study's sub question: *in what ways do practitioners experience SEL as an approach to curriculum?*

Inquiring into high school teachers' lived experiences of SEL allows us to explore the everyday practices and interactions that inspire SEL and the significance these experiences have for teachers and students. Van Manen (1984) states, "the end of phenomenological research is to sponsor a critical educational competence: knowing how to act tactfully in pedagogic situations on the basis of a carefully edified thoughtfulness" (p. 36). I decided upon a phenomenological inquiry because it allows for the lived experience of SEL in the classroom to be differentiated from the concept of SEL through a preconceived framework. We can question what the lived experience of SEL is in the high school classroom and offer descriptions that invite teachers to question what it is like to experience SEL in their classroom, and in so doing, invite opportunities for meaningful reflection.

A school district in Massachusetts invited me to conduct my doctoral study as they had a vested interest in developing SEL within their high school programs. They had successfully developed a SEL curriculum for grades 6-8 but were unsure how to approach SEL at the high school level. They saw the relevance for teachers to share their lived experiences of SEL as an important starting point for understanding how SEL could be integrated into the high school in a way that meets the needs of staff and students. As such, invited participants for this study were not given a specific framework or model of SEL in advance of their participation. Rather, they were encouraged to share their current experiences and interpretations of SEL.

Methodology

Phenomenological Orientation

This study is inspired by Max van Manen's (2016b) "hermeneutic phenomenology."

Hermeneutic phenomenology incorporates the rich descriptive properties of Husserl as well as Martin Heidegger's interpretative approach to meaning-making (1927/1962). Van Manen places great emphasis on how writing is a key component of analysis: "even the 'facts' of lived experience need to be captured in language (the human science text) and this is inevitably an interpretive process" (2016b, p. 181). Writing is integral to the interpretative process and fosters a relational sensitivity to both the experience of the phenomenon and its meaning. As so few studies and resources exist for SEL in the high school context, an approach inspired by hermeneutic phenomenology explores the everyday experiences of engaging students in SEL while allowing for interpretation of their significance through other phenomenological texts.

Participants

Teachers were invited from disciplines that have state-mandated SEL objectives. Twenty-five high school teachers were invited via email, and three volunteered to participate: one health and physical education teacher and two math teachers. A small sample size is beneficial in phenomenological research as it affords the researcher an opportunity to engage in in-depth explorations of the participants' lifeworlds (van Manen, 2016a).

Information Gathering and Analysis

Information was gathered through a series of close observations and interviews. A close observation is meant to allow the researcher to enter the participant's lifeworld, and "involves an attitude of assuming relation that is as close as possible while retaining hermeneutic alertness to situations that allow us to constantly step back and reflect on the meaning of those situations" (van Manen, 2016b, p. 69). Each teacher was observed for two-three class periods. A brief conversation was held after each observation to ask teachers if SEL was experienced. All data collection was gathered virtually because of the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Following two observations, which gave the researcher an experiential orientation to the teacher and the phenomenon of SEL in action, the interview process began. Each teacher was interviewed twice for approximately thirty minutes. In the initial interviews, anecdotes were gathered in response to an invitation to describe a particular moment where SEL was experienced. To phenomenologically deepen their descriptions, teachers were given prompts, such as: what were the sensations in your body? What was your sense of time in the moment? What was it like to interact with the students in your class? What was it like to navigate the space you were in?

After the initial interview, a summary was written, thematic elements were identified, drafts of vignettes were generated, and further examples of anecdotes sourced from phenomenological literature were gathered. In the second interview with each teacher, the meaning teachers find in these moments was explored. Such "*action sensitive knowledge*" (van Manen, 2016b, p. 21) inspired the "write-up" of these lived experiences via vignettes in order to authentically evoke the originary experience (Lloyd & Smith, 2021). Vignettes presented thematic elements of the phenomenon, and phenomenological texts were referenced to interpret significance.

Results: SEL-in-Action

A brief introduction of each educator follows, with identifying details and characteristics masked. A vignette inspired by their lived experience of SEL follows, with a brief exploration of the moment's significance. Common thematic elements of all three participants' experiences

are further discussed in the following sections. Participants used gendered pronouns. All names are pseudonyms, including all teacher participants and the students described.

Mr. Smith, a Secondary School Physical Education Teacher

Mr. Smith would likely not have become a teacher if it were not for the relationships he had with his high school teachers and university mentors. A bright, but unmotivated high school student, one teacher told him that if he applied himself more, he would be an excellent student. This motivated him to work harder and pursue further education. As for why he chose health and physical education, he stated, “my own positive experience with coaches that I had, and the success I had as an athlete.” Mr. Smith is a naturally gifted athlete, but he understands that many of his students do not feel that athletics is their strength, “The students who are not natural athletes need to feel included. So, I find small ways to encourage them.” He is sensitive to the competing needs of the inherently gifted athletes in his class and those who struggle to see any progress. He experiences mediating the relationship the latter group of students has with physical activity as an example of SEL. He shared in an interview the details of helping a reluctant student find meaning in movement, which was the impetus for writing the following vignette:

Finally! A smile spreads across my face. In her weekly reflection on her physical activity for the week, Amy writes:

“I’m beginning to get all of the positive things people say about movement. I really enjoyed my walk today. It was so nice being in nature and being with my friend. I didn’t even notice I was sweaty until I got home.”

I feel my heart swell up in my chest. I feel hope. In other years, Amy refused to take part in any sport, and did so in a loud, sometimes disrespectful, way. During the COVID-19 pandemic, at the beginning of the 2020 school year, she was often sullen, arms crossed, glaring at her computer screen. I felt powerless to affect her. It made me try to put more energy into my movements and more enthusiasm into my voice, but she never joined in. I thought the day was a win if I could get her to smile at any point.

During the pandemic, we asked students to keep a journal reflecting on their physical activity outside of class. At first, every entry Amy described pacing in her house and stated that it felt like a giant waste of time. A few weeks into the assignment, though, she started to walk outside. The tone of her reflections has shifted ever since then, slowly becoming more positive, and a few weeks ago, she started participating in class. This week, she smiled the whole time, and today, her reflection shows she is finding meaning in movement.

Mr. Smith describes experiencing this moment as a realization of just how far Amy had come in her own SEL journey because she had developed an awareness of what physical activity could offer her life. Mr. Smith experiences and understands SEL as “developing the skills that allow them [students] to be happy, healthy people.” Originally, Amy had behaved poorly in class while communicating that she found little purpose in the assignments and activities. Mr. Smith was not sure if assigning movement as homework would be effective or helpful in remedying this, and every time Amy described what a monumental waste of time pacing in her house was, his doubts grew. He had discussed with her different options, and gently encouraged her to try walking outside, but he doubted she would do that. He was thrilled when she tried, and now he was ecstatic that she had found meaning in the experience. The meaning she found in the assignment at home also allowed her to be open to the potential

meaning of the activities in class.

Mr. Smith is very candid about initially being unsure of what this individual student needed from him to grow.

He describes SEL as a series of in-class and outside-of-class interactions and developments. He further describes needing to support and encourage this student while still holding her accountable. The virtual medium brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic also made him further unsure of what she needed and in what ways he may be able to respond to her needs. However, in this virtual medium, he was more effective in helping her attempt and find meaning in physical activity than in any year prior. What this example shows is that students' needs are complex. Growth takes time. A teacher may not know what any given student needs at any given moment, never mind 20 or 30 students simultaneously. It is an ongoing relationship, though, so a teacher has time to help a student grow and develop. One moment alone does not determine growth, but an amalgamation of moments over time can facilitate it.

Mrs. Williams, a High School Math Teacher

Mrs. Williams was drawn to teaching to be able to connect with students. She had a lucrative career in business prior to pursuing education, "I had those corporate years, but this is so much more impactful, so much more exciting, and working with [teenagers] every day and trying to make them equipped for a better life is fulfilling." Mrs. Williams prioritizes her relationships with students over her subject area and claims that this is not the normal practice in high school teaching but is a key component to why she feels so much fulfillment in her work. She defines SEL as: "trying to meet the needs of the learners so that they can learn. Forget your stupid content; just get them in a place where they're able to learn, grow and develop." Mrs. Williams laments that "the model of education in high school is fundamentally different from how we view middle school and elementary school" and refutes this view, claiming, "I think it's the same process; it's just different material." Mrs. Williams is very relationship-oriented, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, she was concerned that students' learning might be impacted. Her description of one specific instance trying to support a learner struggling to connect in a virtual world was the stimulus for the following vignette:

Class has just ended, and Ryan requested to meet to discuss his homework. Before entering the breakout room on Zoom®, I round my shoulders back, stretching my shoulder blades over the frame of my chair. I inhale deeply, let my smile reach across my face, and move closer to the camera lens.

I let Ryan into the breakout room. I can see his bedroom in the background, with his posters and his bedspread.

Ryan says, "I saw you walking last week!"

"Say hi next time!"

He laughs. "I will." He pauses for a moment. "I really miss being in-person."

"Me, too, Ryan. Me, too."

I ask Ryan how I can help him. Ryan explains that he is still having difficulty with a math problem from last night. I ask Ryan to walk me through the problem from beginning to end. At first, Ryan's voice wavers as he explains his reasoning step-by-step. At one point, Ryan says eight multiplied by eight is sixteen.

I interject softly, “Did you just say eight times eight equals sixteen?”

“Yes!” Then Ryan looks down, his brows furrow. He laughs, “Oh that’s not right.”

“Don’t worry! That’s why we write down each step because it’s so easy to make an error like that! Can you talk me through the rest of the problem?”

I try to soften my smile as I listen. It keeps spreading wider because Ryan’s voice has grown stronger, louder, more confident.

“I guess that was my mistake! The rest of the problem is easy now!”

Mrs. Williams understands Ryan is not only asking for math help, but also asking for his emotional needs to be met. That is why she identifies this experience as engaging Ryan in SEL.

For Mrs. Williams, a large component of SEL is developing strong student-teacher relationships. For example, she knew Ryan understood the process they went over that day, and any issue he had was likely a simple calculation error. She could have checked his work and pointed out the miscalculation, but instead she had him process out loud to demonstrate he understood the process. She also took a moment to connect, as he indicated feeling isolated in the new virtual world. Mrs. Williams acknowledged in her interviews, however, that she was more capable of supporting students individually now than she was in the beginning of the pandemic, when the uncertainty of the situation and lack of familiarity with the virtual medium overwhelmed her. She claimed she needed to take a moment to learn how to adapt her own SEL perspective before she could again engage her students in SEL.

Mr. Sanchez, a High School Math Teacher

Prior to becoming an educator, Mr. Sanchez had a successful career in engineering. Mr. Sanchez turned to math education decades ago because he was trying to better advocate for his children. “I came from a different background; I have my education in different countries so I have seen how much competition exists.” He also claims that math education is central to providing opportunities in education, but that for many students, math may not be their favorite subject. “For two reasons. It could be because of their previous experiences with the math, and it could be because just the brains are not thinking mathematically [...] like the certain brain chemistry.” Mr. Sanchez claims here that his role as a math educator is to help students continue and/or remediate their relationship with math; this involves addressing prior experiences and feelings in relation to their math education, as well as becoming aware of the ways in which they approach and respond to a math problem. The process of helping students understand their relationship to math is what he identifies as SEL. When asked to describe a lived experience of SEL, Mr. Sanchez described an in-person, pre-pandemic interaction with students that served as the basis for this vignette:

Two students from my class, Anna (pseudonym) and Sasha (pseudonym), walk up to me in the hall. They smile at me. Anna has a piece of paper in her hand that she pushes towards me.

“I know you come from an engineering background, and I want advice on my courses.”

I only have a few minutes before my next class, and I was hoping to get more coffee, but these students look so hopeful and excited.

“I’m happy to describe what I needed, and what my sons needed when they applied a few years ago. But then you should follow up with a guidance counselor.”

They nod at me. I lean against the wall and review the course list.

“And you want to go into mechanical engineering, right?”

“Yes!”

“Okay, well, your science selections are great, but you should probably take Mr. Deshpande’s course next term instead of this course listed here, because it’s a prerequisite for the math they’ll be looking for in your freshman year...” (Vignette created from interview with Mr. Sanchez)

Mr. Sanchez chose this experience as a moment of engaging a student in SEL because it reflects both the student’s accountability for their own learning, as well as the strength of that student-teacher relationship. That student values his life experiences and counsel. This moment shows that this student knows their teacher is invested in their future success. Mr. Sanchez is also open about how though he values interactions such as these, they eat into his time and take additional energy. He explains if it had been a testing week, or if he really needed another cup of coffee, he would have asked her to return during his office hours. Mr. Sanchez wants to help his students engage in SEL, but understands he can only do that when he is able to take care of his own needs as well.

Discussion of Findings

The participants all discuss SEL in different ways, based on how they relate to students in spontaneous moments of student need. None of the participants described SEL through curricular objectives or through the CASEL framework. In each example, two themes were present: (1) that SEL occurred in moments that disrupted what each teacher had planned for that moment; and (2) that SEL manifested in moments of caring for their students.

SEL as Living Curricula

Teachers’ understandings of SEL-in-action align with responding with tact to unplanned moments: Amy struggles to find meaning in Mr. Smith’s programming; Ryan asks for Mrs. Williams’ help after class; and Anna interrupts Mr. Sanchez during his precious few moments between classes. The teachers chose these moments as examples of SEL because they were very aware of their own feelings in the moment and how their reactions to those feelings would impact their students. Describing SEL in ways that embody pedagogical responsiveness to students orients us to understanding SEL as a curriculum that is lived. Curriculum theorist William Pinar explains that a phenomenological approach to understanding curriculum “invites you to teach as a mode of relation to yourself, to others, to subject matter. A contemplative and meditative self-reflexivity is required” (Pinar et al., 2004, p. 434). The teachers reflect on these moments as experiences of SEL precisely because they were so strongly drawn into an awareness of living and teaching in a relational manner.

In each example of SEL-in-action, a student interrupts the teacher’s plan, asking them to be responsive to their needs. Aoki (1986/1991/2005) labels this tension between curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived the “zone of between” (p. 164). He claims the zone of between is what calls for a responsive relational practice:

Within this tensionality, guided by a sense of the pedagogic good, we are called on as teachers to be alert to the possibilities of our pedagogic touch, pedagogic tact, pedagogic attunement—those subtle features about being teachers that we know, but are not yet in our lexicon, for we have tended to be seduced by the seemingly lofty and prosaic talk in

the language of conceptual abstractions. We must recognize the flight from the meaningful and turn back again to an understanding of our own being as teachers. It is here, I feel, that teachers can contribute to fresh curriculum understandings. (p. 164)

This tensionality and its resulting effects are observed in Mr. Smith's actions. Amy is not meeting the physical activity objectives Mr. Smith had planned, but he cares more about whether she can find meaning and purpose in movement. He keeps challenging her, unsure it will ultimately be meaningful for her. Staying with that tension results in Amy appreciating the intrinsic value of movement. Mrs. Williams welcomes the tension of being responsive to the needs of her student outside of her class period and really beyond the scope of the math lesson. Ryan needs reassurance that he is capable and that he is seen as a student who matters. Finally, Mr. Sanchez also feels the tension in the zone of between. This is his moment to rest and recharge before giving himself to the next class. He is afraid that if he does not follow his plan, he will be unable to give himself fully in the next class and meet the demands of curriculum-as-plan. In the moment, he reflects on his needs, and determines he has this moment to give, and the meaningful interaction with the student does not drain his energy and, in some ways, seems restorative. All three of the participants have a heightened sense of self in these moments because they are so conscious of how their actions impact their students.

These three teachers illustrate the type of self-reflexivity that Pinar describes and also exemplify van Manen's sense of pedagogical tact. There are multiple components, types of sensitivities, that pedagogical tact requires, but two in particular are on display here: "Child-sense: possessing the active and reflective sensitivity to sense what goes on in the life of a child [...and...] Personal pedagogy: developing the self-reflexive awareness of one's own personal background and emotional make-up" (van Manen, 2015, p. 11). For child-sense, honing one's sense of other, in this case the student(s), all three teachers show this type of sensitivity. Mr. Smith understands that Amy must be struggling with something greater than just not wanting to play soccer and gives Amy agency and support in choosing what activity to do. Mrs. Williams is sufficiently familiar with her students to know that although Ryan probably only had a calculation error, he needs a personal check-in. Mr. Sanchez also senses Anna really wants to connect at this moment and may be discouraged if he asks her to come back later.

All three teachers show a developed sense of self-reflexive awareness, as mentioned by Pinar and colleagues (2004), which is essential to van Manen's (2015) pedagogical tact, and further described by theorists and researchers who phenomenologically approach pedagogy and curriculum (Aoki, 1986/1991/2005; Jardine, 2008; Smith, 2021; Snowber, 2019). Mr. Smith stays positive and encouraging, but with firm expectations for Amy to keep her motivated. Mrs. Williams understands she is capable of giving more to her students again now that she has acclimated to the pandemic, but she pays attention to when she needs extra time and space to reacclimate to be able to offer that support to others. Mr. Sanchez reframes the experience cognitively so he feels autonomy in choosing to relate to Anna in this moment, instead of feeling overwhelmed with too much to do and too little time to do it. Their self-reflexivity is essential to their ability to act on their child-sense. In turn, their pedagogical tact seems to be what allows for their ability to deviate from their plans in order to be able to experience and value curriculum-as-lived.

Social Emotional Learning as Giving and Taking Care

Pedagogical tact allows these teachers to respond to moments of tension by sensing what their students need, and being self-aware enough to determine what they can give to their

students in response to this need. These moments demonstrate that a teacher's experience of SEL requires responsiveness, a constant awareness of relation to others in the moment. These moments also require the teacher to care for their students' needs and have the desire to respond to and fulfill these needs. Mr. Smith wants to ensure Amy has a positive association with physical activity. Mrs. Williams aims to support Ryan's sense of self-efficacy and help him feel supported as a learner. Mr. Sanchez hopes his conversation with Anna will better prepare her for what actions she needs to take to have the future she desires. In each example, the teachers are caring for their students, but this care is not just a feel-good experience. In each example of caring, there is an element of tension as the teacher considers whether they can respond to their students' needs.

"Care" is commonly understood today as "To have regard, fondness, or attachment *for* [a person or a thing]" (Oxford University Press, n.d.). Though care and caring often have expressly positive associations in the English language, caring inherently implies concern for others in its meaning in other languages. Van Manen (2002) states: "[W]here in English these two terms care and worry are kept separate, in Dutch, German, and some other languages, these meanings are inextricably wound up in the mode of life described by the term caring" (p. 266). Van Manen claims, "Worry—rather than duty or obligation—keeps us in touch with the one for whom we care" (p. 264). Thus, van Manen uses the term "care-as-worry" in order to represent the experience of caring: "It concerns the relationship between the commonly accepted meanings of the term caring and the lived experience of caring, especially as in the primordial context of caring for someone who is vulnerable due to age, health, or circumstance" (p. 265). The teachers' experiences of SEL in this study indicate that creating a caring relationship with students involves experiencing tension in the zone of between, navigating meeting the demands of both curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived, in addition to responding to the sometimes-conflicting needs of individual students. Care-as-worry describes what the teachers experience as they utilize their pedagogical tact to engage students in SEL in curriculum-as-lived.

In each lived experience description, the teachers in this study express the ways in which they care for their students and the inherent tension in this care. Mr. Smith wants Amy to enjoy physical activity and is unsure how much to challenge her or allow her leeway in pandemic conditions. Mrs. Williams feels Ryan does not need additional content support, but recognizes he needs to discover that for himself. Mr. Sanchez wants to help Anna but hopes it will not impact his ability to teach his next class. To respond to this tension, teachers must not just consider their students' needs and give care to them in these moments, but they must also assess their own needs. Mr. Smith allows himself to be unsure and reminds himself that everyone feels unsure how to best support students in the context of the pandemic. Mrs. Williams takes more time and space for herself to reacclimate after the initial onset of the pandemic so that she can offer students like Ryan the support she does now. Mr. Sanchez acknowledges he will sacrifice a moment for himself and his pined-after coffee, and he reminds himself that it is an opportunity to guide and connect with a student. The teachers only give care to their students after quickly assessing their ability to do so in the moment.

In their interviews, the teachers indicate that turning inward and reflecting on their needs must happen continuously, not just in-the-moment, if they are to be able to engage in SEL. All the participants express being aware of and addressing their own daily needs to ensure they have the ability to care for their students. Mr. Smith states, "you got to keep some like gas in the tank. You can't, you can't give to others [...] if like you're kind of empty." Mrs. Williams

said, “if I don’t get sleep, then I can’t be this nurturing. And I know that, so I have to get my sleep.” When asked in what ways the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted his teaching practice and ability to engage in SEL, Mr. Sanchez states, “The pandemic actually helped [...] I was feeling good about taking care of my own well-being [...] I got time to pay attention to that [...] and that made me more confident in my teaching.” Additionally, all the teachers discussed developing a practice of gratitude that helped them experience fewer moments of tension, and deal with tension more quickly and calmly when it manifested, even as the demands on teachers grew during the pandemic. Mr. Smith kept a gratitude journal. Mrs. Williams made sure to reflect on what she was grateful for on daily walks outside. Mr. Sanchez worked actively on developing his “mindset” so that he was “goal-oriented,” not “problem-oriented.” The amalgamation of their daily practices, as well as their self-reflection in tense moments, is what allowed these educators to take care of themselves sufficiently to give care to their students.

The teachers also state that it is important to acknowledge that if external demands become too great, they struggle to care for students adequately. A teacher must be supported by their administration and colleagues. Classes cannot be too large, the curriculum too vast, or classroom conditions detrimental. Teachers need supports to be able to sustain offering care to others (Hargreaves, 1998). Ideally, the teacher has both strong professional support from their administration and colleagues, as well as meaningful personal support from their family and friends. If the teacher ensures they are sufficiently cared for, they are better able to engage in SEL and care for their students.

Conclusions and Lingering Questions

The high school teachers in this study experience SEL through the ways in which they relate to and care for their students. The teachers share lived experiences of SEL where their plans for that class or that time are interrupted, and they must respond in the moment to the needs of the students. In these moments of SEL-in-action, the teachers describe developing a relational attunement with students to intuit what students need, which intimates that van Manen’s (2015) sense of pedagogical tact is what allows teachers to engage students in SEL. Reflecting on such experiences can help current and future practitioners thoughtfully consider their teaching practice and the ways in which SEL might manifest.

High school teachers want more SEL guidance but not prescriptive curricula. A phenomenological approach to pedagogy and curriculum could allow teachers to develop the necessary relational sensitivities to engage students in SEL. The teachers in this study share that SEL manifests in pedagogical interactions where they are caring for their students, and responding to their needs, even when those needs conflict with the curriculum-as-plan. They also share some ways in which they alleviate the tension of trying to continuously respond to and meet the needs of each student. The teachers in this study primarily do so by demonstrating how they ensure they check in with themselves in moments of disruption, as well as through developing daily practices that sustain their ability to care for others. Their responses suggest that engaging their students in SEL requires sufficient external and internal supports. Further studies exploring the role of support systems and self-care practices in developing SEL would be beneficial to guide teachers in SEL teacher education. Phenomenological inquiry affords an opportunity to better understand the lived experiences of high school teachers, in this case, the ways they experience the complexities and depths of SEL. Phenomenological studies do not offer procedural recommendations or aim for certain outcomes, however. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic and the limitations placed on data collection as a result were a limitation. Further in-person research is needed.

As a practitioner, my initial introduction to SEL did not encourage me to explore such themes as SEL-as-living-curriculum, or what implications such an approach had for developing the ability to care for my students as well as myself. I wish it had, and I wish I had been exposed to such thoughtful SEL education as a preservice teacher, because I left my teacher education program when I experienced personal health issues and felt increasingly pressured to ignore my health to meet the needs of my students. This is a trend mirrored in the teaching profession, and this lack of support for teachers' needs in and outside of the classroom is hypothesized to be a part of the reason why approximately half of new teachers leave the profession within five years (Kelly & Northrop, 2015). Teachers' needs matter. Additionally, they are not able to give care if they are not able to take care of themselves. The findings of this study suggest that a phenomenological approach to SEL teacher education might help teachers develop the personal and relational sensitivities necessary to experience SEL and engage students in SEL, which in turn would positively affect teacher and student well-being as well as learning outcomes.

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