Understanding the interpretation and implementation of social and emotional learning in physical education

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Abstract

Social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies such as self-management and relationship skills are associated with positive outcomes for youth. Therefore, educational policies in many countries emphasize the integration of these competencies throughout the curriculum and specifically in physical education (PE). However, little research has examined the impact of such policy in the context of practice. Drawing upon occupational socialization theory, this study assessed how secondary teachers interpret and implement this aspect of the Scottish national curriculum. Data sources included teacher interviews (n = 14), pupil focus groups (n = 32), and systematic observations of 23 lessons. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics while qualitative data were analyzed using constant comparison and thematic analysis. The trustworthiness of findings was supported through triangulation, peer debriefing, and member check. Findings indicate the curriculum is interpreted at several levels driven largely by teachers’ background experience and organizational influences. Generally, SEL is viewed favorably, but ambiguity and lack of support are challenges to implementation. Common practice involves creating a positive learning environment as well as implicit and reactive teaching approaches. More robust implementation involves the addition of explicit and empowering teaching approaches. Implications for practice, teacher education, policy development, and research are discussed.

Key words: Occupational socialization theory; educational policy; curriculum change; health and wellbeing curriculum
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There is increasing global consensus that physical education (PE) can promote wellbeing and teach personal and social skills (e.g., managing stress, controlling impulses, motivating oneself, resolving conflicts peacefully, solving problems, respecting oneself and others, caring for others) that generalize to other settings (UNESCO; 2015, 2017). Educational policies and curricula in numerous countries reflect this commitment through a range of values, attitudes, and behaviors that can be situated within the broad notion of social and emotional learning (SEL). In fact, the term SEL is now being applied (often retroactively) to pull together a range of skills, learning outcomes, and best-practices that have been developed in PE for decades (Dyson, Howley & Wright, 2020; Wright, Gordon & Gray, in press). For all the attention being paid to SEL in this field, there is still a great deal of work to be done relative to articulating what SEL is and understanding the ways it is interpreted and implemented in practice (Dyson, Howley & Wright, 2020).

Regarding what SEL is, several frameworks attempting to define and promote it have gained international prominence. While there is not universal consensus, there is considerable overlap between frameworks, especially regarding the type of skills and behaviors that characterize SEL. The framework promoted by the Collaborative on Academic, Social and Emotional (CASEL; 2020), for example, is organized around five broad competencies, i.e., self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Each of these competencies is associated with specific skills and behaviors. For example, assessing one’s strengths and weaknesses and recognizing one’s emotions are skills associated with the self-awareness competency. Goal-setting is a specific skill associated with the self-management competency. Being able to give and receive feedback in a constructive manner would map strongly to the relationship skills competency. The social awareness competency may be manifest in recognizing when others need support. Responsible decision-making is a competency that could involve resisting peer pressure or choosing to not to cheat in a game. Another well-established framework promoted by Jones and Bouffard (2012) organizes SEL into three domains. The cognitive regulation domain is comprised of skills such as attention control, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility. The emotional processes domain includes specific skills such as emotional regulation, empathy, and perspective taking. Finally, the social and interpersonal skills domain involves skills such as conflict resolution, understanding social cues, and prosocial behavior.

Across frameworks, skills associated with SEL, including the examples above, are believed to promote healthy development, academic success, and the ability to thrive in society (Brackett, 2019; CASEL, 2019; Frey et al., 2019; Jones & Bouffard, 2012). These beliefs are supported by extensive quantitative research indicating that pupils with higher levels of SEL tend to perform better in school; are more resilient in the face of adversity; and experience better health and economic outcomes in the future (Durlack et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). For these reasons, many leading frameworks promote the idea that SEL should be implemented by teachers, aligned with school-wide initiatives, and supported by educational policy (Brackett, 2019; CASEL, 2019; Frey et al., 2019; Jones & Bouffard, 2012). However, innovation in education often meets explicit and implicit resistance when it requires changes in practice (Fullan, 2007; Maclean et al., 2015). Despite research and policy support, such has been the case with SEL (Elias, 2019; Emery, 2016; Shriver & Weissberg, 2020). A lack of qualitative understanding related to the policy process as well as the interpretation and implementation of SEL by teachers has been identified as a major obstacle to promoting SEL.
in general education (Corcoran et al., 2018; Hamre et al., 2013) and in PE (Dyson, Howley & Wright, 2020).

Scotland, the setting for the current study, is one of many nations where these issues are in play. Changes called for in the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Government, 2009) have implications for SEL in PE. To date, there is little research to help us understand and support the translation of such policy into practice (Gray et al., 2015; Hardley et al., 2020; Horrell et al., 2012). To shed light on the interpretation and implementation of SEL in PE, we use qualitative and descriptive methods to examine the perspectives and behaviors among teachers and pupils in Scottish secondary schools.

Occupational Socialization Theory

Occupational socialization theory provides a dialectical perspective on the socialization process that seeks to understand the recruitment, professional preparation, and ongoing socialization of PE teachers in school environments (Richards et al., 2019). The theory is dialectical because it acknowledges individuals’ sense of agency and ability to resist the influence of those individuals and institutions seeking to socialize them (i.e., organizational socialization; Schempp & Graber, 1992). A hallmark of OST is the recognition that acculturation (i.e., anticipatory socialization) experiences that occur prior to the initiation of formal teacher education (i.e., professional socialization influence individuals’ beliefs and receptivity to subsequent socialization experiences (Curtner-Smith, 2017). Accordingly, many preservice PE teachers hold subjective theories (Grotjahn, 1991), or personal understandings of the discipline, that reflect sport-based PE delivered using teacher-centered instructional approaches they experience during their own formative education (Richards et al., 2013).

A recent emphasis within OST relates to understanding the ways in which physical educators interpret, or read (Gore, 1990), pedagogical models and practices based on their prior socialization experiences. This work has illustrated how teachers’ pedagogies and practices are influenced by their anticipatory socialization, professional socialization, and the support in their current school (Richards & Gordon, 2017; Starck et al., 2018). Related to this influence, Curtner-Smith and colleagues (2008) argued that teachers’ current and prior socialization experiences lead to different interpretations of pedagogical models that manifest as full, watered down, or cafeteria style (i.e., using isolated and selected practices) versions. Cafeteria-style implementation can result in toxic mutations whereby pedagogical models retain their name, but lack critical defining elements (Gordon et al., 2016).

Richards and Gordon (2017) conducted research in New Zealand specifically related to teachers’ interpretation and implementation of the teaching personal and social responsibility (TPSR) model (Hellison, 2011), which places primary emphasis on the affective domain and the cultivation of SEL competencies. The teachers’ use of the model was influenced by their own values and prior socialization experiences as well as school-wide SEL initiatives. However, the teachers’ implementation was watered down when their prior socialization experiences led them to emphasize high physical activity during class time. Implementation fidelity was also hindered when empowerment-based teaching practices required them to stray from the more teacher-centered, direct instructional practices. Given
the alignment between SEL and TPSR (Gordon et al., 2016), these findings likely shed light
on how socialization factors can influence teachers’ interpretation and implementation of
SEL in PE.

While calls to promote SEL are common, this aspect of the curriculum continues to be
ill-defined (Jacobs & Wright, 2014). It has been noted that the ambiguous nature of affective
learning objectives (e.g., self-expression, enjoyment, personal and social responsibility) in the
U.S. national PE curriculum standards (Society of Health and Physical Educators [SHAPE]
America; 2014) has made it difficult to define pupil learning and teacher effectiveness
(Wright & Irwin, 2018). Given a history prioritizing physical and psychomotor outcomes in
PE and the ill-defined nature of SEL as content, we anticipate many researchers and
practitioners struggle to articulate relevant objectives and pedagogical practices (Maclean et
al., 2015). In fact, little research has directly examined the intersection of SEL with PE,
especially related to the interpretation and enactment of policy and curricular change (Dyson
et al., 2020).

Scottish Curriculum for Excellence

The current curriculum in Scotland, Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), was introduced in
2010 (Scottish Government, 2009). Within this curriculum, PE forms part of a collective
alongside physical activity and sport in the curricular area of health and wellbeing. This
curricular area has a central role within CfE, largely due to government concerns about
increases in the rates of young people suffering from mental health issues such as depression
and anxiety (Scottish Government, 2018) and about increases in childhood obesity and
physical inactivity (Horrell et al., 2012). Thus, the health and wellbeing curriculum is the
responsibility of all Scottish PE teachers and aims to develop pupils’ “knowledge and
understanding, skills, capabilities and attributes which they need for mental, emotional, social
and physical wellbeing now and in the future” (Scottish Government, 2009, p. 1).

The implementation of Scottish PE is guided by two key sets of policy statements, the
experiences and outcomes for health and wellbeing, and the experiences and outcomes for
PE. These documents include first-person statements that outline what young people should
experience and achieve as they progress through school (Gray et al., 2012). Regarding SEL,
the policy texts indicate that learning environments should support skills and attributes such
as self-awareness, relationships, confidence, mental wellbeing, cooperation, and the abilities
to assess and manage risk and challenge discrimination (Scottish Government, 2009). While
PE teachers must attend to these policy documents in their planning, teaching, and
assessment, they were initially given little guidance and professional development to achieve
this goal (Horrell & Gray, 2018). The Scottish Government’s (2017) reaction to these
concerns was the development of Significant Aspects of Learning (SALS) and teaching
benchmarks (Scottish Government, 2017) to provide further guidance and specificity. The
SALS serve as broad organizing structures and include (a) physical competencies, (b)
cognitive skills, (c) physical fitness, and (d) personal qualities. The benchmarks are
statements that describe the standards pupils are expected to achieve as they progress through
school and are categorized by each of the SALS, including personal qualities SALS that
focus on developing skills such as confidence, self-esteem, determination, and resilience
(Scottish Government, 2017). The benchmarks are, therefore, intended to present a more
holistic perspective and encourage teachers to assess learners in a wide range of social,
emotional, cognitive, and physical skills.
While the benchmarks highlight pupil outcomes, little guidance is provided relative to the pedagogical practices necessary to support these learning outcomes. Teachers are encouraged to seek out and employ best practice from their field (e.g., models-based practice), but no specific models or practices are mandated. Although studies have been conducted to understand teacher (Gray et al., 2012; Maclean et al., 2015) and pupil (Gray et al., 2018) perceptions of PE curriculum changes in Scotland, little is known about how teachers plan and develop their pupils’ social and emotional health in the PE context. Education policy often becomes politicalized and is related to prevailing public opinion (DeBray & McGuinn, 2009; Richards, 2015). As a result, the landscape surrounding these policies is often fluid, crowded, and highly contested (Houlihan, 2002). Further challenges are introduced given that policies are reinterpreted at the local level based on the current and prior socialization experiences of individual teachers (Lawson, 2018). Accordingly, any attempt to understand educational policy must account for teachers’ interpretation, or reading, of the policy as well as their efforts toward implementation fidelity (Curtner-Smith et al., 2008). In the case of the CfE, from the positioning of PE within the curriculum and its connection to health and wellbeing experiences and outcomes to specific skills mentioned in the SALS and benchmarks, the expectation to address SEL is clearly present but muddled. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand how secondary PE teachers interpret and implement the SEL aspect of the Scottish curriculum in the context of practice.

Methods

The current study employed mixed methods (Thomas et al., 2015). The qualitative aspect of the study involved qualitative interviews and focus groups. The quantitative aspect involved systematic observation. All data were collected concurrently during the same four-month period. The study was approved by the ethics review boards of the first two authors’ universities and the local school authority where the research was conducted. Pseudonyms are used for participant and school names.

Setting and Participants

This study was conducted in a large Scottish city. Snowball sampling (Patton, 2015) beginning with existing contacts in the second author’s professional network was used to recruit 14 PE teachers (9 female, 5 male), including four who served as school level curriculum leaders. In terms of teaching experience, most were early (2-5 years) or mid-career (6-20 years) although one was in her first year (i.e., probation) and another had over 20 years of experience (i.e., late career). The teachers represented four high schools. Stewart and Burns were relatively small schools with enrollments of 610 and 620, respectively. Bruce and MacMillan were larger schools with enrollments of 1,059 and 1,260, respectively. See Table 1 for participant demographic information. Most of the PE classes taught by these teachers met for approximately 50 minutes, two or three times per week, with an average of 25 pupils.

In addition to the teachers, pupils from each school served as contributing informants whose perspectives were used to triangulate with those of the teachers. A focus group was conducted with eight pupils from each school (n = 32; 16 female, 16 male). Pupils, ranging in age from 11 to 15 years old, were purposefully selected (Patton, 2015) in conversation with their teachers. Eligibility required pupils to (a) be in a PE class taught by a participating teacher, (b) provide parental consent, and (c) give written assent to participate. Pupils were
selected to maximize diversity in terms of gender, involvement in athletics, engagement in PE, socio-economic background, and cultural heritage.

**Data Sources**

All 14 teachers participated in one semi-structured, individual interview (Patton, 2015) that was audio-recorded and lasted approximately 60 minutes. Interviews were conducted by the first author at a time and place chosen by the interviewee, typically on school property (e.g., conference room) and during the school day (e.g., planning period). The interview protocol was developed by the first two authors. The interview questions were developed in reference to occupational socialization theory (Templin & Schempp, 1989) with a particular emphasis on how prior and current socialization experiences influence the interpretation and implementation of pedagogies and teaching practices (Curtner-Smith et al., 2008; Richards & Gordon, 2017; Starck et al., 2018). These questions were grouped into sections related to (a) personal background, (b) school context, (c) PE, (d) SEL, and (e) SEL in PE. Sample questions included: (a) “how have you learned about ways to address SEL in your teaching?” And (b) “can you give me an example of a recent lesson that you believe promoted an SEL skill?”

Pupil focus groups, which lasted approximately 50 minutes, were conducted by the first author on school grounds during the day in a conference room or empty classroom. The PE teachers helped organize the focus groups and sometimes chaperoned pupils to and from but were not present during the conversations. The sections of the protocol included (a) personal information, (b) school context, (c) PE, (d) SEL, and (e) SEL in PE. Sample questions included (a) “can you describe a typical PE lesson for me?” and (b) “can you give me an example of an activity or lesson from you PE class that promoted social and emotional learning?” Through explanations in the consent documents and the verbal consent process, the researcher assured that pupils understood the term “social and emotional learning/SEL” as well as representative behaviors, attitudes, and skills.

Systematic observations were conducted using the Tool for Assessing Responsibility-based Education (TARE) 2.0 (Escarti et al., 2015), which is a time-sampling instrument. The original TARE (Wright & Craig, 2011) proposed nine teaching strategies consistent with the TPSR model (Hellison, 2011) but also aligning strongly with SEL in a broader sense (Wright & Irwin, 2018). These strategies include (a) modeling respect, (b) setting clear expectations, (c) providing opportunities for success, (d) fostering social interactions, (e) assigning tasks, (f) providing leadership opportunities, (g) giving pupils choices and voice in the program, (h) letting pupils have an active role in assessment, and (i) promoting the transfer of life skills beyond PE. The second version of the instrument (Escarti et al., 2015) added nine pupil behaviors, including (a) participation, (b) effort, (c) showing respect, (d) cooperating with peers, (e) encouraging others, (f) helping others, (g) leading, (h) expressing voice, and (i) asking for help. All teacher and pupil behaviors are rated on a five-point, Likert-type scale from 0 (not observed) to 4 (extensive) in three-minute intervals throughout the observed lesson. Eleven teachers across the four schools were observed teaching at least two lessons each for a total of 23 lessons yielding 335 observed intervals (i.e., 1,005 minutes of instruction). Classes sampled for observation varied in terms of grade level (S1 through S5), gender make-up (co-educational vs. single sex), setting (indoor gymnasium, outdoor fields, dance studios, weight rooms), and physical activity (e.g., physical fitness, team sports, individual sports, dance, gymnastics). Content validity and inter-rater reliability above 80% agreement has been
demonstrated with the TARE in PE settings through previous research (Escarti et al., 2015; Wright & Craig, 2011).

After teachers had been interviewed and observed, they were invited to participate in a one-hour group interview (Patton, 2015). This group interview had the dual purpose of generating additional data elicited in a more interactive and conversational manner as well as providing an opportunity for member checking to bolster trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Nine teachers accepted and attended an evening meeting hosted at Burns High School. In this meeting, the first two authors shared an overview of the data collected and initial interpretations. Each participant had been given a transcript of their interview prior to the meeting and school level TARE results were provided at the meeting. Participants were invited to comment on the accuracy of transcriptions, data summaries, and interpretations. They also had the opportunity to ask questions, add details, and discuss the research process.

**Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze systematic observation data. Using the five-point, Likert-type scale, means and standard deviations were calculated at the interval level for each of the nine teaching strategies and nine pupil behaviors. Sums of all teacher strategy ratings and pupil behavior ratings for a given interval were calculated at the school level and in the aggregate. The reason for disaggregating data at the school level was to assess the consistency of patterns across contexts.

Approximately 19 hours and 380 pages of transcribed interview and focus group data were analyzed using a combination of inductive and deductive analysis (Patton, 2015). Deductive analysis involved assigning *a priori* codes and organizing data based on topics of interest (i.e., SEL) and the guiding theoretical framework (i.e., OST). Inductive analysis involved open and axial coding to identify units of meaning emerging from the data that could extend or challenge understandings of both SEL and OST. Through constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) a coding system was developed, refined, and applied until several distinct and overlapping themes were defined that characterized the data set.

The trustworthiness of the findings is supported by several procedures recommended for qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and evaluation (Patton, 2015). The study involved triangulation of data sources, methodologies, and stakeholder perspectives in order to better understand teachers’ interpretation and implementation of SEL. We employed peer debriefing throughout the research. Specifically, the first two authors developed the coding system and thematic analysis through an iterative process. At key points in the process, however, the third author engaged in conversations about the data analysis and provided feedback on the thematic structure. The group interview with teachers described above provided an opportunity for member checking. An audit trail was maintained through the documentation of all original transcripts, coding procedures, operational definitions, and theme construction. Final themes were developed based on complete research team consensus.

**Results**

**Curricular Interpretation**
Interpretation is the process by which individuals read, process, and come to understand the formal, written curriculum (Schubert, 1986). The two subthemes that comprise this theme characterize (a) the participants’ interpretation of the curriculum as a moving target, and (b) their mixed opinions about SEL. The primary data source supporting these subthemes is teacher interviews as they have the most direct knowledge of curriculum, however, pupil perspectives are integrated in the second subtheme. Because this theme is focused on interpretation, observational data are not included here but presented in a subsequent theme focused on the actual implementation of the curriculum.

**Curriculum is a moving target**

Participants described curriculum change as a fluid, complex process with perceived ambiguity and limited support. Regarding the dynamic nature of the curriculum, Evelyn lamented, “The framework’s constantly changing; we’ll start teaching it one way and then a term later we’re sent something new”. Although Scottish schools are organized into local authorities that facilitate professional development, teachers, including curriculum leaders like Gordon felt it was like “the blind leading the blind” as they were left on their own to interpret curriculum. Combining this lack of direction with frequent changes left participants frustrated. Martin, another curriculum leader, described the curriculum interpretation process as, “a lot a’ time consuming work and nobody knew whether they were right or wrong”.

Despite perceived challenges, participants worked together. Participants described a group effort at the school level where subject matter teams come together with a curriculum leader to interpret the curriculum and establish their school-level scope and sequence.

> It’s very much a discussion at departmental meetings, and ideas about how many activities we want in a year group, how long we want a year group to be on a particular activity, what activities we’d like to offer, and which we think will engage a percentage of pupils. (Roger)

Even the school-level scope and sequence were viewed as guidelines. Neville observed, “It’ll always be a sorta working document…we always make wee, little tweaks here and there”. Participants were committed to being in compliance with the curriculum. However, as explained by Nancy, they were not willing to reinvent their approach with every change, “It comes from the CfE, but we kinda do our own thing with them, we create our own curriculum almost, but incorporate all that stuff into it”. Most participants indicated this layer of interpretation is based on the teachers’ subjective theories about PE and dominant teaching practices. Ultimately, according to Roger, “It’s completely up to the individual teacher”.

**Mixed Opinions on SEL**

Participants supported the holistic approach to PE within the CfE. Connecting to broader aspects of development resonated with teachers who agreed PE was previously too narrow in its focus. Several embraced “opportunities to develop the whole person as opposed to just the physical” (Martin). Regarding examples of SEL skills, “like teaching pupils how to talk to each other, to communicate, how to manage their emotions”, Helen said “that is part of our lessons now”. Many, including Sean and Nancy, attributed this new guiding philosophy and corresponding changes in practice to the CfE.

Even though teachers’ initial reactions to the notion of SEL were positive, further discussion often revealed challenges to implementation. Based on their prior socialization experiences, many teachers were accustomed to direct instruction, a content-centered view of
the curriculum, and a primary focus on psychomotor learning. As Roger explained it, “I did
view PE as physical and felt like some of the social skills I was developing would transfer
automatically into their life. I never thought it as something that I’d teach explicitly”. This
common mindset left many teachers feeling pressure and viewing SEL as “extra things”
(Jennifer) they had to balance with other expectations.

I need to be teaching them about social and emotional behavior. I need to be teaching
them how to do a badminton overhead clear, I need to be teaching them teamwork,
leadership. And actually what you end up doing is a scatter gun approach that actually
doesn’t tick any of the boxes properly. (Tori)

Many teachers were apprehensive about implementing SEL because of previous
unsuccessful experiences with pupil-centered teaching. In some cases, these attempts lacked
intention. Hellen, describing one class that had become problematic, explained that “pupils
didn’t take it seriously” because they were initially given too much freedom without clear
structure or expectations. Regarding trepidation about pupils who were not ready for
leadership roles, Tori shared, “I don’t know that they’re mature enough to have that
conversation… I feel like they’d be right up in my face and I don’t want that confrontation”.
Even pupils expressed doubts about teachers sharing control. A male pupil from MacMillan
stated, “most people think because they’re your fellow classmate you don’t really have to
respect them as you would a teacher”.

As participants interpret SEL and its role in the curriculum, they draw primarily on
their practical experience in school environments. Most reported learning little about pupils’
social and emotional needs during their initial teacher education except, in some cases, during
their clinical placements. After joining the profession, many reported learning through
experience and in some cases through professional development or school-wide initiatives
related to SEL (e.g., cooperative learning or restorative practice). However, during individual
interviews and the group interview, teachers consistently reported developing their approach
to SEL on the job and with their peers, i.e., “learning from other teachers” (Hellen).

Implementation

This theme is focused on the participants’ experience of implementation (i.e., delivery of the
interpreted curriculum in practice). Two subthemes that characterize their implementation are
(a) common practice, and (b) promising practice. Supporting evidence for both comes from
teacher interviews, pupil focus groups, and direct observation. As illustrated in Table 2, there
was slight variation in TARE 2.0 observations across schools, but generally patterns were
consistent. Therefore, when we refer to these quantitative data, we highlight the aggregate
findings.

Common practice

Participants emphasized the importance of a positive learning environment based on
enjoyment, social interaction, and participation. Teachers and pupils believed such a climate
fosters involvement in physical activity and sport. For example, Martin said, “Our big push is
participation, enjoyment and lifelong physical activity”, and a male pupil from Burns
concorded that, “the main aim for the PE program is to provide a fun environment that
encourages participation in sport”. A female pupil from MacMillan explained that their
teachers “make it fun” by doing things like playing music and allowing pupils to work
together in teams and socialize. In such an environment, pupils reported feeling comfortable
and having good rapport with each other. Even though his peers vary in terms of how
competitive they are, a male pupil from Bruce shared, “When you get them all together it
really does create a nice vibe actually”. A female counterpart of his added, “Most of the time it’s quite positive. If you win, they clap or something like that”. A positive learning environment was frequently described by teachers as a necessary ingredient and precursor to promoting SEL, e.g., “building relationships is really important with pupils” (Neville). Beth made the connection even more concrete by saying, “I think if they’re enjoying it and they have a good relationship with the teacher they’re gonna be a lot more comfortable talking about emotions”.

Many participants provided examples of an implicit approach to promoting SEL. One teacher felt SEL “is taught primarily through the teacher modelling the behavior, rather than it being taught explicitly” (Roger). This aligns with Evelyn’s explanation that, “A lot of it comes down to who I am as a person... what my beliefs are, basic fundamentals of what it is to be respectful, be polite, looking out for others”. Beth was one of several who indicated SEL was naturally embedded in PE, i.e., “It’s something that would come from the overall lesson and atmosphere and content”. Many pupils also recognized this implicit approach as a way they learn about SEL. A female pupil from Stewart described the general but consistent use of SEL related messages, “Like every time you play a team sport, you’re reminded that you have to play fairly and things.” A male pupil from Bruce was one of many who also believed in the organic nature of SEL in PE, stating simply, “In any team sport, you get to know your team better, and then you play better”.

Another way teachers promote SEL is responding to incidents or situations. Most teachers recognized the importance of SEL, but did not necessarily view it as content they proactively teach. Jennifer reflected, “social and emotional are things that can only be addressed through a reactive situation, because emotions aren’t something you can see unless they’re intense.” This perspective led teachers to conflate SEL with behavior management. Many examples of teaching SEL were based in reacting to behavior problems, e.g., when pupils act out because they are “frustrated with their own performance, with their peers, with their teacher” (Evelyn). This was also evident in pupil examples. A female pupil from Stewart explained that some pupils “lose their temper” or “laugh at you because they won” and “sometimes it does get quite serious”. However, from her perspective, “Teachers are good at dealing with that sort of stuff. They calm everybody down”. However, the reactive approach was not restricted to managing negative behaviors. There were examples of teachers reacting to situations positively by praising and motivating pupils. Hellen described an adapted PE class that “took six weeks of throwing and catching to get good at it”. She recounted coaching them on being “resilient” with encouragement like, “It’s okay if the ball drops on the floor, it doesn’t matter. Just pick it up, try again”.

The qualitative findings presented above indicate common practice was described as a general but strong commitment to creating a positive learning environment and promoting SEL through implicit and reactive approaches. These qualitative accounts were consistent with direct observation (see Table 2). Of the nine teaching strategies assessed, those with the highest ratings included Modeling Respect ($M = 3.43$, $SD = .68$), Setting Expectations ($M = 3.05$, $SD = .87$), and Opportunities for Success ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 1.07$). These ratings were often associated with teacher actions such as using pupil names, making eye contact, actively listening, providing clear explanations, managing space and activities effectively, giving behavioral feedback, and differentiating instruction. Two strategies that were implemented with slightly less regularity were Fostering Social Interactions ($M = 1.88$, $SD = 1.17$) and Giving Choices and Voices ($M = 1.28$, $SD = 1.06$). These ratings were often associated with teachers having pupils work together in teams or pairs, creating space for pupils to interact with one another, and giving pupils activity choices. Accordingly, the pupil behaviors
observed with the greatest strength also reflect a structured and safe learning climate
classified by Participation (M = 3.11, SD = .86), Effort (M = 2.44, SD = .86), and
Showing Respect (M = 3.10, SD = .67). Pupils were observed Cooperating with Peers (M =
1.92, SD = 1.17) and Expressing Voice (M = 1.25, SD = .98) less often.

Promising practice

Many participants could also provide examples of an explicit approach to promoting SEL.
This involves active planning and delivery of lessons with clearly stated SEL objectives. In
some cases, examples involved explicit discussion of specific SEL skills. Several teachers
reported integrating SEL learning objectives with other best practices from PE (e.g., models-
based practice) or the broader field of education (e.g., restorative practice). Jennifer, who
reported integrating SEL objectives with her delivery of the sport education model in a
basketball unit, explained, “Their roles are changing every week so they all have different
roles and responsibility.”

Many examples involved modifying a drill or presenting scenarios to highlight a
specific SEL skill, e.g., “Within that lesson you might concentrate on communication and set
up a few games where nobody’s allowed to talk…you can only use gestures to try and get
them thinking about how important communication is” (Neville). When teachers took this
approach, they appeared more likely to address SEL skills explicitly. Beth described a
badminton activity in which doubles partners had to take turns sharing a racquet to “get them
to understand the concept of pressure”. Afterward, she debriefed with the pupils about their
emotional response to increased pressure. Because this explicit approach tends to focus on
discrete skills, it was a source of several examples from pupils. A male pupil from Bruce
perceived it this way, “Before we start, they’ll talk about something like what we’re
doing…teamwork and stuff…then at the end, we’ll have like a big talk about communication
and that, and make sure that we’ve communicated, like that we’re working together”.

Although less common, participants shared examples of teachers sharing power and
control with pupils. This empowering approach often involved promoting autonomy,
prosocial behaviors, and higher order thinking. An example of a teacher allowing pupils to
set their own goals came from a female describing an aquatics unit at MacMillan in which,
“You have to try and do as many widths as you could, or try and move closer to the deeper
end, or improve on a stroke”. A female pupil and her peers at Steward were empowered and
challenged in a dance unit, “We have to try and choreograph a dance and get it finished in
two lessons”. Self- and peer-assessments were other ways of sharing power with pupils. For
example, Hellen encouraged pupils to monitor their progress and think critically about their
performance. She explained that at her school, “We’ve got a little booklet that each pupil gets
and it’s got all the different activities and they self-assess in it…the sort of outcomes are
related to the SALS”.

Several teachers discussed the relevance and possible transfer of SEL skills to other
settings. Neville was one of several who described using analogies to the workplace and
careers to help pupils understand the relevance of specific SEL skills. Evelyn described doing
this as part of a school-wide improvement initiative at Bruce:

Teachers were doing loads of teaching these [SEL] skills but the pupils didn’t know,
they couldn’t vocalize it, because they didn’t really know they were learning that…So
the school have been making a really big effort to actually verbalize it to the pupils and
get them to be able to speak to you about it.
Many pupils were able to verbalize such connections. One female pupil at Stewart explained that in PE, “A lot of the team sports helps you really get to know people and, like, what they can do” and connected this skill to other classes “like, geography and history” in which “they do a lot of group work”. A male peer in the same focus group provided an example of how overcoming fear when competing in sport might generalize, stating, “I think it’s quite good to do things like that so that you’re more confident so that you won’t withdraw from things just because you’re scared”.

The qualitative data above indicate promising practice involves explicit and empowering approaches to teaching SEL. These subthemes are also supported by observational data summarized in Table 2. Teachers were rarely observed Assigning Tasks \((M = .54, SD = .84)\) to facilitate management and organization (e.g., time keeper, setting up equipment) and giving pupils a Role in Assessment \((M = .57, SD = .88)\) of their own performance or that of their peers. The two strategies observed the least across all settings were giving pupils Leadership \((M = .24, SD = .51)\) roles (i.e., supporting others’ learning) or Promoting Transfer \((M = .31, SD = .74)\) of SEL skills outside of PE. Perhaps because of the limited use of explicit and empowering teaching strategies that promote prosocial behavior (e.g., leadership, peer-assessment, urging pupils to encourage their peers), pupils were infrequently observed Encouraging \((M = .61, SD = .75)\) and Helping Others \((M = .44, SD = .62)\). Pupils were least likely to be observed Leading \((M = .30, SD = .53)\) and Asking for Help \((M = .27, SD = .47)\). However, it should be noted that these prosocial behaviors were occasionally observed in the interactions among the pupils even in the absence of prompting by the teacher. Such examples connect to findings about the positive learning environment described above.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to understand how secondary PE teachers interpret and implement the SEL aspect of the Scottish curriculum. Findings confirm that interpretation of the curriculum occurs at multiple levels. For example, local education authorities and school curriculum teams digest changes handed down from the government, but individual teachers make final interpretations that guide their implementation. Consistent with previous research, PE teachers’ interpretation, or reading (Gore, 1990), and implementation of the curriculum was shaped primarily by prior socialization experiences that influenced their subjective theories about the goals and purposes of PE (Richards et al., 2019). When these prior experiences aligned with SEL (e.g., creating a positive learning environment), implementation was facilitated. When the experiences contrasted with SEL, such as emphasizing physical activity and sport content over holistic education, implementation was inhibited (Richards & Gordon, 2017). Also consistent with previous studies, teachers perceived a lack of clarity in the Scottish curriculum (Gray et al., 2012; Horrell & Gray, 2018; Maclean et al., 2015). This was in part because the implementation of the curriculum occurred across multiple phases and reflected a dynamic and fluid public policy space (Houlihan, 2002; Richards, 2015) that did not include appropriate provisions for teacher reskilling and professional development.

While both teachers and pupils had a favorable view of the new and more holistic aims of PE, specific engagement varied widely and included a spectrum of strategies that ranged from implicit and reactive to explicit and empowering. The range of approaches teachers used to promote SEL are not mutually exclusive. In fact, a comprehensive approach
to SEL implementation may involve all of them. For instance, creating a positive learning environment builds a foundation for pupils to feel safe, included, and motivated (Gray et al., 2018; Wright & Burton, 2008). While the implicit approach alone is insufficient, role modelling and consistent messages about behavioral norms, values, and expectations are important in developing SEL instruction and are an important element of the TARE 2.0 observation system (Wright & Craig, 2011). Similarly, the reactive approach by itself often lacks intentionality, is conflated with behavior management, and only reaches pupils presenting with issues (Lavay et al., 2015). However, as part of a comprehensive strategy, the reactive approach has its place. Reframed as teachable moments and combined with a broader, more holistic approach to SEL integration, the same situations provide teachers opportunities to clarify expectations, encourage reflection, and reinforce positive examples of SEL in action (Hellison, 2011). In this study, direct observation of teacher and pupil behaviors triangulated with qualitative data to illustrate that that when teachers create a positive learning environment and make some use of the implicit and reactive approaches, a solid foundation can be laid for SEL implementation characterized by respect, participation, engagement, and cooperation. This is consistent with previous studies using the TARE in PE (Hemphill et al., 2015; Richards & Gordon, 2017; Wright & Craig, 2011; Wright & Irwin, 2018).

Teachers elevate their SEL implementation when they layer explicit and empowering teaching approaches onto common practice (Jacobs & Wright, 2018). Teachers’ use of the explicit approach to SEL integration corresponds with more social interaction, management tasks, and decision-making among pupils. As reported by Wright and Irwin (2018), the explicit approach in this study was characterized by teachers treating SEL as content, setting learning intentions, and planning lessons accordingly. Findings reported here indicate when teachers flipped this switch, pupils demonstrated and understood discrete SEL skills such as communication, teamwork, and goal setting. While participants were comfortable and satisfied with the explicit approach, findings demonstrate setting higher expectations for SEL development is feasible. When teachers did employ the explicit approach, they seemed to gravitate toward familiar affective learning objectives gleaned from the CfE that were concrete and easily featured in PE settings (e.g., communication and teamwork). However, previous research (see Dyson et al., 2020; Pozo et al., 2018) has demonstrated adolescents in secondary PE are capable of higher levels of SEL development including leadership, roles in assessment, and reflection on the relevance and transferable nature of such skills. Participants in this study saw value in empowering experiences, but implementation in this area was sporadic. This trend is reflected in TARE data and mirrors other findings in the literature (Hemphill et al., 2015; Richards & Gordon, 2017; Wright & Craig, 2011; Wright & Irwin, 2018).

This study illustrates the value of using qualitative and descriptive methods to understand the translation of SEL from policy to practice in contextualized ways (Corcoran et al., 2018; Dyson et al., 2020; Emery, 2016; Hamre et al., 2013). Above, we highlighted several insights into the teachers’ interpretation and implementation. However, pupil voice is also sorely lacking in PE research and curriculum development. By integrating pupil perspectives and behaviors into this study, we can see their potential to be active participants in as well as consumers of SEL in PE. If teachers were to include pupil perspectives as they work to understand and integrate SEL, they may improve their practice and could implement the empowering approach in the process. Consistent with previous studies using the OST framework in PE, current findings suggest that the ill-defined nature of SEL, competing
pressures, and traditional views on teacher-pupil roles are barriers to teachers fully realizing the empowering approach.

Our findings highlight opportunities for teacher preparation and continuing professional development. The participants’ professional socialization often did not focus on SEL, but when it did, these experiences seemed to increase receptivity (Curtner-Smith et al., 2008; Richards & Gordon, 2017). We recommend teacher preparation programs become more explicit in articulating what SEL is, why it is important, how it is addressed in the curriculum, and what it looks like in practice (Jacobs & Wright, 2014). Regarding continuing professional development for in-service teachers, action research and communities of practice could foster greater ownership as well as more consistent interpretation and implementation among practitioners. Such approaches have already proven effective for bringing about teacher change in countries including Scotland (Gray et al., 2019), New Zealand (Richards & Gordon, 2017), Spain (Escarti et al., 2018), and the U.S. (Hemphill et al., 2015). Many of these initiatives have used the TARE instruments (Escarti et al., 2015; Wright & Craig, 2011) to introduce specific teaching strategies and to provide feedback for improvement. As suggested in previous studies (Gordon et al., 2016; Melo et al., 2020; Wright et al., 2020), our findings strongly support the alignment between the TARE and a broad conceptualization of SEL. Therefore, the TARE may be an effective tool to support and assess SEL implementation as called for by new or existing policy.

This research also has implications for policymakers. Previous research highlights the challenges that teachers face when interpreting new curricula, especially when they have had limited involvement in the curriculum development process (Gray et al., 2012). Research also indicates that teachers find curriculum interpretation and enactment challenging because they are not afforded the space, time, support or resources to critically engage with concepts related to curriculum design and pedagogic innovation (Horrell & Gray, 2018), particularly given the pace at which policy shifts are introduced (Houlihan, 2002; Richards, 2015). Our results offer some evidence to support these claims and, consequently, provide a basis from which future curriculum developments might be considered. As part of the process, policymakers should consider the complex challenges that new curricula present for teachers, conduct a needs assessment to support teachers’ on-going professional learning, consider the allocation of time for reflection, and foster a safe space for pedagogical innovation. Supporting this view, Priestley (2010) suggests that a clearly articulated process for engagement with externally initiated policy is necessary for better engagement and understanding. Embedding these ideas in future curriculum development processes may help teachers engage with new curricula in meaningful and transformative ways.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our research contributes to the literature in several ways, but primarily by highlighting how teachers have responded to recent curricular changes within PE in the Scottish context. It focuses on the ways in which Scottish teachers have grappled with the challenges of curriculum change, a reconceptualization of PE, and greater responsibility for the development of SEL. Given the international movement (Dyson et al., 2020; 2015, 2017; Wright et al., in press) toward integrating SEL in the PE curriculum, future studies should examine the development, interpretation, and implementation of such curricular changes in other countries as well. Researchers should continue identifying common and promising practices and examine linkages between their implementation and pupils’ SEL learning outcomes. Finally, it was beyond the scope of this study to examine learning transfer in
depth, but future studies should make use of existing frameworks (e.g., Jacobs & Wright, 2018) and instruments (Wright et al., 2019) to better understand the transfer process as an important aim of teaching SEL in PE.
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