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A New Frontier: Palestinian English Teachers' Experiences and Needs for Social-Emotional Learning Integration in EFL Classrooms

Abstract: This qualitative case study explores the integration of social-emotional learning in Palestinian English as a foreign language classrooms. Ten Palestinian EFL teachers were interviewed, revealing a universal recognition of SEL's importance but limited implementation due to challenges such as inadequate knowledge, curriculum demands, and lack of professional development. The study identifies a critical need for explicit SEL integration in curricula and teacher education. Findings highlight teachers' eagerness to incorporate SEL, contingent on support and resources. We end by discussing the necessity for comprehensive SEL initiatives in Palestinian education, considering socio-political contexts and the pivotal role of teacher preparedness and resource availability.

Keywords: social-emotional learning, English as a foreign language, K-12 Palestinian education, teacher education

1. Introduction

The importance of social-emotional learning (SEL) as a critical component of students' academic and lifelong success has become increasingly evident (Pentón Herrera and Martínez-Alba 2021). Education systems worldwide, including Canada (Alberta Education 2016), Singapore (Ministry of Education Singapore 2022), and the United States (Maine Department of Education 2023), have acknowledged the criticality of social-emotional development by integrating SEL competencies into their curricular frameworks. The advantages of SEL are multifaceted: it not only enhances students' abilities to understand and manage their emotions but also bolsters academic achievement and promotes positive social behavior and well-being (Durlak et al. 2011; Pentón Herrera 2024). Furthermore, SEL has been linked to long-term benefits such as improved mental health and reduced behavioral problems (Taylor et al. 2017). Given these extensive benefits, the role of teachers becomes crucial: they are the facilitators of SEL, responsible for integrating these skills into the learning experience. Teachers' ability to impart SEL skills such as empathy, self-regulation, and conflict resolution is pivotal in preparing students to navigate the complexities of modern educational environments (Hart et al. 2013; Oberle and Schonert-Reichl 2017).

The current landscape of English language teaching (ELT) research and publications does not consistently highlight SEL, although there are notable exceptions that underscore its value (e.g. Bai et al. 2021; Pentón Herrera 2024). The conversation surrounding SEL is complex and occasionally contentious, with varying degrees of acceptance and implementation across different educational contexts (Roegman et al. 2022). In the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) – the context of this study – the term *SEL* may not be overtly referenced in official documents such as the Palestinian Education Law or the Inclusive Education Policy. Nonetheless, the essence of SEL is interwoven within the K-12[1] curriculum, implicitly present through subjects such as civic and religious education, as well as Arabic language classes. Moreover, Palestinian teachers are integrating SEL competencies through the hidden curriculum, a reflection of their adaptability in the face of systemic oversights (Abdel Razeq 2020). Such integration, while innovative, brings to light the intricate challenges Palestinian teachers face as they strive to foster these essential skills in a landscape marked by complex socio-political dynamics.

In the OPT, the unique challenges of implementing SEL in teaching practices are particularly pronounced. Abdel Razeq (2020) highlights a significant gap: the lack of explicit SEL curricula with clear benchmarks in Palestinian teacher preparation programs. This absence largely stems from limited attention to SEL in educational planning. Additionally, constrained resources and limited support within the Palestinian education community further impede the development of comprehensive SEL initiatives. Teachers, grappling with an already intensive

curriculum, find little time to incorporate professional development workshops about SEL into their busy schedules. Compounding these challenges are limited backing from the Ministry of Education, difficulties in accessing necessary resources, and varying degrees of parental engagement. These factors collectively exacerbate the difficulties in establishing and integrating SEL within key content areas, such as English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Motivated by the existing lacuna of knowledge about SEL in ELT, especially in the context of the OPT, we conducted the present qualitative case study to investigate Palestinian EFL teachers' integration of and needs for SEL integration in their teaching. The following research questions guided this inquiry:

RQ1: What are Palestinian EFL teachers' experiences with integrating SEL in their teaching practices?
RQ2: What specific supports do Palestinian EFL teachers need to effectively integrate SEL into their teaching practices?

2. Theoretical foundations

In this section, we establish the theoretical underpinnings that inform the study's exploration of SEL, particularly within the context of EFL. We begin by elucidating the benefits of SEL for both students and teachers, highlighting how SEL contributes to holistic development and improved educational outcomes. Following this, the review delves into various pedagogical approaches to integrating SEL in educational settings, emphasizing the importance of teacher self-efficacy and specific strategies for SEL implementation. The focus then narrows to examining SEL's impact on EFL learning, discussing how social and emotional competencies enhance language acquisition and communication skills. We end by addressing the challenges and prerequisites for effective SEL integration in schools, acknowledging the practical considerations and support needed for successful implementation.

2.1. Benefits of SEL for students and teachers

The integration of SEL in foreign language acquisition has not been extensively studied, yet existing research underscores its significant impact. Morilla-García (2017) asserts that learning is inherently social and emotional, not merely cognitive, and is essential to the process of acquiring a foreign language. Similarly, Pentón Herrera (2020) likens SEL's role in education to that of soil and water for seedlings, nurturing students' growth into healthy and autonomous individuals. His work suggests that SEL transcends academic instruction by fostering holistic well-being, thus enhancing both academic and social achievements (Martínez-Alba and Pentón

Herrera 2023). Further supporting this view, Hashemi and Ghanizadeh (2011) demonstrate that SEL positively influences both the teaching process and students' academic performance, promoting the development of well-rounded, empathetic individuals who contribute positively to their broader communities. Lastly, Grissom and Kelchner (2020, 17), exploring the importance of hope and SEL, suggest that SEL encourages English learners (ELs) "when faced with difficulties or perceived barriers to goal attainment," and it also seems to have beneficial effects on teachers and other school staff as well.

Studies show that teachers equipped with SEL competencies are more likely to exhibit higher levels of job satisfaction, reduced feelings of burnout, and an enhanced capacity to build positive relationships with students and colleagues (Sandilos et al. 2023). For instance, Collie et al. (2012) found that teachers' SEL is intricately linked to their professional well-being and their ability to create a classroom environment conducive to learning. Moreover, Schonert-Reichl (2017) highlights that when teachers practice SEL, they report improved classroom management skills and more positive feelings toward teaching, which in turn contributes to better student outcomes. The ripple effects of SEL in the educational setting are evident as it promotes a climate of respect and understanding, essential for both student engagement and staff collaboration (Brackett et al. 2011). These findings underscore the critical importance of integrating SEL not just in curricula for students but also in professional development for teachers, ensuring a holistic approach to education that values emotional well-being alongside academic achievement.

2.2. Pedagogical approaches to SEL integration

Building upon the established benefits of SEL for both students and teachers, it is crucial to explore how SEL can be effectively integrated into pedagogical practices. A concept that seems to be central in empowering teachers to implement SEL successfully is self-efficacy, as delineated by Bandura (1997), which posits that an individual's belief in their capabilities is critical to achieving success (Holmes 2021). Moafian and Ghanizadeh (2009) further argue that SEL's enhancement of teacher self-efficacy reverberates through their teaching practices, influencing students' motivation, attitudes, behaviors, academic success, and overall social environments. This empowered teaching stance enables teachers to facilitate responsible decision-making in students – a core component of SEL – which directly affects learners' behaviors and social interactions. Studies by Ogundokun and Adeyemo (2010), Shao et al. (2013), and Taheri et al. (2019) demonstrate that SEL proficiency aids students in regulating emotions and managing anxiety within EFL contexts, an essential skill for overcoming stressful learning scenarios and achieving higher language proficiency.

In terms of specific pedagogical strategies, SEL integration can be categorized broadly into two approaches: modifying classroom environments and individual

skill development (Rimm-Kaufman and Hulleman 2015). The Responsive Classroom (RC) approach exemplifies the former, and it is structured around four key domains to enhance SEL. The first domain emphasizes creating student-centered classrooms that are not only engaging but also enjoyable and intellectually stimulating. This ensures that learning experiences are interesting and challenge students appropriately. The second domain focuses on fostering a safe and inclusive environment. In such spaces, every student is recognized as an integral member of the class, contributing to a strong sense of belonging and community. The third domain centers on effective classroom management, advocating for a calm and orderly atmosphere that nurtures students' independent learning and fosters a sense of personal responsibility. Lastly, the fourth domain involves adopting a teaching approach that is responsive to the developmental needs of students. This approach tailors teaching and disciplinary practices to align with students' cognitive, physical, social, and emotional growth stages, ensuring a holistic educational experience (Responsive Classroom 2017).

Conversely, approaches such as Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) emphasize explicit individual SEL skill instruction, with regular, focused lessons on emotional awareness, self-regulation, and relationship skills (Bierman et al. 2010). In PATHS, teachers are equipped to deliver focused lessons, typically two to three times a week, which are integrated into daily classroom activities. These lessons concentrate on developing key SEL skills: recognizing and managing one's emotions, adapting to change, empathizing with others, cultivating self-motivation, and resolving interpersonal conflicts (Bierman et al. 2010). In this study, we have utilized both the individualized approach and the broader environmental strategies, as outlined in the Responsive Classroom model, to analyze how Palestinian teachers integrate SEL into their pedagogical practices. This dual approach aligns with the findings of Rimm-Kaufman and Hulleman (2015), who have demonstrated the effectiveness of such comprehensive SEL strategies.

2.3. SEL and EFL

Within the realm of EFL, the integration of SEL emerges as a critical factor not only in advancing teacher effectiveness but also in significantly enriching student learning experiences. This integration has been observed to particularly enhance teachers' self-motivation, a pivotal aspect that correlates with increased student motivation in language acquisition (Pourbahram and Hajizadeh 2018). Moreover, SEL's role extends to facilitating interaction among language learners, thereby harnessing their cognitive and affective skills to effectively enhance their competence in the target language (Melani et al. 2020). Such interactive processes are instrumental for language acquisition, as students exhibiting positive attitudes and emotions are more likely to acquire language skills more readily, reaching higher levels of language proficiency (Saito et al. 2018). Furthermore, this proficiency in language skills

is closely linked to improved communication capabilities in the target language. Empirical studies have shown that students who receive education in SEL skills not only enhance their speaking abilities but also become more proficient listeners, thereby significantly improving their overall communicative competencies in the language they are learning (Ebrahimi, Khoshsima and Zare-Behtash 2018; Huang 2022; Oz 2015; Vandergrift 2007).

The positive influence of SEL integration in EFL instruction is not limited to oral communication skills: it notably extends to reading and writing competencies. Students with heightened emotional intelligence and the capacity to manage stress exhibit significantly higher levels of writing proficiency. This proficiency is characterized by their ability to articulate thoughts coherently, manage their stress during writing tasks, and persistently work through language learning challenges, all of which contribute to achieving higher writing skills (Abdolrezapour 2013; Agesty et al. 2021; Ebrahimi, Khoshsima, Zare-Behtash et al. 2018; Genç et al. 2016). Similarly, the integration of SEL into reading instruction within the EFL context has been shown to enhance students' reading comprehension abilities. This integration facilitates a deeper understanding of texts, improves comprehension skills, and encourages a more engaged reading process, contributing to an overall enhancement of students' reading skills (Izadi and Nowrouzi 2016; Karbalaei and Sanati 2015). These findings collectively underscore the multifaceted impact of SEL on language learning, affirming its role in improving not just communicative competence but also the mastery of specific language skills like reading and writing.

2.4. Challenges and prerequisites for effective SEL integration in schools

K-12 teachers widely acknowledge the crucial role of SEL in enhancing the educational landscape and fostering holistic child development. However, the translation of this awareness into action often encounters obstacles, primarily due to the hesitation in embedding SEL into the school curriculum. This reluctance stems from various factors, such as stringent time constraints and the already intensive nature of existing curricular demands (Barry et al. 2017; Brackett et al. 2012). Additionally, the successful integration of SEL, whether as a teacher-initiated practice or a woven aspect of the curriculum, requires comprehensive teacher preparation. This preparation should not only cover the theoretical underpinnings of SEL but also provide practical strategies for integrating these competencies into daily teaching practices. As Donahue-Keegan et al. (2019) highlight, equipping teachers with these skills is essential for the effective application of SEL principles, ensuring that its integration is both meaningful and impactful.

In implementing SEL strategies or incorporating them into the existing curricula, teachers face a myriad of challenges. Kendziora and Yoder (2016) observe that while there is a general willingness among teachers to integrate SEL into their

teaching, they often lack the necessary preparation and support. Teacher education and professional development should encompass detailed SEL methodologies, enabling teachers to seamlessly blend SEL skills into their pedagogical practices. Moreover, the integration of SEL into schools is not merely a matter of teacher preparedness; it also demands conducive conditions, as outlined by Jones et al. (2018). These conditions include adapting the curriculum to include SEL components, allocating sufficient time for SEL activities, providing ongoing staff support, and ensuring targeted education for teachers. Meeting these prerequisites is paramount for the successful integration of SEL, creating an environment where both teachers and students can fully benefit from the enriching experiences that SEL offers.

3. Methodology

This qualitative case study was conducted during the first semester of the 2023–2024 school year (February to July 2023). A purposeful sampling of Palestinian EFL teachers was used to ensure participants possessed rich, relevant insights into the integration and impact of SEL in their teaching practices. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic data analysis qualitative method. In reporting the findings, we used pseudonyms to maintain participant confidentiality. The ten participants (N=10) were male (N=2) and female (N=8) EFL teachers who were teaching at different K-12 schools. In the subsections below, we offer more details about the study.

3.1. Participants

Ten Palestinian EFL teachers volunteered to participate in the study. All participants are either current BAs in English language and literature or MAs in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) students at a higher education institution. Table 1 shows demographic information about all participants, including age, gender, qualifications, years of experience, and grade levels taught.

Table 1. Participants characteristic

Participants	Gender	Age	Qualifications	Years of Experience	Grades Taught
Kinda	Female	39	BA in English language and literature	15 years	7th – 12th grades
Ra'ed	Male	29	BA in English language and literature	6 years	9th – 12th grades
Rasha	Female	26	MA in Teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL)	2 years	4th – 6th grades

Table 1. (continued)

Hasan	Male	35	MA in Teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL)	11 years	10th –12th grades
Areej	Female	39	BA in English language and literature	12 years	7th –9th grades
Abeer	Female	40	BA in English language and literature	14 years	6th–8th grades
Jana	Female	32	BA in English language and literature	7 years	7th grade
Hala	Female	33	MA in Teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL)	11 years	11th –12th grades
Samar	Female	33	BA in English language and literature	10 years	7th –9th grades
Israa'	Female	26	BA in English language and literature	4 years	1st– 4th grades

3.2. Data collection

In this qualitative case study, we utilized semi-structured interviews as our primary data collection tool, aligning with the methodological approaches recommended for in-depth, qualitative inquiry (Patton 2015). Each interview, lasting approximately 20 to 30 minutes, was conducted with the consent of the interviewees and audio-recorded to ensure accuracy in data capture. Immediate transcription of each interview facilitated a prompt and thorough analysis. The interview protocol comprised 17 questions, meticulously designed to explore Palestinian EFL teachers' integration of SEL in their teaching practices, as well as their needs for effectively incorporating SEL into English lessons and other school activities.

To enhance the validity of our interview questions, we consulted three faculty members with extensive expertise in educational research, a practice that aligns with recommendations for ensuring content validity in qualitative research (Creswell and Creswell 2022). Their feedback led to adjustments in question-wording, the addition of new questions, and the removal of items deemed irrelevant, ensuring alignment with our research questions and study objectives. In ensuring instrument reliability and respondent validity, we adhered to member-checking procedures by revisiting each interview transcript with the respective participants, allowing them to clarify or amend responses as needed (Birt et al. 2016). Additionally, to achieve interrater reliability, a colleague from the Faculty of Education, well-versed in qualitative methods, independently analyzed a subset of the interviews. This type of external collaboration, recommended by Nowell et al. (2017), involved comparing codes and themes from three randomly selected interviews, ensuring consistency in our interpretive processes.

3.3. Data analysis

Data were meticulously analyzed utilizing Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis method, a widely recognized approach for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data (Nowell et al. 2017). This rigorous process allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the participants' perspectives regarding the study's subject matter. In phase 1, our initial task involved immersing ourselves in the data. This was achieved through repeated readings of the transcriptions, ensuring thorough familiarity with the depth and breadth of the content (Braun and Clarke 2006). This phase involved active engagement with the data, where we annotated initial ideas, identified potential patterns, and noted striking elements that warranted further exploration. Phase 2 involved the systematic coding of the data. During this process, we utilized different color highlighters to categorize and segment the data into initial codes, a technique that facilitated the organization and retrieval of relevant data segments for further analysis (Saldaña 2021). In phase 3, we shifted our focus to theme development. This entailed collating codes into potential themes, grouping related codes under tentative labels, and beginning to form a thematic 'map' of the analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Phase 4 required us to review these initial themes, which involved refining the themes to ensure they accurately represented the coded data and the overall dataset – an iterative process that entailed revisiting the coded data extracts and the entire data set (Braun and Clarke 2006). In phase 5, we engaged in defining and naming the themes, a process that demanded a precise and concise articulation of what each theme represented and how it contributed to the broader narrative of the research (Braun and Clarke 2006). Finally, in phase 6, we arrived at the stage of producing the report. Here, we selected compelling extract examples, finalized the analysis of selected themes, and wove the thematic analysis into the narrative of the findings, ensuring a coherent and meaningful interpretation that aligned closely with the research questions (Braun and Clarke 2006). This thorough and methodical approach to thematic analysis was instrumental in unpacking the complex insights shared by the participants, leading to nuanced and well-grounded findings that are presented in the subsequent section.

4. Findings

4.1. RQ 1: What are Palestinian EFL teachers' experiences with integrating SEL in their teaching practices?

In answering the first research question, four themes emerged: (1) SEL skills are critical for students' success and well-being, (2) teacher hesitation to integrate

SEL, (3) diverse approaches to integrating SEL, and (4) hindrances to SEL integration. In the sub-sections, we provide more details about these themes.

4.1.1. Main themes for RQ1

Theme 1: SEL skills are critical for students' success and well-being

All participants emphasized the critical need and significance of SEL skills for their students. Unanimously (N=10), they underscored the positive effects of SEL skills on their students. They reported that such skills assist their students in communication, managing feelings, resolving conflicts, and handling difficulties. In Rasha's words, "these [SEL] skills are so important. They help our students to be able to deal with daily life challenges, to socialize respectfully and successfully, and to support oneself and others." Furthermore, some of the participants (N=6) emphasized the importance of SEL skills for students' academics and careers in the future. For instance, Hala stated: "I think these skills are very important because learners have to have these skills in order to be successful in their academic and career life."

Throughout the data analysis, it became evident that participants believed SEL skills are necessary to develop and acquire because they affect students' lives at school and beyond. Further, participants agreed that SEL skills influence students' motivation, creativity, self-confidence, and relationships. Israa' underscored this point when she stated:

> [t]hey [SEL skills] are very vital at schools and outside schools. They are important because they motivate both teachers and students to work harder. The teacher will be more creative, and the students will be motivated to learn. In addition, the confidence of both teachers and students affects the classroom environment. SEL skills affect the relationship between the students themselves and the teachers and between the teachers and the students.

Kinda also emphasized the need for SEL skills by asserting:

> [o]f course, all our students need SEL skills. Since they are the key to successful interaction, socializing, and success. We do not live in isolation. We live as one community. You need to socialize, interact, manage your feelings, and know when to speak, when to stay silent, when you are enraged, or when the other person you are talking to is enraged.

Areej focused on the effect of SEL skills on students' learning and classroom environment. She added:

I believe that students need SEL skills. If I start the lesson by asking *how are you? how do you feel?* They feel well, inspired, and motivated. These skills help them enjoy the lesson. They will like the teacher. It helps them break any fear they have. They would enjoy school and learning. It is a winning situation to use these skills.

Theme 2: Teacher hesitation to integrate SEL

The majority of the participants (N=8) reported that they are aware of SEL, even if they do not receive explicit instruction about it in their teacher preparation program. For instance, Abeer stated: "Yes, I am aware of these important skills." Ra'ed, another participant, asserted: "Yes, I am aware of both social and emotional skills in education." However, being aware of SEL skills did not seem to affect teachers' willingness to integrate them into their teaching. For example, Kinda confessed: "in our school, let me say that 90% of the teachers are aware of these skills, but not all integrate SEL skills in their classrooms." Participants confessed that the lack of SEL skills integration has a visible effect on students' interactions, behavior, classroom environment, and the overall teaching and learning process, as stated by Jana:

> … from a class of twenty-five students, five may exhibit some SEL skills in their behavior. But the majority cannot socialize and interact in appropriate ways. For instance, during interactions, sometimes the respect for others is zero. They lack the ability to show respect for each other and their teachers. This is a serious communication problem. Also, they are unable to focus during lessons. Maybe because of the harsh conditions under which they live and family issues … Students have many emotions, and they lack self-control. All of this affects their learning and interactions in school and outside school.

In spite of being aware of SEL skills and the need to integrate them, the majority (N=8) of the participants are reluctant to integrate SEL skills into their teaching practices. The data showed that this hesitation was attributed to various reasons. Above all is teachers' lack of adequate knowledge of SEL skills and how to integrate them into their English lessons. A second reason is teachers' concern that they will not be able to complete the demanding English textbooks. Further, the lack of school leadership support and resources discourages teachers from integrating SEL in their classes. Ra'ed's statement best encapsulates this particular finding:

> I would like very much to integrate SEL skills in my teaching. But I do not have time for that. The school puts a lot of pressure on us to complete the units in the books. Three English classes a week are not even enough to finish the books. We need the Ministry of Education's support; we need resources and training on this important issue.

Theme 3: Diverse approaches to integrating SEL

Most of the participants (N=7) indicated that they try to integrate SEL skills in their English lessons as much as they can. Homeroom teachers[2], in particular, try to do so by using various strategies. For instance, one of the participants, Samar, attempted to relate English reading passages that emphasize SEL values and skills to students' lives using group activities. In her own words,

> … homeroom teachers focus more on these skills [SEL skills], but as an English teacher, whenever I have any lesson, I ask my students to relate what they are learning in our class to what they are learning in their own lives. I depend so much on group work strategy, in which students sit in groups where each one has a specific role. I encourage and advise students to show empathy, respect each other, and accept different opinions. I also evaluate their performance based on these values and skills.

Another participant, in addition to the group work strategy, shared that they use pair work and problem-solving strategies to introduce SEL skills. As explained by Rasha,

> [w]e create problem-solving activities where students become aware of the problem and think of ways to solve the problem through cooperation and interaction. I allow my students to work in pairs or in groups. In this way, I teach them to listen to others, to respect others' opinions, to help each other, and to manage their time.

Other teachers chose reading passages and stories that focus on SEL skills such as self-awareness, managing emotions, responding to others' emotions, motivating oneself, and maintaining positive relationships. As expressed by Jana, "I bring passages about real life, about the values like respect, motivation, relationships, and awareness of one's and others' emotions."

Theme 4: Hindrances to SEL integration

All participants (N=10) supported the integration of SEL skills; however, obstacles prevented them from integrating SEL into their teaching practices. One of the main impediments to SEL integration is the lack of professional development. Abeer stated: "Not all teachers are aware of social-emotional learning. Some of them don't know what this term means due to a lack of workshops and training on this significant topic." Rasha echoed Abeer's point that more professional development is needed to assist teachers' integration of SEL skills into their lessons: "I believe that all teachers integrate these skills without knowing the term 'social-emotional learning.' But they still need more training on the issue and guidance on how to integrate such skills into their English classes effectively."

Another obstacle to integrating SEL is connected to curricular constraints and administrative expectations imposed on teachers every year. Participants confessed that they do not have sufficient time to modify the teaching materials they are required to use (i.e. Palestinian textbooks) to include SEL. It is worth noting that Palestinian English teachers are under heavy pressure to complete and cover all the information from the textbooks within a specific time each year. As noted by Kinda, "not all teachers integrate social-emotional learning skills in their lessons. This is because of time and curriculum challenges. We are required to finish the curriculum within a limited time period." Israa' further explains that

> [w]e are aware of these skills, but we have textbooks to finish. So we have to ignore these skills. We do not have time to integrate them into our lessons. We are required to finish all the units in the textbooks. There are many units to teach. We are held accountable if we do not finish them on time.

4.2. RQ2: What specific supports do Palestinian EFL teachers need to effectively integrate SEL into their teaching practices?

In answering the second research question, two themes emerged: (1) professional development and resources on SEL integration, and (2) challenges and constraints in SEL integration. In the sub-sections, we provide more details about these themes.

4.2.1. Main themes for RQ2

Theme 1: Professional development and resources on SEL integration

All participants (N=10) unanimously expressed dissatisfaction with their current level of knowledge and integration of SEL skills in their English classes, describing it as "incomplete" and "mediocre." They emphasized the critical importance of SEL skills for their students' success in both school and life. To effectively integrate SEL skills into their English classes, participants stressed the need for professional development opportunities that would enhance their knowledge, awareness, and practical application of SEL. Israa' articulated this need:

> [w]e need training workshops and courses on how to integrate SEL skills. We need training on how to develop SEL skills as teachers and how to help our students develop and apply them in their real lives. Many of us are aware of some of the SEL skills, but we need to learn about all of the SEL areas and how to develop them in ourselves and our students.

Other participants echoed Israa''s sentiments. For instance, Abeer emphasized, "we need more workshops that focus on the techniques that help us integrate and

apply SEL skills in our English classes." Similarly, Jana acknowledging her status as a new teacher lacking SEL expertise, stated, "as a new teacher who lacks these skills, I need to receive some training on this topic. I do not know how to integrate SEL by myself."

In addition to professional development opportunities, all participants (N=10) recognized the necessity for resources to support the implementation of SEL, not only within the English curriculum but across all subjects. Ra'ed explained:

> [w]e need resources on social-emotional learning skills, such as books, and financial support, in order to fund activities on social-emotional learning skills and values. They [SEL skills] are essential and critical for our students. Further, Palestinian students' needs are enormous and different as far as social-emotional learning is concerned because of our current socio-political situation.

Furthermore, some participants (N=6) stressed the importance of including specific courses on SEL integration within all teacher preparation programs, including those for EFL teachers. They expressed a desire for professional development opportunities covering various SEL frameworks, competencies, and activities to better understand how to incorporate them explicitly and implicitly into their lessons. Ra'ed elaborated on this by stating: "learning about different SEL frameworks and competencies allows a better understanding of each one of them. It helps teachers to focus on each one separately in all subjects, not only English." For further insights into the distinctions among SEL frameworks, competencies, and activities, refer to Pentón Herrera and Darragh (2024).

Theme 2: Challenges and constraints in SEL integration

All participants (N=10) voiced significant concerns regarding the time constraints associated with completing the English textbooks within the allocated timeframe. They emphasized that the limited number of English class periods per week (typically three) is insufficient to adequately cover the content within each unit. This time deficiency poses a formidable challenge to teachers' endeavors to seamlessly incorporate SEL skills into their teaching practices. Moreover, participants expressed a strong desire for SEL skills to be explicitly integrated into the English textbooks, as highlighted by Hala's statement:

> [m]ost of the teachers are worried about completing the English textbooks; that's our primary focus and concern. They [The Ministry of Education] need to reduce the amount of the material that we teach. We also need the Ministry of Education to formally integrate SEL skills into the English textbooks and other school activities. It is not enough to talk about these skills indirectly. They have to be integrated into the curriculum and textbooks explicitly and not only implicitly.

Participants also underscored the importance of having additional time and an increased number of classes each week to effectively navigate the demanding English textbooks and successfully integrate SEL skills into their lessons. Hasan emphasized this need, stating:

> I think it is important for the Ministry of Education to increase the number of English classes during the week to be able to cover the material in the English textbooks and integrate SEL skills successfully. This will assist us in completing the English textbooks according to the Ministry of Education requirements.

Hasan stressed the necessity for more time, additional classes per week, and less crowded classrooms to adequately cover the content within the English textbooks and seamlessly integrate SEL skills in a manner that maximizes their benefit for students. He articulated: "[w]e need more English classes, more space, more time, and less crowded classrooms."

All participants (N=10) expressed a keen interest in being provided with the opportunity, time, and resources to pilot the integration of SEL skills into the English curriculum. This stems from their observations that some school principals remain unconvinced about the necessity of teacher professional development on SEL, procuring resources for SEL, and incorporating SEL skills into the school's overall curriculum. Additionally, participants aspire to receive support and the chance to conduct action research studies to demonstrate the tangible benefits and effectiveness of SEL skills on students. Areej articulated this sentiment by stating:

> [to convince school principals], I would start by showing them the need for SEL integration. I could conduct an action research study to show the effects of SEL integration on students. This might convince school principals of the need for training and purchasing resources on SEL instruction and integration.

5. Discussion and final thoughts

The present qualitative case study delved into the integration of SEL among Palestinian EFL teachers and examined their specific needs in this context. Regarding the first research question, our findings underscore unanimous agreement among teachers regarding the paramount importance of SEL skills for both teachers and students alike. However, several challenges, including time constraints, resource limitations, teachers' inadequate knowledge about SEL, lack of preparation and professional development opportunities, and the demands of the curriculum and instructional requirements, resulted in a restricted and surface-level integration of SEL within their English classes. These outcomes align with previous research by Brackett et al. (2012) and Barry et al. (2017), which highlighted the impediments

posed by time constraints and rigorous curricula in the effective integration of SEL skills into teaching practices.

Turning to the second research question, the study's outcomes underscore a significant demand among Palestinian EFL teachers for time, resources, professional development, and support to successfully, appropriately, and effectively integrate SEL into their classrooms. These findings align with prior research, such as the work of Donahue-Keegan et al. (2019), which emphasized that the effective integration of SEL components into teachers' daily instructional practices necessitates intensive professional development on SEL. Despite the challenges they face, participants in our study demonstrated eagerness, willingness, and enthusiasm to incorporate SEL skills into both instructional and non-instructional activities within their schools, provided they had access to the necessary time, professional development opportunities, and support from school leadership. These findings resonate with Schonert-Reich's (2017) research, which highlighted that teachers are eager to integrate SEL into their content instruction, but this willingness is contingent upon receiving the appropriate training and support.

The findings from this inquiry hold significant implications for teachers and educational stakeholders, such as students, parents, teachers, school leaders, education authorities, and policymakers within Ministries of Education in the Palestinian context as well as for educational contexts worldwide. It is imperative for decision-makers at the Palestinian Ministry of Education to contemplate the development of a comprehensive SEL initiative to encompass all K-12 schools in OPT. Alternatively, an option worth considering is the integration of SEL competencies in the existing English curriculum and other content areas. However, such an approach would necessitate a thorough overhaul of the English textbooks in Palestinian schools, with a particular focus on both the depth and content of SEL integration. Furthermore, achieving successful, meaningful, and effective integration and implementation of SEL requires the essential step of providing professional development in SEL skills to both teachers and school leaders, equipping them with the necessary knowledge and delivery techniques.

The effective implementation of SEL practices hinges on a collective commitment and a strong belief in its necessity and efficacy. Nevertheless, some Palestinian teachers, including school leaders, and Ministry officials, harbor reservations about SEL's feasibility. They argue that the limitations in available resources and time pose significant challenges to developing comprehensive SEL integration into content areas such as English. Despite these challenges and misunderstandings of SEL, it is prudent to invest the effort and resources required to pilot SEL initiatives in select schools and conduct rigorous action research to evaluate its effectiveness, as suggested by Areej. Alternatively, another viable approach is the integration of SEL principles across all content areas, a strategy requiring fewer resources and planning. Given the challenging social, economic, and political circumstances in which Palestinian students live and attend school,

the development and integration of SEL initiatives into the school curriculum emerges as a critical need in the Palestinian context.

There is a substantial body of compelling evidence underscoring the urgent necessity for implementing SEL initiatives within the Palestinian K-12 education system. Numerous research studies have illuminated the challenging circumstances faced by Palestinian children, who are frequently exposed to traumatic experiences (Abdel Razeq 2023). For instance, Abualkibash's research in 2020 revealed that all 537 student participants in his study suffered from chronic trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Moreover, a significant proportion of Palestinian students grapple with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) due to their extensive exposure to trauma and ACEs. Studies such as by Thabet and Vostanis (2015) have established a clear link between exposure to traumatic events and the development of emotional problems, including depression, anxiety, and stress. The absence of support at the family, community, and school levels is anticipated to exacerbate these challenges. To mitigate and ultimately eliminate the profound impact of trauma on Palestinian children, interventions and supportive practices like SEL assume paramount significance. The responsibility for developing and implementing such SEL initiatives lies not only with the Palestinian Ministry of Education but also extends to the Ministry of Health, charitable non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating within the OPT, such as Save the Children, as well as parents and community centers, including churches and mosques. Collaborative efforts across these sectors are imperative to address the multifaceted needs of Palestinian students and provide them with the necessary support and resources for healing and resilience.

The findings related to the first research question aimed to uncover Palestinian EFL teachers' experiences with integrating SEL into their teaching practices. As outlined in the theoretical foundations, these teachers' SEL pedagogical approaches primarily fell into two overarching categories: the creation of SEL-enriched classroom environments and the provision of individualized counseling focused on addressing students' specific needs. The study illuminated Palestinian EFL teachers' earnest efforts to incorporate SEL skills into their English classes, notwithstanding the formidable challenges they encountered. The limited extent of SEL integration and the employment of less-than-optimal strategies by these teachers can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, Palestinian EFL teachers grapple with the daunting task of delivering a comprehensive English curriculum within stringent timelines, leaving little room for in-depth SEL integration. Secondly, it is crucial to acknowledge that these teachers have not received formal education on SEL or its integration into their instructional practices. This lack of teacher education underscores the need for targeted professional development opportunities in SEL for teachers.

Furthermore, the dearth of genuine awareness and support from educational administrators not only discourages teachers from pursuing SEL integration

but also impedes the effective and thorough implementation of such skills in the classroom setting. This points to the critical role of school leadership and administrative support in fostering SEL integration. Finally, the observed results may also be linked to a lack of awareness and a robust belief in the effectiveness of SEL initiatives among Palestinian teachers. This could be attributed to the relatively recent introduction of SEL in schools and a predominant emphasis on academic pursuits within the Palestinian educational landscape. As a consequence, the responsibility for nurturing SEL skills has often been left to parents, religious instructors, and community centers like mosques, churches, and sports clubs. In light of these multifaceted challenges, the study highlights the imperative of providing comprehensive teacher education, awareness-building initiatives, and administrative support to enable Palestinian English teachers to engage in more effective and meaningful SEL integration within their classrooms.

Some participants had not heard of the term 'social-emotional learning' before this study. Following an introduction and explanation of SEL during the interviews, a notable transformation occurred among these participants. They discovered that, albeit unknowingly, they had been integrating SEL skills into their English classes, driven by their strong belief in the beneficial effects of these skills on students' well-being. Their integration efforts occurred without a formal grasp of the academic terminology used to describe SEL components and various strands. This realization helps explain their unanimous agreement on the critical importance of the skills emphasized by SEL instruction. This profound conviction in the value of SEL likely underpins their expressed desire for professional development, resources, and dedicated time. The lack of available resources for professional development can be partially attributed to the Ministry of Education's financial constraints, as it grapples with meeting teachers' salaries. Moreover, the strong emphasis on traditional academic subjects, coupled with occasional, indirect introduction of SEL skills in other areas like civic and religious courses, could help elucidate the lack of dedicated time for the integration of SEL skills into subject-specific contexts or the establishment of separate SEL initiatives within schools, especially for individual and group counseling.

Given the importance of integrating SEL into school curricula and establishing independent SEL practices in the Palestinian educational context, we had hoped to have a larger and more diverse study sample, including teachers, school principals, Ministry of Education officials, and parents. However, due to constraints on the data collection timeframe, it was not possible to include these additional participants. This limitation may have prevented the exploration of diverse perspectives that could have enriched the collected data. Participants' limited awareness of SEL may have also influenced their responses to interview questions. For future research in the Palestinian context and similar settings, researchers interested in SEL could consider conducting studies on the impact of SEL on students' social, emotional, cognitive, and academic achievement. Action research projects led by teachers

and school leaders represent a viable option to explore SEL implementation further. Moreover, it is essential to conduct comprehensive studies involving all stakeholders in K-12 education, including students, parents, teachers, school leaders, and Ministry of Education personnel who hold influential roles in the education system. Additionally, to assess students' and teachers' SEL competencies, researchers and teachers interested in developing SEL initiatives may consider utilizing the Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale (BERS) in accordance with the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework. This approach can help determine the need for SEL practices and provide tangible evidence supporting SEL integration or the establishment of SEL initiatives within the Palestinian education system.

Notes

1   In this manuscript, *K-12* refers to the education system encompassing kindergarten through 12th grade.
2   In the OPT context, the Homeroom teacher oversees classroom organization, collaborates with faculty on student progress, manages record-keeping, and supports students' overall well-being and success.

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