



Research paper

The whole thing needs a shake-up: A mixed method study examining teachers' perspectives on social and emotional skills in schools

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ABSTRACT

This study employed an explanatory sequential design to investigate how teachers' social and emotional capacities and schooling stage impact beliefs about Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). 109 primary and 72 secondary teachers completed surveys assessing emotional traits, comfort, and commitment to SEL. Results showed that relational capacity, the ability to form positive relationships, predicted comfort in promoting positive SEL beliefs, while self-compassion predicted commitment to SEL. Comfort with SEL was higher among primary teachers, indicating a schooling stage effect. Interviews with 8 teachers revealed that identity influenced SEL provision, while beliefs conflicted with job demands, highlighting areas for future research.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is acknowledged as a vital component in education, policy and society (Social) with UK guidance suggesting SEL be taught as part of Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE), circle times, and informal lessons (Clarke et al., 2019). Teachers are expected to nurture the development of both the academic, social and emotional skills necessary for children to flourish as well-adjusted citizens (Binfet & Passmore, 2017; Dusenbury & Weissberg, 2017). Despite the obvious benefits, there are several barriers to SEL in the classroom. Time constraints and curriculum demands have meant social and emotional skills have typically been neglected, particularly in secondary schools (Gedikloglu, 2021). This has been compounded by government prioritisation of attainment and post-covid 19 'catch-up' (Humphrey et al., 2021). To best develop SEL in schools, it is important to understand the experiences, beliefs and aptitudes of teachers as the frontline providers, and their impact on students (Cheung et al., 2018) (see Tables 3 and 4).

1. Teacher attitudes to social and emotional learning

In education, SEL broadly encompasses problem-solving, maintaining positive relationships, self-management, emotional literacy, conflict resolution, responsible decision-making, perspective-taking, emotional regulation and self-awareness. SEL is recognised as vital for mental, physical, social and mental health (Bouffard & Jones, 2012; Clarke et al., 2019; Dobia et al., 2019), and teaching SEL is found to improve student behaviour and student-teacher relationships by promoting a climate of

care and wellbeing in the classroom (Hennessey & Humphrey, 2020). Moreover, the wellbeing of students and teachers is mutually reinforcing, hence fostering a caring classroom climate by teaching SEL is beneficial to both students and teachers (Allen et al., 2018; Binfet & Passmore, 2017).

Classrooms are uniquely emotional environments in which the emotions of students and teachers inevitably interact. Intense emotional labour is typical in teaching roles and can lead to ill health, lack of professional fulfilment and fatigue (Frenzel et al., 2014, pp. 69–82). Acknowledgement of this emotional element could mitigate against such negative consequences and encourage emotional awareness amongst teachers, students and the profession as a whole in preparation for the emotionally demanding task of teaching.

Teachers' beliefs about SEL predict how effectively or ineffectively social and emotional skills are incorporated into the curriculum, whilst the competence of teachers to deliver SEL has a direct impact on the social and emotional development of students. Positive SEL beliefs have been associated with the positive emotional traits of greater self-efficacy and a flexible approach to teaching SEL by weaving it into everyday teaching (Curby et al., 2014). These findings indicate that there is a need for bi-directional consideration of teachers' internal beliefs and emotional traits alongside the taught content of SEL. Since beliefs and emotions are intrinsically involved in teachers' value judgements and decisions, it follows that emotional traits should factor into research into teachers' beliefs (Levin, 2014), yet the relationship between emotional traits and professional teacher behaviours has received little attention

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(Jennings, 2015).

1.1. Potential predictors of social and emotional learning (SEL) beliefs

Teacher's social emotional beliefs may be influenced both by teacher's social emotional capacities, such as their relational capacity and self-compassion, and by structural context, such as students' schooling stage. Each of these factors may play a specific part in forming teacher's beliefs.

1.2. Relational capacity

Relational capacity is the ability to create intimacy or closeness (Corey et al., 2020), to relate, connect and form positive relationships with others (Aspelin et al., 2021; Duffy, 2018). It is important to consider the relational capacity of teachers as a potential influence on their beliefs about SEL, since positive relationships and effective SEL are mutually reinforcing (Greenberg & Jennings, 2009).

Children learn about the world around them through a social process of meaning-making (Vygotsky, 1962). In developing understanding of their world through relationships to others, children also learn about their own and others' emotions (Blair & Diamond, 2008). Learning is social, emotional and relational, and this impacts classroom-based learning. When children experience secure and supportive relationships, they are better able to develop positive intrapersonal skills like emotional intelligence and resilience as well as interpersonal skills such as conflict resolution and collaborative problem solving. Positive repercussions also extend to academic confidence and performance (Delahooke, 2020; Greenberg & Jennings, 2009).

Teachers too need to feel connectedness and compassion in order to experience wellbeing (Delahooke, 2020). Difficulties in relationships between teachers and students can impact on teacher well-being and professional self-belief (Koomen et al., 2011), and a teacher's own social and emotional aptitudes influence their ability to influence positive SEL outcomes in their students (Greenberg & Jennings, 2009). Teachers' own social and emotional wellbeing and relational capacity will determine their ability to successfully develop social and emotional competencies in their students. This gives further cause for paying attention to teachers' self-rated relational capacity. Teaching is socially and emotionally taxing. If teachers neglect their own social and emotional needs this may impede their ability to form positive relationships, their capacity to teach SEL effectively, and negatively influence the academic and behavioural performance of their students (Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

Relational capacity is conceptualised by Corey et al. (2020) in terms of awareness, courage and responsiveness. Awareness deals with behaviours, motives, intentions and desires, and encompasses self-awareness and other-awareness. Self-awareness involves mindful awareness of emotions, reactions and responses while other-awareness relates to the accurate empathetic understanding needed for authentic connection (Corey et al., 2020). Courage involves relational risk-taking through expressions of vulnerability or expressing one's self-identity with authenticity and integrity. Responsiveness is the response to these courageous expressive behaviours, and involves providing validation and empathetic understanding (Corey et al., 2020). Each of these elements of relational capacity influences social and emotional processes, and wellbeing outcomes in the classroom (Allen et al., 2018; Hennessey & Humphrey, 2020).

Self-awareness has been linked to increased aptitude for critical reflection and sensitivity to intrapersonal and interpersonal classroom dynamics while other-awareness facilitates the development of trust, closeness, empathy and kind relating to others (Bercaw et al., 2010). Moreover, self-awareness leads to greater awareness of ones' personal strengths and weaknesses, which encourages resilience and perseverance when challenges arise (Delahooke, 2020). Courage is also necessary for the risk-taking, mistake-making and overcoming challenges which are part of learning inside and outside the classroom. To face,

accept and learn from suffering takes courage, which can be motivated by a desire to form a connection (Gilbert, 2019). These processes entail making oneself vulnerable by risking failure. There is also courage in the vulnerability of authentic self-expression, making oneself known to others and in doing so risking rejection, and, according to France (2019) this vulnerable authenticity is necessary for wellbeing and intimacy in relationships and for effective teaching. Responsiveness is integral to a caring classroom in which students feel that they belong. When teachers respond to their students' needs and concerns with authenticity, their students feel understood and cared for, allowing trusting, positive relationships to develop (Brookfield, 2015; Greenberg & Jennings, 2009).

1.3. Self-compassion

Self-compassion and kindness to others are crucial for encouraging a sense of belonging and lasting wellbeing (Neff, 2009). Compassion and self-compassion may bolster teacher resilience and prevent burnout resulting from excess emotional labour or empathy fatigue (Klimecki & Singer, 2014). Evidence from meta-analyses suggest a positive relationship between self-compassion and wellbeing (Dickhauser et al., 2015) and a negative association between mental disorders and self-compassion (Gumley & MacBeth, 2012).

Teaching is a demanding profession, not least emotionally, and the experience of stress and burnout is commonplace among teachers. Reducing teacher stress would benefit teachers and simultaneously model effective social and emotional skills to students (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Self-compassion was linked to reduced stress and improved coping and resilience during the covid19 pandemic (Chen, 2022), while teacher training in mindfulness has been linked to improved wellbeing, self-awareness and emotional intelligence (Eiroa-Orosa et al., 2017). This has positive knock-on effects on school climate and the social and emotional development of students (Biddle et al., 2009; Eiroa-Orosa et al., 2017).

The research suggests that teachers who are high in self-compassion will have higher social and emotional skills and more positive attitudes to SEL. In contrast, Brotman's qualitative research suggests the relationship may not be so straightforward. Brotman et al.'s (2020) cognitive interviews revealed a disconnect between teachers' awareness of the social and emotional needs of their students, and the fulfilment of their own personal social and emotional needs which were often ignored. A quantitative approach may shed light on the relationship between personal social and emotional attributes, adaptive attitudes towards personal wellbeing, and SEL beliefs among teachers. The shared-humanity aspect of self-compassion connects the intrapersonal and interpersonal, hence measuring the self-compassion of teachers may provide particular insight into this relationship (Neff, 2011).

Positive associations between self-compassion (and constituents of self-compassion, mindfulness and kindness) and attitudes to teaching, suggest self-compassion may prove a useful factor to consider in relation to teachers' beliefs about SEL. Meanwhile, the interconnectedness of emotion, beliefs and behaviour indicates a likely influence of self-compassion and relational capacity on beliefs about SEL (Bailey et al., 2017; Gill & Hardin, 2014; Levin, 2014).

1.4. Schooling stage

Brackett et al. (2012) found that primary school teachers were more comfortable teaching SEL than secondary school teachers, perhaps due to the comparative intimacy of teacher-student relationships in primary settings. Student-teacher relationships tend to become more distanced and formal as they progress from primary to secondary school, while children's perceived kindness of their school diminishes as they progress through school years (Binfet & Gaertner, 2015). Such factors can be detrimental to wellbeing and academic achievement, particularly in children with a deficit in social and emotional competencies (Durlak et al., 2011). Furthermore, teachers of early primary are more likely

than secondary teachers to believe themselves able to foster kindness, or be effective behavioural models for their students (Binfet & Passmore, 2017).

Teacher-student relationships shift in secondary school whereby children go from having one class teacher to multiple subject teachers. However, the student-teacher relationship remains just as important, with upper secondary aged children particularly vulnerable to the negative outcomes of conflictual student-teacher relationships (Ansari et al., 2020). Differences in school structure may impact teachers' self-perceived roles and the opportunities to engage with students. For example, secondary school teachers deal primarily with practical academic issues whilst primary school teachers tend to view emotional guidance as more central to their role, and often bridge the gap between home and school (Tatar, 1998).

1.5. The current study

This study, therefore, seeks to investigate the association of teachers' social and emotional capacities and their beliefs about SEL, and address the research deficit regarding teacher views on SEL particularly in secondary schools (Flint et al., 2012; Hanson-Peterson et al., 2016). Drawing on Binfet's research into teachers' views on kindness in schools, it is proposed that the implications of kindness in schools are far-reaching in their impact on society as a whole.

Through an explanatory sequential design consisting of a quantitative phase followed by a qualitative phase (Clark & Creswell, 2017), this study seeks to understand the role and impact of social and emotional education, kindness and compassion, and relationships in schools; based on the self-reports of teachers. The first study examines the beliefs held by teachers about SEL, with beliefs categorised in terms of comfort in teaching SEL and commitment to teaching SEL. Comfort in teaching SEL measures how comfortable the teacher believes they are in teaching SEL whilst Commitment to teaching SEL measures the teachers' beliefs about how committed they are to teaching SEL. The relationship between these beliefs and teachers' social and emotional capacities is evaluated and any interactions with self-compassion and relational capacity are considered.

The qualitative focus seeks to clarify the quantitative results and shed light on any potential differences between primary school and secondary school teachers. Since issues of emotions and beliefs are notoriously difficult to define and measure (Gerrish, Gilbert, Kirby, & Sherwell, 2022; Gill & Hardin, 2014), it is important that quantitative findings are contextualised and elaborated in relation to the lived experiences of teachers, as expressed via interviews. It is expected that interview findings will echo those found in the first study.

The quantitative phase was therefore driven by the following hypotheses.

H1. Scores on self-compassion and relational capacity will predict teachers' beliefs about SEL.

H2. Comfort with and commitment to SEL teaching will differ significantly between primary and secondary school teachers (Brackett et al., 2012).

2. Quantitative phase

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

One hundred and eighty-one teachers (Female = 162), ranging in age from 23 to 82 ($M = 42.10$, $SD = 10.23$) participated voluntarily after giving informed consent. The full demographic information is reported in Table 1. They were recruited online purposively via Facebook groups, Twitter, Instagram, Teach First, and by snowball sampling via WhatsApp groups. The majority (123) were British (see Table 2).

Table 1
Number of participants as a function of gender and school type.

School	Male	Female	Prefer not to say
Primary	9	99	1
Secondary	7	63	2

Table 2
Average Scores on Teacher SEL Beliefs Commitment (TSEL-CT) and Comfort (TSEL-CM) subscales, Self-compassion (SC) and Relational Capacity (ACRS) scales.

School	N	Commitment	Comfort	Self-Compassion	Relational Capacity
Primary	109	3.86 (0.80)	4.27 (0.61)	3.36 (0.41)	5.74 (0.57)
Secondary	72	3.99 (0.84)	4.05 (0.82)	3.49 (0.43)	5.80 (0.57)

Note: M(SD). Commitment, Comfort and SC are scored out of 5. ACRS is scored out of 7.

Table 3
Correlation Co-efficients for Commitment to SEL, Comfort with SEL, Relational Capacity and Self-Compassion.

Scale	1	2	3	4
1. Commitment	–	–0.10	0.40	0.28 ^b
2. Comfort		–	0.46 ^b	–0.01
3. Relational Capacity			–	0.24 ^a
4. Self-Compassion				–

Note: This table presents Pearson correlation coefficients with pairwise deletion. * $p < 0.05$.

^a $p < .01$.

^b $p < .001$ Commitment and comfort scales measures teachers' beliefs about SEL.

Table 4
Table of themes.

Superordinate Theme	Subtheme Summaries
Making Sense in Grey Areas	<i>We do it because we care</i> Teacher identities of caring and going above and beyond the call of duty. <i>Taking chances</i> SEL implementation as reliant on 'chance' factors. <i>Beliefs and demands</i> Beliefs about what matters conflict with externally imposed demands.
Relationships and Ripple Effects	<i>Getting on, it's the fabric of life</i> Teacher-student relationships in and SE skills in relation to others. <i>Big school and little people</i> SEL as more prominent in early years education, primary and special schools.

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. Teacher social and emotional learning beliefs scale (TSEL; Brackett, 2012)

The TSEL scale consists of three subscales: Culture, comfort and commitment. The Culture subscale refers to institutional culture rather than individual beliefs and so was omitted (Brackett, 2012; Collie et al., 2015). The Comfort subscale (α total sample = 0.84; primary teachers $\alpha = 0.80$; secondary teachers $\alpha = 0.87$), measures teachers' comfort level regarding SEL and consists of 4 items e.g. "I am comfortable providing instruction on social and emotional skills to my students". The Commitment subscale ($\alpha = 0.76$ total sample; primary teachers $\alpha = 0.74$; secondary teachers $\alpha = 0.80$), measures support for, and desire to improve SEL and

consists of 4 items e.g. "I want to improve my ability to teach social and emotional skills to students." Participants were asked to rate items on a scale of 1–5 where 1 = "almost never" and 5 = "almost always".

2.2.2. The awareness, courage and responsiveness scale (ACRS; Corey et al., 2020)

The ACRS (α total sample = 0.92; primary teachers α = 0.92; secondary teachers α = 0.92) measures relational capacity and comprises 24 items rated 1 (never true) to 7 (always true) and measures self-reported probability of performing a range of relational behaviours as indicators of relational capacity. The measure is composed of four primary factors: Self-awareness, 6 items e.g. "I notice how what I feel affects what I do"; Other-awareness, 5 items e.g. "I can anticipate people's wants and needs"; Courage, 6 items e.g. "I am willing to be vulnerable in relationships"; and Responsiveness, 7 items e.g. "I let other people know that I understand how they feel when they are struggling" (Corey et al., 2020).

2.2.3. The self-compassion scale Short Form Neff et al., 2011)

Self-compassion was measured using the Self-compassion Short Form scale (Neff et al., 2011) due to its incorporation of shared humanity, which lends itself to the present study aims of investigating outward-facing beliefs alongside personal SEL skills. While the scale has been criticised by some as a better measure of its negative elements of self-compassion alone (Lopez et al., 2015), Neff (2016) conceptualises self-compassion as a continuous balance between its positive and negative elements and thus maintains that the scale is a valid measure of self-compassion. This is backed by evidence that following self-compassion training, scores on uncompassionate subscales decrease while compassionate subscales increase. The scale consists of 12 items, rated 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always) and measures self-reported self-compassion (α total sample = 0.83; primary teachers α = 0.84; secondary teachers α = 0.82). Half the items are positive and measure self-kindness, mindfulness, and common humanity e.g. "I try to see my failings as part of the human condition". The other half are negative items pertaining to self-judgement, isolation and over-identification e.g. "I am disapproving and judgmental about my own flaws and inadequacies". These items were reverse-scored.

2.3. Procedure

Ethical approval was granted for the first phase of the study. Participants were sent a weblink to a Google form with a briefing and consent form. If they consented, participants provided demographic information on gender, age, type of school, ethnicity and nationality. They were also asked to provide an email address if they were interested in taking part in the follow up qualitative phase. Participants proceeded to complete the three scales and after submitting their responses were automatically sent a debriefing form.

3. Results

All data and analysis code including the qualitative coding process are available here: https://osf.io/3wmhp/?view_only=7961f2a10bc44c36b6c10351fd833774. The research was not preregistered prior to data collection.

3.1. Descriptive statistics

As shown in Table Two, average scores were similar overall, although primary teachers scored higher than secondary teachers in TSEL-CM.

3.2. Preliminary analyses

As can be seen in Table Three, relational capacity and self-compassion were significantly correlated, $r(181) = 0.22$, $p < 0.01$ as

were relational capacity and comfort teaching SEL, $r(181) = 0.46$, $p < 0.001$ while self-compassion and commitment to teaching SEL were significantly correlated, $r(181) = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$.

Preliminary checks of Q-Q plots, skewness and kurtosis for normality, linearity and homogeneity of variance confirmed assumptions were satisfactorily met.

H1: Scores on self-compassion and relational capacity will predict teachers' beliefs about SEL.

To assess **H1**, we fitted a first linear model (estimated using OLS) to predict teachers' comfort teaching SEL with relational capacity and self-compassion. The model explains a statistically significant and moderate proportion of variance, $R^2 = 0.22$, $F(2, 178) = 25.74$, $p < 0.001$, adj. $R^2 = 0.22$. The model's intercept, corresponding to ACR = 0, is at 1.44 (95% CI [0.36, 2.52], $t(178) = 2.64$, $p = 0.009$). As might be expected from the patterns of correlations reported above, within this model the effect of relational capacity is statistically significant and positive, $\beta = 0.60$, 95% CI [0.44, 0.77], $t(178) = 7.17$, $p < 0.001$; Std. $\beta = 0.49$, 95% CI [0.35, 0.62]. On the other hand, the effect of self-compassion is statistically non-significant. We fitted a second linear model (estimated using OLS) to predict commitment with relational capacity and self-compassion. The model explains a statistically significant and weak proportion of variance, $R^2 = 0.08$, $F(2, 178) = 7.82$, $p < 0.001$, adj. $R^2 = 0.07$. As might be expected from the patterns of correlations reported above, the effect of self-compassion was statistically significant and positive, $\beta = 0.56$, 95% CI [0.28, 0.85], $t(178) = 3.92$, $p < 0.001$; Std. $\beta = 0.29$, 95% CI [0.14, 0.44], whilst the effect of relational capacity was statistically non-significant. **H1** was partly upheld since relational capacity predicted comfort beliefs, and self-compassion predicted commitment beliefs.

H2: Comfort with and commitment to teaching SEL will differ significantly between primary and secondary school teachers.

Analyses of Covariance (ANCOVA) were performed to investigate whether scores of comfort with and commitment to teaching SEL differed significantly between primary and secondary teachers, controlling for relational capacity and self-compassion. A one-way ANCOVA with comfort as the dependent variable revealed a statistically significant positive effect of school on comfort with teaching SEL, $F(1, 177) = 5.32$, $p = 0.022$, $\eta^2 = 0.022$. A final one-way ANCOVA with commitment as the dependent variable revealed no significant between-subjects effect, $F(1, 177) = 1.14$, $p = 0.287$, $\eta^2 = 0.005$. **H2** was upheld for comfort with but not commitment to teaching SEL.

4. Discussion

The slight difference between primary and secondary scores in comfort with teaching of SEL (with relational capacity and self-compassion accounted for) can be interpreted with caution and may reflect children's differing between-school-stage needs, developmental stages and relational dynamics with teachers (Richards, 2011). Evidence that social and emotional skills are given far more attention in the younger years, and that teachers perceive themselves as less able to impact student kindness in older years supports this (Binfet & Passmore, 2017). However, the finding that commitment did not differ between school stages indicates commitment to SEL is important to both sets of teachers despite less institutional focus in secondary.

Regression analyses produced two findings of particular interest. The first is that relational capacity (ACRS) had the greatest predictive influence on teachers' beliefs about their comfort with teaching social and emotional learning. This suggests that the relational capacity of teachers has a bearing on the level of comfort they feel with teaching SEL. The second finding, that self-compassion was positively related to commitment to teach SEL is consistent with the notion that self-compassion is a protective factor for wellbeing. Self-compassion encourages healthy self-acceptance and bounded professional commitment, and guards against the tendency in teachers to sacrifice the personal for the sake of professional duty (Limone et al., 2023). Armed with self-compassion,

teachers feel more able to commit without fear of risking burnout.

Successful SEL in students is encouraged by self-awareness in teachers, and teachers' ability to foster supportive relationships with students. Despite copious evidence which links teacher-student relationships to positive social, emotional, and academic outcomes (Greenberg & Jennings, 2009; Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004; Schonert-Reichl, 2017), the association between relational capacity and teachers' beliefs about social and emotional learning (TSEL) was weaker than expected. The finding that relational capacity best predicts comfort with teaching SEL could indicate that relational capacity skills are more related to comfort in teaching SEL than being committed to teaching SEL. It is possible that relational capacity may better predict an updated and refined scale of teacher's comfort in teaching SEL, and highlights a useful area for future research.

5. Qualitative phase

Drawing on the interviews, this phase hoped to illuminate findings of Study One with the following research questions.

1. How do teachers feel about the current state of social and emotional teaching and learning?
2. What are teachers' perceptions of how knowledge and practices around SEL are created and sustained?
3. How do relationships and self-compassion relate to teachers' beliefs about SEL?
4. What are teachers' perceptions of differences between primary and secondary schools, and in particular which may impact SEL?

6. Method

6.1. Participants

Eight teachers participated in semi-structured interviews. Participants were sampled purposively from a pool of participants who had given their email address in the study's quantitative phase and agreed to be contacted about a further study. All participation was voluntary and all participants lived and worked in schools in the UK.

6.2. Materials

The interview schedule consisted of 9 open-ended questions with several prompts and sub-questions, and was developed for the unique purposes of the study (e.g. *What does kindness mean to you?*). The questions investigated teachers' subjective perceptions of the importance of social and emotional skills in schools. Interview transcription was assisted by *Otter.ai* transcription software. Interviews were conducted and recorded using *Zoom* on a *MacBook Air* (2013) laptop. *Quirkos Web* software was used as an organisational tool in the coding process during data analysis.

6.3. Procedure

Participants who had expressed an interest in the study in phase one were emailed the study briefing. Of the ten who replied, eight were selected aiming for a balance of primary and secondary school teachers with a mix of ages and experience. Consent forms were emailed to participants, who were asked to read, sign and return the form by email prior to interviews. Interviews took place over *Zoom* and lasted 45–65 min. As per semi-structured interview protocol (Adams, 2015), the interview script served to structure and direct conversation, with slight adaptations made to clarify answers or allow for further detail if deemed appropriate. Participants were thanked and debriefed by email after interview.

6.4. Methodological approach

Semi-structured interviews facilitated the fluid conversation conducive to deep investigation of experiences, thoughts and emotions. This was aided by the use of open questions and prompts which allowed tangents to be followed where beneficial to the research aims (Adams, 2015). All interviews were conducted by the first author. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021) enabled multi-layered nuanced accounts of individual experiences and semantic and latent patterns of meanings to be established. RTA gives room for interpretive analysis, and recognises and emphasises the self in the process of meaning-making in the process of data analysis. This was an important consideration for the present study due to the first author's history as a teacher. Critical realism informs the present study's epistemology, which considers learning as a sociocultural and socioemotional process (Cromby & Nightingale, 2002), and provides a flexible and expansive lens through which to consider qualitative data in the view of previously collected quantitative data (McEvoy & Richards, 2006).

6.5. Ethics

Ethical approval was sought before conducting the interview. In addition, ethics were upheld in all stages of the design and implementation of the study. Interview questions touched on topics that may have been sensitive or difficult for participants. To this end, questions were carefully constructed to garner personal, meaningful responses while avoiding harm or upset. Participant wellbeing and safety was prioritised. Prior to taking part and consenting participants were made aware of what the study would involve, how their interviews would be used, and what was being asked of them. Pseudonyms were used to protect anonymity and any identifying features were omitted from transcripts. Confidentiality was maintained via secure storage of data. Participants were told of their right to withdraw. Ethics of representation were considered during data analysis and interpretation to shed light on issues raised by who was not being represented, and why, and avoid misrepresentation (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

6.6. Data analysis

Data analysis took a flexible, deductive approach in keeping with an epistemological grounding in critical realism (Fletcher, 2017). However, early familiarisation with the data was more inductive and expansive, allowing for subjectivity and nuance. This was also true of the transcription process which used verbatim speech. Capital letters were used for heavily emphasised words. Fidelity of transcriptions were checked against interview recordings. In excerpts from the theme table occasional, irrelevant data was omitted, denoted by [...]. During data analysis, a deductive approach offered greater theoretical depth and meant links could be made to ecological systems theory and psychosocial development, and informed by social-constructionist and relational epistemologies. All coding was conducted by the first author. Initial notes were made during first readings of the data with preliminary codes such as *identity*, *collective*, and *stress*. Quirkos Web software was then used to aid the process of coding. Codes remained largely semantic and evolved to include latent meanings as familiarisation with the data progressed. Approximately 60 codes were created, then grouped and regrouped in various constellations until three themes developed (See Table Four).

For example, the superordinate theme *Making Sense in Grey Areas* began as *Difference*, and consisted of various semantic codes relating to dichotomies, such as *primary/secondary*, *macro/micro*, *school/home*. These evolved into a super theme influenced by Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecosystemic model called *Ecosystems and Ripple Effects* which later evolved into *Ripple Effects and Relationships*. This process involved synthesising interpretive and descriptive inferences and considering a range

of perspectives.

7. Findings and discussion

Participants shared their feelings and perspectives on a range of issues pertaining to social and emotional learning. Common issues included understandings of kindness, compassion and belonging; views on the value of self-compassion versus self-esteem; the importance of social and emotional skills in the classroom; and the relationship between values, education and future society. In the following section, the excerpts are used to illuminate patterns of meaning in each super-theme, and are grouped by subtheme.

Two superordinate themes were arrived at: Making Sense in Grey Areas and Ripple Effects and Relationships.

7.1. Making Sense in Grey Areas

This theme borrows from a reference made by an interviewee to the importance of appreciating nuance, and “*see(ing) the grey in the world*” (S). As well as alluding to caring and sensitivity, ‘Grey Areas’ ties in with other areas of ambiguity such as blurred boundaries between work and life, self-worth and professional-worth, unrealistic expectations around the role of a teacher, and gaps between policy and reality. ‘Making Sense’ refers both to soft skills and emotional aptitudes being difficult to define, and also describes how teachers are affected by, and work within externally-imposed parameters that may not always ‘make sense’ to them (Frenzel et al., 2014, pp. 69–82).

7.1.1. “We do it because we care”

The first subtheme picks up on the blurred boundaries and tensions of the teacher’s role. These include perfectionism and self-perceived professional failures linked to self-worth; compartmentalisation of self and other; and going the extra mile as standard practice, whilst deprioritising self-care. As Schonert-Reichl (2017) observed, this neglect of self can have negative ramifications for responding to student needs. However, at what point these negative implications manifest is unclear: “*People don’t always take care of themselves. And I guess if we don’t model that in ourselves, perhaps we’re of not doing the best job of helping children to develop that either* (D)

D succinctly summarises this problematic yet widespread teacher trait, acknowledging that teacher wellbeing impacts student wellbeing (Eiroa-Orosa et al., 2017), and the resultant need to model healthy SE behaviour (Doolittle & Jones, 2017; Durlak et al., 2011).

A commonly voiced struggle amongst teachers emerged in protecting life from the demands of work. The teachers were in agreement that “*it is TOUGH*”, as D put it, and struggles with mental health and wellbeing are “*a “nationwide issue”* (D). There also seemed to be an underlying, resigned acceptance that “*you don’t get into teaching for the money*” (A), and that the ‘toughness’ lessened with experience, or perhaps, reduced hours as in J’s case here: “*Like all teachers, I’d probably work much more than I should do. But because I’m part time, I still have time for myself as well [...] with age comes wisdom.* (J).”

Perhaps J’s ‘wisdom’ in its acceptance and shared humanity, can be likened to self-compassion, a protective factor for wellbeing against burnout and empathy fatigue (Klimecki & Singer, 2014). Similarly, D reflects that although he has improved, the struggle continues. In acknowledging his shortcomings, he also demonstrates self-compassion: “*I’ve also become better at not letting a bad lesson, or a bad week just completely fill my head. I’m not perfect by a long shot* (D).”

The identities of the teachers were intertwined with notions of care, sometimes expressed by filling the gaps when wider systems were lacking. With exasperation, C relates her experience of providing food to families during the covid lockdowns.

[...] we got like SACKS of porridge, and we’re trying to split them, we were saying to parents come and drop off tubs to us, [...] we’ll fill it all up,

and we’ll do our best for you. But but where do you draw, you know? [...] We shouldn’t HAVE to be doing these things. But we are and we do it because we care (C)

C provides a stark example of going the extra mile, a common expectation amongst teachers (Binfet & Passmore, 2017). C’s half-finished question seems poignant, as if it cannot be asked in full, “*where do you draw [the line]?*” Perhaps there is no objective line when it comes to caring. “These things” seem to describe both providing food for those in need, but also to pervasive school cultures of ‘doing it because we care’ (Bogler & Somech, 2019).

7.1.2. Taking chances

Listening to the teachers, there seemed to be an undercurrent of chance in the wider realisation of SEL projects. Here, the word ‘chance’ refers to the conditionality and precarious nature of SEL implementation; a reliance on subjective beliefs, caring natures and subtle cultures of going above and beyond to make up for deficits in training, services and curricula. Yet, research suggests proper expertise and leadership are vital if SEL is to be taught effectively (Gedikoglu, 2021).

Whether or not SEL is a focus appears to be down to the values and priorities of individual schools. J expresses appreciation for her school’s pro-SEL ethos: “*We are very fortunate in that the head and the senior leadership team actually value PSHE.*” (J) “*Actually value*” implies this is uncommon, a view shared by H: “*We’ve moved towards that thing of being kind to yourself and self-help and self-healing and taking time out [...] being cynical, I would, I can’t imagine there’s many schools doing that*”.

In expressing ‘cynicism’ at practices in other schools, H signals personal experience of schools undervaluing SEL, echoed in a recent national review (Gedikoglu, 2021) and in international reports (OECD, 2021), and seems at odds with the caring teacher identity discussed previously. This contradiction is reflected in Biddle et al.’s (2009) study in which teachers disclosed the unwillingness of fellow teachers to teach emotion-based content.

Rhetoric of social and emotional learning is criticised as “lip-service” (S and A), since initiatives are short-lived and compete with other priorities. The chance-dependent nature of translating words into action comes through the narratives: “*IS it embedded? You know, is it something that they keep kind of focusing on and believe in? Or is it something that goes out the window because of other pressures*” (S). The question of embeddedness is a common thread, echoed by the other teachers, “*I know, there are a lot of schools that it’s edged out*” (J).

Frustration at the precariousness of SEL is shared, as is recognition that initiatives must be consistent and executed with integrity in order to function. The teachers’ views correspond with Humphrey et al.’s (2021) findings of widespread ambiguity around whole-school approaches to SEL, and lack of clarity on good classroom practices. Here H indicates how this lack of integrity may manifest in everyday practice: “*I think kindness is one of those things that comes up when somebody is being UNkind and dealt with and it’s oh well that’s not kind*” (H)

Without ‘embeddedness’, SEL becomes a reactive measure as opposed to a preventative one. There is a disparity between saying and doing, which the teachers link to lack of time for reflection, and lack of training. For training to be successful, Schonert-Reichl, (2017) suggest that SEL understanding needs to be both professional and personal, addressing SEL in relation to students, but also the social and emotional competencies of teachers. However, teachers reported a scarcity of SEL training in any form. Instead, ‘human nature’ is relied upon, justified by a pervasive latent belief that using or teaching social and emotional skills is to some extent ‘obvious’, or innate. K explains, that despite not having received specific training, she, and teachers in general, rely on common sense and experience: “*I think we do do it. And because it, you kind of have to, and you do it almost naturally*”.

Gaps in training are filled with ‘human instinct’ and subjective skill – trusting that what comes naturally will be appropriate. As highlighted by Aultman et al. (2009), schools are emotional places, yet this

emotional aspect is neglected in formal teacher training.

7.1.3. Beliefs and demands

Personal beliefs about the values and priorities needed in education are often conveyed as conflicting with target-driven priorities. This subtheme can also be conceptualised as knowing versus doing; a subtle culture of belief suppression becomes necessary for getting on with the job. D asks, “*Can schools start the revolution? It’s a bit difficult. We’re quite busy*”. Whilst all the teachers agree on the centrality of kindness to successful schools, subjective understandings of kindness and compassion differ, evoking the Buddhist designation ‘immeasurable’ (Gerrish et al., 2022). A commonly held conception of compassion and kindness is expressed in this admission by C,

You can’t have a school that’s totally, totally focused on that. And it’s all lovely, lovely. Because you have to, you know, you do have to push on, and you do have to try and you know, about progress and the drive the lesson attainment and things like that. (C)

Compassion, understood through rhetoric of softness of soft skills, appears to be in opposition with ideas of robustness, logic and progress. Efforts to promote softer, SE skills are often framed as fighting a losing battle, or “*swimming upstream*” (S). It seems that the teachers’ pro-SEL ecologies of beliefs (Bailey et al., 2017) are constantly being confronted with initiatives and demands which contradict them.

You can’t fatten a pig by weighing it. and I think we’ve become an educational system that’s very much all about measuring progress in like cold, hard data. But some of some of the things that are maybe more skills based or more holistic, aren’t measurable in like empirical data. I think, yeah, it’s quite difficult to navigate (L)

Annoyance is voiced at the narrow need for measurement, and the tensions this creates. The tensions are associated with increased teacher stress and ineffective implementation of SEL (Schonert-Reichl, 2017), as well as reduced focus on creativity and expressive arts. Not impressed, H confesses, “*to be honest, I think the whole thing needs a shake-up*”. D takes the criticism even further, relating the overburdening of schools to an inability to face imminent world challenges.

“Everyone is so pushed for the work they have to produce and the data they have to produce that time to think coherently about how we build the necessary kindness, and clear thinking, and responsive and responsible human beings that we need to survive as a species is kind of limited” (D)

D conveys serious problems, that although teachers are aware that kindness and SE skills reach far beyond the classroom with implications for future generations (e.g. Schonert-Reichl, 2017), they feel powerless to shift the focus of education despite the desire to do so.

7.2. Ripple Effects and Relationships

This theme draws on expressed beliefs about the importance of school relationships, and the emotional nature of teaching. Inspiration is taken from an observation made by C, that social media can cause competition and stress in parents, and that the repercussions, or “*ripples go a long way*”. The metaphor of ripples is useful in considering the emotional impacts of relationships, and the multidimensionality of relationships and influences acting on and through schools from the perspective of ecological systems theories.

7.2.1. Getting on, it’s the fabric of life

In this subtheme, ideas about the importance of teacher-student relationships are explored, and the place of SEL in promoting positive relationships. The subtheme takes its name from this excerpt from J,

Well, basically, that’s, like, the fabric of life, isn’t it? I mean, you know, if, if you don’t get on with people and you don’t, you know, feel right in yourself, then you’re not going to get on, you know, it’s important (J)

Getting on here refers simultaneously to getting on with others; and getting on as being successful in life. J conveys the fundamental importance of relationships to life and wellbeing, that relational capacity is interlinked with success and fulfilment, a view echoed implicitly and explicitly by the other teachers.

Supportive relationships sustain the wellbeing and competence of staff as well as children, as noted by A,

The staff really value the, the idea of you, the students like us, all belonging to the same community. And it really kind of helps foster those relationships that you need to bring - the perhaps the students that, you know, don’t like your subject necessarily in secondary school - kind of onside (A)

A’s observation is shared by the other participants and is confirmed by evidence suggesting that student and teacher wellbeing mutually reinforce one another (Allen et al., 2016; Binfet & Passmore, 2017).

Emotional need is seen as nuanced, and individual in the teachers’ accounts. Recounting her approach to a child behaving uncooperatively, K explains,

... there WILL be more things to this situation than what it first presents and not kind of just assuming that it’s them doing something wrong immediately. Just like, keep talking to them and try to see if there’s something more there. (K)

K expresses an awareness of the interconnected internal and external. Likewise, C describes a boy with severe autism, who has to travel for over an hour to get to school every morning,

“We talk of them like cups. And by the time he comes to us his cup’s totally full already. So we have to kind of work with him to empty his cup before we start kind of making demands on him again, it’s quite, it’s quite a challenge” (C)

C’s sensitivity to emotional need is evident. By attuning to the child, she is able to respond appropriately to help him regulate his emotions. Talking about her time as an early years teacher, C reflects, “*you see children when they’re very raw*” (C)

In both excerpts, C displays both courage and vulnerability in responding to challenges involving intimate relating and emotional intensity, traits France (2019) associates with effective teaching.

7.2.2. Big school and little people

Perceptions of SEL as more prevalent in early years, primary and special education, and less so in secondary are explored. Referring to children’s first experience starting school, C emphasises “*you have to understand that they’re LITTLE people. And this is all big and scary for them*” (C) Pairing *Little people* here with the phrase *big school*, a childish name for secondary school, is intended to evoke the separation and emotional distance between primary and secondary settings.

In relation to her work with children experiencing social and emotional or mental health needs, H describes kindness and SEL as “*part and parcel of the job that I do*” (H). In H’s setting, teaching is built around the awareness that healthy social and emotional development requires that children feel secure and loved (Delahooke, 2020). Teachers’ accounts describe that while this is true for all children, the windows of time dedicated to SEL in mainstream schools, and particularly in secondary schools, is limited.

D voices frustration regarding the secondary schools nearby that his students go on to attend.

“I feel like the compassionate world we are trying to build is at odds with the rigid behaviourist goals-focused, militaristic approach that we see more and more in secondary school” (D)

Despite being a secondary school teacher, A has similar complaints, “I don’t like the big academies, I feel like they kind of are a bit soulless. And they’re kind of sheer numbers, I feel like the students get lost in them” (A)

The teachers associate bigger secondary academies with anonymity and distanced relationships. The use of “soulless” infers a lack of warmth and community, both things A felt were very much present at her school. It is evident that SEL prioritisation is nuanced, and not as simple as primary versus secondary. This is clear in the pro-SEL views expressed by both secondary and primary teacher interviewees.

7.3. Reflexivity

As a primary school teacher myself, my own systems of beliefs are inevitably influenced by my biographical and emotional experiences of teaching. My proximity to the subject made me acutely aware of my presence in my interpretations of the data, and the risk of curating a particular storyline with the data. This was particularly true during the process of coding. It was important to reflect on the choices I was making about what to include and what to omit. These choices of course, were influenced by my own sociocultural and political context, and as such are not neutral. In coding, and recoding I was able to identify codes that perhaps spoke more about my experience than the teachers’. However, a critical realist stance allowed me to acknowledge my teaching history in relation to my interpretations, which rather than seeking an objective truth, intended to create a rich narrative and communicate patterns of meaning which, through a sociocultural lens, I understood as politically, socially and culturally informed.

The online interview format provided useful flexibility and allowed interviews to be scheduled at mutually convenient times with ease. The participants were aware of my previous teaching role, and this seemed to foster a warm atmosphere and soften the interviewer-interviewee power dynamic (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The use of a deductive approach to data analysis allowed me to refer to SEL theories and eco-systemic models; and unpack data in light of research. Interpretive approaches were also adopted when drawing together narrative threads.

8. General discussion

The thoughts, feelings and beliefs communicated in the teacher interviews serve to shed light on the findings of Study One. Widespread poor mental health amongst teachers, perfectionist identities, and cultures of self-sacrificial caring may provide partial explanation for the lack of impact of self-compassion on comfort-related beliefs about SEL. The dependence of SEL on uninterrogated assumptions that social and emotional skills are obvious to all teaching professionals, and, expectations of goodwill which blur the boundaries of the teaching role, are revealed as problematic, and causes of emotional exhaustion (Frenzel et al., 2014, pp. 69–82). The discovery that comfort-related beliefs about SEL were partially predicted by teachers’ relational skills in awareness courage and responsiveness was evident in quantitative findings, and also in qualitative reports which framed relational sensitivity and other-awareness as natural and intuitive.

8.1. The role of relational capacity and self-compassion

Teachers described the need for self and other awareness, both in terms of their attunement to students, and in terms of protecting their own wellbeing, recognised to be an enabling factor for other-awareness. The other two facets of the ACRS relational capacity scale, courage and responsiveness in relating to others, were also indicated as crucial in the interviews. Courage showed up in discussions about the need to be vulnerable, and there emerged from the data a sense of shared commitment to being a good model of emotional resilience and competence for the students by demonstrating vulnerability themselves. Responsiveness was evident in deep knowledge of their students’ needs and difficulties, along with a shared sense of being staunch advocates for

their students in the face of unhelpful demands and systemic obstacles. Mirroring the quantitative results, this courageousness and responsiveness was linked to a sense of comfort and self-efficacy regarding SEL.

Research into the high stress levels of teachers, demonstrates that competing priorities and desires may lower the capacity for self-compassion (Anstiss et al., 2020; Dickhauser et al., 2015; Klimecki & Singer, 2014). Likewise, the performance involved in teacher’s everyday emotional labour may augment their compartmentalisation of self-directed kindness, as separate from other-directed kindness (Jin et al., 2013), which may in turn impact their SEL beliefs. As discussed by the teachers, it is possible to appreciate the positive influence of self-compassion on others’ well-being and remain low in self-compassion themselves (Allen et al., 2016). Research findings of lack of a clear link between one’s own social and emotional capabilities, and their beliefs about values and behaviour (Brotman et al., 2020), supports the non-relationship observed between teachers’ comfort-related SEL beliefs and their self-compassion in Study One. In a professional culture in which emotional exhaustion is a rite of passage, and many teachers opt to work part-time to regain work-life balance, other-focused caring seems to necessitate a degree of compartmentalisation as a matter of self-preservation. The extent to which teachers feel both comfortable teaching SEL and committed to doing so appears to be independent of their own self-compassion. Further research into the separate aspects of self-compassion; mindfulness, self-kindness and shared humanity (Neff, 2009), might clarify whether the lack of predictive potential regarding beliefs is associated with a particular feature of self-compassion (Gonser, 2021; Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

The lack of relationship between relational capacity and commitment-based SEL beliefs might be explained in the divergent purposes of the two scales. Relational capacity, like comfort, requires participants to directly evaluate personal traits and behaviours, while the commitment subscale assesses traits indirectly via participants’ self-rated desire to attend various training sessions. Future studies might consider an alternative measure of commitment beliefs, since concerns about time pressures and other commitments might impede accurate results, as might the abstracted nature of questions.

8.2. Limitations

Purposive sampling of teachers was necessary due to the specific focus on teachers’ perspectives in both studies. Yet a drawback of this selection method is the likelihood that people with a personal interest or connection, and a level of pre-existing emotional investment in the research focus were overrepresented (Dewaele, 2018). Accordingly, it is possible that relational capacity, which appeared to have a slight masking effect on differences between primary and secondary, was overrepresented in the samples of both studies. However, self-selection bias means related beliefs about SEL are likely to be overrepresented. Of course, such biases prevent findings being meaningfully generalised to the wider teacher population (Clark & Creswell, 2017; Costigan & Cox, 2001; Dewaele, 2018). However, this self-selection bias serves to further demonstrate the reliance of successful SEL on the personal beliefs, preferences, personality and character traits of individual teachers, and unspoken assumptions that teaching social and emotional skills is obvious or natural.

Self-selection may also explain why the differences described between primary and secondary schools in terms of cultures and dynamics, did not manifest through teachers’ qualitative reports. In Study Two, participants framed primary and secondary schools as hugely distinct, almost antithetical. However, in practice, in Study One the difference in self-reported SEL beliefs between primary and secondary was slight. Contextualised through views expressed in Study Two, the disparity appears to be driven not by less conviction, but by the differing dynamics, organisation and expectations in secondary compared to primary school. The impact of relational capacity on the difference in TSEL scores between primary and secondary school also warrants further

investigation. It is possible that self-selection resulted in a positive relational capacity bias, and it would be interesting to compare results of different teacher populations, with and without self-selection to investigate whether lower relational capacity leads to greater between-school discrepancy.

8.3. Implications for practice

Primary and secondary teachers in Study Two agreed that SEL and kindness were fundamental to school success and holistic child development. Frustrations at systemic constraints in education which prevent this were expressed unanimously. While there was recognition that social and emotional skills received far greater attention in primary schools, the substantial differences in SEL coverage, and in student-teacher relationships manifested as only a slight disparity on TSEL scores in Study One. While language of nurture and creativity was used more frequently with reference to primary settings, all teachers, whether primary or secondary, expressed equally positive values regarding SEL. However, despite recognising the need, these beliefs are met with organisational and curriculum constraints in secondary school systems. Echoing the teachers' criticisms of lip-service and narrow targets, the main differences affecting thought about SEL seem to come from embedded beliefs about who needs SEL, sociocultural values linking success to academic performance, and a separation of language from meaning whereby despite employing the correct terminology, rhetoric does not align with real practice.

The lack of relationship with self-compassion in Study One, in conjunction with research findings of the compartmentalisation of self-facing and other-facing beliefs highlights the need for inclusion of the self in SEL training, and teacher training in general. This is important both for teacher wellbeing, and the cultivation of social and emotional skills (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). The development of metacognitive and reflexive skills, as expressed by the interviewee teachers, is crucial for the advancement of critical SEL practices (Dos Santos, 2019). These foci may be developed as part of a holistic, dynamic ecological systems-based model.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Lottie Hamer: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Wendy Ross:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Amanda Holland:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision.

Declaration of competing interest

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Data availability

I have shared the link to the data in the manuscript

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