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Understanding Teachers' Perceptions and Practices: Exploring the Integration of Social-Emotional Learning in Mathematics Education.

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Research Summary

Title: Understanding Teachers' Perceptions and Practices: Exploring the Integration of Social-Emotional Learning in Mathematics Education

Problem Statement:

Despite evidence suggesting that Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) enhances student outcomes, its role in improving engagement and academic performance in mathematics still needs to be explored. Could SEL be linked to these improvements? Do teachers fully embrace it? Drawing from Wilson's (2005) concept of curriculum-in-use vs. curriculum-on-paper, this study investigates whether SEL practices are genuinely implemented in classrooms or remain largely theoretical within the written curriculum.

Research Design:

This qualitative study explored teachers' experiences with implementing the SEL strand of the Ontario Elementary Mathematics Curriculum. Data were gathered through interviews with three teachers and surveys completed by 15 educators. The study used Creswell and Guetterman's (2019) six-step process for qualitative data analysis to analyze findings and build themes from the collected insights. The study is grounded in the CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) framework, which outlines five core competencies—Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, and Responsible Decision-Making. These competencies informed the development of interview questions and survey items, guiding the exploration of SEL practices and their integration into mathematics instruction. The CASEL framework also helped frame the analysis of how SEL can foster student engagement, enhance academic performance, and create a respectful and inclusive learning environment.

Key Findings:

Teachers' Perceptions:

- Many teachers value SEL's potential for fostering student engagement and improving attitudes toward mathematics.
- Educators see SEL competencies like social awareness and collaboration as natural fits in math instruction.

Implementation Realities:

- Teachers frequently operate in the gap between curriculum-in-use and curriculum-on-paper. While they intuitively integrate SEL, it is often done without explicit alignment to the curriculum's framework.
- Variability in how SEL is implemented stems from limited professional training and unclear expectations from the Ministry of Education.

Success Stories:

- SEL integration has fostered improved student collaboration, increased problem-solving confidence, and enhanced academic performance.

- Teachers reported that SEL activities promote inclusivity and respect in the learning environment.

Challenges and Support Needs:

- Teachers identified a need for more explicit guidance, professional development, and concrete examples of integrating SEL into math lessons.
- Additional resources, including instructional tools and templates, were highlighted as critical to supporting effective implementation.

Implications:

This study emphasizes the need to bridge the gap between written and enacted curricula. Providing teachers with professional learning opportunities and practical tools aligned to CASEL competencies can ensure more consistent and impactful SEL integration. This alignment not only supports student outcomes but also fosters a respectful and collaborative learning environment.

Conclusion:

The findings underscore the potential of SEL to transform mathematics education and the critical need for systemic support to enable teachers to implement it effectively. By focusing on curriculum-in-use, educators can realize the full benefits of SEL in their classrooms.