Muddy Sensemaking: Making Sense of Socio-Emotional Skills Amidst a Vague Policy Context

Raquel Muñiz
Boston College
United States

Abstract: Education laws and policies have moved toward promoting socio-emotional (SEL) skills, adopting numerous terminologies in their standards. However, the incremental change has left compensatory education practitioners who are committed to promoting SEL opportunities with little guidance when the programs' governing policies do not include language acknowledging the importance of SEL to student success. Additionally, the ongoing debate in the SEL field about which taxonomies might best capture the skills and the lack of conceptual clarity offers these practitioners little additional guidance. Drawing on sensemaking theory, this case study examined how practitioners in a compensatory education program made sense of SEL skills through their practice. The study used a case-based design with multiple methods, namely, document review, observations, and pre- and post-program semi-structured interviews. The study employed sensemaking theory and CASEL's SEL framework in the thematic analysis of the documents, observations, and interviews to understand how practitioners made sense of the concept of SEL. The findings indicate three key aspects important in the practitioners' sensemaking process: the local environment established by the federal policy and the leaders' policy interpretation, which emphasized the importance of SEL skills; their articulation of their conceptualization of SEL skills

at the beginning of the program; and the usefulness of an SEL skills conceptual framework. I discuss the policy and equity implications at the federal and local level.

Creación de sentido *muddy*: Dar sentido a las habilidades socioemocionales dentro de un contexto político vago

Resumen: Las leyes y políticas educativas se han movido hacia la promoción de habilidades socioemocionales (SEL), adoptando numerosas terminologías en sus estándares. Sin embargo, el cambio incremental ha dejado a los profesionales que se comprometen a promover las oportunidades de SEL con poca orientación cuando las políticas de gobierno no incluyen lenguaje sobre la importancia de SEL para el éxito de los estudiantes. Además, el debate en curso en el campo SEL sobre qué taxonomías podrían capturar mejor las habilidades y la falta de claridad conceptual ofrece a estos profesionales poca orientación adicional. Basándose en la teoría de creación de sentido, este estudio de caso examinó cómo los profesionales en un programa de educación compensatoria dieron sentido a las habilidades SEL a través de su práctica. El estudio empleó la teoría de la toma de sentido y el marco SEL de CASEL en el análisis temático de documentos, observaciones y entrevistas para comprender cómo los profesionales dieron sentido al concepto de SEL. Los resultados indican tres aspectos clave del proceso de creación de sentido de los profesionales: el entorno local establecido por la política federal y la interpretación de la política de los líderes, que enfatiza la importancia de las habilidades SEL; su articulación de su conceptualización de las habilidades de SEL al comienzo del programa; y la utilidad de un marco conceptual de habilidades SEL. Discuto las implicaciones de política y equidad a nivel federal y local.

Fazendo sentido *muddy*: Compreendendo as habilidades socioemocionais em um contexto político vago

Resumo: As leis e políticas educacionais passaram a promover habilidades socioemocionais (SEL), adotando inúmeras terminologias em seus padrões. No entanto, a mudança incremental deixou os profissionais comprometidos com a promoção de oportunidades de SEL com pouca orientação quando as políticas governamentais não incluem linguagem sobre a importância do SEL para o sucesso do aluno. Além disso, o debate em andamento no campo do SEL sobre quais taxonomias podem melhor capturar as habilidades e a falta de clareza conceitual oferecem a esses profissionais pouca orientação adicional. Com base na teoria do sensemaking, este estudo de caso examinou como os profissionais de um programa de educação compensatória faziam sentido das habilidades de SEL por meio de sua prática. O estudo empregou a teoria do sensemaking e a estrutura SEL do CASEL na análise temática de documentos, observações e entrevistas para entender como os profissionais entendiam o conceito de SEL. As descobertas indicam três aspectos principais do processo de criação de sentido dos profissionais: o ambiente local estabelecido pela política federal e a interpretação da política dos líderes, que enfatizavam a importância das habilidades de SEL; sua articulação de sua conceituação das habilidades de SEL no início do programa; e a utilidade de uma estrutura conceitual de habilidades de SEL. Discuto as implicações políticas e de equidade nos níveis federal e local.

Introduction

Within the past two decades, the concept of socio-emotional learning (SEL) has gained considerable traction in education, including in education law and policy (CASEL, n.d.c.; McGraw-Hill Education, 2018; Moreno, Nagasawa & Schwartz, 2019; Osher et al., 2016). Given the importance of SEL skills to academic and life success (CASEL, n.d.c.; Heckman & Rubinstein, 2001; Heckman, Stixrud & Urzua, 2006; McGraw-Hill Education, 2018; Moreno et al., 2019; Osher et al., 2016), state and federal education policies have incrementally adopted SEL as an additional measure of what counts (CASEL, 2018; Mass. Ann. Law. Ch. 69, § 1P; National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). For example, the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) requires recipient states to allocate 20% of their funding to well-rounded education, 20% to activities that promote safe and healthy students, at least 1% for development of family engagement, and funding for 21st Century Community Learning Centers. The new ESSA measures replaced and shifted from the narrow focus on academic measures in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)—the seminal legislation that mandated high-stakes standardized testing (NCLB, 20 U.S.C. § 6301 et seq.) to the detriment of disadvantaged populations (Meier et al., 2004; Reardon, Greenberg, Kalogrides, Shores, & Valentino, 2013; Rowley & Wright, 2011).

However, because the inclusion of SEL in education law and policy has been incremental, not all education laws and policies have adopted SEL language that suggests student SEL development matters. For example, within the compensatory education purview, the policy governing Upward Bound (UB), a compensatory education program for high school students (Upward Bound Program, 2020, 20 U.S.C. §1070a-13[a]–[d]), does not include amendments to reflect the important role of SEL in student academic and life success (see, e.g., Education First, 2017; Osher et al., 2016), leaving practitioners committed to promoting SEL opportunities without much guidance on how to define SEL in practice.

In addition, the lack of guidance is compounded by other notable gaps in the SEL field. First, the field lacks conceptual clarity around the terminology and frameworks describing SEL skills (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015; Explore SEL, n.d.c.; Osher et al., 2016; Sánchez Puerta, Valerio, & Gutiérrez Bernal, 2016; West et al., 2016). Though some have attempted to provide conceptual coherence within and across frameworks and have developed different concepts and taxonomies to describe SEL (National Research Council, 2012; Rowan-Kenyon, Savitz-Romer, Weilundemo, Swan, & Liu, 2017; Shechtman, DeBarger, Dornsife, Rosier, & Yarnall, 2013), the concepts and taxonomies remain subject to criticism from peer researchers in the field (e.g., Duckworth & Yeager, 2015; Easton, 2013; Sánchez Puerta et al., 2016; West et al., 2016).

The issue of conceptual clarity in the field of SEL has garnered increasing attention, and scholars have begun efforts to provide tools to increase conceptual clarity within and across frameworks (Explore SEL, n.d.a). A group of scholars at the Harvard School of Education founded the Taxonomy Project in 2015. The project offers an online repository of SEL frameworks, providing an overview of each framework, its purpose(s), and the conceptual definition of each skill in the framework (Explore SEL, n.d.a). In addition, the repository allows for comparison across frameworks. The tools in the project exemplify the diversity of skills included across frameworks, as well as the diversity in conceptual meaning when frameworks include the same skills. For example, two frameworks may include "responsible decision-making" but both define the skill differently (Explore SEL, n.d.d).

Lack of conceptual coherence across frameworks is not in and of itself problematic, because each framework may have a different purpose and can help practitioners make sense of SEL in different contexts (e.g., across developmental stages). In contrast, conceptual clarity vis-à-vis SEL is

of great import and can create issues for all stakeholders interested in SEL, including educational researchers, policymakers, and practitioners (Education First, 2017; Explore SEL, n.d.d; The Pennsylvania State University, 2018). For educational researchers, conceptual clarity regarding the frameworks' aims, definitions, and skills is critical for research design (Education First, 2017; Keefer, Parker & Saklofske, 2018; Measuring SEL, 2018b). Specifically, conceptual clarity helps educational researchers clarify constructs and, where applicable, assess and measure SEL skills of interest. Conceptual clarity matters for policymakers who draft and adopt policies supporting SEL because, if left too vague, the laws and policies may not align with the SEL goals the policymakers aim to address (The Pennsylvania State University, 2018). Finally, conceptual clarity is critical for practitioners in schools and in programs, such as UB. Lack of conceptual clarity within schools or programs can lead to SEL practices that vary across practitioners in conceptualization and application (Moreno et al., 2019. Thus, the skills the students may develop may (or may not) be the SEL skills the practitioners hope to help students develop (Education First, 2017; Keefer et al., 2018; The Pennsylvania State University, 2018). In sum, lack of conceptual clarity can raise issues of alignment among the skills policymakers and practitioners hope to promote in students, the practices to promote the skills, the skills the students actually develop, and the skills researchers assess and evaluate.

Second, the body of research has limited knowledge on SEL efforts outside the school system, given most frameworks aiding SEL efforts focus on programming within the school system, during the school day or after school (see CASEL, 2013, 2015, 2018; Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullota, 2015). Compensatory education programs outside the school system, such as the federally-governed UB program, have received relatively less policy guidance, and SEL research has focused less on these programs (Council for Opportunity in Education, n.d.; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Third, the field has limited knowledge about educational leadership practices that best promote SEL policy implementation and limited knowledge about how to better align SEL with other school efforts focused on academics (Osher et al., 2016).

Drawing on sensemaking theory, the aim of this study is to contribute to filling these gaps in the body of research through an instrumental case study of educational leaders and staff (collectively "practitioners") at a UB summer program, a compensatory education program outside the school system. Lyndon B. Johnson created UB in 1965 to improve college access for low-income students (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). UB has a focus on academic preparation and a purpose to "generate skills and motivation necessary for success in education beyond secondary school" (Upward Bound Program, 2020, 20 U.S.C. §1070a-13[a]). UB serves students from low-income families, where neither parent holds a bachelor's degree (Upward Bound Program, 2020, 20 U.S.C. §1070a-13[a]]. In its mission to improve success in education, all UB programs across the United States must annually demonstrate students are improving their grade point averages, are graduating from high school, and are applying and enrolling in postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). The federal policy mandates all UB programs provide certain programming targeting academic success and financial aid literacy, while allowing, but not requiring, UB programs to adopt other programming that can improve any other skills that aid student success (Muñiz, 2020). The latter category allows UB programs to adopt targeted SEL programming.

SEL is foundational to UB because the conceptualization of the program allows the practitioners to introduce any new initiative that will promote student success, e.g., SEL opportunities. Though the practitioners in the study were known locally for their commitment to developing students' skills beyond academic mastery, their policy mandates focused on academics, with no explicit language in their policy regarding SEL. Thus, they drew on their own developing conceptualization of SEL in practice. I focused specifically on the policy and local environmental context within which the practitioners operated, the individual knowledge and information that

aided practitioners in articulating and making sense of the concept, and on how an explicit conceptual framework influenced the sensemaking process within the practitioners' policy context.

Researcher Positionality and Access

As a first-generation student, I credit my success in graduating from college and in navigating academia to my support systems. The support systems have influenced my research interests. I am interested in examining and improving support systems that help first-generation students who bring different cultural capital to the classrooms succeed in higher education. Research in this area is important, because the literature has found first-generation students face unique challenges in college that can delay graduation and complicate the college experience. The research has also found that helping students access a college education and thrive once enrolled requires more than academic mastery. Thus, I am keenly interested in how schools and programs support student success, helping students with academics and skills beyond content knowledge.

This interest has led me to forge relationships and partnerships with programs dedicated to the success of first-generation students, including the UB program in this study. Over a year, I attended their informational sessions and periodic events. Through our conversations, it became evident that the leaders focused not only on academics but also on supporting skills beyond academic success. Nonetheless, prior to the study, it was unclear how the program leaders conceptualized or promoted SEL through their policies and practices. The site presented issues of conceptual clarity debated in the field of SEL and ripe for analysis. Subsequently, I conceptualized this study, focusing on the residential summer program, where practitioners spent six weeks working with students. The partnership facilitated access to the data and helped me build rapport and trust, as well as facilitated member-checking throughout the data collection process.

Conceptual Framework: Sensemaking Theory, Policy, and SEL

This article focuses on the complex sensemaking process of practitioners, and the factors that helped them make sense of SEL prospectively—before the policy implementation phase at the beginning of the program—and retrospectively—after the conclusion of the program. Sensemaking theorists posit that individuals socially construct meanings of their surroundings, and these meanings form the frameworks and narratives of their reality (Porac, Thomas, & Baden-Fuller, 1989; Weick, 1995). The process of sensemaking has several key distinguishing features (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). The process starts with practitioners noticing and bracketing a phenomenon, giving meaning to something that existed but did not yet have a name. Then, they label the phenomenon, using phrases that might not be fully, comprehensively understood but capture the phenomenon as then understood. Sensemaking is both retrospective and prospective. On one hand, practitioners look backward, labeling and making sense of objects upon reflection. On the other hand, practitioners look forward, making presumptions that connect their abstract understandings with concrete action within their local context. The process of sensemaking is also interdependent, such that the practitioners interact with their environment and those within their environment continue to shape and influence their understandings. Sensemaking helps practitioners organize chaos or flux and ultimately culminates in articulation of the understanding, "to lift equivocal knowledge out of the tacit, private, complex, random, and past to make it explicit, public, simpler, ordered, and relevant to the situation at hand" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 413). In other words, sensemaking is an evolutionary process in which individuals draw on their existing understandings, worldviews and collective interactions in the environment in which the practitioners are embedded (see, e.g., Porac et al., 1989; Weick et al., 2005) in making sense of new concepts and/or phenomena (Porac et al., 1989; Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005).

Much of our knowledge on sensemaking in relation to education policy comes from studies that have examined how educators within the school system make sense of a particular policy, network of reform policies, or initiatives by reconstructing and reshaping these policies during implementation (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2019; Schechter, Shaked, Ganon-Shilon & Goldratt, 2018; Schmidt & Datnow, 2005; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977; White & Mavrogordato, 2018). The practitioners draw on their own worldviews and understandings to make sense of the messages they receive in their environment (Jonson, Thompson, Guetterman & Mitchell, 2017; Spillane, Hallett, & Diamond, 2003), which has often led to the transformation of initiatives in practice (Coburn, 2001; Soutter, 2019). This is because "policy messages are not inert, static ideas that are transmitted unaltered into local actors' minds" (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002, p. 392). Initially, researchers considered the phenomenon of restructuring policies in practice to be a product of practitioners' lack of will to implement a policy as mandated (e.g., Odden, 1991). Later researchers found that restructuring policies in practice was part of the normal social construction process that practitioners experience (Spillane et al., 2002).

Subsequent researchers have examined the way that context, collective sensemaking, and the role of educational leaders within the school system influence policy sensemaking in the implementation process, finding that interactions and the quality of the interactions matter in the sensemaking process (Coburn, 2001, 2005; Spillane et al., 2003). In making sense of policies in practice, educators rely on prior knowledge and belief systems to make sense of what the leaders communicate to them within their given context (Spillane et al., 2003). Interactions with formal and informal partners and the richness of deliberations with colleagues familiar with the new initiative aid educators' sensemaking process (Coburn, 2001; Education First, 2017; Spillane et al., 2002). Within this context, some interactions can be more helpful than others in aiding practitioners make sense of new initiatives (Spillane et al., 2002). For example, interactions that illustrate how the new change is different from the current practices, offer a rationale for the change, and highlight substantive changes of the new policy compared to the current practices, aiding sensemaking and bolstering substantive over superficial change (Spillane et al., 2002).

Sensemaking is more difficult when the policy requires substantive, complex change (Spillane et al., 2002)—for example, initiatives focused on SEL skills, which often ask educators to reconsider their beliefs and knowledge regarding their students' SEL needs (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009) and their own SEL competencies (Iizuka, Barrett, Gillies, Cook, & Marinovic, 2014). The role of the leaders thus can aid policy implementation by (a) setting direction for educators under their leadership, (b) developing educators, and (c) redesigning the organization (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anders, & Wahlstrom, 2004).

Making sense of SEL skills and how to promote these skills in practice can be further challenged by the lack of clarity of the concept of SEL. Conceptual frameworks for SEL skills vary substantially across contexts and fields (Explore SEL, n.d.b; Sánchez Puerta et al., 2016) and have traditionally focused on efforts within the school systems (CASEL, 2018). To illustrate, consider the breadth of concepts. The concept *non-cognitive skills* is typically used in the field of economics; *life skills* is often used by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the World Health Organization (WHO); *soft skills* is typically found in the business and management literature; *socio-emotional skills* is typically found in the psychology and psychiatry literature; *character skills* is typically found in the psychology and economics literature; *personality trait*s and *temperament* are found in the psychology literature, and *21st century skills* have been found in the movement to prepare the next generation of laborers and citizens in a democratic society (Sánchez Puerta et al., 2016). These concepts have different foci—for example, 21st century skills focus on skills necessary for the workforce, while others focus on school and life success, and long-term SEL growth as well as psychological well-

being (Explore SEL, n.d.d; Hagen, 2013)—but some argue that they refer to the same conceptual space (Explore SEL, n.d.b; West et al., 2016).

　　　The frameworks represent the breadth and depth of the different individual or interrelated skills educators hope to promote in practice. Osher and colleagues (2016) have characterized these varying frameworks as follows:

> those that are comprehensive in nature (reflecting a broad array of interlinked domains), those that go deep into one particular domain or another (e.g., emotional intelligence, executive function), those that are more narrowly organized around a single concept or construct (e.g., growth mind-set), those that are simply a list of skills, and those that are embodied in state standards (Dusenbury et al., 2015). These frameworks hold a common purpose: to inform and guide research [(e.g., Diamond, 2013—executive function and self-regulation)], practice [(CASEL, 2013)], and policy [(National Center for O*NET Development, n.d.)]. Across frameworks, however, terms are often used in different ways, and in some cases, the same skill or competency may have different names, or the same name may be employed to refer to different skills. (p. 652)

Among these frameworks, the practice-oriented CASEL framework is one of the most established, comprehensive frameworks (Education First, 2017; Osher et al., 2016). The framework organizes SEL skills into five domains, which theoretically help children with school and life success (see Table 1). The framework was grounded on human development and focuses on the distal and proximal nested contexts that influence the students' SEL skills development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

Table 1

CASEL's Defined Socio-Emotional Skills

Self-awareness	The ability to accurately recognize one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior. The ability to accurately assess one's strengths and limitations, with a well-grounded sense of confidence, optimism, and a 'growth mindset.'
Self-management	The ability to successfully regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations—effectively managing stress, controlling impulses, and motivating oneself. The ability to set and work toward personal and academic goals.
Social awareness	The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures. The ability to understand social and ethical norms for behavior and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.
Relationship skills	The ability to establish and maintain diverse individuals and groups. The ability to communicate clearly, listen well, cooperate with others, resist inappropriate social pressure, negotiate, conflict constructively, and seek and offer help when needed.
Responsible decision-making	The ability to make constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards, safety concerns, and social norms. The realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and a consideration of the well-being of oneself and others.

Source: CASEL (n.d.a)

The CASEL framework was most appropriate for this study for two main reasons. First, the framework focuses on SEL in practice, and this study focused on the conceptualization of SEL in practice—how the practitioners made sense of SEL as evidenced through their descriptions and concrete actions in planning and implementing SEL opportunities (CASEL, n.d.b; Explore SEL, n.d.b). Though other frameworks are also practice-oriented, these frameworks were inadequate for the study given that they focus on the developmental building blocks across childhood and youth development (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; see also Sánchez Puerta et al., 2016). The scope of this study was on the sensemaking of the skills prior to the six-week summer program and after the conclusion of the program, not across developmental stages. Second, because the study focused on the sensemaking of SEL amidst lack of conceptual clarity regarding SEL in the federal and program policy, the research design required a SEL framework that was broad enough to capture the practitioners' varying conceptualizations. The CASEL framework includes five broad SEL categories, which could encompass narrow or broad definitions of SEL (CASEL, n.d.a).

Sensemaking theory provided a lens for unpacking how practitioners in the compensatory education program integrated their knowledge and made sense of the SEL concept, while still remaining compliant with policy mandates focused on academics. In these time-constrained policy contexts, this study shows that practitioners in compensatory education find ways in which they can promote SEL opportunities that align with their existing understandings and worldviews on the importance of SEL, while complying with policy mandates to provide academic-focused activities.

The article makes two contributions to earlier work on the role of sensemaking in policy implementation. First, this study supports and extends the literature on policy sensemaking into the compensatory education realm, and unpacks how the process unfolds. Practitioners in this study remained responsible for the academic development of their students, and thus the educational leaders prioritized academic courses when scheduling. In this sense, they complied with the policy mandates to provide academic-focused activities. At the same time, the program had an implied policy to promote SEL, and thus the practitioners restructured the federal policy to align with their beliefs and worldviews on the importance of SEL (Spillane et al., 2003). By studying how these practitioners made sense of a concept within their time-constrained policy context, I was able to unpack the complicated process of how practitioners maximize limited outlets to promote SEL skills within a constrained policy context and identify the aspects that were most helpful to them in the sensemaking process. Second, the article unpacks how a clearer framework can help practitioners make conceptual sense of SEL, while accounting for those skills that were not necessarily captured by the framework. The article also contributes to the literature on SEL, affirming the usefulness of CASEL's framework, while identifying three issues not captured within the framework. My study was anchored on one research question: how do practitioners in compensatory education, outside the school context, make sense of the concept of SEL amidst the vague educational policy context?

Methods

To understand the practitioners' sensemaking process, I conducted a qualitative case study of an instrumental case (Stakes, 1995). The unit of analysis for this article was a six-week Upward Bound ([UB] 2018) summer program. Instrumental case studies are useful when we "have a research question, a puzzlement, a need for general understanding, and feel that we may get insight into our question by studying a particular case" (Stakes, 1995, p. 3). The use of a case study allowed me to conduct in-depth interviews and observations of the processes through which practitioners made sense and articulated their working understanding of SEL skills. The case study in this article was part of a larger research project, but my analytic focus in this article is the practitioners' sensemaking

of SEL skills. Though not generalizable, case studies are useful in creating new hypotheses and building theory (Stakes, 1995). I selected this particular program because, current and prior employees, as well as local community members knew the program for its commitment to academic support as well as a focus on helping students develop skills beyond academic mastery. Based on these aspects of the program, I perceived an emphasis on SEL development. Prior to the study, I was aware of the program staff's known commitment to developing these skills but remained unaware of whether the practitioners had any formal understanding of the concept of SEL, whether they had made sense of the concept prior to the study, or how the policy context within which they operated helped or hindered the articulation of their understanding of SEL.

Study Site and Context

The six-week UB summer program was situated in the northeast of the United States and, in the summer of 2017, served approximately 115 students. All students attending were high school students from low-income families, where neither parent had attended college. Approximately, half of the students lived in rural communities and the other half in urban communities. The majority of the students from rural communities were White and born and raised in their respective communities. The majority of students from urban communities were Latinx and born in different states or countries and migrated to the United States as late as a few months before joining the UB program. This student population-makeup created a student body with differences of opinion and perspectives, and presented a fertile ground in which practitioners could promote SEL opportunities for students with different SEL needs.

Research participants in this study included 23 practitioners: five program leaders (the director, program director, and three counselors), ten instructors, and eight residential mentors. Differentiating between the three different groups is important, because in answering the research question—how the educators outside the school context made sense of SEL skills—each group played a different role during the summer. The roles impacted the level of interaction each group had with the students and the type and length of training each group attended. Hence, different considerations influenced each group's sensemaking process. What follows is a description of each group and their summer roles.

In terms of the leaders, the director and assistant director designed the summer program and provided resources for all summer practitioners. The director was the final-decision maker, who nevertheless considered all decision-making a team effort and reported often consulting with the other leaders before making a final decision. For the summer of 2017, the assistant director helped design the summer schedule and ensured the other practitioners executed the summer program schedule as planned. Finally, the leadership team included three counselors. Two counselors were stationed at the main office, alongside the director and assistant director. The third counselor worked at a satellite office, housed at one of the schools that students in the program attended.

The instructors taught the students daily or every other day, depending on the course schedule. The focus on academic content and length of interactions with the students in the classroom context only limited the instructors' ability to foster SEL opportunities. The classes included the following: deliberations (a course where students chose a social problem and prepared a position on the issue; the final project included a debate where the students assigned a position –"in favor," "against," or "neutral"— debated the issue in front of all students attending the summer program), capstone (a research class in which the students chose a research topic and prepared a poster to present at a poster session at the end of the summer), science (geo-science and chemistry), mathematics, college preparation courses (sophomore, junior, and senior seminars), and English learning support. Given the schedule, the instructors had to find ways to embed SEL opportunities in their curriculum.

The residential mentors lived in the residential halls with the students, and were in charge of supervising most activities that explicitly promoted SEL skills. They monitored the students right after the students finished their school day at 5:00 p.m. until the students had to retreat to their bedrooms at 10:30 p.m. They spent time with the students: going into the city, playing sports together, or simply talking with the students in the residential halls.

Data Collection

The evidence for this case study comes from three sources of data: interviews, observations, and documents. I interviewed each practitioner twice, once at the beginning and once at the conclusion of the program. The in-depth, semi-structured interviews lasted 30-120 minutes. During the interviews at the beginning of the program, I asked the first two or three participants how they defined SEL skills. This caused some discomfort, one participant noting she felt as though she had to give an answer for a test for which she did not prepare. I adjusted my approach in subsequent interviews, removing that initial question from the protocol. Instead, I kept questions that asked the participants to describe how they thought the program policies promoted SEL opportunities, if applicable, how they hoped to support the students socially and emotionally, and, after the program concluded, how the practitioners had individually supported the students socially and emotionally. These questions drew insight into how the program participants made sense of the concept, drawing on individual experience and knowledge and environmental context, without asking them directly. The open-ended, semi-structured nature of the questions also allowed the participants to reply that SEL was not within their radar and that they were not sure what the concept meant. For example, a few explained that they were not sure how to define it and most said they thought the program policies did not promote SEL or were not sure how the policies would. I additionally asked them questions about training on SEL skills and their interactions with other practitioners. When the participants shared their thoughts on SEL, I asked them to elaborate and provide concrete examples to gain insight as to how they conceptualized SEL and to reduce the risk of participant bias. These questions also informed my understanding about the messages that the practitioners received from the environment about the importance of SEL skills and the extent to which other practitioners helped them make sense of SEL skills.

In the semi-structured post-program interviews, I asked the participants to provide examples of how they had helped the students socially and emotionally, if they expressed that they had. By explaining how they operationalized SEL skills, they also implicitly explained how they made sense of the concept. In the post-program interview, I introduced the CASEL framework (see Table 1) and informed the participants they could draw on the framework to answer the questions. The framework, however, was an optional aid, not a requirement, avoiding imposing any one particular thinking on their latent understanding of SEL. Some participants did not observe the framework at all. In addition to data from 46 formal interviews, I had numerous informal conversations with the practitioners immediately prior, during, and soon after the program concluded. The informal interviews also influenced my data analysis, informing my understanding of the program leaders' hiring process.

A second data source was observations. I observed the participants' interactions with one another and with the students to determine whether and how the practitioners promoted SEL opportunities. I maintained fieldnotes during my observations. The observations were guided by the same protocol as the interviews, informed by sensemaking theory (focusing on the importance of context, staff-staff and staff-student interactions, and concrete activities) and the SEL literature on what helps students develop their SEL skills. I observed the practitioners' interactions at the initial student welcoming orientation, classrooms, hallways, training sessions, special events, award ceremonies, end-of-program talent show, administrative meetings, structured and unstructured

activities in the residential halls, and responsive events based on student concerns. This provided an opportunity to observe how their initial and continually-developing SEL conceptualization translated to practice. In total, I conducted 38 observations of varying lengths, totaling 66 hours.

Documents were a third data source that contributed to my understanding of the policy context regarding SEL. I gathered two types of documents: federal policies and internal program documents. The federal policies formed the regulatory scheme governing the UB program and established the local context. To gather and identify these federal policies and regulations, I visited the United States Department of Education's TRiO programs page, which included a webpage outlining UB's governance documents. I identified the following pertinent documents: Higher Education Act of 1965, as codified in 20 U.S.C. 1070a-13 et seq. (Upward Bound Program, 2020); and Title 34 Code of Federal Regulations (Upward Bound Program, 2010). The federal legislature created the UB program in 1965 to improve college access with a focus on academic preparation. Internal program documents included the program's grant proposals (which outlined the program's proposed plan of action), summer program schedule, teachers' curriculum materials, and summer training handbooks.

Data Analysis

Analysis occurred alongside data collection. Throughout the six-week summer program, I recorded analytic memoranda (Saldaña, 2016) to track my perceptions of the data and my observations, and to reflect on the practitioners' sensemaking process. I drew on sensemaking theory, CASEL's five SEL categories, and my research question to analyze the data and examine how practitioners made sense of SEL skills amidst a vague educational policy context.

To analyze the policy and program documents, I conducted document review, which "involves skimming (superficial examination), reading (thorough examination), and interpretation" (Bowen, 2009). I began the analysis skimming the federal policy to gain a sense of what the policy mandated and allowed in relation to SEL programming and to identify language in the policy that signaled any emphasis on skills beyond academic mastery. I also skimmed the program documents to gain a sense of the structure of the summer program. Next, I read through the documents thoroughly, specifically coding language in the federal policy that could potentially guide practitioners as they made sense of SEL, such as language that required or permitted programming in support of SEL opportunities. I synthesized the codes into broader themes that explained the policy context in which practitioners conducted their work and made sense of SEL. I also thoroughly read the program documents, which included words and graphics. I coded language and graphics that suggested practitioners were promoting SEL opportunities through various exercises. Lastly, I synthesized the codes into broader themes that explained the context in which the practitioners promoted SEL opportunities through their programming.

To analyze the program observations, I reviewed the fieldnotes systematically, iteratively to understand how the participants translated their abstract understanding of the concept of SEL into concrete action. Specifically, I began by skimming the notes to identify the descriptive notes from the interpretive notes. Next, I read the fieldnotes thoroughly and coded concrete examples of participants engaging in activities that might promote any of the five broad SEL categories described in the CASEL framework. I combined codes into broader categories and themes, focusing on the types of activities the participants used to promote SEL, staff-staff and staff-student interactions involving SEL skills, and how practitioners perceived their policy environment could help them promote or hinder SEL.

To analyze my pre-program and post-program interviews, I used NVivo software, a software designed to facilitate qualitative data analysis and management (NVivo, 2018). My coding process can be described as three cycles: a pre-coding cycle, followed by two coding cycles (see Saldaña,

2016). During the pre-coding cycle, I read each interview thoroughly and created one-page profiles for each participant to further understand each participants' role in the summer program and the process by which each participant made sense of SEL skills. I also noted word-choice that signaled an understanding of SEL skills and went against my initial assumption that the program promoted SEL skills simply by chance.

In the first coding cycle, I analyzed the pre- and post-program interviews inductively, using open coding to generate the breadth of practitioners' understandings of SEL skills. I identified initial descriptive codes (e.g., "promoting socio-emotional skills," and "staff-staff interactions"). After generating these codes, I reviewed the codes to identify overarching categories across the initial codes, for example, "socio-emotional skills in the classroom" and "resources to promote socio-emotional skills."

In the second coding cycle, I used deductive coding, guided by sensemaking theory, the CASEL framework, and my research question. In using sensemaking theory, I began coding the data using *a priori* codes, including "noticing/bracketing phenomenon (SEL and SEL skill-building)," "labeling and making sense of SEL upon reflection," "connecting abstract understanding with concrete action vis-à-vis SEL," "interaction within environment shaping/influencing SEL understanding," "articulating phenomenon (SEL)," "drawing on worldview to inform and make sense of SEL," "restructuring federal and program policies in practice," "leader-staff interaction informing sensemaking," "use of prior knowledge and beliefs to understand leaders' messaging on SEL," and "staff-staff interactions vis-à-vis SEL" (see Weick et al., 2005).

In using CASEL's five SEL categories, I identified and noted whether a practitioner's conceptualization of SEL skills was verbatim one of the five SEL skills, represented several of the skills at the same time, or was a skill not yet identified in the framework. In determining whether a description of SEL skills could be coded within any of the five SEL skills identified in the CASEL framework, I determined whether the practitioners' language resembled the five SEL skills by comparing and contrasting the practitioners' descriptions with the CASEL definitions of SEL skills.

I used my research question as a broad category that included sub-categories and codes that answered how practitioners made sense of SEL skills. Specifically, my research question asked how practitioners made sense of SEL amidst the vague educational policy context. Thus, in addition to using the sensemaking codes listed above, I also coded instances where practitioners referenced ambiguity regarding the program's SEL policy, the meaning of SEL, and relationship between the program SEL policy and their understanding and sensemaking of the concept of SEL. To answer the research question, I integrated the themes across the three data sources.
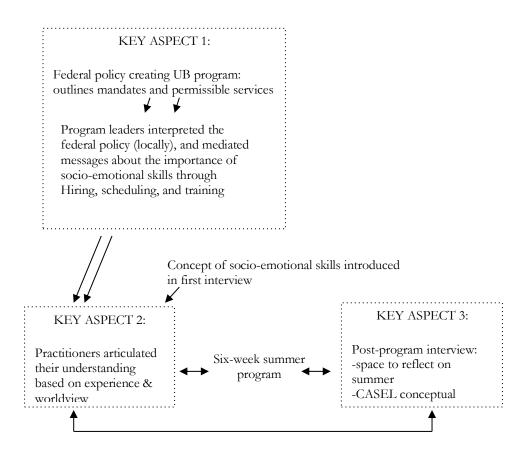
For validity purposes, I triangulated the data. To triangulate the data, I compared my findings against my observation notes, and program documents. I also compared the findings against my analytic memoranda. Through my analysis of the data, the answer to my research question became evident. I discovered that practitioners make sense of SEL skills amidst a vague policy context through a complex iterative process involving key aspects that have the potential to inform policy making and implementation.

Findings

Below, I present three key aspects of the practitioners' sensemaking process during the summer program. The first key aspect I discuss is the federal policy context within which practitioners operated, and the role of program leaders in interpreting the policy and mediating the messages the practitioners receive about the importance of SEL skills. Second, I discuss the practitioners' partial understanding of SEL skills during the pre-program interview. Third, I discuss

the practitioners' understanding of SEL skills during the post-program interview, in which I introduced the CASEL framework as an optional aid. As the practitioners worked in the program throughout the six weeks, these three aspects helped them made sense of SEL. These three key aspects are detailed in Figure 1 below, illustrating the participants' complex sensemaking process. In the remainder of the article, I describe each key aspect in detail.

Figure 1

Conceptualization of the sensemaking process

```
┌ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ┐
:          KEY ASPECT 1:           :
:                                  :
: Federal policy creating UB       :
: program: outlines mandates and   :
: permissible services             :
:            ↓      ↓               :
: Program leaders interpreted the  :
: federal policy (locally), and    :
: mediated messages about the      :
: importance of socio-emotional    :
: skills through Hiring,           :
: scheduling, and training         :
└ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ┘
```

Concept of socio-emotional skills introduced in first interview

```
┌ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ┐          ┌ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ┐
:   KEY ASPECT 2:      :          :   KEY ASPECT 3:      :
:                      :          :                      :
: Practitioners        : Six-week : Post-program         :
: articulated their    : summer   : interview:           :
: understanding based  :←→program←→: -space to reflect    :
: on experience &      :          : on summer            :
: worldview            :          : -CASEL conceptual    :
└ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ┘          └ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ┘
```

Federal Policy Context and the Role of Program Leaders

Time-constrained policy in relation to SEL. Analyzing and understanding the federal policy is important because policies set the mandates and permissible activities of a program, prioritizing certain activities or topics over others. In turn, the policy context can influence practitioners' sensemaking process by limiting access and knowledge available on different topics and concepts, including SEL; practitioners must divert their attention elsewhere. In analyzing the federal UB policy, I found the policy required UB programs to focus the majority of the time on academic activities and allowed for optional permissible services practitioners could adopt to promote SEL opportunities. This time-constrained policy context in relation to SEL skills limited

the amount of time that the practitioners spent learning about and implementing SEL opportunities. I describe the policy scheme next.

The focus of the federal policy was on academic and logistical topics. Academically, the program was mandated to offer tutoring on reading, writing, study skills, mathematics, and science. Curriculum instruction in calculus, lab sciences, foreign languages, and composition and literature was required for programs that received funding for more than two years (Upward Bound Program, 2020, 20 U.S.C. §1070a-13[b]–[c]). The UB program in this study received funding for more than two years. Logistically, the program was required to assist students select courses in higher education, prepare college applications, expose the families to a variety of financial aid options and teach them financial literacy and how to complete aid applications (Upward Bound Program, 2020, 20 U.S.C. §1070a-13[b]). Similarly, if students in the program dropped out of secondary school, the program was required to assist them with options for school reentry or other education options, including a general education development (GED) certificate.

While the policy requirements focused on academics and logistics, the policy also allowed for other activities that promoted SEL opportunities. The five CASEL categories can be useful in describing the permissible activities. UB programs could promote social awareness, for example, by adopting cultural events, academic services, and activities that disadvantaged students traditionally do not have available. UB programs could promote relationship skills by providing an on-campus residential program for students to build community amongst themselves. UB could also promote self-awareness (identifying strengths and weaknesses) and responsible decision-making: exposing students to a range of careers, mentoring programs with K-20 teachers, and work opportunities with exposure to professionals with postsecondary degrees. Finally, the programs could also develop activities to promote any of the five SEL skills—relationship skills, responsible decision-making, social awareness, self-awareness, self-management—and target certain student populations. The populations included "those traditionally underrepresented in postsecondary education," students with disabilities, with limited English proficiency, those experiencing homelessness, those aging out of the foster care system, or other "disconnected youth" (Upward Bound Program, 2020, 20 U.S.C. §1070a-13[d]). Finally, the program could provide any other activity that helped promote the purpose of the program.

The role of local program leaders in interpreting federal policy and mediating messages about the importance of SEL skills. Working within the local environment established by the federal policy, the program leaders interpreted and reshaped the policy (see McLaughlin, 1991; Spillane, 1996) and found three avenues to communicate to practitioners the importance of SEL skills: hiring, scheduling, and training. The leaders first hired practitioners, and then created a schedule enriched with permissible activities that promoted SEL opportunities. Finally, the weeks prior to the summer program, the leaders offered training to the practitioners. These three avenues sent the message to practitioners that promoting SEL skills mattered in the program, and in turn, these messages influenced how practitioners made sense of SEL skills. I describe each avenue next.

Hiring. In informal conversations before, during, and after the summer program concluded, the director shared that she hired practitioners who were committed to promoting SEL skills (see Muñiz, 2020, for a detailed discussion on the hiring process). In the interviews, she used phrases such as "well-rounded citizens" and "soft skills" to describe skills mattered to her in hiring summer staff and to describe the skills that she hoped practitioners would help the students develop. Holden, one of the counselors, confirmed the statements, explaining that the leaders "purposely tried to hire a staff that would be connecting with the students and worrying about their needs." Holden and Truman described these needs as encompassing students' emotional, social, and mental health well-being.

One of the implications of hiring practitioners with the same interest in promoting SEL skills was that practitioners were surrounded by peers who shared that same interest. The program leaders reinforced the practitioners' latent understandings and values about SEL skills through messages in the schedule and trainings about the importance of SEL.

Schedule. The analysis of the internal program documents showed that the summer schedule was dominated by permissible services, even in the time-constrained environment. Table 2 illustrates that students spent approximately 32 hours of the week dedicated to academic activities, and approximately 41.5 hours engaging in permissible activities that promoted SEL skills more explicitly than academic courses. Unsurprisingly, the practitioners reported that the packed schedule exhausted some students and the practitioners as well.

Table 2
Schedule for Average Week in 2017 Summer Program

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
8:00 a.m. 5:00 p.m.	9 hours	9 hours	9 hours (college tours)	9 hours	5 hours Home-bound	Home	Campus-bound
10:30 p.m.	5.5 hours	5.5 hours	5.5 hours	5.5 hours			~ 5.5 hours

The required academic courses were offered Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday of the six-week summer program. The courses ranged from 40-105 minutes. These required services accounted for the majority of the students' day time, from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. The students went home for the weekend.

After ensuring that all required services were in place, the program leaders filled the remainder of the students' time in the summer program with as many as possible permissible services. The majority of these permissible services included activities that promoted relationship skills: for example, ice-breakers, team sports, and networking events. These activities also promoted social awareness through culturally-enriching activities, such as attending theatrical plays and Broadway shows. They also exposed students to college life, taking them on local campus tours. In sum, the leaders' explicit statements that they wanted to help the students develop soft skills and twenty-first century skills, both phrases used to describe SEL, were reflected in the schedule.

Training. The analysis of the program documents, triangulated with the observations and interviews, showed that the trainings influenced the sensemaking process by reinforcing the importance of promoting SEL skills. However, the trainings remained variant in what they called the skills, which might account for the practitioners' varied responses in answering whether they received program training on SEL during the summer. To be clear, the trainers discussed SEL, but similarly to the field of SEL, they used numerous concepts and phrases to describe the same skills and described different skills using the same concepts or phrases (see Osher et al., 2016). Table 3 explains the breakdown of the training by group, which I explain in detail below.

Table 3
Practitioners Trainings for Summer 2017

	Student Safety	Pedagogy (focus on student motivation, self-awareness and self-management)	Ethical Literacy (responsible decision-making)	Week-Long Training (numerous sessions on relationship skills)
Leaders	✔			
Instructors	✔			
Residential mentors	✔			✔

Note. ✔ represents required training.

The internal program documents and my observations showed that program leaders offered required and optional summer trainings that emphasized the importance of SEL skills. The program leaders required all practitioners to train on student safety and mandatory reporting. The majority of the training documents on student safety focused on teaching practitioners how to supervise the students responsibly during the six weeks. Leaders then offered different types of trainings for each group of practitioners. Program leaders had no summer training requirements, but did receive other types of training throughout the year, including attending conferences on cultural competence and trauma-informed education. These training opportunities were both offered through the program and sought by the program leaders.

The program leaders offered two types of optional training sessions for the instructors: pedagogy (two sessions) and ethical literacy (one session). The pedagogy sessions included discussions on the importance of student motivation and engagement, and activities on how to motivate students. Brooklyn, the instructor tasked with giving the trainings, described the allocation of time for the two half-day trainings as follows:

> I wanted to find a balance between doing things like lesson planning and more classroom management ideas. Also, talking about things like student motivation and giving students feedback. Because I think with the group [sic] kids that are in this program, that those types of topics are important. Because many of these kids, maybe, don't feel motivated in school, or they don't have family members or other mentors to make them feel motivated, or like they can be successful. I thought it would be important to talk about those things. I would say, I spend about 50% of the time talking about lesson planning and classroom management and then, I spend about 50% of the time talking about feedback, setting goals, motivation, where these students are at in their lives.

The ethical literacy session focused on the importance of helping students learn about ethical decision-making throughout their courses. The instructors were not required to attend.

In contrast, the residential mentors were required to train for a full week, from 9:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. The trainings included activities focused on the importance of relationship skills. To illustrate, each training session included an ice-breaker or team-building activity, and the week included a two-hour session titled "Moving Barriers & Understanding Boundaries of Relationship Building with our Students." Finally, the training included a discussion on the importance of listening skills, a discussion about tools to be a better listener, and a session on how to approach discipline of students being sensitive to the students' needs.

The interviews showed that practitioners made sense of the messages on the importance of SEL skills, but remained vague in their conceptualization of these skills and on whether these skills

were covered in the trainings at all. For example, three leaders said SEL skills training was offered for instructors and residential mentors only. The two other leaders expressed confusion about the concept of SEL skills, and said they received no training on SEL skills for the summer. The majority of the instructors who attended trainings described them as "food for thought" or training on "general overview of curriculum," such as setting learning objectives. Only two instructors discussed the trainings as perhaps promoting other skills and did so with ambivalence. For example, in response to whether she received training on SEL skills, Rae responded "No. I don't want to say no, but no. Not that I'm aware, but maybe it was subtle. I can't be sure. But I bring my own emotional intelligence training to the platform." In contrast, all residential mentors described the training they received as useful, thorough, and informative in helping students with non-academic issues, and three explicitly said they received training on SEL skills. The variance in responses might be attributed to the differences in training length and content, varied language used to describe SEL, or to the context of the practitioners' work, i.e., inside versus outside the classroom.

In sum, the local context established by the federal policy was time-constrained and primarily reinforced academic success. However, in restructuring the policy, the leaders sent the practitioners messages about the importance of SEL. First, they purposely hired practitioners who shared their values vis-à-vis SEL (Muñiz, 2020) and then they reinforced the practitioners' latent understandings and values about SEL via the schedule and trainings.

Partial Understanding of SEL Skills at the Start of the Program

In the practitioners' sensemaking process of SEL skills throughout the six weeks, they articulated their conceptualization of SEL during the pre-program interview, which remained partial. The partial conceptualization remained somewhat vague and lacked coherence across the practitioners. Though the practitioners' conceptualization was partial, vague, and lacked coherence, their conceptualization can be summarized as most akin to relationship skills. With the exception of one instructor, no practitioner conceptualized SEL expansively enough to encompass all five skills in the CASEL framework. Furthermore, responsible decision-making was largely left out; only four practitioners referenced the skill. Table 4 summarizes which skills the practitioners referenced in conceptualizing SEL. Next, I describe their partial understanding, differentiating between each group because each group had different roles, which in turn, influenced how they made sense of SEL.

Table 4
Conceptualizing Socio-Emotional Skills

	Self-awareness	Self-management	Social-awareness	Relationship skills	Responsible decision-making
Truman		✔	✔	✔	✔
Holden		✔		✔	
Cecile			✔		
Talin			✔	✔	
Arnold				✔	
Bette			✔		
Brooklyn	✔		✔		
Donna	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔

Table 4 cont.
Conceptualizing Socio-Emotional Skills

	Self-awareness	Self-management	Social-awareness	Relationship skills	Responsible decision-making
Dortha	✔				
Edna	✔	✔	✔	✔	
Franklin		✔	✔	✔	
Maddox	✔			✔	
Rae	✔	✔	✔		✔
Wilton	✔	✔	✔	✔	
Bernard	✔			✔	
Bobby				✔	
Dollie				✔	
Joanne					✔
Lucy		✔		✔	
Travis	✔	✔			
Wilber				✔	
Wilda	✔			✔	
Total	**10**	**9**	**10**	**15**	**4**

The majority of practitioners, 15 out of 22, referenced relationship skills in their conceptualization of SEL skills, two describing SEL skills solely as relationship skills. In describing relationship skills, all practitioners emphasized the importance of interpersonal skills, forging connections and bonds with diverse groups, and learning to listen to other perspectives. For example, Truman shared the type of social support he hoped to provide the students:

> Socially, I think it is simply developing a community. Helping the students feel that they have a sense of belonging in that community. It's a community with rules and expectations. It's a community where we tell students, "Conduct yourselves in a way so that … your words aren't insensitive, your actions are not acts of intolerance." . . . That's where we do the social stuff and that is really a major task of the residential [mentors], since they're around them for much longer…than we are. That's where that social emotional development happens… in that residential community setting.

In the quote above, Truman emphasized the importance of helping students thrive in a community designed to be diverse in numerous ways, and learn to respect others' perspectives. He perceived that most relationship skills development took place in the residential halls, after school hours.

Residential mentors also conceptualized SEL skills as akin to relationship skills. Out of eight residential mentors participating, only two did not make any reference to relationship skills and three conceptualized SEL skills only as relationship skills. The residential mentors specifically referenced the importance of listening skills and communication among students who shared similarities and differences. For example, Wilber described what SEL skills he hoped to teach the students:

> … just the way you ask questions without being too intrusive, asking open-ended questions using how and what, instead of just asking "why?" or answering or giving questions that could be answered with the yes or no, it's very important so people

> feel like they can open up more. I feel like that's actually one of the most important things in understanding how important conversation is and how you go about it.

Residential mentors also highlighted the importance of communicating with others, learning to prepare well-thought out responses and listening. For example, Bernard shared that he hoped to help the students improve the following: "Response. They're good at listening but their responses aren't necessarily well thought out." While Bernard perceived the need to help the students create better responses in conversations with other students as crucial, Bobby described SEL skills in relation to helping students become better listeners:

> Socio-emotional skills: a big one is—and I'm not sure—is listening [to] one another…. I feel they always are looking for somebody to talk to but there is always another side to the person who's talking, and that's the person who's listening. That's many times why many of the students feel lonely, because although they're looking for somebody to talk to, there are not as many of those that we know [that] would listen.

Similarly, Dollie, another residential mentor, focused on the importance of creating relationships:

> So, I want to really get them to branch out of their comfort zone to people outside of their comfort zone, activities outside of their comfort zone. And of course, it's good to be able to just relax, and be on your own. But they are really good at that…. I want them to talk to each other about things that they usually don't talk about, and just get them to leave their comfort zone. Not go into an uncomfortable zone, but you don't talk about bugs, ask her about bugs. Let's have this conversation. It's also interesting to hear other people's interests.

Other residential mentors described SEL skills similarly, however, I have included the descriptions that are most detailed and concise.

The residential mentors exhibited the narrowest conceptualization of SEL skills across the three groups. They did not make any reference to social-awareness, only one referenced the importance of responsible decision-making, two mentioned self-management, and three mentioned self-awareness. One difference between the residential mentors, instructors, and leaders is that the residential mentors received an intense one-week training, which focused on listening skills, building relationships, and creating community. Their responses suggest the training influenced their sensemaking of SEL skills by directing their attention to the concept of relationship skills.

Although the instructors were tasked with teaching courses and helping students academically, they also found ways to teach students SEL skills through academics. The instructors were unique inasmuch as they conceptualized SEL skills more comprehensively than program leaders or residential mentors. Their emphasis was not limited or narrowly focused on relationship skills. When they did reference relationship skills, they focused on meaningful interactions and the importance of understanding others to form better bonds. For example, Arnold shared:

> I think diversifying the classroom would help their [SEL skills,] assuming that they have meaningful contact with each other…. There were a couple of studies, I think back in the desegregation era, where the research looked at whether or not putting black students and white students in the same school would help relations. They found out…that that didn't really help…. What did help was when they started having meaningful interactions … and actually working together towards a common goal; that helped relations. I think, that probably will happen in this program.

The other instructors gave similar responses, emphasizing "cooperation," "how you apply your different emotions in the social complex," and "being able to communicate" with others.

The extent of their conceptualizations also influenced their implementation throughout the summer program, time within which they continued to make sense of SEL skills. For example, Donna, who showed the most comprehensive conceptualization of SEL skills described how she remained attentive to the students' SEL needs in all respects, even when requesting her classroom assignment. She chose a room with large glass windows, next to an outdoor garden:

> [Sometimes students say] "I hate this, I want to go home", and I'm like, "Okay, you hate being here, and you want to leave." Then, very quickly they deescalate themselves. They don't really want to leave. They don't really hate it here…. They just feel really frustrated, and they need that to be validated and then be given a moment to just chill out for a sec[ond. O]ne of the reasons that teaching at [the M-building] was so nice is that we worked there for three hours several days. I really ha[d] the resources [to help them] regulate [themselves] in terms of feeling sleepy or feeling angry…. [To one of the students, I was] just like, "Let's go walk around the garden for a little bit." We were right next to that nice, green outdoor space, and I was just like "We just need to do a lap. Go get a drink. Your feelings are validated. I hear you. I think you need a second to think about this, but go and use the restroom or take a walk or get a drink or wash your face."

Donna described her classroom request as intentional, with the hope to have a resource to help students further develop self-management skills. She brought a breadth of experience in trauma-sensitive education practice, having taught refugee children with past traumatic experiences for numerous years. In contrast, consider Brooklyn, who had a less robust conceptualization of SEL. She expressed her challenges in helping students with self-management skills:

> You'll learn the students pretty quickly—who's going to do the work and who's not. Then, I particularly would walk to the ones that aren't doing the work, and I would just keep going over to them and say, "I expect you to be doing this. I expect you to be filling this out" …. I had a few students who really just didn't want to do the work, and they would constantly say things like, "Can we just turn in one packet for each group, or can we just watch a movie today?" … With those students especially, I think that they were struggling a lot with their management. I also think there were some motivational issues…. So, for them, after it persisted for a while, I tried to be a little bit more strict and say, "You're expected to do this work, that's why you're here. I need you to do it, because we take plenty of breaks and do plenty of fun things that when we're working, manage your work." I think it helped for most of the students. There was one student, I don't think she ever got it. I think she just didn't want to be here.... I basically just thought, well my job is to teach them [science], and not to help them with these [self-management] skills. I just basically ignored it, which I guess is not the best approach; I shouldn't have probably done that. But, I didn't know how else to deal with it.

To be clear, Brooklyn shared other experiences in which she promoted SEL skills throughout the summer, and these were reflected in my field observations as well. Her statement, however, points to the difficulty in addressing the students' immediate SEL needs and her perceived lack of guidance as to how to address these challenges. Her commitment to promoting SEL skills was evident in the first interview, in which she explained how she hoped to help students with SEL skills, and how she perceived that the training she taught would help others learn how to promote SEL skills. Thus, she

did not express a lack of desire to promote SEL opportunities but rather frustration in practice. The remainder of the participants shared similar experiences in practice. In sum, at the beginning of the program, the practitioners lacked conceptual understanding of SEL, focusing on relationship skills, but exhibited a commitment to promote the skills they valued but did not fully articulate. Their conceptualization influenced implementation throughout the six weeks.

Fuller Understanding of the Concept Using a Conceptual Framework

A third key aspect in the practitioners' sensemaking process was the usefulness of an SEL framework, which provided most practitioners a conceptual organizing scheme and greater conceptual clarity. After the program concluded, I interviewed the participants again and provided them the CASEL framework along with the skills' definitions (see Table 1). Most practitioners drew the framework closer to them as they responded, and the analysis showed that referencing the framework helped them make explicit their latent understandings of SEL. What follows are examples that illustrate how the conceptual framework made explicit the practitioners' latent understandings of SEL skills.

The CASEL framework served as a useful conceptual organizational scheme and provided greater conceptual clarity for most participants. To illustrate, consider the following examples of program leader's, instructor's, and residential mentor's conceptualization at the beginning of the program compared to their conceptualization drawing on the CASEL framework. For example, at the beginning of the program a leader described the SEL skills he wanted to promote:

> Independence, maturity, the ability to overcome adversity. Also, that our students have, some of them, are coming or maybe a majority of them are coming from a very dysfunctional situation. Whether it's in their families, they have to overcome some sort of adversity whether it's health, health issues, family, whatever. For me, it's developing that grit that's necessary to get through and navigate through today's world, today's culture…. [S]ome of them are afraid to come out of their shell. They're in their comfort zones. We try to bring them out of their comfort zone…

His response is coherent in discussing some of the different skills that he considered to be included in the concept of SEL. At the same time, the response remained nebulous, mixing multiple related skills without fully unpacking these skills. For example, he referenced independence and maturity, which can be characterized as consistent with self-awareness and self-management skills. He also mentions the ability to overcome adversity, a skill that can be captured through the concept of grit. He references grit by name, but also references the importance of navigating today's world and culture, skills that fall within CASEL's social awareness and relationship skills. Finally, he references the importance of stepping out of their comfort zone, a skill that can be captured with the relationship skills category. His conceptualization of SEL skills is not erroneous or misplaced, but it is evident that his understanding at that point was still developing; thus, most of the articulation remained chaotic inasmuch as it lacked conceptual coherence. Consider his response in the post-program interview, when he held the CASEL framework in hand as he spoke:

> [T]he one for me that really speaks out is responsible decision-making. That [happened,] again, through the planning and through the courses and stuff, but also during study halls. When I had to go in there and talk to them about measuring their words, measuring their actions, and to quit fooling around and get a job done, in terms of getting the homework done…. I think it [also] happened in a classroom with instructors. It happened during group talks, during study halls. It happened with any one on one interaction that I had with the students…. I was happy that during that big activity where that catharsis occurred, that one of the students that I never

> expected would say that as, "I heard that someone told us a memo. We have to think
> about our words." . . . [A] lot of policies and a lot of things that I do in [the program]
> handbook, in the residential [mentors] manual, really fall on responsible decision-
> making.

His post-program response is more comprehensive and in-depth compared to his original
conceptualization at the beginning of the program. He did not go through every single definition in
the CASEL framework but was able to identify one skill that most resonated with his role in the
program. Then, he was able to offer an in-depth description of how the summer program promoted
that skill. The framework helped him organize his actions in promoting SEL skills.

    Instructors followed a similar trend: the conceptual framework was useful as a conceptual
organization scheme. Consider Edna's response to the pre-program question regarding what SEL
skills she hoped to teach the students throughout the summer.

> Well, being able to communicate and to be self-aware of their limits, and, again, to
> know where they need help or support. I'm trying to think of resources I could have.
> I don't know. I don't know if I would be doing them directly. I mean, for example,
> with time management and budgeting and these different skills they are going to
> need for college—I think that indirectly they are going to impact on the social
> emotional skills. But I don't think that I have a specific activity that is mainly for
> that…. [I hope they also learn] self-awareness to maybe understand better their
> motivations for going to college. Maybe, they just know that they want to go to
> college, but they haven't really thought why. What would be that thing that would
> motivate them to say, "Yes, I want to make this because I want to be the first one in
> my family to graduate."… Communication: I mean, their personal relationships
> when they are working in groups; distributing their time. I don't know.

Similar to the leader's response, Edna's response included references to multiple SEL skills, such as
relationship skills and self-awareness. She ended her thought admitting that she remained ambivalent
and not too confident in her conceptualization of SEL skills. She also discussed the skills
interchangeably and did not fully describe any one skill in depth. At the outset of the program she
had the will and intention to promote SEL skills, but was unsure how to make sense of the concept.
Consider her post-program response to the same question about the SEL skills she taught students:

> [S]elf-awareness: I definitely covered that with a lot of reflection activities and these
> tests to know more about themselves . . . I think that helped [them] a lot. Self-
> management, definitely. I covered stress management, self-motivation to keep
> working on their goals and having all these plans….I asked them about what
> happens when a person stresses out, emotionally, physically, so that they could see
> the seriousness of the consequences of stress. And from there everybody would say
> how they usually feel, and then at the end of that activity, I gave them a list of
> different activities that they could do to fight stress. I think it was actually divided by
> the sense, like visually, listening, I don't remember the ones [included]. They would
> have to pick the ones that they could really feel they could practice. That was the
> stress management [example]…. Social-awareness: empathy, it was formally touched.
> Appreciation, diversity as well, respect as well…. Relationship skills: communication,
> engagement in the class, teamwork. All that was included too. I guess decision-
> making: being responsible for their assignments, and also during the activities in
> reflecting what we're doing and how would they apply to their situation, solving
> problems in the group activities…. Reflecting, stress management, goal setting,

>organizational skills, self-confidence, recognizing strengths, analyzing situations, I
>think that overall self-management would be a big one…

Her response follows the same pattern as the leader's response. Edna identified a skill and proceeded to map that skill to her actions. Weick et al. (2005) identify that process in the sensemaking trajectory as one in which the individual is labeling, communicating what the individual considered complex and abstract prior to the label. In her case, she identified how she promoted each of the five SEL skills in her classroom. The final example comes from a residential mentor. The residential mentors received the most in-depth training on SEL skills, with a focus on relationship skills. In the pre-program interview, residential mentors focused on aspects of relationship skills. Consider Wilber's response when asked what SEL skills he hoped to teach the students:

>I want to explain to the students how important body language [is]…and how there
>are many easily readable things that people do naturally that are very obvious, that
>are very telling, and they might not even notice it.

His response evidenced his commitment to promote skills beyond academics, as well as his ability to draw on his knowledge of skills that are important. Before joining UB, Wilber worked at a university program that facilitated difficult dialogues among parties. Pre-program, Wilber identified the importance of relationship skills, without labeling these skills as such. He was much more focused on describing how this set of skills translated into what he hoped to promote throughout the summer program. In contrast, consider his post-program response to the same question:

>Definitely empathy. Definitely again teaching them to understand other perspectives.
>Confidence always, and encouraging them, having . . . like the confidence even when
>somebody isn't always there to support them, they can support themselves….
>Communication skills: this was a big thing with [the] capstone [project], improving
>patience. There are some really amazing public speakers in that group, but then also
>with the ones that aren't… It's giving them steps going forward. There was a two-
>for-one combo thing: one of… the circles was to improve public speaking, and I'd
>given [a student] a couple of tips as time went on. I just watched a TedTalk not too
>long before, and long story short, I told her after her capstone presentation, "When
>you breathe out that's when you talk. It gives you a moment. That's what might give
>you time to speak so you're not rushing or your words [are not rushing], and just
>going without a purpose of what you're speaking."

Wilber's response above is generally more comprehensive. He identified several different skills and was able to identify how these made sense in the context of the activities he engaged. The conceptual framework helped the practitioners organize their abstract understanding about SEL skills, identifying how they might have promoted one or several SEL skills during the summer program. In the iteration process of sensemaking, according to the sensemaking theory (Weick et al., 2005), this fuller conceptualization of SEL skills likely informed the practitioners prior understanding and worldviews as well.

Notably, though most of the participants found the CASEL framework useful, a few practitioners reported experiences in practice that did not conform with the framework. These experiences can be captured in three interrelated categories: issues of morality, ethnoracial diversity, and issues of trauma. For example, a residential mentor and a leader explained that they hoped to teach the students "to do the right thing morally" by "just talking to them about morality," and they spent countless hours doing so. Practitioners interested in promoting morality and furthering students' cultural capital found little guidance in the framework during the post-program interview.

Other practitioners described the importance of ethnoracial diversity and embracing the cultural capital African American and Latinx students brought to the program. Some practitioners emphasized the importance of building community and creating a sense of family and belonging in the program. The practitioners explained that once they built these relationships that fostered community and valued different cultural capital, students expressed greater trust and were more likely to reach out for help, which sometimes led to improved academic performance.

Additionally, the framework gave practitioners a label that described the importance of respecting cultural differences ("social awareness") but did not provide much more guidance on how to achieve meaningful integration. The program brought ethnoracially diverse students together during the summer but did not train staff on how to improve social awareness skills in students. Thus, practitioners were unsure about how to discuss political differences among students when, for example, students voiced support for building a wall in front of (im)migrant students or when someone voiced ethnoracial stereotypes. The participants found the framework accounted for the importance of cultural competence but did not provide much more guidance.

Lastly, the framework described five SEL categories that help students be socially and emotionally competent but were presented without accounting for issues of trauma. Some instructors perceived that some students sometimes felt less motivated because of past trauma. These students, the instructors thought, could benefit from learning self-management skills. Some instructors, such as Donna and Rae, drew on their own training on trauma-sensitive education and emotional intelligence to offer the students guidance, but other instructors were less sure how to approach the situations. Other instructors described similar trauma-related challenges during the program, which they thought hindered students' ability to participate in SEL opportunities. For example, a teacher created an exercise to promote relationship skills among students but one student received a call from home that left her feeling anxious and distraught. The teacher's focus shifted to ensuring the student's emotional wellbeing; the student did not participate in the activity and contemplated leaving the program.

Discussion

In this section, I first present a summary of the findings and then discuss how the findings inform our prior understanding of sensemaking in policy implementation and conceptual clarity in the field. I found three key aspects in practitioners' process in making sense of SEL skills amidst the vague policy context (See Figure 1). First, the federal policy influenced the sensemaking process by establishing the local environment in which practitioners must operate. In this environment, the role of the program leaders became crucial. The leaders interpreted the federal policy and communicated their interpretation to all practitioners, sending messages about the importance of SEL skills through hiring, scheduling, and training. Second, the practitioners articulated their understanding of SEL skills at the beginning of the program, displaying a partial understanding of the concept. Articulation is important in the sensemaking process because it helps make abstract understandings concrete (Weick et al., 2005). Third, in articulating the concept of SEL skills after the conclusion of the program, a conceptual framework (CASEL) was useful as an organizing scheme and in providing greater clarity, though a few practitioners reported experiences that the framework did not capture.

Aligning Policy Mandates and Permissible Services with SEL Views

This study supports and extends the research on policy sensemaking (see Coburn, 2001, 2005; Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2019; Schechter et al., 2018; Spillane et al., 2002; Spillane et al., 2003; White & Mavrogordato, 2018) into the compensatory education realm and unpacks the process. Within the program context, the practitioners were primarily governed by a federal policy

that was time-constrained (Upward Bound Program, 2020, 20 U.S.C. §1070a-13[b]–[d]) and had not adopted language on the importance of SEL, yet the practitioners valued promoting SEL. Because these values and beliefs formed the frameworks of their realities (see Porac et al., 1989; Weick, 1995) and because educators rely on their prior knowledge and beliefs to make sense of the messages that leaders communicate to them (Jonson et al., 2017; Spillane et al., 2003), the practitioners found avenues to promote SEL. Practitioners enriched the schedule with permissible services that promoted SEL deliberately, instructors incorporated activities that furthered SEL, and residential mentors engaged in activities and conversations that promoted SEL. While the practitioners did not frustrate the policy mandates that focused on academics (see, e.g., Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Odden, 1991; Schmidt & Datnow, 2005; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977), they did restructure the policy in practice by finding avenues to promote SEL (see Coburn, 2001, 2005; Spillane et al., 2002; Spillane et al., 2003).

The avenues the leaders found to promote SEL within their time-constrained context also helped them align SEL practices with the program's mandates to develop academic skills. How to successfully align practices that promote SEL alongside academic skills is a gap present in the SEL field (Osher et al., 2016). In aligning both practices, however, the practitioners experienced challenges. First, the leaders prioritized hiring practitioners that valued SEL and offered some training on SEL skills but were unclear on how the program defined SEL and did not provide further guidance in practice. This challenge likely influenced the practitioners' partial conceptualization of SEL at the beginning of the program and led to differences in implementation. Second, in enriching the schedule with SEL-focused activities alongside academic courses, the practitioners promoted SEL opportunities consistently throughout the summer program. Yet, inclusion of continual activities left little time for students or practitioners to rest. Some practitioners reported feeling stressed and burned-out. Thus, though the program did not provide simple strategies that practitioners can adopt in practice regularly (see Education First, 2017; Jones & Bouffard, 2012), the analysis did show at least three avenues in compensatory education that can help in aligning academic and SEL practices: hiring, scheduling, and training. These avenues would likely need improvement. For example, clearer training might improve conceptual clarity.

The study also supports and extends prior research on the importance of the role of educational leaders in the policy implementation process from the school context (Coburn, 2001, 2005; Education First, 2017) into compensatory education. While some studies have found that educators within the school context need regular supports, such as training and coaching, to implement SEL policies (Davies & Cooper, 2013; Education First, 2017; McGraw-Hill Education, 2018; Trach, Lee & Hymel, 2018), the field of SEL still lacks research on how to improve educators' buy-in and the quality of implementation (Osher et al., 2016). This study contributes to the body of research on the role of the program leaders in promoting SEL policy implementation. In the program, the role of the leaders became markedly important in the time-constrained policy context, because the leaders mediated the information and messages the practitioners received. The leaders prioritized SEL skills content and activities to include in the schedule and trainings (see Coburn, 2005). The leaders' role was necessary in strategically planning and intentionally designing a program that promoted SEL. Their role was also influential in the hiring process, because the leaders had the latitude to decide which practitioners participated in the summer program and in what roles (see Leithwood, 2004).

The Value of Conceptual Clarity in Making Sense of SEL Skills

Conceptual clarity in the field of SEL matters and has direct implications for research, policy, and practice (Education First, 2017). As discussed above, a lack of conceptual clarity can lead to a lack of alignment among the skills policymakers and practitioners hope to promote in students

through their policies, the implementation of the policies in practice, the skills students develop, and the skills researchers assess and evaluate (Explore SEL, n.d.a). The leaders had ideas about promoting SEL skills, as evidenced by their pre- and post-program discussions regarding the importance of promoting skills beyond academic mastery. While the emphasis on skills beyond academic mastery informed the leaders' hiring and programming, the summer staff implementing practices to promote these skills lacked clear guidance about how to implement practices that promoted the skills that mattered to the program leaders and practitioners. The leaders also lacked guidance from the federal policy; the policy did not explicitly describe the value of SEL skills and did not require programming to promote SEL. The lack of conceptual clarity in the policy and program led to different and partial conceptualizations of SEL across practitioners, which in turn, led to different practices targeting the promotion of certain SEL skills in the application of practitioners' conceptualizations.

For example, in describing their understanding of SEL skills, a practitioner described a lack of guidance regarding SEL in the federal and program policies and also his understanding of the capital that different students brought to the classroom. In describing the skills he hoped to promote (i.e., grit—a skill criticized for its lack of regard of structural inequities), he also shared his understanding of the student population: "some of them, are coming or maybe a majority of them are coming from a very dysfunctional situation." Deficit-based narratives of students and lack of understanding regarding structural inequities can frustrate the implementation of SEL practices. (Kennedy, 2019; Trach et al., 2018). An asset-based framework that accounts for structural inequities hindering students' abilities to develop their SEL skills can help leaders frame SEL development as asset-based and contextualize structural inequities for practitioners as they work with students (Kennedy, 2019).

In this study, the CASEL framework was a useful conceptual organizing scheme aiding practitioners in making sense of the concept of SEL skills, though a few exceptions were present. This finding implies that in the midst of ambiguity and change in education policy embracing SEL skills (Kennedy, 2019; Osher et al., 2016), having clearer conceptual clarity prior to interacting with students may help practitioners make sense of the SEL skills they must promote. It is true that in this case study, the practitioners promoted SEL skills even though they had a partial and vague understanding of the concept at the start of the program. However, practitioners and policymakers should not rely on the hope that other practitioners will do the same. One difference that made these practitioners unique is that they valued SEL skills even before being introduced to the concept, schedule, or trainings. The program director shared multiple times that she intentionally hired practitioners who shared her same values about SEL skills and helping the students further these skills. What is more appropriate to conclude from the data is that conceptual clarity is crucial (see Explore SEL, n.d.a; Osher et al., 2016).

If conceptual clarity matters, which framework should education programs adopt? The response to the question depends on the SEL skills the program needs and/or hopes to promote. The field of education abounds with concepts and taxonomies to ascribe to these skills (Explore SEL, n.d.d; Osher et al., 2016; Sánchez Puerta et al., 2016), and researchers do not seem to agree which one should dominate the debate (see Duckworth & Yeager, 2015; National Research Council, 2012; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2017; Shechtman, et al., 2013; West et al., 2016). Again, the existence of numerous SEL frameworks is not in and of itself problematic, but the lack of conceptual clarity in the field, policy, and practice can raise issues of misalignments that frustrate policy implementation and educational research on SEL.

With a few caveats, this study supports the use of the CASEL framework defining five SEL categories: social awareness, self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. The practitioners were not aware of the framework when making sense of the SEL

skills at the beginning of the program. They described the concept expansively. Still, the analysis showed that their conceptualizations were largely, but not entirely, captured by the CASEL framework. Similarly, at the end of the program, the practitioners mapped the majority of their actions promoting SEL opportunities throughout the summer program to the CASEL framework.

Limitations of the CASEL Framework

The CASEL framework had two main limitations in the study. First, a few participants identified issues not explicitly acknowledged or described in the CASEL framework: the importance of morality in decision-making; embracement and development of African American and Latinx students' cultural capital; and the role of trauma in relation to the five skills (Kennedy, 2019; Osher, Pamela, Berg, Steyer & Rose, 2017; Pawlo, Lorenzo, Eichert & Elias, 2019. Second, while the framework described five skills and provided the practitioners greater conceptual clarity, it did not provide much guidance about how to promote the five skills, especially when issues such as ethnoracial tension or trauma arose (Baker & Clark, 2017; Manning-Oulette & Beatty, 2019). The acknowledgment of and guidance on issues that may arise is critical because, as this study shows, without more guidance, practitioners can value SEL but may remain unsure about how to promote SEL opportunities or may give up on their efforts to promote SEL (Education First, 2017).

CASEL has implemented important changes to the framework but has room to improve. CASEL has begun to explore how structural inequities impact SEL and the importance of embracing the cultural capital of students from marginalized communities (Measuring SEL, 2018a). However, the five skills in the framework do not yet reflect the changes. Additionally, CASEL has not yet fully included trauma-informed ideas into the framework (CASEL, n.d.a). A growing body of literature discusses the importance of making all SEL frameworks trauma-informed because these frameworks are adopted across all contexts and students with trauma are learning across all different contexts (Kennedy, 2019; Osher et al., 2017; Pawlo et al., 2019).

Implications for Policy and Equity

Program-Level

Compensatory education leaders operating under time-constrained policy contexts and who have the desire to promote SEL opportunities need to identify the avenues through which they can promote SEL opportunities, and then adopt explicit or implicit program policies that align with these interests. This study identifies three avenues: hiring, scheduling, and training. A program policy to hire practitioners who are also interested in promoting SEL opportunities can be an approach to bring together a group of practitioners who share similar appreciation for SEL. A program policy to find as many possibilities within the program schedule to promote SEL skills can ensure that the practitioners who are already willing to promote SEL skills have a space through which they can promote these skills. Finally, a program's training policies on SEL skills can provide practitioners with knowledge and examples on how to promote SEL skills, as did UB's training on relationship skills. Training on SEL skills can also help reinforce the message in the environment about the importance of SEL skills, though the quality of the training matters as well. A conceptual framework, such as the CASEL framework, can guide the trainings but should also account for the students' unique needs—such as the importance of cultural capital and addressing trauma.

Policymaking Level

As they craft laws and policies, policymakers who aim to support traditionally disadvantaged students develop skills beyond academic content mastery (e.g., SEL skills) need to adopt clearer

conceptual frameworks or standards regarding the SEL skills they hope to promote. One reason why the practitioners in this study seemed less certain about the meaning of SEL was likely related to a lack of a framework in the federal or program policy. Their conceptualization became clearer after receiving a conceptual framework. As the study shows, CASEL's framework was comprehensive enough to account for most of the practitioners' conceptualizations. Another reason practitioners had to find creative ways to promote SEL opportunities throughout the summer was because their time was constrained by a policy that focused on academics and on helping students learn the logistics of applying to college. A clearer framework that acknowledges and defines SEL skills would lessen the time constraints. Policies do not need to mandate SEL activities but can incentivize practitioners to promote SEL opportunities.

Educational Equity

While I discuss issues of equity throughout the article, educational equity is critical and a discussion on the implications of the lack of conceptual clarity on educational equity merits a separate discussion (Education First, 2017; Jagers, Rivas-Drake & Williams, 2019). Students in the program were predominantly low-income, first generation students. The literature has documented the challenges that students from low-income communities experience in developing their SEL skills (Jagers et al., 2019). For example, students living in low-income communities are more likely to experience adverse traumatic experiences and lack systemic support to develop their SEL skills, such that their SEL skills may be underdeveloped. Thus, adopting policies and practices that support the development of SEL skills students in the program need is important. Conceptual clarity regarding SEL can help program leaders adopt effective policies and guide practitioners to meet the SEL needs of students.

Conclusion

Policymakers continue to slowly recognize the importance of SEL skills and thus are enacting policies that reflect that shift. The incremental change has left practitioners who are committed to promoting SEL within compensatory education with little guidance when the program's governing policy is silent on SEL. The lack of conceptual coherence in the SEL field has also provided little guidance to these practitioners. These practitioners must make sense of the concept of SEL in implementing their governing policies. This study shows that the sensemaking process is complex. Practitioners draw from messages in their environment and individual knowledge within their policy contexts, and a defined conceptual framework can make a difference in providing greater clarity as practitioners continue to make sense of SEL skills. In this case study, the practitioners seemed able to promote the SEL skills in the absence of a framework, relying on their prior experiences, knowledge, values, and beliefs. Further research in compensatory education should examine whether and how SEL sensemaking and implementation practices vary depending on different training practices, and should examine empirically how to improve the alignment of mandates focused on academics with practices that promote SEL opportunities, as well as how the adoption of an SEL framework (or aligned frameworks) at the beginning of programs influence practice and student SEL development.

Appendix 1: Code Tree from Pre- and Post-Program Interviews

KEY ASPECT 1
Federal Policy Context
- Lack of explicit acknowledgement regarding SEL
- Required academic-oriented/financial literacy services
- Permissible services (any) to promote student success

Program Policy Context
- Hiring practices emphasizing skills beyond academic mastery
- Scheduling programming emphasizing skills beyond academic mastery
- Training emphasizing skills beyond academic mastery

KEY ASPECT 2: Articulating SEL Conceptualization Pre-Program
- Experience working with students
- Experience working with similar student populations
- Prior training (e.g., trauma or emotional intelligence)
- Commitment to skills beyond academic mastery
- SEL = Relationship skills

KEY ASPECT 3: Articulating SEL Conceptualization Post-Program
- More expansive conceptualization of SEL

Inductive codes:
Unanticipated issues influencing conceptualization of SEL
- Moral decision-making
- Value of family/familial-like relationships
- Importance of building community
- Building trust

Unanticipated challenges to transfer SEL conceptualization into practice
- Trauma/adverse childhood experiences
- Ethnoracial stereotypes
- Ethnoracial tensions

Acknowledgements

References

Baker, T., & Clark, J. (2017). Modifying status effects in diverse student groups in New Zealand tertiary institutions: Elizabeth Cohen's legacy for teacher education. *Journal of Education for Teaching: Cooperative Learning: Exploring Challenges, Crafting Innovations, 43*(3), 338–348. https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2017.1321675

Berman, P., & McLaughlin, M. W. (1978). *Federal programs supporting educational change. Vol. III. Implementing and sustaining innovations.* Santa Monica, CA: RAND.

Bronfenbrenner, U., & Morris, P. A. (1998). The ecology of developmental processes. In R.M. Lerner (Ed.), *Handbook of Child Psychology* (5th ed., Vol. 1, pp. 993-1028). New York: Wiley.

Coburn, C. E. (2001). Collective sensemaking about reading: How teachers mediate reading policy in their professional communities. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 23*(2), 145-170. https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737023002145

Coburn, C. E. (2005). Shaping teacher sensemaking: School leaders and the enactment of reading policy. *Educational Policy, 19*(3), 476-509. https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904805276143

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL]. (n.d.a). *Core SEL Competencies.* Retrieved from https://casel.org/core-competencies/

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL]. (n.d.b) *SEL implementation tools and resources.* Retrieved from https://casel.org/resources-support/

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL]. (n.d.c) *SEL policy.* Retrieved from https://casel.org/policy/

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL]. (2013). *The 2013 CASEL guide: Effective social and emotional learning programs – Preschool and elementary school edition.* Chicago, IL: Author.

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL]. (2015). *The 2015 CASEL guide: Effective social and emotional learning programs – Middle and high school edition.* Chicago, IL: Author.

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL]. (2018). *State Scorecard Scan.* Retrieved from https://casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/csi-scorecard-sept2018.pdf

Council for Opportunity in Education. (n.d.) Resources. Retrieved from http://www.coenet.org/trio.shtml

Davies, M., & Cooper, G. (2013). Training teachers to target and develop social skills as an academic enabler. In B. Knight & R. Van Der Zwan (Eds.), *Teaching innovations supporting student outcomes in the 21st century* (pp. 45-55). Tarragindi, Australia: Oxford Global Press.

Duckworth, A. L., & Yeager, D. S. (2015). Measurement matters: Assessing personal qualities other than cognitive ability for educational purposes. *Educational Researcher, 44*(4), 237-251. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X15584327

Easton, J. (2013, June). *Using measurement as leverage between developmental research and educational practice.* Paper presented at the Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning Meeting, Charlottesville, VA. Retrieved from https://ies.ed.gov/director/pdf/Easton062013.pdf

Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, Pub. L. 114-95, 129 Stat. 1802 (2015).

Education First. (2017). Social & emotional learning: Looking back, aiming forward [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from https://assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/2017/11/Education-First.-Social-and-Emotional-Learning-Looking-Back-Aiming-Forward.pdf

Explore SEL. (n.d.a) About Explore SEL. Retrieved from http://exploresel.gse.harvard.edu/about/

Explore SEL. (n.d.b). Casel. Retrieved from http://exploresel.gse.harvard.edu/frameworks/

Explore SEL. (n.d.c). Compare skills between frameworks. Retrieved from http://exploresel.gse.harvard.edu/compare-frameworks/

Explore SEL. (n.d.d) Search for skills. Retrieved from http://exploresel.gse.harvard.edu/terms/

Ganon-Shilon, S., & Schechter, C. (2019). School principals' sense-making of their leadership role during reform implementation. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 22*(3), 279–300. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2018.1450996

Hagen, E. (2013). *Social and emotional learning: Comparing frameworks.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, Extension Center for Youth and Development. Retrieved from https://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/195138/issue-brief-comparing-frameworks.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Heckman, J. J., & Rubenstein, Y. (2001). The importance of noncognitive skills: Lessons from the GED testing program. *The American Economic Review, 91*(2), 145-149. https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.91.2.145

Heckman, J. J., Stixrud, J., & Urzua, S. (2006). The effects of cognitive and noncognitive abilities on labor market outcomes and social behavior. *Journal of Labor Economics, 24*(3), 411-482. https://doi.org/10.1086/504455

Higher Education Act of 1965, Pub. L. 89-329, 79 Stat. 1219, codified at 20 U.S.C. § 1001 *et seq.* (1965).

Iizuka, C. A., Barrett, P. M., Gillies, R., Cook, C. R., & Marinovic, W. (2014). A combined intervention targeting both teachers' and students' social-emotional skills: Preliminary evaluation of students' outcomes. *Australian Journal of Guidance and Counseling, 24*(2), 152-166. https://doi.org/10.1017/jgc.2014.12

Jagers, R. J., Rivas-Drake, D., & Williams, B. (2019). Transformative social and emotional learning (SEL): Toward SEL in service of educational equity and excellence. *Educational Psychologist: Social and Emotional Learning, 54*(3), 162–184. https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2019.1623032

Jennings, P. A., & Greenberg, M. T. (2009). The prosocial classroom: Teacher social and emotional competence in relation to student and classroom outcomes. *Review of Educational Research, 79*(1), 491-525. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654308325693

Jones, S. M., & Bouffard, S. (2012). Social and emotional learning in schools: From programs to strategies. *Social Policy Report, 23*(4), 1-33. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2379-3988.2012.tb00073.x

Jonson, J. L., Thompson, R. J., Jr., Guetterman, T. C., & Mitchell, N. (2017). The effect of informational characteristics and faculty knowledge and beliefs on the use of assessment. *Innovative Higher Education, 42*(1), 33–47. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-016-9366-7

Keefer, K.V., Parker, J. D. A., & Saklofske, D.H. (2018). Three decades of emotional intelligence research: Perennial issues, emerging trends, and lessons learned in education: Introduction to Emotional Intelligence in Education. In K. V. Keefer, J. D. A. Parker & D. H. Saklofske (Eds.), *Emotional intelligence in education* (pp. 1-22). Switzerland: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-90633-1_1

Kennedy, K. (2019). Centering equity and caring in leadership for social-emotional learning: Toward a conceptual framework for diverse learners. *Journal of School Leadership, 29*(6), 473–492. https://doi.org/10.1177/1052684619867469

Leithwood, K., Seashore Louis, K., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How leadership influences student learning*. New York: The Wallace Foundation.

Manning-Ouellette, A., & Beatty, C. (2019). Teaching socially just perspectives in first year seminars: A faculty guide to strengthen inclusive teaching methods. *The Journal of Faculty Development, 33*(2), 19–23. Retrieved from http://search.proquest.com/docview/2316406933/

Mass. Ann. Law. Ch. 69, § 1P.

McLaughlin, M. (1991). The Rand Change Agent study: Ten years later. In A. R. Odden (Ed.), *Education Policy Implementation* (pp. 143-156). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

McGraw-Hill Education. (2018). *2018 social and emotional learning report: Fall 2018.* Retrieved from https://s3.amazonaws.com/ecommerce-prod.mheducation.com/unitas/corporate/promotions/2018-social-emotional-learning-survey.pdf

Measuring SEL. (2018a, November). Equity and social and emotional learning: A cultural analysis. Retrieved from https://measuringsel.casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Frameworks-Equity.pdf

Measuring SEL. (2018b, September). Ten criteria for describing and selecting SEL frameworks. Retrieved from https://measuringsel.casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Framework-A.3.pdf

Meier, D., Kohn, A., Darling-Hammond, L., Sizer, T. R., Wood, G., et al. (2004). *Many children left behind: How the No Child Left Behind Act is damaging our children and our schools*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Moreno, A.J., Nagasawa, M.K., & Schwartz, T. (2019). Social and emotional learning and early childhood education: Redundant terms? *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 20*(3), 221–235. https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949118768040

Muñiz, R. (2020). Rethinking social justice: Promoting SEL opportunities to achieve a more just society. *Journal of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies 3*(3).

National Center for O*NET Development. (n.d.). *O*NET skills*. Retrieved from https://www.onetonline.org/find/descriptor/browse/Skills/

National Policy Board for Educational Administration. (2015). *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders 2015*. Retrieved from https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Professional-Standards-for-Educational-Leaders-2015.pdf

National Research Council. (2012). *Education for life and work: Developing transferable knowledge and skills in the 21st century*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Pub. L. 107-110, 115 Stat. 1425, codified at 20 U.S.C. § 6301 *et seq.*

NVivo. (2018). *What is NVivo?* Retrieved from https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo/what-is-nvivo

Odden, A. R. (1991). *Education policy implementation*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Osher, D., Kidron, Y., Brackett, M., Dymnicki, A., Jones, S., & Weissberg, R. P. (2016). Advancing the science and practice of social and emotional learning: Looking back and moving forward. *Review of Research in Education, 40,* 644-681. https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X16673595

Osher, D., Pamela, C., Berg, J., Steyer, L., & Rose, T. (2017). *Science of learning and development: A synthesis*. Retrieved from American Institutes for Research website:

https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/Science-of-Learning-and-Development-Synthesis-Osher-January-2017.pdf

Pawlo, E., Lorenzo, A., Eichert, B., & Elias, M. J. (2019). All SEL should be trauma-informed. *Phi Delta Kappan, 101*(3), 37–41. https://doi.org/10.1177/0031721719885919

Porac, J. F., Thomas, H., & Baden-Fuller, C. (1989). Competitive groups as cognitive communities: The case of Scottish knitwear manufacturers. *Journal of Management Students, 26*(4), 397-416. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.1989.tb00736.x

Reardon, S. F., Greenberg, E. H., Kalogrides, D., Shores, K. A., & Valentino, R. A. (2013). Left behind? The effect of No Child Left Behind on academic achievement gaps. Retrieved from https://cepa.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/reardon%20et%20al%20nclb%20gaps%20paper%2012aug2013.pdf

Rowan-Kenyon, H. T., Savitz-Romer, M., Weilundemo, O., Swan, A. K., & Liu, P. P. (2017). Finding conceptual coherence: Trends and alignment in the scholarship on noncognitive skills and their role in college success and career readiness. *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research, 32*, 141-179. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-48983-4_4

Rowley, R. L. & Wright, D. W. (2011). No "white" child left behind: The academic achievement gap between black and white students. *The Journal of Negro Education, 80*(2), 93-107.

Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. London: Sage Publications,.

Sánchez Puerta, M. L., Valerio, A., & Gutiérrez Bernal. (2016). *Taking stock of programs to develop socioemotional skills: A systematic review of program evidence*. Washington, DC: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank. https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-0872-2

Schechter, C., Shaked, H., Ganon-Shilon, S., & Goldratt, M. (2018). Leadership metaphors: School principals' sense-making of a national reform. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 17*(1), 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2016.1232836

Schmidt, M., & Datnow, A. (2005). Teacher sense-making about comprehensive school reform: The influence of emotions. *Teaching and Teacher Evaluation, 21*(8), 949-965. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2005.06.006

Shechtman, N., DeBarger, A. H., Dornsife, C., Rosier, S., & Yarnall, L. (2013). *Promoting grit, tenacity, and perseverance: Critical factors for success in the 21st century*. Retrieved from http://pgbovine.net/OET-Draft-Grit-Report-2-17-13.pdf

Soutter, M. (2019, January 21). Unintended lessons of SEL programs. *Phi Delta Kappan*. https://doi.org/10.1177/0031721719827550

Spillane, J. P. (1996). School districts matter: Local educational authorities and state instructional policy. *Educational Policy, 10*(1), 63-87. https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904896010001004

Spillane, J. P., Hallett, T., & Diamond, J. B. (2003). Forms of capital and the construction of leadership: Instructional leadership in urban elementary schools. *American Sociological Association, 76*(1), 1-17. https://doi.org/10.2307/3090258

Spillane, J. P., Reiser, B. J., & Reimer, T. (2002). Policy implementation and cognition: Reframing and refocusing implementation research. *Review of Educational Research, 72*(3), 387-431. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543072003387

Stakes, R. (1995). *The art of the case study*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

The Pennsylvania State University. (2018, January). School climate and social and emotional learning: The integration of two approaches. Retrieved from https://www.prevention.psu.edu/uploads/files/rwjf443059.pdf

Trach, J., Lee, M., & Hymel, S. (2018). A social-ecological approach to addressing emotional and behavioral problems in schools: Focusing on group processes and social dynamics. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders, 26*(1), 11–20. https://doi.org/10.1177/1063426617742346

Tyack, D., & Cuban, L. (1995). *Tinkering toward utopia: A century of public school reform.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Upward Bound Program, 20 U.S.C. §1070a-13[a]-[d] (2020).

Upward Bound Program, 34 CFR 645 (2010).

U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). Upward bound: Purpose. Retrieved from https://www2.ed.gov/programs/trioupbound/index.html

U.S. Department of Education. (2018). Upward Bound [Upward Bound]. Retrieved from https://www2.ed.gov/programs/trioupbound/index.html

Weatherley, R., & Lipsky, M. (1977). Street-level bureaucrats and institutional innovation: Implementing special-education reform. *Harvard Educational Review, 47*(2), 171-197. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.47.2.v870r1v16786270x

Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Weick, K. E., Sutcliffe, K., & Obstfeld, D. (2005). Organizing and the process of sense-making. *Organization Science, 16*, 409-421. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1050.0133

Weissberg, R. P., Durlak, J. A., Domitrovich, C. E., & Gullota, T. P. (2015). Social and emotional learning: Past, present, and future. In J. A. Durlak, C. E. Domitrovich, R. P. Weissberg, T. P. Gullota (Eds.), *Handbook for social and emotional learning: Research and practice* (pp. 3-19). New York, NY: Guildford.

West, M. R., Kraft, M. A., Finn, A. S., Duckworth, A. L., Gabrieli, C. F. O., & Gabrieli, J. D. E. (2016). Promise and paradox: Measuring students' non-cognitive skills and the impact of schooling. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 38*(1), 148-170. https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373715597298

White, R. S. & Mavrogordato, M. (2018). Educators' use of policy resources to understand English-learner policies. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 18*(4), 560-590. https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2018.1513150

About the Author

Raquel Muñiz
Boston College
raquel.munizcastro@bc.edu
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9052-3969

Raquel Muñiz, J.D., Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of law and education policy at the Lynch School of Education and Human Development at Boston College, as well as a liaison with the Boston College of law. As a sociolegal scholar, her research focuses on the examination of the implications of law and policy on the education system and public policy decision-making; and on the use of social science research evidence in the legal system and public policy decision-making process. She focuses on educational equity for all students, particularly those who have experienced substantial adversity throughout their lives.

education policy analysis archives

Please send errata notes to Audrey Amrein-Beardsley at audrey.beardsley@asu.edu

Join EPAA's Facebook community at https://www.facebook.com/EPAAAAPE and **Twitter feed** @epaa_aape.