Social and Emotional Learning in Preschool Education - A Qualitative Study with Preschool Teachers

Marco Ferreira [1], José Reis-Jorge and Sara Batalha

Instituto Superior de Educação e Ciências (ISEC), Lisboa, Portugal

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is an important component of early school readiness and healthy child development. Research has shown that children`s development of social and emotional skills at preschool age is critical for long-term school and life success. Teachers play a key role in this process. There is evidence to indicate that effective SEL depends, among other factors on the way teachers construct and incorporate SEL in their daily practices. In this qualitative, exploratory study we aimed to uncover and understand Portuguese preschool teachers` representations and practices of SEL as a contribution to filling in a perceived gap in the Portuguese empirical literature. Our findings indicate that our participants shared a positive view and an awareness of the theoretical foundations of SEL. However, in terms of practice, they revealed to make use of a limited repertoire of SEL strategies, which points to the need for greater attention to the practices of SEL in teacher initial training and continuing professional development initiatives.

Keywords: social and emotional learning, preschool, teachers` perceptions, teachers` practices, SEL strategies.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in programmes for the development of social and emotional skills in schools in result of a growing perception of the importance of these skills for the promotion of school success and for life. This growing interest has spurred the creation of legislative support and guidance measures

---

[1]
   Corresponding author. Email address: marco.ferreira@iseclisboa.pt

such as the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in the United States and the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) in England.

Research demonstrates that the inclusion of SEL in preschool curricula can foster positive attitudes towards school and academic success (Denham, 2016; Durlak et al., 2011; Gunter et al., 2012; Ornaghi et al., 2017). Nevertheless, whereas much attention has focused on children who exhibit externalising behaviours, less attention has been paid to research and practice of interventions targeted to internalising behaviours, presumably because they are not disruptive (Gunter et al., 2012). However, overlooking internalising problems in early age can have long-term negative consequences during adolescence and adulthood (Merrell & Gueldner, 2010). Internalizing behaviours encompass a dimension of childhood psychopathology that includes behaviours that are directed inward or overcontrolled and are associated with several depressive and anxiety disorders (Hansen & Jordan, 2017).

Adult guidance is crucial "to address and potentially prevent such problems [by providing] children with early social and emotional learning experiences" (Gunter et al., 2012, p. 151). Besides parents and the family, preschool teachers play an important role as mediators and socialisers of emotions as they are responsible for promoting meaningful "emotion laden" learning situations (Denham et al., 2012, p. 140).

According to Giles (2011) 'who we are' shapes 'how we are' as teachers. Given that teachers` awareness, knowledge, and understanding of SEL impact their perceptions of the programme and the effectiveness of their classroom interventions (Humphrey, 2013), it is legitimate to consider the way of viewing SEL as a determining factor in how to approach it in the context of practice. The preparation of preschool teachers assumes crucial importance in this respect. With this in mind, and given the scarcity of empirical evidence and lack of formal training in SEL in the Portuguese context (Cristóvão et al., 2017), the objective of the present study is to understand the Portuguese preschool teachers` representations of SEL and the practices they adopt for the development of social and emotional skills of preschool children.

Around the concept of SEL

Social and emotional competencies provide the basis for better adjustment and academic performance and are reflected in knowledge, skills and attributes related to positive social behaviours and relationships with colleagues, less frequency of disruptive behaviors, less emotional stress and better academic ratings (Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2003).

According to Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), SEL can be defined as:

> [T]he process by which children and adults effectively acquire and apply knowledge, attitudes and skills needed to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2019, para. 1).

SEL is the process by which each student develops their ability to integrate thinking, emotion and behaviour in order to perform important social tasks. In this sense, individuals develop skills that allow them

to recognise, express and manage emotions, build healthy relationships, establish positive goals and respond adequately to personal and social needs (Ornstein et al., 2017; Zins et al., 2004). According to the CASEL model (2005), SEL consists of five key competences:

1. Self-awareness, i.e. the ability to recognize a person's emotions, thoughts, and their influence on behaviour

2. Self-control, i.e. the ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts and behaviour in different situations;

3. Social awareness, i.e. the ability to assume the other's perspective and empathise with people from different cultures, understanding the social and ethical norms of such behaviour;

4. Relationship skills, i.e. the ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships and;

5. Responsible decision-making, i.e. the ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behaviour and social interactions based on ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms, considering the well-being of oneself and others (Weissberg et al., 2015).

All these skills are important to support collective and cooperative behaviours, the ability to develop effective problem solving skills, self-discipline, impulse control and management of emotions, and lead to less behavioral and communication problems as well as less emotional tension (Greenberg et al., 2003). Social and emotional competences allow children to calm down when they are angry, facilitate friendships, help resolve conflicts and allow ethical and safe choices to be made (O'Brien & Resnik, 2009).

It is essential to build a stable and emotionally peaceful learning environment in the preschool education classrooms, which facilitates the expression of feelings and emotions and the development of positive social emotional skills and interpersonal relationships. The understanding of emotions leads to better self-regulation, which in turn leads to emotional and affective well-being, resulting in a better predisposition for learning and greater school and life success (Vale, 2012).

The foundations of social and emotional competences that are developed in the early years of life impact future emotional well-being and the ability to adapt functionally to school and to form successful relationships throughout life (Durlak et al., 2011). Thus the relevance of including SEL content in the preschool curriculum in order to help prevent emotional and behavioral problems, and prepare children to address the learning and social challenges that they will face in later school cycles (Gunter et al., 2012). Children have the opportunity to acquire, practice and expand these skills through involvement in various experiences designed by the adults and peers with whom they interact. The stability and security of the student - teacher relationship is foundational to social and emotional learning. Preschool children need to experience secure and positive attachments with caring adults they can trust and rely on (Hyson, 2004). Such relationships allow children to become more empathetic and better able to cooperate in classroom activities such as sharing toys and other objects, turn taking, giving and asking for help (Warnes et al., 2005).

SEL in Preschool Education and challenges

The first years of life are crucial for school success and for adult life. It is at this stage that the brain has a unique plasticity and remarkable development. Neuronal pathways are developed through external stimuli, which, in turn, have an impact on children`s emotional, social, and intellectual skills and competences (Allen & Kelly, 2015). Early experiences affect the development of the brain architecture, which provides the foundation for all future learning, behaviour, and health. A major ingredient in this developmental process is the serve and return interaction between children and their parents and other caregivers (Harvard University, 2020).

Science shows that "[y]oung children experience their world as an environment of relationships, and these relationships affect virtually all aspects of their development – intellectual, social, emotional, physical, behavioral, and moral" (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004, p. 1). It is through interaction with the environment, with peers and with adults that children develop their socialisation skills, oral language, autonomy, and knowledge of the world. Hence the importance of the development of social and emotional skills since preschool age (Allen & Kelly, 2015).

Over the past 15 years, the goals and requirements for enhancing academic performance in preschools have increased exponentially (Bassok et al., 2016). The focus on academic achievement and a perceived need to better prepare children for the demands of schooling has motivated increasing expectations for children to learn basic knowledge of letters and numbers before entering school (Bassok et al., 2016). There is a risk in narrowing the focus of preschool education to place an early emphasis on academic skills. A reduction of time devoted to the development of social emotional competences and autonomy can undermine the child-school bond, as well as long-term school adjustment (Bierman et al., 2016).

The focus on academic skills can lead to high levels of stress for children, a decrease of their self-efficacy and motivational factors inherent to school acquisitions and consequently a change in their attitudes towards school (Stipek, 2006). Furthermore, an orientation towards the development of academic skills, in a dogmatic way, can lead to a mismatch between the child's needs and the type of activities that are proposed to them, conditioning the harmonious development of social emotional skills that children need to sustain a positive involvement in learning and in school (Huffman & Speer, 2000). In addition, SEL is in itself an important component of healthy child development, and many recognise the important role that schools play in supporting areas of child development that go beyond academic skills (Battistich, et al., 1999).

Children who enter school with weak social emotional skills often manifest difficulties in the initial skills of reading, writing and calculus (McClelland et al., 2006). However, preschool teachers systematically report that they do not receive sufficient training to effectively help children develop social emotional skills (Bierman & Erath, 2006).

Research on SEL has grown dramatically in recent years. The research interests have been mainly in the promotion of children's and youths` social and emotional competences, and the effects of such practice on

academic achievement and in shaping adult life (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). However, although "[t]eachers are the engine that drives SEL programs and practices in schools and classrooms … until recently, their role in promoting SEL and their own social and emotional competence and wellbeing have received scant attention" (Schonert-Reichl, 2017, p. 138). Little is known about teachers` formal training in SEL and how teachers` beliefs about SEL influence the promotion of SEL in their classrooms (Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

In this study, we intend to contribute to fill in this gap as we aim to understand preschool teachers` representations of SEL and the practices they adopt to develop the social and emotional skills of preschool children.

Methodology

In view of our research aims and the exploratory nature of our study, a qualitative methodology was adopted to collect the participants` rich narratives of their representations of SEL and experiences in its implementation.

Participants

For the purposes of the present study a purposeful sample was selected (Patton, 2002) that fits the following two selection criteria: to be a preschool teacher and have 5 or over years of teaching experience. In order to meet the selection criteria, the recruitment of the participants followed a kind of snowball sampling (Naderifar et al., 2017) whereby each participant who volunteered to take part in the study indicated other colleagues they knew might be willing to participate. We ended up with thirteen female preschool teachers with extensive professional experience ranging from 8 to 41 (average of 28 years of teaching experience) in preschool classrooms with heterogeneous groups of 3 to 5-year-old children. None of the participants had specific/formal training in SEL, but they all referred to have learned about it in in-service sessions not directly related to SEL or in a more informal way through attending conferences, doing self-initiated readings and talking with colleagues. All the participants claimed to have integrated SEL in their practices. For the sake of anonymity and confidentiality the participants were assigned codes (T1 to T13), which will be used in this article for the purposes of data evidence presentation.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection for the present study was carried out with in-depth interviews which are particularly appropriate to gather detailed information about people's thoughts and behaviours (Seidman, 2013). The questions in the interview protocol focused on the topics under study: representations and knowledge of social and emotional development, and classroom practices and strategies adopted to work children's social and emotional skills. Examples of the in-depth questions included in our interview protocol are as follows: "What is your understanding of SEL? How did you come to know about SEL? How have you implemented SEL in your classrooms? Based on your experience, how important do you think SEL is at preschool education?"

All the 13 interviews were made by one of the authors of the present study, who is an experienced researcher, in the period from February to April 2019. The interviews were conducted in places and times chosen by the participants to their best convenience. Each individual interview lasted 45-60 minutes. The interviews were audio tape recorded with prior consent of the interviewees.

For the purpose of analysis, the interviews were transcribed *verbatim*, and the interviewees were asked to read their respective transcripts as a means of confirming their testimonials. This procedure also served data validation purposes (Mero-Jaffe, 2011).

Thematic analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was adopted as the method of data analysis. This is a method capable of guaranteeing richness and detail of analysis and thus particularly appropriate for understanding the participants' perceptions and uncovering their experiences (Brown & Stockman, 2013). Braun and Clarke (2006) describe TA as being two directional, that is being performed both inductively and deductively. This approach can aid in demonstrating rigor in analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This was the case with our analytical approach: while predominantly utilizing TA inductively in an iterative and multi-directional manner, moving backwards and forwards across each transcript to identify emerging themes, our analysis was also guided by the research objectives and questions in a deductive manner. Both approaches were used during the coding phase of the analysis, which involved the identification of the initial themes and sub-themes. Once the themes were developed, a chart for the themes, subthemes, and units of meaning was created and underwent several rounds of revisions.

The analysis was conducted by the three authors of the study. At first, it was conducted individually following the procedures described above. In a second stage, the comparison of the results of the individual analyses allowed some adjustments and the elaboration of a final chart as shown in Table I. This analysis strategy, which involves more than one investigator/researcher observing the same data, is described by Denzin (2009) as 'investigator triangulation' as a way of validating the analysis and the findings.

Results and Discussion

The analysis identified two core themes and five sub-themes encompassing the teachers` representations of SEL and the classroom practices implemented for the purposes of SEL.

As represented in Table I, the teachers` conceptual representations of SEL built mainly on their representations of social and emotional development and the roles of the different actors (family, community and teachers) in the process of children`s social and emotional development. As regards classroom teaching, the participants described and discussed their practices in relation with the learning environment, the intentionality of the strategies, and the approaches to dealing with conflict and frustration.

Table I. Thematic analysis: themes, sub-themes, and units of meaning

Theme: Representations of SEL		
Sub-themes	Description	Units of meaning – some statement examples
- Social and emotional development	- The ability to identify one's feelings. - Development of emotional, self-regulation and frustration management skills. - Building positive relationships with other children and adults. - Empathy	*Social and emotional development is the ability that children acquire ... to control and deal with emotions, to manage their conflicts at home and in the school. (T5)* *When children learn to self-regulate emotions, frustrations, and fears. (T11)*
- Roles of the family, the school community, and the teachers	- The family as the basis of social and emotional development. - The school as the extension of the family – interaction with adults and peers. - The teachers – promotion of interpersonal relationships and the appropriation of emotional language; empathy, affection, and encouragement.	*The family and affection are the main basis of this learning, later expanding to other groups of interaction. (T1)* *For a child to grow and be balanced, it is necessary to be well with oneself and to know how to manage emotions (...) we educators have an important role in this development. (T4)*
Theme: Classroom practice		
Sub-themes	Description	Units of meaning – Some statement examples
- The learning environment	- Safe, welcoming environment - Sense of belonging - Non-directive - Setting up rules and routines	*A safe and quiet environment, where children feel respected and valued (...) and have a sense of belonging. (T1)* *A welcoming environment (...) where they have the opportunity to express themselves, but always with respect for others. (T8)*
- Pedagogic intentionality	- Intentionality of pre-planned activities – use of thematic stories, games, dramatisations.	*Reading stories where topics related to emotions, conversations about the themes, records, drawings (...) songs accompanied by massages among the children. (T4)* *Conversation and dialogues, games of pairs and groups with emotions, like for example the story of the 'Color Monster'. (T6)*
- Dialogue	- Dealing with conflict and frustration – dialogue; the teacher`s role as conflict mediator.	*Always on the basis of dialogue and I insist that they are capable (...) I tell them that I understand them, that I know what they are feeling, I never belittle, I encourage them to control, to calm down, and then we talk. (T2)* *Dialogue, conversations, we show the group the achievements, with affection, and if it is something very important, an achievement I value in front of the group and the parents. (T8)*

Representations of SEL

From the perspective of our participants, the concept of SEL in the context of Preschool Education is closely associated with the concept of social and emotional development and with the role of the main actors involved in the process of children's development.

Social and emotional development

According to our participants, SEL involves essentially the development of social and emotional skills, that is, the ability to identify one's feelings, as well as the development of emotional, self-regulation and frustration management skills. As defined by one participant:

> Social and emotional development is the ability that children acquire over time, they learn to control and deal with emotions and they manage to manage their conflicts at home and in the school (T5).

> For almost all the participants, self-regulation assumes an especially relevant role in the SEL process which occurs "when children learn to self-regulate emotions, frustrations, and fears" (T11). As described by another participant,

> [Self-regulation] is a part of the whole that is the child… it is associated with its emotional and social part that encompasses aspects such as self-knowledge, the ability to identify and manage feelings or reactions, emotional stability and interaction with others. (T8)

The value accorded by our teachers to self-regulation is in line with previous research showing that children's ability to regulate their own emotions is positively associated with academic success and productivity in the classroom (Graziano et al., 2007).

In the discourse of our interviewees it was also evident the importance of building positive relationships between children and adults and knowing how to face and communicate challenges. In addition to recognizing and raising awareness of one's own and others` emotions, SEL takes into account empathy as a crucial factor "insofar as the child puts themselves in the shoes of other children and realize what they are feeling" (T4). The following testimonials illustrate the importance accorded to self-regulation and empathy as crucial pillars of the children`s social and emotional development:

> Talking about social and emotional development means talking about knowing how to listen, knowing how to listen, and accepting others without judgment, and with total availability to accept differences. (T7)

> It has to do with the way children feel and demonstrate their emotions, affections, their joys and, therefore, the experiences they have gone through… the part of socialization and interaction with peers and adults. (T12)

The discourse of our participants is corroborated by the theoretical principles that point to the importance of positive relationships between children and adults (Esen-Aygun & Sahin-Taskin, 2017), which in turn strengthens social awareness, which implies the child's ability to empathise with others and put themselves in the others` shoes (CASEL, 2019). As Zins and colleagues (2007) explain, the term 'social and emotional learning' resulted from a journey that has been driven by concepts, research, and practice. It started

with a shift in thinking from prevention of mental illness, behavioural and emotional disorders, and problem behaviours as a goal and moved toward the wider goal of promoting social competence.

The role of the family, the school community, and the teachers

In the view of the interviewees, social and emotional development is essentially centered on "the family, the community itself and also the cultural background" (T2). There was total agreement among our participants about the crucial role of the family as "the main basis of this learning, expanding later on to other interaction groups." (T1)

Our interviewees were unanimous in considering that preschool, as a complementary ecosystem of the family, plays a crucial role in the development of children, in that, in addition to cognitive and linguistic development, it provides them with situations that enhance the construction of their identity and social and emotional skills.

Pivik (2009) highlights that family involvement in children's education has positive benefits to the child, showing that higher parental involvement is associated with higher student academic achievement, better attendance, better self-regulatory skills, and beliefs about the importance of education.

In this sense, "the school must be comprehensive and not just focus on students' academic success, even in preschool, and develop skills that allow them to recognize and manage emotions" (T1).

Almost all of our participants mentioned the importance of the teacher in the social and emotional development of children by promoting interpersonal relationships and helping them in the appropriation of emotional language through the management and communication of their emotions. In reflecting on the role of the teacher, T2 for example, valued the affection and words of encouragement on the part of teachers, considering that "affectionate caresses and words of encouragement tell the child that they are special and help the child to manage their emotions and helping other children in this process too." Another participant, in turn, emphasised the importance of the teacher becoming empathetic with children, since "adults, when they know their emotions, know what children feel and become empathic with them" (T12). The following testimonials illustrate the participants` views of the critical role of the teachers in promoting children`s social and emotional development:

> Our work is essentially about this… teaching children to interact with each other, accepting others in their differences and similarities… sharing, helping and supporting, respecting difference… living with each other, working as a team, to take care and protect (T3)

> For a child to grow and be balanced, it is necessary to be well with oneself and to know how to manage emotions (…) we educators have an important role in this development. (T4)

Ulavere and Veisson (2015) found that teachers and parents of preschool children considered honesty, health, helpfulness, cooperation, tolerance, trust, sense of duty and independence as the most important values to be taught to children. These skills help students establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships and behave according to social norms.

SEL in preschool - the teachers` practices

In reflecting on their practices aimed at promoting children's SEL, the teachers focused on three main elements; the role of the learning/school environment, rules and routines; the intentionality of the strategies and activities implemented; and the use of dialogue as a decisive factor in the management of conflicts and frustrations.

The role of the learning/school environment, rules, and routines

Many of our interviewees claimed that the SEL promoting environment needs to be "safe, quiet, welcoming and harmonious" (T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T9, T10 and T12). "Valuing and respecting children and providing them a feeling of belonging in a non-directive, democratic climate" are also critical to the promotion of SEL (T8; T13).

For most of the interviewees, emotional development is promoted in moments of free expression, in large and small groups, through dialogue, sharing points of view (T1, T2, T3, T4, T7, T9, T11, T12 and T13), during routines, in free time and in games (T5, T6, T8, T10, T11 and T13), since "it is during make-believe that children resolve conflicts, build relationships and express feelings" (T12).

Ferreira and colleagues (2020) refer that there are so many and simple activities that teachers can use inside the classroom, activities where students can control themselves, understand the perspective of others, make wise choices, show persistence and empathy; and activities whereby students can decrease emotional distress and enhance a greater commitment with school.

The importance of setting up rules and implementing routines was also mentioned by some teachers in considering, like T11, for example, that "rules and routines should be well defined and internalized in well-organized, spacious and easily accessible classrooms" as elements facilitating the children`s SEL.

In reflecting on her own practice, one participant emphasised the importance of promoting "positive interactions between children both in playing with, and in supporting each other at different times as crucial experiences integrated into the group's routines" (T9).

Pedagogic intentionality

Reading thematic stories followed by the discussion of the role of the characters, group and pair interaction games, and conversations about emotions were pointed out by the participants as activities they have implemented to help and encourage children to take ownership of their emotional discourse:

> Reading stories where topics related to emotions, conversations about the themes, records, drawings (…) songs accompanied by massages among the children (T4)

> Conversation and dialogues, games of pairs and groups with emotions, like for example the story of the "Color Monster" (T6).

Such activities can be pre-planned or implemented spontaneously as the teachers see fit as dictated by the context:

> The activities can be planned (…) whenever a problem arises either in the room or even in the playground and that is beneficial to the group to integrate activities that promote these skills (…) some

other times I change projects at the moment because I see that there are situations that have to be worked on (T9).

It is part of the routines, there are moments that are intentional (…) then there are those activities that are spontaneous (T10).

The intentional activities are principally aimed to provide children with opportunities for free and guided dramatisations (T11, T12 and T13), using puppets and dramatization accessories (T2, T6, T10, T11, T12, and T13), cooperation and table games (T7, T8, T9, T12). A number of teachers (T2, T3, T5, T6, T7, and T13) also claimed to make use of materials collected from the surrounding environment (e.g. plastic and waste materials) in the activities they implement with the children.

The use of stories and picture books in early childhood has been recommended by experts in social and emotional development. In terms of teacher education, research has shown that the practice of reading and exploring emotion picture-books increases pre-service preschool teachers' references to emotions, which can be translated into greater use of emotion language in the early childhood classrooms (Garner & Parker, 2018; Grazzani et al., 2016).

Dialogue as a decisive factor in the management of conflicts and frustrations

The responses to disruptive behaviors and problem solving differs from teacher to teacher depending upon the different situations they have been in and the different groups of children. However, one element of practice common to the group of participants was the use of dialogue in situations of disobedience, tantrums, conflicts, and frustration. Calming down the situations and the children was considered by the teachers as the starting point for a productive dialogue and the conversation to flow: "I usually try to calm down the situation so that the child feels physically calmer and more assertive" (T1). This is in line with (Vale, 2012) that a calm dialogue must be adopted so that children feel listened to, which contributes to the maturation of internal self-control.

Other strategies pointed out by the participants involve them in guiding the children to reflect on their attitudes and behaviours: "I hear both explanations and I guide the conversation with questions (…) to raise their awareness" (T4). This strategy places the teachers in the role as conflict mediators making use of dialogue to guide children through the process of reflecting on their feelings and actions, identifying the conflict, sharing points of view, generating solutions, and reaching an understanding. In situations of tantrums or disobedience, giving children the opportunity to calm down and undervaluing certain behaviors were referred by some teachers (T1, T3, T5, T8, T10) as strategies they have used successfully. The balance between tolerance and firmness were pointed out by T9 and T11 as fundamental to deal with situations of conflict.

In the face of frustration, dialogue seems to prevail. Transmitting courage, confidence and encouragement and showing affection were pointed out as effective strategies (T1, T2, T3, T4, T8, T10, T11, T13) as illustrated in the following quotes:

> Always on the basis of dialogue and I insist that they are capable (…) I tell them that I understand them, that I know what they are feeling, I never belittle, I encourage them to control, to calm down, and then we talk (T2).

> Dialogue, conversations, we show the group the achievements, with affection, and if it is something very important, an achievement I value in front of the group and the parents (T8).

McClelland and colleagues (2017) refer to three strategies likely to make interventions more successful: the training of preschool teachers and the building-up of their own SEL skills; the inclusion of direct instruction in SEL skills in the daily classroom activities; and the engagement of the families so that children have the chance to work on the social and emotional skills both in school and at home. In reflecting on their practices our participants placed the emphasis on McClelland and colleagues' (2017) second strategy, i.e. the integration of SEL in the daily activities. However, it was noticeable that, although they recognised the important role of the family in the process of children's social and emotional development, none of the teachers made explicit reference to any kind of strategy associated with the involvement of the families as complement to their classroom work. Furthermore, no reference was made to the development of their own social and emotional competencies as a supporting strategy of the children´s SEL.

Conclusion

Our findings revealed that the preschool teachers in our study tended to conceive of SEL much in line with the key competences in the CASEL model (2005). Embedded in the narratives of their views and understanding of SEL were concepts such as self-awareness and self-control, social awareness, and relationship skills as competences they found important to be developed at early ages.

At the level of practice, their narratives were more limited when compared with their discourse at conceptual level. Despite the emphasis they placed on the intentionality of their practice, their reflections centered mainly on a restrict number of activities they have implemented in their classrooms. As discussed above, in the preschool teachers` narratives there were no references to the adoption of strategies with the potential to enhance the involvement of the families in the process of children's development of social and emotional competences as suggested by McClelland and colleagues (2017) as one factor that fuels successful SEL interventions.

In Portugal, despite the importance accorded to social and emotional development in the preschool curriculum, the implementation of SEL has depended largely upon teachers` individual interests in, and awareness of SEL (Cristóvão et al., 2017). In this scenario our findings point to the need for the integration of a SEL component in preschool teacher initial training programmes. Apart from introducing preschool teachers to the theoretical discourse of SEL such a training component should aim at equipping the teachers with a diversified number of competences that enable them to widen their repertoire of strategies to include aspects of mental health, theory and evidence-based instructional teaching methods, formative assessment practices for classroom use, and the implementation of a whole-school approach with direct engagement of the families and other social and cultural actors.

Given the small number of participants in the present study, it would be interesting for future research to focus on drawing a broader picture of the topics in our research by surveying larger samples of preschool teachers.

One limitation of this research relates to the type of sample used. Being a purposeful small-size sample, it does not allow us to make any claims for generalisations. What we can hope for is the "transferability" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of our findings, that is, the possibility of our findings to be applicable to similar contexts of practice.

References

Allen. L. R. & Kelly, B. B. (2015). Tr*ansforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation*. National Academies Press (US). https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK310550/

Bassok, D., Latham, S., & Rorem, A. (2016). Is kindergarten the new first grade? *AERA Open*, *1*, 1–31. http://ero.sagepub.com/content/spero/2/1/2332858415616358.full.pdf

Battistich, V., Watson, M., Solomon, D., Lewis, C., & Schaps, E. (1999). Beyond the three Rs: A broader agenda for school reform. *The Elementary School Journal*, *99*, 415-432.

Bierman, K. L., & Erath, S. A. (2006). Promoting social competence in early childhood: Classroom curricula and social skills coaching programs. In K. McCartney & D. Phillips (Eds.), *Blackwell Handbook on Early Childhood Development* (pp. 595-615). Blackwell.

Bierman, K. L., Morris, P. A., & Abenavoli, R. M. (2016). *Parent engagement practices improve outcomes for preschool children.* University Park, PA: PEdna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center, Pennsylvania State University.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Brown, N., & Stockman, T. (2013). Examining the use of thematic analysis as a tool for informing design of new family communication technologies. In S. Love, K. Hone, & T. McEwan (Eds.). *Proceedings of the 27th International BCS Human Computer Interaction Conference*, (Article No. 21, pp. 1-6). BCS Learning & Development, Ltd.

CASEL (2005). *Safe and sound: An educational leader's guide to evidence-based social and emotional learning programs* – Illinois edition. Retrieved from https://casel.org/safe-and-sound-an-educational-leaders-guide-to-evidence-based-social-and-emotional-learning-programs-illinois-edition/

CASEL (2019). *What is SEL?* Retrieved from https://casel.org/what-is-sel/#.

Cristóvão, A. M., Candeias, A. & Verdasca, J. (2017). Social and Emotional Learning and Academic Achievement in Portuguese Schools: A Bibliometric Study. *Frontiers in Psychology, 8,*1913 https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01913

Giles, D. (2011). ' Who We Are ' and ' How We Are ' are Integral to Relational Experiences: Exploring Comportment in Teacher Education. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education, 36*(1). http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2011v36n1.5

Denham, S. A. (2016). 19. Assessment of SEL in educational contexts. In J. A. Durlak, C. E. Domitrovich, R. P. Weissberg, & T. P. Gullotta (Eds.). *Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning: Research and Practice* (pp. 285-300). Guilford Press.

Denham, S. A., Bassett, H. H., & Zinsser, K. (2012). Early Childhood Teachers as Socializers of Young Children's Emotional Competence. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 40*, 137–143. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-012-0504-2.

Denzin, N. (2009). *The research act: A theoretical introduction to sociological methods* (3rd ed.). Prentice Hall.

Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Shellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development, 82*(1), 405-432.

Esen-Aygun, H. & Sahin-Taskin, C. (2017). Teachers' Views of Social-Emotional Skills and Their Perspectives on Social-Emotional Learning Programs. *Journal of Education and Practice, 8*(7), 205-215.

Fereday, J., & Muir-Cochrane, E. (2006). Demonstrating rigor using thematic analysis: A hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development. I*nternational Journal of Qualitative Methods, 5*(1), 80-92. https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690600500107

Ferreira, M., Martinsone, B., & Talić, S. (2020). Promoting Sustainable Social Emotional Learning at School through Relationship-Centered Learning Environment, Teaching Methods and Formative Assessment. *Journal of Teacher Education for Sustainability, 22*(1), 21-36. https://doi.org/10.2478/jtes-2020-0003

Garner, P. W. & Parker, T. S. (2018). Young children's picture-books as a forum for the socialization of emotion. *Journal of Early Childhood Research, 16*(3), 291–304.

Grazzani, I., Ornaghi, V., Agliati, A., & Brazzelli, E. (2016). How to foster toddlers' mental-state talk, emotion understanding, and prosocial behavior: A conversation- based intervention at nursery school. *Infancy, 21*(2), 199-227. https://doi.org/10.1111/infa.12107

Graziano, P. A., Reavis, R. D., Keane, S. P., & Calkins, S. D. (2007). The role of emotion regulation in children's early academic success. *Journal of School Psychology, 45*(1), 3–19. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2006.09.002

Greenberg, M. T., Weissberg, R. P., O'Brien, M. U., Zins, J. E., Fredericks, L., Resnik, H., & Elias, M. J. (2003). Enhancing school-based prevention and youth development through coordinated social and emotional learning. *American Psychologist, 58*(6-7), 466–474. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.58.6-7.466

Gunter, L., Caldarella, P., Korth, B., & Young, K. (2012). Promoting Social and Emotional Learning in Preschool Students: A Study of Strong Start Pre-K. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 40*(3), 151-159. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-012-0507-z

Hansen, L. K., Jordan, S. S. (2017). Internalizing Behaviors. In Zeigler-Hill V., Shackelford T. (eds) *Encyclopedia of Personality and Individual Differences*. Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-28099-8_907-1

Harvard University (2020). *Center on the Developing Child*. Retrieved from https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/brain-architecture/

Hyson, M. (2004). *The emotional development of young children* (2nd ed.). Teachers College, Columbia University.

Huffman, L. R., & Speer, P. (2000). Academic performance among at-risk children: The role of developmentally appropriate practices. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 15*(2), 167-184. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0885-2006(00)00048-X

Humphrey, N. (2013). *Social and emotional learning: A critical appraisal*. SAGE Publications.

Lincoln, Y. S. & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage Publications.

McClelland, M. M., Acock, A. C., & Morrison, F. J. (2006). The impact of kindergarten learning-related skills on academic trajectories at the end of elementary school. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 2*(4), 471-490. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2006.09.003

McClelland, M. M., Tominey, S. L., Schmitt, S. A., & and Duncan, R. (2017). SEL interventions in early childhood. *Future of Children, 27*(1), 33-47.

Merrell, K. W., & Gueldner, B. A. (2010). *Social and emotional learning in the classroom: Promoting mental health and academic success*. The Guilford Press.

Mero-Jaffe, I. (2011). 'Is that what I said?' Interview transcript approval by participants: An aspect of ethics in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 10*(3), 231-247. https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691101000304

Naderifar, M., Goli, H., & Ghaljaie, F. (2017). Snowball sampling: A purposeful method of sampling in qualitative research. *Strides in Development of Medical Education, 14*(3), e67670. https://doi.org/10.5812/sdme.67670

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2004). *Young children develop in an environment of relationships*. Working Paper No. 1. Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University. Retrieved from http://www.developingchild.ne

O'Brien, M. U., & Resnik, H. (2009). The Illinois social and emotional learning (SEL) standards: Leading the way for school and student success. *Illinois Principal Association Bulletin, 16* (7), 2-5.

Ornaghi, V., Brazzelli, E., Grazzani, I., Agliati, A., & Lucarelli, M. (2017). Does training toddlers in emotion knowledge lead to changes in their prosocial and aggressive behavior toward peers at nursery? *Early Education and Development, 28*(4), 396-414. https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2016.1238674

Ornstein, A. C., Levine, D. U., Gutek, G. L., & Vocke, D. E. (2017). *Foundations of education*. Cengage learning.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. (3ª ed.). SAGE Publications.

Pivik, J. (2009). *Promoting literacy, social emotional learning and parent/community involvement in inner city schools: Combining evidence-based research and experiential knowledge*. Apriori Research.

Schonert-Reichl, K. A. (2017). Social and emotional learning and teachers. *The Future of Children, 27*(1), 137-155. https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.2017.0007

Seidman, I. (2013). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (4ª ed.). Teachers College Press.

Stipek, D. (2006). No child left behind comes to preschool. *Elementary School Journal*, *106*(5), 455-466. https://doi.org/10.1086/505440.

Ulavere, P., & Veisson, M. (2015). Values and values education in Estonian preschool child care institutions. *Journal of Teacher Education for Sustainability*, *17*(2), 108-124. https://doi.org/10.1515/jtes-2015-0014

Vale, V. M. (2012). *Tecer para não ter de remendar. O desenvolvimento socioemocional em idade pré-escolar e o programa Anos Incríveis para educadores de infância*. [Unpublished Doctoral thesis]. Universidade de Coimbra, Portugal.

Warnes, E. D., Sheridan, S. M., Geske, J., Warnes, W. A. (2005). A contextual approach to the assessment of social skills: Identifying meaningful behaviors for social competence. *Psychology in the Schools*, *42*(2), 173-87.

Weissberg, R., Durlak, J., Domitrovich, C., & Gullotta, T. (2015). Social and Emotional Learning - Past, Present, and Future. In Joseph A. Durlak, Celene E. Domitrovich, Roger P. Weissberg, and Thomas P. Gullotta (Eds), *Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning: Research and Practice* (pp. 3-19). Guilford Press.

Zins, J. E., Bloodworth, M. R., Weissberg, R. P., & Walberg, H. J. (2004). The scientific base linking social and emotional learning to school success. In J. Zins, R. Weissberg, M. Wang, & H. J. Walberg (Eds.), *Building academic success on social and emotional learning: What does the research say?* (pp. 3-22). Teachers College Press.

Zins, J. E., Elias, M. J., & Greenberg, M. (2007). School practices to build social-emotional competence as the foundation of academic and life success. In R. Bar-On, J. G. Maree, & M. J. Elias (Eds.), *Educating people to be emotionally intelligent* (pp. 79–94). Praeger.