Social and emotional learning - Portuguese and Spanish teachers' representations and classroom practices

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Introduction: This study aims to uncover the representations and practices of Portuguese and Spanish school teachers regarding social and emotional learning (SEL), hoping to contribute to filling a perceived gap in the empirical literature of these two countries.

Methods: This is an exploratory qualitative study with a convenience sample of 68 Portuguese and Spanish teachers who responded to an open-ended questionnaire. The teachers` responses were analyzed following a hybrid approach to the method of thematic analysis. As an extension to the study, we checked the level of similarity of the perspectives and practices expressed by the Portuguese and the Spanish teachers.

Results: The findings reveal the participants` awareness of the theoretical foundations of SEL with an emphasis on the association between SEL and students' mental health. In terms of classroom practices, they tended to implement activities involving students in reflecting on their feelings and emotions to facilitate the development of healthy social and emotional behavior. No significant differences were found between teachers from the two countries.

Discussion: Our findings echo previous research showing that teaching SEL cannot be a process carried out haphazardly or intuitively. Teachers who are well-trained and prepared to teach are more willing to change their practices and more likely to implement SEL in their classrooms. Therefore, the development of teaching skills in SEL should be part of initial and in-service teacher training programs to become competent in promoting a whole school approach.

KEYWORDS

social and emotional learning, teaching practices, mental health, self-assessment, qualitative methodology

Introduction

Teachers have been urged to implement teaching methodologies and strategies in their classrooms aimed at helping students develop skills for managing their emotions, being focused, and developing healthy relationships with peers and adults (Berg et al., 2022; Meyers et al., 2019). Berg et al. (2017) state that like academic skills, social and emotional learning can also be developed, mobilized, and practiced in the classroom. In schools, social and emotional

learning (SEL) can be provided directly through specific SEL programs, or indirectly through effective instruction that encourages students to engage in cooperative and challenging activities within and outside the classroom (Lawson et al., 2019).

The importance of SEL in schools has been recognized on a global scale (Zins and Elias, 2007). However, there is a lack of research into the development of SEL skills in primary schools in Portugal and Spain. Therefore, the present study aims to contribute to filling this gap in the empirical literature of these two countries by exploring the representations and practices of Portuguese and Spanish school teachers regarding social and emotional learning (SEL).

A study carried out by Jones et al. (2015) revealed that children with developed social and emotional skills are more likely to achieve better academic results, make friends, maintain healthy relationships and engage in teamwork in the classroom context as they normally present higher levels of thinking, attention and emotionally stable behavior. The authors also found significant associations between social and emotional skills developed in kindergarten and the outcomes in young adults in domains associated with a person's social and emotional well-being and social inclusion, education, employment, criminal activity, substance use, and mental health. According to the authors, classrooms are thus a unique space for the development of SEL, as they allow students to work on their concentration, manage their emotions and relate to others.

Ferreira et al. (2020) state that teachers must promote an environment of SEL within the classroom, since good social and emotional development influences positively students' lives in terms of their behavior, health and school results. The quality of teaching is critical to student learning (OECD, 2012). Relationships between teachers matter (Reis-Jorge et al., 2024). The environments in which students are inserted can either facilitate or hinder the development of social and emotional skills (Cohen, 2001).

Clarke et al. (2015) concluded that promoting environments conducive to student learning, not only at a cognitive level but also at social and emotional levels, has significant repercussions in adolescence and adulthood. Cooperation between teachers and a high level of collaborative work makes it possible to achieve very positive educational results, with obvious benefits for students and teachers (OECD, 2012). In this respect, teachers need to have common goals and work cooperatively to facilitate the coordination of individual resources and strategies (Meyers et al., 2019). This cooperation allows the development of social and emotional skills in education professionals, enabling the establishment of relationships and the sharing of knowledge and experiences, contributing to an optimistic school environment (Ferreira, 2021a). Greenberg et al. (2003) posit that when there is involvement of the school community (teachers, families, education technicians, non-teaching staff, and health professionals) in the teaching and learning process, there is a greater likelihood of students adopting positive social and healthy practices.

Teachers` motivation, professional satisfaction and involvement play a crucial role in planning, implementing and evaluating the effectiveness of teaching and learning (Ferreira, 2021b). Findings of a large body of research have indicated a positive correlation between positive and supportive relationships between teachers and students and the long-term development of better school outcomes and reduced instances of disruptive behavior the particular case of SEL, the quality of the relationships between teachers and students impact the implementation of SEL activities (Berg et al., 2022; Jennings and Greenberg, 2009).

Hamre and Pianta's (2005) longitudinal study carried out in the United States with a group of teachers trained in the implementation of SEL programs revealed that "primary school children at risk of academic failure (…) progressed as much as their low academic risk peers" (p. 367).

According to the Collaborative Consortium for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2013) three main areas are critical to the promotion of SEL in classrooms: (1) setting a favorable classroom environment where students feel safe, comfortable, motivated and challenged; (2) integration of SEL in school curricula, so that students have opportunities to gain awareness and understanding of their own emotions, have contact with other perspectives, cultivate trusting relationships, solve problems constructively and make decisions taking into account the needs of others; (3) explicit teaching of SEL, which involves teachers becoming aware of the importance of their agency in developing social and emotional skills of their students, and the impact this can have on their future. On the same note, Mahoney et al. (2018) state that, to help students develop social and emotional skills, schools must adopt different types of approaches and create organizational structures that support students' holistic development. Schonert-Reichl (2017), in turn, considers teachers are the engine that allows the development of SEL programs and practices in schools and that their skills and well-being strongly influence the learning context of students in their classrooms. According to Carocho (2017), the role of the teacher becomes even more relevant when social and emotional skills are recognized by the educational authorities and curriculum developers as is the case in Portugal with the Perfil do Estudante à Saída da Escolaridade Obrigatória [*Student Profile on Leaving Compulsory Education*] (Ministério da Educação, 2017).

The training of teachers to implement SEL strategies in their classes has been largely recognized in the literature. In quoting Weissberg et al. (2015) and Cristóvão et al. (2020) argue that "the most relevant SEL approaches involve training teachers to provide intentional classes that teach social and emotional skills" (p. 4).

Kress et al. (2004) found that many teachers tended to emphasize academic content to the detriment of the social and emotional development of students. This practice, which can have a negative impact on the implementation of activities that favor positive SEL in the classroom, is often in result of a lack of knowledge of how to incorporate the development of social and emotional skills in the academic curriculum (Hoffman, 2009), and lack of confidence to do so (Pavri and Hegwer-DiVita, 2006). The deficit in training to adopt adequate means to implement SEL has been consciously recognized by teachers as they become aware of the importance and need to develop SEL in their classrooms (Suberviola-Ovejas, 2012).

The observation of the factors that we have been enunciating above and the importance of filling in a gap in research on the implementation of SEL in classrooms in Portugal and Spain constituted the motivation for carrying out this study, which aimed to investigate how Portuguese and Spanish school teachers perceive and practice SEL in their daily practices.

Method

Research objectives

The main aim of this study was to uncover and understand Portuguese and Spanish teachers` representations and promotion of

SEL in their pedagogical practices. To achieve our main goal, we formulated the following two specific objectives:

1 To identify the representations of SEL of Portuguese and Spanish primary school teachers.
2 To identify the pedagogical practices implemented by the teachers to promote SEL in their classrooms.
3 To verify the level of similarity of the perspectives and practices expressed by the Portuguese and the Spanish teachers.

Considering the research objectives and the exploratory nature of the study, we adopted a qualitative approach. From an epistemological point of view, this study adopts a constructivist stance, given that the phenomenon under analysis is by nature, emphasized from the participant's point of view and therefore does not have a "neutral value" (Ormston et al., 2014). The study thus acquires a phenomenological stance as it seeks to explore the "lived experiences" of the participants, with the evidence obtained mainly through the participants' eyes (Vagle, 2018). The qualitative findings raised interest in exploring the possible level of similarity between the perspectives and practices of SEL of the Portuguese and Spanish teachers.

Participants

For this study data were collected via an open-ended questionnaire that was sent to several primary schools in Portugal and Spain. Out of the 300 questionnaires sent to the schools 75 were returned. However, 68 were selected to integrate a convenience sample (Cohen et al., 2017) of the teachers who responded positively to our invitation to participate in the study and met the selection criterion that they were classroom teachers maintaining direct and daily contact with their classes. The group was formed of 31 primary school teachers from 7 Portuguese schools in the Lisbon area, and 37 primary school teachers from 6 Spanish schools in the Valencia area. Of the 68 teachers, 11 were men and 57 were women. The age of the participants varied between 24 and 64 years ($\bar{x}$=41 years of age), and the number of years in the profession varied between 3 and 40 years ($\bar{x}$=19 years of teaching experience).

Data collection instrument

As stated above, a questionnaire was the data collection instrument for this study. The questionnaire included 10 open-ended questions aimed at providing the respondents with space to write freely in as much detail as possible. The questionnaire was designed on the basis of several previous studies on the topic of SEL where the authors of this article were involved (Berg et al., 2022; Ferreira et al., 2020; Ferreira et al., 2021; Ferreira et al., 2023; Reis-Jorge et al., 2024). Besides, the questions were tested for clarity, relevance and ambiguity with the help of three experienced researchers (2 Portuguese and 1 Spanish). The researchers' feedback allowed the rephrasing of a couple of questions to avoid redundancies. Examples of open-ended questions about the participants' representations and personal experiences of SEL included in the questionnaire are as follows: *What in your view does SEL represent? How do you see the role of the teacher in the social and emotional development of children? In your teaching practice do you create opportunities for your students to reflect on their feelings and emotions? Please give examples.*

Procedures and data analysis

The questionnaire was sent out to several schools in Portugal and Spain and filled out manually by the respondents. For informed consent, a cover letter was included with information about the objectives of the research, assurance of confidentiality and anonymity and the use of the data only for the study. Return of the questionnaire indicated acceptance to participate. To guarantee anonymity, the teachers were coded from P1 to P68 for data processing and analysis.

The qualitative data generated from the open-ended questionnaire were analyzed following the six-step method of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). We used a hybrid approach to thematic analysis that incorporated a deductive process followed by an inductive, data-driven process (Boyatzis, 1998; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). At the deductive level, the data were coded, and themes and sub-themes were identified given their suitability to answer each of the questions. This was a surface level of analysis, followed by an inductive level of analysis looking for latent meaning. At first, the data were analyzed by each author individually. A review of the entire process was then carried out by all the authors to validate the themes and subthemes identified, and to eliminate overlaps and ambiguities. This procedure allowed a consensus to be reached among the authors and the validation of the analytical process. Finally, a frequency count was carried out for each theme and subthemes and respective meaning units. It is worth noting that the meaning units under each subtheme resulted from an exhaustive analysis of the data to represent the participants' perspectives and testimonials in as much detail as possible.

To find the level of similarity of the perspectives and practices of SEL expressed by the Portuguese and the Spanish teachers, we conducted an extension to the study building upon the frequencies of the responses in the qualitative data.

Findings

The analysis of the data revealed two themes: (1) SEL – concept, learning and development and (2) SEL – methodologies, strategies and activities with four and two subthemes, respectively, as represented in Table 1. We present the findings with direct quotes from the teachers' responses as evidence to substantiate the analysis. Despite the qualitative nature of the study which is the essence of the research based on the thematic analysis, we also include frequency counts of the responses for each subtheme. This extension of the analysis from a quantitative perspective allowed a detailed view of the meaning units for each subtheme and served also to verify the existence of commonalities and differences between the Portuguese and Spanish teachers.

Theme 1: SEL – concept, learning and development

The first thematic axis was organized around the concept and role of teachers regarding SEL. Also noteworthy is a set of units of meaning

TABLE 1 Themes and sub-themes from data analysis.

Themes	Sub-themes
1. SEL - concept, learning and development	1a) Concept of SEL 1b) SEL and development 1c) SEL and mental health 1d) Role of the teacher and the school community in SEL
2. SEL - methodologies, strategies and activities	2a) Specific activities, resources and strategies 2b) Self-assessment, school tasks and problem-solving

that led to the identification of a subtheme in which SEL and mental health are associated.

Concept of SEL

With regard to the teachers` ways of conceiving SEL, in general, the tendency was for them to associate SEL with the promotion of meaningful learning, that is, learning that involves social and emotional skills and values, essential values for living in society; learning aimed at improving academic performance; learning that engages students emotionally; and learning that takes social and emotional factors into account. For example, for P1 SEL "is a form of learning based on socialization"; for P21 it is about "learning in decision-making, in personal choices, with responsibility. It is about acquiring greater self-knowledge … behavior management," and for P45 "It's knowing how to live and be with others in a healthy and fulfilling way."

SEL and development

As regards the inclusion of SEL in their practices, the participants` answers revealed a lack of consensus among the group on the importance of working social and emotional skills with the students. Some participants attributed the importance of SEL to its potential for the adjustment and adaptation of children's behaviors and attitudes (P3; P7; P3; P13; P18; P29; P41) and its contribution to school success and the formation of the individuals (P33; P35; P46; P64). P6, for example, stated that "social and emotional factors condition the development of children and consequently their learning." P14 added that "it [SEL] is very important because it not only allows the acquisition of social and emotional skills but also influences the improvement of students' psychosocial adaptation, their attitudes, academic results and the prevention of various behavioral problems."

Differently, other participants associated SEL with a positive climate, growth, a sense of responsibility and participation in promoting skills for managing emotions and understanding the social context (P4; P11; P19; P28; P40; P66). Yet other participants valued SEL as a source of encouragement for self-confidence and emotional balance, facilitation of the teaching-learning process, prevention of disruptive behaviors, adaptation to social problems, and the promotion of student's integral development (P1; P7; P17; P20; P38; P42; P61).

In reflecting on the role of the teacher as an agent of children's social and emotional development, the participants considered that practitioners have a relevant contribution in creating situations that allow children's social and emotional growth and emotional balance.

In this regard P17's claim captures the general feeling among the group: "If there is a good social and emotional relationship between the teacher and the child, a good fundamental foundation is established for the child's learning and emotional stability."

The participants also emphasized the figure of the teacher as a pedagogue and an educator who facilitates brain changes (P49), has an important role in guiding the group (P5; P34; P57), helps to unblock situations of anxiety and anguish (P68), promotes effective and healthy relationships (P11; P15; P23; P38; P44; P51), and increases emotional confidence and self-esteem (P7; P17, P39).

In general, the recognition of the potential of SEL to improve children's development constitutes a common denominator in the diversity of perspectives expressed by the participants.

SEL and mental health

The positive influence that social and emotional development can have on children's mental health emerged as an important point in the participants` testimonials. The most prominent aspects are related to the fact that good social and emotional development allows the development of self-regulation and the creation of positive relationships (P11; P21; P37; P62), prevents the emergence of mental disorders (P26; P49), allows greater predisposition for learning (P34; P41), enables more responsible decision-making in different situations (P22; P48; P65), and enhances the development of self-awareness (P32; P47).

Other relevant aspects put forward by the participants are related to personal, emotional and social enrichment (P7); freedom of choice (P26); the balance between cognitive, social and emotional levels (P45); the ability to deal with oneself and others (P65); the contribution to mental balance (P43); and preparation to deal with potential obstacles or difficulties (P25). P2 summarizes the group's perspectives in considering that AS "allows the development of self-regulation, a good ability to relate to others, building a more balanced "self" in the cognitive, social and emotional domains."

Role of the teacher and the school community in SEL

The role of the teacher in SEL was described by the participants as that of a pedagogue and educator who: facilitates adolescent brain maturation (P49), has an important role in guiding the group (P5; P34; P57), helps to unblock situations of anxiety and anguish (P68), promotes effective and healthy relationships (P11; P15; P23; P38; P44; P51), and promotes emotional confidence and self-esteem (P7; P17, P39).

P3 stated that "the teacher has a fundamental role in all student learning and social and emotional skills are no exception"; P31, P43 and P48 highlighted the importance of the teacher as a role model of effort, motivation and commitment. In this regard, P64 considered that "the teacher must have a planned behavior marked by positive and emotionally stable relationships."

Some participants valued the role of the school community in promoting social and emotional skills with the involvement of students in activities outside the classroom in the following terms: "carrying out activities in the community is an excellent means of promoting relational skills, as students come into contact with other types of educational agents and contrary to what it seems, the role of the teacher is equally valued" (P17); "Student participation in tasks within the school community provides unique social and emotional development situations that are impossible to implement in a

classroom context" (P43). P12, P27 and P49 highlighted the importance of the school opening up to the surrounding community, allowing students to create new work habits and teachers to promote new relationships of closeness, trust and openness.

Theme 2: SEL - methodologies, strategies and activities

The second thematic axis was built around the specific methodologies, activities and strategies used by the teachers in the classroom/school context to develop students` social and emotional skills. This thematic axis also included the units of meaning associated with self-assessment, highly valued by the participants in this study.

Specific activities, resources and strategies

There was total agreement among the participants about the importance of students' motivation to work with other students through involvement in experiences created to promote cooperative work such as "association tasks, specific tasks designed to make everyone feel useful in helping their colleagues" (P3).

A diversity of strategies and resources used by the participants to promote SEL were mostly related to strategies involving affection, positive reinforcement, encouragement, praise, and team building. The list of strategies used by the participants to promote appropriate social and emotional behavior included: games involving movement and communication (P8; P19; P39; P45); keeping a class diary, a behavior map and a "behavior honor list (P5; P27; P34); presentation and discussion in the classroom of real day-to-day situations of deviant behaviors (P21; P34; P62; P67); holding class assemblies (P1; P9; P18; P32); keeping a daily plan and reflecting on it at the end of the day (P6; P17; P43); exploration of literary works portraying different people's opinions (P4; P43); carrying out research activities (P27); and the creation of a Kit with self-regulation materials (P41).

Self-assessment, school tasks and problem-solving

The creation of opportunities for students to share and receive opinions or comments from other people was another aspect valued by the participants of crucial importance to SEL.

The most frequent examples of tasks pointed out by the teachers include students` involvement in oral presentations, debates, and discussions of each other's work (P8; P19; P21), group work (P34, P46), and class assemblies (P21, P37). Hetero- and self-evaluation, sharing and reflecting on lived or observed situations of misbehavior or negative attitudes were other SEL learning strategies implemented by some of the participants.

When asked about the creation of opportunities for students to reflect on their feelings and emotions, the participants mentioned dialogue between teacher and student (P19; P23, P48), class assemblies (P21, P31; P49; P63); and keeping a class diary (P45, P54, P62). Other strategies implemented to deal with situations of inappropriate behavior or serious behavioral complaints were attendance of a personal and social skills program or citizenship training classes (P23; P26; P48); activities with specific situations that allow students to express and comment on how they feel or act (P23); writing exercises (P32); self-analysis of behaviors and attitudes (P22); weekly behavior reviews (P42); and daily meditation (P3).

There was much agreement among the participants on the support provided to their students to consider, respond to, and learn from their peers' contributions during a discussion. Illustrative of these

practices are the class assemblies as the space where students discuss positive and negative occurrences and the attitudes to adopt in each situation (P24; P25; P26); discussion of ideas and debates (P19; P34; P49); and involvement in project work (P29).

The most part of the participants considered that SEL practices can be incorporated into the content of different topics or school subjects and developed in an intentional and meaningful way, through formal and informal interactions between students and teachers in the classroom. P11, for example, mentioned that "the role of the school is to provide students with social and emotional skills that, together with cognitive skills, enhance their integral development." Several participants pointed out that despite the value that teachers accord to SEL, lack of training and specific curriculum regulations in this area, the implementation of SEL strategies largely depends on the personal interests and motivations of both teachers and students. P21's words are meaningful in this respect: "the intervention I carry out daily in the classroom in the SEL area are many times guided by my intuition and interest, whether or not I do it is up to me."

Extension of the analysis – comparison between groups of Portuguese and Spanish teachers

Following the qualitative data analysis, it seemed interesting to verify the level of similarity of the perspectives and practices expressed by the Portuguese and the Spanish teachers. In this sense, without neglecting the essentially qualitative nature of our study, we proceeded to quantify the frequencies for each of the themes and subthemes emerging from the thematic analysis, as presented in Tables 2, 3. These tables include all the significant data obtained with a total response frequency equal to or greater than 5. The equality of proportions test was used to verify the existence of significant differences between Portuguese teachers and Spanish teachers.

Finally, we performed the hypothesis test for the equality of proportions of the teachers' responses, the results of which are presented in Table 4. We sought to observe possible significant differences between the responses of the Portuguese and the Spanish teachers for each of the themes and sub-themes. The criterion for the results of the hypothesis test applied to the responses to the themes and sub-themes was the calculation of the p-value.

As shown in Table 4 all the p-values obtained are greater than 0.01 (significance level assumed as comparison value). This indicates that there are no significant differences between the groups of Portuguese and Spanish teachers regarding the topics under investigation.

Discussion

The present study aimed to uncover and understand Portuguese and Spanish teachers` representations of SEL and how they integrate social and emotional skills in their pedagogical practices to develop educational practices that promote the inclusion of specific areas and activities related to SEL in the curriculum.

Recent studies indicate that teachers have a positive view and an awareness of the relevance of the theoretical foundations of SEL for the development of children and adolescents. However, those studies also revealed that teachers use a limited repertoire of SEL strategies in

TABLE 2 Theme 1 and sub-themes - pieces of evidence and frequencies of Portuguese (PT) and Spanish (SP) teachers.

Theme	Sub-themes	Meaning units	Frequencies PT /SP / TOTAL
1. SEL – concept, learning, and development	1a. Concept of SEL	Promotes social and emotional skills	9 / 12 / 21
		Management and control of emotions	9 / 9 / 18
		Behavior management and control	6 / 9 / 15
		Ability to deal with yourself and others	6 / 7 / 13
		Reflect, identify and recognize emotions	5 / 7 / 12
		Social relations management	6 / 6 / 12
		Adaptation of attitudes	6 / 6 / 12
		Successful contribution to life	5 / 6 / 11
		Full development	6 / 5 /11
		Growth	4 / 5 / 9
		Responsibility	5 / 4 / 9
		Acquisition of social and emotional skills	4 / 4 / 8
		Develop the potential of each student	3 / 4 / 7
		Full development of the child	4 / 3 / 7
		Impact on child development	2 / 5 / 7
		Knowing how to live in society	3 / 3 / 6
		Preventing disruptive behaviors	2 / 4 / 6
		Self-knowledge	3 / 2 / 5
		Personal enrichment	3 / 2 / 5
		Responsible decision making	2 / 3 / 5
		Total	93/ 106 / 199
	1b. SEL and development	Greater predisposition for learning	7 / 8 / 15
		Important at school and in the future	5 / 6 / 11
		Sharing of knowledge	3 / 5 / 8
		Positive classroom climate	4 / 3 / 7
		Contribution to school success	3 / 3 / 6
		Way of learning	2 / 4 / 6
		Significant learning	3 / 2 / 5
		Total	27 / 31 / 58
	1c. SEL and mental health	Boosts self-confidence	6 / 7 / 13
		Improves mental health	6 / 6 / 12
		More self-confident and assertive children	6 / 5 / 11
		Emotional and social balance	4 / 5 / 9
		Balance at cognitive, social and emotional levels	4 / 5 / 9
		Greater self-awareness	4 / 3 / 7
		Establishing healthy relationships	3 / 2 / 5
		Psychosocial adaptation	2 / 3 / 5
		Total	35 / 36 / 71

(Continued)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Theme	Sub-themes	Meaning units	Frequencies PT /SP / TOTAL
	1d. Role of the teacher and the school community in SEL	Teacher as a role model for students	10 / 10 / 20
		Influences learning	7 / 10 / 17
		Promotes more favorable peer relationships	8 / 8 / 16
		Significant role, positively or negatively	6 / 9 / 15
		Regulates and guides the group	7 / 7 / 14
		Important role in the child's development	7 / 7 / 14
		Motivation	5 / 7 / 12
		Provides situations of social and emotional development	6 / 5 / 11
		Promotes the path to success	5 / 6 / 11
		Unblocks anxiety and anguish situations	4 / 5 / 9
		Relationship of closeness, trust and openness	4 / 4 / 8
		Promotes habits of changing mindsets	5 / 3 / 8
		Understanding your own emotions	3 / 3 / 6
		Promotion of social and emotional skills throughout the school community	4 / 2 / 6
		Verbalizes words of encouragement	2 / 3 / 5
		Affection and emotional bond	2 / 3 / 5
		Total	85 / 92 / 177

their daily practices (Ferreira et al., 2021; Martinsone et al., 2020). A possible reason for this situation was suggested by one of our participants in stating that "teachers live with the corset of a national curriculum disfigured in view of the current reality of students and the society in which we live, making it difficult to value social and emotional skills in our pedagogical routines" (P23).

The core competencies of SEL were derived from child development theory, and subsequent research shows strong associations between these skills and student academic success (Brackett et al., 2015). The participants in our study emphasized some of these relationships, namely the vital role of SEL in helping students navigate their academic and life experiences. Sims (2010) highlights precisely this role of SEL in arguing that the incorporation of thinking, feeling and behavior in important SEL tasks is fundamental for the healthy development of children and adults.

Another relevant aspect that emerges from our results has to do with the important role of social and emotional skills in helping students during the transition between study cycles and changes in the school context. This aspect is in line with Reilly's (2017) contention that emotional skills help the process of adaptation and learning at school. The author also posits that school culture and climate, academic support and classroom management strategies by the teacher are crucial elements for students` growth and holistic development.

SEL is contextually relevant in schools as it increases students' ability to learn and prepare for the future (Ferreira et al., 2023;

Newman and Moroney, 2019; Yoder, 2014). The participants in our study considered the school environment as the essence of SEL development and highlighted the need to create a caring and responsive environment that enhances students` meaningful learning, motivation and emotional support, which in turn promotes academic success, boosts self-esteem and self-confidence with obvious implications for the future. The perception on the part of the participants in our study of the relevance of explicit integration of SEL in the curriculum, reflects, to a large extent, the point of view of Yoder (2014) about promoting SEL skills through various teaching practices including self-reflection and self-assessment, cooperative learning, and classroom discussions.

One of the aspects valued by the participants in our study, which was somehow surprising due to its frequency, was the relationship between SEL and mental health. Indeed, several studies indicate that SEL and the development of associated skills promote mental health and prevent psychological problems (O'Connor et al., 2018; Sklad et al., 2012). Research has also shown that SEL programs are beneficial in reducing internalized behaviors such as stress, anxiety or depression, and externalized behaviors such as impulsivity, violence, and use of narcotics (Browne et al., 2004; Greenberg et al., 2003; Weare and Nind, 2011). Notably, follow-up studies have indicated that these effects persisted over time (Taylor et al., 2017). The testimonials of our participants are, to a large extent, in line with this empirical evidence by highlighting the psychological and cognitive benefits of SEL in terms of, for example, the creation of antibodies against disruptive

TABLE 3 Theme 2 and sub-themes - pieces of evidence and frequencies of Portuguese (PT) and Spanish (SP) teachers.

Theme	Sub-themes	Meaning units	Frequencies PT /SP / TOTAL
2. SEL – methodologies, strategies, and activities	2a. Specific activities, resources and strategies	Team games	7 / 10 /17
		Debates	8 / 7 / 15
		Group project and research work	7 / 8 / 15
		Free expressive activities	6 / 8 / 14
		Body and communication activities	7 / 7 / 14
		Group story writing	5 / 7 / 12
		Permanent dialogue	6 / 6 / 12
		Teamwork	5 / 6 / 11
		Interactive multiple-choice exercises	4 / 5 / 9
		Class assemblies	5 / 3 / 8
		Exhibition of plastic works and written stories	4 / 4 / 8
		Discover feelings through story characters	5 / 3 / 8
		Writing exercises	3 / 4 / 7
		Sharing lived or observed experiences	4 / 3 / 7
		Presentation of autonomous research works	5 / 2 / 7
		Daily meditation	2 / 3 / 5
		Use of mascot in class with the possibility of taking it home during the weekend	3 / 2 / 5
		Self-study time	2 / 3 / 5
		Civic training classes	4 / 1 / 5
		Total	92/ 92 / 184
	2b. Self-assessment, school tasks, and problem-solving	Diverse moments of self-evaluation	12 / 15 / 27
		Presentation of works/productions	12 / 10 / 22
		Hetero evaluation of group activities	11 / 8 / 19
		Evaluative dialogues between teacher/student	11 / 8 / 19
		Records of collected information	8 / 8 / 16
		Moments of reflection on attitudes and behaviors	6 / 8 / 14
		Self-analysis of behaviors and attitudes	5 / 8 / 13
		Summative assessment of work	6 / 5 /11
		Peer work assessment	5 / 6 / 11
		Regular/immediate feedback	5 / 5 / 10
		Correction and collective evaluation of individual works	3 / 5 / 8
		Reflection on attitudes and motivations	5/ 3 / 8
		Weekly behavior balance	5 / 3 / 8
		Summative assessment moments	4 / 3 / 7
		Reflection at the end of the day	5 / 2 / 7
		Behavior map	3 / 3 / 6
		Comparison of formative assessments	3 / 3 / 6
		General appreciation of the work	2 / 3 / 5
		Class diary	2 / 3 / 5
		Total	113 / 109 / 222

behaviors and the promotion of a balance in cognitive, social and emotional levels.

The teachers in our study also valued the importance of implementing strategies that allow students to reflect on their feelings and emotions through activities that involve emotional regulation and conflict resolution as facilitators of healthy social and emotional behavior. In this respect, Jones and Bouffard (2012), for example, highlight the importance of developing SEL

TABLE 4 Results of the hypothesis test for the equality of proportions between the Portuguese and the Spanish teachers by theme and subtheme.

Themes and sub-themes	Portuguese teachers answers	Spanish teachers answers	Total answers	Observed value of the test	p. value
1a	93	106	199	−0.92	0.36
1b	27	31	58	−0.52	0.60
1c	35	36	71	−0.12	0.90
1d	85	92	177	−0.53	0.59
Total theme 1	240	265	505	−1.11	0.27
2a	92	92	184	0.00	0.99
2b	113	109	222	0.27	0.79
Total theme 2	205	201	406	0.20	0.84

programs, especially in schools with a high risk of disruptive behaviors.

Another relevant aspect pointed out by our teachers was the emphasis placed on self-assessment processes and classroom practices aimed at boosting and valuing students' efforts and their academic results. Self-assessment allows the creation of evaluative teacher-student dialogues, and the records of the information collected facilitate reflection and self-analysis of attitudes and behaviors and immediate feedback, allowing an immediate relationship between effort and results. When SEL activities are explicitly incorporated into classroom practices, academic performance increases (Cristóvão et al., 2020), diversity is valued, and citizenship skills flourish (Ferreira et al., 2020).

The non-existence of significant differences between the Portuguese and the Spanish teachers regarding the representations and practices of SEL echoes the findings of previous studies that indicate that pedagogical practices in countries with similar cultures present more similarities than differences (Arnove, 2013; Kubow and Fossum, 2007; Wolhuter, 2008).

Conclusion

The findings of this research must be interpreted with caution. Despite the relatively large professional experience of the participants, no claims for generalisability of the findings can be made in this study. Furthermore, given the nature of the instrument and its volunteer completion it may have been the case that those who responded were most engaged with the topic. However, the risk of bias may have been mitigated by the range of age and teaching experience of the participants. Nevertheless, given the process of construction and validation of the questionnaire and exhaustive data analysis it is legitimate to draw a number of conclusions with implications for the training of teachers.

Research has shown that teaching social and emotional skills cannot be a process carried out haphazardly or intuitively. Schonert-Reichl (2017) states that teachers who are well-trained and prepared to teach are more willing to change their practices and more likely to implement SEL activities in their classrooms. The development of teaching skills in the area of SEL must be part of initial or in-service teacher training programs. Teachers need specific instruction on how to integrate SEL into their practices,

including a deeper understanding of theoretical foundations and empirical evidence of the integration of SEL in classroom practices. At a more informal level, sharing practices with more experienced colleagues can be another source of learning how to integrate SEL in their pedagogical practices.

The traditional training of teachers supported by manuals or very short-term actions does not seem to be sufficient to create a sustainable and long-lasting SEL teaching model (Taylor et al., 2017). Lately, approaches to teacher training have become more focused on the totality of learning environments, the education community, the school and the classroom (Taylor et al., 2017). Relevant in this context is the figure of the teacher-as-researcher (Reis-Jorge, 2007; Reis-Jorge et al., 2020), whose role as investigator of their work creates valuable opportunities to adopt an evidence-based reflective stance systematically to assess children's social life, their students and their own social and emotional and self-regulation skills, and the impact of SEL approaches and activities on their students. This approach to continuous professional development aims at the ability to adapt to concrete realities and the promotion of collaborative work (Ferreira, 2021b) and create a whole school approach focused on the holistic development of students and teachers, representing a new phase for the development of SEL in schools.

The detail of the meaning units identified in the present study may serve the design of a new scale to be used and validated in future research. Despite the non-existence of significant differences between the perspectives and practices of SEL of the Portuguese and Spanish teachers justified partly by cultural factors, further studies should have this topic as the central core of research.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval were not required for the study on human participants following the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

MF: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. JR-J: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. GO-S: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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