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Eleni Dimitrellou, George Koutsouris & Alison Pearson

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Has the explicit teaching of emotions a place in the secondary school curriculum? a small-scale PE-based study

Eleni Dimitrellou , George Koutsouris  and Alison Pearson 

School of Education, University of Exeter, Exeter, UK

ABSTRACT

The secondary school curriculum largely aims to prepare students academically, often overlooking the holistic development of the learner. The benefits of socio-emotional learning (SEL) to student behaviour and academic attainment are gradually acknowledged and discussed, but teachers may find it hard to integrate SEL into their subject knowledge. This paper draws on the findings of a novel pilot project that aimed to integrate socioemotional-oriented teaching into the secondary school curriculum. It employs a lesson study (LS) approach to actively involve teacher trainees in curriculum development that introduces SEL in the context of physical education (PE). The project was conducted in partnership with one mainstream secondary school in the Southwest of England for a period of 2 months during the summer term 2021–2022. Two teacher trainees and one qualified PE teacher designed, evaluated, and planned a sequence of four research lessons focusing on integrating socioemotional-oriented teaching in PE. Data collection involved four focus groups and six in-depth evaluation interviews. Our findings provide insights into the tensions, challenges and significance of explicitly introducing socioemotional-oriented teaching into a secondary curriculum subject raising questions about the place of emotions in education. It also highlights the potential of a lesson study approach in empowering teachers' involvement in curriculum development. Evidence suggests that teacher trainees might be more motivated to draw on SEL teaching when it is integrated in their subject topic. Practical implications for teacher training and professional development are discussed.

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secondary school curriculum; socio-emotional learning (SEL); lesson study; physical education (PE); teacher curriculum development

Introduction

This paper explores the integration of socioemotional-oriented teaching into the secondary school curriculum, and more particularly the subject of physical education (PE), using a Lesson study (LS) approach. Incorporating

CONTACT Eleni Dimitrellou  e.dimitrellou3@exeter.ac.uk

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socioemotional-oriented teaching into the secondary school curriculum raises questions about the role of emotions in education more generally and in the PE lesson specifically.

The role of emotions in education has drawn the attention of scholars over time. In recent years, Biesta (2015) suggested that education could be seen as having ‘three different domains’ of purpose, i.e. enabling students to develop skills and gain knowledge (Qualification); giving students the opportunity to engage with others and, through interaction, become aware of different cultures and traditions (Socialisation); and instilling qualities and forming critical, autonomous and compassionate people (Subjectification). These three domains stress that educational purposes extend beyond achievement and cognitive measurable outcomes (Biesta, 2009, 2015) to the holistic development of children and young people – and that also applies to emotions.

Whole-child approaches to education (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development [ASCD], 2023), involving also socioemotional-oriented teaching (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and emotional learning (CASEL), 2023), have been found to be effective in promoting engagement for all children, and support their wellbeing and educational outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011; Green et al., 2021). Such approaches to education are now needed more than ever due to the rapid increase in the number of children and young people experiencing mental health needs nationally (in England) and internationally (NHS, 2021; World Health Organization WHO, 2020). One way of fostering socioemotional-oriented teaching in school life is through its integration into the school curriculum (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, [CASEL], 2023; Cefai et al., 2018; Committee for Children, 2019; OECD, 2019). In the USA, such an initiative is the Second Step Curriculum that involves direct SEL instruction (Wallender et al., 2020). In the UK context, as a way to promote socio-emotional development in schools, the government made the personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education a statutory curriculum requirement (Department for Education, 2019), inviting all schools to teach and integrate it in the national curriculum subjects of citizenship, PE, science, and computing (Department for Education, 2021). But it was also acknowledged that more could be done for SEL. A subsequent government report acknowledged that yet unexplored ‘opportunities exist to develop and promote social and emotional skills’ (HM Government & Children & Young People’s Mental Health Coalition, 2021, p. 6) implying that a more focused socioemotional-oriented curriculum is needed. This is also supported by the findings of a meta-analysis conducted by Weare and Nind (2011) who acknowledged that an essential requirement for the effective implementation of socioemotional-oriented teaching at schools is for it to become integrated into the curriculum and daily life of the classroom. This

UK-based study is the first attempt to incorporate socioemotional-oriented teaching into a subject topic of secondary school curriculum.

What is socioemotional learning (SEL)?

Socioemotional learning has often been used by researchers, policy makers, and practitioners as an umbrella term that includes constructs such as social and emotional learning, emotional intelligence, character, non-cognitive skills, non-academic skills, soft skills, and employability skills (Jones et al., 2016, p. 2). In the literature, there is a range of frameworks that promote SEL (Jones et al., 2016), and one of the most widespread frameworks is the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). CASEL defines SEL as the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (CASEL, 2023, para. 4). Within this framework, SEL competence skills are categorised into five interrelated areas of competence: *self-awareness* (i.e. the ability to recognise and understand emotions and the effects they have on behaviour), *self-management* (i.e. the ability to control one's emotions and behaviour to fit the context of a situation), *responsible decision-making* (i.e. the ability to make constructive choices, identify and solve problems); *relationship skills* (i.e. being able to establish and maintain healthy relationships), and *social awareness* (i.e. the ability to understand those around us). Although CASEL provides a detailed definition for each of these five skills, it is not clear what each skill might involve (Wigelsworth et al., 2020) nor whether there is an element of progression across the skills (Granada et al., n.d.). The CASEL framework has also been criticised by placing greater emphasis on interpersonal skills, while giving relatively less attention to emotional and cognitive skills (Jones et al., 2016).

In the UK, critique of CASEL framework has recently emerged for two main reasons. First, Peck and Smith's (2020) argue for a 'neuro person framework', which advocates that any change in a person's behaviour, and by extend SEL skills can emerge through the development and interplay between schemas, beliefs and awareness. Yet existing measures are primarily designed to assess the outcomes of SEL skills, rather than the different aspects of behavioural change (Mcneil & Stuart, 2022). The second reason is about placing emphasis mainly on turning students into productive citizens to contribute to a healthy economy (OECD 209), 'missing the more-ethical dimension' of socioemotional-oriented teaching (Donnelly et al., 2020, p. 9) which is to help individuals relate with the social world. Perhaps what is needed is the development of a new model of SEL one that further supports an individual's growth in various

dimensions of their lives encompassing cognitive, physical, and affective domains (Granada et al., n.d.).

Socioemotional oriented teaching and school curriculum

Around the world, most SEL curriculum-based interventions are preventative whole school-based approaches aiming to promote student wellbeing (Humphrey, 2013) and create positive learning environment for all (Flynn et al., 2018). In the UK context, one of the most common ways to encourage more SEL focused instruction is through the implementation of standalone programmes, such as the 'Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL)' and the 'Targeted Mental Health in Schools' where discrete lessons are explicitly taught sequentially throughout the academic year, with varying differences in duration (Wigelsworth et al., 2020).

However, as many scholars argue (Durlak et al., 2011), most SEL evidence-based programs are tailored to address the needs of elementary students between the age of 6 to 12 and this explains why more developmentally complex skills like self-motivation and organisational skills are less targeted in existing SEL interventions (Lawson et al., 2019). Overall, the number of evidence-based SEL programs targeting middle school students is significantly smaller (Domitrovich et al., 2022; Durlak et al., 2011). It can be argued though that early adolescence is a critical development period in which individuals undergo significant physical, cognitive and social changes (Slavin, 2018). These changes quite often trigger the onset of mental health difficulties such as anxiety and depression that can significantly affect one's wellbeing, school and social life (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). During this period, young adolescents have the tendency to be emotionally vulnerable and experience problems related to behaviour, peer relations and school disengagement (Steinberg, 2017). They might also experience a decline in their social awareness (i.e. the ability to take the perspective of others), self-efficacy (i.e. belief in one's ability to succeed in achieving a personal goal) and self-management skills (West et al., 2020). So, implementing SEL program interventions in schools specifically for adolescents could bring several positive social and academic outcomes (e.g. Cefai et al., 2018; Durlak et al., 2011).

This is why over the last two decades, several scholars worldwide have tried to integrate SEL into the curriculum by designing specific interventions that teachers can use in the classroom (Cipriano et al., 2023; Domitrovich et al., 2007). Most of these packaged programmes/interventions are in the form of scripted strategies where teachers rely on manuals for their delivery (Rimm-Kaufman & Hulleman, 2015), without having an active contribution to the content, provision or designing process. Prescribed lessons are often focused on the cultivation of a specific SEL skill (Wiglesworth et al., 2020) but are for general use and

thus not confined to a specific subject topic. It has often been debated whether SEL interventions ought to be offered indirectly (e.g. via school climate, family, and community partnerships) or through explicit instruction in the curriculum (Cefai et al., 2018; Weare & Nind, 2011). This study explored the latter approach using a lesson study framework that is discussed next.

Lesson study

Lesson study (LS) is an approach that has its roots in Japan and includes a collaborative form of professional development which is based on a study-plan-do-review model (Lewis, 2009; Dudley, 2013). LS involves teacher collaboration to form a series of research lessons (Takahashi & Yoshida, 2004) to enhance pupil learning by focusing on specific aspects of the curriculum (Dudley, 2013). In the UK, Lesson Study (LS) cycles involve three jointly planned, observed, and reviewed research lessons led by a trio of teachers (Norwich et al., 2016). Lesson planning and evaluation process is informed by case students, usually two or three with specific needs that are used as a point of reference to improve specific forms of pupil learning. Case students play a key role in the lesson study process as teachers inform their lesson observations based on case students' responses and actively seek student feedback at the end (Dudley, 2013).

The purpose of lesson study often varies with emphasis given on teacher professional development (Gómez et al., 2015), pupil learning that might involve a focus on enhancing SEN practices (Norwich & Ylonen, 2013), and curriculum development with emphasis given on teaching cognitive skills in subjects like maths (da Ponte, 2017). However, using LS with a non-cognitive, affective focus is less usual; for example, there is one Canadian study that used LS to develop an intervention programme for enhancing young adolescent boys with behavioural needs SEL skills (Kwiatkowski, 2019).

Over the years, LS as an approach has received criticism mainly for lacking sustainability as it requires time and commitment for each implementation (Dudley et al., 2019). It is also largely reliant on the role of the school leader in creating a safe environment and giving teachers time and flexibility in scheduling arrangements (Schipper et al., 2020). However, research evidence has shown that the benefits outweigh the negatives, as LS has been found to move the focus from teachers to students (Munthe et al., 2016), and reduce a sense of isolation for teachers (Schipper et al., 2020). It has also been found to be an effective approach in promoting continuous professional development (Schipper et al., 2020), teacher knowledge and skills (Leavy & Hourigan, 2016), and enabling curriculum enhancement (Kuno, 2015).

This study was conducted in the context of PE, as physical curriculum interventions have been found to enhance, in addition to physical fitness and body composition, student subjective well-being and social competence (Wang &

Chen, 2022) offering several opportunities for social interaction and teamwork-building activities (O'Brien et al., 2020). PE can also positively affect cognitive, affective, and social developments (Bailey et al., 2009) in alignment with Bloom's (1956) taxonomy. Although there is extensive research suggesting that PE can offer a conducive platform for teaching young adolescents SEL through appropriate pedagogical approaches (Bailey et al., 2009), it is believed that there is no other study exploring how SEL elements can be integrated into a specific subject topic in secondary education curriculum.

The study examined the following research questions:

- Is there a place for SEL-oriented teaching in PE lessons?
- To what extent is LS an effective approach to integrate SEL in the subject topic of PE?

Current study

This empirical project examines an LS approach (see Figure 1) as a platform to develop a SEL-informed curriculum conducted in partnership with one mainstream secondary school in the Southwest of England for a period of 2 months during the summer-term June–July 2022. The study received seed-corn funding from the University of X for pilot work that restricted the scale and timetable. The study focused on early adolescence (Year 7) as at this developmental period students tend to self-report increased levels of school-related stressors (Anniko et al., 2019; Kaczmarek & Trambacz-Oleszak, 2021) due to the difficulties they may encounter over their transition from primary to secondary education (Zeedyk et al., 2003). So, in the UK context, Year 7

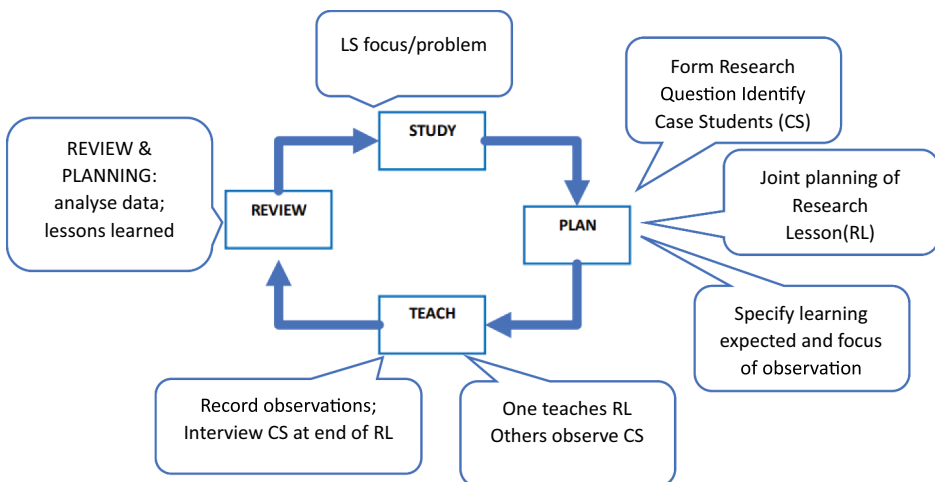


Figure 1. Lesson study model, Norwich et al. (2021).

(ages 11–12) is a transition year, and this is why it was selected for the purposes of the study. In this project, we used an LS approach to introduce socioemotional-oriented teaching, through explicit instruction, in the subject topic of PE. According to the Department for Education (Department for Education, 2013) the purpose of PE is to offer ‘a high-quality physical education curriculum [that] inspires all pupils to succeed and excel in competitive sport and other physically demanding activities [...] become physically confident, [...] build character and help to embed values such as fairness and respect’ (p.1). In this study, PE lessons were conducted with an emphasis given on cultivating relationship skills and self-and social-awareness aspects of SEL.

Methods

An LS approach was employed as a way to actively involve teacher trainees in curriculum development that explicitly involves SEL teaching.

Before the beginning of the LS

The Research Team (the authors of this paper) worked with a secondary mainstream school located in the South West of England. The school was selected as a pair of teacher trainees had their placement training which is a requirement for the successful completion of Initial teacher-training (ITE) course (Department for Education, 2019). Before the beginning of the LS, the Research Team and the LS Team (two PE teacher trainees and one qualified PE teacher, their mentor) met twice on Microsoft Teams (May 2021) for about 40 min to discuss the purpose of the study, their responsibilities, and mental health difficulties Year 7 students often encounter in PE lessons. A subsequent focus group with the LS Team was also conducted to explore teachers’ understanding of mental health and wellbeing, along with their knowledge of SEL and identify any specific areas to prioritise for training purposes. A swift analysis of focus group data was conducted first to inform teacher training content, and secondly to identify stressors that Year 7 students often experience in PE lessons as perceived by teachers. Findings revealed that Year 7 students were reported to be more likely to experience stress in performing in front of others and working in groups with peers other than their friends.

The school SENCO and the LS team were asked to identify one class from this cohort that they thought would benefit from participating in the study the most. The Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD-7) questionnaire (Spitzer et al., 2006) (that is not reported here) was administered to all students to identify those experiencing high levels of anxiety. GAD-7 has been found to have excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .92$) and good reliability (intraclass correlation = 0.83) (Spitzer et al., 2006). Three students who self-rated themselves as

having moderate anxiety difficulties were selected as case students to act as the focus for their planning and review of the lesson (Dudley, 2013). Due to time constraints, only two research lessons were conducted within each LS cycle.

A focus group with the three case students was also conducted to explore further the stressors students can experience in PE lessons and the strategies they use to cope. Student data were also swiftly analysed to inform teacher training and subsequent lesson planning design. Teacher training took place at the end of May 2021 and lasted for 2 hours. Academic papers, reports and slides with a focus on SEL were shared with the LS team after the training as a point of reference to help them develop PE lessons that explicitly introduce socioemotional-oriented teaching. After the training, an initial meeting was arranged by the lesson study team to decide on the overarching goal of each LS cycle to provide focus and direction for the planning of their teaching. The research question that guided the LS cycles was as follows: *'How can we reduce students' anxiety in performing in front of others by promoting self-awareness and team building?'* To explore this question, two LS cycles, with different foci and teaching approaches were conducted.

The LS cycles

Both LS cycles took place in June–July 2021. At the end of each research lesson, one of the teachers asked the case students for their feedback on the lesson and their experiences. For each research lesson, the LS team had to keep detailed notes of the agreed lesson plans, activities, materials and pedagogic approaches using bespoke templates (Norwich, 2020). At the end of each research lesson, a review and planning meeting was organised where the LS team had the opportunity to reflect on the research lesson using their notes on the bespoke templates from teacher observations and case student feedback. The LS team was then using that knowledge to inform and plan the next lesson.

The first LS cycle was led by one of the teacher trainees. The focus of this cycle was on self- and social awareness and understanding of relationship skills. The activities used focused on team building. The learning objective (LO) of the first research lesson was to enable students to understand and reflect on their emotions by playing different roles within the group. The LO of the second research lesson was to teach students relationship skills by understanding the skills of a good leader while they had to complete a task as a team. At the end of LS cycle 1, a review and planning meeting was arranged to evaluate the first cycle and plan for the second one. The main reflections that were taken into consideration to plan the second cycle were that case students seemed to lack communication skills, and that there were student concerns about the overall focus of the PE lesson that felt less competitive and so less engaging.

The focus of the second cycle was, thus, placed on teaching students how to communicate effectively while working together towards a common goal. The LO of the first lesson was about trust building while climbing on a wall

blindfolded. The LO of the second research lesson was to understand one's instructions and perform a long jump through non-verbal communication. The second LS cycle was led by the second teacher trainee.

At the end of each lesson study cycle, an evaluation interview was conducted with the lesson study team to evaluate the approach and reflect on their experiences. Overall, at the end of the LS, six individual evaluation interviews were conducted with members of the LS team, two case students, and one non-case student (student interviews are not reported here due to word limit constraints). The aim of the evaluation interviews was to gather teachers and students' insights to understand opportunities and challenges associated with socioemotional-oriented teaching in secondary school through the use of LS. Some indicative themes that were explored for teachers were issues around changes in teaching practices (e.g. How has participating in the LS cycle impacted your instructional practice?), and student engagement (e.g. Do you feel that the students saw these lessons differently? In which ways?).

Reflections

Although clear instructions were given to all LS team members that each research lesson has to be cooperatively planned with an equal contribution for each member; in this study, there was an inherent imbalance of power as teacher trainees 'jointly' designed the research lessons in collaboration with a qualified PE teacher who was also their placement mentor. In the LS literature, issues around unequal power relations between teachers (Skott & Møller, 2020) and between teacher trainees and qualified teachers (Authors, 2022; Saito & Atencio, 2013) are often discussed.

Data analysis and ethics

Qualitative data drawn from focus groups and individual interviews were first transcribed, followed by a process of thematic coding where key ideas, and concepts were systematically labelled and categorised in meaningful units of text (Braun & Clarke, 2012). After coding the data using NVivo software, patterns among data were scrutinised, looking for connections and contradictions within and across themes. Two research team members (X and X) carefully discussed each emerging theme until they reached an agreement to ensure the reliability of identified themes.

The study received ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee of the University of Exeter. Written informed consent was obtained from the qualified teacher (QT) and the two teacher trainees (TT), the case students and the parents/carers of all the pupils in the participating Year 7 cohort.

Findings

This section presents qualitative findings of the study organised into the following sections: A. Debating the role of SEL in PE; B. SEL curriculum as part of secondary school; and C. Explicit socioemotional-oriented teaching and curriculum development in the context of PE.

Debating the role of SEL in PE

Analysis of evaluation focus groups and individual interviews of LS cycles with the LS team revealed two divergent and often conflicting discourses around explicitly teaching SEL in PE curriculum. On one hand, teachers reported that elements of SEL were already implicitly taught in the PE curriculum, and an attempt to explicitly integrate SEL could deconstruct PE's perceived core focus which was described as engaging students in sports and enabling them to develop competence in a broad range of physical activities. On the other hand, there was acknowledgement that PE can be an effective platform to incorporate elements of SEL and offer students mental health support.

Tensions with regards to explicitly integrating SEL in PE

Debating PE focus/purposes and student engagement

Findings from the focus group evaluation of the LS team revealed contrasting views among teachers about the attempt to incorporate SEL in PE teaching. It seems that some more experienced PE teachers approached SEL with scepticism compared with less experienced ones, as they thought that a focus on SEL could lead to the disengagement of high athletic students. This point is exemplified in the following interview extract referring to a conversation one member of the LS team (qualified teacher) had with a former PE head at the PE department whilst the project was still ongoing.

He was very much under the impression that he taught a lot of [SEL competence skills] within lessons already and was much like a believer of 'at what point does it stop becoming a PE lesson, you know?' By the end of it, you're not teaching PE anymore you are just thinking about emotions through practical lessons ... (Focus group, QT)

In her individual interview, the same member of the LS team repeated that explicitly teaching SEL competence skills in PE lessons can pose several challenges, from meeting students' expectations of a PE lesson to keeping them constantly motivated. As she put it:

So, the lesson with the traversing wall [whilst blindfolded] it just didn't, it was devoid in competition and serious challenge other than the fact that they had to communicate more clearly, more effectively and to listen well, but as far as it being a PE lesson, that's what it really lacked, and the students come to us expecting a PE lesson ... So, they lost

the enthusiasm for it. So, we wanted to make the athletics lesson, the second one, a lot more competitive. (Individual Interview, QT)

Despite the concerns expressed by qualified teachers, both teacher trainees seemed more open to recognising the benefits that explicitly teaching SEL competence skills might bring to students. There was the belief that students who struggle, especially emotionally and socially, might reap more benefits from such an approach. The two trainee teachers reported that SEL is something they were planning to draw on in their future practice.

I think the class we chose was like a lower ability . . . but I think emotionally and socially, they actually were quite well, not great and I think if I ever come across another class in my teaching career that has a huge struggle with just really low confidence and not enjoying lessons because they are so stressed about others facing . . . I think I will then like take a pause on the more practical ability side, and actually, I'll go let's just start looking at the social and emotional learning aspect more. (Individual Interview, TT 2)

PE as a platform to promote wellbeing and teach SEL competence skills

Despite the reported concerns around incorporating SEL in PE, there seemed to be a consensus among the LS team with regard to mental health awareness in schools and the prospect of developing a curriculum that can foster emotionally literate students.

It is changing because it is very important, and I think a lot of top athletes have started to talk about it. I think for athletes being in charge of their emotions is very important, and [for students] understanding that you have to be able to fail to learn. I think building a curriculum that creates better learners. [is key] (Focus Group, TT 1)

Overall and despite some concerns, all LS team members saw the value of incorporating SEL into the secondary PE school curriculum.

SEL curriculum as part of secondary schools

The next theme explores the importance of SEL as part of the secondary curriculum. Concerns were raised regarding teacher responsibility in supporting student emotional needs and the lack of relevant training.

Importance

SEL curriculum was seen as having a place not only in primary but in secondary schools as well, for two main reasons, both related to adolescence. The first reported reason was that SEL competence skills are seen as a developmental continuum where students need to cultivate some basic skills first before being in the position to develop more complex ones:

I see [SEL skills] as a continuum. I don't think self-management can be developed until the students have self-awareness or social awareness because if they don't recognise how they feel and how they respond to a certain situation, how can they then better manage themselves? (Individual Interview, QT)

The second reason was that in adolescence, students are more likely to experience emotional challenges, and even if they are equipped with effective strategies to regulate their emotions in primary education (that might not be the case), they should be able to access this form of support in secondary school:

I am not convinced based on the way our young people behave and the way they manage their emotions and themselves, that is happening in primary schools, and I think it needs to happen in secondary schools as well. (Individual Interview, QT)

Balancing responsibility with lack of training

All teachers showed awareness of the mental health difficulties students might encounter, recognising the importance of teaching students strategies to regulate their emotions. There was also an acknowledgement of the insufficient training provided at school and a recognition that supporting students understand and face their emotions might also be the responsibility of teachers – and not that just pastoral staff:

They're just going 'she's got anger issues, let's send her to wellbeing' or 'she has an issue'. Not how do we address this problem, how do we help this child [...]? how do we then build-in strategies to allow them to deal with those strong emotions? Help them have the motivation to achieve and be more resilient. She's just been allowed to get angry, and no one has done anything about it. (Individual Interview, QT)

Despite their goodwill to help students, conversations around incorporating SEL in PE enabled teachers to reflect on their knowledge and abilities urging for in-service training tailored to SEL in the context of PE. It was acknowledged that if it is for SEL to be successfully implemented, then it has to be a collective school effort and not only an individual initiative of PE teachers.

I think it's something that teachers would need to be given some really good like CPD and need to have some good inset training on what SEL could look like and what it might look like in PE. So, yes, absolutely, it one hundred per cent has its place, but I actually think it needs to be across the whole school. I don't think it's something that you should just do in PE. (Individual Interview, QT)

Explicit instruction of emotions and curriculum development in the context of PE

We will now move to a different theme, one that explores the role of LS in supporting the explicit instruction of SEL in PE and curriculum development.

Explicit SEL instruction in PE

All LS team members agreed that PE can be a useful subject for introducing socioemotional-oriented teaching as there are many opportunities to help students engage with their emotions:

There's lots of opportunities in PE for students to develop brilliant SEL skills that they can take through to the rest of their lives ... In the first lesson we started by saying to them you know what are the characteristics of a good leader and they had to discuss this as a group. So, at each task each member of the group was given the role of a leader [to perform]. One of the case study students at the first hurdle expressed her frustration which is what we hoped we wanted students to start to recognise how the activities made them feel. (Focus Group, QT)

Curriculum development in the PE context

Members of LS team reported particular ideas in terms of how to implement socioemotional oriented teaching in the PE curriculum suggesting focusing on the development of a different SEL skill across the secondary school. Recommendations were also made on different ways to facilitate the explicit instruction of SEL in PE lessons. This might take the form of a manual that could be used as a guide to help teachers teach SEL competence skills effectively needed less preparation time.

If I was designing a curriculum, I'd definitely consider it. We could focus on like the first year in Year 7 at handball for the hand-eye coordination but actually, within that you might want to focus on how does sport make them feel? and How you meet the emotional aspects for it? So, it's like a little book that they have to follow along as they do lessons, and it has questions and like information like little QR codes, videos and I really liked the idea of a knowledge organiser for like Years 7, 8, 9 before GCSE. Like more fixed because once you have that takes up a lot of your time. I think introducing that theory element of PE is quite important, and I think this is where you could involve the more social and emotional side of it. (*Individual Interview, TT 1*)

Promoting awareness of student needs

Teachers finally reported how their involvement in the LS process enabled them to become more aware of students' SEL needs.

I think PE already gives students you know the opportunity to develop these but it's about explicitly teaching them and having a particular focus like we did [in LS] with students becoming more self-aware or students developing relationship skills and actually designing the activities around a very specific area. (*Individual Interview, QT*)

Discussion

This novel UK-based study, is the first attempt to introduce explicit socioemotional-oriented teaching in a specific subject topic (PE) of the secondary curriculum. Findings indicated that the explicit socioemotional-oriented teaching has a place in secondary education and LS can be a promising platform to integrate SEL instruction into the school curriculum. Regarding the first research question, our findings demonstrated contrasting perspectives on the explicit socioemotional-oriented teaching in PE, revealing two distinct discourses among participants: one about maintaining the core focus of the subject unchanged and another emphasising the importance of a PE lesson to cover learning objectives that go beyond the teaching of physical skills (i.e. psychomotor), to also cover the affective domain of teaching, such as that of socioemotional learning, as suggested in Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1956). However, experienced teachers participating in the study questioned the explicit introduction of socioemotional-oriented teaching in PE lesson, expressing concerns that it might undermine its primary objective, which is to equip students with physical development skills. They also highlighted the potential for student dissatisfaction if PE lessons deviated from their expected structure and content.

On the other hand, all participating teachers in the LS study highlighted increased need for support among young adolescents who often struggle to comprehend, regulate and manage their emotions effectively (Cracco et al., 2017). This is why they were open to consider a more explicit instruction of SEL in secondary education and discussed this in two ways. First, the development of SEL competence skills within the curriculum was seen as an ongoing and progressive process. That means, rather than viewing SEL skills as separate entities, teachers recognized the importance of understanding them as part of a broader developmental continuum. Yet, most SEL interventions are tailored to address primary aged students' needs (Wigelsworth et al., 2020); this can be a lost opportunity for young adolescents to cultivate more sophisticated skills, appropriate for their age, such as self-management (Lawson et al., 2019), which is less likely to develop naturally during childhood (Thompson, 2009). This observation is consistent with previous research, indicating that a considerable proportion of SEL programs predominantly concentrate on foundational SEL competence skills (Lawson et al., 2019; Wigelsworth et al., 2021), while more advanced skills, including cognitive coping, self-talk, goal setting, and planning, are notably absent in around 75% of these interventions (Lawson et al., 2019). There is, therefore, a need to bridge this gap and explicitly introduce socioemotional-oriented teaching in secondary education to ensure young adolescents enjoy positive short-term and long-term outcomes linked with positive attitudes toward self and others and positive

behaviour, mental health and academic success, respectively (Cefai et al., 2018; Durlak et al., 2011; Wigelsworth et al., 2020).

Second, adolescence marks the onset of numerous emotional challenges among students (Slavin, 2018). Hence, teachers argued that the explicit introduction of socioemotional-oriented teaching in secondary education could offer one more opportunity for students to develop their SEL competence skills, even if they had not previously cultivated these during childhood.

Another significant finding of this study is that LS has the potential to be a promising approach for explicitly integrating SEL teaching into varied subjects/activities in the school curriculum. This is illustrated by the following key findings. First, LS was seen as a way of making the implicit instruction of socioemotional-oriented teaching in PE lessons explicit. All participating teachers in the LS study recognised that having to access, evaluate and plan a sequence of PE lessons with a SEL focus enabled them to gain awareness of their beliefs regarding the explicit integration of socioemotional-oriented teaching in PE. Second, participation in LS comprises collaborative involvement in designing, planning and reviewing research lessons, alongside personal reflection, knowledge exchange and active engagement in completing templates, written communications, and observation forms. Through participation to LS teachers can become aware of their unconscious thoughts, emotions and beliefs that affect their practice (Norwich et al., 2016). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that this process necessitates a considerable investment of time and commitment for each implementation that is largely dependable on the school leaders to give teachers flexibility in scheduling arrangements (Dudley et al., 2019). Power relations between teachers might also need to be taken into consideration (Skott & Møller, 2020).

Finally, LS was also considered to be an effective approach for curriculum development in the context of PE. Teachers in the LS study discussed, for instance, the need for a practical tool like a PE SEL manual, which would include appropriate activities and offer guidance on effectively implementing SEL in PE lessons. This could save teachers valuable time and could be also used as a tool for self-evaluation of SEL teaching practice. Apart from extra desire for additional resources, all participating teachers also raised the need for more training opportunities, if it is to improve their delivery of a SEL-focused curriculum. This finding is consistent with that of other research that suggests that lack of SEL training (Cefai et al., 2018) might lead to poor implementation (Cipriano et al., 2023; Durlak & DuPre, 2008), which is also more likely due to teachers having to follow packaged programs and manuals in the form of scripted strategies (Rimm-Kaufman & Hulleman, 2015) that they may find hard to relate to. In contrast to previous research, results from this study demonstrated that teachers were generally engaged in SEL-related activities when they were integrated into their subject topic. This finding suggests that subject teachers might

have an important role to play in the integration of SEL teaching into the secondary school curriculum (Weare & Nind, 2011).

Significance of the study

This study makes three key contributions. Firstly, it stresses that LS approach is not only about teacher professional development, but it can also be used for the development of lessons that integrate both physical skills and affective elements such as SEL. Secondly, it indicates that teaching both subject related skills (e.g. physical skills) and incorporate elements of SEL is possible. Thirdly, this study also extends debates about the role of socioemotional-oriented teaching in the school curriculum and links also to broader debates about the purposes of education (Biesta, 2009) that goes beyond measurable outcomes to the development of a whole-child approach – which is also aligned to the OECD’s learning compass for education and skills 2030 broader education goals (OECD, 2019). The OECD learning compass defines the competencies (i.e. knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values) that students ought to cultivate to fulfil their potential and to develop individual and collective wellbeing. In addition to literacy, numeracy data and digital literacy, the compass emphasises also physical and mental health and social and emotional foundations. This challenges narrow views of schooling and highlights the importance of integrating socio-emotional-oriented teaching into the school curriculum and everyday life.

This is the first study utilising an LS approach to explicitly introduce SEL into the secondary school curriculum. The study found that the role of emotions in education is still a matter of debate. However, as this study has shown there are ways to explicitly integrate SEL skills into a subject topic without deviating much from its expected structure and content. LS was perceived to be a useful approach that can empower teachers’ active involvement in SEL curriculum development. As evidence from this study suggests, teachers were motivated to engage with SEL when they were asked to integrate it into their subject topic – while they appear to be disengaged when they have to follow closely SEL interventions not linked to particular subjects (Rimm-Kaufman & Hulleman, 2015). This is an important finding suggesting that a way of incorporating SEL into secondary schools is through the curriculum (Weare & Nind, 2011) and not as an add-on subject – see, for instance, how the PSHE subject is often implemented in the UK (Department for Education, 2019). Another contribution of this study is that PE can be a useful subject to explicitly teach young adolescents SEL skills for two main reasons. Firstly, its experiential nature (O’Brien et al., 2020) offers several opportunities for social interaction and teamwork-building activities that allow students to directly experience and explore emotions in a practical context. Secondly, the subject of PE has more flexibility than other subjects especially in secondary education where students have to perform in

competitive exams – in the UK-context GCSEs and A levels (Ofqual & DfE, 2021). Further research is needed nationally and internationally to expand the approach taken in this study to other curriculum subjects, including (but not limited to) Citizenship, Computers, and Science, as suggested by Department for Education (2021).

Limitations

We believe that our findings can spark discussions about the role of socio-emotional teaching in the secondary school curriculum, within and beyond the subject of PE. However, we also acknowledge the small scale of our study that limits the interpretations and reach of our findings. There is a possibility that the limited time we had to implement LS affected our findings, and that findings would differ if we had more time for implementation, were able to repeat LS at different times and involve more Year groups – and also different schools with different characteristics, for example, in more or less deprived areas. Although this is important to acknowledge, we feel that it does not radically change the point that we would like to raise: that there is a discussion to be had in the context of secondary school curriculum about the role of socioemotional teaching. This discussion is not limited to the UK secondary school curriculum but has significant implications for the ways we understand education and its aims more broadly.

In future investigations researchers could explore the current topic on a larger scale, including young adolescents across key stage three, and teacher trainees from different disciplines. Future studies could also implement LS for a longer period of time (e.g. using three research lessons across two full LS cycles), and/or repeat an LS cycle at different times of the school year. Future research could particularly examine the complex power relationships that can emerge in the LS team especially in cases where both qualified and trainee teachers are involved. We felt that in our study the LS team worked in a collaborative and collegial way – however, there was an implicit power imbalance, inherent in the trainee/trainer role. This differs from cases where LS is only used by a team of qualified teachers.

Conclusion

This paper has drawn on the findings of a UK-based empirical study to discuss the tensions and challenges of introducing SEL into the secondary curriculum. The main point of the article is that explicit instruction of socioemotional-oriented teaching in the secondary school curriculum is not only necessary but also practically possible. Using LS to explicitly integrate SEL elements into teaching indicated that teachers might be more motivated to implement SEL interventions when these are integrated into their subject topic – rather than as

add-on interventions not organically linked to the school curriculum. This calls for a deeper exploration of the role of SEL in education more broadly. What is now needed is more research on how SEL can be integrated into different subjects to establish continuity and ensure continuing investment in students' wellbeing throughout their educational journey.

Disclosure statement

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ORCID

Eleni Dimitrellou  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6964-4379>

George Koutsouris  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3044-4027>

Alison Pearson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4341-1267>

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