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Enhancing Preschool Teachers' Capacity to Support Children's Social Emotional Learning in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood teachers are critical in implementing social and emotional learning (SEL) while working with young learners. This qualitative study examined preschool teachers' experiences in Turkey regarding their involvement in a SEL intervention. Four preschool teachers attended teacher workshops and received coaching support through the REACH program to improve children's social-emotional development. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and documents, including teachers' reflective journals and implementor's research journal. Thematic analysis was used to identify common themes in the data and four main themes emerged: (1) benefits to teachers, (2) benefits to children, (3) facilitators of implementation, and (4) barriers to implementation. The results underscore the importance of providing professional development support to increase teachers' capacity to support children's SEL. The findings suggest that providing coaching support may be a focus area for effective SEL implementation. Furthermore, results highlight that culturally adapted SEL programs are necessary for successful implementation.

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Coaching; culturally responsive practices; preschool education; social-emotional learning; teacher training

Understanding the developmental milestones in early childhood is crucial for creating a nurturing environment that fosters growth and learning (McCabe & Altamura, 2011). Children who are socially and emotionally competent can easily manage their emotions, develop successful friendships, cope with social and academic difficulties that arise in their daily lives, and become engaged citizens (Greenberg et al., 2017; Guhn et al., 2016). Social-emotional factors also have been associated with academic skills (Alzahrani et al., 2019; Denham & Brown, 2010), with a focus on its role in children's academic achievement (Denham et al., 2012), developing a positive attitude toward learning (Coolahan et al., 2000), increasing learning engagement (Nix et al., 2013), supporting cognitive readiness (Bierman et al., 2009), early literacy skills (Curby et al., 2015), and their school adjustment (Nakamichi et al., 2021). Conversely, children with low social and emotional skills may exhibit challenging behaviors as a way of expressing their needs (Division for Early Childhood, 2017). These behaviors can hinder their social-emotional development, creating barriers that may persist into adolescence and adulthood, as emotional and behavioral problems in early childhood often have long-term consequences (Basten et al., 2016; Beyer et al., 2012). Addressing these challenges early through interventions that support social-emotional learning (SEL) is essential to mitigate potential difficulties and foster healthier developmental outcomes (Gunter et al., 2012).

Teachers play a crucial role in facilitating activities and creating environments that support SEL in young children (Humphries et al., 2018; Murano et al., 2020). Empowering teachers with the

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This research is based on data used in the first author's doctoral dissertation during her candidacy in the Department of Early Childhood Education at Cukurova University in Adana, Turkey.

knowledge, resources, and strategies to foster SEL is essential for creating inclusive and responsive learning environments that address each child's holistic needs. This is particularly vital for children from low-income families, who often face challenges that hinder their development (Kellam et al., 1998; Saitadze & Lalayants, 2021). Research consistently highlights the adverse effects of low income on children's social and emotional development, further underscoring the critical need for teacher-led interventions in such contexts (e.g., Lee & Zhang, 2022; Raver et al., 2015). Despite this, many teachers lack adequate preparation to effectively support children's SEL (Jones & Doolittle, 2017; McClelland et al., 2017), highlighting the urgent need for in-service training to bridge this gap. However, evidence shows that SEL interventions are predominantly implemented in WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) countries, with limited application in non-WEIRD contexts (e.g., Hayashi et al., 2022; Luo et al., 2022). This disparity is particularly concerning given the unique cultural and socioeconomic factors in non-WEIRD countries that require context-specific SEL approaches. Although SEL has gained momentum in recent years (e.g., Baker-Henningham et al., 2021; Inam et al., 2015), its use in countries like Turkey remains relatively restricted, reflecting the need for greater attention to localized implementations.

In this context, the primary objective of this study is to explore the experiences of preschool teachers in Turkey regarding an SEL intervention aimed at enhancing their ability to foster children's social-emotional competencies. By examining the barriers and facilitators from the perspective of teachers who serve as frontline providers, this research provides valuable insights for designing more effective interventions. The study has significant implications for policymakers, researchers, and educators in supporting teachers in enhancing the SEL skills of preschool children, particularly in underrepresented and non-WEIRD contexts.

Literature

SEL in preschool classrooms

Since neural structures facilitating self-control begin to form in early childhood, starting in infancy and toddlerhood, children require additional adult support in developing social-emotional competencies, particularly in regulating their emotions and behaviors (Bierman & Motamedi, 2015). There is considerable evidence demonstrating a positive association between parents' supportive behaviors and various aspects of children's skills. These include emotion regulation (Macklem, 2008; Spinrad et al., 2004), emotional understanding (Eisenberg et al., 1998; Fabes et al., 2002), positive peer relationships (Denham et al., 1997), and lower levels of internalizing and externalizing behavior problems (Mirabile et al., 2016). During the preschool age, socio-cultural contexts become more important for children's development (Bassett et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2016). Preschool children learn social-emotional skills not only through direct interactions with teachers and peers but also by observing the social-emotional norms of their classroom environment (Bassett et al., 2017; Denham et al., 2022). Research has demonstrated strong connections between children's social-emotional competence and the quality of teacher-child relationships (Garner et al., 2014; O'Connor et al., 2011), as well as the presence of teachers' emotional support (Curby et al., 2013; Zinsser et al., 2013) and their emotional socialization behaviors (Bassett et al., 2017; Denham et al., 2022).

Although teachers are responsible for teaching SEL and creating supportive learning environments (Fleming & Bay, 2004), many lack adequate preparation for enhancing children's social-emotional skills (McClelland et al., 2017). This gap in preparation stems from several factors, one of which is the variability in preschool teachers' educational backgrounds. In many contexts, such as the United States, early childhood educators are not consistently required to have foundational training or a degree in education, and many begin teaching before completing their formal education (Early et al., 2007). Moreover, an increasing number of teachers obtain state teaching licensure through alternative certification routes (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015), further contributing to the lack of standardized qualifications. This variability limits

opportunities for preschool teachers to acquire SEL-related knowledge and skills during their training. Compounding this issue is the inadequacy of teacher preparation programs, which often fail to provide courses focused on equipping educators to teach preschoolers effectively or to address SEL comprehensively (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). These challenges underscore the urgent need for systemic efforts to integrate SEL training into all levels of early childhood education. To address these gaps, in-service training focusing on SEL has become increasingly critical (Zins et al., 2004). Such training equips teachers to implement SEL interventions more effectively, manage their classrooms more efficiently, develop teaching strategies, and respond to challenging behaviors in constructive ways (Jones & Doolittle, 2017). By prioritizing both pre-service and in-service training, the field can better prepare educators to support children's social-emotional development.

Recent recognition has been given to The Pyramid Model for its effectiveness in supporting the social-emotional development of preschool children and reducing challenging behaviors (Hemmeter et al., 2021; Swalwell & McLean, 2021). Developed by Fox et al. (2003), the Pyramid Model comprises evidence-based practices, such as establishing relationships with children, teaching classroom rules and expectations, and instructing children in emotions and social problem-solving skills. In addition, it involves developing and implementing individualized behavior support plans. Notably, the Pyramid Model is a framework rather than a curriculum designed to guide the implementation of these practices (Hemmeter et al., 2018). The Reaching Educators and Children (REACH) program, developed by Conners-Burrow et al. (2017), is an intervention initiative rooted in the Pyramid Model. REACH provides training and coaching to preschool teachers, aiming to introduce basic strategies from each tier of the Pyramid Model and enhance their classroom practices. An assessment of the REACH program involving 139 teachers in toddler and preschool classrooms from the U.S. showed that it positively impacted teachers' implementation of social and emotional support techniques, such as conflict resolution instruction. The program also improved children's prosocial behaviors and reduced verbal aggression, where the participating teachers expressed high satisfaction with the training and materials provided (Conners-Burrow et al., 2017).

Need for SEL in Turkish preschool classrooms

Prior research has revealed that preschool teachers in Turkey often rely on harsh discipline strategies (Akgün et al., 2011; Durmuşoğlu Saltalı & Arslan, 2013). Uysal et al. (2010) found that Turkish preschool teachers tended to adopt a more reactive approach to challenging behaviors, frequently using verbal and non-verbal warnings and punishment strategies. Additionally, Esen-Aygun and Sahin-Taskin (2017) observed that many primary school teachers in Turkey were not familiar with the concept of SEL, and those who were often lacked sufficient knowledge about it. Further emphasizing this issue, Rakap et al. (2018) reported that only 14% of Turkish preschool teachers employed strategies supporting children's social-emotional development. Moreover, 35% of these teachers displayed concerning behaviors, such as a reliance on teacher-directed activities, chaotic transitions, and reprimanding children, considered red flags in early childhood education. These studies underscore the need for effective professional development programs to support children's social-emotional development among Turkish preschool teachers.

Despite this need, in-service training in Turkey, primarily under the authority of the Ministry of National Education (MoNE), has shown limitations. An examination of the in-service training activities planned by the Ministery of National Education (2022) over the past 10 years reveals that training focused on enhancing teachers' capacity to support children's SEL skills is scarce. Only two professional development activities were provided to improve teachers' SEL implementation, including violence prevention and social skills support training. Given these circumstances, there is an apparent necessity to increase the number and quality of in-service training activities for preschool teachers, particularly those aimed at improving SEL implementation.

Theoretical framework

This study is informed by Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, 2005), which provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex interplay between an individual and their environment. The theory posits that development occurs through complex interactions between an individual's biology and their multi-layered environment. According to this theory, five socially organized subsystems guide and influence individual development: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Each system represents a different level of influence, from immediate surroundings to broader societal factors.

Within this framework, the microsystem, representing the child's immediate surroundings, plays a central role. Due to their close proximity and frequency, interactions with significant individuals, such as teachers, within this system directly influence child development. These interactions are bidirectional; while teachers shape children's behaviors through their actions and guidance, children's individual traits and responses also influence how teachers interact with them.

Guided by this theoretical foundation, the present study aimed to enhance preschool teachers' capacity to implement evidence-based interventions to support children's social-emotional development. The study focused on enabling teachers to effectively foster children's SEL skills by equipping teachers with targeted training and ongoing coaching support. This, in turn, aimed to improve the quality of teacher-child interactions, fostering positive and reciprocal relationships that contribute to children's holistic development.

Current study

This study explored preschool teachers' experiences in Turkey, a non-WEIRD country, with a SEL intervention. Even though the implementation of SEL programs has increased significantly, particularly in developed Western countries, most research focuses on the effectiveness of these programs on children and teacher outcomes (e.g., Domitrovich et al., 2007; Hemmeter et al., 2016). Few studies examine teachers' experiences regarding SEL interventions (e.g., Allen et al., 2020; Leckey et al., 2016). With notable exceptions (Baker-Henningham & Walker, 2009), qualitatively, little is known about the SEL program experiences of early childhood teachers, particularly in non-WEIRD contexts. In fact, qualitative studies are uniquely positioned to uncover the "black box" of SEL program interventions by providing in-depth insights into the implementation process (Corcoran et al., 2018). Understanding teachers' perspectives on the implementation and effectiveness of SEL programs is essential for developing practical and impactful interventions. As Buchanan et al. (2009) noted, many SEL programs are developed by researchers and then implemented by teachers, often leading to a disconnect between program design and its practical implementation in classrooms. To this end, the present study aims to bridge this gap by amplifying the voices of teachers, the frontline providers of these interventions. By exploring both the facilitators and barriers to SEL program implementation from their perspective, this study seeks to inform the design of effective and culturally adapted interventions. Additionally, this research offers a unique contribution by examining these experiences in a non-WEIRD context, providing valuable insights for global implementations of SEL programs.

In sum, this study explored preschool teachers' experiences in Turkey regarding a SEL intervention designed to increase their capacity to support children's social-emotional competencies. Specifically, we sought to address the following research questions:

(1) How did the teachers perceive the effectiveness of the SEL program?
(2) What barriers and facilitators did teachers experience during the implementation of the SEL program?

Method

Study context

This research was conducted in a public preschool in a disadvantaged neighborhood in Adana, Turkey. This neighborhood is characterized by limited socioeconomic resources, such as low household income, reduced access to quality educational and community services, and high unemployment rates. Serving children from low-income families who are at increased risk for social-emotional challenges (Raver et al., 2015), this preschool highlights the critical need for targeted SEL support to address these developmental needs in such contexts.

Children age 36–72 months are enrolled in this school. A single teacher is responsible for all teaching activities in each classroom, with no other adult present to assist. These teachers are responsible for planning activities based on the Preschool Education Program outlined by the Ministry of National Education (2013). While the program provides a framework, it allows for flexibility, enabling teachers to tailor their monthly and daily plans to the specific interests and needs of the children in their classes. On average, children spend six hours per day in this preschool setting. During the six-hour school day, children engage in circle time, structured educational activities, free play, outdoor time, and meal periods. The research context highlights teachers' crucial role in meeting children's developmental needs, particularly in environments where resources and support may be limited.

Participants

In this study, four preschool teachers, all of whom had bachelor's degrees and seven to eight years of teaching experience, participated. These teachers serve children primarily from low-income families and have not previously engaged in in-service training to support children's social-emotional development or address challenging behaviors. They voluntarily participated in this research. The classrooms they managed varied in size, with student numbers ranging from 21 to 31 children.

An information form explaining the research's aim and process was sent to the parents of the children in these classes to gather background information. Parents were requested to complete the Demographics Questionnaire, which included questions about their child's age, gender, schooling experience, family income, and the parents' educational background. Ninety-two parents responded to this questionnaire. The children in the study (42 girls and 50 boys) were between 48 and 72 months ($M_{age} = 65.86$ months, $SD = 5.96$). Notably, 89% of these children had no previous school experience. Regarding parental education, 14% of the mothers and 7% of the fathers had only primary school education. Higher education levels were also reported, with 15% of mothers and 27% of fathers holding university degrees. Additionally, 32% of mothers and 44% of fathers were high school graduates. The data further revealed that 84% of the households fell into low-income families.

Pseudonyms were assigned to the teachers to maintain confidentiality and adhere to ethical principles. The teachers were referred to Mrs. Yilmaz, Mrs. Kaya, Mr. Demir, and Mrs. Çelik (Table 1).

Table 1. Teacher and classroom profiles.

Teacher (Pseudonym)	Highest education level	Teaching experience (years)	Classroom size	Child age (month)
Mrs. Yilmaz	Bachelor's degree	8	22	59–68
Mrs. Kaya	Bachelor's degree	8	31	61–72
Mr. Demir	Bachelor's degree	7	21	48–59
Mrs. Çelik	Bachelor's degree	8	30	63–72

Procedure for intervention

Approval for conducting the study was obtained from the ethics committee of Çukurova University (Protocol Number: 43250) and the participating school districts in Turkey. Written informed consent was secured from all relevant stakeholders, including the participating children's teachers, school directors, and caregivers, prior to initiating the study. Our study implemented the Reaching Educators and Children (REACH) professional development program (Conners-Burrow et al., 2017), which was developed to enhance early childhood educators' ability to support children's social and emotional development. To tailor the program to the Turkish context, the first author contacted the original developers of REACH. With their permission secured, the research team translated the REACH program materials into Turkish. The adapted program involves two director workshops and six teacher workshops based on the Pyramid Model, individual coaching sessions, and toolkit items.

Director workshops

The first director workshop focused on the importance of supporting children's social-emotional development at an early age, introducing the social-emotional learning pyramid and a detailed presentation of the REACH program. The second director workshop focused on how administrators could support teachers to support children. The school director and the assistant director attended the workshops together.

Teacher workshops

The teachers received six small-group interactive workshops and ongoing individual coaching sessions from February 2019 to May 2019. We taught specific Pyramid Model strategies in the workshops using adult teaching methods such as role-playing, working on scenarios, videotape modeling, discussions, worksheet activities, and modeling strategies by the trainer (see Figure 1). Each workshop was carefully designed to include both theoretical explanations and practical applications, ensuring that

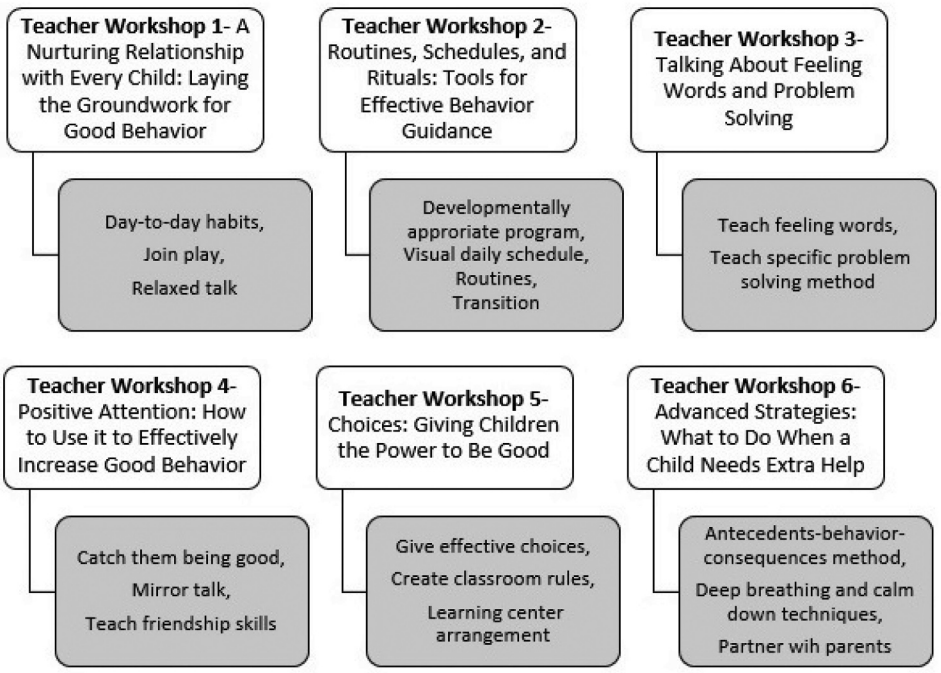

Figure 1. Content of teacher workshops.

the teachers could immediately apply the strategies in their classrooms. Each workshop began with a brief overview of the strategy's theoretical foundations, followed by interactive activities such as role-playing and scenario analysis, where teachers practiced the strategies in simulated classroom situations. The sessions concluded with group discussions and reflection on how the strategies could be adapted to their unique classroom needs. The workshops were scheduled at times that did not coincide with the teachers' regular classes, ensuring that they did not disrupt the ongoing teaching process. The first author conducted workshops every two weeks. Providing workshops every two weeks allowed the teachers to try the newly learned strategies in their classroom and to receive coaching. Each workshop lasted two hours, and the teachers received 12 hours of training.

Teacher coaching sessions

The coach provided 12 weekly coaching sessions in each teacher's classroom to support their practices. The coach designed the sessions in three steps of a cyclical nature. First, the coach observed each teacher's classroom for up to three hours weekly, focusing on their use of newly learned strategies and overall classroom practices. Detailed notes were taken during these observations to document the teachers' strengths, areas for improvement, and contextual factors that influenced their implementation of the strategies. Observations were conducted non-intrusively to ensure that the teachers and children felt comfortable and that the classroom dynamics were not disrupted. Second, the coach held individual feedback meetings with each teacher. These meetings were tailored to address the specific needs and challenges observed during the classroom visits. During these sessions, the coach encouraged teachers to reflect critically on their use of the strategies and discuss the perceived effectiveness of their implementation. The coach provided constructive feedback and highlighted both successful practices and areas requiring further improvement. Teachers were also invited to share any challenges they encountered and to suggest potential adjustments to enhance the strategies' applicability in their unique classroom contexts. Third, the coach and each teacher collaborated to develop an action plan for the following week. This plan included specific, measurable goals for implementing the strategies, tailored to the teacher's individual classroom needs and the developmental levels of the children. The action plan also included practical steps and suggested activities, ensuring the strategies were implemented systematically and with fidelity. This process was repeated weekly, with the coach and the teachers consistently following these steps. The coach provided a total of 42 hours of coaching support for each teacher, averaging 3.5 hours per week. While the goal was to allocate at least 30 minutes for weekly feedback meetings, the exact duration of these meetings was not systematically recorded for each teacher. Estimates based on process notes indicate that the time spent on feedback sessions generally ranged between 25 and 35 minutes, depending on the teachers' needs and availability. In addition to the scheduled meetings, the coach communicated with teachers through messaging and phone calls to offer further support and guidance as needed. These additional interactions were not consistently timed or logged but served as supplemental support to address immediate concerns or questions.

Toolkit items

REACH has an extensive list of materials. The teachers received handouts in each workshop. Various complementary practice materials, such as posters, puppets, children's picture books, worksheets, problem-solving kits, visual daily schedules, and calendar cards, were given to the teachers to enable them to use the newly learned strategies in their classrooms. In addition, parent pages were included to provide families with simple strategies and activities to support their children's social and emotional development at home.

Data collection

We used individual interviews as the primary data collection method in this study. To increase the trustworthiness, we triangulated interview data with classroom observations and documents,

including the teachers' reflective journals and the implementor's research journal (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain, we checked what teachers said in the interview against what we observed in the classroom and what we read in the documents. The use of triangulation in this study heightened its validity by enabling the examination of potential biases and limitations that might arise from a single data collection method, specifically interviews. Thus, we obtained valuable insights that provided a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of the teachers' experiences.

Individual interviews

We conducted semi-structured face-to-face interviews to explore the perceptions and experiences of the teachers regarding the intervention following the completion of all workshops and coaching sessions. We presented the teachers with 26 open-ended questions categorized into five dimensions. These dimensions encompassed inquiries about the strengths and weaknesses of the intervention, their experiences in implementing newly acquired strategies in the classroom, the positive and negative effects of the intervention, and any recommendations they might have. All interviews were conducted in Turkish, the native language of the teachers. After getting verbal approval from the teachers, we audiotaped the interviews and transcribed them. We made a member check over the transcripts via a second meeting with the teachers. We asked the teachers to review their thoughts and inform us what they would like to change or add.

Observations

We observed the teachers in their classrooms to determine how they used the newly learned strategies during the intervention. We conducted non-participatory observation after each workshop. We used a semi-structured observation protocol of 10 questions in four dimensions, including toolkit items, teacher's experiences, children's reactions, and changes in the classroom environment. Details of the observation protocol, including the specific questions and dimensions, are presented in Table 2.

Documents

We used the teachers' reflective journals and the implementor's research journal as documents. Throughout the intervention, we asked them to keep a reflective journal in which they were encouraged to document their thoughts, observations, and insights related to the intervention process, strategies learned in the workshops, challenges faced, and any other reflections deemed relevant to their professional growth and the effectiveness of the intervention. Furthermore, the first author, responsible for conducting the workshops and coaching sessions, maintained a personal journal to record and reflect on experiences throughout the study, from its initiation to conclusion. The first author noted the impressions after each workshop, overall assessments at the end of the feedback meeting, and suggestions for future implementations.

Table 2. Observation protocol.

Using toolkit items	Teacher's experiences	Children's reactions	Changes in the classroom environment
• Were the toolkit items posted on the wall as a reminder? • Did the teacher or child use the toolkit items? • Was there any barrier noticed to the use of toolkit items?	• Did the teacher implement the newly learned strategies? • Which strategies did the teacher seem to have benefited more? • What difficulties did the teacher appear to experience in practice?	• What were the observed reactions of the children to the strategies? • What were the observed reactions of the children to the toolkit items?	• What were the positive changes observed in the classroom environment? • What were the negativities observed in the classroom environment?

Data analysis

We employed an inductive analysis approach, which involves the researcher discovering codes, key themes, and sub-themes within the data (Patton, 2002). We performed the interview data analysis in three steps. At first, we transcribed audiotaped interviews. In order to prevent errors and omissions that may have occurred during the translation, the first author listened to the audiotapes repeatedly and compared them with the transcript. Second, the first author read and reread all the transcripts and explored representative teacher comments and descriptive anecdotes. Third, based on the representative data, the codes with potential patterns were combined to form sub-themes. Then, the sub-themes were gathered, and the key themes were put forward.

Additionally, we conducted a cross-case analysis of the data gathered from observations, teacher journals, and research journal (see Table 3). We meticulously cross-referenced the statements made by teachers during the interviews with our classroom observations and the content of the teachers' and implementor's research journal. This process involved verifying the consistency of the teachers' reported experiences and perspectives with what was actually observed in the classroom settings. For instance, if a teacher mentioned a specific strategy they used to enhance children's social interactions during the interview, we checked for instances of this strategy in our classroom observation notes and journal entries. This triangulation helped to ensure the accuracy and reliability of our findings. To further ensure data reliability, the second author reviewed all the transcripts and evaluated the code, sub-themes, and key themes formed by the first author. Then, the first and second authors met to refine and organize the code and themes to reflect the data accurately. The two researchers agreed on the revised data. Following a two-week interval, both the first and second authors performed a recoding of the same data. During this process, they identified changes in three of the 43 codes and two of the 18 sub-themes. Accordingly, there was 92.31% consistency between the two analyses. After six months, we worked on the data a third time to detect overlapped themes and merged these to finalize the coding of themes. We used direct quotations from the participants' statements to explain the findings in detail. Furthermore, we presented data obtained from observations, teacher journals, and research journal using direct quotations to reinforce the validity of the interview data.

Results

We gathered our results under four key themes: (1) benefits to teachers, (2) benefits to children, (3) facilitators to implementation, and (4) barriers to implementation (see Table 4).

Table 3. Cross-case analysis.

Main theme	Sub-themes	Interview	Observation	Teacher journals	Research journal
Benefits to teachers	Improved behavior management skills	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Increased emotional well-being and self-efficacy	✓			✓
	Established a positive teacher-child relationship	✓	✓		✓
	Reduced workload	✓	✓		
Benefits to children	Increased behavioral competence	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Increased emotional competence	✓		✓	
	Increased social competence	✓	✓	✓	
	Improved academic outcomes	✓			
	Improved classroom atmosphere	✓		✓	
Facilitators to implementation	Teachers' positive beliefs regarding the intervention	✓	✓		
	Practice-oriented and fun training sessions	✓		✓	
	Providing toolkit items	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Providing coaching support	✓			✓
Barriers to implementation	Behavior and emotion regulation difficulties in teachers	✓	✓		✓
	Children's difficulties in some skills	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Poor physical environment and resources	✓	✓		
	Difficulty implementing some strategies under real-world conditions	✓	✓		✓

Table 4. Summary of the code, key themes, and sub-themes.

Main theme	Sub-themes	Code Examples
Benefits to teachers	Improved behavior management skills	"I used to give punishment, and I was depriving too much. For instance, I used to say, 'Those who do not perform their art activities well will not go outside.' Alternatively, before going outdoors, I used to say, 'If anyone steps on the slide backward, they will have to sit next to me.' Now I remind children of the rules before going outside." (Mrs. Kaya, interview)
	Increased emotional wellbeing and self-efficacy	"Despite having eight years of teaching experience, I now feel more well-prepared to handle the social and emotional development of children." (Mrs. Çelik, interview)
		"Today, I came across Mrs. Kaya at school, and we had a quick word. She said, 'It was a hard day today, but I always took a deep breath, calmed myself by saying that I will follow the program, I will not get angry, I will not yell.'" (Research Journal)
	Established a positive teacher-child relationship	"My relationship with the children has become warmer and more intimate. There is also a change in the children's love and attitude toward me because when I punished the child, the child was afraid of me. Now, the children are closer to me and like me more." (Mr. Demir, interview)
	Reduced workload	"Previously, children would constantly come to complain because they could not solve problems on their own. I used to individually talk to each of them and try to resolve the issues myself. They would say, 'Teacher, s/he hit me, took my toy' because they could not solve their problems. However, I found myself becoming exhausted during that process." (Mrs. Yilmaz, interview)
Benefits to children	Increased behavioral competence	"There were children in my class who had physical aggression. They used to exhibit aggressive behavior when they felt something as annoying. Now, these behaviors have decreased." (Mr. Demir, interview)
	Increased emotional competence	"I have observed the children saying to each other, 'You look so sad. What happened? Oh, you look so happy.'" (Mrs. Yilmaz, interview)
		"Visual daily schedule is a small thing. I would not have done it if the trainer did not want me to practice it. I never thought that it would be effective, but it had a powerful effect on anxious children." (Mrs. Çelik, journal)
	Increased social competence	"The children give each other time to play with toys that they both want. They say: 'I will give it to you in five minutes." (Mrs. Kaya, interview)
		"Their conversations among themselves have intensified and diverged. The children's relationship with each other has improved. They've also begun using kind words and giving each other praise." (Mrs. Yilmaz, interview)
	Improved academic outcomes	"One of the children was distracted during the activity. I used the mirror talk strategy by saying, 'Now you are using the red crayon, now you have the blue crayon in your hands.' The child immediately focused on the activity." (Mrs. Yilmaz, interview)
	Improved classroom atmosphere	"Previously, I was afraid to face away from children. Now, I have a safe class." (Mrs. Yilmaz, interview)
Facilitators to implementation	Teachers' positive beliefs regarding the intervention	"I was able to understand and implement each workshop easily. The most powerful aspect of the intervention was that it was user-friendly." (Mrs. Kaya, interview)
		"We talk about problem-solving steps in the workshop. Then, we go to the classroom, and there are many problems. What are we going to do? Of course, we solve it using the strategies." (Mrs. Yilmaz, interview)
	Practice-oriented and fun training sessions	"After each strategy, we both played roles and watched video examples. Theoretical knowledge is easily forgotten. The main thing is practicing them." (Mrs. Celik, interview)
	Providing toolkit items	"Providing ready-to-use materials has made our job easier. We did not know how to prepare them. We quickly used them without wasting time." (Mrs. Celik, interview)
	Providing coaching support	"The motivation provided by the coach to encourage us to implement the strategies was exceptionally crucial. It was a great emotion to feel that we were seen and heard." (Mrs. Kaya, interview)
		"I would not implement the strategies without coaching." (Mr. Demir, interview)

(*Continued*)

Table 4. (Continued).

Main theme	Sub-themes	Code Examples
Barriers to implementation	Behavior and emotion regulation difficulties in teachers	"The program tells us to stay calm, but I had a challenging time staying calm after physical aggression behaviors." (Mrs. Yilmaz, interview) "I have learned problem-solving steps, but I have not been able to implement them fully because I was a million miles away. Even though I was physically in class, I could not focus too much." (Mr. Demir, interview)
	Children's difficulties in some skills	"When there is a problem, children do not want to talk about their feelings and solutions. Children struggle to express their emotions." (Mrs. Kaya, interview)
	Poor physical environment and resources	"It is easier to solve the problem between two children in learning centers. However, I cannot create a center because my class area is too small. Therefore, I could not implement some strategies." (Mr. Demir, interview)
	Difficulty implementing some strategies under real-world conditions	"I need to use problem-solving steps. Children do not want to talk about their feelings and solutions. I take out the solution kit. Since that process takes longer, the attention of other children in the class is distracted, and I need to motivate them again. It becomes challenging to gather the class when that magical time for the activity is missed." (Mrs. Kaya, interview)

Benefits to teachers

Teachers reported numerous benefits from the intervention. They believed the REACH program enhanced their classroom behavior management skills, emotional well-being, self-efficacy, and relationships with children while also reducing their workload. The primary objective of the REACH program is to enrich teachers' knowledge, skills, and practices in fostering children's social-emotional competence. Based on the teachers' reports, these objectives were successfully achieved. Most notably, the intervention significantly increased the use of positive behavior management strategies and decreased reliance on negative techniques. One teacher explained the change:

> I used to respond to challenging behavior in a rather harsh manner. There were numerous instances where I would pass judgment on children without truly listening to them. However, after participating in the workshops, I found myself reflecting and thinking, "I wish I had given these children the opportunity to express their feelings." (Mrs. Yilmaz, interview)

The research journal supported this finding as follows:

> During the visit to Mrs. Yilmaz's classroom, I noticed that a child labeled with challenging behaviors by the teacher from the beginning of the intervention showed positive behaviors towards their friends and listened carefully to the teacher. When I shared my observation notes with Mrs. Yilmaz during the feedback meeting, she admitted, "Without even realizing it, I had labeled this child as challenging and had taken sides against them. However, after the training, I altered my behavior, and there was a significant improvement in the child's attitude. The other children's attitudes towards the child changed positively as well." (Research Journal)

The teachers were confident that they had bolstered their self-efficacy, leading to reduced stress levels and an overall enhancement of emotional well-being. Teachers believed they could solve the problems, felt emotionally relaxed, experienced decreased stress levels, and had more fun in the classroom environment:

> I started to feel more comfortable when the problem arose. For instance, I used to get nervous when a child was crying. After the training, I calmly go near the children and say, "I think there is a problem." When the teacher stays relaxed and composed, it has a similar effect on the children. They tend to become calmer, too, and this helps us find solutions quickly. It is like our job becomes so much more fun. (Mrs. Kaya, interview)

The increased positive behaviors and improved emotional well-being have additionally led to teachers establishing more positive relationships with the children. The teachers reported that they started to spend more time with the children and join their plays, which allowed them to realize their needs while

laying the foundations of teacher-child closeness. Teachers who started to spend more time with the children stated that they recognized the developmental needs of the children and that they had more realistic expectations from them:

> Because their attention span is short, children do not want to sit for a long time, and they start moving. Previously, this seemed to be a challenging behavior. However, now I realize that this is normal. Rather than labeling the children, I've learned that engaging in self-reflection and self-critique is important. And I started to say, "Well, I had to plan this activity in a way that every child would be active." (Mrs. Çelik, interview)

Teachers expressed that their workload decreased with the intervention as follows: "It used to be quite tiring when it was time to clean up. The children did not want to pick up the toys. Now I guide them easily by giving them choices or praising positive behaviors." (Mrs. Yilmaz, interview). Observation notes confirmed this:

> At playtime, two children could not share a toy. Both children wanted to play with the same toy. One child was pulling the toy on one side, and the other was pulling the toy on the other. One of the children said, "Then let's look at the teacher's pictures [mentioning the problem-solving kit]." The other child agreed. After leaving the toy in its place, they took the problem-solving kit and looked at the pictures to choose a solution. They resolved the issue without needing to involve the teacher. (Mrs. Çelik, observation notes)

Benefits to the children

The teachers thought the intervention improved the children's behavioral, emotional, and social competencies and academic skills. Furthermore, they believed that a positive classroom atmosphere was created through the intervention. First, teachers addressed that the children's appropriate behaviors increased and that challenging behaviors such as pushing, hitting, crying, and disruptions decreased after the intervention. Teachers who focused on the children's appropriate behaviors instead of challenging behaviors expressed that they had positive behavior transmission among the children:

> When I employ the mirror talk strategy, which involves reflecting to a child what I see or hear them doing or saying, other children in the classroom begin to request the same approach for themselves. They, too, start exhibiting positive behaviors, and it seems to spread like a contagion. The increase in positive behaviors is quite remarkable and happens almost instantly. (Mrs. Yilmaz, interview)

Teachers reported that the children's emotional understanding and expression skills improved and that they felt safe and happy in the classroom. Teachers expressed that these improvements resulted from the newly learned strategies and toolkit items, with statements like the following: "Since I started encouraging the children to express their feelings when facing any issues or problems, I've noticed that over time, more and more children have begun to express their emotions and share their feelings." (Mrs. Çelik, interview). The teacher journal supported this finding: "[T]he children have begun to ask each other more about their emotions. I hear them saying, 'Are you sad? Are you mad at me?'" (Mr. Demir, journal).

Teachers expressed that the children's problem-solving and self-expression skills improved and sharing behaviors and friendship skills improved. Teachers who used problem-solving steps and solution kits reported views such as:

> The children started to solve the problem faster. In addition, they started to create solutions without the need for a solution kit. They often say things like, "What were we supposed to do? I had to share it with my friend, I had to ask my friend for permission, or I had to wait." Interestingly, many problems are now resolved among the children themselves without needing me to intervene or be informed. (Mrs. Çelik, interview)

In parallel with the development of problem-solving skills, the teachers observed that the children were better able to express themselves. One teacher described the development of the children's self-expression, saying:

> I had quiet and introverted children in my class. I noticed that they started talking to their friends more and more. They began expressing themselves through discourses such as "I do not like how you treat me like this. Why did you say that?" (Mrs. Yilmaz, interview)

Teachers reported that the children's academic outcomes improved in addition to their behavioral, emotional, and social competencies. The children's thinking skills developed, and they started to focus better. During the intervention, the teacher, who expressed that the children's thinking skills improved, said, "When we do not offer solutions to the children's problems and expect them to produce solutions, the child starts thinking and constantly generates new ideas." (Mrs. Çelik, interview). One unexpected benefit was that teachers reported an improved classroom atmosphere. The teachers believed the classroom noise decreased and the classroom became safe. One teacher said, "Previously, free time activities used to be very noisy, everyone used to shout, and children used to play violent games. But now there is a calmer environment, the noise has decreased." (Mrs. Çelik, interview).

Facilitators to implementation

Teachers' positive beliefs about the intervention, practice-oriented and enjoyable training, provision of toolkit items, and coaching were identified as critical facilitators for successful implementation. Teachers' beliefs in the intervention's effectiveness in promoting positive child outcomes, the program content being fully responsive to their needs, and its user-friendly nature constituted the initial steps for the program's effective implementation. One of the teachers, who observed that the program provided a rapid change in the children's behaviors, expressed her thoughts:

> I realized the intervention is very effective and provides rapid change in the children's behaviors. For instance, we receive training at the beginning of the week, then we start to use different strategies in our classes, and we can get positive results instantly. (Mrs. Çelik, interview)

The observation notes also support this finding:

> After the workshop day, where the "giving children effective choices" strategy was taught, I observed Mrs. Yilmaz's classroom during the clean-up time. Mrs. Yilmaz went to the child who did not want to pick up the toys and asked, "Do you want to pick up the big blocks or the small blocks?" [giving choices]. The child began picking up, expressing their choice to the teacher and opting to collect the larger blocks. (Mrs. Yilmaz, observation notes)

Another crucial point is facilitating the implementation of the practice-oriented program and enjoyable nature of the training sessions. Teacher evaluation suggests that the intervention is effective because it provides ample opportunities for practical application rather than focusing solely on theoretical knowledge: "It would not be engaging if you presented it in a traditional seminar format, just briefly touching on the subject without elaborating or providing a detailed example. The fact that there are practices has made the strategies memorable." (Mr. Demir, interview).

Teachers stated that the toolkit items were effective facilitators by capturing the children's attention, guiding their implementation, and being readily usable. A teacher who used visual daily schedule cards in the classroom expressed her thought as follows: "The materials aroused curiosity in the children. The children noticed the new things as soon as they entered. In particular, the visuals of daily schedule captured the attention of the children." (Mrs. Yilmaz, interview). The observation notes supported this finding: "Mrs. Çelik took the solution kit out to solve a problem between two children. All children not directly related to the problem played in different learning centers gathered around the teacher and looked over the kit." (Mrs. Çelik, observation notes). In addition, the teacher reported that teacher handouts, a toolkit item, guided them in managing challenging behaviors: "I have looked at the sample sentences in the handout many times to find out what I should do during the crisis and what I should say to children." (Mrs. Çelik, interview). "I have looked at the handout over and over again for using the 'catch them being good' strategy (see Figure 1). It comes out of my mind because I am not used to it. It has made me remember." (Mr. Demir, interview).

The teachers highlighted the importance of coaching, emphasizing that it provided ongoing support, enabling them to implement strategies accurately and boosting their motivation. "If there was no coaching, I think I would not understand the strategies clearly. We were able to get instant support, especially when there was a problem in practice." (Mrs. Çelik, interview). The teachers stated that coaching allowed them to correct their misunderstandings and that they had the opportunity to implement them accurately. "Feedback meeting at the end of the day was beneficial. It was good to receive feedback and realize implementation flaws and the areas that needed improvement." (Mrs. Yilmaz, interview). A teacher stated that coaching promoted implementing the strategies regularly with the following words:

> The trainer's approach of solely teaching the strategies and then leaving the school might have resulted in occasional usage on my part. There could have been days when I did not implement them. However, knowing that the coach would be present during the bi-weekly workshops encouraged me to postpone using the strategies daily, thinking I could address them the next day. Having the coach on-site has been a game-changer, enabling me to consistently practice the strategies with high fidelity. (Mrs. Çelik, interview)

Barriers to implementation

Teachers reported facing challenges in regulating their own behavior and emotions and difficulties in implementing certain strategies under real-world conditions. They also noted deficiencies in children's basic skills and expressed concerns about the inadequacy of the physical environment and available resources.

Teachers expressed challenges in behavior and emotion regulation, which included difficulties in breaking their habits, ensuring anger management, and managing their problems/stress. Teachers' difficulties regulating their behaviors and emotions were most prominently rooted in their struggles to change their habits and gain a new perspective. For instance, all teachers expressed that they often used general praise in their classroom and were not used to descriptive praise that focuses on the child's behavior. One of the teachers explained his views on this issue with the following words:

> We have the habit of using some general praises such as well done, very nice, and it looks great. Sometimes, when I was trying to give descriptive praise, I felt like I would make a sentence in English. It sounded so strange because we do not use it at all, and it is not familiar. (Mr. Demir, interview)[1]

A teacher who had difficulty in getting rid of the traditional point of view said:

> The program feels a little different from how we grew up. I grew up traditionally and got traditional education in school.[2] Although I know the accurate practices, I tend to do what I learned from my mother and teachers. It is something that I learned by just observing and embedding in my subconscious. It is not something I *did on purpose*. (Mrs. Kaya, interview)

All teachers stated that the children had difficulty expressing their emotions and offering solutions when they had problems with their friends. Teachers made the following statements: "While solving problems, some children did not say anything. They could not express their emotions. They remained silent." (Mrs. Kaya, interview), "Using problem-solving steps took a long time. The children had a hard time when coming up with solutions." (Mrs. Çelik, interview).

Teachers reported that it was challenging to implement some strategies and that much practice is needed to be competent. One teacher said, "When I started using some strategies, I was thinking, 'Oh no, what I should have said now, how would it be more accurate to make a sentence.' It settled down as I practiced." (Mrs. Çelik, interview). The observation notes reflected it as follows:

> Mrs. Çelik tried to use problem-solving steps. She walked to the children having problems and said, "I think there is a problem. Do you want to tell me about it?" (Step one). Children started talking in unison. The teacher did not listen to the children and solved the problem by saying, "Share the toys!" Then she said, "I could not remember what to say. I could not follow the problem-solving steps, could I?" (Mrs. Çelik, observation notes)

After 12 school days, the same teacher recorded the following notes in her journal:

> A boy was hitting his friend. I went to them and said, "I see a problem." I asked them to tell me what happened and how it made them feel. "I kicked him because he said he would not play with me again," one of the children said. He said, "He was angry." The other child said: "I was angry that he took my toys without permission, and I said I am not going to play with you." So, I asked the children what we needed to solve this problem, and I took the solution kit. "If he had asked kindly, I would have given him the toy," one child said, choosing a permission request card from the solution kit. The other boy said that I should have asked for permission and that hitting was not good. Then, they started playing together. (Mrs. Çelik, journal)

The teachers expressed difficulty implementing the intervention due to failure to set up learning centers, large class sizes, and the lack of materials. Two of the teachers reported that the class size made it challenging to implement the program. A teacher expressed her views with the following words: "Classrooms are very crowded in Turkey. It would be easier to implement the program if the class size were not large." (Mrs. Kaya, interview). Furthermore, one of the teachers stated that he had difficulty in implementing due to the lack of materials with the following words: "There is not enough material in our classrooms. If children play with the material linking to their interest, there will be fewer challenging behaviors." (Mr. Demir, interview).

Discussion

This study qualitatively assesses preschool teachers' experiences with SEL interventions in Turkey. The findings revealed four main themes: benefits to teachers, benefits to children, facilitators to implementation, and barriers to implementation. Results underscore the importance of providing professional development support to increase teachers' capacity to support children's SEL skills. By highlighting both facilitators and challenges, this research provides essential guidance for effectively supporting teachers in enhancing the SEL skills of preschool children, particularly in non-WEIRD countries.

One of the important findings of the study is that the teachers believed that the intervention led to improvements in both them and the children in their classrooms, such as using positive behavior management strategies more (e.g., focusing on positive behaviors, using descriptive praise) and used negative strategies less, such as punishment, deprivation, or none. This finding is consistent with the study of Uysal et al. (2010), who found that preschool teachers in Turkey adopted the reactive model to challenging behaviors and mostly used harsh reprimands and threats. Baker-Henningham and Walker (2009) also stated that teachers' greater use of negative strategies might be due to a lack of knowledge about positives, supporting the importance of providing teachers with comprehensive training in positive behavior support strategies. In supporting this, Hemmeter et al. (2021) emphasized that systematic training in positive behavior support equips teachers with the skills to create nurturing and proactive classroom environments, contributing to children's social and emotional growth. Moreover, Sutherland et al. (2018) found that targeted professional development initiatives can enable teachers to replace negative responses with instructional and supportive practices. Together, these findings underscore the importance of providing comprehensive training for teachers in positive behavior management, as it can significantly shift their approach from a reactive mode to a supportive and instructional mode, benefiting both teachers and children alike.

The findings of this study can be understood through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory, which emphasizes the reciprocal interactions between individuals and their environments. The teachers in the present study perceived that the positive changes they experienced had a beneficial impact on the children in their classrooms, such as improving children's behavioral, social, and emotional competence. We consider that teaching positive attention strategies (catch them being good, mirror talk; see Figure 1) is the basis of the change mechanism in teacher and child behaviors. We predict that increasing teacher behaviors focusing on positives improves children's social and emotional competencies; therefore, their challenging behaviors decrease. The reciprocal change in the behaviors of teachers and children enhances teacher-child relationships. Previous studies also indicated a positive relationship between the teacher-child dynamic and its influence on children's social

development (Ewing & Taylor, 2009) and behavioral competence (Pianta et al., 1995). Teacher behaviors that emphasize children's positive actions play a pivotal role in breaking the cycle of coercive behavior, where both the teacher and the child mutually contribute to negative interactions. Such interactions exemplify how changes at the microsystem level can have broader implications for developmental outcomes.

Findings highlight that all these teacher and child behavior changes contribute to the increase in teachers' self-efficacy and emotional well-being. In our study, the teachers reported that their stress levels decreased as a result of the intervention. This aligns with the findings of Ducharme and Shecter (2011), who identified challenging behaviors as a primary concern for teachers, often leading to heightened stress. Similarly, Reinke et al. (2014) noted that teachers frequently report difficulties coping with challenging behaviors due to insufficient behavior management skills. Such struggles can lead to feelings of inadequacy, further exacerbating their stress levels (Sayeski & Brown, 2011). By learning and implementing positive behavior management strategies, teachers in this study began to manage their classrooms more effectively, significantly enhancing their sense of self-efficacy. This is consistent with Steed and Durand's (2013) findings that evidence-based interventions focusing on behavior management improve teachers' self-efficacy. Additionally, improving teacher-child interactions not only benefits children's outcomes but also fosters teachers' emotional well-being by creating a more positive and supportive classroom environment (Narea et al., 2022, Penttinen et al., 2023). Overall, the intervention in this study was both successful and acceptable for preschool teachers in Turkey, providing them with practical strategies to address challenging behaviors and reduce their stress.

The teachers identified several key facilitators for the successful implementation of the intervention. First, their positive beliefs about the intervention were reinforced as they observed improvements in children's competence, which motivated them to persist with the practices. Second, practice-oriented and engaging training was crucial. Unlike traditional professional development models in Turkey, such as courses and seminars (Bümen et al., 2012), our findings indicated that teachers preferred interactive, hands-on training over didactic content. Third, the provision of ready-to-use toolkit items facilitated implementation by capturing children's attention and providing practical guidance. However, the teachers' reliance on handouts, evidenced by statements like "What was I supposed to say?" or "What sentences should I use?," suggests a rote learning approach, potentially limiting the teachers' ability to address diverse classroom challenges effectively. For true efficacy, teachers need to internalize the intervention's principles.

Findings underscore that coaching support emerged as a critical facilitator. Teachers emphasized that coaching not only ensured the correct and sustainable implementation of strategies but also significantly boosted their motivation. Teachers reported that the coaching provided a safe space to express any conflicting emotions or doubts they encountered during implementation. Coaches actively acknowledged and addressed these feelings, empowering teachers to navigate challenges arising from cultural differences while maintaining their focus on children's developmental needs. All teachers agreed that without coaching support, they would not have continued using the new strategies, underscoring the essential role of coaching in achieving long-term success. This finding aligns with extensive literature highlighting coaching as an effective teacher professional development strategy. For instance, Rogers et al. (2020), in their synthesis of 24 professional development studies in early childhood education, found that combining professional development with coaching was among the most effective approaches for improving early childhood education outcomes. While effective at raising awareness of intervention practices, traditional professional development methods often fail to help teachers translate evidence-based strategies into classroom implementation (Artman-Meeker et al., 2015). This difficulty stems from teachers' challenges in transferring knowledge acquired in traditional in-service training to real-world classroom environments (Kretlow & Bartholomew, 2010; Scheeler et al., 2009). Consequently, teachers require ongoing, practical support to implement interventions accurately and as intended. Without such

support, their fidelity in executing these strategies significantly diminishes (DiGennaro et al., 2007). Moreover, Knight (2018) stressed that coaching creates a collaborative partnership between coaches and teachers, which helps sustain motivation and ensures teachers feel supported throughout the implementation process. Thus, coaching emerges as an essential component of comprehensive support systems, ensuring the effective and lasting implementation of newly learned strategies while simultaneously enhancing teacher efficacy and motivation.

The study identified four primary barriers to implementation: challenges related to behavior and emotion regulation among teachers, difficulties in some skills among children, difficulty implementing some strategies under real-world conditions, and poor physical environment and resources. Teachers' social-emotional competencies, which include regulating emotions and behavior, affect the classroom atmosphere and children's development. Byun et al. (2022) found that teachers' psychological well-being was generally related to their practice. In the Prosocial Classroom Model, Jennings and Greenberg (2009) put forward that teachers with high social-emotional competence could implement SEL interventions more effectively. To this end, fostering teachers' social-emotional competencies for effective SEL practice is essential. The interventions can be enriched by adding emotion and behavior regulation techniques and mindfulness- and self-compassion-based activities to the content of professional development programs.

Our findings highlight significant barriers to implementation, particularly the difficulties children face in expressing their emotions and offering solutions to problems. This adds new dimensions to the limited literature on implementation challenges. The lack of basic emotional expression skills among children can be attributed to cultural influences, which play a crucial role in how emotions are experienced and expressed (Le et al., 2002). Turkey's unique geographical location results in a blend of individualist and collectivist cultures. While individual autonomy, characteristic of individualistic cultures, has some influence, the emphasis in Turkey remains on close relationships, as seen in collectivist cultures. The collectivist culture in Turkey fosters widespread acceptance of parental control, with parents aiming to raise obedient children who listen to them (Kagitcibasi & Ataca, 2005). This cultural tendency may lead to undervaluing children's emotions, thoughts, and needs. Decision-making is often dominated by adults, with parents taking charge at home and teachers holding authority in the classroom. Consequently, children are expected to conform to adult-established rules and decisions, with insufficient encouragement to express their ideas and feelings freely. This dynamic can hinder children from individually solving problems and expressing their emotions. In this context, the importance of culturally adapted SEL practices becomes evident. Hayashi et al. (2022) argue that SEL interventions cannot adopt a one-size-fits-all approach and must consider sociocultural and historical contexts in their design, implementation, and evaluation. Therefore, expanding the content related to emotional expression and social problem-solving in SEL programs for Turkey and similar cultures can significantly enhance their effectiveness.

The present study highlights significant challenges in effectively implementing some strategies within real-world classroom contexts, which emerged as substantial barriers to successful execution. Teachers expressed a strong need for support in translating newly acquired strategies into their classroom practice. As Joyce and Showers (1982) noted, classroom conditions differ considerably from workshop environments, necessitating additional time for teachers to develop ready-to-use skills from their training. Coaching has been identified as an effective professional development model to facilitate this skill transfer (Murphy et al., 2005). Positive feedback when teachers apply new strategies in the classroom increases their likelihood of using these strategies more frequently and with greater fidelity (Kretlow & Bartholomew, 2010). In this study, teachers reported that extensive practice was necessary to gain competence in implementing specific strategies. Similarly, Baker-Henningham and Walker (2009) found that teachers in Jamaica required significant time and practice to master some strategies. Therefore, when planning an SEL program, it is crucial to account for the time-intensive nature of learning strategies that demand substantial practice. Providing ample opportunities for

teachers to practice can significantly enhance their competence and effectiveness in implementing SEL strategies.

This study underscores the inadequacy of the physical environment and resources as significant barriers to implementation. Teachers reported facing challenges such as small classrooms and large class sizes, along with a need for more necessary materials to implement the intervention in Turkish classrooms effectively. The REACH program, initially developed for early childhood settings in the U.S., does not fully align with the Turkish context. Turkish preschools often suffer from poor physical conditions, including limited classroom space, high child-teacher ratios, and insufficient resources. Despite these obstacles, the study found that the intervention was beneficial for both teachers and children. We attribute this success to the ongoing support and extensive coaching provided, totaling 42 hours (3.5 hours per week for each teacher), which significantly boosted the teachers' motivation to implement the program despite the challenges. However, the provision of ongoing support requires substantial time and human resources, highlighting the potential impact of policy changes at the national level to improve the physical environment of preschools. Enhancing classroom conditions and resources is not just a necessity but a promising step toward the sustainable and effective implementation of such interventions.

Limitations

This study has some limitations. The first is that the research is a small-scale qualitative study in which only four classrooms are included. The results require careful interpretation regarding transferability. Expanding the sample size or conducting follow-up studies in future research would enhance the applicability of the results. The second limitation is that the voluntary selection of the participants may shape their perception of the intervention. The teachers who voluntarily participated in this study may be different from others in that they may have a stronger commitment to support social-emotional development and a greater willingness to improve in this area of practice. Therefore, the perception of the teachers who voluntarily participated in the study and the non-volunteer teachers may differ, affecting the research results. The third limitation is that the results cannot be transferred to teachers serving other socioeconomic levels since the participants in this study consisted of those teachers serving children from low-income families. Fourth, due to the substantial time investment needed for the teacher training and coaching protocol used in this research, a smaller group of teachers participated. Thus, we could not reach the number of participants that would allow us to collect continuous data until saturation was achieved in the emerging themes. However, similar themes emerged in each teacher interview, providing some evidence of saturation. Fifth, the fact that the researchers conducted individual interviews may have caused the teachers to respond to the researchers' expectations, express more positive views, and hide their negative thoughts. However, using multiple data sources, including interviews, observations, and documents, helps to alleviate this limitation. In addition, the fact that the teachers clearly expressed their opinions about the barriers to the intervention indicates that the impact of the threat of social desirability is low. Sixth, school administrators were not included in the scope of this research. Future research may reveal the benefits of interventions, facilitators, and barriers to implementation from the perspective of school administrators. Finally, the seventh limitation is that the research results cannot be generalized to those obtained from other SEL practices because the study results are based on a specific SEL program.

Conclusions

This study contributes to the limited literature examining teachers' experiences regarding REACH, a SEL program, and provides some new insights into SEL practices by illustrating how the intervention was adapted to align with the collectivist cultural norms of Turkish preschools and the practical challenges teachers face in this context. The participating teachers believed the intervention improved their behavior management skills, emotional well-being

and self-efficacy, and relationship with children in their classroom. The teachers perceived that the positive changes in their own behavior and approach had a beneficial impact on the children's behavioral, social, and emotional competence in their care. Results suggest that the intervention demonstrates acceptability and feasibility in the Turkish context, although the REACH program was developed and implemented in the United States. However, some adaptations are needed to make the intervention culturally adaptive. First, the content of SEL interventions should be enriched by adding emotional and behavior regulation techniques for adults. Second, the content of SEL interventions should be designed to maximize preschool children's ability to express emotions and solve social problems. Third, teachers should be given more opportunities to practice implementing SEL interventions effectively. Fourth, coaching should be an essential part of SEL interventions. Finally, the physical environment and resources should be improved to enable teachers to implement SEL strategies effectively and support children's emerging social and emotional skills development. The culturally adapted elements of the REACH program are summarized in the Appendix, which details the justifications for the adaptations, their sources, and the specific modifications implemented. To this end, the importance of culturally adapted SEL practices emerged. Further research is needed to explore new practices and transfer the culturally sensitive SEL practices identified in this study to different settings and contexts.

Notes

1. It is important to acknowledge that speaking English can be challenging for Turkish individuals. According to the English Proficiency Index in 2022, Turkey ranks among the countries with low English proficiency. Additionally, in the European region where English is not a native language, Turkey holds the second-to-last position in terms of English proficiency.
2. The qualifier "traditional" refers to an authoritarian parenting and teaching style. Teachers contribute to the persistence of obedience-demanding behaviors that are highly valued by the collectivist culture.

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Ethical approval

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Cukurova University (43250).

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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Appendix. Adapted REACH program.

Justification for Adaptation	Source of Justification	Adaptations
Teachers lacked sufficient prior knowledge of the strategies included in the original program.	(1) Teacher interviews (2) Observation (3) Research journal	Additional information aimed at enhancing teachers' knowledge of the strategies was integrated into the workshops, which, consequently, were extended in duration. Examples of how the strategies can be implemented in the classroom have been added.
Teachers experienced challenges in acquiring proficiency in implementing the strategies included in the original program.	(1) Teacher interviews (2) Observation (3) Research journal	Additional practical activities (e.g., role-playing, small-group work, scenarios) were designed to support teachers' skills in implementing strategies.
Children faced difficulties expressing their emotions.	(1) Teacher interviews (2) Observation (3) Teacher journals (4) Research journal	Classroom activities to enhance children's ability to understand and express emotions were developed and provided to teachers. Fifteen picture books related to emotions were selected and added to the program for teachers to use in the classroom.
Teachers were not accustomed to spending time with children to discuss emotions and the problem-solving process.	(1) Teacher interviews (2) Observation (3) Research journal	Information and examples of practices to improve teacher-child relationships were added. The workshops incorporated additional information, practice examples, scenarios, and video examples related to emotions and problem-solving.
Teachers valued the problem-solving steps but experienced challenges in applying them during implementation.	(1) Teacher interviews (2) Observation (3) Teacher journals (4) Research journal	Additional emphasis was placed on this topic during teacher workshops. A new section was created based on teachers' experiences during the study.
There are challenges in implementing the strategies due to constraints in the educational environment, such as a lack of learning centers, insufficient materials, and large class sizes.	(1) Teacher interviews (2) Research journal	Learning centers were planned collaboratively with the teacher and coach. Discussions during teacher workshops focused on solutions implemented in other teachers' classrooms to address these challenges. Teacher handouts included tips on setting up learning centers and using recyclable materials.