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Social-Emotional Learning in English Language Education:
Mapping the Landscape and Reflecting on the Way Forward

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Exploring the Integration of Social-Emotional Learning in EFL Pre-Service Teacher Preparation in Morocco: A Mixed-Method Study

Abstract: Morocco's educational policy documents underscore social-emotional competence as an important learning outcome. This study examines how the prominence of SEL in Morocco's educational reform policy is reflected in the pre-service preparation of EFL teachers. The researchers have conducted a mixed-methods study that examines SEL integration in pre-service teacher preparation programs, and the extent to which student teachers report evidence of social-emotional learning associated with their pre-service preparation programs. Findings indicate that while two thirds of EFL student teachers reported that their pre-service preparation programs incorporate SEL skills aligned with the CASEL framework, responding to stress, managing anxiety and emotions, and collaboration stood out as areas requiring further strengthening in EFL teacher education programs in Morocco.

Keywords: Morocco, social-emotional learning, student teachers, SEL competencies, power skills, mixed methods

There is enough room for SEL in our teacher education programs—CRMEFs [Regional Centers of the Professions of Education and Training], ESEFs [The Higher Education Schools of Education and Training], FSE [Faculty of Education], and ENSs [The Normal Schools]¹

– a Moroccan pre-service teacher educator

1. Introduction

English is occupying an increasingly prominent place as the foreign language of choice in Morocco. In April 2021, the British Council surveyed 1,211 urban youth aged 15–25 on their foreign language preference. According to the report findings (British Council 2021), English is expected to be the foreign language most used by the country's youth in the next five years, which constitutes a tidal shift in the country's foreign language landscape. Due to Morocco's colonial history, French has occupied a privileged status (Ennaji and Sadiqi 2008), followed to a lesser extent by Spanish (Chahhou 2014). Consistent with the findings of the British Council report, existing literature on factors accounting for the rising prominence of English in Morocco often highlights extrinsic and instrumental variables related to economic and academic advancement (Belhiah 2020; Slimani and Iguider 2023). In this paper, we posit that the intentional integration of social-emotional skills in English as a foreign language (EFL) into pre-service teacher preparation will strengthen student teachers' social-emotional learning (SEL) preparedness, which, after graduation, is articulated in terms of professional knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors that create learning opportunities associated with students' success in learning English in Morocco. This hypothesis is consistent with the EFL literature in other contexts (e.g. Hascher and Waber 2021; Heineke and Vera 2022; Pentón Herrera 2020), and it also reflects our personal stories as former EFL learners *and* high school teachers.

As EFL professionals, we personally believe that our teachers' ability to provide welcoming learning environments was a major factor in our success as EFL learners. Our first encounter with EFL was in the 10th grade. We embarked on this new foreign language experience somewhat scarred by a failing French learning experience. Compounding the fact that one could not master the first foreign language with the anxiety of further embarrassment resulting from struggling yet again in learning a new foreign language, we are indebted to our high school and college EFL instructors for making the social-emotional dimension of our learning as vital as its cognitive and linguistic aspects. Therefore, in addition to the research itself and its implications, this study carries a personal significance because it highlights an often-unacknowledged strength of many members of the EFL teaching community in Morocco. It is their mindfulness of SEL as an essential ingredient in holistic learning that has enabled many students to feel seen, heard, and loved.

From a research perspective, studying SEL in the context of EFL teacher pre-service education is an attempt to contribute to filling the gap in knowledge about the integration of socio-emotional skills into EFL teachers' preparation in Morocco. In addition to its research relevance, the study has policy implications, especially in EFL teacher preparation in higher education. In 2022, the Ministry of Higher Education launched a comprehensive Higher Education overhaul. A key pillar of

this transformation is the integration of SEL across undergraduate and graduate curricula. By focusing on SEL integration into undergraduate and post Bachelor teacher preparation programs, the study results are intended to inform the ongoing SEL policy implementation and highlight recommendations anchored in the reality of SEL integration as experienced by future EFL teachers.

2. Literature review

In this review, we begin by defining SEL. Then, we share a brief overview of SEL in Morocco's education reform and discuss the nexus of SEL and foreign language learning in international contexts as well as in Morocco. In this study, we reiterate Darling-Hammond's (2015) assertion that the cultivation of social-emotional intelligence is at least as crucial as the development of technical knowledge and skills. Employing the framework of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL 2020) as a guide, we define SEL as:

the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes 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 2020, 1)

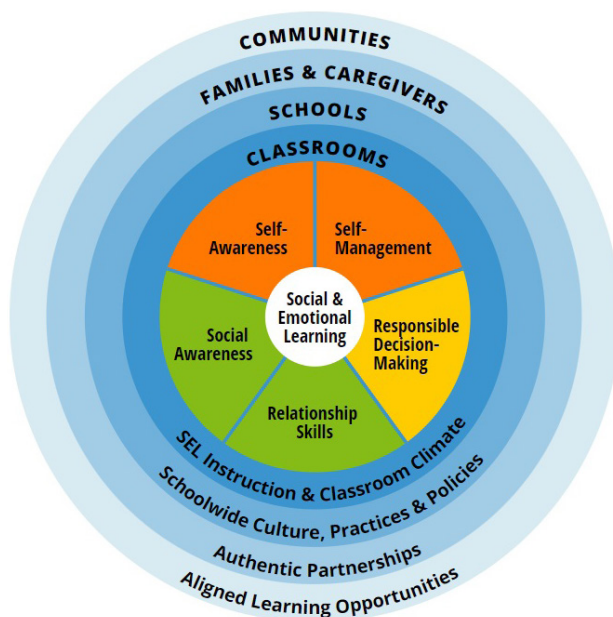


Fig. 1. CASEL's SEL framework (CASEL 2020)

As shown in Figure 1, CASEL divides SEL into five key competencies: 1) self-awareness, 2) self-management, 3) responsible decision-making, 4) relationship skills, and 5) social awareness. The five competencies nest within four concentric circles. At the inner core are classrooms, where SEL instruction and classroom climate have a direct bearing on the social-emotional skills of learners. The classroom is, in turn, nested in schools with schoolwide culture, practices, and policies. At the outer levels, CASEL (2020) identifies families and caregivers. Communities constitute equally important spheres where SEL can flourish thanks to authentic school-family-community partnerships. These partnerships nurture holistic SEL that spans the boundaries of homes, communities, schools, and classroom environments.

In Morocco, the National Charter for Education and Training (COSEF 2000) captured learning aspirations aligned with SEL competencies. It envisioned a citizen who is steeped in social, multi-cultural, and religious values. She or he strives for moderation and is curious, innovative, and engaged in lifelong learning. To help put in place the learning conditions of this desired citizen, the National Charter calls for an education system that nurtures initiative, positive outlook, mastery of languages, technological literacy, openness to dialogue; and commitment to democracy, law, and order. The Charter also underscores the criticality of effective pre-service teacher education programs (Bentahar 2019) in achieving the desired learning outcomes.

In 2015, the High Council for Education, Training, and Scientific Research published the 2015–2030 Strategic Vision for Education, Training, and Scientific Research (SVETSR). SEL-relevant outcomes in the vision included education quality and equal learning opportunities, attractive and relevant learning, multiple pathways to learning and lifelong learning, promotion of foreign languages, citizenship, critical thinking, democracy, equality, employability, innovativeness, and cultural openness. In 2019, Morocco signed the SVETSR strategy into a binding law known as the Framework Law (FL) 51.17.

In 2022, Morocco launched a landmark higher education reform called PACTE ESRI 2030. The acronym stands for the National Plan for the Acceleration of the Transformation of the Ecosystem of Higher Education, Scientific Research, and Innovation. PACTE ESRI 2030 presented an integrated vision for higher education reform that encompasses pre-service teacher preparation as well as SEL. In this regard, the Ministry of Higher Education uses the term “power skills” to refer to a broader set of cross-cutting aptitudes. Some of the intended SEL outcomes include the ability to navigate the new realities of independent living at the university, self-awareness, effective communication, multicultural awareness, and the ability to speak persuasively and confidently in public and work settings. As of 2023, the Ministry of Higher Education (2023) proposed a standard course description that covers study skills, life skills, civic skills, and professional skills. All university students are required to take these transversal modules to graduate.

Pre-service teacher preparation is another key reform area under PACTE ESRI 2030. As detailed in Elmeski et al. (2023), qualification for teaching positions is a

five-year process that begins with a three-year bachelor's in education, followed by two-year professional qualification training. To obtain a bachelor's degree in education, student teachers need to demonstrate subject matter mastery of the content area(s) they are expected to teach. To qualify for a teaching position, applicants need to pass an admission exam to one of the 12 Regional Centers for the Professions of Education and Training (CRMEFs). CRMEFs are post-baccalaureate professional qualification programs affiliated with the Ministry of National Education. They further build on the candidates' subject matter knowledge by focusing on equipping student teachers with the planning, classroom management, and assessment skills necessary to deliver lessons effectively. In the second year, teacher candidates begin full-time teaching duties under the dual supervision of a regional supervisor and a supervising teacher educator from the CRMEF. For consistency purposes, we use the term 'teacher educators' to refer to university professors as well as post-baccalaureate CRMEF trainers.

According to the Ministry of Education, full immersion in teaching during Year 2 is intended to strengthen student teachers' reflective skills and raise their awareness of the socio-emotional and interpersonal dimensions of actual teaching. As detailed in the official Ministry documents describing the teacher preparation pipeline (Elmeski et al. 2023), the first three years are intended to develop subject-matter knowledge, or what is officially referred to as the know-what competencies. In Year 4, student teachers' preparation is more focused on the know-how of instruction. In Year 5, the intended learning outcome is primarily the development of the competencies associated with how to be and act as a teacher.

At the end of the second year, those who successfully pass the Exam of Professional Qualification and present their action research report (similar to a thesis or a final project) are officially matriculated as fully qualified public school teachers (Elmeski et al. 2023). In this study, we use the term 'student teacher' to refer to students in the university undergraduate program (Years 1 to 3) and the CRMEF qualification program (Years 4 and 5).

In summary, the review of Morocco's educational policy appears to indicate a clear awareness of the importance of socio-emotional skills as a desired learning outcome of teacher preparation programs. This emphasis is also evident in the PACTE ESRI 2030 identification of power skills as key transversal competencies required of all university students, many of whom will potentially graduate to start their pre-service teacher journeys in CRMEFs. Considering the advent of university-based teacher preparation programs², these transversal competencies are becoming a core component of teacher preparation, which is a major development in teacher education reform at the university level. Similarly, the Ministry of National Education, through its professional qualification institutions (CRMEFs), clearly names life skills or "the know-how to be" as a target competency, especially during the first year of supervised teaching. These policies apply to all future teachers.

The clearer intentionality about strengthening social-emotional learning in teacher preparation is consistent with international literature about effective teaching. In this respect, the Six Principles for Exemplary Teaching of English Learners by the TESOL International Association captures the centrality of the SEL dimension as a key aspect of holistic and inclusive EFL. The six principles stipulate that EFL teachers know their learners, create conditions for language learning, design high-quality lessons for language development, adapt lesson delivery as needed, monitor, assess student language development, and engage and collaborate within a community of practice (Pentón Herrera and Martínez-Alba 2022).

Indeed, the importance of the socio-emotional dimensions of foreign language learning is a proposition that goes back to well-known classics such as Gardner and Lambert's (1972) work on integrative and instrumental motivation, and Rubin's (1975) "What the 'Good Language Learner' Can Teach Us". Other heavily quoted sources on socio-affective and cultural factors predicting language learning include Kaplan (1966), Asher (1969), Stern (1975), Scovel (1978), Bialystok (1978), and Tarone (1980).

Reflecting on the rationale for social-emotional learning (SEL) in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), Pentón Herrera (2020) underscored the centrality of a holistic instructional experience that acknowledges the refugee and migrant displacement realities of some of the EFL learners, which nests their needs to thrive academically in their more fundamental right to feel safe. However, the benefits of SEL extend to teachers as well as students. In this regard, a study of Norwegian lower secondary school teachers (Virtanen et al. 2019) found that improving teachers' well-being is associated with improved teacher-student interactions and vice versa.

Earlier in this article, the authors of this study related their personal accounts of the value of feeling seen, heard, and loved, particularly in foreign language situations where the risk of feeling awkward or sounding foolish constitutes a major concern of students, especially in their teen-age years. The need for foreign language learners to feel safe is well supported by the literature. In an ethnography of the lived experience of five multilingual learners (MLLs) of English in a community college, Abbott (2018) related how students' lack of fluency in English led to their anxiety with a tendency to self-isolate from classmates and professors.

Relatedly, Pappamihiel (2002) documented how middle-school Mexican immigrant students were much more likely to show anxiety in English as a second language (ESL) classrooms, compared to mainstream peers. In this regard, she emphasized the importance of preparing teachers of MLLs of English to recognize the role of affective factors in nurturing students' self-efficacy. Teacher preparation should, therefore, attend to the creation of differentiated and safe learning spaces that acknowledge the need to support students in situations where learning a new language can be associated with instances where they risk a) losing face due to

language mistakes and cross-cultural miscommunication, and b) not sounding fluent or feeling the embarrassment of being rebuked or laughed at.

In conclusion, in a world where mental disorders affect 1 in 7 of youth aged 10–19 (World Health Organization 2021), SEL is, at heart, a mental health imperative. For Levine et al. (2024), it is often marginalized populations that are worst affected by mental disorders. When teachers attend to their SEL needs as well as the needs of their students, they help contribute to the improvement of mental health by demonstrating an inclusive grasp of what it takes to create respectful and engaging opportunities for all learners. It is this holistic approach to promoting equitable and effective opportunities that guided our inquiry into how SEL is integrated into EFL pre-service preparation in Morocco.

3. Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in CASEL's five SEL competencies: 1) self-awareness, 2) self-management, 3) responsible decision-making, 4) relationship skills, and 5) social awareness. As discussed earlier, the official launch of PACTE ESRI 2030 is as recent as September 2023. In this early phase of the policy implementation, CASEL's five SEL competencies framework casts a wide and granular net that allows for capturing emergent indicators of SEL integration into EFL pre-service teachers' preparation programs. The framework also encompasses Morocco's Ministry of Higher Education dimensions of SEL. Therefore, it represents a coherent conceptual model for exploring how SEL competencies are integrated into student teachers' pre-service preparation.

According to Osher et al. (2016, 646),

- Self-Awareness [designates] the abilities to recognize one's own emotions and values, to accurately assess weaknesses and strengths, and to possess a well-grounded sense of self-efficacy and optimism.
- Self-Management [refers to] the ability to regulate emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in diverse situations, including the ability to manage stress, control impulses, and set and achieve goals.
- Social Awareness [is] the ability to adopt the perspective of those with different backgrounds, understanding social and cultural norms, and recognizing available resources and supports.
- Relationship Skills [are manifested in] the ability to establish positive relationships with different kinds of people, communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate peer pressure, negotiating conflict, and seeking help when necessary.
- Responsible Decision Making [denotes] the capacity to make choices based on realistic evaluations of consequences, well-being, ethics, safety, and social norms.

In addition to informing the design of the survey questions, the CASEL framework helps shed light on the extent to which EFL teacher preparation programs in Morocco address the multiple competencies of SEL. Relatedly, it can serve as a dashboard for identifying future SEL program improvement needs, especially as it pertains to teaching English as a foreign language.

4. Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore how SEL is implemented in EFL teacher preparation programs across Morocco. The researchers employed a mixed-methods concurrent explanatory design using an online survey completed by 518 student teachers (which is the term commonly used in Morocco to refer to pre-service teachers) and focus groups with teacher educators from universities and CRMEFs. In mixed methods, concurrent designs enable researchers to engage with data collection in an independent fashion, where one strand of data does not have to inform the collection of the other strand (Bell et al. 2022). Leveraging the advantages of both data strands – quantitative and qualitative – helped ensure a more robust and complete understanding of the topic using different perspectives. Two research questions guided our research exploration:

RQ1: How is SEL defined and operationalized in the new teacher pre-service education program in Morocco?

RQ2: From the perspective of EFL student teachers, how confident are they about their acquisition of SEL competencies during pre-service education?

4.1. Instruments

The researchers used two instruments to collect the data – a survey and focus groups. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected in December 2023. Author 1 (Mohammed Elmeski) tested the survey following a think-aloud protocol where three university-based student teachers from Years 1, 2, and 3 in the teacher preparation bachelor's program read the survey items out loud. Then, Author 1 probed the three university-based student teachers' grasp of the survey instruction to verify their understanding of the intended meaning.

Survey

The survey consisted of 21 questions broken into three sections. The survey respondents, i.e. student teachers, were asked to first agree to participate as part of the consent protocol integrated into the online survey as Question 1. The first four questions helped collect demographic information, and the next set focused

on introducing the concept of SEL in terms of personal characteristics, beliefs, and implementation in higher education settings. The survey also included questions about SEL-related competencies and values that the participants may have developed during their programs, including the role of teacher educators and administrators in these programs. 518 participants from different regions in Morocco completed the survey.

Focus group

In a predominantly Muslim culture such as Morocco, we deemed it more convenient to facilitate a discussion of SEL implementation in teacher preparation settings in same-sex focus groups, ensuring teacher educators discuss the topic with more comfort and ease. An invitation was emailed to over 120 teacher educators involved in Morocco's EFL pre-service teacher preparation. Of the eight members who had initially confirmed participation in Focus Group 1 (male group), five showed up; another five of the six who had agreed to participate attended the second focus group (female group). The total number of participants is N=10.

Author 2 (Adil Bentahar) administered and facilitated the two focus group discussions. One of the key advantages of focus groups, as a qualitative instrument, is the ability to leverage the participants' body language while sharing their responses and fostering interaction among them (Krueger and Casey 2015). Ten participants took part in two focus group discussions (FGDs), all in English, using Zoom. The FGDs lasted 60 and 85 minutes respectively.

4.2. Data collection procedure

The researchers contacted the teacher educators involved with EFL teacher education in Morocco. The email asked the stakeholders to inform prospective pre-service teachers in their regions about the study and complete an online survey. Author 1 handled this phase of quantitative data collection. Likewise, Author 2 followed similar procedures by encouraging these same facilitators in higher education to participate in focus groups. An email was sent to around 120 EFL professionals, and the first 10–15 who expressed interest were invited to participate the following week.

4.3. Participants

In sum, 518 EFL pre-service teachers across Morocco completed the online survey. Almost 76 percent were female respondents, and 80.9 percent were in their undergraduate education program. The remaining 19.1 percent were bachelor's degree holders in the two-year CRMEF qualification programs. In terms of geographical distribution, 45.8 percent were from the Rabat-Sale-Kenitra region,

22.6 percent were from Marrakesh-Safi, and 11.1 percent were from the Souss-Massa region. Another 5.6 percent represented Fez-Meknes, and 4.6 percent came from Casablanca-Settat. The other 10 percent remaining were spread among the seven remaining administrative regions in Morocco.

Age distribution reveals a young teacher population consisting of 90.4 percent of student teachers aged 18–24. The remaining 9.2 percent were aged 25–30. Table 1 shows student teachers' years of pre-service preparation. The largest majority were in the first year of the undergraduate program.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the survey respondents (N=518)

Year in the pre-service teacher preparation program	%
First year undergraduate	53.2
Second year undergraduate	14.3
Third year undergraduate	11.8
First year CRMEF	1.9
Second year CRMEF	15.5
Masters	2.7
PhD	0.6

Descriptive statistics also indicate that 93.3 percent of the respondents reported having hobbies they like pursuing in their free time. However, inside their pre-service teacher preparation programs, 69.7 percent of respondents declared that their only role is to attend classes and work on their assignments. Only 30.3 percent reported involvement in extracurricular activities, such as drama clubs, public speaking, and student representation.

The 10 FGD participants' EFL teaching experience in higher education settings (e.g. university and teacher education program centers) ranged from 3 to 7 years. The geographic locations were also diverse with a) Rabat-Sale-Kenitra (N=4); Tanger-Tetouan-Al Hoceima (N=1); Dakhla-Oued Ed-Dahab (N=1); Fes-Meknes (N=2); Casablanca-Settat (N=1); and Marrakesh-Safi (N=1). Three teacher educators represented CRMEFs and the other seven represented university-based teacher education programs.

4.4. Data analysis

The researchers formulated well-informed comparisons of the two data set responses, i.e. quantitative and qualitative, in a more meaningful fashion (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011). Keeping the research questions as the primary focus, the

goal for merging qualitative and quantitative data included an examination of potential areas of data convergence and corroboration (Bowen 2009).

To analyze the data from the focus groups, the researchers used Krueger's (1994) "Framework analysis," following a multi-step process of distinct, yet interconnected, stages. The latter include: 1) data collection, where the facilitator records the discussion key points and complements the generated data with the observation notes, 2) familiarization, which entails listening to the recording, reading the transcript several times, and referring to the observation notes made during and after the discussion, 3) thematic framework, which refers to the researchers writing down phrases that capture emerging themes leading to the next steps of creating categories, 4) indexing, where the researcher begins "sifting the data, highlighting and sorting out quotes and making comparisons both within and between cases" (Rabiee 2004, 657), and 5) charting and mapping, where the researcher migrates select quotes from the original text and uses them contextually in their new categories to fit the ideas being discussed in the analysis (Rabiee 2004).

5. Findings

5.1. RQ 1: How is SEL defined and operationalized in the new teacher pre-service preparation program in Morocco?

Awareness of SEL does not mean implementation

Six of the ten participants in the focus group seemed to understand the concept of SEL, and after an extensive discussion, two of the remaining four members realized they already implemented some of SEL in their activities and syllabi, yet the concept was still not entirely familiar. Four of the seven university-based teacher educators insisted on the value of incorporating SEL practices in teaching and learning in general. SEL was defined by several members as meaningful experiences for university students to engage in and practice inclusiveness, cooperative learning, empathy, self-awareness, self-regulation, and problem-solving. Other practices and/or qualities used to further define and depict SEL in EFL teacher education programs in Morocco included students feeling a sense of belonging, or "feeling part of the group."

While not entirely sure about a specific definition of SEL, more than half of the participants (N=6) seemed to understand where it fits, or hoped to see it fit in their day-to-day instructional practices. The statement "When we teach students task-based or project-based learning, we require students to have elements of social-emotional learning there" reflected a university professor's awareness and implementation of SEL in their assignments.

Empathy and the ability to solve problems were also elements associated with SEL, according to several participants. One of them commented: “[w]e need to care about SEL in order for [student teachers] to have self-awareness and awareness of others and share common ways of solving problems. Reinforcing these skills will help us [teacher educators] not only with linguistic competence but human competence ... [to help university students] feel part of the learning process.”

One common theme in these discussions is that regardless of any existing policies that may get in the way, SEL should be a top priority for “the human and humane side of pedagogy”, because it matters in college life as well as in Moroccan teacher education programs. One of the participants quoted the Moroccan Minister’s opening remarks the previous day when the Minister mentioned the importance of “power skills and soft skills” on top of the digital skills. This is why “we need to responsabilize the trainees [student teachers] and reward positive attitude” during the teaching-learning cycle, hoping they would ultimately share these dispositions in their EFL classrooms.

As part of the effective implementation of SEL, the participants shared tangible and real-life experiences where the student teachers engaged with SEL more intentionally. Two of the key modules commonly used in CRMEFs are action research and professional development (i.e. end-of-program) projects. These modules, according to a participant, help student teachers “acquire [SEL through] self-awareness when they delve in[to] the process of action research.” Action research is an ideal method for teachers, but “the way it is applied in the Moroccan context is devoid of its noble cause as it was theorized in the West,” commented one teacher educator. Action research “has [also] become a way to justify the transition ... [as] an administrative document/step so they can validate [i.e. pass modules] ... devaluing the action research from its intended purpose, which is to allow teachers to develop professionally.”

Important as it can be, SEL implementation and its prioritization rest on the teacher educators, i.e. teacher trainers and university professors, despite existing hurdles. The curriculum “doesn’t foster SEL” but “it depends on the teacher educators themselves to enable students to instill it ... by working on projects, doing presentations, making associations and relationships with peers.” It used to be that students would create monographs because they offer “a moment of research and learning ... [but] under this reform our students are not expected to [do so]. Media studies is another opportunity that ‘we’ – teacher educators used to ‘teach’ but it no longer exists in the curriculum.” Other colleagues nodded in agreement while this participant shared these sentiments about media studies.

In summary, the definition and assessment of SEL implementation in teacher education programs across Morocco appear to be a shared aspiration of all the FGD participants. However, the enactment of this aspiration seems to be challenged by superficial implementation of action research, and a teacher preparation curriculum that does not prioritize it. Coupled with the short period of the CRMEF training – only six months, teachers’ good intentions and appreciation for SEL do not seem

to be matched by curricular provisions that allow for the adequate incorporation of SEL throughout the teacher preparation program.

5.2. RQ 2: From the perspective of EFL student teachers, how confident are they about their acquisition of SEL competencies during pre-service education?

Student teachers responded to prompts about whether their teacher preparation programs offer courses in SEL. They were also asked to confirm whether their preparation programs offered modules and activities aligned with the Ministry's proposed power skills curriculum. Additionally, they self-rated CASEL-related competencies and the degree to which their preparation program was instrumental in their development of specific socio-emotional skills. Following is a summary of the results concerning each question from the questionnaire.

Have you benefited from any training or activities in social-emotional learning?

Overall, 56.5 percent of the survey respondents (N=518) reported that they have benefited from training or activities in social-emotional learning. The remaining 43.5 percent reported that they did not. Figure 2 shows how student teachers' answers differ by year of pre-service teacher preparation. The results displayed indicate that except for Year 3 undergraduate students [university-based student teachers], the rating of their other levels is more positive about the incorporation of SEL activities in teacher preparation. This might be because they align with the Ministry vision of the first year of supervised full-classroom immersion to be intentional about the development of life skills. As Figure 2 indicates, almost 60 percent of student teachers in their full-time teaching experience report benefiting from SEL, which suggests that at least for three-fifths of the teacher candidates, the Ministry seems to have achieved its goals.

With respect to gender, the difference between males versus females regarding their rating of the incorporation of SEL in their pre-service preparation is not statistically significant. Almost 60 percent (57.43) of female student teachers and 53.57 male student teachers confirmed the availability of SEL activities.

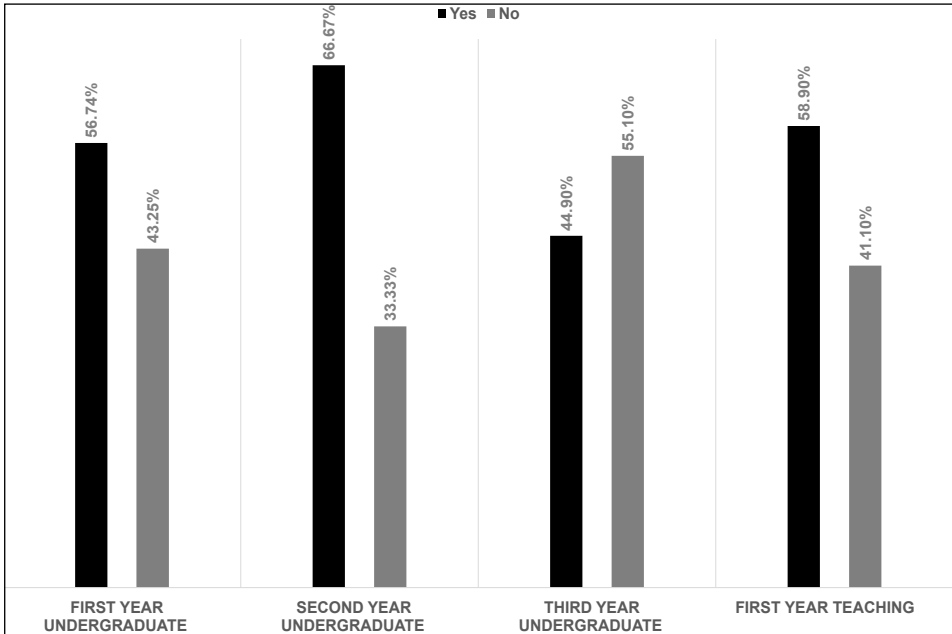


Fig. 2. Student teachers reporting benefiting from SEL activities during their pre-service preparation programs

Does the university/CRMEF offer training in SEL-related areas?

To facilitate the presentation of results, we have grouped items in the survey that are relevant to CASEL’s five SEL competencies, namely self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness. Table 2 summarizes the survey items that fit each of the five SEL competencies. A mean percentage was assigned to each of the five SEL competencies based on the participants’ responses regarding the corresponding sub-items.

Table 2. University/CRMEF SEL learning goals grouped by five SEL competencies

Self-awareness	Self-management	Responsible decision making	Relationship skills	Social awareness
Critical thinking and organizing ideas	Learning how to complete assignments on time and how to manage stress	Understanding academic requirements, rights and responsibilities, and how to avoid plagiarism	Understanding learning styles, how to solve problems, and extracurricular activities	Understanding how the university works and learning about student services

Consistent with the results shared in Figure 2, Figure 3 shows that at least two-thirds of the participants agreed that their teacher programs offer SEL programs and activities that are aligned with CASEL's framework. With respect to self-awareness, the percentage of students confirming the incorporation of SEL-related skills exceeded 80 percent. Albeit self-reported, this number remains a very encouraging finding among student teachers.

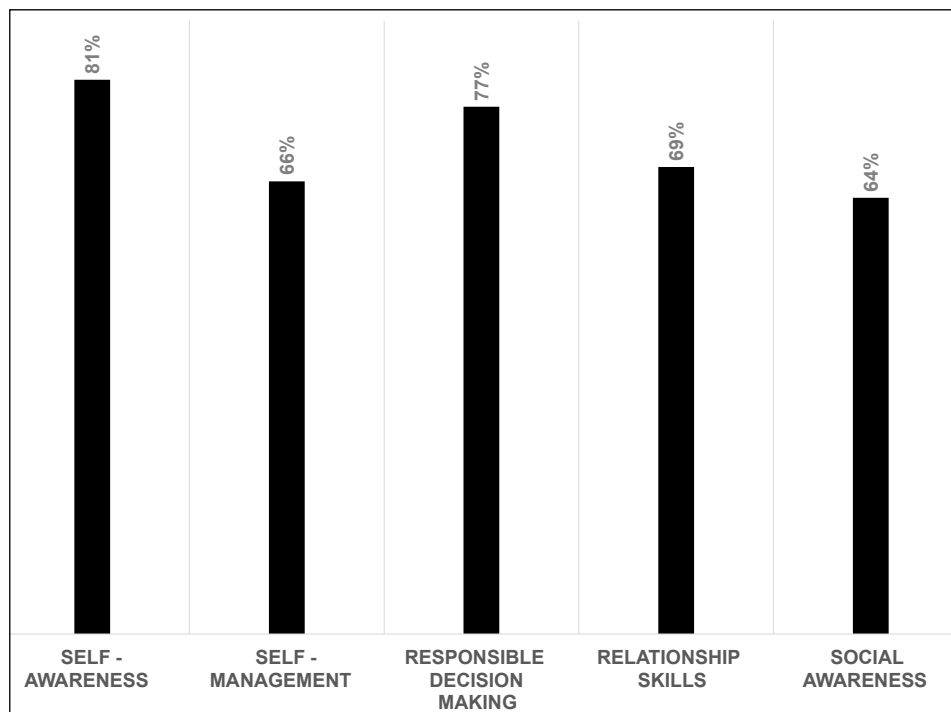


Fig. 3. Percentage of student teachers confirming the promotion of the five SEL competencies in their pre-service preparation programs

In addition to the formal SEL activities intentionally designed by Moroccan teacher preparation programs to promote social-emotional skills, the researchers asked the survey respondents to self-assess their social-emotional skills. The stem of the corresponding question was phrased as follows:

1. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following?
 - a) Ability statements
 - b) Belief statements

Figure 4 captures the ability statements and highlights the percentage of student teachers who fully agreed that they possess abilities related to self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making.

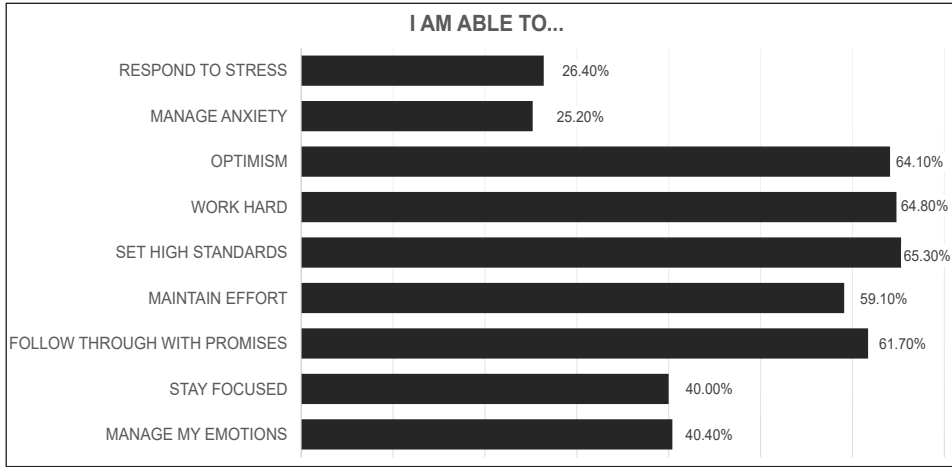


Fig. 4. Percentage of student teachers who reported full confidence that they can demonstrate SEL-related abilities

Regarding the beliefs indicating relationship skills and social awareness, Figure 5 captures the opinions of student teachers who reported that they agreed with those beliefs to a large extent.

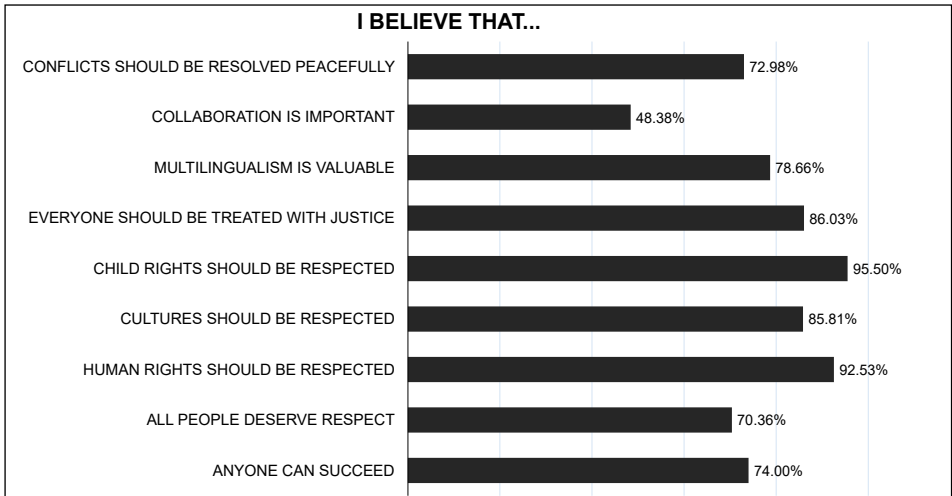


Fig. 5. Percentage of student teachers who reported full confidence that they can demonstrate SEL-related beliefs and values

A follow-up question was the extent to which the survey respondents, i.e. student teachers, would credit their teacher preparation programs for having a role in their SEL growth. Figures 6 and 7 report only the percentage of the respondents

who were unequivocally positive that the teacher preparation program played a role in their development of SEL abilities and beliefs. Of note is that working hard and maintaining effort are indicators of self-management. While the first gauges the ability to exert oneself to the maximum, the second indicator highlights the ability to sustain and manage consistent effort to achieve results.

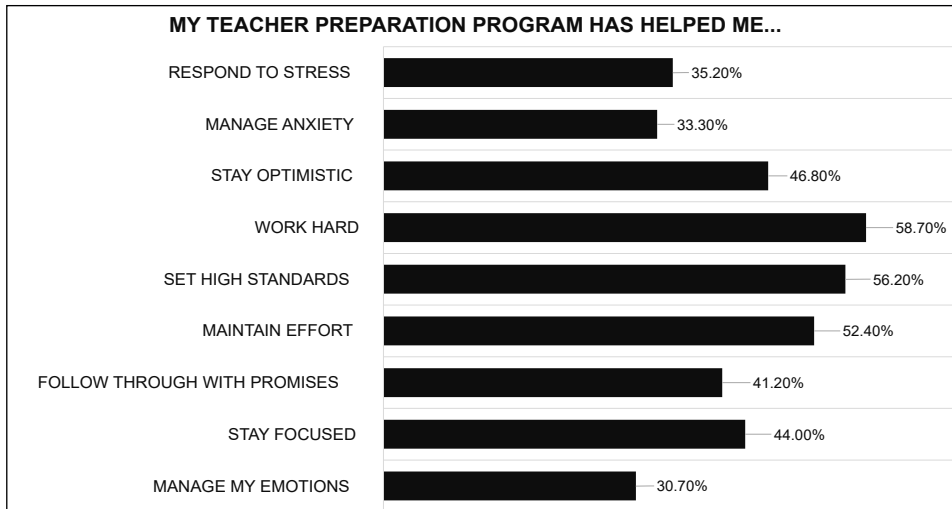


Fig. 6. Proportion of teachers who credit their preparation program for helping them strengthen SEL abilities

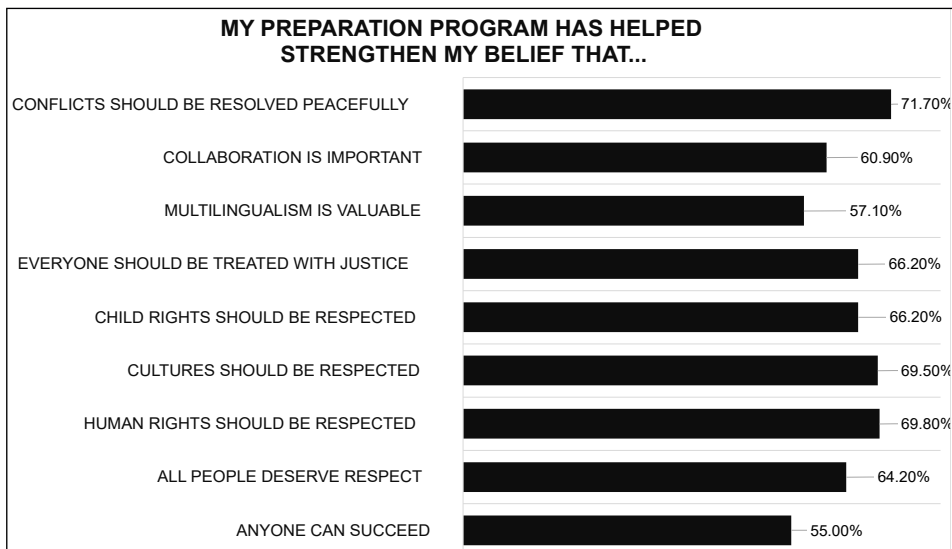


Fig. 7. Percentage of teachers who credit their preparation program for helping them strengthen SEL beliefs and values

Reviewing the self-assessment of SEL abilities and beliefs, and the extent to which the pre-service preparation program has been instrumental in participants' development, yielded the following four important observations:

Only 25 percent of student teachers are fully confident that they are able to respond to stress and manage anxiety.

A range of 30 to 35 percent of student teachers confirmed that the pre-service preparation program plays a significant role in the development of skills to respond to stress, to manage anxiety and emotions.

Collaboration, a key aspect of effective English language teaching, stood out as the belief with the least supporters. Only 48.4 percent agreed that collaboration is important.

Based on the results from Figures 4 through 7, self-regulation and relationship skills come out as the SEL competencies that need to be further strengthened in teachers' pre-service preparation programs. According to the student teachers, improvement in preparation pertaining to self-regulation should address responding to stress, managing anxiety, managing emotions, and staying focused. With regard to relationship skills, more emphasis needs to be placed on strengthening collaboration. The evidence on the deleterious effects of teacher isolation is compelling. In fact, teacher isolation was identified as a leading factor for burnout and attrition, especially among new teachers (Flinders 1988; Murphy 1982; Ostovar-Nameghi et al. 2016; Rogers and Babinski 2002). Therefore, collaboration emerges as a SEL skill that is vital for teachers' retention, self-efficacy, and well-being.

The focus group discussions (FGDs) were also particularly relevant in casting light on aspects impacting SEL implementation during their pre-service preparation. First, the emphasis on linguistic competence in English appears to be the most important skill for admission to the training program. Second, teaching overload seems to prevent teacher educators from engaging in and promoting SEL in their practice. And third, the importance of striking a balance between mastery of English and ensuring that student teachers have SEL tools to succeed appears to loom large.

Overemphasis on language “before and during” teacher education experience

One FGD participant made it clear that the invitation to entrance exams is primarily based on the [student teacher candidates'] transcripts (i.e. grade point averages [GPAs]), which seems to agree with what other entrance examination interviewers do in their respective programs.

Overwhelming teaching and administrative load that limits opportunities for SEL

“Do we really have the time to teach [student teachers] beyond academics?” is a question that stood out to the facilitator during the focus group discussions. Despite

all good intentions and willingness to help student teachers thrive, university educators seemed to agree that “overwhelming pressure and curriculum” impedes their efforts to include non-academic areas of learning such as SEL. “SEL is not implemented enough ... we need guidance” is another statement shared by one participant, who is also a teacher supervisor and teacher trainer. If anything, perhaps this participant’s call for help reflects the need to act promptly, which was a statement the discussion facilitator wrote down. The quotation also reflects the need for explicit discussion and incorporation of SEL into the existing curricula for both teacher educators and EFL students to gain familiarity with the concept. Despite the challenges, many participants reported helping future EFL teachers “feel part of the community” and foster a sense of belonging and care toward others.

Striking a balance between language and passion for teaching

Data from the focus groups suggest that during the interviews, the teacher educators try hard to strike a balance between students’ English proficiency and passion. Committee members, in their quest to go beyond language criteria and in consideration for SEL competencies, “may come across trainees [student teachers] with low academic [English] levels *but* high passion.” In the same vein, one of the FGD participants shared the following inspiring statement about their recruitment practices:

[w]e do really care about this [SEL] component of the candidate ... are they suitable ... to take the challenge in different contexts – be it rural, semi urban, and urban with all profiles of students – middle school and high school...? We do care... about their reaction to emotions... including the social-emotional dimension in their training ... It’s a call that we have to answer and at least include in one of the modules that are prescribed by the Central Training Unit in Rabat [the capital of Morocco].

In summary, the FGD data suggest that SEL is an emerging field in the EFL pre-service teacher preparation programs. Teacher educators are keenly aware of its importance. However, selection considerations that seem to be skewed towards the prioritization of student GPAs and teaching overload were identified as barriers to the full integration of SEL in teacher preparation.

6. Discussion

“Do we really have the time to teach [student teachers] beyond academics?” is a statement that seemed to garner consensus among the participants. While most of the FGD participants seemed to accept and appreciate the opportunities and value of integrating SEL, they agreed that several challenges get in the way. One of the

conclusions from this study is that regardless of the setting, i.e. CRMEFs or universities, there appears to be an overemphasis on building the academic foundations of EFL future teachers both before and after they join the preparation programs. According to the respondents, such overemphasis prevents them from integrating SEL in their practice, not to mention their recognition of its importance.

Reflecting on the uniqueness of language teachers and educators, Bentahar (2020, para. 1) noted, “As language educators, we have not only the opportunity but also the honorable charge of bringing about change in our classrooms, schools, and communities” by going beyond the curriculum and challenging our students to contribute to their communities alongside ensuring mastery of the language. Project-based activities, mentioned in the FGDs, are an ideal learning opportunity for future EFL teachers to practice English and, at the same time, develop skills such as planning, managing their schedules, empathizing with others, and making decisions that benefit them and the community.

Student teachers will need to promote these SEL skills in their own classrooms if they genuinely want to make a difference in the lives of their (future) students (Bentahar 2020). Rather than stirring competitiveness, creating meaningful activities for EFL student teachers can nurture creativity and critical thinking. School organizations and university clubs are examples of settings where these student teachers can practice community service. Fostering a sense of belonging and care toward others, an important aspiration reported by the FGD participants, seems to support a key type of competencies elucidated by CASEL (2020): social awareness, where empathy and a consideration of the needs of others matter. While self-awareness is critical in understanding one’s strengths, future teachers need intentional opportunities to socialize, share constructive criticisms, empathize, and make decisions for the betterment of the community.

Several respondents mentioned school organizations or on-campus extra-curricular activities because they “can also be empowering, especially when students help recruit other members to join clubs and exercise essential civic concepts, such as campaigning, voting, and running for leadership positions” (Bentahar 2020, para. 7). These extracurricular activities are appropriate support mechanisms for individuals, including K-16 students and student teachers, to engage with community members responsibly and confidently; collaborate with peers on community-based projects; and exercise leadership by taking on roles on committees, such as club chairs and media coordinators (Bentahar 2018 and 2020). While extra-curricular activities are at the heart of SEL, they can also promote academic and professional excellence in English language teaching and/or learning.

Exposing student teachers to real-life challenges and giving them the opportunity to produce solutions can sustain the integration of SEL in teacher preparation programs. In this regard, Pentón Herrera (2020) underscored the key role, and failure, of teacher education programs in coping with the challenges that students face regularly. He reiterated Cohen’s (2006) argument that the pressure from

schools and families continues to loom large. Likewise, pre-service teachers should be conscientious about the pressures and opportunities of SEL integration into their preparation programs and, subsequently, their own classrooms.

Morocco was hit by two major disasters, COVID-19 and a 2023 destructive earthquake that reached 6.8 on the Richter scale. The relevance of SEL to help make sense of isolation and massive loss of life could not be any more pressing. For future EFL teachers in Morocco, SEL skills will help them design engaging and effective learning opportunities. Most importantly, SEL will help them develop the necessary resilience to continue to improve as language professionals as well as educational leaders who have the skills and the empathy to coach their students and community members in times of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (Lawrence 2013).

In summary, EFL student teachers in Morocco will appreciate SEL experiences and skills that support their transition into the real world of teaching with the necessary efficacy to engage their students to develop their own autonomy as effective EFL learners. The stakes of SEL integration could not be any higher considering the desired outcomes set forth in the Framework Law 51.17, most notably the citizenship and quality outcomes pertaining to the celebration of diversity, pluralism, multiculturalism, perseverance, initiative, solidarity, and the cultivation of intellectual, communicative, emotional, creativity, and employability skills (Loi cadre N° 51.17 2019). In essence, integrating SEL in pre-service EFL teacher preparation in Morocco is evidently a policy priority whose prominence has yet to be concretely reflected in EFL pre-service teacher preparation practice.

7. Recommendations

As we reflect on recommendations from the results of this study, we reiterate our conviction that successful EFL learning is a meaningful process where the body, the heart, and the mind work together to educate well-rounded users of English. As we see it, SEL enacts Freire and Macedo's (1987) definition of literacy as a joint act of reading the word and the world. In the context of teaching and learning EFL in Morocco, SEL integration transcends artificial boundaries between how we interact with, make sense of, and learn about the world. In this respect, and with appropriate qualifiers, we propose the following recommendations about the integration of SEL in EFL teacher preparation in Morocco.

- Teacher preparation programs should exercise flexibility by supplementing the curricula with content that goes beyond language learning and includes mental and emotional well-being (Pentón Herrera and Martínez-Alba 2022; Pentón Herrera et al. 2023). In doing so, these programs would better serve the community at large by graduating teachers who have learned and practiced SEL skills and dispositions as learners themselves,

and by intentionally putting in place plans to implement such learning in their classrooms.

- Extend the period of teacher preparation in CRMEFs from six months in the first year to a full academic year to ensure ample time for EFL student teachers to learn and practice non-academic content such as SEL.
- To promote SEL, it is important that student teachers' early involvement in hands-on school activities be informed by clear SEL outcomes. This approach systematically weaves in SEL in every aspect of the student teachers' growth. Like the action research requirement in the second year of CRMEF, student teachers' clinical experience can only be meaningful and effective if the student teacher is encouraged to reflect on their learning in ways that strengthen the five SEL competencies, namely self-awareness, self-regulation, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness.

8. Limitations

This study included both quantitative and qualitative data about a topic that is gaining ground in the Moroccan higher education context. However, it presents a few limitations. First, the survey questions were addressed to two distinct groups of participants, including one representing a new teacher preparation cohort that began with the first year at the university and will start teaching after completing the fifth year of qualification training at the CRMEFs. The second group represented a soon-to-be phased-out approach that consists of opening teaching opportunities in schools to general bachelor's degree holders, who sit for an employment exam and begin teaching after six months of training. Perhaps a more homogenous population ensuing from only one teacher pre-service preparation pipeline could have been easier to analyze. The second limitation is the different nature of our focus group participants, which in this study consisted of educators representing CRMEFs and university-based teacher preparation programs; perhaps a study focusing on one of the two groups of teacher educators would yield more focused responses specific to each context. Finally, the timing of the focus group data collection was during the week of EFL teacher education entrance examinations. A different time would probably have yielded higher participation in the focus groups.

9. Conclusion

The findings of this study contribute to the ongoing international conversations in the ELT field about SEL and teacher preparation (Pentón Herrera 2020; Heineke and Vera 2022). Against the backdrop of the rising awareness of the centrality of teacher well-being as an important predictor of teacher satisfaction, career

advancement and longevity, and improved students' learning outcomes (Hascher and Waber 2021), shining the light on the extent to which SEL is a part of ELT teachers' pre-service preparation in Morocco adds to the global literature on the topic, especially in a region where the literature on SEL in ELT teacher preparation is nascent at best. In this regard, the study offers valuable insights into the understanding and implementation of SEL in Moroccan EFL teacher education programs in two contexts, i.e. CRMEFs and universities.

The study has also leveraged the perspectives of both EFL student teachers as well as teacher educators at a time when more research has yet to empirically document SEL implementation in these contexts. As such, this exploration represents new ground in empirical research on raising awareness among all educational stakeholders, especially in ELT settings, and ensuring consistent implementation of SEL guidelines across Morocco. The findings will also potentially inform new directions in planning, designing, and implementing experiences for future EFL teachers to thrive during and after their teacher education programs.

Notes

- 1 ENS and ESEFs are higher education teacher training institutions that fulfill the same function.
- 2 Prior to 2019, and except for the Faculty of Education in Rabat, no other university in Morocco offered a bachelor's in education.

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