



Redressing the Achievement Gap through Early Social Emotional Learning (SEL): Building a Foundation with Early Childhood Educators in a Professional Learning Community

Jessie-Lee McIsaac, Mount Saint Vincent University

Co-Principal Investigators: Elizabeth Munroe, St. Francis Xavier University; Jean Hughes, Dalhousie University;

Background

Established link between well-developed social and emotional skills and academic achievement

Increased focus on early childhood education in Nova Scotia

Early Years Centres were introduced which included an early childhood program for four-year olds

- Early evaluation results found the early childhood educators wanted opportunities for professional learning
- Recognition of effectiveness of in-depth, on-going, job-embedded opportunities for professional learning



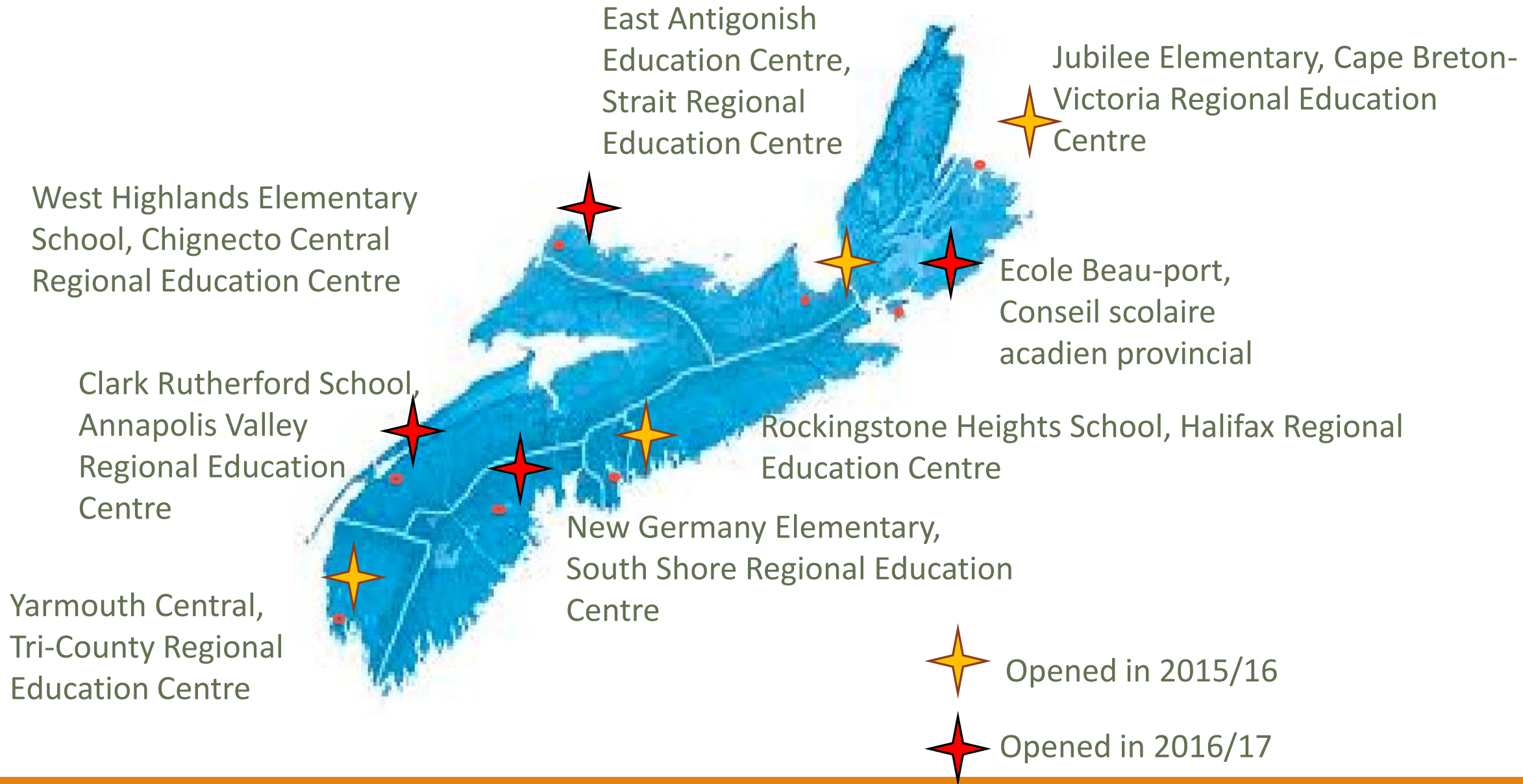
Early Years Centres in Nova Scotia

Located in or near schools and are for children age four and under and their families

Schools provide a stable platform and core funding allows an integrated program that can serve more families more effectively

Each is tailored to meet the needs of its community according to three core services

- A school offered, no fee, play based Early Learning Program for 4 year olds
- Family supports and resources
- Regulated child care responsive to the needs of families



Purpose of project

To establish a Professional Learning Community (PLC) regarding social emotional learning (SEL) for the early childhood educators (ECEs) from the eight Early Years Centres (EYCs)

Focused on enhancing ECEs understanding of supporting SEL through play



Key aims

To connect educators to build knowledge through inquiry, shared understanding and reflection as a means for improving practice

To help inform other professional development and learning opportunities with ECEs across the province

What did we do?



7 sessions (four online, three in person) with ECEs between October 2016 and May 2017. Each session focused on a different element of SEL.

18 ECEs participated

Data collection included:

- Semi-structured telephone interviews at project baseline and project end
- Field notes during the in-person PLC sessions
- Artifacts from the in-person sessions (e.g. brainstorming charts)
- Audio-recordings and discussion boards texts from group discussion and breakout rooms
- Feedback forms completed by ECEs after each in-person and online session

Data analysis

Qualitative thematic analysis included identifying core themes and data patterns, developing codes that helped explain the themes, and interpreting the information and themes

Themes are presented in this presentation with illustrative examples to capture the depth and breadth of the participants' experience

Project findings: Insights into PLC process

Most ECEs had not taken part in a PLC before and noted an appreciation of being connected with others

They gained perspectives on other sites, felt validated in expressing their struggles

The 'coming together' was the important part of their experience

*“The biggest thing I found for me was **just being able to connect with the other EYCs and to be talking to them and not feel so isolated.**”*

*“When you hear from **other people that are experiencing the same thing**, who you respect and you know that they’re proficient at their job, **then you know it’s not just you.... I found that encouraging and reassuring that you are on the right track...**”*

Project findings: Insights into PLC process

In-person sessions were preferred but travel was challenging

Once a month worked well

The PLC structure (e.g. group work, presentations, scenario discussions) was appreciated

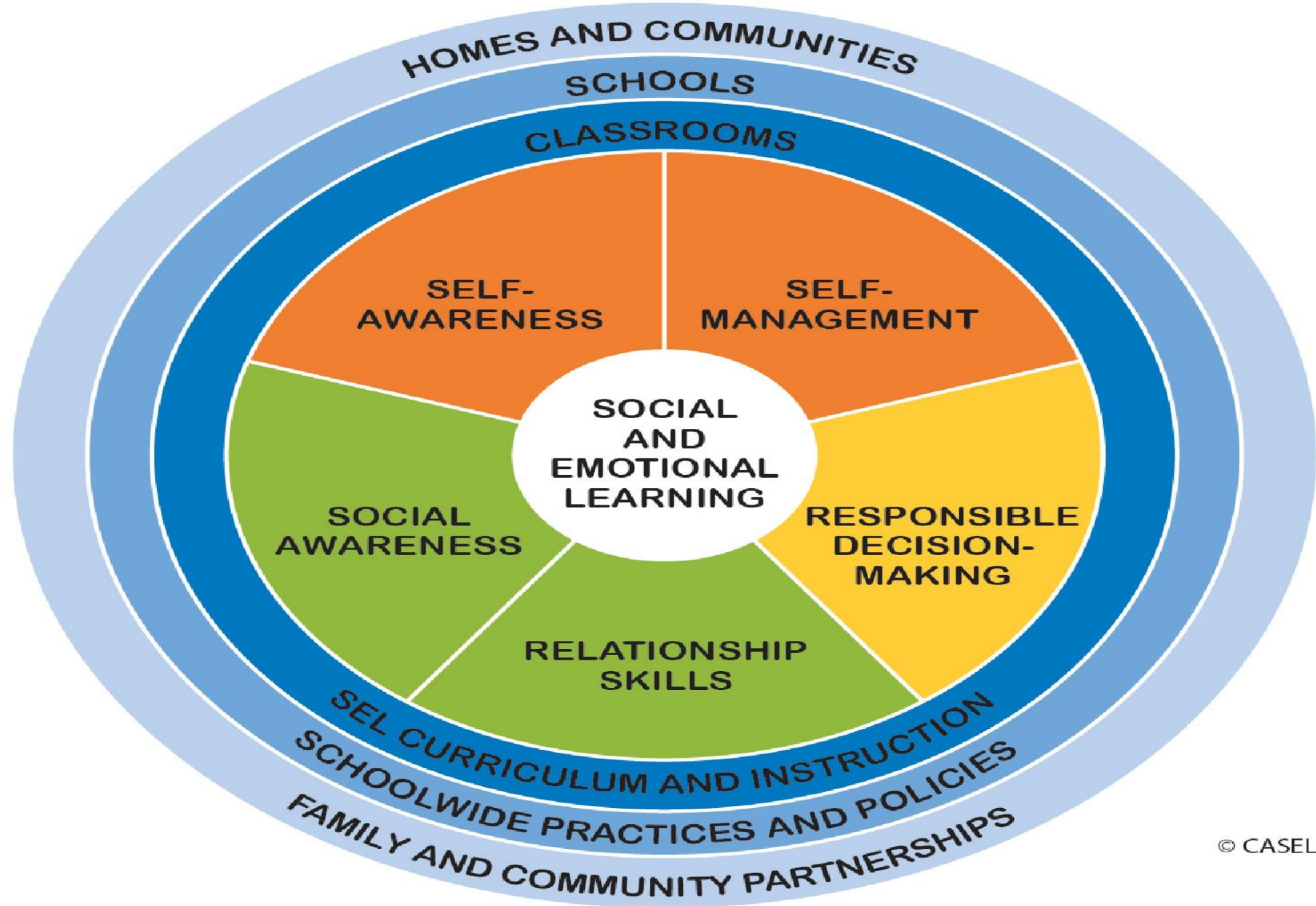
Technology could be challenging as each site has varying levels of support

Provision of resources was helpful

Project findings: Insights into PLC & SEL

ECEs expressed that they looked forward to connecting with other ECEs from the EYCs, to learn together, and to share ideas – this connecting with others was the most meaningful parts of the PLC

At final session, ECEs shared stories of a success & a particularly challenging situation encountered over the past year, how they used SEL to address the challenge, and lessons learned



Project findings: Insights into SEL

Before the PLC, most ECEs noted a general appreciation of the importance of SEL while some were not as familiar with SEL or SEL terminology

After the PLC, ECEs shared various ways in which their understanding of SEL had changed

*“It’s definitely **opened my eyes** to some things **maybe I didn’t pick up on, or didn’t notice right away, and different techniques** um, and practices we should be doing, not that we weren’t doing them already but **different ways** to do, I guess, them.”*

Project findings: Insights into SEL

ECEs shared ways that their practice had changed to support children and families in terms of SEL – this included changes in the classroom, strengthening practice, and using SEL terminology with children, families and colleagues

*“...this year **there’s a lot of social and emotional needs in our classroom.** So that really **helped me just be aware and recognize things a lot sooner so that I could, you know, do some different things to help them.** Put some things out around the classroom. We now have a **calming space** and, like, **beautiful quiet areas** and lots of visuals and, like, just different things...”*

*“We’ve had conversations with a child’s family and **having these sessions on social emotional development I think really helped me to speak to the parents about what we were struggling with the child.**”*

Actions and recommendations

Educational resources and human resources are needed to help to support SEL

- Material resources and additional time/staff
- Information for families

*“So, I find, as far as actual resources, like, yes, books and yes, you know **all that kind of stuff would be helpful?** But at the end of the day, **if you don’t have the staff to implement** what you need to do, like **all that stuff is just not going to do it.**”*

Actions and recommendations

Improved understanding and increased support from administration and other school staff

- Informal meetings
- Formal learning opportunities

*“I’d love to have **more time to sit down and discuss things**. But I just **feel like that’s not even feasible**.*

‘Cause the principal is so busy ... And so to put more on [them], I feel like would just be asking way too much.”

Study Delivery Challenges

‘Work to rule’ job action across the province

- Principals were not able to engage in the SEL sessions

EYC model is new and evolving

- Pre-primary Program introduced after project ended

Concluding thoughts: Moving forward

Our study focused on establishing a PLC and focused on supporting ECEs understanding of SEL

- It was successful in supporting learning and establishing connections among ECEs
- They expressed interest in further professional learning, including on SEL topics

Future work should consider connecting PLC with other professional development initiatives for ECEs

Contact information

Jessie-Lee Mclsaac, PhD
Canada Research Chair in Early Childhood: Diversity and Transitions
Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education and Department of Child and Youth Study
Mount Saint Vincent University
Email: Jessie-Lee.Mclsaac@msvu.ca
Phone: 902-457-6508
Twitter: @jlmclsaac

This research was funded by the Inter-University Research Network at the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood. This research was undertaken, in part, thanks to funding from the Canada Research Chairs program.