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A matter of skills: a mixed-method study on the evaluation and implementation of an SEL program tailored to the skills adolescents need in educational settings and at home

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Citation
Sande, M. C. E. van de. (2024, December 10). *A matter of skills: a mixed-method study on the evaluation and implementation of an SEL program tailored to the skills adolescents need in educational settings and at home*. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4172036

Version:	Publisher's Version
License:	Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden
Downloaded from:	https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4172036

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Chapter 6

Low-achieving adolescent students' perspectives on their interactions with classmates

An exploratory study to inform the implementation of a Social Emotional Learning program in prevocational education

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Children and Youth Services Review (2024), 156, 107263

ABSTRACT

Social and Emotional Learning programs, designed to enhance adolescents' social and emotional skills, are implemented in schools worldwide. One of these programs is Skills4Life (S4L), for students in Dutch secondary education. To strengthen this program and adapt it to students' needs, we conducted an exploratory study on their perspectives on their own social-emotional development, focusing on low-achieving students in prevocational education.

We interviewed eleven boys and eleven girls in five focus groups on (1) their general school life experiences, (2) their perceptions and experiences regarding interactions with peers, the problems they encountered in these interactions, and (3) the strategies and skills they used to solve these problems. Driven by findings in related studies initial thematic analyzes were extended using a three-step approach: an inductive, data-driven process of open coding; axial coding; and selective coding, using the social-emotional skills comprised in an often-used SEL framework as sensitizing concepts.

Overall, students were satisfied with their relationships with classmates and teachers and their ability to manage their daily interaction struggles. Their reflections on their interactions indicate that the skills they preferred to use mirror the social-emotional skills taught in many school programs. However, they also indicated that they did not apply these skills in situations they experienced as unsafe and uncontrollable, e.g., bullying and harassment.

The insights into adolescents' social-emotional skills perceptions and the problems they encountered with peers at school presented here can contribute to customizing school-based skills enhancement programs to their needs. Teacher training is required to help teachers gain insight into students' perspectives and to use this insight to implement SEL programs tailored to their needs.

INTRODUCTION

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is the process of acquiring the social-emotional skills necessary for young people to successfully participate in and contribute to the contexts in which they live and learn (Zins & Elias, 2007). Examples of such skills are, e.g., empathy, self-regulation, and problem solving. Adolescence is a sensitive period for SEL (e.g., Crone, 2017; Napolitano et al., 2021). Also, SEL is an interactive process starting at home in parent-child interactions; individual and environmental factors influence this process (e.g., Grusec, 2011; Sanders & Turner, 2018).

Growing up in poor and marginalized families challenges the development of social-emotional skills (Fletcher & Wolfe, 2016; West et al., 2020). Besides this, intellectual, emotional-behavioral, and learning problems are associated with an impeded development of these skills (Cook et al., 2008; Wiley & Siperstein, 2015). The skills young people learn at home vary depending on their parents' beliefs, values, goals, and practices regarding child development, and the context in which they raise their children (Grusec, 2011; Sanders & Turner, 2018). Besides the home, schools are considered crucial contexts for developing social-emotional skills (Durlak et al., 2015; Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Therefore, it is not surprising that schools worldwide implement SEL programs aimed at enhancing these skills.

One of these programs is the Dutch classroom-based secondary education SEL program, Skills4Life (S4L) (see Appendix 1 for more details on the S4L program). Evaluation studies of S4L found promising results on social-emotional skills and psychosocial health outcomes in students from different school types (e.g., Fekkes et al., 2016; Gravesteijn, 2010; Pannebakker et al., 2019). However, the results also showed that the program asked too much of the intellectual and language abilities of low-achieving students in the least selective tracks in prevocational secondary education, indicating the need for adaptation for this target group (Kocken et al., 2010).

The Dutch secondary education system is highly stratified. The system consists of two levels of general secondary education (known in Dutch as HAVO and VWO) and prevocational education consisting of a Practical Educational (PrE, Praktijkschool in Dutch) track training students for work and four Preparatory Vocational Secondary Education tracks (PVSE, VMBO in Dutch). The PVSE basic (PVSE-b) is the least selective of these four tracks. Eleven percent of the students in grades nine and ten in Dutch secondary education are in the PVSE-b and PrE tracks (Statistics Netherlands,

2016). Students in these tracks have additional educational needs due to intellectual, emotional-behavioral, and learning problems (Hop & Van Boxtel, 2013; Koopman et al., 2015). In this study, we use the term 'low-achieving' to indicate students in these tracks. Both of these tracks have a high proportion of students from low-income families and non-Western backgrounds (Statistics Netherlands, 2016).

The current study is part of a larger research project on the development, implementation, and evaluation of an adapted version of the original S4L program, for low-achieving students. To inform the adaptation of the program, individual and focus group interviews were conducted with various stakeholders on the themes they deemed important for students in PVSE-b and PrE tracks. Besides interviews with teachers and internship supervisors, we also conducted an exploratory study amongst the students themselves. As little is known about adolescents' own perspectives on SEL related to their school life experiences, involving them in implementing SEL programs in secondary education is recommended (Yeager, 2017).

The purpose of this exploratory study was to provide insight into students' perceptions of their daily school life, their interactions with classmates, and the social-emotional skills they felt they needed in order to manage these interactions. The following questions were addressed: 1. What are low-achieving students' perceptions and experiences regarding their school life in general?; 2. What are students' perceptions and experiences regarding their interactions with classmates and the problems they encounter in these interactions?; and 3. What strategies and skills do students use to manage these interactions and problems?

Findings from the interviews with teachers and internship supervisors informed several adaptations of S4L for low-achieving students. Examples of these adaptations are the need for more behavioral instruction exercises and the inclusion of social-emotional skills relevant to the workplace, as students in these tracks learn simultaneously at school and internship workplaces (see Appendix I for an overview of the content of S4L). The initial thematic analysis of the interviews with students did not yield new themes and skills that students considered important to target. Based on students' perceptions, only a few modifications were made, particularly regarding more straightforward language. Adaptations were kept limited to adhere to the program's core elements (Falicov, 2009; Kreuter et al., 2003). The adapted S4L program was implemented in PVSE-b and PrE tracks between 2015 and 2018.

However, an evaluation study of the adapted S4L program showed that overall positive effects on any social-emotional skill or psychosocial health outcome were absent (Van de Sande et al., 2022). These findings suggest that the adaptations made did not meet these low-achieving students' needs. To gain a more in-depth understanding of which strategies and skills students considered most relevant in different situations at school, we conducted additional analyses of the data using the social-emotional skills comprised in an often-used SEL framework (CASEL, 2003) as sensitizing concepts.

METHODS

To explore students' perspectives and strategies, we adopted a qualitative inductive approach. We conducted focus group interviews with the participants in the school context. Assuming that participants would feel more comfortable being amongst classmates and allowing them to express their views freely, we favored small-group, same-sex focus groups over individual interviews. Focus groups also allowed us to obtain in-depth data on the perceptions of a relatively large number of students in a relatively short period of time (Krueger, 2014). In principle, they also provide a broader perspective on students' interactions with peers than interviews with other stakeholders.

The research objectives, methodology, and interview protocol used in the focus groups were discussed beforehand by the first author (MS) in close collaboration with other members of the research team. MS conducted the focus group interviews in collaboration with two female social work students (LG, MH), one of whom had a non-Western background, while the other was native Dutch. All three researchers were familiar with the population under study based on their past experiences at work, internships, or school.

Sample

We recruited students from the least selective tracks of three inner-city prevocational schools in the western Netherlands.

Twenty-two students in grades 9 and 10 (eleven girls and eleven boys; age range 15-19, M = 16.6) participated in the interviews (see Table 1). The majority of the students (17/22) were from non-Western backgrounds. Most students (19/22) attended the PrE track, and three attended the PVSE-b track. The ethnic composition of the study population represents low-achieving students in prevocational education in inner-city schools in the western Netherlands.

Table 1 Background Characteristics of Students Included in the Study

Gender	Age	Ethnicity [1]	Prevocational track
Male	17	Native Dutch	PVSE-b
Male	16	Native Dutch	PVSE-b
Male	15	Native Dutch	PVSE-b
Male	17	Native Dutch	PrE
Male	18	Native Dutch	PrE
Male	18	Non-Western	PrE
Male	17	Non-Western	PrE
Male	16	Non-Western	PrE
Male	18	Non-Western	PrE
Male	17	Non-Western	PrE
Male	16	Non-Western	PrE
Female	16	Non-Western	PrE
Female	16	Non-Western	PrE
Female	16	Non-Western	PrE
Female	16	Non-Western	PrE
Female	16	Non-Western	PrE
Female	15	Non-Western	PrE
Female	16	Non-Western	PrE
Female	16	Non-Western	PrE
Female	18	Non-Western	PrE
Female	18	Non-Western	PrE
Female	X	Non-Western	PrE

[1] Non-western students were e.g., Moroccan, Turkish, Antillean, or Somali.

Procedure

Parents and students gave passive informed consent for participation in the study. Classroom teachers selected students based on the following criteria: students were in grades 9 and 10 of relevant tracks, available and willing to contribute, and considered being able to talk to strangers and to participate in a focus group with each other. Based on teachers' decisions and students' timetables, focus groups were composed of three, five, or six boys or girls. Although they were not in the same classroom, participating students had known each other since they started secondary school. Some of them were friends. Most students did not live in the same neighborhood, so they met primarily at school.

Focus groups lasted 45-75 minutes, depending on the number of students. Before the interviews, these students were again asked for oral consent, first by their teachers and then by the researchers at the beginning of the interviews. After anonymity was guaranteed, the students consented to the interviews being audio-recorded. We emphasized that they were not obliged to answer the questions and that they could leave the focus group at

any time (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). One of the girls decided to leave the focus group as she felt uncomfortable discussing her interaction problems, despite the support of the other group members.

Interview topics

Based on the study objectives, the interview protocol included three broad topics *(a) General school experiences, (b) Interactions and interaction problems with classmates, and (c) Strategies used in solving these problems*. In addition, we identified *(d) demographics: age, gender, ethnic background (native Dutch vs. non-Western), and educational track (PVSE-b vs. PrE)*. The substantive interview topics were derived from literature surveys on health promotion and social-emotional skills development during adolescence (e.g., Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Crone, 2009; Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Reyes & Elias, 2011). The semi-structured focus group interviews enabled us to probe students' perspectives on the topics, following their answers and wording. Examples of questions used to approach the topics were: "How are you doing at school?," "How are other students doing at school?," and "How are you getting along with each other."

Analyses

For the analysis, the audio-recorded focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim into Dutch, and Atlas.ti software was used to code the transcriptions. Aiming to inform an adaptation of the S4L program, initial data analyses focused on the identification of students' own perceptions regarding skills and themes relevant to address. As explained in the introduction, findings in an evaluation study of the S4L program, adapted for low-achieving students, drove the current study's additional analyses. For these analyses, we used the skills comprised in the five competency domains targeted in the framework developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) as sensitizing concepts for our interpretation of the data and, in particular, the strategies expressed and pointed to by students (see Table 2 and 3 for more detail on these concepts and strategies) (Bowen, 2006; CASEL, 2003). These competencies and skills are often referred to in SEL literature (e.g., Humphrey, 2013; Jones et al., 2019).

An explorative data-driven process was used in which the students' narratives and behavior were inductively coded in three steps (see Table 2), starting with open coding inspired by the interview topics. Subsequently, axial coding was conducted to combine coded text fragments which led to emerging categories, such as *academic achievements, maturation, bullying, sexual harassment*, and *unsupportive responses*. Finally, selective

coding was applied using the sensitizing concepts to interpret the strategies students articulated in their reflections in terms of the skills comprised in the CASEL framework.

Two researchers (MS and MB) independently coded two interviews. They compared and discussed their interpretations of the codes to obtain consensus; subsequently, in close collaboration with the research group, MS coded the other interviews.

Table 2 Coding scheme for the analysis of the focus group interviews.

Open Coding (Interview Topics)	Axial coding (Categories)	Selective coding (Sensitizing concepts)[1]
General school life experiences	- School achievement, future goals - Support - Self-confidence	Self-awareness - Optimism - Recognizing own emotions - Knowledge of strengths and weaknesses - Self-efficacy
Daily interactions with classmates	- Getting along well with others - Mutual trust and maturation - Knowing each other thoroughly - Daily issues at school	Social awareness - Empathy - Perspective-taking - Appreciating diversity - Understanding social norms
Severe interaction problems at school	- Unsupportive responses - Sexual harassment - Bullying - Teacher ignorance	Self-management - Self-regulation - Goal setting - Perseverance
		Relationship skills - Communication - Cooperation - Peer pressure resistance - Social problem solving - Help seeking
		Responsible decision making - Considering relevant factors and consequences of actions -Taking responsibility for decisions

[1]Competency domains and -skills comprised in the CASEL framework (CASEL, 2003).

THEORY

SEL programs teach social-emotional skills in order to promote adolescents' psychosocial health, education, and work prospects (e.g., Cefai et al., 2018; Durlak et al., 2015; National Research Council, 2012). Meta-analyses on such programs have identified positive short-term and long-term effects on social-emotional skills, psychosocial health, and academic achievement (e.g., Durlak et al., 2011; Sklad et al., 2012). Such positive effects were measured regardless of students' socio-cultural and socio-economic background (Taylor et al., 2017).

Many SEL programs and frameworks for guiding these programs' implementation have appeared over the last decades (e.g., Durlak et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2019). These programs and frameworks vary in their theoretical base and the social-emotional skills targeted (Jones et al., 2019; Van de Sande et al., 2019).

SEL program implementation

Providing a safe and supportive context is essential for SEL program implementation (e.g., Jones and Bouffard, 2012; Weissberg et al., 2015). Classroom teachers, assumed to know their students best, are the preferred providers both of such programs and safe classroom contexts (Durlak et al., 2011). Although training is recommended to support delivering a program with fidelity, teachers are also assumed to tailor programs to their students' specific needs (Biesta, 2007; Durlak, 2016; Falicov, 2009).

Young people are active participants in the development of their social-emotional skills (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Lerner & Steinberg, 2009). Therefore, insight into adolescents' social-emotional development is informative for teachers who wish to engage students in enhancing their skills.

Social-emotional development during adolescence

Adolescents' growing cognitive and social-emotional capacities enable them to develop the advanced socio-emotional skills necessary for accomplishing developmental tasks, such as independence and high self-concept clarity (e.g., Crone, 2017; Lerner & Steinberg, 2009). Accomplishing these tasks requires various skills; some of these, such as empathy and self-control, diminish in early adolescence and develop to adult levels in late adolescence (Güroğlu et al., 2014; West et al., 2020). Although adult guidance and support remain necessary, interactions with peers are crucial for adolescents to develop their social-emotional skills (Crone, 2017).

Adolescents, in particular, are highly involved in what is going on inside themselves and others, which makes them potentially valuable informants on their SEL needs (Liebermann, 2012; Yeager, 2017). However, the personal experiences addressed in SEL programs can also cause students to experience discomfort, which may discourage them from active participation (Medin & Jutengren, 2020). Additionally, it is important for young people to learn social-emotional skills that are meaningful and connected to their real-world experiences (Phillips, 2011). In implementing and adapting SEL programs, therefore, it is crucial to take adolescents' perspectives into account.

FINDINGS

To provide insight into students' perceptions of their social-emotional functioning at school, below we structure our findings according to the interview topics, describing 1. general school life experiences, 2. daily interactions with classmates, and 3. severe interaction problems at school (see Table 2). Additionally, the strategies students indicated are presented (see Table 3). To illustrate students' perceptions and reasoning, we inserted quotes from the interviews in italics, including initials, sex and age. No differences between students related to their background characteristics were identified, which is potentially due to the skewed relationship between native Dutch and non-Western students in the sample.

General school life experiences

Almost all students enjoyed their school life and had a positive attitude towards learning. They perceived school as a community for learning and living, where they *met their friends, shared daily life events,* and *had fun*. Students associated life at school with their satisfaction with achievements, emphasizing that *life was going fine*. They talked freely about their low marks in school exams and their grief on not continuing further education due to not passing mandatory exams. In this regard, students seemed to have a realistic perspective on their low achievements and the consequences for their future school careers. They were determined that *things would turn out well in the end*, and – as the following quotes illustrate – encouraged others to stay hopeful too:

> *M (boy, 18): I would like to study too, but I do not think I will be able to. The school decides on that […]; that's just the way it is, and my grades aren't good enough to get into Senior Secondary Vocational Education [….]. It's math that's stopping me – otherwise, I would get there […].*
>
> *S (boy, 17): You will get there, you will get there […], if you do your best.*

Such faith, and the *help of friends and teachers*, motivated students to *pursue their goals at school and in future life*. Some, but not all, stressed the importance of *self-confidence* and having *the right attitude* to goal achievement. Others assured themselves they were *better at manual work than working with their heads.* These convictions seemed to encourage students to do *their best at school and workplace internships*, despite their educational disappointments, including failing exams and being in the least achieving tracks in secondary education.

Daily interactions at school

Overall, students felt comfortable among their teachers and classmates. According to them, spending several years together at school contributed to *intimate relationships, improved collaboration, developing mutual trust*, and *accepting others as they are.* Students were motivated to *solve problems with others* at school and were convinced that classmates felt responsible for this, too, as the following quotes illustrate:

> *N (girl, 16): We were in the same class last year – well, some of us. That helped us learn to trust each other, and if something happens, we know how to solve a problem together.*
>
> *R (girl, 16): Let's put it like this: we stick up for each other, so if something happens, we help each other out […] or if someone loses something in class, we all look for it.*

Students perceived *a sense of maturation* regarding their relationships with classmates. In their view, this was manifested – relative to earlier school years – in a lessening of *quietness and shyness* and *anger and fights* among classmates. Notwithstanding their social-emotional growth, they encountered issues with classmates, such as *name-calling, quarrels,* and *gossip*. Although students disapproved of such behavior, they considered it inherent to daily school life. They tended to ignore or withdraw from other people's annoying or undesirable behavior; however, they also stressed the importance of *standing up for themselves* to avoid being harassed. The following quote illustrates how a student used his perceptions of himself and others to manage and prevent interaction problems:

> *R (boy, 18): Yeah, you certainly get to know someone. I know exactly how to act with her in such situations. I know how she will behave in one case and also how she will behave in other circumstances. I always try to play jokes on her. […] I don't know exactly how everyone's mind works. However, if I don't like somebody initially, I'd rather stay out of his way […] to prevent getting into trouble.*

Despite their rejection of *name-calling, quarrels,* and *gossip* and *their attempts to withdraw from or talk about these issues*, most students had been involved – as victims or perpetrators – in such daily school life struggles. They indicated that such struggles could also result in fights among peer groups or threats *to deal with alone after school.* Some of them also reflected on their own annoying behavior towards peers. Although they downplayed the impact of this on others, they also considered the possibility that they hurt others' feelings, as the following quote shows:

> *G (girl, 16): We sometimes swear at people as a joke in our class. I mean, we don't usually intend to harm someone. Everyone laughs about it. However, we also know when it has, like, gone far enough. Then we stop straight away. That's just how we do such things.*

All students sincerely wanted to *get along well* with others and prevent problems at school. They emphasized the need to approach others *respectfully* and to *act normally*. Most students perceived themselves as having the ability to manage difficulties in their interactions with others, especially with intimate friends. Overall, students were satisfied with and proud of the strategies they used in daily interactions with classmates.

Although most students considered learning appropriate social-emotional skills essential for their future success, some were convinced that these skills are learned at home and not at school. Others were openly suspicious about learning skills relevant for interacting with others at school, as *such skills would be useless on the street*.

Severe interaction problems at school

Although students perceived themselves as being responsible for establishing positive interactions, and while *talking about issues* was the preferred skill for coping with problems, this did not always work to their satisfaction, as the following quote shows:

> *N (girl, 16): And if something is up, you have to talk it over. […]. Everyone has a picture of what is going on, which can spread into many stories that aren't even true. […] However, if it involves someone else, I will go up and tell them that I do not appreciate it. Yeah, and if they behave ordinarily, you can talk about it. However, if they react weirdly, well, that's when I get angry.*

Students got upset by such unexpected responses and perceived the other person as rejecting their attempts at problem solving, which legitimized, in their view, to start fighting. Despite their preference for talking about problems with their peers, most students regularly attempted to regulate their behavior by deciding to *stay quiet, ignore or withdraw* from severe interaction issues. They often chose to remove themselves from situations that made them feel *embarrassed, anxious,* or *angry*. When they perceived themselves as being approached inappropriately, some of them *answered back*. The following reflection displays a student's ability to distinguish between his own and others' contributions to a problem:

> *R (boy, 18): If I don't like something a guy does, I will answer back [….]. One other guy and I haven't been able to stand each other all year, right from the first day. He doesn't want to do anything about it. He can be quite a nice guy, but sometimes he can be a real pain; I'm just not in the mood then.*

In some, but not all, of the interaction problems students encountered, they relied on *help from teachers or friends*. They expected teachers and peers to help them stay out of difficulties or to offer help in solving problems with others. However, teachers' actual interventions in problems between classmates did not always meet their expectations. Students perceived it as annoying if the teacher's support failed to focus sufficiently on their attempts at problem solving, and in such cases, they interpreted the support given as intended mainly *to keep the class quiet*. The following quote illustrates such a perception:

> *F (boy, 16): […] We had a boy in class who kept on making body contact. In the end, you get fed up with it, and you do something back. And then you're the one the teachers hold responsible. If you then say, well, watch out, the issue with body contact is getting out of hand […]. What's more, it gets out of hand, and you are the one who is held responsible, not him […].*

Students were seriously concerned about some severe and recurrent problems regarding bullying and other harassment. Although they empathized with the victims and felt responsible for solving such issues, they also experienced them as being beyond their control. Girls believed that *ignoring boys or behaving unresponsively* to sexual harassment was the most appropriate thing to do; however, they did not feel confident about this approach. They were convinced that boys were *not always able to understand the impact of their harassment* on them. In her response, a girl showed empathy for boys' feelings and the ability to take their position into account:

> *N (girl, 16): It's complicated to explain to boys [that you do not like sexually charged comments], you know? Because you don't know what a boy feels […]. Some of them would understand, but others wouldn't understand a thing.*

Although students reported that bullying decreased as they matured, most of them were still concerned about it. When reflecting on how bullying might be stopped, some were convinced that *experiencing what the victims feel* would force bullies to understand the

impact of their behavior. At the same time, they considered stopping the bullies as being beyond their control. Most of them seemed to withdraw from the bullying or to avoid it. When victimized, they armed themselves by *practicing not to feel the pain* and *acting unresponsively* towards bullies. They were well aware of the power imbalance between bullies and their victims and recognized that some peers were more vulnerable to bullying *because of their appearance, clothes, or height*. Students did not seem to seek support for the victimization that deeply burdened them. Some students were disappointed by teachers' responses to their concerns about bullying, as the quote by F (boy, 16) above illustrates.

Managing school life experiences and interactions

In their reflections, students indicated several strategies for managing their daily school life, their interactions with classmates, and the problems they encountered. Using their language and wording, table 3 illustrates the strategies students said they used in the context of general school life experiences, daily interactions, and severe interaction problems at school, and the CASEL skills reflected in these strategies. The strategies mentioned by students reflect skills comprised in all five competency domains of the CASEL framework.

In their reflections on their school life students demonstrated awareness of their academic achievements and their education and work prospects. They indicated that self-confidence and perseverance were necessary to achieve their future goals and expressed their need for support from their friends and teachers in accomplishing these goals.

According to students, managing daily interactions with classmates requires talking as well as staying quiet when experiencing intense emotions and the alertness to stop when others are hurt. Establishing positive relationships requires interpersonal strategies, e.g., acting respectfully, understanding others and accepting them as they are, as well as intrapersonal strategies, e.g., self-confidence and standing up for yourself. With regards to solving daily interaction problems at school, students emphasized the importance of being able to work together.

When it came to severe interaction problems, students sometimes tried to seek help from, or provide help to, friends and teachers. However, they indicated that they often used avoidance strategies, such as ignoring or withdrawing from problematic interactions. Students were well aware that these strategies did not provide satisfactory solutions

to the severe problems they and others encountered. However, they did indicate which strategies would aid in solving such problems, e.g., knowing what others feel and understanding others' views. Despite their perceived inability to fix problematic interactions between classmates, which they regretted, students still felt responsible for solving them. Although they indicated the need for teacher support, they did not know how to establish such support.

DISCUSSION

To inform teachers implementing the Skills4Life program, we explored low-achieving adolescents' perceptions and experiences regarding their school life in general, their interactions with classmates, and the strategies and skills they used in managing these interactions. Overall, students were satisfied with their school life and experienced a sense of safety and belonging at school. They felt able to manage their interactions with peers, including the problems they encountered.

Strategies for managing interactions with classmates

Students indicated using a range of strategies, such as talking, collaboration, and being aware of others' feelings to manage their interactions with classmates. However, they did not use their preferred strategies to tackle severe interaction problems despite feeling responsible for solving them. According to them, a critical obstacle they faced in solving their interaction problems was their difficulty in controlling their emotions and behavior.

Our finding that students experienced difficulties in using their problem-solving strategies in situations perceived as emotionally intense is supported by other studies. Stapley et al. (2020) demonstrated that adolescents primarily tried to manage difficulties by disengaging or distracting from problem situations and seeking support from teachers or parents. Markova & Nikitskaya (2017) found that previous experiences of success or failure in using problem-solving skills determined whether adolescents applied these skills in new situations. For the students in our study, the characteristics of a situation, i.e., whether it was experienced as safe and supportive, determined which strategies they applied. Other research found that the experience of being respected and taken seriously is crucial for helping adolescents solve difficulties with peers (DeLara, 2012; McCluskey et al., 2013). Insight into adolescents' perceptions regarding safety and support is relevant for implementing SEL programs.

Table 3 Strategies indicated by low-achieving adolescent students related to interview topics

Interview topics	Strategies indicated by students (CASEL skills and domains[1])
General school life experiences	- Hope for the future (Optimism, self-awareness) - Insight into academic achievements and future life prospects (Knowledge of strengths and weaknesses, self-awareness) - Hope for the future (Optimism, self-awareness) - Self-confidence (Self-efficacy, self-awareness) - Pursuit of (future) goals (Goal setting and perseverance, self-management) - Help from teachers and friends (Help seeking, relationship skills)
Daily interactions with classmates	- Knowing others' feelings and thoughts (Empathy, social awareness) - Talking (Communication, relationship skills) - Knowing somebody and accepting others as they are (Perspective taking, appreciate diversity, social awareness) - Awareness of anger, sadness, irritation (Recognize emotions, self-awareness) - Acting respectfully/normally (Understand social norms, social awareness) - Staying quiet, ignoring, withdrawal (Self-regulation, self-management) - Self-confidence (Self-efficacy, self-awareness) - Standing up for yourself, boundary setting (Peer pressure resistance, relationship skills) - Collaboration on tasks and problems (Cooperation, relationship skills)
Severe interaction problems at school	- Feigning ignorance, withdrawal, frustration (Emotion regulation, self-management) - Knowing what others feel (Empathy, social awareness) - Understanding the view of others (Perspective taking, social awareness) - Helping others (Help seeking, relationship skills) - Awareness of avoidance as an ineffective problem-solving strategy (Considering factors and consequences, responsible decision making) - Feeling responsible for solving interaction problems (Taking responsibility for behavior, responsible decision making)

[1] Competency domains and -skills comprised in the CASEL framework (CASEL, 2003).

Teachers' awareness and interventions

Another finding of our study – namely, that students perceived teachers as being unaware of their difficulties in solving more severe interaction problems or unwilling to intervene, is congruent with findings in other studies on bullying. For example, students indicated that their teachers often do not notice bullying situations (Fekkes et al., 2004). According to students in a study by Wachs et al. (2019), teachers were regularly not aware of, or ignored or dismissed, bullying. This undermines their status and being respected in the eyes of others, which is so crucial for adolescents (Crone & Dahl, 2012; Yeager, 2017). As a result, students value teachers' efforts to intervene in difficult interactions less highly. When students feel that teachers do not intervene or provide support in severe interaction problems amongst students, this also diminishes students' own willingness to intervene, despite their perceived responsibility.

Students' sense of responsibility

A third notable finding of our study is that students felt responsible for, and motivated to contribute to, solving severe interaction problems and to establish a safe school context. A study by De Mooi et al. (2022) on younger students obtained similar findings. A sense of belonging and trust in others at school, both of which were experienced by students in our study, were identified as contributive to enhancing social-emotional skills, especially for marginalized youth (Korpershoek et al., 2020; Wray-Lake et al., 2016). Adolescents' sense of responsibility for solving interaction problems with classmates may be drawn on to engage adolescents in SEL program implementation.

Strengths and limitations

As far as we know our study is one of the first to explore low-achieving adolescents' perspectives on their interactions with classmates and the social-emotional skills that are meaningful and useful for them, and which should, consequently, inform SEL program implementation. A strength of our study is that it draws on students' own descriptions and behavior to outline their perceptions, experiences, and reflections regarding the social-emotional skills they preferred to use. The focus group interviews provided opportunities for most – but not all – students to interact with classmates in the safe and familiar context of school. This context allowed us to obtain a broader description of their interactions than can be gained from interviews with other stakeholders, such as teachers and parents (Krueger, 2014).

The fact that we used the CASEL competency domains and the social-emotional skills they comprise as sensitizing concepts, to conceptualize students' own perceptions of their skills and strategies for managing their school life and interactions with classmates, can be considered both a strength and a limitation of our study (CASEL, 2003). The concepts enabled us to provide insight into the social-emotional skills students perceived as relevant (Bowen, 2006). However, they might also have prevented us from indicating strategies and skills not comprised in the concepts used (Kane, 2001).

Another limitation of the study is that, despite using open-ended questions, the questions and discussions in the focus group interviews may have prompted students to present themselves favorably during the focus group discussions and to respond in socially desirable ways (Krueger, 2014). However, we made sure that students understood we were genuinely interested in their experiences and perspectives. We also made sure they felt comfortable voicing opposing opinions regarding the social-emotional skills they

perceived appropriate and their perceptions of situations for using these skills. It is also possible that their views of their problem-solving strategies were too optimistic (Compas et al., 2001; Schmidt & Čreslovnik, 2010). Similarly, the retrospective accounts provided of their interactions with peers may not have reflected their actual skill performance in interaction problems (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Norris, 1997). However, students' awareness of appropriate skills and strategies in social interactions are relevant inputs that can be used to engage students in SEL program implementation.

A final limitation is that teachers selected the students in the study based on their availability, willingness, and their ability to talk with strangers and each other about their school life experiences. These students do not represent the total population of low-achieving students in Dutch prevocational secondary education, nor students in other educational tracks. The findings cannot, therefore, be generalized to all adolescents in secondary education (Patton, 2002). However, generalization of findings was not the purpose of this study.

Implications for practice and research

Overall, our findings indicate that low-achieving adolescent students are valuable informants for those who wish to implement SEL programs tailored to their needs (De Leeuw et al., 2018; Mishna et al., 2020; Yeager, 2017). Our study has highlighted a number of factors that teachers and schools should take into account when implementing programs such as Skills4Life. For instance, we advise teachers to explore adolescents' language and their experiences concerning interactions with classmates, the strategies they perceive as useful in navigating these interactions, and the difficulties they encountered. This would provide insights that may be used to adapt an SEL program to students' needs (Burleigh & Wilson, 2021; Yeager et al., 2018). This is especially important for low-achieving students who have difficulty transferring skills learned in one context to other contexts (Gresham, 2010). (Digital) instruments are available for identifying students' skills and interactions with classmates (Ferreira et al., 2020; Thomson et al., 2018) however, classroom discussions are necessary for obtaining insight into students' lived experiences and language.

A second finding of our study pertains to students' perceptions and concerns that teachers are often unaware of the severe interaction problems students face. Insight into these perceptions and concerns can help teachers to create the safe and supportive classroom contexts necessary for social-emotional skills enhancement (McKown et al., 2019; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Such contexts allow teachers to discuss students' interactions and

problems, and to inform them about useful (additional) social-emotional skills. Teaching these skills adapted to students' experiences and language is assumed to be conducive to engaging students in SEL program implementation (Côté-Lussier & Fitzpatrick, 2016; Meyer et al., 2020).

A third implication for practice of our study is that students felt a personal responsibility for intervening in and solving (severe) interaction problems. This is consistent with research on adolescent development (Güroğlu et al., 2014), and can be used to engage students in practicing the skills taught in SEL programs.

A fourth implication for practice indicated by our study results is that low-achieving adolescent students are valuable sources of information for SEL program implementation (Cook-Sather, 2020; Ramirez et al., 2021). Therefore, exploration of their skills, resources, and concerns on interactions with peers at school before implementing the program is indicated to provide teachers with valuable insights and opportunities to tailor SEL programs to their students' needs. To support teachers, we recommend that program developers make exploring adolescents' social-emotional skills and assets an integral part of SEL programs and provide knowledge and materials for such exploration.

Additional teacher training and support are recommended for assessing students' language, perceptions, and experiences regarding interactions with classmates and the strategies they perceive as relevant. Teachers' assessments should be used to tailor a program to students' needs while maintaining its core elements (e.g., Durlak, 2016; Rotherham-Borus et al., 2012).

As our study mainly included low-achieving students in prevocational education, future research on the perspectives and experiences of other student populations is necessary (McKenna & Millen, 2013). Future research should also focus in more detail on students' hesitancy to apply certain social-emotional skills in problematic interactions. We also recommend further research on teachers' and students' experiences regarding SEL programs that have been tailored to students' needs based on teachers' assessments of students' perceptions. Finally, additional evaluation studies are required on the effects of such programs.

CONCLUSION

Adolescents' active participation in developing their social-emotional skills makes them valuable informants for those who wish to implement SEL programs tailored to adolescents' needs. Our study indicates that low-achieving adolescent students have their

own perspectives and language regarding their interactions with classmates and their own views on how to manage these interactions. They indicated a range of strategies that they preferred to use for interaction management, such as talking, collaboration, and understanding others' views. The strategies they indicated mirror the social-emotional skills regularly targeted in SEL programs. However, students indicated that they did not apply these strategies when they felt unsafe or unsupported. Particularly when it came to severe interaction problems, such as bullying, students stated that teachers were often unaware of these difficulties. Prior experiences of disrespect or not being taken seriously by teachers contributed to students' decisions not to intervene in emotionally intense situations at school. Obtaining insight into students' perceptions of their interactions with peers, the problems they encountered, and their views on the strategies and conditions required for managing interactions is helpful for teachers implementing SEL programs, who wish to tailor these to their students' needs. Additional teacher training is required on discussing, with the students themselves, their perceptions, experiences, and strategies for managing interactions and interaction problems with classmates at school; and on how to adapt a program while maintaining its core elements.

Human subjects approval statement

The study was submitted to the Dutch Central Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects (CCMO) for ethical approval and was exempted as it did not pose a burden to participants.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

Funding

This work was supported by SIA, the Taskforce for Applied Research in the Netherlands, under Grant number PRO-4-43.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank LG and MH for their contribution to the data collection and analyses, and SB for English language editing.

Appendix 1 Skills 4 Life Basic- and -Internship Module, Lesson Titles, and Content

Skills 4 Life-Basic Module: Lessons and Content	
Title of Lesson	**Content of Lessons**
1.Introduction to Skills4Life program	Awareness of personal characteristics, including similarities and differences Making agreements on interpersonal behavior in the classroom
2.Observing behaviors	Being aware of the consequences of your own reactions Observing helpful and unhelpful behavior Making agreements on interpersonal behavior in the classroom
3. Observing emotions	Being aware and recognizing your own emotions and those of others Making agreements on interpersonal behavior in the classroom
4. Recognizing behaviors; self-talk	Being aware and recognizing your own thoughts and those of others Recognizing social situations Managing your own thoughts Making agreements on interpersonal behavior in the classroom
5. Looking at yourself and managing thoughts	Being aware and recognizing your character traits and those of others Being aware and recognizing your own thoughts Managing your thoughts
6. Trust in relationships and friendships	Managing emotions and social situations Being aware of social situations and managing them well
7. Peer pressure and saying no	Being aware of and recognizing your feelings, thoughts, and reactions and their consequences to yourself and others Expressing thoughts and emotions Standing up for yourself and indicating borders Being aware and recognizing peer pressure Managing your emotions and thoughts
8. Specifying boundaries and respect in intimate relationships	Self-awareness, self-management, and social awareness Being aware of, recognizing, and managing conflict in social situations
9. Conflicts between students and teachers	Being aware of social situation Being aware of and recognizing your feelings and thoughts, your behavioral reactions, and those of others Managing conflicts Indicating, expressing, and maintaining personal borders Respecting other people's borders
10. Conflicts between students and parents	Being aware of and recognizing your feelings and thoughts, your behavioral reactions, and those of others Being aware of, recognizing and managing distress in social situations and conflicts
11. Conclusion	Being aware of, recognizing and expressing feelings and thoughts Being aware of, recognizing and managing social skills

Skills 4 Life-Internship Module: Lessons and Content	
Title of Lesson.	**Content of Lessons**
1. Internship and work	Introduction Differences between school and workplace Checklist for the first day of your internship Interviewing your parents on their own career and internships
2. Presenting yourself	My pitch: who I am? Contacting internship providers Writing a Curriculum Vitae
3. Apply for internships and demonstrating initiative at work	Managing and updating your Curriculum Vitae Learning to apply for internships Importance of demonstrating initiative at work
4. How to deal with criticism	Purposes and importance of criticism Criticizing and being criticized
5. Keeping calm and quiet during internships	Attendance Being aware of stress Relaxing.
6. Networking	Importance of personal networks Extending and maintaining your network