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Preliminary feasibility study of a global training-of-trainers for the Social, Emotional and Ethical Learning program

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ABSTRACT

The SEE Learning® (Social, Emotional and Ethical Learning Program) is a K-12 curriculum developed at Emory University and launched globally in 2019. The program aims to foster awareness, compassion, and ethical engagement in students. To address the high demand for the program across the world, a hybrid training-of-trainers (ToT) course was introduced in 2020. This paper presents the model for this ToT course, as well as feasibility data regarding trainees' experience of it. Given the lack of evidence-based models for effectively training trainers to deliver social and emotional learning (SEL) programs, this mixed-method feasibility study is meant to spur more discussion and research on the topic. The study, involving N = 166 trainees from 21 countries, aimed to answer three questions: 1) What were the qualifications and motivations of those selected into the ToT program? 2) How did the trainees respond to the program components and what aspects were perceived to be most effective? 3) What outcomes did they experience from receiving the program? Trainees indicated their motivations to enhance their knowledge of SEE Learning and to inspire teachers in their application program in the classroom. They also reported small group meetings as the most impactful in their understanding of the concepts, as well as their practice of the training competencies. Results indicated that trainees experienced an increase in content knowledge and confidence in applying the facilitation skills to train educators in the SEE Learning program. Preliminary results showed 72 % of trainees were certified at the conclusion of the ToT course. Implications for similar global efforts are discussed.

Introduction

Research has established that schools are most successful in their educational mission when they integrate universal efforts to simultaneously promote children's academic, social, and emotional learning. For instance, a meta-analysis examined the outcomes of over 200 school-based social and emotional learning (SEL) programs involving about 270,000 primary and secondary students in the United States (Durlak et al., 2011). Compared to control students, those who participated in SEL programs showed improved social-emotional skills, academic motivation, and behavior (e.g. attendance, rule-following). Of the twenty-seven programs that examined indicators of academic achievement at the post-intervention period, students receiving SEL programs showed significant and meaningful improvements on achievement test performance; the effect was equivalent to an approximately 11-percentile-point gain in achievement. A second meta-analysis which examined 82 school-based SEL programs involving about 98,000 students, considered the effects of participation in SEL programs up to 18 years post-program (Taylor et al., 2017). Students who participated in SEL programs were found to do better than control students on social-emotional skills, attitudes, and wellbeing. These improvements were shown regardless of the child's race, socioeconomic background, or school location. More recent meta-analyses confirm these earlier studies, and we can conclude there is now strong evidence that SEL improves academic and social-emotional outcomes in diverse students in both the near and longer-terms (Cipriano et al., 2023; Durlak et al., 2022).

While these are important results, calls have also been made for

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greater consideration of adult (teacher) preparation in SEL (Roeser et al., 2024) and to cultural responsiveness to diverse students and families (Jagers et al., 2019). In addition, related to the focus on adult SEL, there is now much greater attention to the challenge of how to implement SEL programs for students at scale (e.g., beyond single classrooms) while maintaining high quality classroom program implementation (Baelen et al., 2023). A key aspect of ensuring high quality program implementation involves offering classroom teachers high quality professional development to prepare them to deliver SEL programs to students (Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning CASEL, 2023). A less obvious, but even more primary aspect of scaling while ensuring high quality SEL programs, concerns training-of-trainers (ToT) who will provide professional development to educators in different geographical locales and in culturally responsive ways (Choles et al., 2022).

In this paper, we focus attention on this ToT level of implementation quality, in the context of an on-going, global effort to implement and scale the SEE Learning® (Social, Emotional, and Ethical Learning) Program in nations in North and South America, Europe, and Asia. The SEE Learning program is a preschool to K-12 SEL curriculum, developed at Emory University and launched in 2019. The program can be downloaded for no charge from the SEE Learning website and is available in multiple languages. It is currently used by educators in over forty countries across the globe. It consists of sequential lessons, taught by classroom teachers, that aim to help students to develop knowledge and skills around awareness, compassion, and engagement regarding self, others and the world (see Appendix B for definitions of these constructs). As the program became accessible to educators across the world, a (ToT) model was constructed to support the implementation of the program. It was determined to be particularly important to prepare trainers to deliver SEE Learning educator workshops to educators from their own geographic region, in their first/native language and with consideration to their local cultural context.

SEL program implementation quality as essential

As implementation science approaches to SEL programs have advanced, more factors impacting the quality of program implementation have come to light. Research shows, for instance, that implementation support offered by districts and principals positively affect the quality of teachers' implementation of student SEL programs and thereby their impact on students (Domitrovich et al., 2019; Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Goldberg et al., 2019; Kendziora & Osher, 2016). Our knowledge is continuing to evolve on how the characteristics of the school context and student body, the instructor or teacher who delivers the program, or the pedagogy and program itself, may impact student engagement and outcomes (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). In addition, while there is growing research on the quality of implementation at the level of district, school and teachers, to our knowledge there is little to no existing evidence-based model to inform how to effectively train-the-trainers who will eventually train classroom teachers to deliver SEL programs to students (Choles et al., 2022).

Given the growing interest in SEL programming globally (OECD, 2019), as well as interest in implementation quality, we focus here on how (regional) trainers across the world can be trained to teach classroom teachers as part of the scaling and sustaining process for, in this case, the SEE Learning program. We describe the SEE Learning Program's training-of-trainer (ToT) model and theory of change, the processes of trainee selection, and how the first international cohort of trainers perceived the training and its outcomes.

The SEE Learning program

The goal of the SEE Learning curriculum is to cultivate in students' dispositions and skills necessary for the development of compassionate and ethically oriented individuals (Jazaieri, 2018; Roeser, 2019). This is hypothesized to be achieved through developing competencies in the three dimensions of awareness, compassion, and engagement, as they can be applied within the personal, social, and systems domains. Through practices such as focused attention or open awareness mindfulness skills, students develop awareness of self, others, and the social and natural worlds in which one is embedded (Singer & Engert, 2019; Lutz et al., 2008). Through compassion practices, students develop empathy and compassion for themselves and others, and come to recognize our common humanity in which we value all human and sentient beings (Gilbert, 2019; Neff, 2023). Through engagement with the world and other people, students learn self-regulation and restraint, kindness, and a concern for the welfare of wider communities (Gilbert, 2019). In the three-by-three matrix, we see the nine key competencies of the SEE Learning Framework (see Fig. 1). This framework was used to guide the development of the SEE Learning curriculum, as well as to guide the content and practices in the ToT course. The SEE Learning program was designated as an evidence-based K-12 CASEL SELect program in 2024 (Frazier et al., 2025).

Conceptual framework and theory of change for training-of-trainers program

The ToT was designed for adult learners informed by David A. Kolb's experiential learning theory which poses four stages of learning: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb, 2015). The ToT course consisted of key pedagogical, structural and local support features (see Fig. 2), each of which provided opportunities for trainees to learn through experience, reflection, theorizing, and then applying new understandings and skills throughout the ToT course and in one's professional life. The main features of the course are further outlined below.

Pedagogical features

Robust and intentional training with clear learning goals and activities for each of the 9 course modules

The ToT included nine modules delivered over a nine-month period. These modules included: (1) the SEE Learning Framework/Pedagogical Model; (2) The Role of Pedagogy in SEE Learning Implementation; (3) Compassion; (4) Resiliency Skills; (5) Emotions; (6) Awareness and Attention Skills; (7) Systems Thinking; (8) Implementation; and (9) Self-Reflection and the Certification Process. Each module contained clearly defined learning goals, content, and course activities that were designed to meet the following overarching learning objectives: 1) ensure that trainees developed the SEE Learning content knowledge needed to train others in the program; 2) engage trainees in their personal development of contemplative practice; 3) give trainees a first-hand experience of teaching SEE Learning to students through the developmentally organized curriculum; and 4) provide trainees with a first-hand experience of what a caring, supportive learning community feels like, and to reflect on the programmatic elements which helps create it. As represented in the ToT Theory of Change, the ToT inputs were specifically designed to further the content knowledge, skill development, and embodied understanding of the SEE Learning trainees (see Fig. 2).

Creation of peer learning communities

One of the goals of the SEE Learning program is to help teachers engage in practices that create a safe and productive learning environment for students. Adult learners, like students, benefit from nonjudgmental, peer-supported learning communities (e.g., MacDonald & Shirley, 2009). The initial 3-day in-person educator training allowed trainees to build relationships that were further cultivated in the ToT hybrid course through interactions in the online course platform, breakout rooms in the large zoom meetings, co-facilitation practice experiences, and small group meetings. The online course engaged trainees in creating and referring to a set of community guidelines to

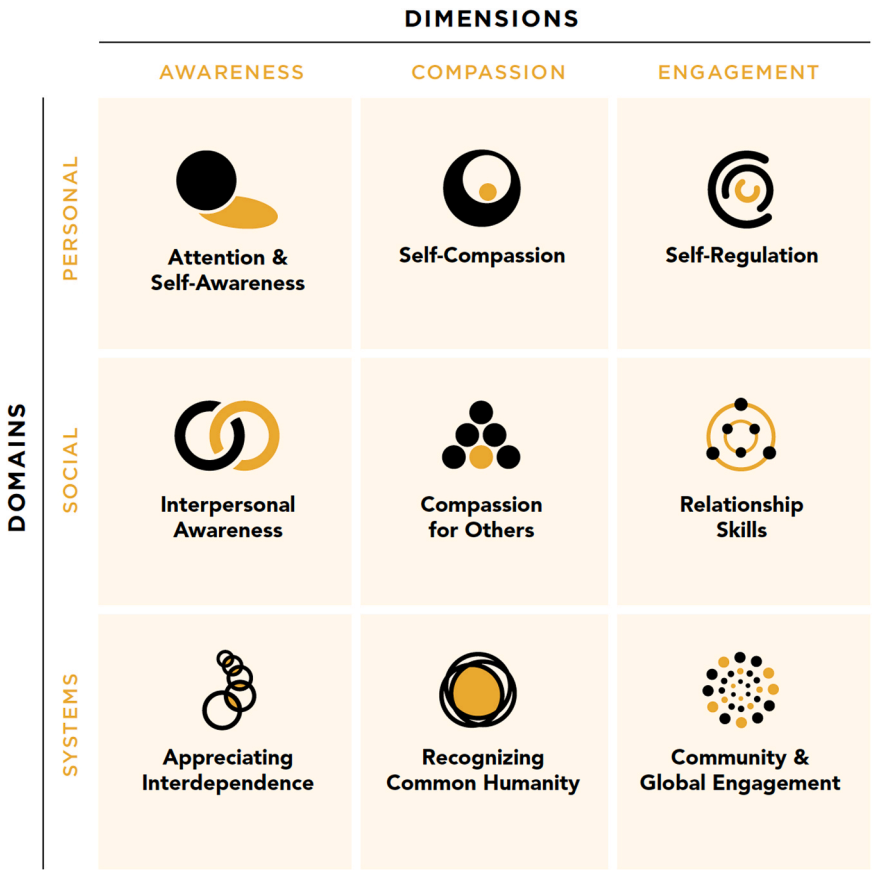


Fig. 1. SEE Learning Framework (from SEE Learning Companion, 2019).

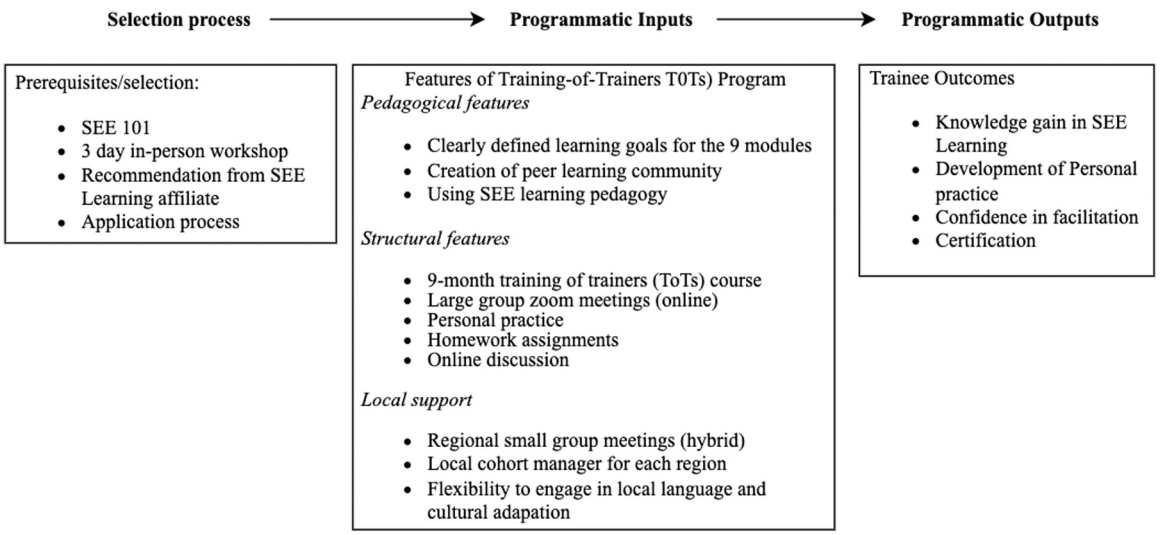


Fig. 2. Conceptual framework and Theory of change for SEE Learning Training-of-Trainers (ToT) program.

support the creation of a positive learning community.

Using SEE Learning pedagogy

The SEE Learning pedagogical model presents the three levels of learning: received knowledge, critical insight and embodied understanding. Received knowledge is a declarative understanding of a subject matter, and was achieved in the ToT through readings, videos, expert talks, and discussions that facilitated trainees understanding of the program's core content and practices. Critical insights are personalized knowledge that results from deeper reflection, connection, and application by connecting to their prior knowledge and experience. To foster critical insights, trainees were given opportunities to reflect more deeply on their conceptual understandings, and to make personal connections between their prior knowledge and the newly received knowledge. These insights are tentative and must be further reflected on regularly, thus achieving the third level of embodied understanding, where the new knowledge becomes part of one's being and behavior and is embodied in an automatic way. The goal of the SEE learning pedagogy

is to direct trainees into developing this highest level of embodied understanding that will help them guide others in learning the SEE Learning program (Roeser et al., 2024).

Structural features

Large group zoom meetings

The large group zoom meetings included presentations by expert guest speakers, guided content exploration, small group breakout, and question and answer at the end. Zoom meetings provided contact between course instructors and trainees, and allowed for continued exploration of the material that was presented online. Additionally, course instructors modeled facilitation skills during the zoom calls, which trainees were prompted to observe and reflect on.

Personal practice

The personal practice assignment required that trainees engage in contemplative practices from the curriculum, keep a journal on their experience, and write a reflection paper on their journey as a contemplative practitioner. This assignment focused on helping trainees develop an embodied understanding of the SEE Learning core concepts and skills. This is an important part of trainee development as it encourages trainees to practice, model, and embody the competencies they would be introducing to educators (Roeser et al., 2024).

Knowledge assessment

Throughout the 9-month course, trainees were required to read sections of the SEE Learning Companion which explains the theoretical basis for the program and clearly describes the program framework, content, and pedagogical model. They were required to complete a written assessment that tested their knowledge and understanding of the material.

Teaching and training assignments

Trainees completed two practical skills assignments in which they applied their teaching and training skills they learned during the course. One assignment required that they plan and teach a lesson from the SEE Learning curriculum to a group of students so that they would have first-hand experience using the curriculum in the classroom. Another assignment required trainees to plan and facilitate a SEE Learning mini workshop for educators. Both of those assignments required that trainees complete a written reflections detailing their planning, facilitation, and self-evaluation, thereby helping them become reflective practitioners.

Online discussion

Trainees responded to each module's content and its applications through discussion prompts that were posted online. The online discussion forum provided an opportunity for trainees to learn from their peers, to explain subject matter in their own words, to share their 'ah-ha' moments or critical insights, to consider various points of view, and to experience learning in dialogue with a culturally diverse group. They could pose questions on the platform which could be answered by other trainees or the course instructors. The nature and quality of the discussion forums also provided instructors with information about trainees' progress in the understanding of the subject matter.

Applied practice of the 16 facilitation skills

A key aspect of the ToT was to support the development of facilitation skills that the trainees could use as workshop leaders (see Appendix C). Trainees completed a self-assessment of their skill level of each of the targeted sixteen facilitation skills and were invited to reflect on their strengths and target areas for growth. During small group meetings, trainees rotated the responsibility to facilitate the small group meeting agenda, which included activities which were identical to the ones that would be planned into the educator workshops. During zoom calls, trainees were invited to lead practices for their peers and during their facilitation assignment, all trainees were again provided with opportunities to practice the set of key facilitation skills. Trainees received feedback on their facilitation skills both from course instructors and from their small group members.

Local Support

One unique aspect of the ToT, designed as a hybrid learning experience, was the inclusion of local support for the trainees.

Regional small group meetings

The small group meetings were organized by geographic proximity and shared common language and were held in-person when possible. Small group meetings provided trainees with the opportunity to meet with their peers to discuss the content, to practice facilitating, and to give and receive feedback on facilitation.

Flexibility to engage in local language and cultural adaptation

The small group meetings themselves also provided an opportunity for course trainees to explore and discuss the materials in their native language, while considering important questions about cultural contextualization of the materials for their environment. This component provided an opportunity to trainees to suggest and innovate cultural adaptations to the SEE Learning curriculum to meet the needs of educators and students while remaining faithful to the purpose, content and pedagogy of the program.

Because culture impacts the ways in which social emotional competencies are defined, communicated, enacted and taught (Hecht & Shin, 2015), the ToT course instructors identified the need for flexibility in regional program adaptation. There is growing consensus about the need for cultural adaptation of SEL programs that balance fidelity to core program components with cultural and contextual "fit." (Cefai & Simões, 2025; Colagrossi et al., 2025; Hecht & Shin, 2015)

ToT course instructors operated under the understanding that culture is a complex, multi-layered, multi-faceted concept that is best defined by educational leaders themselves within their specific context. We proposed that people from within a cultural context would be the best judgments of how to assess and adapt the "cultural fit" of the SEE learning curricular materials and classroom implementation strategies. While course instructors provided some general recommendations for surface-level adaptations (Li et al., 2024), such as changing names and stories, the ToT trainees were invited to consider the ways in which deeper-level adaptations, such as emphasizing collectivism versus individualism, might be needed to situate the program content and pedagogy within their specific contexts. Additionally, trainees were invited to consider the contextualization of the SEE Learning training materials and curriculum to their specific site of implementation. For example, within India, trainers explored how to introduce SEE Learning to educators and students at private, international school, and rural, tribally-run schools. Trainees discussed proposed adaptation with cohort managers which were reviewed by the ToT course instructors. The most common elements of the program that required modification were: timing and pacing of the lessons (taking more or less time as needed), teacher scripts (they would put the script into their own words), and stories and character names and places (replaced to be culturally familiar), definition of some terms (to align with cultural contexts), and pedagogical elements that were unfamiliar to teachers (such as student-centered instruction) that needed additional explanation and modeling. We recognize linguistic and cultural adaptation as an ongoing discussion and area of attention and discernment.

Local cohort managers supported trainees in each region

Each regional affiliate organization chose a cohort manager who was a main point of contact between the ToT course instructors based at the SEE Learning office at Emory University, Atlanta, and the local trainees

enrolled in the ToT. The cohort managers ensured that the regionally-based small group meetings progressed as they should. These cohort managers also reached out to trainees who were experiencing difficulty with the course or obstacles in their personal or professional lives which impacted their course engagement. Cohort managers also helped those who needed assistance with English language materials and who benefited from further explanation of the ToT course requirements and assignments. Finally, cohort managers assisted the course instructors in gathering feedback from trainees about the course itself which assisted the course instructors in making minor adjustments to the course to increase trainee engagement and satisfaction. With trainees participating from various time zones and cultural contexts, the cohort managers played a crucial role in supporting the ongoing participation of trainees in the program.

Research questions

In summary, this preliminary feasibility study of the SEE Learning ToT program addresses three primary research questions: 1) What were the qualifications and motivations of those selected into the ToT program? 2) How did the trainees respond to the program components and which ones did they perceive to be most effective? 3) What outcomes did trainees experience from receiving the program?

Methods

Prerequisites/the selection process

After the global launch of the SEE Learning program in 2019, there was a large demand for the curriculum from many nations. Thus, SEE Learning quickly established relationships with local affiliates which are regional organizations and institutions who share the vision of SEE Learning and support its implementation and scaling. These affiliates are responsible for training, translation, outreach, and dissemination of the program in their region. In addition, a team at SEE Learning created a training-of-trainers (ToT) workshop in 2020 to prepare regional affiliates to train classroom educators in the SEE Learning implementation.

Because the ToT program was launched shortly after the SEE Learning curriculum was made freely available, the SEE Learning team faced a unique challenge: the ToT program would need to work with individuals who were just familiarizing themselves with the SEE Learning curriculum. Because of this, a selection process for potential trainees was created to nominate and screen trainees during the application process. The selection criteria included prior experience in contemplative practice, teaching experience in SEL or related programs for children or adults, and attendance in the 3-day in-person educator workshop. Additionally, because the global COVID-19 pandemic impacted international travel and in-person gatherings at this time, the hybrid version of the ToT program was developed so that it could reach trainees in many countries virtually. While the initial ToT was conceived of as an in-person series of workshops, the new program had to be conducted primarily online to engage trainees from across the globe. Overall, the hybrid ToT program was estimated to take 150–175 h to complete. The trainees for the ToT were nominated and selected by the regional affiliate organizations. Interested individuals sought acceptance to the ToT by completing an application which was approved by the SEE Learning staff or by the leaders of the regional affiliates. Potential trainees had to meet the following prerequisites in order for their applications to be reviewed: they had to take the SEE 101 course - a self-paced online SEE Learning introductory course that takes between 3 and 4 h to complete and is accessible to everyone in English then (now available in multiple languages); and they had to attend a 3-day in-person SEE Learning educator workshop. These workshops were held regionally in North and South America, Europe, and Asia and were taught by the developers of the program. The workshops included lecture, reflection, small group and large group discussions, guided practice in lesson delivery with feedback from instructors, and experiential activities from the curriculum. The workshops introduced trainees to the program framework, rationale, and key curricular concepts and practices. In addition, these workshops offered trainees guidance on how to deliver SEE Learning educator workshops in their own countries with fidelity. They were delivered in English, with translation into trainees' first languages as needed. These prerequisites (course, workshop), coupled with the application screening process and nominations made by local affiliates, ensured that only the most motivated and dedicated individuals were invited to join the ToT program.

The application process asked applicants to indicate their level of experience in the following areas: teaching children in the classroom, providing professional development or training to adults, implementing SEL (or similar) programs, and engaging in a personal contemplative or reflective practice. Trainees were accepted into the program if they had significant experience in at least two of these areas, with moderate levels of experience in at least one other area. The application also asked trainees to comment on their motivation to be trained as a SEE Learning facilitator and their commitment to promote SEE Learning in their region. Trainees were screened out if their motivations didn't sufficiently align with program goals, for example, if they were simply seeking to add a certification to their resume. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Emory University (IRB # IRB00109277) and consent from the participants was sought before to the beginning of the study.

Study design

This is a mixed-method preliminary feasibility study of the SEE Learning global training-of-trainers program. Data collection includes pre- and post-program surveys, an open-ended mid-program feedback form, and pre- and post-program interviews (Appendix A). A total of N = 166 individuals participated in the study: $n = 63$ (36.4 %) trainees were from Asia (India, Mongolia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, Singapore), $n = 69$ (39.9 %) trainees originated from Europe (Austria, Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, UK plus Jordan and Ukraine), $n = 34$ (19.7 %) trainees were from North/South America (USA, Canada; Brazil, Chile and Colombia). For the interviews, we randomly selected 36 trainees representative of the overall sample based on age, gender, employment sector, experience in contemplative practice, and country/region. Table 1

Regarding trainees' background in reflective/contemplative practices, between 70 % and 85 % of the trainees across all regions said they practiced mindfulness. Around 50–60 % reported engagement in compassion practices or other kinds of self-reflection practices (Fig. 3a).

About teaching experience (see Fig. 3b), 90 % of all the subgroups had teaching experience with either children or adolescents. Over 90 % of the Asian subgroup, and over 50 % of the Europe and Americas groups had experience teaching social-emotional or mindfulness-based programs. 75 % or more of the trainees in each subgroup indicated experience with teaching adults. More than 50 % of trainees in each subgroup had experience with programs such as Cognitively-Based Compassion Training (CBCT), SEE Learning, or Science of Compassion. (Fig. 3c). Finally, regarding experience with SEL and related programs, results showed that the participants had the most exposure to Emotional Intelligence (more than 85 %), followed by Social and Emotional Learning (more than 80 %), Trauma-informed Practices (more than 65 %), and Peace Education (more than 60 %) (see Fig. 3d). In summary, in terms of the qualifications of those who entered the ToT program, more than half the trainees had some contemplative experience or experience in content related to SEE Learning, and the majority had experience in K-12 education and facilitating workshops for children and adults.

The dropout rate in this study was 9.64 % (16 dropouts of the sample of 166). To examine differences between the dropouts and the remaining sample, the Welch test was performed. We found significant differences

Table 1
Sample Characteristics.

	Asia (N = 63) 36.4 %		Europe (N = 690 39.9 %		North/ South America (N = 34) 19.7 %		Total (N = 166)
Variable	*N*	*%*	*N*	*%*	*N*	*%*	*N/ %*
Age Group							
20–30	9	18	2	4.4	3	12.5	14 (11.8 %)
31–40	14	28	10	22.2	10	41.7	34 (28.6 %)
41–50	1	2	8	17.8	8	33.3	17 (14.3 %)
51–60	-	-	4	8.9	1	4.2	5 (4.2 %)
60 +	26	52	21	46.6	2	8.3	49 (41.1 %)
Gender							
Female	52	83.9	49	70	22	64.7	125 (74.4 %)
Male	9	14.5	21	30	12	35.3	42 (25 %)
non-binary	1	1.6	-	-	-	-	1(%)
Current Position							
School Admin	5	8.9	1	1.9	1	3.4	7 (5.1 %)
School support	9	16.1	14	26.4	6	20.7	29 (21 %)
Teacher	10	17.9	14	26.4	7	24.1	31 (22.5 %)
Non-Profit Admin	21	37.5	7	13.2	10	34.5	38 (27.5 %)
Higher Education	10	17.9	15	28.3	5	17.2	30 (21.7 %)
Affiliate	1	1.8	2	3.8	-	-	3 (2.2 %)
Years at Current position							
0–3	17	29.3	8	17.4	13	44.8	38 (28.6 %)
3–5	18	31	11	23.9	7	24.1	36 (27.1 %)
5–10	14	24.1	8	17.4	6	20.7	28 (21.1 %)
10 +	9	15.5	19	41.3	3	10.3	31 (23.2 %)
Level of education							
Doctorate/PhD	7	11.1	10	14.3	1	2.9	18 (10.3 %)
Graduate	40	11.1	31	44.3	22	64.7	93 (53.4 %)
Undergraduate	7	11.1	10	14.3	6	17.6	23 (13.2 %)
High School	-	-	2	2.9	-	-	2 (1.1 %)
Others	2	3.2	1	1.4	-	-	3 (1.7 %)

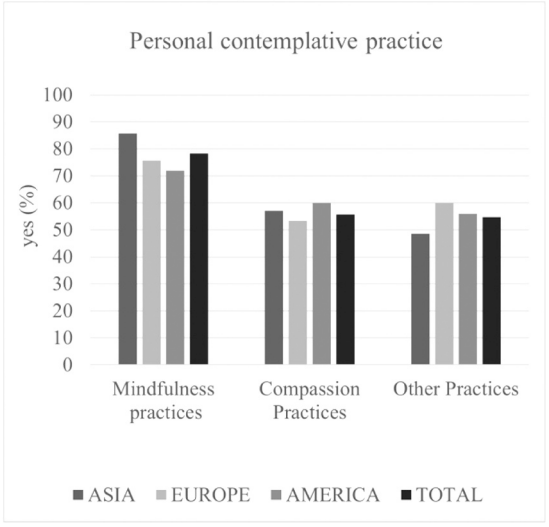


Fig. 3a. Personal Contemplative Practice.

for regional background (11 of the 16 dropouts came from the European subgroup), years of experience in the current job (less experience in the dropout group), and in experience in administering SEE Learning to students (lower self-assessment among the dropouts) ($p < .05$).

Study measures

Pre-post surveys

To answer the three research questions, we developed questionnaires containing both open and closed response formats. In the pre-survey, we

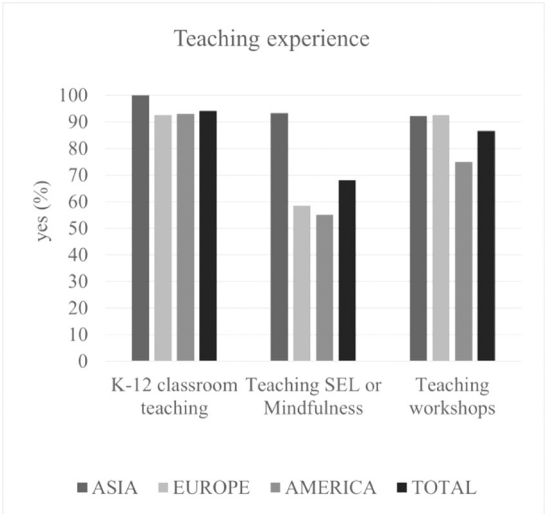


Fig. 3b. Teaching Experience.

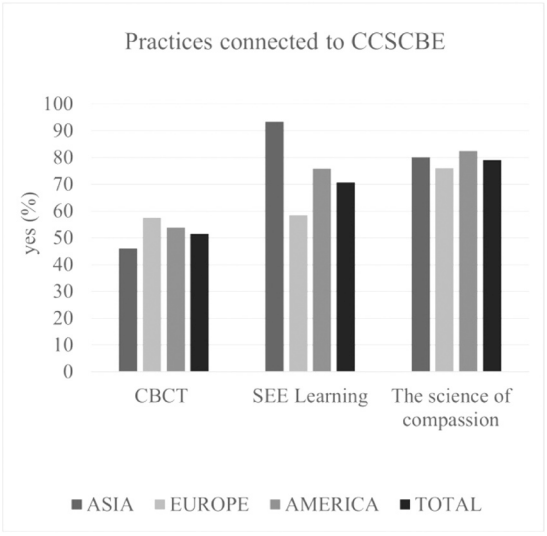


Fig. 3c. Practices Connected to CCSCBE.

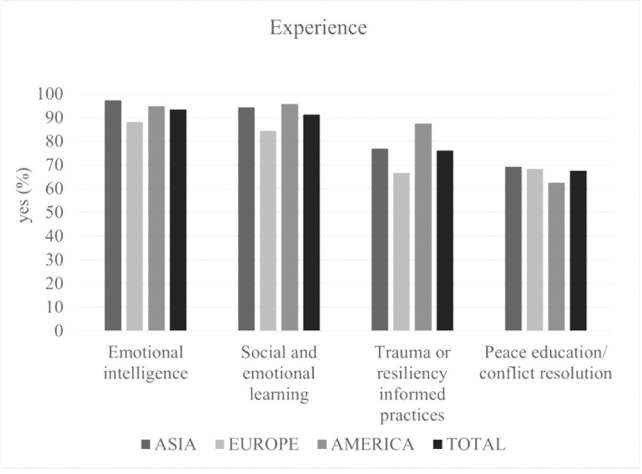


Fig. 3d. Experience with SEL / Related Programs.

asked about demographics such as age, gender, current job, years of work experience, education level, prior teaching experience, and personal practices including contemplative practices. Additionally, we asked about their beliefs regarding SEL and their motivation for joining the training, their goal as a trainer, pedagogical orientation, and knowledge about the key concepts and practices in SEE learning. In the post-survey, we removed the questions that didn't have much variability and added questions about program evaluation, future goals, and what made the small group effective. Results from the midterm survey were used to develop additional questions about small group meetings in the post-survey. All the surveys were collected online using Qualtrics software. (see Appendix A)

Mid-term course feedback

Mid-course, participants were asked to provide feedback on the program through answering a series of open-ended questions. Specifically, we asked participants to anonymously provide feedback about 1) the effectiveness of different instructional components, 2) the clarity of the learning goals and their alignment with other instructional activities, 3) the quality of support and communication provided by course instructors and cohort managers, and 4) any general feedback about the course. (see Appendix A)

Pre-post interviews

The interview questions were aligned with the survey questions but sought to capture participants' voices about their contemplative practice backgrounds, motivation for joining the training, reflections on the ToT process, and the effectiveness of the program in preparing them to train others in implementing SEE Learning. The pre-interviews were completed within the first month of the start of the course, whereas the post-interviews were conducted after completion of the course. The interviews were conducted in English, on Zoom, by the two primary authors and their two research assistants. (see Appendix A)

Analysis

For descriptive analyses and data processing, the IBM SPSS Statistics for Mac/Windows and Excel were used. Descriptive statistics were calculated to characterize trainees' demographic and contemplative practice backgrounds, as well as trainees' perceived effectiveness of features of the training. These data were described separately for the trainees from different regions of the world. Only for the pre-post assessment of knowledge of the SEE Learning content, paired-samples *t*-tests were used, and effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's *d* (.2 and.4 = small, between.5 and.7 = medium and >.8 = large effects). The alpha level for the t-tests was set at .05.

All the interviews were conducted in English except for the European cohort where some of the interviews were conducted in German. The interviews were transcribed verbatim from the recordings and translated where needed and uploaded to MAXQDA for analysis. Initial deductive coding was done by the authors and subsequently, the research assistants went over the coded segment and coded again to ensure inter-rater reliability. The authors met with the research assistant to review their code assignment, resolved any differences, and developed a final codebook that has high interrater reliability.

Results

We begin by presenting results of research question 1 - **What were the qualifications and motivations of those selected into the ToT program?** The qualifications of the participants were described earlier under the under the Study design section. We examined trainees' motivation for joining the program (see Fig. 4). All the trainees across the regional subgroups agreed that they wanted to deepen their knowledge and skills in the field of contemplative science, compassion-based ethics, and SEL. All the subgroups agreed that they wanted to inspire others about the importance of SEE Learning, and the importance of compassion in the educational system. More than 86 % of trainees in all subgroups reported being motivated to provide SEE Learning training in their own regions and in their native language. In contrast, only about 25 % of trainees in each subgroup indicated they were motivated to pursue new career opportunities provided by bringing SEE Learning to their own context.

During interviews, trainees described a variety of motivations for joining the ToT. Fig. 5 shows the 10 different reasons we coded that were provided by interviewees. The most frequently cited motivation was their interest in bringing SEE Learning in education (n = 18). This includes bringing SEE Learning into K-12 classroom, higher education, as well other educational settings such as integrating into the International Baccalaureate program, after school programs, and youth programs such as Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). As one trainee noted:

> *I see that there is a really huge need in this world, on our planet to have such an educational approach, which is addressing to educate the heart and the mind based on compassion and discernment. We are in crisis in*

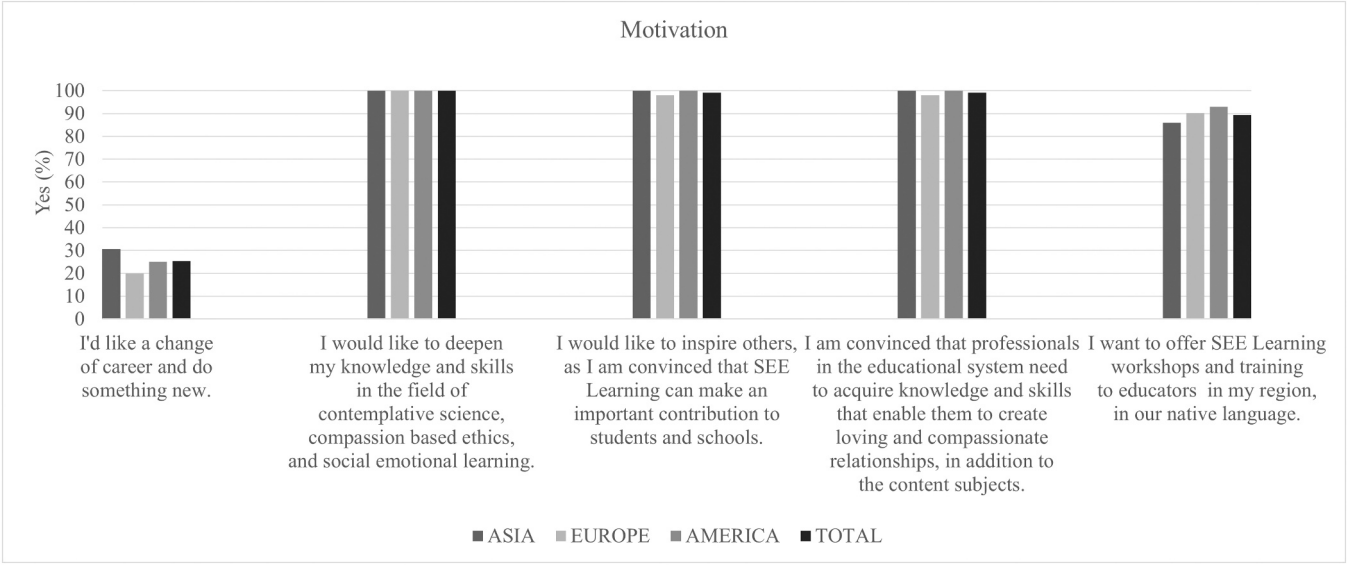


Fig. 4. Motivations for Attending ToT Program - Survey Data.

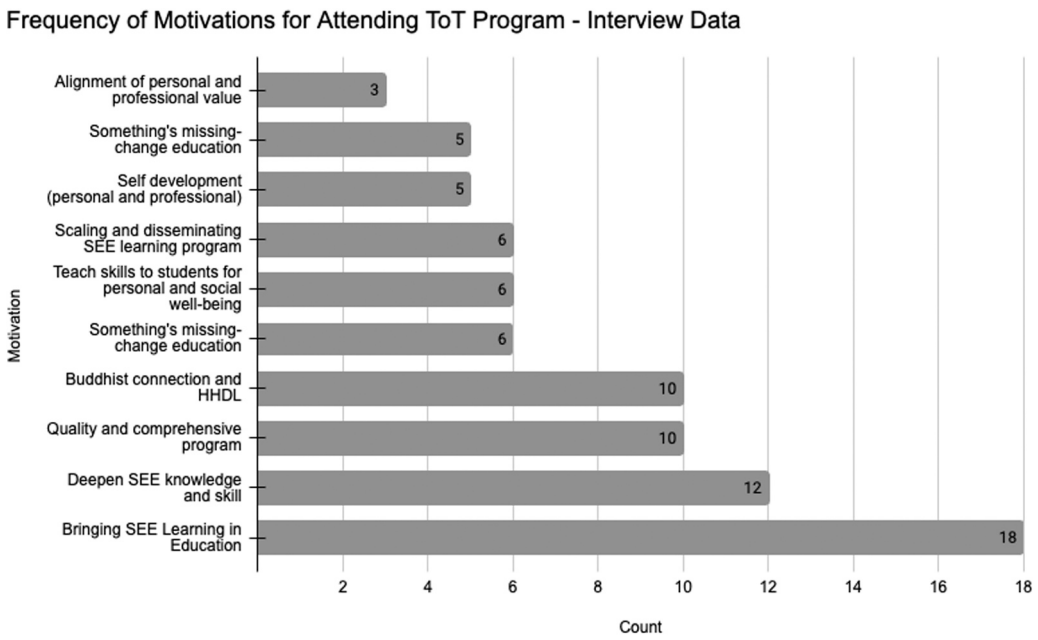


Fig. 5. Frequency of Motivations for Attending ToT Program - Interview Data.

many parts. So there's so much war going on and environmental issues, and there's a need to understand one's own emotions and to really be able to regulate them. I never learned that in school, so I would have wished to have got that opportunity, and with whomever I speak, people are so touched and so motivated and open towards this topic.

Trainee, Germany

The second most frequently cited motivation for joining the ToT was to deepen SEE Learning knowledge and skills (n = 12), consistent with the quantitative findings (Fig. 4). Interviewees expressed a desire to understand the full curriculum scope and sequence, the scientific foundations of the program, and how to embody key skills through personal practice. Two themes were equally common as the third most frequently cited motivations (n = 10 each): the quality and comprehensive nature of the SEE Learning program, and their personal connections to Buddhism or His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

The second research question was: **How did the trainees respond to the program components and which ones did they perceive to be most effective?** In general, results showed that the trainees reacted very positively to the overall training experience. Small group meetings were recognized as a specifically beneficial feature. Results showed that 100 % of trainees from all regions indicated that the small group meetings provided a rich and meaningful space for learning where they felt safe sharing their experiences. More than 97 % of trainees from all regions agreed that small groups allowed them to reflect on and evaluate their learning process, while more than 92 % said the small group provided space to hear different perspectives from group members.

The mid-course evaluation supports this positive experience of the different instructional component of the course. Except for the online discussion forum (58 %) on the digital platform, all other course components were rated as effective by more than 72 % of trainees in all subgroups. Again here, 80 % of the trainees reported that the small group was the most effective instructional method of all (see Fig. 7). The aspects of small groups that trainees described as helping their learning

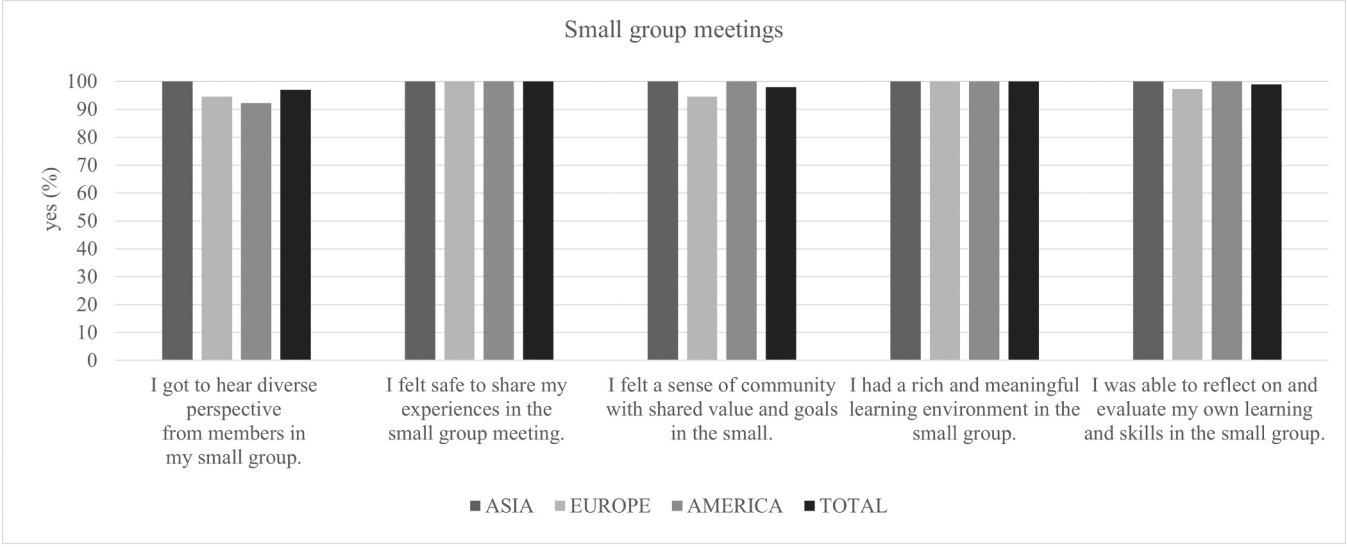


Fig. 6. Evaluations of Small Groups.

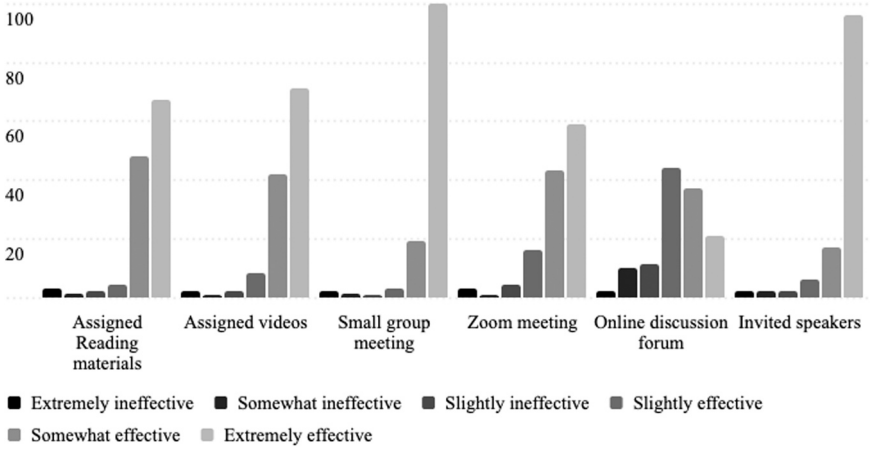


Fig. 7. *Perception of Effectiveness of Program Components.*

were: development of sense of community, structure provided for running the small group, staying motivated to continue the training, and finally, opportunity to communicate in their native language.

As one trainee commented during the midterm course feedback.

> *"The small group meetings have been able to create a safe space between individuals. A feeling of gratitude to SEE Learning and the cohort to have created this opportunity to expand our circles of trust and a community that believes in a purpose. The diverse perspective that each one brings into these meetings is extremely helpful and broadens our existing outlook and approach towards a particular subject or topic."*
>
> *Trainee, Asia*

Research Question 3: What outcomes did trainees receive from the program?

Our third research question was: What outcomes did trainees receive from the program? Results from the post survey showed that a very high percentage of trainees attested that they benefited significantly in terms of increasing their knowledge of SEE Learning concepts, and in terms of maintaining a regular contemplative practice (Fig. 8). In addition, 71–98 % of the trainees agreed that they benefited from the teaching assignments. However, trainees rated the adult teaching assignments 10 %age points more beneficial on average than teaching school children. Trainees (more than 85 %) also reported that the program helped them to maintain a regular practice of SEE Learning reflective practices. Trainees in all subgroups agreed that they gained confidence in teaching SEE Learning to educators.

With regard to knowledge of the SEE learning program, paired-sample *t*-tests including $n = 89$ of the total sample (with two measurement points) comparing pre to post knowledge ($M_{pre} = 3.46$ ($SD = .67$); $M_{post} = 4.38$ ($SD = .61$)) showed a significant increase in their knowledge[2] of key concepts in SEE learning, $t(88) = -13.13$, $p = .000$, with a moderate effect size of $d = .67$.

Finally, 72 % of the 166 trainees were certified as facilitators at the end of the training. In the end, 100 % of trainees who completed the survey indicated that they would continue to integrate SEE Learning practices into their daily lives and would work to support the implementation of SEE Learning in their respective regions through offering workshops. Trainees also indicated they planned to stay in touch with their peers in their region after the program concluded.

[2] The trainees from different regions did not differ significantly in their increase in knowledge ($p > .05$).

Discussion

In this study, we introduced the selection process, conceptual model and theory of change of our newly designed hybrid ToT program for SEE Learning. The ToT was borne out of a need to prepare trainers from disparate geographical locations to deliver SEE Learning educator workshops in their local regions. The main goal of the ToT was to certify trainers who would be highly qualified to deliver SEE Learning workshops, so that SEE Learning could be scaled and sustained globally. A good SEL program does not inevitably lead to positive results, it requires effective implementation of the program on the part of well-qualified and prepared trainers and teachers (Durlak et al., 2011). Based on the results of this feasibility study, we have preliminary information about several factors that may have contributed to the success of the program.

First, as we hypothesized, the required prerequisites and selection of criteria for the first ToT international cohort was very effective in attracting trainees with demonstrated dedication to social-emotional learning and with a regular contemplative practice. The trainees' prior experience in K-12 education, facilitation and teaching, and contemplative and compassion practices also likely contributed to the trainees' strong engagement and motivation throughout the training period. Most of the trainees came from non-profit organizations that work closely in education and thus, trainees' goal to bring SEE Learning into education by integrating it into their current programs was supported by their work environments. The fact that most of the trainees have graduate degrees and are more established in their career may be an additional factor that have allowed them to participate in such an extended training program.

In addition to their experience in education and regular practice, a third of trainees shared prior connections to Buddhist organizations or believed in His Holiness the Dalai Lama's message about the importance of teaching basic human values such as compassion in education (Dalai Lama, 2011). This could partially explain the dedication and personal commitment reflected by the trainees. Therefore, the trainees first-hand experience of the shortcomings of modern school education, their interest and experience with contemplative practice, and their vision to bring a holistic education led to self-selection of candidates who would likely be successful in this program.

The trainees' personal experiences with contemplative practices, that were often deepened during their participation in the program, strengthened their conviction that we can foster learning environments in which everyone can flourish. With this conviction, the trainees were motivated to deepen their understanding of SEE Learning so that they can support educators in their respective regions. Thus, the trainees' past experience in contemplative practices, the need they saw for a compassion-based education in schools, and their strong motivation to deepen their learning made the programmatic structure that we

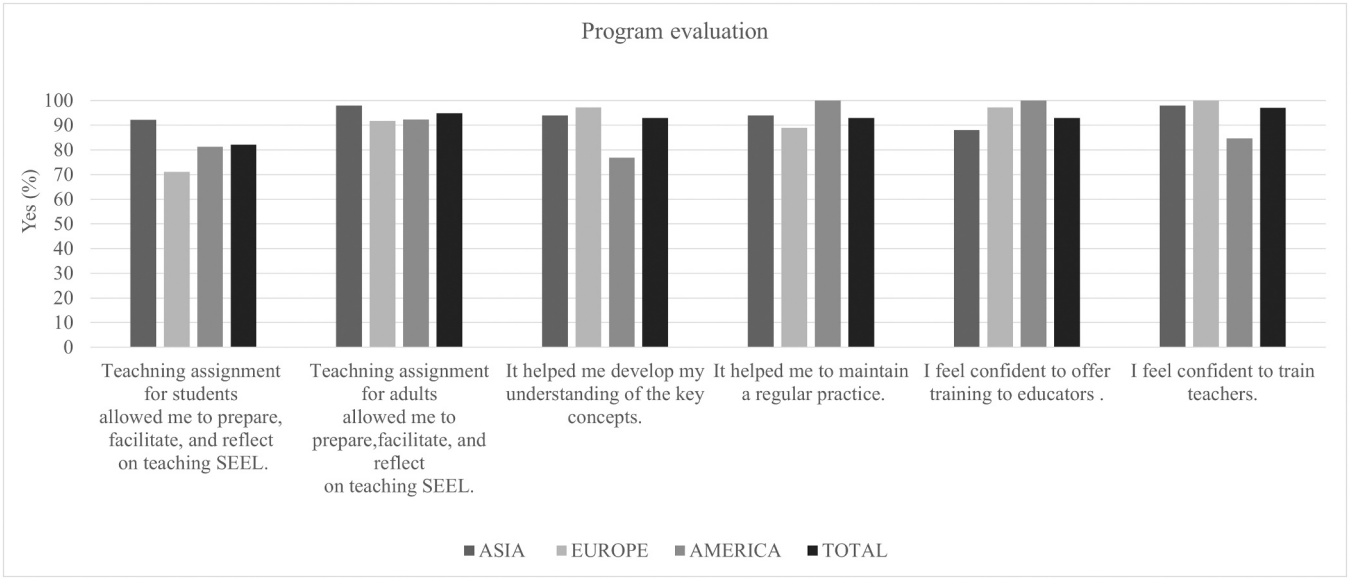


Fig. 8. Program Outcomes.

designed fit synergistically in creating a meaningful learning experience for all trainees.

Results of this study also showed that, overall, the trainees had a positive experience of the 9-month ToT program. The gradual socialization of the trainees beginning with the 3-day in-person workshop, then the large group zoom meetings with instructors, and small group meetings helped create a strong learning community even in an online setting. The most effective instructional activity, as indicated by the trainees, was the small group meetings where they had the opportunity to practice and develop both a deeper understanding and firsthand knowledge of the SEE Learning program and a set of 16 facilitation skills. Trainees mentioned that the small group provided the feeling of safety, connection between members that allowed for risk taking, and minimal judgment from peers. The opportunity to share new insights and vulnerabilities in the small group in their native language, allowed the trainees to provide critical feedback to each other and benefit from different perspectives in the group. The small group structure reflected the pedagogical model of the SEE learning program: creating safe spaces for teaching and learning, fostering critical discussions and self-reflections to deepen one's experience, and practice-based knowledge. The combination of theoretical and evidence-based background information of core concepts such as compassion was coupled with experiential activities and social interactions, leading to critical insights and finally, an embodied understanding. The strong connection between trainees in small groups demonstrated the embodiment of valuing compassion that further reinforced the urge to bring compassion into teaching and learning. The trainees background, the intentional design of the program structure that include emphasis on learning communities and modeling the SEE Learning pedagogy, and the trainee's active participation in the learning activities resulted in a rich learning experience for most of the trainees. The cohort managers which acted as liaisons between the local small groups and the ToT course instructors also supported the participation of the trainees and provided communication avenues for the course instructors which allowed them to remain responsive to trainee needs.

Finally, our results showed that the pedagogical and structural features of the program previously discussed, combined with local support, likely contributed to the successful certification of most trainees. Attrition is expected in most trainee programs that require significant time and effort. It is notable that some trainees dropped out of the program very early on due to personal health challenges, job changes, or lack of time. Still, most of the trainees completed the requirements of the program, even if they chose not to be certified at the end. This sustained engagement over time reflects very highly on the program; especially considering the fact that trainees were universally impacted by the global pandemic during this time. This accomplishment is even more impressive when considering that more than a few trainees were also impacted by other socio-political factors (such as government coups, natural disasters, and even war) that, at times, posed great challenges to their personal well-being.

Both the survey and interview data showed that a clear majority of trainees reported an increase in proficiency. The pre and post survey questions that asked trainees about SEE Learning content provided insights into how their knowledge and confidence of the subject matter was influenced by the program. Data on trainees' level of knowledge regarding secular ethics, compassion, resiliency, attention, emotion, and e.g. systems thinking indicates a statistically significant increase. Most of the trainees reported that the program benefitted them in the development of their personal practices, and implementing SEE Learning values in their personal and professional lives. All these factors likely contribute to the fact that trainees felt increasingly confident to deliver SEE Learning workshops to other educators in their regions because of the ToT course. The SEE Learning framework is both robust, comprehensive and requires prolonged engagement with its content and practices to gain insight and embody its qualities such as a compassionate and caring attitude towards oneself and others. Although the trainees entering the program already had rich experience in contemplative practices, they nevertheless seemed to benefit from further self-discovery, peer learning, and experiential understanding.

Overall, we propose that the intentional selection of trainees, experiential design of program structure based on SEE Learning pedagogy, along with a supportive learning community, contributed to trainees' self-reported deeper understanding of the SEE Learning program, and their confidence in using facilitation skills to train others.

Limitations

This first attempt at studying the feasibility of a global ToT program for SEE Learning does not come without limitations. Although trainees are represented by over 21 countries, the initial selection of trainees for this program was limited to individuals with many years of contemplative experience or those who are inclined to be followers of His Holiness the Dalai Lama's universal message to integrate compassion and ethics into education. With these specific aspects, this cohort can by no

means be considered representative of educators around the globe. On the contrary, it remains to be seen to what extent motivation and inner connection to the overarching goals of SEE Learning could change or influence the satisfaction and effectiveness of such a training. When considering educators with no background in SEL or contemplative practice, the current model may not provide a clear pathway for preparation to those individuals.

In addition, this study was designed to investigate the ToT program design and how trainees experienced the program during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the uncertain and unclear situation worldwide, the start of the virtual training was delayed. Once the virtual program began, it seemed that trainees found it particularly supportive as it engaged them in compassion-focused (SEL) content during a period of global uncertainty. We have not examined what effects both the delay and the pandemic itself may have had on our training including the effect of just the social support system that program generated regardless the content of the training, and how a live version of the training in a post-pandemic world may operate (Kola, 2020, Kumar et al., 2020).

Considering that the ToT involved such a culturally diverse group of trainees, cultural and language differences are likely to have impacted the study in ways that are difficult to quantify. Although it was possible to switch to the respective language during small group work, fluency in English was a prerequisite for overall participation in order to be able to take part in the monthly large group meetings and also to use the online feedback formats. This required translation work on the part of each individual participant and may have led to limitations. Most of the required course components, and most of the research components such as surveys and interviews were conducted in English, possibly compromising the ability of some trainees to fully express themselves and demonstrate their expertise in the online discussions, assignments, or interview responses. Cohort managers played a crucial role in attending meetings with the course instructors during which issues of language barriers and translation were discussed and addressed. Whenever possible, trainees' local languages were welcomed and used during local small group meetings where trainees had opportunities to discuss the course material, practice facilitation skills, and provide peer feedback. Since this first ToT, select trainees have received additional training and support so that they can deliver the ToT to trainees locally in their first language.

A final limitation of this study is the way we tried to measure the learning, internalization, and embodiment of compassion and compassion-based ethics. Our survey and the elements within it, such as increased knowledge, fall far short of measuring embodiment of SEE Learning values. In future studies, multi-method approaches should possibly be used to do more adequate justice to the measurement of such complex constructs (Davidson & Kaszniak, 2015; Mascaro et al., 2020).

Conclusion

For an effective global scaling of any SEL program, understanding the key components of successful implementation of a training-of-trainers program is essential. From this feasibility study, we recommend the following key components as critical for consideration for a hybrid ToT program. Firstly, a rigorous selection procedure of candidates who: a) engage in regular personal reflection or contemplative practices such as mindfulness; b) possess extensive teaching experience in the field of SEL, emotional intelligence, trauma and resiliency informed practices, and conflict resolution; c) demonstrate strong conviction in the importance of SEL programming in schools; d) exhibit a growth mindset, continually developing their own competencies across SEL domains. Secondly, the program should have a well-developed course structure with multiple opportunities for trainee participation that reflects the theory and pedagogy of the program and finally, the creation of a structured socialization experience for trainees from the beginning to allow for deeper engagement with the course content in local dialects and to engender sustained motivation is essential for successful completion of the course. Although these components might seem common knowledge for running any training program, with this study we hope to contribute to the limited literature on how to successfully train qualified trainers of SEL programs across multiple countries in a hybrid setting.

Many variables are likely to influence the success of ToT programs in SEL. Such programs, though commonly used for scaling SEL programs, have rarely been studied and few conceptual models have been proposed for investigation. We call for more discussion around ToT models, and their impact on the implementation of SEL programs, globally and nationally. We propose that program developers pay close attention to the ways in which the ToT program could integrate SEL practices and foster the ability of trainers to model the skills they will bring to educators. Thus, to study how to train qualified trainers, longitudinal studies are recommended assessing the quality of training provided by the trainers and understanding support and continuing education needs of the trainers. One way to do this would be to assess the quality and fidelity of implementation of the SEE Learning program in the classroom by teachers trained by different trainers - a future step in this line of research.

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Impact Statement

There is growing interest in implementing social-emotional learning (SEL) programs globally. This requires the development and scaling of training-of-trainers (ToT) programs to effectively prepare individuals to train local educators around the globe to deliver SEL programs in their home cultures and languages. These trainers are instrumental in the quality implementation of SEL programs as they must skillfully train educators who will, in turn, implement SEL in their respective classrooms and schools. However, little attention has been given to SEL trainers. Few conceptual models exist and research on such ToT programs is scarce. This study presents one hybrid ToT model (combining in-person and online instruction) and highlights key ideas around (a) how to select teacher trainers who are most likely to succeed; (b) the importance of creating supportive learning communities using small groups and the opportunity to interact in local languages; c) the importance of including training activities that integrate learning content, facilitation (training) skills, and the development of reflective and personal practices that support trainees in modeling the competencies they seek to teach others.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Christa Tinari: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Conceptualization. **Roeser Robert W:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Formal analysis. **Tenzin Sonam:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Corina Aguilar-Raab:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at doi:10.1016/j.sel.2025.100164.

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