

**Georgia State University**  
**ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University**

---

Educational Policy Studies Dissertations

Department of Educational Policy Studies

---

5-17-2019

# Empty Seats at Circle Time: A Phenomenological Perspective of Social-Emotional Learning in Preschool

Alicia C. Burford  
*Georgia State University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/eps\\_diss](https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/eps_diss)

---

## Recommended Citation

Burford, Alicia C., "Empty Seats at Circle Time: A Phenomenological Perspective of Social-Emotional Learning in Preschool." Dissertation, Georgia State University, 2019.  
[https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/eps\\_diss/202](https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/eps_diss/202)

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Educational Policy Studies at ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Educational Policy Studies Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gsu.edu).

## ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, EMPTY SEATS AT CIRCLE TIME: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN PRESCHOOL, by ALICIA C. BURFORD, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Education, in the College of Education & Human Development, Georgia State University.

The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student's Department Chairperson, as representatives of the faculty, certify that this dissertation has met all standards of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty.

---

Sheryl Cowart-Moss, Ph.D.  
Committee Chair

---

Susan Ogletree, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

---

DaShaunda Patterson, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

---

Nick J. Sauers, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

---

Date

---

William Curlette, Ph.D.  
Chairperson, Department of Educational Policy Studies

---

Paul A. Alberto, Ph.D.  
Dean, College of Education & Human Development

## **AUTHOR'S STATEMENT**

By presenting this dissertation as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the advanced degree from Georgia State University, I agree that the library of Georgia State University shall make it available for inspection and circulation in accordance with its regulations governing materials of this type. I agree that permission to quote, to copy from, or to publish this dissertation may be granted by the professor under whose direction it was written, by the College of Education and Human Development's Director of Graduate Studies, or by me. Such quoting, copying, or publishing must be solely for scholarly purposes and will not involve potential financial gain. It is understood that any copying from or publication of this dissertation which involves potential financial gain will not be allowed without my written permission.

---

Alicia Couchigian Burford

## **NOTICE TO BORROWERS**

All dissertations deposited in the Georgia State University library must be used in accordance with the stipulations prescribed by the author in the preceding statement. The author of this dissertation is:

Alicia Couchigian Burford  
3105 Madison Drive  
Monroe, GA 30655

The director of this dissertation is:

Sheryl Cowart Moss, Ph.D.  
Department of Educational Policy Studies  
College of Education and Human Development  
Georgia State University  
Atlanta, GA 30303

## CURRICULUM VITAE

Alicia Couchigian Burford

ADDRESS: 3105 Madison Drive  
Monroe, GA 30655

### EDUCATION:

Doctor of Education	2019	Georgia State University Educational Policy Studies
Specialist Degree	2009	Lincoln Memorial University Educational Leadership
Master's Degree	2007	University of North Georgia Special Education
Bachelor's Degree	2003	University of North Georgia Criminal Justice

### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

2014–Present	Special Education Coordinator Walton County Public Schools, GA
2011–2014	Assistant Principal Youth Middle School, GA
2008–2011	Special Education Specialist Loganville Middle School, GA
2008–2003	Special Education Teacher Loganville Middle School, GA

### PROFESSIONAL SOCIETIES AND ORGANIZATIONS

2011–Present	Georgia Council of Administrators of Special Education
2010–Present	Georgia Association of Educational Leaders

EMPTY SEATS AT CIRCLE TIME: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF  
SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN PRESCHOOL

by

ALICIA COUCHIGIAN BURFORD

Under the Direction of Sheryl Cowart-Moss, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

The disparate rate of young children who are removed from early learning programs due to behavioral concerns was the concern addressed by this study. Through the tenets of hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher sought what is known and not yet known about school leaders' experiences with early childhood expulsions and suspensions, with a particular focus on their perceptions of social-emotional learning as an intervention means for preschool children. Hermeneutics is a research methodology aimed at producing rich, textual descriptions of individuals' experiences to connect with the experiences of others in a collective sense. Qualitative data were collected from in-depth personal interviews and ongoing reflective notes. The analytical methods were guided by the aim of uncovering emerging themes to obtain

meaning making from the participants regarding their lived experience. The identified themes answered the research questions, giving voice to school leaders experiencing the phenomenon. The findings speak to the need for specialized training for schools to address the behavioral and developmental needs of young children, policy and funding support for social-emotional learning in K-12 education, and efforts to bridge the potential research-to-practice gap.

INDEX WORDS: Social-Emotional Learning, Preschool, Special Education, Phenomenology, Hermeneutics

EMPTY SEATS AT CIRCLE TIME: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF  
SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN PRESCHOOL

by

ALICIA COUCHIGIAN BURFORD

A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the

Degree of

Doctor of Education

in

Educational Leadership

in

Educational Policy Studies

in

the College of Education and Human Development

Georgia State University

Atlanta, GA

2019



Copyright by  
Alicia C. Burford  
2019

## **DEDICATION**

For Bobby...

You stood beside me through my tears, frustration, laughter, and learning - from my first degree to my last - I will forever love you.

For Brennan and Anderlyn...

This is for all of the nights you watched your mom perennially hunched over a laptop, for all of the games I had to miss, and most of all, for always inspiring me to keep going when I thought I couldn't. I hope that I have provided you with a model of determination, dedication, and drive to achieve your own goals in life. I love you to the moon and back. Now, let's celebrate because mom is finally done!

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This three year journey was one filled with many back roads, pit stops, and unexpected detours. I would like to acknowledge my many passengers who made this journey possible.

To my dissertation chair, Dr. Sheryl Cowart Moss, and committee members, Dr. Susan Ogletree, Dr. DaShaunda Patterson, and Dr. Nick Sauers, thank you for your leadership and direction during this process. I am so honored to have completed this journey with each of you in my corner.

To my family, thank you for being my number one fans. When I would disappear into the depths of research, thank you for checking on me to be sure I was eating, sleeping, and taking care of myself through the most challenging points of this journey. I love you all.

To my Cohort V family, of all the things I'm grateful for having gained through this experience, it is the deep, life-enriching friendships that I cherish the most. I lucked out being a part of 'The Whole Handful.'

To my tribe, no matter how bumpy the road became you were always there to remind me that the journey would be worth it in the end. Thank you for being my biggest support system; I could not have done this without you. I can't wait to see where the road takes us next, hand in hand, moving forward together. I am forever grateful for each of you.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	iv
1 SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN PRESCHOOL: THE PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL LEADERS FROM THEORY INTO PRACTICE .....	1
Background of the Study: Researcher-Leader Perspective.....	4
Guiding Questions .....	8
Definitions of Terms .....	9
Review of the Literature .....	10
Chapter Summary .....	43
References.....	44
2 THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PRINCIPALS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN PRESCHOOL.....	63
The Significance of the Study.....	65
Methodology.....	69
Research Study Design .....	77
Research Methods.....	82
Data Collection .....	89
Data Analysis .....	97
Ethical Considerations .....	106
Limitations .....	110
Findings.....	111
Future Considerations .....	130
Conclusion .....	131
References.....	135
APPENDICES.....	142

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Hermeneutic phenomenological framework .....	79
Figure 2. The basic form of the hermeneutic circle .....	105
Figure 3. Emergent themes .....	113

## **1 SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN PRESCHOOL: THE PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL LEADERS FROM THEORY INTO PRACTICE**

Early learning is critical to the development of young children during the beginning stages of their lives. These early stages should include learning experiences that balance cognitive, physical, and social-emotional activities and skills (Gilliam, 2005; Weiland, 2016; Yoshikawa, Weiland, & Brooks-Gunn, 2016). Early formative developmental experiences from birth to age 5 support and shape young learners' lives (Brown & Pickard, 2014). A child's social environment is essential during the early stages of development (Frabutt & Waldron, 2013). As children enter the phase of foundational learning, experiences should include preacademic skills as well as emotional and social skills. As children are receiving foundational skills, parents and educators need to understand how best to prepare early learners for kindergarten readiness (Frabutt & Waldron, 2013).

Although preschool has not typically been the target of academic rigor, the expectations set forth by state and federal policy initiatives have increased steadily (McCurdy et al., 2016). Educational policy changes have required that teachers spend less time building relationships with students due to an increased singular focus on academic content and high-stakes assessment (Brown & Pickard, 2014). Therefore, school readiness continues to be a major objective in the field of education as pressures to increase student achievement rise and students are expected to learn and do more, year after year (Mashburn & Henry, 2005). With the current focus on high academic achievement, there is an imbalance in student education as the development of social-emotional skills necessary for success, not only in school but also in life, is neglected (Elias & Mocerri, 2012).

When the demands of learning do not match a child's self-regulation, cognitive ability, or internal motivation, behavior concerns may surface (Fantuzzo, Bulotsky-Shearer, Fusco, & McWayne, 2005). Educators, researchers, and policymakers are cognizant of the increasing number of children beginning school without the social, emotional, and behavioral skills necessary for long-term school success (Hemmeter, Ostrosky, Artman, & Kinder, 2008; McCurdy et al., 2016). According to McGill-Franzen (2006), each child brings to kindergarten a varying degree of knowledge about reading, math, and writing. These discrepancies often present challenges for teachers because, despite what knowledge children have on the first day of school, the present goal of kindergarten teachers is to deliver multiple aspects of literacy, including a strong notion of print awareness, a deep knowledge of letters and sounds, a profound sense of phonemic awareness skills, and a solid base knowledge of all that it takes to become an emergent and fluent writer (McGill-Franzen, 2006). Similarly, the expectations of kindergarten students in mathematics are challenging (Nutbrown, 2006). Just a few of the math skills that children are required to master in kindergarten are effortless counting, matching sets and numbers, seeking and creating patterns, identifying and working with shapes, understanding space and measurement, and understanding simple addition and subtraction concepts (McGill-Franzen, 2006). These benchmarks are a far cry from the previous expectations of kindergarten students; therefore, children who enter kindergarten with a deficit in these areas are seemingly already behind in their academic development (Fuller, 2008).

Aside from these rising academic expectations, perhaps the most controversial area for early childhood educators is determining which social and emotional behaviors are deemed appropriate and necessary to function in a school setting (Marotz & Allen, 2016). Kindergarten students today are expected to be able to manage their emotions and self-regulate their behaviors

by taking turns, controlling their impulses, following multistep directions, and striving to please peers and adults (Marotz & Allen, 2016). In addition, Riley, San Juan, Klinkner, and Ramminger (2008) emphasized the importance of being able to develop proper peer relationships, stating, “The quality of peer relationships in early childhood predicts later success in intellectual growth, self-esteem, mental health, and school performance” (pp. 35-36). These social-emotional behaviors can be particularly challenging for young children to demonstrate daily; however, developing these productive behaviors will make them socially and emotionally healthy and stronger students in the future (Bruce & Cairone, 2011).

According to Commodari (2013), early childhood programs should focus on reputable social and behavioral skills to assist with school readiness. Demonstrated proficiencies in these developmental domains in kindergarten are strong indicators of school success (Commodari, 2013; Riley et al., 2008). Whereas some children enter school ready to learn, many do not. These children tend to struggle academically and demonstrate challenging or concerning behavior. Often these struggles continue through their entire school careers (Bruce & Cairone, 2011).

At-risk children who have the opportunity to attend early learning programs are more likely to be pushed out through exclusionary practices such as suspension and expulsion (Gilliam, 2005). This is particularly true for African American boys, children with disabilities, and children living in poverty (Gilliam, 2005; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). This push-out phenomenon has become an increasing concern in the field of education. In 2005, the first national study to examine this phenomenon found that exclusionary discipline practices were 3 times higher in early childhood settings than in K-12 settings (Gilliam, 2005; Gilliam, Maupin, & Reyes, 2016). Current findings from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2016) indicated the disparities in suspensions and expulsions for at-risk groups



of children are perhaps even more alarming than previously considered, with data supporting they are pushed out of school at disproportionate rates. Furthermore, elementary school teachers have reported challenging behavior as the single greatest challenge they face daily in the classroom (McCurdy et al., 2016).

Helping children to learn and maintain the necessary skills for school success sounds ambitious, but it is, and always has been, fundamental to the success of the education system (Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan, 2013). Helping children learn is the reason that great teachers can change lives, helping their students discover hidden gifts, talents, and inner purpose. Everyone in education shares an amazing calling: to foster in children the knowledge, skills, and character that help them build better lives. This calling is an honor, not an elective. Because all facets of education involve social, emotional, and academic learning, teachers have but two choices: ignore what is needed in schools and accept disappointing results or address these needs for students, intentionally and purposefully.

### **Background of the Study: Researcher-Leader Perspective**

Before examining the existing literature and guiding questions selected for this study, I found it imperative to highlight the antecedents that sparked my interest in this research phenomenon, providing insight into my personal perspective through which the research unfolded. I was not only the research designer, but also the primary research instrument; therefore, it seems especially important to account for how my own conventions, experiences, and beliefs have influenced the research questions and study design.

Research is inextricably connected to self, derived from personal interest, experience, and passion (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010). Not surprisingly, then, this examination is affixed in my professional experiences, with my personal hopes and aspirations embedded within

the purpose of the study. The following discussion offers insight into the sociocultural perspective I bring to this research, an angle formed through my personal and professional experiences and strongly influenced by opportunities in my career and life.

My perspective in this study is unique. My experiences include being a student, parent, teacher, school administrator, and most recently a special education coordinator, all within the same school system. As an educational leader, I work in the community that raised me, where I have chosen to raise my own children. I see my staff members at the grocery store and sit next to the parents of my students at local restaurants. My former teachers sit on the School Board and are principals in the buildings where I work each day. It is a small, tight-knit community, and my connections to this community are wrapped up in everything I do.

When I transitioned from a middle school administrator to a district-level elementary coordinator role, I noticed a significant need with our most at-risk students. Part of my new role was to work with our special-needs preschool program. The youngest learners were being identified as having significant developmental and behavioral deficits before they walked in the school doors. The beginning years of school are momentous in a child's life and are often referred to as the biggest challenges, yet the most important transition, that young children face (Dockett & Perry, 2015). In reflecting upon my experiences in public school, I realized a chasm had developed in the field of education, and I was watching, from a front row seat, as it invaded the community I love. Why were students increasingly coming unprepared for school? Why did teachers seem less prepared to address the social-emotional and behavioral needs of their students? Was increased academic rigor and expectations the cause of concern? Whereas I have always had the opportunity to develop meaningful relationships with my students and staff, indirectly leading to high academic achievement, policies and procedures chasing test scores

now dictate that teachers spend less time building meaningful relationships and focus exclusively on academic rigor and content.

As a teacher turned school administrator, I watched many of my former colleagues look at early retirement or leave teaching after minimal years in the profession. Each mourned the societal changes that make teaching today seem impossible. Yes, it *is* harder to teach today. Kids have changed. Parents have changed. Society has changed. And that's when I got it. These were great teachers. These were experienced teachers. These were dedicated teachers. These were teachers just like me. If they could not teach anymore, something was wrong. I assumed that the fault lay in society, not in our schools. There is some truth to that assumption, of course. Every day more children than ever arrive lacking the basic care, basic skills, or basic love needed to learn. This became my personal pursuit. This disconnect was becoming a phenomenon across the nation (Gilliam, 2005), and I recognized it within my community. Like most educators, I would like to think of myself as having super powers, but any change starts small. I pursued answers to my thoughts and questions and where else to get these answers, to the school community itself.

Teaching—anywhere—*is* just harder today. Educating students with many deficits and needs often may seem impossible. Yet we as educators cannot throw up our hands in defeat because we are no longer greeted each morning by eager students ready to learn. Schools have to change too. We cannot fix society, but maybe—just maybe—we can improve society by starting with our schools.

My research led me to the concepts of emotional intelligence and social-emotional learning and their place, or lack, alongside school readiness (Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2003; Goleman, 1995; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2008).

Mayer et al. (2008) devised a four-branch model and have defined emotional intelligence this way:

These branches include the abilities to perceive emotions in oneself and others accurately, use emotions to facilitate thinking, understand emotions, emotional language, and the signals conveyed by emotions, and manage emotions so as to attain specific goals". (p. 459)

The research also introduced literature supporting the position of educating the whole child, a movement known as social-emotional learning (CASEL, 2003). Social-emotional learning is a student's "ability to recognize and manage emotions, develop caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging situations constructively" (CASEL, 2013, p. 6). A large body of research has shown that social-emotional learning approaches, teaching self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, are associated with students' long-term academic and career success. Yet, social and emotional development often has been called the "missing piece" of today's education system. Social-emotional learning interventions can be powerful components of positive school change. Studies have identified benefits ranging from improved classroom behavior, increased reading and math achievement, higher graduation rates, and increased ability to handle stress.

The promotion of social-emotional learning is not an educational fad but the foundation of education. Teaching students social-emotional skills is not a distraction from the "real work" of math and reading but rather allows real learning to occur. Social-emotional learning is not another reason for political polarization; it summons a traditional emphasis on the character of children with a historical emphasis on the art of teaching to develop the social and emotional

needs of students, especially those who have experienced the greatest challenges (CASEL, 2013).

From an insider's vantage point, I chronicle the experiences of school leaders who work with preschool students. The experiences of the selected principals, assistant principals, and coordinators, along with the interpretations that I derived as the researcher, strengthen the literature and research concerning challenging behaviors with preschool students and exclusionary discipline practices. Furthermore, this study was meant to provide insight into the practice of using a social-emotional learning curriculum with preschool students as a behavioral intervention.

### **Guiding Questions**

The purpose of this study, firmly oriented in a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, was to describe, analyze and interpret school leaders' accounts and perceptions of preschool students' challenging behaviors. More specifically, through recorded in-depth interviews, the research presented school leader perceptions as they explore the implementation of a social-emotional learning curriculum for preschool students as a behavior intervention measure. The study was designed to find both the distinct topics and common themes within the experiences of school leaders in the selected school district. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the perceptions and accounts of school leaders regarding preschool behaviors that lead to exclusionary discipline measures?
2. What are the perceptions and accounts of school leaders regarding the implementation of a social-emotional learning curriculum for preschool students as a behavior intervention measure?

## Definitions of Terms

**Challenging behavior.** B. Smith and Fox (2003) defined challenging behavior as a “repeated pattern of behavior, or perception of behavior, that interferes with or is at risk of interfering with optimal learning or engagement in prosocial interactions with peers and adults” (p. 7).

**Early childhood education.** Any type of public or private program focused on educating young children in the years prior to entering kindergarten is early childhood education. This term can be used interchangeably with *early learning programs* (Morgan, 2011).

**Early intervention.** This is the process and program, using guidelines from the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004), through which children ages 3–5 and at risk for behavior problems receive screening, referral, early identification, eligibility determination, and provision of treatment and services. Powell, Fixsen, Dunlap, Smith, and Fox (2007) defined early intervention as a system of programs and policies (federal, state, and local level) that positively impact a child’s social-emotional development and behavior.

**Head Start.** Head Start is an early education program provided by government agencies to assist children under 5 years old in learning and developing skills necessary for success upon public school entrance (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018).

**Preschool classroom.** For the purpose of this study, a preschool classroom refers to a classroom designed for children aged 3–5 years.

**School readiness.** The first of the National Education Goals states, “All children will start school ready to learn” (National Education Goals Panel [NEGP], 1998). Georgia’s Department of Early Care and Learning (as cited in Early et al., 2018) described school readiness within the context of families, communities, and the services they provide. School readiness is

defined within the context of schools and their readiness for children (Early et al., 2018).

Children are ready to learn when

- possible health barriers that block learning have been detected;
- suspected physical or mental disabilities have been addressed;
- enthusiasm, curiosity, and persistence toward learning are demonstrated;
- feelings of both self and others are recognized;
- social and interpersonal skills are emerging;
- communication with others is effective;
- early literacy skills are evident; and
- a general knowledge about the world, things, places, events, and people has been acquired (Early et al., 2018).

**Social-emotional development.** This term refers to the behavior and emotion based on a child's temperament and guided development of those behaviors and emotions at different ages to enable a child's positive progression (CASEL 2003, 2013).

**Social-emotional learning.** CASEL (2003, 2013) defined social-emotional learning as the process for helping children develop the capacity to recognize and manage emotions, problem solve effectively, and establish positive relationships with others.

### **Review of the Literature**

Educators and policymakers alike have suggested that preschool students are not ready to start school, not necessarily due to academic delays, but due to social and behavioral deficits (Bridgeland et al., 2013; Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], 2015; Gilliam, 2005; Jones & Kahn, 2017). The existing literature on early learning and preschool studies has suggested that often these deficits manifest into behaviors that lead to poor social development, harsh

disciplinary measures, and lowered school achievement (Bridgeland et al., 2013; Gilliam, 2005). For years, educational researchers have studied early learning programs in an attempt to define the academic and behavioral skills necessary for students to experience success in school (Chaudry, Morrissey, Weiland, & Yoshikawa, 2017; Weiland, 2016; Yoshikawa et al., 2016; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). Quality early learning programs are the basis of the significant fundamental reforms for early childhood education, as such programs have been shown to accurately predict a student's future achievements (Duncan & Magnuson, 2013; Weiland & Yoshikawa, 2013). For example, the ESSA (2015) provided an opportunity for states and local education agencies to rethink local goals and policies in place for public education. Under the direction of the revised policy, educational leaders have flexibility to define student success and to design their own systems to ensure educational equity (ESSA, 2015). This major paradigm shift sanctions policymakers to improve the strategies that take into account all aspects of children's learning and development, including social-emotional skills, that are instrumental for success in school and in life (ESSA, 2015).

The literature review presented is intended to support the guiding questions and appropriately frame this study by examining the theories behind preschool education and presenting a historical timeline of early learning. Further, the literature addresses social-emotional development of young children through exploration of high-quality preschool programs, challenging behaviors in young children, and the impact of social-emotional learning on school readiness.

### **History of Early Childhood Education**

To evaluate the true impact of early intervention programs, a historical background of early childhood education is required. The discussion that follows depicts the evolution of what



is known as preschool. Understanding the history of early learning aids educators in comprehending current programs and practices, as well as in planning adequately for future early learning programs. Effective philosophies, policies, and practices in early childhood education continue to be debated among educators, researchers, and policymakers (K. Miller, 2015; Palla, 2018; Sahin, Sak, & Tuncer, 2013; Skouteris, Watson, & Lum, 2012).

In past centuries, early childhood programs and pedagogy have experienced shifts that can be linked back to the beliefs of early researchers and theorists (Follari, 2015). For the purpose of this study, the historical and theoretical background will focus on the concept of “education for all children.” Fostered by researchers like Comenius, Montessori, and Pestalozzi (as cited in Follari, 2015), education for all remains at the forefront of early childhood programming. This equity-based education initiative suggests that despite social status or educability, all children have the fundamental right to education. The principles and teachings of these researchers have influenced modern preschool programs and can be observed around the world.

In the 17th century, John Amos Comenius (1592–1670) acknowledged that improving education for children would improve society as a whole (Follari, 2015; Giardiello, 2013). His “education for all” philosophy promoted educating children from any social class equally, to battle the detrimental results of living in poverty. Not only a theorist, Comenius produced some of the earliest known teaching materials aimed for young children (Giardiello, 2013). Inspired by such philosophies, many decades later Head Start was formed to address underprivileged children and provide an early education program that could put them on a level equal to their peers from nondisadvantaged backgrounds (Barnett et al., 2017; Follari, 2015; Giardiello, 2013).

Maria Montessori made noteworthy influences in early childhood education with her successful work in pediatric analysis (Giardiello, 2013). She espoused the principle, “First the education of the senses, then the education of the intellect” (Giardiello, 2013, p. 89).

Montessori’s view on student-led learning through play correlates to today’s idea of universal education for children from all backgrounds (Follari, 2015; Giardiello, 2013). Her contributions to early childhood education were many; however, one key imprint not only remains visual within education today, but also aligns beautifully within my study’s mission and vision.

Montessori spent a significant portion of her career shedding light on the teaching and learning of children with developmental and cognitive disabilities (Giardiello, 2013). Even though dialogue about student disabilities did not expand substantively until the 1960s, during the late 19th century Montessori acknowledged the value of focusing on children with special needs (Giardiello, 2013).

Understanding the history behind early childhood education is imperative to appreciate the influence of current programs and practices today. The connections made between programs designed for preschool and kindergarten largely have come from the education reform movement of the late 20th century (Kagan & Kauerz, 2012). In addition to school leaders and educators, many federal, state, and local lawmakers recognize the need for quality early childhood education programs (White House, 2014).

One of the earliest focuses on early learning developed from President Lyndon B. Johnson’s fight against poverty. The President chose classrooms as the setting where the most benefit from education could be realized by the country’s most vulnerable citizens—children (Gormley, Phillips, Adelstein, & Shaw, 2010). President Johnson recognized an urgency for

early education, and in a speech publicizing the establishment of Head Start on May 18, 1965, stated,

Five and six-year-old children are inheritors of poverty's curse and not its creators. Unless we act, these children will pass it on to the next generation, like a family birthmark. . . . This is one of the constructive programs that this nation has ever undertaken. (Johnson, 1965, para. 9)

The initial philosophy behind ending the war on poverty was influenced by research about the effects of poverty and its direct impact on education (Follari, 2015; Giardiello, 2013). Head Start was the first national program initiative designed to close the educational gap for low-income children (White House, 2002).

The Economic Opportunity Act provided a bridge to the nation's first federally funded early learning program, Head Start (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018b). Head Start is a national program "that promotes school readiness of young children from low-income families through agencies in their local community" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018a, para. 1). This was a monumental time in educational history because Head Start was the first program to provide comprehensive programming for disadvantaged preschool students (Kagan & Kauerz, 2012).

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975), Public Law 94-142, was authorized November 29, 1975 by President Gerald Ford. This legislation incorporated six major components that have forever changed the landscape of education across the United States:

- a free appropriate public education,
- the least restrictive environment,
- an Individualized Education Program,

- procedural due process,
- nondiscriminatory assessment, and
- parental participation (Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975).

This was a monumental addition to the education system, as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act mandated that all children, regardless of disability, should be provided an education appropriate to their unique needs at no cost to the parents (Follari, 2015; Giardiello, 2013; Kagan & Kauerz, 2012). Consequently, Head Start was redesigned to expand services to include services for children with disabilities and would require that at least 10% of funds be set aside especially for these children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018b).

In 1986, the federal law was amended to create the Handicapped Infants and Toddlers Program, which mandated states provide a free and appropriate public education for children with disabilities from birth through age 2 (Follari, 2015; Giardiello, 2013; Kagan & Kauerz, 2012). This program grew exponentially. After just 1 year of implementation, the preschool grant served approximately 261,000 children. By 2001, when all states were making services available, this increased to 598,922 children (Harper, 2012).

At the turn of the 21st century, educational policies made remarkable growth on both the state and federal levels. Government interest and influence on early education policy were minimal prior to the Head Start initiative; however, government influence played a major role in influencing policies that improved educational services to young children (Yelland, 2010).

On January 8, 2002, Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), a bipartisan education reform bill reauthoring the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Jorgenson & Hoffman, 2003). The goal of NCLB was for every child to be reading at grade level by third grade. NCLB focused specific attention on services for children more likely to fall

behind in reading, such as children from poverty, children with disabilities, and children who are English language learners (Jorgenson & Hoffman, 2003). The mandate was described as a historic reform, giving states and school districts unprecedented flexibility in return for setting rigorous standards for achievement and increasing accountability in schools (Morrissey, Hutchison, & Burgett, 2014). Transformations of curricula became more reflective of state standards, services options were expanded to include disadvantaged populations, and increased levels of funding were provided to state and private preschool programs (Yelland, 2010).

With NCLB, a new era of accountability, local control, parental involvement, and appropriate funding became the cornerstone of the nation's education system (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). The focus of NCLB (2002) was to "ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education" (§ 1001).

The basic foundation of early childhood education and increased focus on Head Start continued through other presidential administrations. The administration of President George W. Bush presented a federal initiative known as Good Start, Grow Smart as an extension of elementary education to create universal learning standards for preschool education (White House, 2002). President George W. Bush and First Lady Laura Bush recognized that efforts to achieve the goals of NCLB must start before children enter kindergarten (Harper, 2012). So, in April 2002, the Bush Administration announced the Good Start, Grow Smart initiative to help states and local school systems strengthen early learning. The goal of this initiative was to ensure that young children enter kindergarten with the skills they will need to succeed at reading. Implementation of these readiness standards, which focused on language, literacy, and mathematics skills, was a significant step in providing quality preschool curriculum and instruction (Harper, 2012; Stipek, 2006).

Throughout history, U.S. Presidents may either alter or reauthorize some aspect of the previous mandates of their predecessors, and President Obama was no exception (Harper, 2012; Slack, 2013). In 2009, he signed the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act, which provided additional Early Head Start and Head Start units (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018b). In 2013 during a State of the Union address, President Obama called on Congress to expand access to high-quality preschool to every American child with the following plea:

In states that make it a priority to educate our youngest children . . . studies show students grow up more likely to read and do math at grade level, graduate high school, hold a job. . . . So let's do what works and make sure none of our children start the race of life already behind. (as quoted in Slack, 2013, para. 1)

Even though the need is presumed by many to be prevalent and evident, during this time, less than 30% of 4-year-old children were enrolled in a high-quality preschool (Slack, 2013).

Recent changes in federal policy through the ESSA (2015) provide the opportunity for states to extend their definition of student success (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018b). Since the passing of ESSA in 2015, many states have calculated ways to incorporate measures of school climate in their plans, predominantly by encouraging school districts to support social-emotional learning within positive learning environments (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016; Weiland, 2016). As states began to implement their plans, it was opportune for policymakers to reflect on ways to include measures of social, emotional, and academic development; school climate; and related outcomes in their accountability to highlight if schools were developing the whole child (Meek & Gilliam, 2016). The whole-child approach to learning allows teachers to teach to all areas of a child's

development (Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2006). For example, teachers would not focus solely on cognitive development, but equally on social and emotional development. This approach is in contrast to the cognitive approach of teaching, where the primary focus is on reading and math skills (Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2006). The research literature has supported whole-child learning as a beneficial approach with young children, suggesting that to improve a child's future outcomes, the focus must be to develop the child as a whole person (Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2006).

### **Early Childhood Education**

The beginning of a child's life is crucial for building a foundation needed for strong developmental trajectories and success in school. During this period, the brain is extraordinarily sensitive and affected by a child's relationships, environments, and experiences. The first 5 years are concurrently the most opportune and most vulnerable for setting children on a trajectory for success or failure (Brown, 2013; Meek & Gilliam, 2016). Early adversities set the stage for later adversities. Unfortunately, these early adversities are too common, and supports for children are not common enough (Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal, & Thornburg, 2009).

Pianta et al. (2009) determined that "a substantial portion—about half—of the achievement test gap in high school exists at the time children enter kindergarten" (p. 283); children who do poorly in kindergarten are more likely to do poorly through high school as well. In an Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, kindergarten test scores accounted for almost 60% of the variance in third-grade test scores, showing that gaps from the kindergarten year are indeed predictive of similar gaps in later years (Pianta et al., 2009). Although the research is still emergent, professionals in the education field have the ability to pinpoint and mediate early

needs and reduce or eliminate problems before they become ingrained and unchanging for a child (Morrissey et al., 2014).

Early identification of children ages 3–5 exhibiting developmental delays and problem behaviors is necessary for building successful educational outcomes (Morrissey et al., 2014). Problem behaviors may be the first warning sign of a developmental delay, disability, or potential behavior disorder for a child (Buschbacher & Fox, 2003; Powell, Fixsen, & Dunlap, 2003; Wakschlag et al., 2007). Moreover, early intervention programs can reduce or eliminate behavior problems (Duda, Dunlap, Fox, Lentini, & Clarke, 2004; Fantuzzo et al., 2005, Morrissey et al., 2014). Both teachers and researchers have identified referrals for early intervention services as a high priority for children exhibiting challenging problems (Powell et al., 2003; Severson, Walker, Hope-Doolittle, Kratochwill, & Gresham, 2007). Several state and federal programs, noted previously in this chapter, exist as gateways to referral, early identification, and coordination of services for preschool children (Powell et al., 2003; Powell et al., 2007; Severson et al., 2007). Powell et al. (2003, 2007) expressed the need for early intervention pathways to be seamless between all the systems and service providers.

One of the most promising educational systems available for early learning services for children with disabilities is special education, as defined in IDEA (2004). IDEA (2004) provided educational opportunities and structured support to children with disabilities and directed how states provide early intervention and special education services. IDEA regulations are divided into Part C, which serves children ages birth to age 3, and Part B, which serves children and youth ages 3–21 (IDEA, 2004). Local schools are responsible for identifying, assessing, and providing preschool special education services for eligible children ages 3–5 (IDEA, 2004). Research has suggested that early intervention services are associated with improved future



outcomes, making this federal initiative vital for many children (Samuels, 2014). Preschoolers who qualify for special education services can be served in preschool classrooms or community-based preschool programs appropriate for children with and without disabilities.

### **School Readiness**

The concept of school readiness incorporates a plethora of skills that preschool children need to master to be successful in kindergarten and beyond (Elias et al., 1997; Gilliam, 2005; Zins & Elias, 2006; Zinsser, Weissberg, & Dusenbury, 2013). Characteristically, school readiness is considered to be mastery of preacademic proficiencies, such as early literacy and basic numerical skills. Nonetheless, social-emotional development, including skills such as emotional knowledge, self-control, and social behavior, is also an integral part of school readiness (Brown, 2013; Elias et al., 1997; Gilliam, 2005; Gormley et al., 2010; Zinsser et al., 2013). Demonstrating both cognitive aptitudes and social-emotional awareness is imperative in identifying school readiness (Brown, 2013; Gormley et al., 2010).

For several decades, educational policymakers have heightened the focus on ensuring all children are ready for school (Brown, 2013; Gormley, Phillips, & Gayer, 2008). In an effort to support young children, educational outreach programs, such as Head Start and NEGP, formed a movement in support of preschool research and initiatives (Daily, Burkhauser, & Halle, 2011; NEGP, 1998). NEGP (1998) established several goals specific to school readiness, and with the development of Ready to Learn, the hope was by the Year 2000, preschool children would start school with the skills necessary for adequate learning (Brown, 2013; Daily et al., 2011). NEGP provided three basic principles for school readiness: (a) children will have access to high-quality preschool programs; (b) parents and teachers will assist in the child's learning; and (c) nutrition,

physical activity, and healthcare will be provided (Brown, 2013; Daily et al., 2011; NEGP, 1998).

Along with NEGP, Head Start also created standards to address school readiness. Head Start identified that school readiness occurs when children are ready for school, families can support learning, and schools are ready for children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). Specifically, Head Start created five areas to prepare children for school: (a) language and literacy development; (b) cognition and general knowledge; (c) approaches to learning; (d) physical health, well-being, and motor development; and (e) social and emotional development (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005).

### **Social-Emotional Development**

School readiness encompasses many age-appropriate skills needed to be successful at the start of school and beyond, such as early academic achievement, motor development, language development, and social-emotional development (Lin, Lawrence, & Gorrell, 2003). Lin et al. (2003) examined teachers' perceptions of school readiness through kindergarten teacher survey data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study–Kindergarten Cohort. Results indicated teachers were most concerned with the social-emotional aspect of school readiness rather than academic school readiness. Only 22% of teachers reported that children knowing the alphabet was important to school readiness, whereas 84% of teachers rated emotional well-being and behavioral regulation as essential to school readiness (Lin et al., 2003).

Much of the existent research has indicated a strong documented relationship between a child's social-emotional development and early learning (Gilliam, 2005; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). Specifically, significant research has identified the skills children need as they move into kindergarten, including the ability to recognize and

express emotions appropriately, maintain friendships with others, persevere during challenging tasks, follow adult directions, and participate in group activities (Hemmeter et al., 2008, Hemmeter, Ostrosky, & Corso, 2012; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). For example, during structured learning activities such as circle time, children must be able to self-regulate, inhibit verbal and motor activity, listen carefully, and pay attention; in free play, other skills are required to initiate and maintain cooperative peer interaction.

Given the consequences of behavioral difficulty for children's school readiness, teachers and school administrators must be prepared to identify children who have significant social, emotional, or behavioral concerns; unfortunately, many educators express feelings of unpreparedness (Hemmeter et al., 2008). According to Yudron, Weiland, and Sachs (2018), a child's ability to get along with peers contributes in all aspects of development and may be the single most important childhood predictor of adult adaptation. Yudron et al. elaborated that children who are unable to sustain close relationships with other children and cannot establish a place for themselves will struggle with school longitudinally and are at risk for not finishing school.

All preschool children are learning to play with friends, take turns, and use inside voices, but some children are unusually antisocial or overly aggressive with others. Both preschool teachers and school administrators are familiar with typical preschool-age behaviors such as interrupting, refusing, and tantruming; however, most preschool children learn quickly to replace problem behaviors. Others persist with inappropriate behaviors that negatively affect peer relationships and continue into their adult life (Keys et al., 2013). These examples illustrate the vast amount of variation among typically developing children. Recent research has denoted that preschool children are three times as likely to be suspended as their school-aged peers,

which represents approximately 5,000 preschool children per year (Gilliam et al., 2016). Furthermore, elementary school teachers have reported disruptive behavior as the single greatest challenge they face daily in the classroom (McCurdy et al., 2016). When children are suspended early in school, they are more likely to have behavioral and academic struggles throughout their school years (Gilliam, 2005; Gilliam et al., 2016; Osher, 2010). The numbers are irrefutably appalling, and the practice of suspending children from preschool settings has long-term consequences (Gilliam, 2005; Gilliam et al., 2016; Osher, 2010).

Many children do not have the parental involvement or prekindergarten experiences that would help their development to school readiness. Ziol-Guest and McKenna (2014) described how early childhood housing stability impacts school readiness. They researchers found instability in home environment was not negatively associated with language and literacy outcome but was with behavior problems among 5-year-olds (Keys et al., 2013; Ziol-Guest & McKenna, 2014). This is a paramount research finding in the field of early childhood learning. The data indicated that being able to relate, have self-control, and communicate with others appropriately are significant behavioral skills directly associated with readiness factors that impact student success (Ziol-Guest & McKenna, 2014). Without high levels of parental involvement or preschool experiences, children are responsible for learning these skills and behaviors alongside the academic rigors within the classroom. This puts a significant burden on kindergarten teachers and school administrators, intensifying the importance of differentiated practices in the classroom (Ziol-Guest & McKenna, 2014).

### **Quality Preschool Education**

Although many factors may affect a child's school success, the years before a child starts school are seen as the most fundamental time to intervene to prepare them for future school

success (Samuels, 2014). The quality of preschool programs is one of the leading predictors of school readiness for a child (Magnuson, Meyers, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2004). Identifying the level of quality in a preschool program is essential (Workman, Griffith, & Atchison, 2014). According to Mashburn et al. (2008), parents need to look for all necessary components of a quality preschool program, including the overall experience of the child. Several studies support that early learning programs ensure high-quality learning activities and can alter the projected life path and success of a child by promoting intense cognitive, social, and emotional benefits (Mashburn et al., 2008; National Center for Research on Early Childhood Education, 2010; Samuels, 2014; Workman et al., 2014).

Magnuson et al. (2004) examined the academic outcomes of children who attended a center- or school-based preschool program compared to children who did not attend a preschool program. School readiness was measured by examining the reading and math skills of the children in kindergarten and again in first grade. Children who attended a preschool program had higher math and reading scores than children who did not attend a preschool program (Magnuson et al., 2004). These results emphasize the importance of a classroom experience for children before kindergarten, as well as the lasting impact of developing school-readiness skills, particularly for disadvantaged children (Magnuson et al., 2004).

In a meta-analysis of over 70 studies concerning quality preschool education, D. M. Ramey (2015) concluded the effects of interventions in preschool are methodically related to characteristics of the preschool programs. The research suggested that the association between the quality of interventions and child-level outcomes was independent of other factors such as parental education, socioeconomic status, and family structure (D. M. Ramey, 2015). Multiple qualitative reviews have summarized this evidence base, and numerous meta-analytic studies

have quantitatively summarized similar evidence (Chaudry et al., 2017; Duncan & Magnuson, 2013; Phillips et al., 2017; Weiland, 2016; Yoshikawa et al., 2016; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). For the purpose of this study, I briefly summarize the takeaways from multiple studies that are particularly salient to the conversation about quality preschool education, including academic, social, and behavioral outcomes for children (Barnett et al., 2017; Chaudry et al., 2017).

**Cognitive and academic benefits.** Over the years, preschool programs have shifted focus due to the importance that has been placed on early learning experiences (Christie & Roskos, 2006). Preschool programs are utilized for a variety of reasons, including childcare for working families, early learning opportunities, and socialization opportunities for young children (Christie & Roskos, 2006). Parents increasingly are choosing to send children to preschool, and many private and public agencies typically have an extensive waiting list. Barnett et al. (2017) suggested that the push could be primarily to an increase in academic rigor and high-stakes accountability in the early grades. With greater demands for academic achievement, even preschool classrooms are experiencing the backlash. The push for early literacy, numeracy, and language-acquisition skills has necessitated the addition of higher level expectations and standards in the prekindergarten curriculum (Barnett et al., 2017; Christie & Roskos, 2006).

A large body of research has corroborated the short- and long-term effects of quality early learning programs (Chaudry et al., 2017; Duncan & Magnuson, 2010; Weiland & Yoshikawa, 2013). Moreover, researchers concur that children who attend a quality preschool program tend to enter kindergarten with sound school-readiness skills and increased cognitive abilities (Chaudry et al., 2017; Duncan & Magnuson, 2010; Mashburn et al., 2008; National Center for Research on Early Childhood Education, 2010; Phillips et al., 2017; Samuels, 2014; Weiland & Yoshikawa, 2013; Workman et al., 2014). Chaudry et al. (2017) found that the

average preschool program has the ability to close about 40% of the reading and mathematics readiness gap between low-income and middle-class children, with the most successful programs closing nearly all of the gap. Further examination of the literature revealed several other studies concerning the correlation between quality preschool programs and academic success (Gormley et al., 2008; Huang, Invernizzi, & Drake, 2012; Weiland & Yoshikawa, 2013). The Virginia Preschool Initiative study found children who participated were more likely to meet the state literacy aptitudes in kindergarten than those who did not participate (Huang et al., 2012). Likewise, data from a study of Oklahoma's state-funded prekindergarten program showed that children attending the program performed at a higher level on prereading skills, prewriting skills, and premath skills than children who did not attend (Gormley et al., 2008). Weiland and Yoshikawa (2013) sought to determine whether Boston's public preschool impacted children's language, literacy skills, and math ability. Data were collected from over 2,000 students, and the findings suggested participation in preschool produced positive impacts on measures of mathematics, literacy, and language skills (Weiland & Yoshikawa, 2013).

Duncan and Magnuson (2013) identified the implications of improved academic ability increasing the long-term impact of the preschool education. In their analysis, Perry Preschool children demonstrated significantly higher reading and math skills, which Duncan and Magnuson asserted could translate into success after high school. In another longitudinal study, Lipsey, Farran, and Durkin (2018) tracked 3,000 children between preschool and third grade, in a study known as the Tennessee Voluntary Pre-K initiative. The study informed the effects of the Tennessee Voluntary Pre-K each consecutive year until students took the state-mandated assessment at the end of third grade (Lipsey et al, 2018). At the conclusion of prekindergarten, the results indicated children had significantly higher achievement scores on all achievement

subtests, including literacy, language, and mathematics. For each consecutive year, the results indicated less significant scores. Lipsey et al. concluded that over time, educators were not capitalizing on the skills children brought with them from year to year.

Head Start has been the center of early childhood research for years (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). With more than 1,000 studies focused on the program, the research has mixed reviews regarding the benefits of attending Head Start (Kalifeh, Cogen-Vogel, & Grass, 2011; Morrissey et al., 2014). These factors could be due to differences in state standards, teacher education requirements, and even the geographic location of the programs (Kalifeh et al., 2011; Morrissey et al., 2014). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2010) recognized a need to determine the quality of the program and created the Head Start Impact Study. In a large-scale randomized control study, researchers collected data over 4 years on 5,000 children who were enrolled in either a Head Start program or a different preschool program. The study demonstrated short-term gains in tests of prereading, prewriting, and vocabulary for 3-year-olds and gains in only prereading and prewriting among 4-year-olds. Further, the study found children enrolled in Head Start classrooms were, on average, exposed to higher quality programs than children who were not enrolled in Head Start classrooms (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010).

Similar to the Head Start initiative, the Carolina Abecedarian Project was developed to investigate the effects of early learning on children from low-income families who were at high risk for developmental delays (C. T. Ramey, 2018). The researchers behind this project also wished to determine whether gains in a preschool program could be continued through elementary school and whether early learning was sufficient to improve academic and cognitive skills (C. T. Ramey, 2018). The randomized study assigned infants born in 1972 to either the



early educational intervention group or the control group and continued for 5 years. From birth to age 5, the children received full-time intervention in the childcare setting, with each child having an individualized education plan focused on social, emotional, language, and cognitive development through a variety of activities and games (C.T. Ramey, 2018). Findings from several follow-up studies provided evidence that disadvantaged children who have the opportunity to participate in an early learning program reap numerous benefits (Heckman & Masterov, 2007).

Researchers concluded that the children from the Abecedarian Project (a) had higher cognitive scores at age 21, (b) scored higher on reading and math tests of achievement from elementary school through young adulthood, (c) were more apt to finish high school and attend a 4-year postsecondary institution, and (d) experienced heightened language acquisition (Campbell et al., 2012; Cunha & Heckman, 2009). Further, researchers from the University of North Carolina projected in the findings that both cognitive and academic benefits from the program were stronger than those in most other early childhood programs (Campbell et al., 2012).

Early childhood experts understand that preschool school should be play-based, purposeful, and developmentally appropriate (Epstein, 2014; Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2011; Yudron et al., 2018). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (2016) developed an advanced framework of developmentally appropriate practices that emphasize the sequence in which children gain specific concepts, skills, and abilities. The National Association for the Education of Young Children also stated that when teachers have a deep understanding of the developmental skills, teaching practices will improve to help individual children progress.

Several researchers have recognized the role of play in learning across the multiple domains, such as language development (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013; Woolf,

2013), mathematics (Clements & Sarama, 2009), literacy (Roskos & Christie 2001), and social and emotional development (Ashiabi, 2007; Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2015; Singer, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek 2006). Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff (2015) offered research support for guided play as a position between play and direct instruction. They concluded that high-quality experiences for young children should include opportunities for children to explore freely and also times when teachers work directly with children (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2015). The challenge for early educators is to intentionally select approaches that are effective in meeting children's learning and development needs (Epstein, 2014).

**Social and behavioral benefits.** Progressively, educational administrators and policymakers are recognizing the intense connection between social-emotional competence and academic achievement (Bridgeland et al., 2013; Christie & Roskos, 2006; Duncan & Magnuson, 2013; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Despite an increased understanding, promoting the importance of social-emotional skills and creating school environments that foster social-emotional learning are still not widespread in education (Bridgeland et al., 2013). In this section, the literature supports the importance of promoting social-emotional learning in the classroom. To increase understanding of the need to incorporate social-emotional skills, the literature reviewed aligns the connection between social-emotional well-being and school readiness for preschool students (Bridgeland et al., 2013; Christie & Roskos, 2006; Duncan & Magnuson, 2013; Durlak et al., 2011; Pate et al., 2013).

Most preschool programs intend to lay a solid foundation for children by emphasizing preacademic skills (Christie & Roskos, 2006). However, in previous decades, the purpose of preschool was artistic expression, free play, and outdoor activities. Now many programs are designed around academic learning instead (Christie & Roskos, 2006; Pate et al., 2013).

Preschool programs are necessary not only for a child's cognitive growth, but also for the support of social and emotional growth (Bradley, Chazan-Cohen, & Raikes, 2009; CASEL, 2003; Epstein, 2014; Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2015; Yudron et al., 2018). For students to succeed academically, their social and emotional well-being should be developed appropriately. The components of school readiness should be understood by all providers to ensure all students experience positive outcomes. According to Bradley et al. (2009), early learning programs should be set up to develop prosocial skills, such as behaving appropriately in class, liking school, and demonstrating good attendance, emphasizing the importance of school readiness.

Whereas some children come to school predisposed to the skills needed to ensure learning, many children do not. These children often struggle academically and demonstrate behavioral difficulties (Duncan & Magnuson, 2013; Ladd, 2006). Halle, Hair, Wandner, and Chien (2012) stated that school-readiness skills are needed not only in a school setting, but also in other settings where social and academic skills are practiced. Recent research in the field of early childhood education has documented how early experiences have a deeper impact in the growth and development of young learners' social-emotional skills (Halle et al., 2012).

By increasing access to high-quality preschool programs, children can have greater intellectual, prosocial, and cognitive developmental gains (Duncan & Magnuson, 2013; Ladd, 2006). In addition, the research supports that children who attended preschool programs had lower juvenile arrest rates, higher graduation rates, and fewer suspensions and expulsions (Gilliam, 2005; Gilliam et al., 2016; Yudron et al., 2018). Thus, quality early-care environments matter, and nurturing relationships are essential (Gilliam, 2005, Gilliam et al., 2016; Yudron et al., 2018) to reinforce the healthy development of young children, especially children from low-income families.

## **Social-Emotional Learning**

Schools are not just dispensaries of knowledge. Some educators will argue that schools also should teach students the act of how to learn; how to problem solve; and most importantly, how to generalize learned skills throughout the course of their lives (Cefai & Cavioni, 2013; Christie & Roskos, 2006). Schools are social in nature; therefore, schools are considered a natural setting for social preparation (CASEL, 2003). Since 2000, a new educational approach known as social-emotional learning has evolved that applies just such a socially constructed framework (CASEL, 2003, 2013). The goal of social-emotional learning is to support schools in social constructs based on emotional intelligence and the application to social, emotional, and academic work in the classroom (Cefai & Cavioni, 2013).

CASEL (2003) defined social-emotional learning as the process for helping children develop the capacity to recognize and manage emotions, problem solve effectively, and establish positive relationships with others. CASEL (2003, 2013) is renowned for the identification of the five competencies addressing cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills critical for success: (a) self-awareness, (b) social awareness, (c) self-management, (d) relationship skills, and (e) responsible decision-making. Self-awareness includes recognizing personal feelings in the moment, having a realistic understanding of one's own abilities, and possessing self-confidence. Social-awareness refers to being able to sense how others are feeling, see others' point of view, and interact with a wide variety of individuals. Self-management is the ability to handle one's own emotions, have impulse control, and persevere when obstacles or frustrations occur. Relationship skills encompass effectively handling emotions in the context of relationships, maintaining healthy relationships, resolving conflicts, resisting adverse social pressures, and asking for help when needed. Responsible decision-making is being able to assess situations and

make decisions after considering all factors, respecting others, and taking personal responsibility for one's actions (CASEL, 2003, 2013).

Durlak et al. (2011) proclaimed that it is a mistake to view social-emotional learning as a lenient approach to learning; he adamantly described it as quite the opposite. An emphasis on social-emotional capacities is a source of rigor within the classroom and sets children up for future success, both academically and behaviorally (Durlak et al., 2011). The development of social-emotional skills helps preschool children feel more confident in building friendships, resolving conflicts, persisting when faced with challenges, coping with frustrations, and managing emotions (Durlak et al., 2011; Epstein, 2014; Gilliam, 2005).

Experts in early learning have articulated the benefits of social-emotional pedagogy in early childhood environments (Brown, 2013; Cefai & Cavioni, 2013; Cefai, Ferrario, Cavioni, Carter, & Grech, 2014). Effective implementation of these standards in schools has proven successful for teaching young students, particularly those with diverse needs, social, emotional, and academic competencies (Brown, 2013; CASEL, 2003, 2013; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Fler, 2013; LaRue & Kelly, 2015; E. Miller & Almon, 2009; Woolf, 2013). Teachers who incorporate opportunities for students to practice these competencies in the classroom are less likely to have extensive disruptive behaviors in the classroom (Woolf, 2013). Research has shown social-emotional learning is an integral part of learning to learn rather than incidental to learning. Therefore, by incorporating social-emotional skills into the curriculum, schools can prepare students to achieve both academically and socially (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Fler, 2013; LaRue & Kelly, 2015).

Proponents of social-emotional learning have argued that positive school experiences are connected to emotional security, academic achievement, and constructive peer relationships in

children (Durlak et al., 2011). However, fundamental skills such as emotional security and positive relationships may easily be an oversight in the quest for high academic achievement (Cefai & Cavioni, 2013; Elias et al., 1997; Zins & Elias, 2006; Zins et al., 2013).

Unfortunately, many young students do not have the capacity for building appropriate social-emotional competencies, causing them to be increasingly less connected to school (Durlak et al., 2011). The aim of social-emotional learning initiatives is to incorporate these skills into the academic content areas in a developmentally appropriate sequence. The center of this approach is not ideological at all. It is rooted in the experience of teachers, parents, and students and supported by educational research of the past few decades (CASEL, 2003, 2013; Gilliam, 2005; Gilliam et al., 2016). The existing research has indicated teachers and parents believe social-emotional learning is important to education (CASEL 2013). Furthermore, at least two thirds of current high school students think similarly (Jones & Kahn, 2017). In one study by Jones and Kahn (2017), a student said, “Success in school should not be defined just by our test scores . . . but also by the ability to think for ourselves, work with others, and contribute to our communities” (p.20).

As discussed throughout this literature review, today’s classroom teachers are tasked not only with supporting cognitive development, but also with fostering adequate social-emotional learning opportunities (Greenberg et al., 2003). Much research has supported the notion that emotional security should be a significant priority to create more productive and successful schools (CASEL, 2013). The tenants of social-emotional learning must be deeply embedded into the culture of a school (Bridgeland et al., 2013; CASEL, 2013; Duncan & Magnuson, 2013; Gilliam, 2005; Gilliam et al, 2016; Halle et al., 2012; Ladd, 2006; Yudron et al., 2018). By focusing on social and emotional needs in schools, students can be more engaged in the

classroom, staff can better understand how to meet the individual needs of their students, and preventative strategies in schools will become the new norm.

**Seminal works.** Much of the extant research has pointed to the underpinnings of emotional intelligence, as well as social-emotional learning, in academic achievement (CASEL, 2003, 2013; Goleman, 1995; Mayer et al., 2008). One of the seminal frameworks for social-emotional learning is from Waters and Sroufe's (1983) explanation of competent people as those able to generate flexible, adaptive responses to demands and to capitalize on opportunities in life situations. Elias et al. (1997) defined social-emotional learning as the process of acquiring competencies in managing emotions, setting and achieving goals, appreciating others' perspectives, establishing and maintaining positive relationships, making responsible decisions, and handling interpersonal situations in socially and emotionally skilled ways.

Goleman (1995) described social-emotional intelligence as the ability to be effective in critical areas of life, including school. As a predominate, well-known researcher in emotional intelligence, Goleman focused on the preliminary evidence suggesting social-emotional learning was the necessary element to enhance academic achievement by teaching skills such as self-awareness, managing emotions and impulses, and increasing empathy. Other researchers, like Zins, Weissberg, Wang, and Walberg (2004), have validated a direct link between social aptitude and positive scholarly outcomes, as well as the relationship between antisocial behavior and poor academic functioning.

**Benefits of social-emotional learning.** Educational research has supported that positive school experiences connect to emotional security, academic achievement, and positive peer relationships in children (CASEL, 2003; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Fleer, 2013; Durlak et al., 2011; LaRue & Kelley, 2015; E. Miller & Almon, 2009; Woolf, 2013). Often, emotional security

is an oversight in the quest for academically challenging classrooms and high achievement (CASEL, 2003, 2013; Elias et al., 1997; Zins & Elias, 2006; Zins et al., 2013). The social-emotional learning outcomes for behavior include prosocial behaviors, such as a reduction in aggression, disruption, and interpersonal violence. In regards to performance, Zins and Elias (2006) explained that students with social-emotional skills had increased achievement over time, better problem-solving skills, and were able to plan effectively.

Research considering the correlation between emotions and behavior has emphasized how emotional experiences and expectations influence social interaction (Cefai et al., 2014; Denham, Wyatt, Bassett, Echeverria, & Knox, 2009). Social and emotional competence helps children in life; lack of social-emotional skills will hinder children, depending on the degree of development (Cefai et al., 2014; Denham et al., 2009). Broadening the relational field and diversifying relationships with their peers, families, and teachers facilitate the process of self-knowing, helping the child understand his or her own capabilities and limitations (Denham et al., 2009). However, at this stage, intrapersonal reflections and basic social behaviors are initially developed. These two major acquisitions allow children not only to integrate externally imposed requirements but also to realize their individual needs and characteristics (Cefai et al., 2014; CASEL, 2003, 2013). For the first time, children begin to acquire some idea about social roles and can learn the patterns of appropriate interaction. This perspective links appropriately to an educational approach that emphasizes the importance of emotional and social well-being for young children (CASEL, 2003, 2013).

The research base for social-emotional learning has continued to demonstrate that addressing the needs of preschool children can promote resiliency, decrease emotional and behavioral problems, and contribute to academic performance (Zins & Elias, 2006). The social,



emotional, and psychological factors of education are gaining increased attention; social-emotional learning is the “missing link” in the accountability-driven practices that are the legacy of past educational initiatives (Bridgeland et al., 2013; Cefai et al., 2014; Elias, 1997). Payton et al. (2008) conducted a meta-analysis of approximately 300 studies, including over 300,000 participants, of social-emotional learning programs for children from preschool to high school. The study found, across reviews of universal and indicated social-emotional learning programs, that these programs significantly impacted a wide range of outcomes across multiple domains in children both with and without identified emotional or behavioral problems. Similarly, Durlak et al. (2011) conducted a meta-analysis, identifying and analyzed over 200 studies involving social-emotional learning for all grade levels. Durlak et al. stated the research indicated marked improvements in behavior, attitudes, and academic performance, as well as concurrent decreases in conduct problems and emotional distress.

People are not born with these skills intact. Development of social skills is open to change, growth, and intervention over time (Cantor, Osher, Berg, Steyer, & Rose, 2018). The research on social-emotional learning has indicated people continue to develop social, emotional, and cognitive skills and competencies throughout childhood and adolescence, into adulthood, with unique needs during each stage of life (Cantor et al., 2018). For example, young children need support to identify and manage their wide range of emotions and focus their attention in new environments. Adolescence is a period of remarkable exploration, as young people begin to develop their sense of self and their purpose in the world, along with their decision-making and critical-thinking skills (Farrington et al., 2012).

To create more productive and successful schools, the research has suggested emotional security should be a significant priority (CASEL, 2013; Durlak et al., 2011; Payton et al., 2008;

Woolf, 2013; Zins & Elias, 2006; Zins et al., 2004). The tenets of social-emotional learning should be embedded in the culture of a school. By addressing the need for social-emotional learning in schools, school leaders can assure that students are engaged in the classroom, staff understand how to meet the individual needs of their students, and preventive behavioral strategies become the new norm. When schools embrace universal efforts to promote social-emotional learning, the results suggest a promising means for students' success in school and life (Elias et al., 1997; Zins & Elias, 2006; Zins et al., 2013). Whereas research studies have varied in strategies, student population, and behavioral outcomes, they have determined that school-based social-emotional interventions are effective for students (Durlak et al., 2011).

**Social-emotional learning and students with disabilities.** According to some researchers, social-emotional learning approaches can transform learning for students with disabilities (CASEL, 2013; Elias & Mocerri, 2012; Harper, 2012). As education moves towards inclusive environments for students, using an inclusive and supportive approach to developing the classroom climate has become fundamental (Harper, 2012). A successful response to intervention needs for this population requires a more consistent and inclusive structure, which involves more classroom work to address the social structures that are intrinsically missing. Improving social relationships requires explicit skill building and a pattern of instruction, practice, and feedback with regard to these social interactions (CASEL 2013, Harper, 2012).

The basic tenets of social-emotional learning include the development of meaningful relationships and helping students to acquire the necessary skills to maintain relationships (CASEL, 2013; Durlak et al., 2011). In the classroom, social-emotional learning consists of the explicit teaching of self-awareness, including feelings vocabulary, and encourages opportunities for students to practice relationship skills in the classroom setting. Promoting self-regulation is

another building block of social-emotional learning helpful for special education students (Harper, 2012). Durlak et al. (2011) postulated that social-emotional learning interventions that link academic and social-emotional learning have the greatest likelihood of helping students with disabilities.

In a meta-analysis comparing schools who were implementing social-emotional learning with schools that were not implementing social-emotional learning, Bridgeland et al. (2013) found that when implemented with fidelity, these classrooms were particularly effective for at-risk students. The massive study of 270,000 students found that participation in social-emotional learning had these effects:

- Prosocial behavior (behaving appropriately in class, liking school, and good attendance) increased by 10%.
- Antisocial behavior (misbehaving in class, violence, bullying) dropped about 10%.
- Academic achievement (test scores) went up by 11% (Bridgeland et al., 2013).

Other studies reported similar positive effects of social-emotional learning, including a decrease in aggressive and antisocial behaviors, as well as decreased emotional distress (Clarke, Morreale, Field, Hussein, & Barry, 2015; Weare & Nind, 2011; Wilson & Lipsey, 2007).

Research, including meta-analyses and reviews of evaluation studies, identified that social-emotional learning had a significant impact on positive attitudes towards others and on learning (Sklad, Diekstra, De Ritter, & Ben, 2012; Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017; Wilson & Lipsey, 2007). Wilson and Lipsey's (2007) research implied that social-emotional learning principles can prevent aggressive behaviors in children and, when delivered universally, are a key component for the reduction of many other typical behavior concerns in schools. Clarke et al. (2015) found that universal, schoolwide social-emotional learning interventions were

particularly effective with children most at risk of developing challenging behaviors.

Comparably, Weare and Nind (2011) reported that universal approaches to social-emotional learning have a positive impact on the mental health of all children.

### **Challenging Behaviors in Preschool**

Evidence has suggested that students display problem behaviors as early as preschool; however, many behaviors are not identified as concerns until middle school (Gilliam et al., 2016; Gilliam & Shahr, 2006; Merrell, 2000). In light of this evidence, the best practice is to intervene early and prevent the problem from manifesting. Merrell (2000) rationalized that by increasing protective factors, children can acquire the competence to buffer the toxic effects of risk factors as they age. In essence, schoolwide social-emotional learning programming can be implemented to support social development, building capability early and reducing the risk and deficits associated with problem behaviors (Gilliam et al., 2016; Gilliam & Shahr, 2006).

Knowing the impact of challenging behaviors within the classroom is imperative, as these behaviors can be disruptive. In addition, challenging behaviors, such as tantrums, physical aggression, defiance, and elopement, displayed by preschool children may prevent them from acquiring the skills vital for school readiness (Gilliam, 2005; Meek & Gilliam, 2016; Nores & Barnett, 2014). Children often have difficulty regulating their emotions, exerting self-control over their impulsive behaviors, and maintaining relationships with age-appropriate peers and sometimes teachers. These children are often behind academically and develop social skill deficits as an outcome of their actions, or more likely, as an outcome of the discipline consequences (Gilliam, 2005, Gilliam et al., 2016, Yudron et al., 2018).

At a preschool level, behavior is often viewed differently, and to a certain level, inappropriate behavior is considered part of average development (Fox & Hemmeter, 2009,

Morgan, Salomon, Plotkin, & Cohen, 2014). Therefore, young children should not be held accountable at the same level when normal, developmental behaviors occur (Morgan et al., 2014). However, in some instances even behavior in young children is considered inappropriate. In lieu of an office discipline referral, teachers of young children utilize behavior incident reports (Fox & Hemmeter, 2009; Muscott et al., 2009). Significant behaviors for young children that may be reported on a behavior incident report include physical aggression towards others that results in physical pain or harm, running away from adult supervision (eloping), self-injury, self-stimulatory behavior, chronic disruption or tantrums, use of inappropriate language, noncompliance, teasing, biting, property damage, social withdrawal and general use of unsafe behaviors (Fox, Veguilla, & Perez Binder, 2014).

Expulsion and suspension are by-products of injustice and an immature understanding of developmental norms seen in early learning programs across the United States (Meek & Gilliam, 2016). These practices of early exclusion are pivotal points of influence in a child's life that must be tackled by involved stakeholders, including researchers, policymakers, and school districts (Gilliam et al., 2016; McCormick, Hsueh, Weiland, & Banger, 2017; Meek & Gilliam, 2016). Although a few studies have looked at early expulsion and suspension, significant gaps still exist in many areas, including thorough evaluations of interventions designed to prevent exclusive practices. A high-quality early learning program requires all stakeholders to diagnose current inequities and set out to mitigate them (Nores & Barnett, 2014). When classroom behaviors improve and students feel comfortable in an academic setting, they will learn better (Meek & Gilliam, 2016). From an educational perspective, this is a terrific case for bringing social-emotional learning into schools.

Often children are expelled from preschool programs well before the opportunity to offer any evidence-based interventions, supports, or strategies to address the problem behaviors (Bassok, Latham, & Rorem, 2016; Gilliam, 2005; Meek & Gilliam, 2016). Since 2000, several interventions have emerged in schools as efficient alternatives to exclusionary practices that reduce behavioral issues in schools (CASEL, 2013; Soloman, 2012). Young children are especially susceptible to punitive disciplinary measures, and the preschool phenomenon of suspension is increasingly concerning given the disproportionate rates of suspensions and expulsions (Meek & Gilliam, 2016). These harsh disciplinary measures come at a time when children should be learning to form positive relationships with teachers and peers; instead, suspended children see school as a place where they are not welcome and unable to succeed (CASEL, 2003, 2013; D. M. Ramey, 2015). Furthermore, a study released by the Yale Child Study Center found that numerous authorities on early childhood education have argued that the current structure and expectations of modern preschool, in which block sets and dress-up rooms often have been replaced with alphabet drills and quiet desk work, may be to blame as well (Gilliam, 2005; D. M. Ramey, 2015).

With an emphasis on preschool academic learning, many experts are raising questions about the decreasing priority towards social skills development, despite much supporting research that social skills are an essential component for school readiness and ongoing success (Brown, 2013; Gilliam et al., 2016; Osher, 2010; Stipek, 2006). Federal policies require state and local school systems to meet strict new academic expectations (Gilliam et al., 2016; Gilliam & Zigler, 2004). When children are pressed to work on activities or curriculum above their skill or age level, frustration and negative behavior often result (E. Smith & Harper, 2015).

High expulsion rates are a significant indicator that preschools are failing to provide appropriate support for teachers and students (Farran, Meador, Christopher, Nesbitt, & Bilbrey, 2017; E. Smith & Harper, 2015). Decreasing disciplinary school removals and their disparate impact on marginalized children requires changing everyday practices (CASEL, 2003, 2013; Meek & Gilliam, 2016; D. M. Ramey, 2015). Zins and Elias (2006) recommended teaching social-emotional learning competencies, such as emotional regulation skills, to counteract many risk processes and provide protective factors that may improve overall mental health—ultimately playing a role in preventing dysfunction in youth.

School systems are slowly implementing social-emotional programs across the nation, but without the proper training and professional development for staff, the idea of “another new program” and a “new way of thinking” may seem unfounded and scary for teachers. My community is not much different. Some schools have picked up social-emotional learning without hesitation, while others sit back and wait for the mandate. Some school leaders ask for resources and supports for their students in crisis; others suspend students with no thought about teaching. Researchers have supported that this separation in philosophies among leaders is not uncommon, but the literature explaining why is sparse. My study is born from curiosity and a deep need to understand the why. Who better to go to for the answers to these questions than the leaders in the trenches day to day? These leaders know the challenges that should be addressed within schools. I focused on just that, the perceptions of school leaders. I wanted to know their thoughts and opinions about the behavior challenges in schools. What are their experiences with the increasing needs recognized in preschool? While school system staff looked for “magic” programs, the “right” interventions, and necessary trainings to support the most at-risk students, what were leaders in the schools looking for exactly?

I knew one thing at the beginning of my mission. Teachers were not asking me about literacy or math curricula for their students. Leaders were not requesting professional development about standards and assessment for their staff. I was attending two and three meetings a day to discuss what to do with “that kid”—the one who tears the room apart or hits his teachers every day. The one who gets to school each day and hides under his desk or elopes so quickly no one can catch him. These were the questions I was getting. It was becoming a phenomenon within my own community, and we needed to work together to discover the cause and the solution.

As this literature review has demonstrated, children with externalizing behaviors will continue to struggle throughout their education, leading to academic and continued behavioral difficulties through elementary school and beyond. Behavioral concerns should be targeted early with a structured, quality environment to lessen or even remove academic and behavioral difficulties to prepare children with disruptive behaviors to succeed in school.

### **Chapter Summary**

The literature review for this study supported the guiding questions by examining the research on preschool expulsion and suspension, social-emotional learning implementation, and early intervention services. Traditionally, educators assumed that a child’s ability to cope with school stressors was either intrinsic, a part of their personality, or was simply figured out along the way. In reality, many children never develop the skills needed, and educators cannot assume that children enter classrooms with the skill capability necessary for adequate learning.

Educators support that a student’s daily experiences are saturated with emotions, and some children need to learn to regulate emotion. If educators recognize the need for social-emotional learning in the classroom, how do schools increase knowledge and build capacity?



## References

- Ashiabi, G. S. (2007). Play in the preschool classroom: Its socioemotional significance and the teacher's role in play. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *35*, 199-207. doi:10.1007/s10643-007-0165-8
- Barnett, W., Friedman-Krauss, A., Weisenfeld, G., Horowitz, M., Kasmin, R., & Squires, J. (2017). *The state of preschool 2016: State preschool yearbook*. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research.
- Bassok, D., Latham, S., & Rorem, A. (2016). Is kindergarten the new first grade? *AERA Open*, *1*, 1-31.
- Bradley, R., Chazan-Cohen, R., & Raikes, H. (2009). The impact of Early Head Start on school readiness: New looks. *Early Education & Development*, *20*, 883-892. doi:10.1080/10409280903365033
- Bridgeland, J., Bruce, M., & Hariharan, A. (2013). *The missing piece: A national teacher survey on how social and emotional learning can empower children and transform schools*. Chicago, IL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. Retrieved from <https://www.casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/the-missing-piece.pdf>
- Brown, C. P. (2013). Reforming preschool to ready children for academic achievement: A case study of the impact of pre-K reform on the issue of school readiness. *Early Education & Development*, *24*, 554-573. doi:10.1080/10409289.2012.694352
- Brown, C. P., & Pickard, H. (2014). Balancing the school readiness equation in early learning environments. *Journal of the Association for Early Childhood Education International*, *90*, 418-426. doi:10.1080/00094056.2014.982975

- Bruce, N., & Cairone, K. (2011). *Socially strong, emotionally secure: 50 activities to promote resilience in young children*. Lewisville, NC: Gryphon House.
- Buschbacher, P. W., & Fox, L. (2003). Understanding and intervening with the challenging behavior of young children with autism spectrum disorder. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools, 34*, 217-227. doi:10.1044/0161-1461(2003/018)
- Campbell, F. A., Pungello, E. P., Burchinal, M., Kainz, K., Pan, Y., Wasik, B. H., . . . Ramey, C. T. (2012). Adult outcomes as a function of an early childhood educational program: An Abecedarian Project follow-up. *Developmental Psychology, 48*, 1033-1043. doi:10.1037/a0026644
- Cantor, P., Osher, D., Berg, J., Steyer, L., & Rose, T. (2018). Malleability, plasticity, and individuality: How children learn and develop in context. *Applied Developmental Science, 22*(2), 1-31. doi:10.1080/10888691.2017.1398649
- Cefai, C., & Cavioni, V. (2013). *Social and emotional education in primary school*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Cefai, C., Ferrario, E., Cavioni, V., Carter, A., & Grech, T. (2014). Circle time for social and emotional learning in primary school. *Pastoral Care in Education, 32*(2), 116-130.
- Chaudry, A., Morrissey, T., Weiland, C., & Yoshikawa, H. (2017). *Cradle to kindergarten: A new plan to combat inequality*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Christie, J., & Roskos, K. (2006). Standards, science, and the role of play in early literacy education. In D. G. Singer, R. M. Golinkoff, & K. Hirsh-Pasek (Eds.), *Play = learning: How play motivates and enhances children's cognitive and social-emotional growth* (pp. 57-73). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

- Clarke, A., Morreale, S., Field, C., Hussein, Y., & Barry, M. (2015). *What works in enhancing social and emotional skills development during childhood and adolescence? A review of the evidence on the effectiveness of school-based and out-of-school programs in the UK*. Galway: National University of Ireland, World Health Organization Collaborating Centre for Health Promotion Research. Retrieved from <https://aran.library.nuigalway.ie/handle/10379/4981>
- Clements, D. H., & Sarama, J. (2013). Rethinking early mathematics: What is research-based curriculum for young children? In L. D. English & J. T. Mulligan (Eds.), *Reconceptualizing early mathematics learning: Advances in mathematics education* (pp. 121-147). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer. doi:10.1007/978-94-007-6440-8\_7
- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (2003). *Safe and sound: An educational leader's guide to evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL) programs*. Chicago, IL: Author. Retrieved from <https://casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/safe-and-sound.pdf>
- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (2013). *Implementing systemic district and school social and emotional learning*. Chicago, IL: Author
- Comodari, E. (2013). Preschool teacher attachment and attention skills. *Springerplus*, 2, Article 673. doi:10.1186/2193-1801-2-673
- Copple, C., & Bredekamp, C. (2009). *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs* (3rd ed.). Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

- Cunha, F., & Heckman, J. (2009). The economics and psychology of inequality and human development (NBER Working Paper No. 14695). *Journal of the European Economic Association*, 7, 320-364. doi:10.3386/w14695
- Daily, S., Burkhauser, M., & Halle, T. (2011). School readiness practices in the United States. *National Civic Review*, 100(4), 21-24. doi:10.1002/ncr.20080
- Denham, S. A., Wyatt, T. M., Bassett, H. H., Echeverria, D., & Knox, S. S. (2009). Assessing social-emotional development in children from a longitudinal perspective. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 63, 37-52. doi:10.1136/jech.2007.070797
- Dockett, S., & Perry, B. (2015). Transition to school: Times of opportunity, expectation, aspiration, and entitlement. In J. M. Iorio & W. Parnell (Eds.), *Rethinking readiness in early childhood education* (pp. 123-139). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan. doi:10.1057/9781137485120.0013
- Duda, M., Dunlap, G., Fox, L., Lentini, R., & Clarke, S. (2004). An experimental evaluation of positive behavior support in a community preschool program. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 24(3), 143-155. doi:10.1177/02711214040240030201
- Duncan, G., & Magnuson, K. (2013). Investing in preschool programs. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 27(2), 109-132. doi:10.1257/jep.27.2.109
- Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R., Dymnicki, A., Taylor, R., & Schellinger, K. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82(1), 405-432. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x

- Early, D. M., Orfali, N. S., Maxwell, K. L., Bultinck, E., Nugent, C., Mason, R., . . . Bingham, G. (2018). *Quality Rated Validation Study Report 3: Director, teacher, and provider perceptions of Quality Rated*. Bethesda, MD: Child Trends.
- Education of the Handicapped Amendments of 1986, Pub. L. No. 99-457 (1986).
- Elias, M. (1997, December 3). The missing piece: Making the case for greater attention to social and emotional learning. *Education Week*. Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/1997/12/03/15elias.h17.html>
- Elias, M., & Mocerri, D. (2012). Developing social and emotional aspects of learning: The American experience. *Research Papers in Education*, 27, 423-434. doi:10.1080/02671522.2012.690243
- Elias, M. J., Zins, J. E., Weissberg, R. P., Frey, K. S., Greenberg, M. T., Haynes, N. M., . . . Shriver, T. P. (1997). *Promoting social and emotional learning: Guidelines for educators*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Epstein, A. S. (2014). *The intentional teacher: Choosing the best strategies for young children's learning*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Every Student Succeeds Act, Pub. L. No. 114-95, §§ 4106-4109 (2015).
- Fantuzzo, J. W., Bulotsky-Shearer, R., Fusco, R., & McWayne, C. (2005). An investigation of preschool classroom behavioral adjustment problems and social-emotional school readiness competencies. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 20, 259-275. doi:10.1016/j.ecresq.2005.07.001
- Farran, D. C., Meador, D., Christopher, C., Nesbitt, K., & Bilbrey, L. (2017). Data-driven improvement in prekindergarten classrooms: Report from a partnership in an urban district. *Child Development*, 88, 1466-1479. doi:10.1111/cdev.12906

- Farrington, C., Roderick, M., Allensworth, E., Nagaoka, J., Keyes, T., Johnson, D., & Beechum, N. (2012). *Teaching adolescents to become learners: The role of noncognitive factors in shaping school performance: A critical literature review*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research.
- Fleer, M. (2013). Affective imagination in science education: Determining the emotional nature of scientific and technological learning of young children. *Research in Science Education, 43*, 2085-2106. doi:10.1007/s11165-012-9344-8
- Follari, L. (2015). *Foundations and best practices in early childhood education: History, theories, and approaches to learning*. Hoboken, NJ: Pearson.
- Fox, L., & Hemmeter, M. L. (2009). A programwide model for supporting social emotional development and addressing challenging behavior in early childhood settings. In W. Sailor, G. Dunlap, G. Sugai, & R. Horner (Eds.), *Handbook of positive behavior support: Issues in clinical child psychology* (pp. 177-202). Boston, MA: Springer. doi:10.1007/978-0-387-09632-2\_8
- Fox, L., Veguilla, M., & Perez Binder, D. (2014). *Data decision-making and program-wide implementation of the pyramid model*. Tampa: University of South Florida, Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Young Children.
- Frabutt, J. M., & Waldron, R. (2013). Reaching the youngest hearts and minds: Interviews with diocesan leaders regarding Catholic early childhood education. *Journal of Catholic Education, 17*(1), 5-40. doi:10.15365/joce.1701022013
- Fuller, B. (2008). *Standardized childhood: The political and cultural struggle over early education*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

- Giardiello, P. (2013). *Pioneers in early childhood education: The roots and legacies of Rachel and Margaret McMillan, Maria Montessori and Susan Isaacs*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gilliam, W. (2005). *Prekindergarteners left behind: Expulsion rates in state prekindergarten systems*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Child Study Center.
- Gilliam, W., Maupin, A., & Reyes, C. (2016). Early childhood mental health consultation: Results from a statewide random-controlled evaluation. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 55, 754-761. doi:10.1016/j.jaac.2016.06.006
- Gilliam, W., & Shahar, G. (2006). Preschool and child care expulsion and suspension: Rates and predictors in one state. *Infants and Young Children*, 19, 228-245. doi:10.1097/00001163-200607000-00007
- Gilliam, W., & Zigler, E. (2004). *State efforts to evaluate the effects of prekindergarten*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Child Study Center.
- Gormley, W., Phillips, D., Adelstein, S., & Shaw, C. (2010). Head Start's comparative advantage: Myth or reality? *Policy Studies Journal*, 38, 397-418. doi:10.1111/j.1541-0072.2010.00367.x
- Gormley, W., Phillips, D., & Gayer, T. (2008). Preschool programs can boost school readiness. *Science*, 320, 1723-1724.
- Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*. New York, NY: Bantam.
- Greenberg, M. T., Weissberg, R., O'Brien, M., Zins, J., Fredericks, L., Resnik, H., & Elias, M. (2003). Enhancing school-based prevention and youth development through coordinated

- social, emotional, and academic learning. *American Psychologist*, 58, 466-474.
- Halle, T., Hair, E., Wandner, L., & Chien, N. (2012). Profiles of school readiness among four-year-old Head Start children. *Early Childhood Quarterly*, 27, 613-626. doi:10.1016/j.ecresq.2012.04.001
- Harper, J. (2012). Leading special education in an era of systems redesign: A commentary. *Journal of Special Education Leadership*, 25(1), 48-52.
- Heckman, J. J., & Masterov, D. M. (2007). The productivity argument for investing in young children (NBER Working Paper No. 13016). *Review of Agricultural Economics*, 29, 446-493. doi:10.3386/w13016
- Hemmeter, M. L., Ostrosky, M., Artman, K., & Kinder, K. (2008). Moving right along . . . planning transitions to prevent challenging behaviors. *Young Children*, 63(3), 18-22.
- Hemmeter, M. L., Ostrosky, M., & Corso, R. (2012). Preventing and addressing challenging behavior: Common questions and practical strategies. *Young Exceptional Children*, 15(2), 32-46. doi:10.1177/1096250611427350
- Hirsh-Pasek, K., & Golinkoff, R. M. (2011). The great balancing act: Optimizing core curricula through playful learning. In E. Zigler, W. S. Gilliam, & W. S. Barnett (Eds.), *The pre-K debates: Current controversies and issues* (pp. 110-115). Baltimore, MD: Brookes.
- Hirsh-Pasek, K., & Golinkoff, R. M. (2015). Introduction. In H. Bohart, K. Charner, & D. Koralek, *Spotlight on young children: Exploring play*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Huang, F., Invernizzi, M., & Drake, E. (2012). The differential effects of preschool: Evidence from Virginia. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 27(2), 22-34.



- Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, Pub. L. No. 108-466, 118 Stat. 2647 (2004).
- Jorgensen, M. A., & Hoffmann, J. (2003). *History of the No Child Left Behind Act*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.
- Johnson, L. B. (1965). *Remarks on Project Head Start, May 18, 1965*. Retrieved from <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-project-head-start>
- Jones, S. M., & Kahn, J. (2017). *The evidence base for how we learn: Supporting students' social, emotional, and academic development. Consensus statements of evidence from the Council of Distinguished Scientists*. Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development. Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED577039)
- Kagan, S., & Kauerz, K. (Eds.). (2012). *Early childhood systems: Transforming early learning*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Kalifeh, P., Cogen-Vogel, L., & Grass, S. (2011). The federal role in early childhood education: Evolution in the goals, governance, and policy instruments of Project Head Start. *Educational Policy, 25*, 36-64. doi:10.1177/0895904810387413
- Keys, T. D., Farkas, G., Burchinal, M., Duncan, G., Vandell, D., Weilin, L., . . . Howes, C. (2013). Preschool center quality and school readiness: Quality effects and variation by demographic and child characteristics. *Child Development, 84*, 1171-1190. doi:10.1111/cdev.12048
- Ladd, G. W. (2006). Peer rejection, aggressive or withdrawn behavior, and psychological maladjustment from ages 5 to 12: An examination of four predictive models. *Child Development, 77*, 822-846. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.2006.00905.x

- LaRue, A., & Kelley, B. (2015). *Transforming the workplace for children birth through eight: A unifying foundation*. Washington, DC: National Academy of Sciences.
- Lin, H.-L., Lawrence, F., & Gorrell, J. (2003). Kindergarten teachers' views of children's readiness for school. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 18*, 225-237. doi:10.1016/S0885-2006(03)00028-0
- Lipsey, M., Farran, D., & Durkin, K. (2018). Effects of the Tennessee Prekindergarten Program on children's achievement and behavior through third grade. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 45*, 155-176. doi:10.1016/j.ecresq.2018.03.005
- Magnuson, K. A., Meyers, M. K., Ruhm, C. J., & Waldfogel, J. (2004). Inequality in preschool education and school readiness. *American Educational Research Journal, 41*, 115-157. doi:10.3102/00028312041001115
- Marotz, L. R., & Allen, K. E. (2016). *Developmental profiles: Pre-birth through adolescence*. Boston, MA: Cengage Learning.
- Mashburn, A. J., & Henry, G. T. (2005). Assessing school readiness: Validity and bias in preschool and kindergarten teachers' ratings. *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice, 23*(4), 16-30. doi:10.1111/j.1745-3992.2004.tb00165.x
- Mashburn, A., Pianta, R., Hamre, B., Downer, J., Barbarin, O., Bryant, D., . . . Early, D. (2008). Measures of classroom quality in prekindergarten and children's development of academic, language, and social skills. *Child Development, 79*, 732-749. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.2008.01154.x
- Mayer, J., Salovey, P., & Caruso, D. (2008). Emotional intelligence: New ability or eclectic traits? *American Psychologist, 63*, 503-517. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.63.6.503

- McCormick, M., Hsueh, J., Weiland, C., & Banger, M. (2017). *The challenge of sustaining preschool impacts: Introducing ExCEL P-3, a study from the Expanding Children's Early Learning Network*. New York, NY: MDRC.
- McCurdy, B., Thomas, L., Truckenmiller, A., Rich, S., Hillis-Clark, P., & Lopez, J. (2016). School wide positive behavior intervention and supports for students with emotional and behavioral disorders. *Psychology in the Schools, 53*, 375-389.
- McGill-Franzen, A. (2006). *Kindergarten literacy: Matching assessment and instruction*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Meek, S. E., & Gilliam, W. S. (2016). *Expulsion and suspension as matters of social justice and health equity* (Discussion paper). Washington, DC: National Academy of Medicine. Retrieved from <https://nam.edu>
- Merrell, K. W. (2000). Linking prevention science and social and emotional learning: The Oregon Resiliency Project. *Psychology in the Schools, 47*, 55-70. doi:10.1002/pits.20451
- Miller, E., & Almon, J. (2009). Crisis in kindergarten: Why children need to play in school. *Education Digest, 75*(1), 42-45.
- Miller, K. (2015). The transition to kindergarten: how families from lower-income backgrounds experienced the first year. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 43*, 213-221.
- Morgan, H. (2011). *Early childhood education: History, theory and practice*. Plymouth, England: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Morgan, E., Salomon, M., Plotkin, M., & Cohen, R. (2014). *The school discipline consensus report: Strategies from the field to keep students engaged in school and out of the juvenile justice system*. New York, NY: Council of State Governments Justice Center.

Retrieved from [http://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/The\\_School\\_Discipline\\_Consensus\\_Report.pdf](http://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/The_School_Discipline_Consensus_Report.pdf)

Morrissey, T., Hutchison, L., & Burgett, K. (2014). *The short-and long-term impacts of large public early care and education programs* (Research brief). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary For Planning and Evaluation.

Muscott, H. S., Szczesiul, S., Berk, B., Staub, K., Hoover, J., & Perry-Chisholm, P. (2008). Creating home-school partnerships by engaging families in schoolwide positive behavior supports. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 40(6), 6-14. doi:10.1177/004005990804000601

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2016). *Standing together against suspension and expulsion in early childhood: A joint statement*. Retrieved from <https://www.naeyc.org>

National Center for Research on Early Childhood Education. (2010). Learning how much quality is necessary to get to good results for children. *NCRECE in Focus*, 1(2). Retrieved from ERIC database (ED544021)

National Education Goals Panel. (1998). *Principles and recommendations for early childhood assessments*. Washington, DC: Author.

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2004). *Children's emotional development is built into the architecture of their brains* (Working Paper No 2). Retrieved from <https://developingchild.harvard.edu>

Ngunjiri, F., Hernandez, K.-A. C., & Chang, H. (2010). Living autoethnography: Connecting life and research. *Journal of Research Practice*, 6(1), Article E1.

- No Child Left Behind Act, Pub. L. No. 107-110 (2002).
- Nores, M., & Barnett, W. (2014). *Access to high quality early care and education: Readiness and opportunity gaps in America* (CEELO Policy Report). New Brunswick, NJ: Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes.
- Nutbrown, C. (2010). *Threads of thinking: Young children learning and the role of early education*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Osher, D. (2010). How can we improve school discipline? *Educational Researcher*, 39(1), 48-58.
- Palla, L. (2018). Characteristics of Nordic research on special education in preschool: A review with special focus on Swedish conditions. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 23, 436-453. doi:10.1080/13603116.2018.1441337
- Pate, R., O'Neill, J., Brown, W., McIver, K., Howie, E. & Dowda, M. (2013). Top 10 research questions related to physical activity in preschool children. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 84, 448-455. doi:10.1080/02701367.2013.844038
- Payton, J., Weissberg, R., Durlak, J., Dymnicki, A., Taylor, R., Schellinger, K., & Pachan, M. (2008). *The positive impact of social and emotional learning for kindergarten to eighth-grade students: Findings from three scientific reviews*. Chicago, IL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning.
- Phillips, D., Lipsey, M., Dodge, K. A., Haskins, R., Bassok, D., Burchinal, M. R., . . . Weiland, C. (2017). *Puzzling it out: The current state of scientific knowledge on pre-kindergarten effects*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- Pianta, R. C., Barnett, W., Burchinal, M., & Thornburg, K. (2009). The effects of preschool education: What we know, how public policy is or is not aligned with the evidence base,

and what we need to know. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 10, 49-88.

doi:10.1177/1529100610381908

Powell, D., Fixsen, D., & Dunlap, G. (2003). *Pathways to service utilization: A synthesis of evidence relevant to young children with challenging behavior*. Tampa: University of South Florida, Center for Evidence-Based Practice: Young Children With Challenging Behavior.

Powell, D., Fixsen, D., Dunlap, G., Smith, B., & Fox, L. (2007). A synthesis of knowledge relevant to pathways of service delivery for young children with or at risk of challenging behavior. *Journal of Early Intervention*, 29(2), 81-106. doi:10.1177/105381510702900201

Ramey, C. T. (2018). The Abecedarian approach to social, educational, and health disparities. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 21, 527-544. doi:10.1007/s10567-018-0260-y

Ramey, D. M. (2015). The social structure of criminalized and medicalized school discipline. *Sociology of Education*, 88, 181-201. doi:10.1177/0038040715587114

Riley, D., San Juan, R. R., Klinkner, J., & Ramminger, A. (2008). *Social & emotional development: Connecting science and practice in early childhood settings*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

Roskos, K., & Christie, J. (2001). Examining the play–literacy interface: A critical review and future directions. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 1(1), 59-89. doi:10.1177/14687984010011004

- Sahin, I. T., Sak, R., & Tuncer, N. (2013). Comparison of preschool and first grade teachers' views about school readiness. *Educational Sciences: Theory and Practice, 13*, 1708-1713. doi:10.12738/estp.2013.3.1665
- Samuels, C. (2014, August 6). Focus on youngest, neediest endures. *Education Week, 33*(37), 1-17.
- Severson, H., Walker, H., Hope-Doolittle, J., Kratochwill, T., & Gresham, F. (2007). Proactive early screening to detect behaviorally at-risk students: Issues, approaches, emerging innovations, and professional practices. *Journal of School Psychology, 45*, 193-223. doi:10.1016/j.jsp.2006.11.003
- Sklad, M., Diekstra, R., De Ritter, M., & Ben, J. (2012). Effectiveness of school-based universal social, emotional, and behavioral programs: Do they enhance students' development in the area of skill, behavior, and adjustment? *Psychology in the Schools, 49*, 892-909.
- Skouteris, H., Watson, B., & Lum, J. (2012). Preschool children's transition to formal schooling: The importance of collaboration between teachers, parents and children. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood, 37*(4), 78-85.
- Slack, M. (2013). *What you need to know about President Obama's plan to provide high-quality early education for all children* [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2013/02/14/what-you-need-know-about-president-obamas-plan-provide-high-quality-early-education->
- Smith, B., & Fox, L. (2003). *Systems of service delivery: A synthesis of evidence relevant to young children at risk of or who have challenging behavior*. Tampa: University of South Florida, Center for Evidence-Based Practice: Young Children With Challenging Behavior.

- Smith, E., & Harper, S. (2015). *Disproportionate impact of K-12 school suspension and expulsion on Black students in southern states*. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University, Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education.
- Solomon, B. (2012). A meta-analysis of school-wide positive behavior support: An exploratory study using single-case synthesis. *Psychology in the Schools, 49*, 105-121.
- Stipek, D. (2006). No Child Left Behind comes to preschool. *Elementary School Journal, 106*, 455-466.
- Taylor, R. D., Oberle, E., Durlak, J., & Weissberg, R. (2017). Promoting positive youth development through school-based social and emotional learning interventions: A meta-analysis of follow-up effects. *Child Development, 88*, 1156-1171. doi:10.1111/cdev.12864
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2005). *Report to Congress: Assessment of children in Head Start programs*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2010). *Head Start impact study: Final report*. Retrieved from [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/hs\\_impact\\_study\\_final.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/hs_impact_study_final.pdf)
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2016). *Spotlighting progress in policy and supports*. Retrieved from [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ecl/expulsion\\_resource\\_guide\\_11\\_4\\_16\\_final.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ecl/expulsion_resource_guide_11_4_16_final.pdf)
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2018a). *About the Office of Head Start*. Retrieved from <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ohs/about>
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2018b). *Head Start timeline*. Retrieved from <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/about-us/article/head-start-timeline>



- Wakschlag, L., Briggs-Gowan, M., Carter, A., Hill, C., Danis, B., & Keenan, K. (2007). A developmental framework for distinguishing disruptive behavior from normative misbehavior in preschool children. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, *48*, 976-987. doi:10.1111/j.1469-7610.2007.01786.x
- Waters, E., & Sroufe, L. A. (1983). Social competence as a developmental construct. *Developmental Review*, *3*, 79-97. doi:10.1016/0273-2297(83)90010-2
- Weare, K., & Nind, M. (2011). Mental health promotion and problem prevention in schools: What does the evidence say? *Health Promotion International*, *26*(S1), i29-i69. doi:10.1093/heapro/dar075
- Weiland, C. (2016). Launching Preschool 2.0: A road map to high-quality public programs at scale. *Behavioral Science & Policy*, *2*(1), 37-46.
- Weiland, C., & Yoshikawa, H. (2013). Impacts of a prekindergarten program on children's mathematics, language, literacy, executive function, and emotional skills. *Child Development*, *84*, 2112-2130.
- Weisberg, D. S., Hirsh-Pasek, K., & Golinkoff, R. M. (2013). Guided play: Where curricular goals meet a playful pedagogy. *Mind, Brain, and Education*, *7*, 104-112. doi:10.1111/mbe.12015
- White House. (2002). *Good Start, Grow Smart: The Bush administration's early childhood initiative*. Retrieved from <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/earlychildhood/earlychildhood.html>
- White House. (2014). *My Brother's Keeper Task Force report to the President*. Retrieved from [https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/053014\\_mbk\\_report.pdf](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/053014_mbk_report.pdf)

- Wilson, S. J., & Lipsey, M. (2007). School-based interventions for aggressive and disruptive behavior: Update of a meta-analysis. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 33(2 Suppl), 130-143. doi:10.1016/j.amepre.2007.04.011
- Woolf, A. M. (2013). Social and emotional aspects of learning: Teaching and learning or playing and becoming? *Pastoral Care in Education*, 31(1), 28-42.
- Workman, E., Griffith, M., & Atchison, B. (2014). *State pre-K funding—2013-14 fiscal year*. Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States.
- Yelland, N. (Ed.). (2010). *Contemporary perspectives on early childhood education*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Yoshikawa, H., Weiland, C., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2016). When does preschool matter? *The Future of Children*, 26(2), 21-35.
- Yoshikawa, H., Weiland, C., Brooks-Gunn, J., Burchinal, M., Espinosa, L., Gormley, W., . . . Zaslow, M. (2013). *Investing in our future: The evidence base on preschool education*. New York, NY: Foundation for Child Development. Retrieved from <https://www.fcd-us.org/assets/2013/10/Evidence20Base20on20Preschool20Education20FINAL.pdf>
- Yudron, M., Weiland, C., & Sachs, J. (2018). *Public investment in aligning instructional content and improving quality across prekindergarten auspices: Classroom outcomes and lessons learned*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Zigler, E. F., & Bishop-Josef, S. J. (2006). The cognitive child versus the whole child: Lessons from 40 years of Head Start. In D. G. Singer, R. M. Golinkoff, & K. Hirsh-Pasek (Eds.), *Play = learning: How play motivates and enhances children's cognitive and social-emotional growth* (pp. 15-35). New York, NY: Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195304381.003.0002

- Zins, J., & Elias, M. (2006). Social and emotional learning: Promoting the development of all students. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation, 17*, 233-255. doi:10.1080/10474410701413152
- Zins, J., Weissberg, R., Wang, M., & Walberg, H. (2004). *Building academic success on social and emotional learning: What does the research say?* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Zinsler, K., Weissberg, R., & Dusenbury, L. (2013). *Aligning preschool through high school social and emotional learning standards: A critical and doable next step*. Chicago, IL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning.
- Ziol-Guest, K., & McKenna, C. (2014). Early childhood housing instability and school readiness. *Child Development, 85*, 103-113. doi:10.1111/cdev.12105

## 2 THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PRINCIPALS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN PRESCHOOL

*There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.*

~ Maya Angelou

“My son has been suspended five times. He’s 3.” After being told by the preschool that her son was not allowed to come back, Tunette Powell, a mother, author, and motivational speaker, set out to tell her son’s story. Published in the *Washington Post*, Powell (2014) delivered a serious message, eliciting a sobering discussion about the push-out phenomenon trending with young children, particularly Black children. In telling her child’s story, she exposed her own experiences as a young child:

I was expelled from preschool and went on to serve more suspensions than I can remember. But I do remember being told I was bad and believing it. I remember just how long it took me to believe anything good about myself. (Powell, 2014, para. 6)

The daycare staff and even friends and family suggested that Powell pull her two young sons out of the preschool program:

At first, I considered that. . . . But moving my boys to another school would have provided a stopgap solution. . . . It may have solved my problem, but it would not have solved the problem. (Powell, 2014, para. 18-19)

Powell’s experience is a story of inequity and injustice (Gilliam, 2005). Her story, like so many others, feeds the beast. Not only was Powell right, but a decade of research also has divulged that this problem was not hers alone (Benedict, Horner, & Squires, 2007; Denham & Burton, 2003; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Elias et al., 1997; Gilliam, 2005).

We can no longer put a Band-Aid on our nation's preschool-to-prison pipeline, which pushes children out of the education system and criminalizes relatively minor offenses.

. . . This is not the time to be silent. We must speak out. I cannot go back and undo what was done to me, but I refuse to let it be done to my children. (Powell, 2014, para. 19, 23)

Disappointingly, these adversities are all too common, while the supports to protect young children are not common enough (Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan, 2013; Cefai, Ferrario, Cavioni, Carter, & Grech, 2014; Elias et al., 1997; Fantuzzo, Bulotsky-Shearer, Fusco, & McWayne, 2005; Gilliam, 2005; Hemmeter, Ostrosky, & Corso, 2012). Unraveling the phenomenon of early childhood suspensions and expulsions is a collective and systemic responsibility (Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2011; Huang, Invernizzi, & Drake, 2012; Jones & Kahn, 2017; Kalifeh, Cogen-Vogel, & Grass, 2011; Mashburn et al., 2008; Meek & Gilliam, 2016; Samuels, 2014). This study explores what is known and not yet known about early childhood expulsions and suspensions, unequivocally focuses on school leaders' perceptions about challenging preschool behaviors, describes their experiences with the application of social-emotional learning, and offers proposals for future directions in research.

Suspension and expulsion are not interventions for behavior. Dr. Walter Gilliam (2005) of the Yale Child Study Center stated, "Suspension and expulsion are adult decisions, not child behaviors." Early childhood researchers have reported that preschool children who demonstrate challenging behaviors are 3 times more likely than school-aged children to be suspended or expelled (Gilliam, 2005; Gilliam, Maupin, Reyes, Accavitti, & Shic, 2016; Hemmeter et al., 2012). These statistics are particularly disconcerting given that research has suggested school expulsion practice has an adverse correlation to negative educational and life outcomes (Gilliam, 2005; Gilliam et al., 2016; Hemmeter et al., 2012; Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2011; Huang et al.,

2012; Jones & Kahn, 2017; Kalifeh et al., 2011). Exclusionary practices not only impede a child's learning potential, but also increase the risk for future problems into adulthood (Cefai & Cavioni, 2013; Gilliam, 2005; Gilliam et al., 2016; Hemmeter et al., 2012, Meek & Gilliam, 2016). Preschool students who are expelled or suspended experience greater academic failure and retention in school, hold more adverse mindsets about school and are less engaged, have higher rates of dropout, and face increased possibilities of incarceration than their peers who are not (Cefai & Cavioni, 2013; Gilliam, 2005; Gilliam et al., 2016; Gilliam & Shahrar, 2006; Hemmeter et al., 2012; Meek & Gilliam, 2016).

### **The Significance of the Study**

With a steady rise in challenging behaviors and exclusionary practices during the preschool years, there is an immediate need for resources and support in the areas of social, emotional, and behavioral development for the nation's youngest learners (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2013). Social-competency skills are "the abilities of students to function in their primary environments and community by acquiring their needs and wants with the highest degree of independence" (Stichter, Randolph, Gage, & Schmidt, 2007, p. 219). Most times social-competency skills are learned and aid in responding and interacting in the preschool environments (Follari, 2015). Having the ability to recognize emotion and being able to self-regulate emotions are fundamental to the preschool year, as these skills assist children with building successful social relationships (Cefai & Cavioni, 2013). In times where schools are focused more on academia than life skills, it is becoming increasingly necessary for schools to address and create a plan of implement for these skills into the classroom (Denham, Bassett, & Zinsler, 2012; Denham & Burton, 2003; Elias et al., 1997; Gilliam, 2005).

Gilliam (2005) explained that researchers and practitioners cannot address the preschool push-out phenomenon if it is ignored at the earliest entry point. The following research questions were a guide for this study:

1. What are the perceptions and accounts of school leaders regarding preschool behaviors that lead to exclusionary discipline measures?
2. What are the perceptions and accounts of school leaders regarding the implementation of a social-emotional learning curriculum for preschool students as a behavior intervention measure?

A comprehensive body of research has provided a clear scaffold for social-emotional learning in schools and has advocated for children who come unprepared to enter school due to their social, emotional, and behavioral deficits (Denham & Burton, 2003; Gilliam, 2005; Gilliam et al., 2016; Gilliam & Shahar, 2006; Hemmeter, Ostrosky, Artman, & Kinder, 2008; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). Beginning early in a child's life, social and emotional learning can be highly impactful for helping preschool children to understand and manage their emotions, feel and show empathy for others, establish healthy relationships, set positive goals, and make responsible decisions (Denham & Burton, 2003; Gilliam, 2005; Gilliam et al., 2016). According to McGill-Franzen (2006), each child comes into school with varying degrees of academic knowledge and social competence. These discrepancies often present major challenges in classrooms. Despite the levels of knowledge a child has on the first day of school, the present goal of kindergarten teachers remains delivering multiple aspects of cognitive and social development skills (McGill-Franzen, 2006). Integrated efforts to develop a child's social and emotional skills result in many positive outcomes, including prevention of risky behaviors such

as drug use, violence, and dropping out (Gilliam et al., 2016; Gilliam & Shahar, 2006; Hemmeter et al., 2008; Zins et al., 2004).

Consequently, several research needs and questions surfaced from the literature presented on preschool expulsion and social-emotional learning. Why are disciplinary exclusions happening with children as young as 2 years old? Are there long-term consequences for these children? More importantly, how can educational leaders prevent these intense consequences?

### **Situation to Self**

Following the methodological direction of Van Manen (1997), I found within the current study the contextual constructionist perspective to which I subscribe, which has enabled the continuing practice of reflexivity. The practice of positioning myself within an epistemological stance has proven to be a sanctioning experience and has added an awareness of my own portion within this research (Crotty, 2006; Van Manen, 1997). This feels like a harmonious place to be; through my own professional and personal experiences, I have accumulated knowledge and involvement that I recognize are shaped by diverse contexts. Through engagement with the differing areas that have influenced my positioning, I have been able to realize how much these contextual differences have shaped my approach to understanding, both my own experiences and those of others.

In attempting to define the methodology that best aligned with both my own epistemological position and that of my research questions, I became immersed in the similarities and differences between the differing qualitative methodologies, at first struggling with making sense of the finely nuanced differences (Crotty, 2006). While exploring what I deemed not right as a methodological approach for my research, I gained a deeper appreciation for the intricacies of what I had chosen as best fitting. Both the contextual constructivist position and my choice to



position my research within the phenomenological arena feel congruent with my personal perspectives (Van Manen, 1997).

In saying this, however, I am also aware of the possible impact of the potential biases this brings on the ultimate purpose of the research—the uncovering of what is there (Crotty, 2006). This for me has been the major impact on the process of defining my chosen methodology and designing my research study. In becoming more aware of my own epistemological stance and phenomenological positioning and the reasoning behind them, I feel I hold a stronger appreciation of the alternative perspectives. Being mindful of this brought me closer to the research in a mature, informed, open, and honest way.

### **Study Outline**

From an insider's vantage point, this study chronicled the experiences of school leaders working with challenging preschool behaviors and their perceptions of social-emotional learning. The experiences of the selected principals, assistant principals, and coordinators, along with the interpretations that I derived as the researcher, could strengthen the literature and research concerning challenging behaviors with preschool students and the increase in exclusionary discipline practices. Furthermore, this study was meant to provide insight into the use of a social-emotional learning curriculum with preschool students as a behavioral intervention. Through the tenets of hermeneutic phenomenology, the study aimed to enrich the pedagogy by providing a deep appreciation of the experiences rather than by developing prescriptions for specific actions within the study (Gadamer, 1976/2004; Gilgun, 2014; Van Manen, 1997, 2014). The work of hermeneutics is not meant simply to develop a new understanding, but to clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place. Gadamer (1976/2004) stated, "Hermeneutics must start from the position that a person seeking to understand something has a bond to the subject matter that

comes into language through the traditionary text and has, or acquires, a connection with the tradition from which it speaks” (p. 295).

This chapter introduces and describes the selected methodology for this study, phenomenology (Gadamer, 1976/2004; Gilgun, 2014; Heidegger, 1926/1996; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002; Vagle, 2014; Van Manen, 1997, 2014). Along with the historical and philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology, the methodological encroachments of hermeneutics are employed as a research methodology, providing the best opportunity to give voice to school leaders, within the context of this study (Gilgun, 2014; Patton, 2002; Vagle, 2014; Van Manen, 1997, 2014). The works of Van Manen (1997, 2014), whose research structure and analytical approach informed my research design, are introduced as his methods “offer the kind of practical approaches that may be helpful” in interpretive research (p. 30). Further, the underpinnings of Gilgun (2014), Moustakas (1994), Patton (2002), and Vagle (2014) are referenced often as leading support within this research.

### **Methodology**

*Somehow, out of the haze of multiple competing perspectives, we share desires to understand persons in context from their points of view, to be immersed in those contexts, to produce material grounded in human experience. (Gilgun, 2014, p. 13)*

As a researcher interested in the experiences of school leaders, I found phenomenology to be the philosophy that defined the experiences I desired to elicit and that was aligned to my research questions most appropriately. Phenomenology is thought to be unique within the realm of qualitative methodologies as it is both a philosophy and an approach to inquiry that seeks truth and logic through critical and intuitive thinking about human existence (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002; Vagle, 2014; Van Manen, 1997). Many researchers have supported

phenomenology as a methodology, and understanding the philosophy of the approach creates a further dimension in the researcher journey. Vagle (2014) posited that phenomenological researchers see the world with openness, allowing “life to be transparent and assuring protection of an experience within the natural environment” (p. 74). Patton (2002) stated that a phenomenologist is “committed to understanding social phenomena from the actor’s perspective, and reality is what people perceive it to be” (p. 69). Further, Moustaskas (1994) claimed that nothing can be taken for granted because all things are not what they may seem; instead, phenomenological researchers seek to understand exactly how things come to be.

### **Pioneers of Phenomenology**

The central approach to phenomenology, dating back to the early 20th century, is understood within the context of one’s social and cultural context and experiences (Moustaskas, 1994; Patton, 2002; Vagle, 2014; Van Manen, 1997). Much has been written about the theoretical assumptions of phenomenology; nonetheless, the history and origin of phenomenology are best understood through the pioneers of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, and his student, follower, and later a leader in his own right, Martin Heidegger (Patton, 2002; Vagle, 2014; Van Manen, 1997, 2014). This section examines the work of these philosophers in relation to the philosophical development of phenomenology, as well as the ideas of Heidegger’s student, Hans-Georg Gadamer, the leading philosopher in hermeneutical thought (Patton, 2002; Vagle, 2014).

**Edmund Husserl.** Edmund Husserl (1889/1980) is referred to as the father of phenomenology, and he concentrated primarily on the here and now (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002; Vagle, 2014; Van Manen, 1997). Through a clear focus on the structure of the experience, Husserl (1889/1980) gave form and meaning to the lifeworld (Kvale, 1996). He defined

phenomenology as the study of the intentional content remaining in the mind after the bracketing of the world, arguing that all philosophy should end in a description of the experience through pure perception (Husserl, 1965; Kvale, 1996). Husserl developed phenomenology in contradiction to the positivism movement and applied the methods to human concerns (Patton, 2002; Vagle, 2014). Positivistic studies are meant to address the observation of external reality; however, Husserl desired for a new science within phenomenology, one that observed individuals in their natural environment (Husserl, 1965; Vagle, 2014). Thus, *transcendental phenomenology* was created (Kvale, 1996; Vagle, 2014; Moustakas, 1994).

Husserl desired his new approach to gain acceptance as a rigorous science, so he created his three-step approach for research: *anschannng*, intentionality, and bracketing (Husserl, 1952/1980; Kvale, 1996). Husserl (1965) espoused questioning what is “real and valid about an experience and the relationship between the knower and the known” (p. 1970). The first of Husserl’s three steps, *anschannng*, or to look at a phenomenon, is a form of phenomenological intuition, empty of any and all preconceived notions (Husserl, 1965; Kvale, 1996). Whether this is actually possible is one of the questions in relation to Husserlian phenomenology, discussed later in this section. The second step, intentionality, addressed the existence of material reality, as Husserl knew that acts of consciousness are intentional because we are aware of the world (Husserl, 1952/1980; Kvale, 1996). Husserl’s (1952/1980) last key step, and perhaps his most notable, is bracketing. To bracket out information is to suspend belief, to uncover the true essence of an experience in its pure state (Husserl, 1952/1980; Kvale, 1996). Husserl (1952/1980) preferred the researcher to be detached from an experience to be able to observe the phenomenon properly, with wide-open eyes clear of any preconceived ideas (Kvale, 1996).

**Martin Heidegger.** Husserl wished for student and fellow philosopher, Martin Heidegger, to build on his work in phenomenology; however, Heidegger's early work was significantly different, despite extending Husserl's original position (Kvale, 1996; Patton, 2002; Vagle, 2014; Van Manen, 1997). Heidegger's name became synonymous with interpretive phenomenology; his seminal text, *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 1926/1996), is considered a significant philosophical work, but Husserl perceived Heidegger's path as a betrayal of the principles of phenomenology (Patton, 2002; Vagle, 2014, Van Manen, 1997). A common foundation within phenomenological studies is the interest in the found meaning during the exploration of the experience; the experience is the philosophical basis for understanding, knowledge, and truth (Patton, 2002; Vagle, 2014; Van Manen, 1997). Yet, noted differences between the two viewpoints of Husserl and Heidegger have resulted in two diverse research traditions.

Heidegger's (1926/1996) focus on the existence (being-in-world) as opposed to consciousness (something out there) was the significant turning point for the development of hermeneutic phenomenology (Patton, 2002; Vagle, 2014; Van Manen, 1997). Heidegger opposed his predecessor's process of bracketing, declaring that it is far from possible for a researcher to separate previous knowledge and experience to establish an independent standpoint (Vagle, 2014; Van Manen, 1997, 2014). His unique ideals and philosophies led to the creation of hermeneutic phenomenology.

**Hans-Georg Gadamer.** Hans-Georg Gadamer, Heidegger's intellectual progeny, furthered the work of hermeneutics in his mentor's name, emphasizing the shift from a pure description of an experience to an interpretation of the experience within meaning (Gadamer, 1976/2004; Van Manen, 1997). At the core of Gadamerian philosophy is the belief that the relationship between society and culture can only be revealed through human dialogue (Van

Manen, 1997). Gadamer's views signify that we continually interpret the world and therefore cannot be neutral or independent observers, but rather existential interpreters. Gadamer took the position charted by Heidegger that all existence is hermeneutical and built on that position by focusing on the idea that all human understanding occurs through the lens of tradition and language (Van Manen, 1997).

Gadamer's (1976/2004) interpretation of hermeneutic phenomenology "is not to develop a procedure of understanding, but to clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place" (p. 263). When applying hermeneutics to the process of interpretation, Gadamer introduced a *horizon* as a way to conceptualize one's understanding. He defined a person's horizon to be as far as the person can see or understand (Gadamer, 1976/2004). True understanding occurs when one's horizon or present knowledge progresses to a new understanding; thus, the process of understanding is a "fusion of horizons" (Gadamer, 1976/2004, p. 263). An individual's personal history also influences the horizon and becomes a rich metaphor denoting a range of vision that includes everything seen from a particular vantage point (Gadamer, 1976/2004).

Although Gadamer's (1976/2004) theory of philosophical hermeneutics developed near the end of a long chronological history of philosophy, his impacts tapped the roots to a far more ancient tune. Historically, Gadamer's epistemological beliefs revived the practice of hermeneutics, designed as an interpretation of ancient texts in the quest of the true meaning. However innovative it may seem, philosophical hermeneutics possess a mythical origin, reaching back to the makers of western tradition, the ancient Greeks.

Rather than expound philosophical hermeneutics' historical pedigree, I wish here to illuminate its character, to personify it to show relevance rather than simply dissect it with a detached view. After all, this act of personifying is a hermeneutical rehearsal. According to

Hillman (1975), “To understand anything at all, we must envision it as having an independent subjective interior existence, capable of experience, obliged to a history, motivated by purposes and intentions” (p. 16). Hence, while I lean on Aristotle’s *On Interpretation*, which confronted the epistemological structure of hermeneutics, I implore rather the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* to animate such practice and reveal the underlying mythology. I imagine Gadamer would support a humanizing direction for his research, as he saw value in mythological consciousness (Gadamer 1976/2004). He maintained mythological consciousness allows for a more “dynamic and authentic relationship between subject and object” (Gadamer, 1976/2004, p. 128). Therefore, the analysis of Gadamer’s theories through the lens of *Hymn to Hermes* ought to remain in the spirit of the genuine rapport. Therefore, I turn to the mythological understanding of philosophical hermeneutics and introduce Hermes, the god of interpretation.

The term *hermeneutics* is derived from the Greek word *hermenuin* and suggests the act of interpretation (Van Manen, 1997). Hermes, from Greek mythology, was a winged messenger and interpreter for the mythological gods of ancient Greece. Hermes was thought to be responsible for changing the unknowable into a form that humans could understand. What had been a scholarly method for dealing with obscure sacred text in the Bible became known as hermeneutics (Van Manen, 1997). Now it is known as both a philosophy and method of interpretation, and Heidegger maintained that human existence in the realm of being was unavoidably hermeneutical (Van Manen, 1997).

### **Modern Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is characterized as a “movement” and considered a dynamic philosophy that comprises several parallel currents that are related but not homogeneous (Patton, 2002; Vagle, 2014; Van Manen, 1997). They do, however, have a common point of departure and

agree on the fundamental phenomenological task: the descriptive investigation of the phenomena, both objective and subjective, in their fullest breadth and depth. Each phenomenologically inspired approach has a different emphasis depending on the specific strand of phenomenological philosophy that informs the methodology (Patton, 2002; Vagle, 2014; Van Manen, 1997). Educational research literature splits between transcendental and hermeneutic phenomenology, each school of thought with its own adherents.

Husserl's (1965) early transcendental phenomenology is built around the idea of reduction, referring to suspending the personal prejudices and attempting to reach to the core or essence through a state of pure consciousness. Therefore, transcendental phenomenology advocates for applying the phenomenological attitude within a natural attitude. Researchers such as Gurwitsch (1901–1973), Schutz (1899–1959), Giorgi (2009), and Moustakas (1994) trailed Husserl's transcendental philosophies within their works.

A sharp turn can be observed in the ideas of Heidegger (1926/1996) and Gadamer (1976/2004), termed as hermeneutic phenomenology. Hermeneutics is primarily the rejection of the idea of suspending personal opinions and rather adding the interpretive narration to the description (Patton, 2002; Vagle, 2014; Van Manen, 1997). Based on the premise that reduction is impossible and accepting the possibility of endless interpretations, this school of phenomenology attempts to get beneath the subjective experience and find the genuine objective nature as realized by an individual. Patton (2002), Vagle (2014), and Van Manen (1997) all subscribe to this school of method.

### **Hermeneutic Practices**

Hermeneutic practices permit researchers to explore complex, dynamic relationships and experiences while acknowledging powerful social issues such as power relations, gender



(in)equality, or other contextual factors (McCaffery & Moules, 2016). Hermeneutic phenomenology is attentive to philosophies and considered a research methodology aimed at producing rich textual descriptions of the experiences of individuals that can connect with the experiences of all collectively (Patton, 2002; Van Manen, 1997). In search of a true understanding of an experience, the researcher seeks an increasingly deeper and layered reflection by using rich descriptive language. This genre of phenomenology brings the reader closer to the subculture studied through the lived experiences of the participants as interpreted by the researcher (Van Manen, 2014). The hermeneutic turn of phenomenology resulted from the opinion that individuals' experiences can be best understood through stories they tell of that experience. With this style of research, an in-depth understanding of the experience is needed to obtain comprehensive descriptions, providing the basis for a reflective analysis that portrays the essences of the authentic experience (Van Manen, 2014).

For this study, a phenomenological design with hermeneutic methods of inquiry was employed to investigate the perceptions and experiences of selected school leaders during the implementation of a social-emotional learning program in selected preschool classrooms. My desire for this study was to interpret the essence of the phenomenon, rather than simply describe it (Van Manen, 2014). I believe it is difficult to bracket out personal elucidation; therefore, I have chosen to shadow the philosophies of Gadamer (1976/2004) and Van Manen (1997) with the development of a hermeneutic phenomenological study. The tenets of hermeneutic phenomenology permitted me to collect and interpret the participants' experiences and to determine the essences of those experiences (Van Manen, 1997, 2014). I could create a space, as a researcher, to explain the meanings and assumptions of the participants' experiences based on my theoretical and personal knowledge (Patton, 2002; Vagle, 2014; Van Manen, 1997).

## Research Study Design

Phenomenology has evolved throughout the years and cannot be regarded as a “singular methodology” (Vagle, 2014, p. 51). Building from the seminal works are contemporary approaches to hermeneutic paradigms, one proposed by Max Van Manen (1997, 2014). A hermeneutic phenomenological study intertwines the interpretations of both the participants and the researcher, to uncover layers of details and to identify the core essence of that lived experience (Patton, 2002; Van Manen, 1997). The research design outlines the philosophical groundwork and methodological approach selected for this study. Following the traditions of Heidegger and Gadamer, Van Manen (1997) maintained that researchers must acknowledge previous experiences and beliefs, noting the importance of how these may influence the researcher in all phases of data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

For this study, school leaders were asked to consider their views, both through meaning and expectation, of the phenomenon (Van Manen, 2014). I chose not to set aside my bias, but instead, to disclose my postulation that social-emotional learning is important for a child’s development and success in school. This notion of conducting coinquiry and the researcher having a preunderstanding about a topic is central to Van Manen’s (1997, 2014) distinction of hermeneutic phenomenology. I, as the researcher, participated fully with the participants to best understand their complex interactions. Although this study evolved from my own experiences, I aimed to create space in the research for the participants to share their stories and lived experiences. Creswell (2014) noted, “We see the constructivist worldview manifest in phenomenological studies in which individuals describe their experiences” (p. 25). Therefore, Van Manen’s (1997) approach aligns closely with my research philosophy and is traditionally representative of this type of hermeneutic phenomenological study.

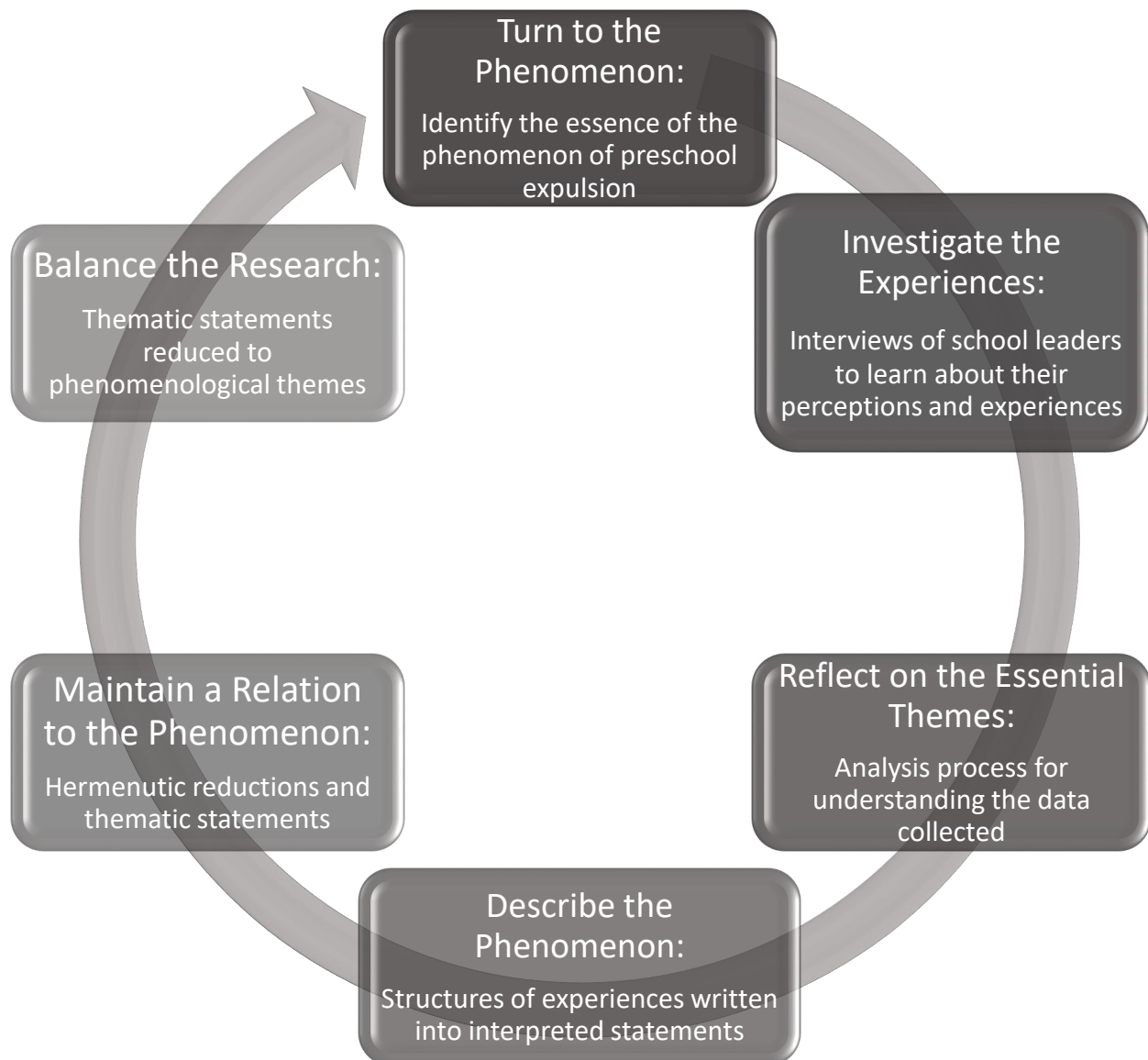
Van Manen (1997) is resistant to structure, stating that predetermining a research methodology would stifle the very fabric of human science research in hermeneutic fashion. However, Van Manen (1997) suggested a six-step “methodological structure” (p. 30), which provided the framework for current research study. The steps allow for flexibility in emphasizing or minimizing one step or another as the data unfold. The thematic steps are as follows:

1. Turn to the nature of lived experience.
2. Investigate experience as people live it.
3. Reflect on the essential themes characterizing the phenomenon
4. Describe the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting.
5. Maintain a strong and orientated relation to the phenomenon.
6. Balance the research context by considering the parts and the whole (Van Manen, 1997).

Whereas these steps are somewhat sequential, Van Manen (1997) advocated for fluid movement between the phases of the research design. He described his design approach as allowing for a natural unfolding of an experience as the data are read and reread, considered and reconsidered, and examined and reexamined (Van Manen, 1997).

Although Van Manen’s (1997) research structure is neither absolute nor fixed, his methodological structure was particularly useful while sorting through the data collected within this study. Van Manen’s (1997) six research activities were used as a guide and woven through the project and should be seen as a “dynamic interplay” (p. 30). The circular interpretation, as shown in Figure 1, is active, has no bottom or top and no beginning or end (Van Manen, 1997, 2014). This approach was chosen to gain an understanding of each individual’s experience and also to provide a universal description of all participants’ experiences as a collective whole (Van

Manen, 1997). Specifically, this design permitted the collection of data from individuals while simultaneously capturing the core experience of all participants.



*Figure 1. Hermeneutic phenomenological framework. Based on *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (2nd ed.), by M. Van Manen, 1997, New York, NY: Routledge.*

### **Turn to the Phenomenon**

Turning to a phenomenon that interests the researcher is the first of the six frames providing structure for the presentation of the methodology (Van Manen, 1997). Van Manen (1997) emphasized research with a special significance or a particular interest, which means the researcher is likely to have personal experiences and perceptions of the phenomenon before commencing the study. Similarly, phenomenological research has been described as being granted or given over to a task (Van Manen, 1997), which requires deep questioning and is always a project designed to make sense of an aspect of human meaning. Within this data collection section, I describe the essence of the study, the research questions, and the orientation within the study.

### **Investigate the Lived Experiences**

Investigating an experience as it is lived is the second of the six frames providing the structure for the presentation of this methodology (Van Manen, 1997). This stage of research is concerned with establishing a “renewed contact with the original experience” (Van Manen, 1997, p. 31) and outlines the research methods employed to investigate the experiences of school leaders, including a description of the site, the selection of the participants, and the data collection methods.

### **Reflect on the Essential Themes**

The third step in Van Manen’s (1997) framework is to reflect on the essential themes characterizing the phenomenon. The emphasis of this process begins the data analysis, which includes analyzing the data collected, the development and emergence of the themes, and reflection activities to capture the essential meaning of the lived experiences (Van Manen, 1997). I followed this process.

Along with Van Manen's (1997) framework, this study also included the circularity of interpretation and coherence of the whole and its parts through the hermeneutic circle (Gadamer, 1976/2004). The objective of phenomenological data analysis is to "transform the lived experience into a textual expression of its essence—in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful" (Van Manen, 2014, p. 36).

### **Describe the Phenomenon**

The hermeneutic process of cocreation between the researcher and participants in the construction of meaning consists of a circle of reading, reflective writing, and interpretations of the experiences (Gadamer, 1976/2004). The fourth step in Van Manen's (1997) six-step approach is to describe the phenomenon in the art of writing and rewriting. Van Manen (1997) elaborated on constructing a text, emphasizing the importance of involving continual dialogue between seemingly meaningful words, phrases, and concepts and then questioning these sections of the text to ask, "What is really being said here?" which is the heart of the analysis process.

### **Maintain a Relation to the Phenomenon**

The focus of the fifth step in Van Manen's (1997) research design is "maintaining a strong and orientated relation to the phenomenon" (p. 33). I remained attentive to the nature of the study and the basis of the research questions. To establish a strong relation with a certain phenomenon, I could not afford to become disinterested. Van Manen (1997) explained, "To be orientated to an object means that we are animated by the object in a full and human sense" (p. 33). Moustakas (1994) described a similar result in his heuristic phenomenology approach:

It refers to a process of internal search through which one discovers the nature and meaning of experience. . . . The self of the researcher is present throughout the process

and, while understanding the phenomenon with increasing depth, the researcher also experiences growing self-awareness and self-knowledge. (p. 17)

### **Balance the Research**

The sixth and final step is “balancing the research context by considering the parts and the whole” (Van Manen, 1997, p. 33). Thus, I stood back and looked at the study by focusing on my role as researcher, ethical components of trustworthiness, limitations within the study, and further areas of study. “It’s easy to get buried in writing that one no longer knows where to go, what to do next, and how to get out of the hole one has dug” (Van Manen, 1997, p. 33).

### **Research Methods**

Van Manen (1997) began his dialog regarding human science research beginning with a discussion of the meanings of methodology versus the meaning of methods, procedures, techniques, and skills.

On the one hand, methodology refers to the philosophic framework, the fundamental assumptions, and characteristics of a human science perspective, . . . which is associated with or implied by a certain research method. We might say methodology is the theory behind the method. . . . On the other hand, the word ‘techniques’ refers to the virtually inexhaustible variety of theoretical and practical procedures that one can invent or adopt in order to work out a certain research method. (Van Manen, 1997, pp. 27-28)

In addition to a distinction for methodology, Van Manen (1997, 2014) also made distinctions between the concepts of methods, procedures, and techniques. Methods, in research, can be described as the procedures and strategies for gathering and analyzing the data of a study. Vagle (2014) has suggested that the researcher can arrange personal and methodical steps in interpretive research to analyze data to locate meanings in a text. Techniques are like procedures

but may imply “an element of expertise . . . connotations of expertise in a professional or technical sense” (Vagle, 2014, p. 28). Just as the techniques used to design and interpret quantitative statistics require technical knowledge and abilities, so do the techniques used to conduct hermeneutic interviews and analysis (Vagle, 2014; Van Manen, 1997).

### **Research Questions**

Phenomenological research is fundamentally a matter of ascertaining what genuinely interests a person and identifying the interest in the phenomenon (Van Manen, 1997). Gadamer (1976/2004) considered the spirit of the question, describing it as the opening up and keeping open of possibilities. However, true reflection will occur only when a researcher can remain open in such a way to become deeply interested in the inquisitiveness that makes the question possible in the first place (Van Manen, 1997, 2014). To exercise true questioning of experience is to interrogate it from the center of one’s being (Gadamer, 1976/2004). Even the most trivial of phenomenological questions seeks deep knowledge and understanding, and Van Manen (1997) noted that the researcher should “live this question, and become this question” (p. 40).

To distinguish phenomenological questions from other styles of research questions is imperative, as these questions must be clear, understandable, and lived by the researcher (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002; Vagle, 2014; Van Manen, 1997). Van Manen (1997) suggested that phenomenological questioning teaches the reader to “wonder and to question the very thing that is being questioned by the question” (p. 44). Two questions guided this study:

1. What are the perceptions and experiences of school leaders regarding preschool behaviors that lead to exclusionary discipline measures?



2. What are the perceptions and experiences of school leaders regarding the implementation of a social-emotional learning curriculum for preschool students as a behavior intervention measure?

At all stages, the researcher should be mindful of the original questions and be persistently oriented in the lived experience that makes it possible to ask the “what it is like” type questions.

### **Hermeneutic Methods**

Phenomenology is heavily rooted in an existential worldview in which an individual’s experiences and perceptions are the foundation for knowing and understanding reality. Thus, to understand something relies upon the experiences and perceptions of individuals who have experienced that thing. A hermeneutic phenomenological study intertwines the interpretations of both the participants and the researcher, to uncover layers of details and to identify the core essence of that lived experience (Patton, 2002; Vagle, 2014; Van Manen 1997, 2014).

Ultimately, the overarching goal of examining unique experiences is to interpret those experiences in order to relate particular instances to a universal understanding.

Data collection in hermeneutic phenomenology should be a reflective process aimed to access the insights of participants as they make sense of their lived experiences and situatedness (Creswell, 2014; Laverly, 2003; Van Manen, 1997). The methodology of a study informs the vital aspects of the procedures and technique (Crotty, 2006; Patton, 2002). For example, the methodology of an interview dramatically influences the methods of an interview (Patton, 2002). Think about how dissimilar the interviews conducted by a journalist and a detective may be, notwithstanding a description of each. Therefore, adequately designing the data collection for a study is vital. Phenomenological methods aim to enrich pedagogic wisdom by providing a deep

understanding of what the experience is like for participants rather than by simply developing prescriptions for action, and the methods should align with the selected philosophy.

The act of interpretation was necessary to position myself to construe the true meaning of the phenomenon. As a hermeneutic phenomenologist, I understood the importance to not only collect, but also interpret meaning from the lived experiences of the participants. In doing so, I could ascertain how my personal values, contextual interactions, and respective collaboration were major factors in the research. To some degree, the lived experiences of the participants, in terms of the central phenomenon, relied on my subjective analysis, so it was critical that I enter the participant's world through the hermeneutic principles (Vagle, 2014).

**Participants and recruitment.** The goal of hermeneutic phenomenological research is to develop a vibrant and dense description of the phenomenon investigated in this particular context; therefore, when selecting participants, recommendations should be made by the researcher based on their knowledge of these individuals and their potential willingness to participate and their potential for open contributions (Crotty, 2006). According to Crotty (2006) the phenomenon dictates the chosen method, not vice-versa, including the type of participants.

Purposeful selection was an appropriate means of selecting the site and the participants for this study as it allowed me to carefully select what could best inform the study (Creswell, 2014; Crotty, 2006; Van Manen, 1997, 2014). The chosen school district is located in the southeastern United States and is considered a midsized rural area. This study was specific to chosen elementary schools within the selected school district. An inclusive factor for the elementary school was that the school must have at least one preschool special education classroom or one prekindergarten classroom.

Patton (2002) suggested that for a phenomenological study, two to 10 participants are sufficient to reach saturation. Creswell (2014) endorsed “long interviews with up to ten people” (p. 113). Therefore, a sample size of six to nine school leaders was selected for this study. At the selected elementary schools, the principal and assistant principals were invited to participate. In addition to the building-level administrators, the study included two school-based coordinators who work with the special needs’ preschool classrooms. I believed these participants could illuminate the phenomenon of social-emotional learning and preschool expulsion. In addition to knowledge and experience, Van Manen (1997) and Vagle (2014) suggested that the availability and willingness of the participants and their ability to communicate experiences are also essential components of the research process.

Each participant was asked to partake in at least one in-depth personal interview. The length of the interview varied by participant, as I interviewed them to the point of data saturation and redundancy. Two assistant principals did not participate in the study because they were new to the school district. One coordinator did not participate in the study due to schedule conflicts. This left the study with a total of six participants: three principals, two assistant principals, and one preschool coordinator. These leaders shared commonalities and experiences to inform the study and illuminate the phenomenon of preschool behaviors and social-emotional learning.

**Role of the researcher.** Due to my intimacy and involvement in this study, it was imperative that, as the researcher, I recognized all assumptions and biases related to the research questions being studied (Van Manen, 2014). Therefore, before beginning this study, I engaged in the reflective process of making explicit understandings, biases, and beliefs related to the study (Laverty, 2003; Moustakas, 1994). It is not entirely possible to set aside one’s personal feelings

and thoughts, yet researchers should become aware and account for the interpretive influences (Laverty, 2003; Van Manen, 1997).

**Essence of the study.** How people make sense of life experiences defines their connection to the world (Patton, 2002). This is often referred to as intentionality, “the inseparable connectedness between subjects and objects in the world” (Vagle, 2014, p. 27). A thorough analysis of experience helps to reveal how people are meaningfully tied to the world, through the understood connection between the experience and individuals. “This requires methodologically, carefully, and thoroughly capturing and describing how people experience some phenomenon; how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). Such a way of being cannot be learned; rather, one must live the experience, drawing from who one is and is becoming.

Further, I believed that this phenomenon should be examined in the living world where these leaders worked amid educational doors, some of which were wide open, but some simply slammed shut. To remove a story from its textual background is to remove meaning and thus the possibility of understanding the essence of the experience.

**Orientation to the study.** According to Van Manen (1997), orientation within a phenomenon helps to define one’s views on life and our place in the world, which he called the “vantage point in life” (p. 40). As an example, Van Manen (1997) described his many vantage points as being a husband, a friend, and a person who enjoys reading. Concerning his research, Van Manen (1997) stated, “To orient oneself to a phenomenon always implies a particular interest. . . . I orient to life as parent and teacher” (p. 40). The difficulty with phenomenological inquiry is not necessarily knowing too little about a phenomenon, but rather potentially knowing too much.

As the researcher, I must pursue an aggressive inquisitiveness related to my area of interest to demonstrate a “turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world” (Van Manen, 1997, p. 30). How do I orient within my research? I find my orientation to be that of a teacher, leader, and mother who believes in the importance of educating the whole child. My orientation stems from 15 years as a public school educator, more specifically, a special education teacher, behavior specialist, instructional coach, assistant principal, and currently a central office leader. I am a mother of two beautiful children. I am a wife of 15 years. My interest creates a link between the orientation of the study and the research questions; I am interested in the experiences of school leaders, their perceptions of social-emotional learning, as well as their accounts of challenging preschool behaviors. This interest stems from my orientation as a school leader and educator who believes the beginning years of any child’s life are critical for building the foundation needed for healthy developmental trajectories and success in school.

***Reduction.*** Rarely do people stop and reflect on the meaning of our daily occurrences. Phenomenology is a method to break through this “taken-for-grantedness and get to the meaning structures of our experience,” known as the phenomenological reduction (Van Manen, 2014, p. 215). The phenomenological reduction consists of two parts, the epoché and the reduction (Husserl, 1965; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002; Van Manen, 1997). Epoché encompasses being open to new possibilities by acknowledging our own assumptions, a form of the bracketing created by Husserl; however, Van Manen (1997, 2014) and other hermeneutic phenomenologists reject the idea that a researcher should have to lay all assumptions aside. Van Manen’s theory guided me through my study of the experiences of school leaders and prompted me to acknowledge that my philosophical beliefs and phenomenological understanding could blanket

my interpretation and concreteness of this study; therefore, it was imperative that I recognize the impossibility to neglect previous knowledge because the “presupposition persistently creeps back into our reflection” (Van Manen, 2014, p. 47). I was conscious of my own preconceptions, and journaling during the study helped me to be aware of those preconceptions.

The next stage of phenomenological reduction is the concrete reduction of the text (Van Manen, 1997). Reduction is a way to unravel the textual findings and discover the meanings within the uniqueness of an experience (Van Manen, 1997, 2014). The task of reduction in a hermeneutic analysis entails breaking down several components to intensify the understanding of the experience and then bringing the newly identified understandings back together, making the experience whole again. For that level of understanding, the researcher must focus on the experience.

The reduction approach creates a focus during the reflection process to gain conceptual insight. I was aware of my own biases with preschool behaviors and social-emotional learning and used that awareness when I dialogued with the text. These new insights, as Van Manen (1997) recognized, may be different for me as a researcher looking at the material compared to another researcher because the reduction methods affect the insights gained from the data. The reduction methods come together as a whole, through the hermeneutic circle (Gadamer, 1976/2004), to create hermeneutic phenomenology texts (Van Manen, 1997).

### **Data Collection**

Prior to the collection of data, I spent the necessary time to frame my research study and develop a seamless process in the best interest of the participants. I submitted my research proposal to the Georgia State University Institutional Review Board for approval along with the developed interview guides and the proposed participant consent form. Along with the

Institutional Review Board submission for Georgia State, I reached out for site approval in the selected school district. After receiving approval from both organizations, I began the research process. An introductory e-mail (Appendix A) was sent to each participant with the participant consent letter attached (Appendix B). The e-mail was designed to introduce myself as the researcher, describe the study to the potential participants, and allow them to review the consent prior to the interviews. The participants and I corresponded through e-mail several times to decide on the specific conditions for the interviews.

### **Reflective Journal**

Van Manen (2014) clarified, “To write is to reflect; to write is to research. . . . In writing we may deepen and change ourselves in ways we cannot predict” (p. 20). Following this philosophy, I chose to use a reflective journal throughout this study. I recorded general impressions of the interview and reflected on and recorded impressions of other aspects of the research process (Patton, 2002; Vagle, 2014). This method of data collection also allowed me to reflect on emotions, perspectives, and experiences during the research process that might influence analysis of the data. The second place I utilized the reflective journal was during data analysis. I elaborate further on my reflective journaling within the analysis and findings sections later in the chapter.

### **Interviews**

Van Manen (1997) suggested several possible approaches to gather the “lived experience material of different forms” (p. 53), including observations, personal experience, interviews, protocol writing, and exploring literature. Kvale (1996) described data collection for qualitative interviews as “literally an inter-view, an interchange of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest” (p. 1), where the researcher attempts to “understand the world

from the subjects' point of view, to unfold meaning of peoples' experiences" (p. 2). The foundation of phenomenology is the intent to understand the phenomena in participants' own terms and to provide a personal account of human experience, allowing the essence to naturally emerge (Kvale, 1996; Moustakas, 1994).

Interviews are viewed as an appropriate selection of data collection because they highlight "building a relationship of trust between the interviewer and interviewee that leads to a more give and take conversation" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 36). For hermeneutic accounts, Van Manen (1997) advocated investigating lived experiences to the full extent as opposed to "simply learning about them through books, journals, and other second-hand accounts" (p. 31). Therefore, for this study I selected the use of in-depth, personal interviews to examine people's unique experiences and gain new perspectives on the phenomenon.

While conducting this research, I endeavored to relive and relearn the nature of the participants' experiences as they related to me; to understand these phenomena, it was necessary to enter the lives of those who had lived the experience (Patton, 2002; Vagle, 2014). Typically, the interview would begin with me introducing the research:

I appreciate you for taking time to speak with me about your lived experiences as a school leader. The purpose of this interview is to describe your perceptions and accounts of preschool behaviors that effect school readiness and often lead to exclusionary discipline measures. More specifically, the questions seek to explore the implementation of social-emotional learning in preschool classrooms as a preventative behavior intervention. (see Appendix C)

Working within the district and knowing the participants as colleagues brought an interesting dynamic to the interviews. Interviewing peers or colleagues brings an added



dimension and complexity of preexisting relationships (Patton, 2002). To ensure effective peer interviewing, I needed to understand the issues of personal interaction, space, environment, and process. Prior to the interviews, I made sure to reflect on these limitations, and I journaled my perspective and thoughts:

I face a researcher dilemma. These are my colleagues. . . . I have worked alongside many of them and call others of them my true friends . . . what type of interview I envision. I will have to choose between being collegially interactive or being formal and distanced, because they will expect me to be very interactive . . . to be me. Ultimately, I think it will be best to be interactive and use active listening strategies during the interviews, but share my thoughts with them at the end of each interview. (Journal entry)

I am still uncertain whether this interview debriefing was a good solution; however, I thought it was the best of both worlds and still allowed for comfort for both parties. These issues have been called the “who, where, and how” of interviewing, and I addressed these questions as a part of the interview planning and during the interviews (Patton, 2002; Vagle, 2014; Van Manen, 1997).

**Attitude.** The details for conducting the interviews were guided by a desire to “develop trust and a relationship of personal sharing” (Van Manen, 2014, p. 315), which allowed for a conversational tone instead of the formality of an interview. Questions needed to remain close to experience and were guided by a sense of curiosity and wonder. I met answers with animation, openness, and alertness to emerging stories. To enhance trust and comfort in discussions, I used pseudonyms for the participants, schools, and other persons discussed in the recounting of experiences.

**Where.** Interviews were conducted in a mutually agreed-upon location. The settings allowed for a climate that was conducive to conversational talking (Van Manen, 1997). All but

one participant requested to meet at the school. The last participant asked to come to my office for her interview.

**When.** Van Manen (2014) recommended choosing interview times that allow for a conversation to develop without urgency and to allow for space that would contribute to conversational ease. I conducted interviews at a time mutually agreed-upon by both parties. After discussing possible locations and the inherent need to be in a setting conducive for conversation, the first participant invited me to meet with her during a holiday break, when teachers and students were not scheduled to be in the building. Four other participants requested to meet early in the day to avoid lunchtimes and dismissal from school. The preschool coordinator and I met after school. Each allowed for a conversational tone.

**Why.** The purpose of the in-depth, personal interviews was to gather experiential descriptions and the experiences of the school leaders regarding challenging preschool behaviors. It was important to maintain a focus on the experience and to avoid common pitfalls noted in phenomenological research (Van Manen, 1997). For example, researchers tend to underestimate the unique challenges of phenomenological interviews (Van Manen, 2014). “It is extremely difficult to get interviewees to tell an experiential account in prereflective terms. It is much easier to get a person to tell *about* an experience than to tell an experience as lived” (Van Manen, 2014, p. 315). Therefore, I was careful to “keep the phenomenological intent of the interview clearly in mind . . . [and to] try to obtain concrete stories of particular situations or events” (Van Manen, 2014, p. 316).

**Interview techniques.** Qualitative interview techniques can differ in many ways, but each technique shares commonalities, requiring a particular focus and purpose, active listening, establishment of a certain rapport, and a questioning technique that mines deeply into the area

being investigated (Vagle, 2014). In particular, a hermeneutic interview is an interpretive conversation wherein both participants reflectively orient themselves to bring the significance of the phenomenological question into view. Vagle (2014) also suggested following the rules of improvisational theater and in *Bossypants*, Tina Fey (2011) described her rules of life through improv. Fey (2011) believed that a person must say yes and agree with what is offered and remember there are no mistakes, only opportunities. By carefully developing questions that were conversational in nature, my intent was to mobilize the participants to reflect on their experiences to determine the deeper meanings of these experiences.

***The questions.*** During the interviews, the questions were kept open, exploratory, and oriented towards both process and meaning (Van Manen, 1997). A list of semistructured questions was used as a means of guiding the interview (Appendix C). These questions helped to direct the interview and the participant if the topics started to veer off track. I approached the questions with more than just a general idea of how the conversations would develop and jotted down any questions, thoughts, or phrases of interest as the participants spoke. The aim of questioning was to encourage answers from participants that remained within the scope of the research questions or did not deviate too far away while also facilitating an open, explorative process (Van Manen, 1997). The questioning technique involved a semistructured protocol, which Crotty (2006) suggested allows the participants to share honest thoughts and feedback while assuring the researcher remains aligned with the baseline.

***Conversational openness.*** Seeking to advance understanding of a topic through a discovery of other people's standpoints is the nature of hermeneutic conversations (Van Manen, 1997). This requires the researcher and the participants to pay attention to the different perspectives that other people have to share (Van Manen, 1997, 2014). In-depth, conversational

questions were congruent with my research paradigm and methodology and enabled advanced access to the experiences of school leaders (Patton, 2002; Van Manen, 1997). This conversational method centered on acquiring a deeper consideration of the leaders' stories by examining the meaning-making of school leaders through their language, perceptions, and lived experiences of challenging preschool behaviors (Van Manen, 1997). Further, this data collection method allowed me, as the researcher, to fully appreciate the rich, interpersonal dialogues and see the themes that emerged from the interviews and hermeneutical writings (Van Manen, 1997). These perspectives added depth and breadth to my understanding of the lived experience of school leaders' perceptions of challenging preschool behaviors and social-emotional learning for school readiness.

***Balance.*** Common misnomers can occur if the proper balance is not maintained during the interview to collect experiential data. For example, Van Manen (1997) advised that the length of the interview is important, but no objective measure exists to determine the length. Equally problematic is gathering a response that is “skimpy or that lacks sufficient concreteness” or that is “long winded with unmanageable quantities of tapes or transcripts” (Van Manen, 1997, p. 67). Likewise, both openness and focus were critical to the study. To maintain focused yet open interviews, I was intent on listening to the participant and not directing and controlling the exchange, through an adopted willingness to allow the participant to steer the conversation. This method allowed for a greater potential for discovery as the interviewees might reveal insights and experiences that I had not predicted. While maintaining a conversational tone, “one needs to be oriented to the question or notion in such a strong manner that one does not get easily carried away with interviews that go everywhere and nowhere” (Van Manen, 1997, p. 67).

The first interview made evident that my initial set of questions might have been too ambitious. Instead of creating an interview that was rushed and felt too systematic, I chose at that point to highlight the main questions I wished to ask; the remainder of the questions would be asked if time or purpose allowed. Also, I saw the need to include second-tier prompting questions, to foster a more natural flow to the interview and facilitate a more meaning-making narrative (Van Manen, 1997). To this end, some second-tier prompt questions were devised as a way of opening up potential areas for discussion where necessary (Smith & Osborn, 2003). These included, “What happened?” “How did it start?” “Will you elaborate on that?” and “How did you feel?”

### **Transcriptions**

After each interview, the recording was sent to an online service for the initial phase of transcription. I was keenly aware that within the literature, there is a great deal of debate about verbatim transcription due to a high level of errors that occur when interviews are transcribed by somebody other than the researcher (Patton, 2002; Vagle, 2014; Van Manen, 1997). Therefore, after each transcription was returned and the interview was fresh in my memory, I listened to the recording and read each transcription for accuracy. For each recording and matching transcription, I performed this activity to carefully examine the conversational dialogue. I dedicated time to each recording, making sure that the text was a true and accurate record of the accounts.

Analysis for hermeneutic phenomenology actually begins in the data collection such as the interview itself and the initial transcription of the interview (Van Manen, 1997). Nonverbals, such as pauses, voice inflection, and facial cues, were included as an observation of the participants' behavior during the interview and were taken into consideration during the

interpretive process (Gilgun, 2014). I began formulating ideas around patterns I was seeing, my own reflective process, and possible categories emerging from the meaning-making created by participants of their experiences (Gilgun, 2014).

### **Data Analysis**

“Phenomenology claims that in order to grasp the essence of a thing, it is necessary to take phenomena as the object of the analysis” (Tarozzi & Mortari, 2010, p. 23). Because this type of research is a qualitative analysis of narrative data, methods to analyze data vary significantly from more traditional methods of research (Patton, 2002). Educational research often involves large sample sizes, but the phenomenological approach to research uses vastly fewer participants and is typically more intimate and lesser scaled (Patton, 2002). Essentially, phenomenological studies are focused on meaning—the meaning of the experience, behavior, or narrative (Waters, 2017).

In keeping with the methodology adopted for this study, the data analysis approaches were developed from hermeneutic principles, following the guidelines from the literature. The analytical process was directed by Van Manen’s (1997) six-step “methodical structure” (p. 30). It is important to note that these steps are fluid; although they are sequentially listed, more of a circular dynamic tends to occur during analysis (Gadamer, 1976/2004). Furthermore, consideration was given to Van Manen’s approach for isolating the prominent themes contained in the data (Crotty, 2006; Gadamer, 1976/2004; Patton, 2002; Vagle, 2014; Van Manen, 1997, 2014).

While undertaking this analysis, I kept in the forefront of my thinking Patton’s (2002) words: “Do your very best with your full intellect to fairly represent the data and communicate what the data reveal given the purpose of your study” (p. 433). To consider each experience and

describe it completely in hermeneutic phenomenology involve the development of themes through reflection and analysis by attending to the lived experience descriptions generated from the text. Thematic analysis and reflection mean applying the reduction directives to make sense of an experience and to remain open to the true meaning of the experience in “a process of insightful invention, discovery or disclosure” (Van Manen, 1997, p. 79). Vagle (2014) reminded researchers that insight might be found in unique experiences and examples: “Sometimes a single statement, from one participant, at one moment in time is so powerful that it needs to be amplified” (p. 97).

### **Open Coding Process**

Van Manen (1997) proposed that the intent of the hermeneutic analysis is to construct an evocative description of human actions, behaviors, intentions, and experiences as one might meet them in the lifeworld. To consider each experience and describe it completely in hermeneutic phenomenology involves the isolation of themes through deep reflection and thorough analysis (Van Manen, 1997). Open coding provides a rich, detailed, and complex account of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Going beyond description, thematic analysis is “the process of recovering the theme or themes that are embodied and dramatized in the evolving meanings and imagery of the work” (Van Manen, 1997, p. 78).

The process of transcribing an interview simply marks the line in the sand between the data collection and data analysis phases of a study. While I described the transcription process earlier, the breaking apart or working the text speaks to commencement of true analysis for understanding and interpretation of the lived experiences (Patton, 2002). This cannot be a mechanical application of one-word codes or frequency counting that may characterize other methodologies; rather, hermeneutic themes are structures of experience or structures of meaning,

as the meaning is found within the experience (Van Manen, 1997). Van Manen (2014) explained the process of isolating themes as reflective and “not a rule-bound process but a free act of seeing meaning” (p. 320). The thematic analysis and development were traced back to each interview, as I sought to identify noticeable phrases in the participant responses and encouraged elaboration to ensure sufficient data were collected.

In hermeneutic phenomenology, the identification of themes is not about revealing repeating patterns, but about recovering the structure of meanings embodied in human experiences in text (Van Manen, 2014). Using a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological analysis approach described by Van Manen (1997), whereby themes emerged from the data sets, I analyzed the data with “three approaches towards uncovering thematic aspects of a phenomenon” (p. 92). The three-step open coding followed is detailed below. The themes developed through a detailed reading approach that consisted of identifying statements and phrases that were believed to be of significance to form initial themes and subthemes.

**Wholistic.** The objective of analysis at the wholistic level is to concentrate on the text as a whole (Van Manen, 1997). After the transcriptions were returned, I read through each, listening for precision, and worked the text to create a flowing conversation. At this stage in the thematic isolation, I allowed participants’ thoughts, feelings, and stories to filter through my mind. Intense focus on the transcription gave me the opportunity to make notes about the emotive content of the interview and personal intuitive responses to the interviewee. The information within the transcriptions was not altered, but trimmed and refined to directly reflect the conversational account between the participant and myself (Van Manen, 1997). By “working the text,” I was able to begin interpreting the meaning within the transcripts; however, that “does not make one interpretation necessarily truer than another” (Van Manen, 1997, p. 94). This wholistic process



of the individual interviews allowed me to consider the individual parts but also consider the parts as a whole (Van Manen, 1997). The interview questions addressed three categories specific to the current school, preschool, and social-emotional learning. These parts of the transcriptions were separated initially to identify commonalities within themes, statements, or phrases. Separating sections of the transcripts enabled easier visualization of the statements within isolation. At this point, I began with the second approach in identification of common themes.

**Selective.** Van Manen (1997) suggested that the next level in the open coding process is meant to help determine “what statements or phrases seem particularly essential” (p. 93). Sometimes called the highlighting phase, the selective approach involved reading and listening to the transcriptions and inquiring which statements seemed especially revealing about the phenomenon (Van Manen, 1997). By listening a second time, in such a slow and methodical way, I could acknowledge the personal impact and reflect upon each line of the conversation (Van Manen, 1997). I identified common statements and phrases, highlighted what spoke to me as a researcher, and made anecdotal reflections in my journal. During this state I formed the beginnings of the themes for this study (Van Manen, 1997).

**Detailed.** This stage of reflection is meant to allow the researcher to look at every sentence or cluster of sentences and ask, “What does this sentence, or sentence cluster, reveal about the phenomenon or experience being described?” (Van Manen, 1997, p. 93). Subsequently, I clustered phrases containing similar ideas and then developed key concepts surfacing from these. Seeing the selected phrases and statements in parts allowed the themes to truly emerge from the data (Patton, 2002; Vagle, 2014; Van Manen, 1997). Vagle (2014) illuminated, “Sometimes a single statement, from one participant, at one moment in time is so powerful that it needs to be amplified” (p. 97). For example, after implementing the three-step approach for a

transcription, specific phrases appeared more often and some statements stood out to me for some reason. Although this approach is used as a final look for individual transcriptions, for me, this was an integral part of the comparison from one interview to another.

### **The Art of Writing**

Phenomenological descriptions “strive for precision and exactness by aiming for interpretive descriptions” (Van Manen, 1997, p. 17). Such descriptions go further to make sense of findings, offer explanations, draw conclusions, and “impose order on an unruly but surely patterned world” (Patton, 2002, p. 480). At this point, I stopped recounting and began interpreting the experiences of the participants, within the newly discovered themes.

I questioned the data, in light of the perspective, “Is this concept shared or different from the other perspectives?” “What does this mean in relation to the phenomena?” (Van Manen, 1997). The act of interpretation enables a researcher to describe the phenomena through writing. Hermeneutic phenomenology rejects the idea of fixed, timeless, and acultural essences of experience (Henriksson & Friesen, 2012). The epistemological goal is to interpret the texts of life in descriptions that are evocative and powerful, yet for the very same reason remain contestable.

**Interpretation.** In hermeneutic phenomenology, interpretation is a key element, and writing continues as an interpretive component (Patton, 2002; Vagle, 2014; Van Manen, 1997). Interpretation of phenomenological data deals with how the meanings have been translated into the findings. For Van Manen (1997), the act of interpretation is what separates the analytical process from other phenomenological studies. “Writing a phenomenological text is a reflective process of attempting to recover and express the ways we experience life as we live it” (Van Manen, 2014, p. 20). Hermeneutic phenomenology embraces thematic analysis; Van Manen (1997) wrote,

Writing is our method. . . . There comes a moment when a researcher needs to communicate in writing what she has been up to. . . the ‘research report’ which suggests that a clear separation exists . . . yet for . . . hermeneutic phenomenological work, writing is closely fused into the research activity and reflection itself. (p. 124)

A researcher’s ability to be reflective and insightful should be evident, demonstrating the researcher’s ability to see, to think, and to show (Van Manen, 2014).

Along with disassembling the interviews into parts and analyzing the phrases and statements, I practiced reflective journaling as a means of data collection and further analysis. Keeping ongoing notes in a journal throughout the research process helped me to see the participants’ feelings, thoughts, and attitudes as active and visible (Patton, 2002). According to Smith, Flower, and Larkin (2009), the phenomenological researcher should keep detailed and comprehensive notes about the data through close analysis.

Close analysis allowed me to form a deeper engagement with the content, such as noticing the things that matter and things that have meaning to the participant, combined with any noteworthy similarities, differences, or contradictions (Smith et al., 2009). This close analysis was partly about getting the initial ideas down, so I then could proceed with a more consistent focus. However, it was also partly about identifying and considering the influence of my preconceptions. I cannot seal my knowledge and understanding off in a vacuum, but I could aim to be open minded and reveal my biases where possible. This was an ongoing reflexive process and a stream of consciousness that was in constant flow for me throughout the study.

### **Back to the Beginning**

A phenomenologist endeavors to provide a rich and thick description by exploring a phenomenon in all its first-hand consequences. Further, the researcher strives to provide a deep

text that “reaches for something beyond,” which involves that one must “meet with it, go through it, encounter it, suffer, it, consume it and, as well, be consumed by it” (Van Manen, 2013, p. 152). To establish a strong relation with a certain phenomenon, the researcher cannot afford to become disinterested, because, as Van Manen (1997) stated, “To be orientated to an object means that we are animated by the object in a full and human sense” (p. 33).

For a researcher, participation in a phenomenological research project can be transformational. “Phenomenological research is often in itself a form of deep learning, leading to a transformation of consciousness, heightened perceptiveness, increased thoughtfulness and tact, and so on” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 163). However, studies of this nature tend to be long and arduous, taxing on a person emotionally and mentally (Van Manen, 1997). The commitment to this sort of project makes demands on a researcher’s time and attention, drawing them away from family and career.

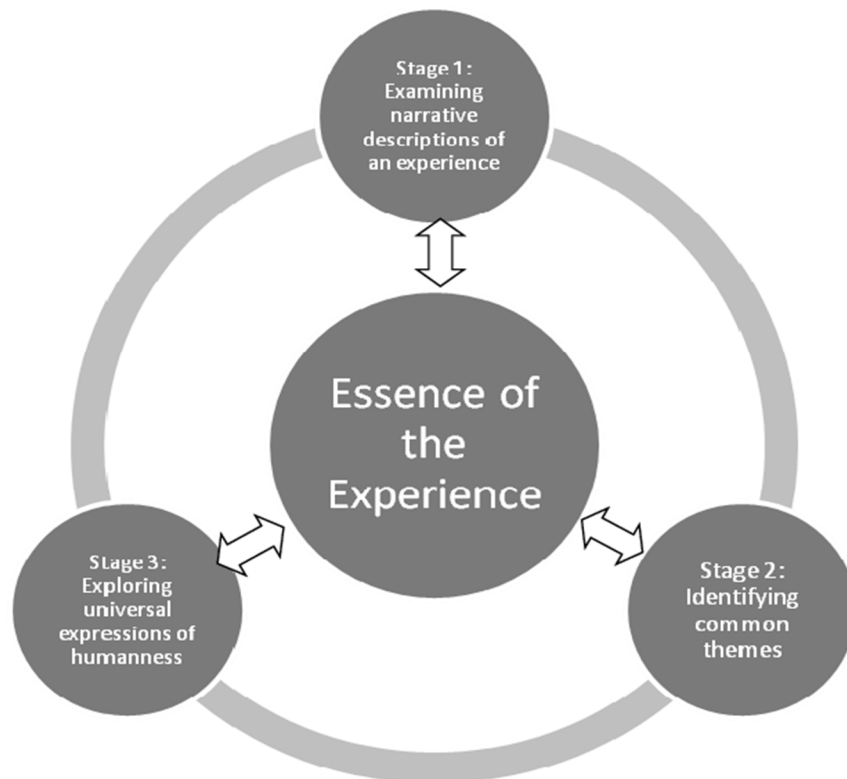
Justly, it was difficult to remain focused with the intensity needed to complete this marathon, as it was tempting to stop prior to the finish line. I was fully aware that no one could tell me what to do with the data; one has to dwell with data one’s self. Thinking back to the countless hours of staring at the data, attempting to frame, categorize, and put the data in a box, nothing seemed to guide my thinking. I found myself remembering my love for my many different hats, so many of which I had boxed up and placed on a shelf. I am a mom, a wife, a leader, a sister, a friend, a teacher, and a volunteer, just to name a few. Each hat brought me great joy, and I found myself dwelling upon these memories, drawing me away from the research where I had found great joy. Therefore, this stage forced me to stop, reflect, and revisit my purpose. Essentially, I needed to figure out how to reenergize myself and remember “my why.”

**Transformation.** For the purpose of remembering the “why” behind my research, it became evident that I needed to circle back to the beginning by revisiting the literature behind my research, pulling out what interested me, and reorienting within the phenomenon (Gadamer, 1976/2004; Patton, 2002; Vagle, 2014; Van Manen, 1997). The topics researchers choose often identify how they self-orient to the research (Van Manen, 2014). My orientation reflects a broad curiosity about the nature of student behavior, adult behaviors, and how leaders support these notions within schools. Theories abound on behavioral and discipline practices for school leaders; however, exclusionary discipline practices are on the rise, affecting the youngest, most vulnerable children. These children are the future. In this phenomenological study, my hope was to describe the nature and meaning of the experiences of leaders within the selected school district. As Van Manen (1997) wrote,

If we are expected to do the right thing in our pedagogic relationship with children we may require an idea of pedagogic competence that makes pedagogic praxis possible. However, to spell out the conditions of adequate pedagogic performance by formulating a concept, theory, or model of pedagogic competence is an idle endeavor, because such effort presumes that we know conceptually what is essentially unknowable in a conceptual or positive sense. And yet we do know in what directions the significance of pedagogic competence must be sought. (p. 158)

The intent of these exercises was to reengage myself within the study to “maintain a strong relationship to the research” (Van Manen, 1997, p. 33). This also brought light into Gadamer’s (1976/2004) hermeneutic circle (see Figure 2). Each activity within the research served a purpose, circulating in increasingly complex layers, as it is through a “constant

circulating of all relevant directions that a phenomenological question may entice the author to extend him- or herself” (Van Manen, 1997, p. 56).



*Figure 2.* The basic form of the hermeneutic circle. Based on *Philosophical Hermeneutics* by H.-G. Gadamer (D. E. Linge, Trans.), 2004, Berkeley: University of California Press (Original work published 1976).

**Hermeneutic circle.** In order to maintain a strong relationship to the research, my analysis was also informed by Gadamer (1976/2004) in terms of the fusion of horizons and the hermeneutic circle. Use of the hermeneutic circle is one way of staying close to the phenomenon, and remaining on the research questions, in that it funnels down into the exploration of the phenomenon, thus honing understanding rather than widening it (Gadamer, 1976/2004; Vagle, 2014; Van Manen, 1997). Interpretive phenomenological researchers naturally engage in the hermeneutic circle during the data collection stage, while interviewing participants, and during the phase of data analysis, while revisiting the data (Vagle, 2014). Therefore, this process allows

the researcher to return to the spoken words recursively, reflecting on these and revisiting what is meant by them to bring the parts together into one whole (Van Manen, 2014).

I was able to revisit the recordings and transcriptions as a method of refocusing on the experiences. The participants' stories were not linear; instead, they were contextual, moving back and forth in time, telling me what happened in their schools, remembering stories about students, staff, and so on. These stories were analogous to the hermeneutic circle in that they moved between the whole of the subject under discussion to the outside parts (Gadamer, 1976/2004).

Researchers of this methodology are rarely outside the research, never planning with full confidence that they know precisely how it will be; rather, such researchers are always already in the midst of the research, confronting the possibilities, making choices, and wrestling with the restlessness of possibilities. Such a way of being cannot be learned from exact structures, procedures, or instructions; rather, one must truly live the experience, drawing from who one is and is becoming.

### **Ethical Considerations**

“It’s easy to get buried in writing that one no longer knows where to go, what to do next, and how to get out of the hole one has dug” (Van Manen, 1997, p. 33). Gadamer (1976/2004) likened phenomenological reflection to following certain paths, “towards a clearing” (p. 264) where something could be shown, revealed or clarified in its essential nature. These paths are not simply identified by fixed signposts; they need to be discovered.

### **Role of the Researcher**

As the researcher, my role was first and foremost to remain in an ethical frame of mind during all stages of the research process (Crotty, 2006; Van Manen, 1997). While gathering and

reporting trustworthy and credible data, my role as a phenomenological researcher was to be less concerned with the factualness and more focused on the plausibility and evolution of the lived experiences of the participants (Van Manen, 1997).

As a professional in the field of special education and early childhood education, I have a firsthand knowledge about school-related issues, including those related to managing behavior, as well as overall gaps in this field. However, as a researcher it was imperative that I not apply my own professional experiences to interpret a problem or gap in the research topic but instead rely on the views of the participants to construct meaning (Patton, 2002; Van Manen, 1997) about the phenomenon of preschool expulsions and acknowledge that these meanings stemmed from cultural, historical, or personal experiences.

Various ethical considerations had to be accounted for in this study, as phenomenology is considered a study of human science. However, the purpose of this research was not to evaluate individuals or programs; rather, the purpose was to gain insight and understanding of the experiences to inform the research questions. I made every attempt to make the research goals clear to the participants as stated in the informed consent (see Appendix A). The participants were aware that all data would remain anonymous throughout the research study, as I used pseudonyms where needed to protect anonymity. The electronic data were organized within my home computer and stored under a password-protected file. Most paper copies were scanned and housed in the computer files by participant; however, any paper copies remaining were stored in a locked file cabinet. As an ethical consideration, I offered the participants access to the results of the research.



## **Trustworthiness**

The traditional potential of phenomenographic research is that of collective learning (Van Manen, 1997). This entails building knowledge, potentially accumulative, which can be a factor contributing to desirable societal change (Moustakas, 1994). The results of this study represent possible interpretations of personal experiences. The study is not meant to be comprehensive or the only interpretation; not all experiences will be exactly the same. My goal was to be illustrative, to facilitate a type of understanding but not a generalized prediction of or prescription for how one ought to think or behave. As a district leader within the selected school system for the study, I was mindful of my own opinions and biases of the study (Moustakas, 1994). By following the precedent set forth by Van Manen (1997), I sought to establish levels of trustworthiness by focusing on reliable methods of research to determine whether the study's findings were credible, confirmable, dependable, and transferable.

**Credibility.** Crotty (2006) argued that ensuring credibility is one of the most important factors in establishing trustworthiness in qualitative studies. Likewise, Merriam (2009) explained that credibility is whether the findings are congruent with reality. A study is considered credible when the researcher and readers have confidence in the research findings. Credibility establishes the analytical abilities of the researcher through various methods (Crotty, 2006; Van Manen, 1997). The transcriptions, through my interpretation, were taken back to the participants to validate the data (Creswell 2013). They had the opportunity to check the accuracy of the transcription as well as indicate whether anything was missing. Specific questions were asked in regard to the member-checking activity:

- Did I leave something out?
- Do you want to add something?

- Is there something you do not agree with?

All of the participants returned the copy of their transcripts indicating no concerns were found.

**Transferability.** Transferability is another aspect of qualitative research to consider (Crotty, 2006). Transferability means what is found in one context is applicable in another context. To provide for transferability, I made great efforts to provide detailed descriptions of the data collection and analysis and to present the findings with detailed, rich descriptions of the phenomena. The hope is for future readers to use these themes, rich descriptions, and findings as a means of transferability within their context (Crotty, 2006).

**Dependability.** Dependability is the degree to which results are consistent with data and emphasizes the importance of the researcher accounting for the ever-evolving context of the research (Crotty, 2006; Van Manen, 1997). My role in the study was not to generate replicability but to interpret the experiences and thoughts through those lived experiences (Van Manen, 1997). One way that a research study may demonstrate dependability is for its process to be audited (Koch, 1994), which is discussed in further detail below.

**Conformability.** According to Merriam (2009), confirmability is established when credibility, transferability, and dependability are all achieved. To establish confirmability, I provided a clear audit trail highlighting the data analysis steps. Keeping records of the interview recordings, journal notes, and transcripts, which helped me systemize, relate, and cross-reference the data, are all acceptable means of creating a clear audit trail (Merriam, 2009). A reflexive journal was used to document the daily logistics of the research, methodological decisions, and the researcher's personal reflections. Also important, Moustakas (1994) explained, is establishing the truth of things by establishing the perception of the researcher. The researcher first must reflect on the meaning of the experience from the researcher's own perspective, then

turn outward to those being interviewed to establish intersubjective validity, the testing of understanding with interviewees through a back-and-forth social interaction (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

Van Manen (1997) reminded researchers to balance the research context by “considering the parts and the whole” and being able to stand back and look at the study in its entirety (p. 33). One method to ensure balance within the research is recognizing the limitations, which are the potential disadvantages or weaknesses of the presented research in which the researcher might have no control (Crotty, 2006; Vagle, 2014). Limitations are characteristic of phenomenological analysis; however, this is the case in most qualitative and quantitative research studies (Moustakas, 1994; Vagle, 2014; Van Manen, 1997). Moreover, identified barriers create a need for future research, and this research study was subject to limitations beyond the power of the researcher and the limited scope of the sample.

1. This research study was limited to specific schools within the selected school district, and more specifically, the research was limited to the selected school leaders familiar with prekindergarten and preschool classrooms.
2. The deductions drawn from the study cannot be generalized to other schools or school districts that implement social-emotional learning programs.
3. While each elementary school is implementing a social-emotional learning program, the plans may differ slightly, so actual implementation supports might manifest differently.

Conclusively, research studies grounded in phenomenology are often based on specific situations and unstructured in nature, making it challenging to generalize information from one case to the next (Moustakas, 1994).

Being a phenomenological study, the main criteria for the selection of participants was their experience with the phenomenon; therefore, the participants needed to have knowledge and experience but within the current school district. Consequently, school leaders that were new to the district were eliminated as participants based on the exclusion criteria.

Research transforms from building knowledge about the world to being transformative in itself. In interpretive research, trustworthiness has developed as an important alternative for measuring the value of research and its effects, as well as leading the way of providing for rigor in the research process (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, trustworthiness plays an important role in not only effecting change in a study's original setting, but also contributing toward building a body of knowledge that can play an important role in societal change.

### **Findings**

*Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.*

*~ Soren Kierkegaard*

The previous sections of this chapter offered the introduction to the problem surrounding challenging preschool behavior and exclusionary discipline practices. Also, this study was meant to provide clear insight into the perceptions of leaders who have used a social-emotional learning curriculum as a behavioral intervention. The methodology and research design were specifically chosen so that I, as the researcher, could position myself to not only collect, but also interpret the meaning and concepts from the phenomenon. The purpose of hermeneutic research is to explore the experiences rather than the cases, so the findings presented in this section are organized by thematic experience rather than by the participant who supplied the description of the experience. These discoveries highlighted the focus on the relationships between, across, and among the school leaders within the selected school district.

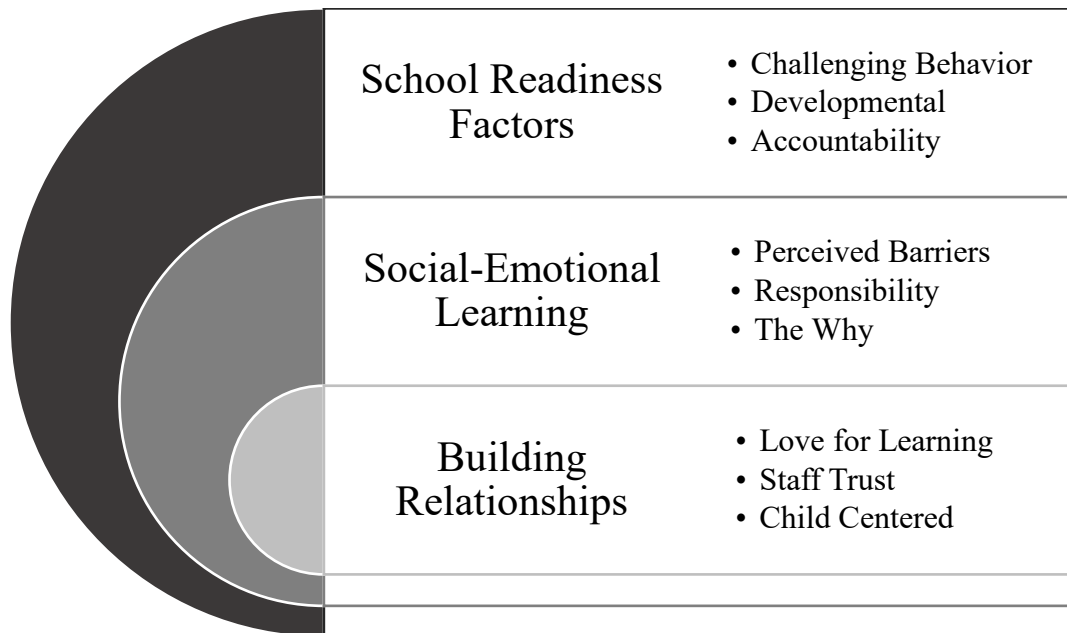
## Identified Themes

The broad, overarching themes that emerged from the data analysis included (a) school readiness, (b) social-emotional learning, and (c) building relationships. These themes were explored within the context of the experiences from which they grew, and these experiences fundamentally support the findings. The themes grew from a heuristic analysis of the participants' interviews and transcriptions that I developed by searching for emerging phrases and layering these statements with my reflective notes to produce possible interpretation. This interpretation was informed not only by my personal pedagogical stance as a school leader and my reflections on the experiences shared with me, but also by the reflective analysis of the participants. It is also important to note that these findings provide only one possible interpretation of the meaning of school leaders' experiences. Despite some degree of subjectivity, as the interpretations are largely influenced by my own orientation as a school leader, I hope my orientation contributes to rather than detracts from the value of the findings.

The themes were not predetermined but emerged candidly from the transcription data as I discovered reoccurring statements, ideas, and phrases. During this thematic analysis and development, over 250 significant statements were identified from the data. These statements and phrases were organized into three major themes, with supporting subthemes. The themes that emerged from the study were school readiness, social-emotional learning, and building relationships. Several subthemes were developed as well and are displayed in the visual representation along with the major themes in Figure 3.

Gilgun (2014) stated that researchers “grab” the findings by eliciting meaningful quotes and emotional stories from participants to demonstrate a particular phenomenon. I was extremely mindful of giving a voice to the leaders by using their authentic experiences; therefore, this

section is heavily laden with the words of the participants in the descriptions of their experiences. Also, in adhering to research principles of hermeneutic phenomenology, the findings support an intricate dance between the parts, which are the statements built into the themes, and the whole that represents how the experiences parallel one another.



*Figure 3.* Emergent themes.

### **Theme 1: School Readiness**

School leaders recognized challenging behaviors by preschool students as related to lack of school-readiness skills. School readiness has continued to be a major objective in the field of education as pressures to increase student achievement rise and students are expected to learn and do more each year. School readiness has been defined as a child's ability and readiness to learn when starting school, but the definition is much broader than simply determining a child's alphabet and number knowledge. School readiness, in the broadest sense, is about children, families, early environments, schools, and communities. Children are not innately ready or not ready for school. I found it interesting that in all six interviews, participants stated the phrase,

“They don’t know how to play school.” Each leader made mention of this phrase at least once during each interview, and this statement became the basis of the first theme: school readiness. Within school readiness I identified three subthemes: (a) behavior readiness, (b) developmental readiness, and (c) academic readiness. The literature supported that school readiness has long been attributed to cognitive and academic development; however, educational literature supports the importance of other developmental skills, such as social and emotional development, as necessary for a child’s educational success. Increasingly apparent is that some children arrive on the first day of school without the necessary social-emotional skills.

**Behavioral readiness.** During the interviews, the school leaders were asked discussion questions related to identifying the most prominent behaviors preschool students exhibit that cause them to be removed from the classroom. The participants shared these behaviors: talking back, being overly emotional (crying), hitting teachers and friends, demonstrating explosive behavior such as property destruction, not sitting properly at lunch, not sitting still in circle time, using bad language, and being unable to get along with others. Most of these behaviors are indeed considered challenging behaviors which were leading to exclusionary practices within the identified schools. However, several common thoughts and feelings from the participants focused on behavioral readiness indicators as referenced from phrases such as “teaching behavior,” “school expectations,” “power struggles,” and “they just don’t know.” Overwhelming, these statements emerged across all of the school leaders’ responses. For example, one leader explained,

We are educators, so we should try to teach the children how to behave, how to handle their emotions, how to respond appropriately, how to find joy on bad days, how to “squash it out” when your brain is telling you, “I just can’t start this, it’s too hard.”

Another leader explained that she often has discussion with her teachers because often “our teachers get in power struggles with them [students], and I try to tell them, you’re going to lose a power struggle every time because you can’t take it to the level they will. . . . They just don’t know yet.”

When I asked about their perceived challenges within preschool, the statements aligned with school-readiness deficits as well. One leader commented,

They [students] do not know that you shouldn’t scream at the teacher. They don’t know that they need to share their toys. They have never had to share with anyone before. So, that first month, I would say maybe even up until October, was rough at times. I would have to visit the preschool classrooms a lot to address disruptive behaviors, but then, you know, it is like a light switch after that, and we don’t get called down to those classes as much.

Later in the interview, she added,

I think because of the rise in social and emotional problems, we are seeing these problems at more and more of a younger age. I think it’s fair to say, our first graders are struggling with a lot more problems . . . deep social-emotional problems . . . more than first graders were 20 years ago. I think it is noticeable in schools.

Participants also indicated students demonstrated difficulty with routines and procedures. A common understanding was about the importance of spending the necessary time to develop these procedures fully and functionally for preschool students. For example, one leader explained,

Much of what is absolutely necessary are the things we chose to rush through, like routines, expectations, and the understanding of why. These skills are the very basic



level, but really for whatever reason, so many [children] come in and don't know how to obey rules, just because it's a rule. So, we teach this . . . why does society have rules?

Why are rules important? Taking the time will go miles.

**Developmental readiness.** The theme of school readiness also encompasses developmental milestones. Many of the extracted statements from the interviews also related to these developmental milestone components. By understanding that certain developmental delays are appropriate depending on the age of the child, school leaders can better apprehend what factors might have contributed to behaviors deemed challenging and often misunderstood during a child's developmental years.

Some behaviors that teachers find difficult to manage in young children are developmentally appropriate, depending on the age of the child (e.g., aggression in 3-year-old boys). Additionally, motivations for some behavior problems evident in preschool children will become less common and decrease with age and development, as children attempt to develop a more mature sense of self. The literature supports these views, suggesting that many of the challenging behaviors, such as tantrums, aggression, and noncompliance, exhibited by preschool children are normal behaviors at this age.

The leaders in this study seemed to understand these factors of age and developmental appropriateness. All but one of the participants had been a leader in more than one level and recognized the progression of maturity. A leader who had been in a middle school previously stated,

At the middle school level, I felt like I did a lot of disciplining, counseling. I guess with kids and with staff. So, when I first came to the elementary school, that was very different for me because their level of understanding or I guess, their social-emotional

skills, was very different. All of it was very different, and so I really had to learn to adjust back to elementary school kids. We expected our middle school children to understand rules and expectations, to a certain extent. But these are just babies.

Another leader shared her concerns about the developmental age of the students in preschool and her understanding of the maturity barrier:

Immaturity is going to be a barrier no matter what. They are just so young, and we are asking them to be ready for something that they are just not ready for. We have to remember that we may be the first people to set this level of expectations.

During the preschool years, children experience significant social, behavioral, and cognitive transformations, including the development of self-control, self-regulation, and increased frustration tolerance. Most young children engage in some forms of noncompliant behaviors prior to the development of such aforementioned changes. Further, the social, behavioral, and cognitive changes help children learn to inhibit inappropriate behaviors and develop means of compensating for their frustrations.

**Academic readiness.** The third subtheme identified under school readiness was based on phrases and statements concerning academic demands and high-stakes accountability. All six of the leaders identified challenges for preschool due to the ever-increasing academic demands being placed on schools. One of the participants explained that high academic accountability can be a “stressor for teacher, students, and leaders.” Another said, in jest, “Kindergarten’s the new first grade, so that means pre-K must be the new kindergarten.” She elaborated with a memory from kindergarten enrollment:

Especially now, but I think parents are even feel feeling the demands of kindergarten. I know that sounds crazy, right? I will never forget this one mother that called to schedule

a registration appointment for her kindergarten daughter. After agreeing on a date, I told her that she needed to bring her child with her. She asked me, “Why would I do that?” “Ma’am, we will do a screening test for her.” She sounded confused and aggravated, “My gosh! What do you test?” Every year this happens.

The participants suggested multiple reasons behind the behavioral issues with preschool children but many were related to academic readiness. One leader stated,

Some of it, in some cases, was just what I thought was immaturity, you know, they just weren’t ready for school. They were struggling academically, but I didn’t really feel like it was a learning problem; they just weren’t ready.

All of the leaders perceived academic readiness to be a major area of concern, as evidenced by their experiences and stories. Teachers perceived that they are “held to the fire,” as their evaluations are tied to assessment, and every year they “feel the expectations and the push from above, at the district level and state level.” Overall, they expressed a universal concern about the maturity and developmental needs of the students. As one leader stated,

I think our preschoolers, yes, they’re learning colors and numbers . . . all kinds of things that they need academically. But there’s a huge piece of it that should be focused on just how to do school, how to be a student, and how to just operate within the school . . . within the parameters of a school and in processes that we have in place, so they can be successful.

Investing in ongoing professional development to enhance teaching and behavioral management strategies to reduce challenging behaviors is an important step towards reaching school-readiness goals for preschool students. The findings in this study revealed that a majority

of the research participants perceived that teachers and administrators could benefit from receiving extra support in implementing strategies to reduce ongoing challenging behaviors.

## **Theme 2: Social-Emotional Learning**

The second theme that emerged from the interviews with the school leaders referenced the responsibility for teaching social-emotional skills. Within this theme were three identified subthemes to support the research questions: (a) the why for children, (b) the why for teachers, and (c) identified barriers behind the why. The school leaders expressed a high level of commitment to developing all students' social and emotional competencies and an evident belief in the potential benefits of doing so. Further, the leaders agreed that schools hold some level of responsibility to incorporate these skills during the school day; however, the leaders exhibited slight differences in how they felt about current implementation and practices.

Social and emotional abilities are said to be indicators of how well a person adjusts to his or her environment and adapts to change, ultimately impacting how successful she or he will be in life. Core development abilities such as conscientiousness, emotional stability, openness, and agreeableness can be as or even more important than cognitive intelligence in determining future employment. Despite these competencies being related to consequential life outcomes, educators are challenged to find effective ways to prioritize, teach, and assess social and emotional skills.

**The why for children.** Challenging behaviors displayed by young children can affect many domains of functioning, including social skills, communication, and play. Preschool children who demonstrate challenging behaviors in classrooms and playgroups are at risk for a number of later difficulties, including social exclusion from peers. The school leaders within this study showed a strong consensus that social and emotional skills should be developed in all students to contest behavioral challenges in young students. One leader expounded on his

perceptions, stating that social-emotional development is “good for kids” and helps them learn how to “manage their feelings and begin to solve problems independently.” Another leader stated that social-emotional skills are “essential life skills that support mental health and overall well-being.”

The textual evidence of several leaders’ experiences revealed a growing need to address social-emotional skills in schools. One leader posed the following concern:

The reality for us is that we’re beginning to see some mental health concerns that we didn’t see in the past, and there are more and more students that cannot manage their own behaviors. . . . Starting to address the social-emotional learning for students grew out of the need we were experiencing. . . . How do I interact with my friends, and why is it important? How does my behavior impact my class? What strategies can I use when I get mad at my friends? All of those pieces together have been really big.

In support of these concerns, another leader added, “It is up to us to prepare our students for independence in the future.” All of the school leaders referenced wanting their students to be able to manage interfering behaviors, relate to other peers, resolve conflicts, and feel positive about themselves and the world around them.

Schoolwide implementation of social-emotional learning as a means to address the needs of students is an important piece to the puzzle. In addition, the participants in this study alluded to the need for schoolwide practices to develop clearly defined expectations and explicit rules for adult and student navigation of the K-12 continuum (Follari, 2015; Lane, Pierson, & Givner, 2003). Defining these expectations provides clarity for all students regardless of skill set, allows equitable access, and in essence levels the playing field.

Further, the leaders supported the need for schoolwide behavioral systems, such as positive behavioral interventions and supports, to support a universal and communal school culture and language. Several of the leaders offered experiences to support their claims:

You have to teach them the expectations. You cannot assume children understand why it is not all right to throw a tantrum when they don't get their way. It is the only way we can truly hold them accountable for their actions. We must teach it first.

Remembering back to her own childhood, a leader offered her perception that schools were no longer addressing the basic social needs that were in place when she was in school:

We are not talking about what the norms [are] and how we should behave. We're not having those conversations like my mama had with me and how I should act to other people. So, having that time to talk at school is even more important now. It's not just about them doing the centers and a teacher being in the room, it's about being an adult who's saying, what are we working on and why? Or, what do you know about this? What has happened in here?

Defining behavioral expectations gives clarity to all students. As one leader explained, "Before we can address individual behaviors, we have to make sure we have a solid school foundation." She shared a story about teaching schoolwide expectations as her school developed positive supports across the building:

So, one day we were just talking about the cafeteria behavior and how it had been kind of unruly. And we realized, you know what? Some of these kids don't even eat at a table [at home]. So how do they know how to behave at a lunch table? At lunch we're telling them to turn around, and we're telling them to keep their food in one area . . . and they eat in cars and on the couch. . . . Now, we teach the expectations schoolwide. Each morning we

talk about it on the morning show, we use common language, so everyone is on the same page. I say often, we cannot assume these little people ever understand what we are asking of them unless we have taken the time to teach them the skill.

One leader explained the importance of recognizing the need to teach the expectations: “We teach the standards all day long. We teach students how to do math problems. We teach how to find nouns and verbs. But if we don’t teach them how to behave, how do we expect them to behave?”

**The why for teachers.** The second subtheme that developed refers to perceived benefits of teaching social-emotional skills for teachers. The leaders perceived multiple benefits of teaching social-emotional learning for their staff, both personally and professionally. Social-emotional learning is most productive when all teachers are invested in the program. With social-emotional learning, students not only experience less anxiety, less hyperactivity, and less aggression, but also are generally happier and more attentive. The impact on teachers is no less profound. It was evident from the literature and supported by statements from this study’s participants that social-emotional learning can contribute to the adults’ feelings of happiness, helping them be more organized and responsive.

In support of this, my reflective notes referenced two administrators who discussed not only students, but also teachers coming to work each day with high levels of stress, frustration, and anxiety. One leader went to great length to explain the recognized concern for staff:

I see some teachers get frustrated so easily with students when they cannot behave. I think, as educators, we forget that not all children come to us with the same skill set. [For teachers] We know how to teach children to read, and we know what to do if a child struggles in math . . . but we panic if a child can’t follow directions or cusses during

class. Why don't we know that we have to also teach how to behave? When children are taught specific strategies for responding to emotions or thinking through challenging situations or even communicating effectively, they are less likely to act out frustrations at school and elsewhere.

Another leader explained that understanding social-emotional development would help teachers comprehend how to work with students who have deficits in social-emotional skills. She stated, "Being able to recognize when to push and when a child just needs a break."

**Identified barriers to the why.** Despite tremendous agreement among the leaders that implementing social-emotional learning could have great benefit in schools, the leaders expressed concerns and perceived barriers to this process. The major question collectively was, "How do we start? . . . With all of the current mandates, initiatives, and requirements, how do we pick up another thing?"

Although all of the schools within the study had access to a social-skills curriculum for the preschool classes, only one of the leaders had moved to a schoolwide social-emotional learning initiative. She was able to share barriers her school had experienced throughout the process. She shared the beginning of her journey:

One of the things I really started to notice was all of the sudden, we had an increase in students who were talking about having suicidal thoughts. And I mean really talking about it with us, our counselor, it was heartbreaking. So, we were running a lot of suicide protocols, and we were working with parents to get help when they needed it. But these were children even in first grade. And that was new for me, and it was new for our building. We watched and managed those concerns for a year or two. We were also getting children whose behaviors when they came in were just very extreme, just



aggressive behaviors that could shut down a classroom. I started asking myself, how can a 5-year-old destroy a classroom in .5 seconds? Or even the kids who were just sad, who just didn't seem to enjoy school at all. . . . And I was like, we were really struggling with, so what, what do we do next? Our school has always achieved, meeting all of the marks the state asks us to, but there was just something else.

Having worked closely with this leader before, I recognized the angst in her story. I asked her what made her think about social-emotional learning as the answer. She responded,

I really think, Alicia, you and I were at a leadership conference last year and attended a session that was really my "aha" moment. How do you move a school academically when they are already performing well? What if we focused on children first, academics second for all children? Would we soar if our teachers could focus there first, back to teaching kids to love school? I thought, this is what we need, if we just spent the time remembering why we are really here.

Her testimony was powerful. As a leader she came full circle and went out on a limb because she saw a need. She shared that a major barrier was the financial aspect:

Adopting a predeveloped [intervention or curriculum] can be very expensive, which is why many schools shy away from these type things. We toggled with the idea of developing our own themes and lessons from the literature, but you know . . . I was learning it all too, and it was important for me that my staff could see success during implementation, so I could create buy-in. We had an immediate need, so we had to jump in head first.

Leaders described other barriers as well. A universal concern among the participants was the intense need for training and professional development. The school leaders not only

recognized the need for training within their buildings due to intense behavior concerns with students, but also talked about the needs within college education courses for new teachers. After being asked if their teachers understood the basics of teaching social-emotional skills, four of the leaders shared that teachers are not coming prepared to teach social skills or behavioral expectations. One participant stated,

College education courses are often focused on academics, teaching kids to read, strategies to use in math, basic classroom management maybe. . . . It's been a long time since I was in college, but even when I think back, it was all about reading class or math class, and I only had one class related to how to work with behavioral difficulties or students with special needs.

Other leaders had similar responses about their own staff capacities and agreed that “immense training needs and ongoing support would be necessary in order to see success” as a school or as a school district. One stated, “I would say we [provide professional development] limitedly. . . . I think we provide most of the support to our school counselors and our social workers, and we should probably expand it to more of our staff because they could benefit from it as well.”

Additionally, the leaders described a prodigious misconception with teachers understanding consequences versus discipline. “It is not uncommon for me to be called to a classroom two or three times a week to remove a child who is throwing a temper tantrum.” The leader added that she sees teachers sometimes “push buttons” when they had other options to diffuse a situation. She continued, “If you push buttons, that's when you see those behaviors come out in children. But I really think some teachers just do not have a toolbox filled when it comes to addressing behavior.”

### **Theme 3: Building Relationships**

The last theme that emerged from the interviews with the school leaders was the importance in building successful relationships within schools. Within this theme, three subthemes were identified: (a) love for learning, (b) trust between administrators and teachers, and (c) trust between teachers and students.

**Building a love for learning.** All the leaders in this study had a story about how they achieved their current place in education and why they are an educator, and this theme might have been the most surprising to me. Like many others who work in school administration, I am keenly aware of the importance in building relationships; however, it was intriguing to me how strong the leaders' feelings were about creating a love for learning. All six of the participants felt strongly that a major barrier to creating emotionally healthy children is that schools are not "creating a love for learning." As evidenced in multiple stories, these leaders had a forever love of school and wanted this same experience for their students.

The leaders indicated through their interview responses that the love of children was a major reason they decided to go into education. One participant stated, "I kind of always knew that I wanted to become a teacher. I've always enjoyed working with kids, and I do enjoy seeing the progress that they make." Most participants knew that they were going to be a teacher at an early age. Another said, "I can't ever remember not wanting to teach or do something else." Four of the six leaders had parents as educators; one person stated, "It was inevitable. Both of my parents were in education, so I just knew because it is what I grew up around." Another leader explained that she realized she wanted to be a teacher by working with children: "I always worked with the church in different activities with the nursery and like babysitting, and my heart

has just always been with the kids in striving to make a difference in as many lives as I could.”

The passion of teaching and learning was evident with all of the participants.

Likewise, the leaders believed schools had to intentionally create a culture for learning to achieve this measure. One of the leaders laughed and reminisced about how she had to “sneak” a Halloween activity past her supervisors:

My principal and I always believed that you should have fun at school, first and foremost. But back when the economy tanked, and we were cutting days of school out, the focus had to be mainly on standards. We were like, oh my goodness, this is just not fun anymore. Of course, we tried to abide by the rules. . . . We tried to strategically plan everything so that we did not interfere with the instructional time. Then we found out that other schools may not have been as strict as we were. . . . I’ll never forget, we decided we were going to do our “trick-or-treating activity” on Halloween, but we knew we couldn’t call it that.

She said they renamed the activity and set it up as a “character parade.” “Parents were excited, teachers and kids were excited, and we were set and ready.” She went on:

So, there we were, all outside on the blacktop, everyone having a blast . . . when two of the central office folks stopped by to say hello. We must have looked panicked because they both started laughing, and all I could do was laugh! I thought, oh my gosh, these two. . . . They never really said anything to us about it, and from that point on we had a “character parade.” There has to be a balance of fun and learning at school.

Children have an innate curiosity. They’re eager to explore the world around them, soaking up new information and skills like sponges. But somewhere along the way, this natural love of learning is often lost. Many children grow to dislike and even dread school and learning

new things. Significant to all of the leader participants was that building a love for learning, as early as possible, was essential for addressing behavioral needs at school.

**Building trust between leaders and teachers.** Humans are literally hard-wired with the desire and need to connect to others. People are social beings who thrive on healthy relationships. Unfortunately, relationships are seen as secondary, and they should be higher on the priority list.

The leaders in this study all perceived relationships as fundamental and intrinsic for developing students. They also perceived that their teachers would support new initiatives, like social-emotional learning, if they had trust in the school leader. For example, one of the participants stated that conversation with teachers is important, sharing, “Sometimes just talking about your decisions, including teachers in the conversation about the needs of our students, or discussing how to address the behavior” can be effective in building trusting relationships.

One leader explained that school leaders “cannot separate our existence from our relationships” and added that leaders need to “model the expectations of positive relationships.” This was her first year as a leader in the building, and she shared her experience as a new leader:

It’s a constant work in progress, and it becomes more about the overall morale. . . .

Building relationships is important. As a new leader here, I knew I really needed to help develop a healthy culture with our staff and students. . . . If low morale hangs around long enough, it becomes the culture, and that’s really what you want to do as an educator, as a principal, or as a leader, is change the culture of a school for the better.

**Building trust between teachers and students.** Teachers who practice mindfulness are more likely to respond to their students with empathy (Gilliam, 2005). One leader expressed, “Stern, angry responses from teachers can breed resentment in the children,” whereas teachers

who “lead with compassion” are more likely to gain the respect of their students. Likewise, this modeled compassion has tangible benefits, too: “Students of compassionate teachers tend to be more engaged in their own learning.” Additionally, the literature (CASEL, 2013; Durlak et al., 2011; Gilliam, 2005) supports the statement by one leader that when teachers are “vulnerable with their students about their own social-emotional abilities, students have more compassion for their teachers.”

Gilliam (2005) proposed that the early years are critical for fostering positive relationships and learning experiences necessary for building strong social, emotional, and academic outcomes for children. One of the leaders expressed that often, “It is not as easy as teachers sometimes think it should be.” Another echoed, “Teachers are so eager to teach, that they forget. . . . You so want your kids to just soak up everything you give them, but the reality is, building a trusting relationship has to happen first.”

Our kids come to school each and every day, and they’re longing for that connection, and they need it. They come here no matter what’s happening at home, and they really need to be in a place where someone believes in them. And that is something that I think occurs here.

The leaders proposed strategies that had been successful when working with teachers to emphasize the importance of building relationships. Several stated that modeling relationship building was important and helped teachers build confidence. With that, one of the leaders stated that relationships are still an overall concern in education based on her professional perception. Two participants mentioned that they ask teachers to call students’ homes for a positive reason at least quarterly during the school year. A common thought related to this was about the importance of “having the conversation.”

## **Future Considerations**

The findings from the current study and the extensive social-emotional learning evidence base suggest four areas of future consideration: (a) advancing the research agenda and communicating findings, (b) prioritizing policies and funding to support social-emotional learning, (c) strengthening professional development and training, and (d) bridging the research to practice gap. Each is described in the following sections.

### **Advance the Research Agenda and Communicate Findings**

The social-emotional learning evidence base has been building for more than two decades, and current efforts, including the reauthorization of the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), have created centralized platforms for studying and distributing knowledge on social-emotional learning. Based on this study, the recommendation is for further research in the following areas: the value of implementing systemic, school-wide social-emotional learning; the impact of improved training on social-emotional learning implementation; and how data on social-emotional learning can be used effectively by teachers to improve instruction, by principals to improve school climate, and by districts to better prepare all youth for success in school, postsecondary, careers, and life.

### **Prioritize Policies and Funding to Support Social-Emotional Learning**

To help schools advance social-emotional learning and systemize an understanding at all levels of practice and policy, federal and state policymakers should consider prioritizing policies and necessary funding for training, implementation, and assessment of social-emotional learning. Funding considerations should include resources, evaluation, and the creation of learning networks. Funding streams for increased research also will be critical for expanding knowledge and creating lines for social-emotional learning advocacy. Policy action should include

advancing new federal policies to promote social-emotional learning and allotting adequate resources toward its growth in both preK-12 and higher education.

### **Strengthen Professional Development and Training**

Rather than just focusing on obtaining a higher degree, teachers need more support in responding to the direct occurrences that result from managing challenging behaviors. The school leaders who participated in this study agree that increased training in teaching strategies to address behavior is necessary to achieve successful schoolwide implementation. In addition, integrating this training into preservice teacher programs will help guarantee more teachers have the knowledge and skill base to implement social-emotional learning from the start. High-quality professional development can provide continuous training for current administrators and experienced teachers.

### **Bridging Research to Practice**

Despite the areas of additional research described, one area that should be a primary focus of the current study's results is addressing and bridging the potential research-to-practice gap. Taking the findings from this study and comparing the specific approaches recommended by experts to the strategies being used for managing challenging behaviors would provide critical information on whether schools are using recommended best practices. Such comparisons also would provide information regarding discrepancies between what strategies are being used and what strategies should be used, as well as how this use differs based upon specific behaviors. Determining such differences would allow for trainings to target specific areas of need for early childhood educators working with children exhibiting challenging behaviors daily.

### **Conclusion**

*We don't learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on experience.*



~ *John Dewey*

This hermeneutic phenomenological study was designed to understand the holistic experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of school leaders about preschool behaviors leading to expulsion from school. Also, the study provides a universal understanding of how this school district is using social-emotional learning as a behavior measure for students (Van Manen, 1997). The shared experiences of participants were collected and explored to answer the central research questions. The data analysis from the personal interviews, ongoing reflective notes, and my own knowledge and experiences revealed three predominant themes: (a) school readiness, (b) social-emotional learning, and (c) building relationships. The themes and corresponding subthemes answered the research questions. Moreover, they provided the means to give voice to school leaders experiencing the phenomenon of challenging student behaviors and implementation of social-emotional learning.

This study was guided by Van Manen's (1997, 2014) methodological structure for hermeneutic research, and the findings supported the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions and experiences of school leaders regarding preschool behaviors that lead to exclusionary discipline measures?
2. What are the perceptions and accounts of school leaders regarding the implementation of a social-emotional learning curriculum for preschool students as a behavior intervention measure?

The findings from this study and the accompanying literature for social-emotional learning support an eagerness for the expertise, training, and support necessary to implement a social-emotional learning program as a proactive behavior intervention for preschool students. Although a majority of school leaders believe teaching these skills in school will improve student

behavior, learning, and development, only one of the six leaders reported use of a schoolwide plan for teaching students social-emotional skills.

Administrators and teachers need access to a knowledge base on effective social-emotional learning programming and training in how to effectively integrate social-emotional learning into academic instruction. While this study made clear that school leaders value the development of their students' social and emotional competencies, the textual evidence supported the need for a more developed understanding of how to create a systematic plan for social-emotional learning implementation. Further, the school leaders shared a common understanding of the importance of professional development for social-emotional learning implementation. School leaders value social-emotional learning, but consideration should be given for greater knowledge and support to effectively implement schoolwide, evidence-based programs.

Schools need expertise in child development, developmentally appropriate practices, social-emotional pedagogy, and approaches to efficiently address challenging behaviors. Findings from the study revealed that school leaders believe not all teachers are planning appropriately for students displaying challenging behavior. Educational leaders must do a better job at breaking down barriers within schools, especially those that do not support all children. This requires broad effort from multiple stakeholders and must oppose the acceptance of negative mindsets, especially at the early learning level. Leaders must call into question discourse within early learning environments and consider a paradigm shift in how learning and socialization should be constructed for the youngest students. Removing children from classrooms as result of their behavior is a cause of trauma, the traumatic effect of an expulsion or push out.

Exclusionary discipline measures, particularly at a young age, send the message that something is wrong with a child, when in actuality something is wrong with the system. Why is this a need that should be addressed, not only for preschool children, but all children? One of the school leaders said it best:

Indirectly, social-emotional learning is happening some, but it is not formalized like it should be. We need to make the emphasis that every teacher is taking steps to deal with social and emotional needs of students, but I understand it's hard because they have to get through so much curriculum for tests. It turns into an assembly line of information, rather than caring about a kid who is struggling with turmoil in their life.

## References

- Benedict, E. A., Horner, R. H., & Squires, J. K. (2007). Assessment and implementation of positive behavior support in preschools. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 27(3), 174-192.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Bridgeland, J., Bruce, M., & Hariharan, A. (2013). *The missing piece: A national teacher survey on how social and emotional learning can empower children and transform schools*. Chicago, IL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. Retrieved from <https://www.casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/the-missing-piece.pdf>
- Cefai, C., & Cavioni, V. (2013). *Social and emotional education in primary school*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Cefai, C., Ferrario, E., Cavioni, V., Carter, A., & Grech, T. (2014). Circle time for social and emotional learning in primary school. *Pastoral Care in Education*, 32(2), 116-130.
- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (2013). *Implementing systemic district and school social and emotional learning*. Chicago, IL: Author
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Crotty, M. (2006). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. Crows Nest, Australia: Allen & Unwin.
- Denham, S. A., Bassett, H. H., & Zinsser, K. (2012). Early childhood teachers as socializers of young children's emotional competence. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 40(3), 137-143. doi:10.1007/s10643-012-0504-2

- Denham, S., & Burton, R. (2003). *Social and emotional prevention and intervention programming for preschoolers*. New York, NY: Kluwer-Plenum.
- Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R., Dymnicki, A., Taylor, R., & Schellinger, K. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development, 82*(1), 405-432. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x
- Elias, M. J., Zins, J. E., Weissberg, R. P., Frey, K. S., Greenberg, M. T., Haynes, N. M., . . . Shriver, T. P. (1997). *Promoting social and emotional learning: Guidelines for educators*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Every Student Succeeds Act, Pub. L. No. 114-95 (2015).
- Fantuzzo, J. W., Bulotsky-Shearer, R., Fusco, R., & McWayne, C. (2005). An investigation of preschool classroom behavioral adjustment problems and social-emotional school readiness competencies. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 20*, 259-275. doi:10.1016/j.ecresq.2005.07.001
- Fey, T. (2011). *Bossypants*. New York, NY: Little Brown.
- Follari, L. (2015). *Foundations and best practices in early childhood education: History, theories, and approaches to learning*. Hoboken, NJ: Pearson.
- Gadamer, H.-G. (2004). *Philosophical hermeneutics* (D. E. Linge, Trans.). Berkeley: University of California Press. (Original work published 1976)
- Gilgun, J. F. (2014). Writing up qualitative research. In P. Leavy (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of qualitative research methods* (pp. 658-676). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Gilliam, W. (2005). *Prekindergarteners left behind: Expulsion rates in state prekindergarten systems*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Child Study Center.

- Gilliam, W., Maupin, A. B., Reyes, C. R., Accavitti, M. & Shic, F. (2016). *Do early educators' implicit biases regarding sex and race relate to behavior expectations and recommendations of preschool expulsions and suspensions?* New Haven, CT: Yale University Child Study Center.
- Gilliam, W., & Shahar, G. (2006). Preschool and child care expulsion and suspension: Rates and predictors in one state. *Infants and Young Children, 19*, 228-245. doi:10.1097/00001163-200607000-00007
- Giorgi, A. (2009). *The descriptive phenomenological method in psychology*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1996). *Being and time* (J. Stambaugh, Trans.). Albany: State University of New York Press. (Original work published 1926)
- Hemmeter, M. L., Ostrosky, M., Artman, K., & Kinder, K. (2008). Moving right along . . . planning transitions to prevent challenging behaviors. *Young Children, 63*(3), 18-22.
- Hemmeter, M. L., Ostrosky, M., & Corso, R. (2012). Preventing and addressing challenging behavior: Common questions and practical strategies. *Young Exceptional Children, 15*(2), 32-46. doi:10.1177/1096250611427350
- Henriksson, C., & Friesen, N. (2012). Introduction. In N. Friesen, C. Henriksson, & T. Saevi (Eds.), *Hermeneutic phenomenology in education: Method and practice* (pp. 1-14). Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense.
- Hillman, J. (1975). *Re-visioning psychology*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Hirsh-Pasek, K., & Golinkoff, R. M. (2011). The great balancing act: Optimizing core curricula through playful learning. In E. Zigler, W. S. Gilliam, & W. S. Barnett (Eds.), *The pre-k debates: Current controversies and issues* (pp. 110–115). Baltimore, MD: Brookes.

- Huang, F., Invernizzi, M., & Drake, E. (2012). The differential effects of preschool: Evidence from Virginia. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 27*(2), 22-34.
- Husserl, E. (1965). *Phenomenology and the crisis of philosophy: Philosophy as rigorous science and philosophy and the crisis of European man*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Husserl, E. (1980). *Phenomenology and the foundations of the sciences*. Boston, MA: Martinus Hijhoff. (Original work published 1952)
- Jones, S. M., & Kahn, J. (2017). *The evidence base for how we learn: Supporting students' social, emotional, and academic development. Consensus statements of evidence from the Council of Distinguished Scientists*. Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development. Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED577039)
- Kalifeh, P., Cogen-Vogel, L., & Grass, S. (2011). The federal role in early childhood education: Evolution in the goals, governance, and policy instruments of Project Head Start. *Educational Policy, 25*, 36-64. doi:10.1177/0895904810387413
- Koch, T. (1994). Establishing rigour in qualitative research: The decision trail. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 19*, 976-986. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2648.1994.tb01177.x
- Kvale, S. (1996). *InterViews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lane, K. L., Pierson, M. R., & Givner, C. C. (2003). Teacher expectations of student behavior: Which skills do elementary and secondary teachers deem necessary for success in the classroom? *Education and Treatment of Children, 26*, 413-430. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42899770>

- Laverty, S. M. (2003). Hermeneutic phenomenology and phenomenology: A comparison of historical and methodological considerations. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2(3), 21-35. doi:10.1177/160940690300200303
- Mashburn, A., Pianta, R., Hamre, B., Downer, J., Barbarin, O., Bryant, D., . . . Early, D. (2008). Measures of classroom quality in prekindergarten and children's development of academic, language, and social skills. *Child Development*, 79, 732-749. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.2008.01154.x
- McCaffrey, G., & Moules, N. J. (2016). Encountering the great problems in the street: Enacting hermeneutic philosophy as research in practice disciplines. *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics*, 2016(1). Retrieved from <https://philpapers.org/rec/MCCETG>
- McGill-Franzen, A. (2006). *Kindergarten literacy: Matching assessment and instruction*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Meek, S. E., & Gilliam, W. S. (2016). *Expulsion and suspension as matters of social justice and health equity* (Discussion paper) Washington, DC: National Academy of Medicine. Retrieved from <https://nam.edu>
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education: Revised and expanded from Case Study Research in Education* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.



- Powell, T. (2014, July 24). My son has been suspended five times. He's 3. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/07/24/my-son-has-been-suspended-five-times-hes-3>
- Rubin, H., & Rubin, I. (2012). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Samuels, C. (2014, August 6). Focus on youngest, neediest endures. *Education Week*, 33(37), 1-17.
- Smith, J. A., Flower, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Smith, J. A., & Osborn, M. (2003). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (pp. 51-80). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Stichter, J. P., Randolph, J., Gage, N., & Schmidt, C. (2007). A review of recommended social competency programs for students with autism spectrum disorders. *Exceptionality*, 15, 219-232.
- Tarozzi, M., & Mortari, L. (Eds.). (2010). *Phenomenology and human science today*. Bucharest, Romania: Zetabooks
- Vagle, M. (2014). *Crafting phenomenological research*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Van Manen, M. (1997). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Van Manen, M. (2014). *Phenomenology of practice: Meaning-giving methods in phenomenological research and writing*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

Waters, J. (2017). *Phenomenological research guidelines*. North Vancouver, BC, Canada: Capilano University.

Zins, J., Weissberg, R., Wang, M., & Walberg, H. (2004). *Building academic success on social and emotional learning: What does the research say?* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A

#### INTRODUCTORY E-MAIL

Dear <Potential Principal>,

Hello, my name is Alicia C. Burford and I am a doctoral student at Georgia State University. I wanted to take a few minutes to talk with you about the research study I will be conducting here at <>. The study is entitled “Empty Seats at Circle Time: A Phenomenological Perspective of Social-Emotional Learning in Preschool.”

This study will explore school leaders’ perceptions and accounts of preschool behaviors which lead to exclusionary discipline measures. More specifically, the study seeks to explore the implementation a social-emotional learning curriculum for preschool students as a behavior intervention measure. The results of the study will provide insight and guidance for school leaders in relation to preschool behaviors and the implementation of social emotional learning programs within schools.

If you decide to participate in this study, it will involve a minimum of one face-to-face interview to last no longer than one hour. To clarify understandings, I may ask for a follow-up face-to-face interview to last no longer than 30 minutes. All interviews will be audio recorded so I can ensure accuracy of the information you provide. Once the audio recording is transcribed, you will have an opportunity to review for accuracy, taking no longer than 30 minutes.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you would like to participate, we can go ahead and schedule a time to meet and I can give you more information. If you need more time to decide if you would like to participate, you may also call or email me with your decision.

Do you have any questions for me at this time? If you have any more questions about this process or if you need to contact me about participation, I may be reached by cell phone at [number] or by e-mail at [aburford2@student.gsu.edu](mailto:aburford2@student.gsu.edu).

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

*Alicia C. Burford*

Alicia C. Burford  
Doctoral Candidate, Educational Policy Studies  
Georgia State University

## APPENDIX B

### INFORMED CONSENT

Georgia State University  
Informed Consent

**Title:** Empty Seats at Circle Time: A Phenomenological Perspective of Social-Emotional Learning in Preschool

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Sheryl Cowart Moss

**Student Principal Investigator:** Alicia C. Burford

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to describe school leaders' perceptions and accounts of preschool behaviors which lead to exclusionary discipline measures. More specifically, the study seeks to explore the implementation a social-emotional learning curriculum for preschool students as a behavior intervention measure.

#### **Procedures**

If you decide to take part, you will participate in an individual interview in order to share your experiences with preschool behaviors, exclusionary discipline measures, and social-emotional learning.

- The interview will be held at the participant's school and will be scheduled at a time that is convenient for each participant.
- The interview will be conducted with the researcher and will last approximately one hour.
- During the interview, audio will be recorded to allow the researcher to transcribe the session.
- To clarify understandings, the researcher may ask for a follow-up interview to last no longer than thirty minutes.
- Each participant will be allowed to review the transcription in order to confirm that the information recorded accurately represents his or her views which will take no more than 30 minutes.

#### **Future Research**

Researchers will remove information that may identify you and may use your data for future research. If we do this, we will not ask for any additional consent for you.

#### **Risks**

In this study, you will not have any more risks than you would in a normal day of life.

#### **Benefits**

This study is not designed to benefit you personally. Overall, the hope is to gain information from school leaders' experiences with preschool student behaviors, exclusionary discipline measures, and social-emotional learning.

#### **Alternatives**

The alternative to taking part in this study is to not take part in the study.

### **Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal**

You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time.

### **Confidentiality**

We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. The following people and entities will have access to the information you provide:

- Dr. Sheryl Cowart Moss, Principal Investigator, and Alicia C. Burford, Student Investigator
- GSU Institutional Review Board
- Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP)

We will use a pseudonym rather than your name on study records. The information you provide will be stored on a password and firewall protected computer. When we present or publish the results of this study, we will not use your name or other information that may identify you. An audio recorder will be used in order to accurately capture information presented during the interview. The recordings will be transcribed, but your name will not be included in the transcription. The audio recordings and transcription will be kept on a password-protected computer. Transcription of the recordings will be completed as soon as possible and the recording will then be destroyed to minimize a breach of confidentiality since voices are potentially identifiable to anyone who hears the recording.

### **Contact Information**

Contact Dr. Sheryl Cowart Moss, Principal Investigator, and Alicia C Burford, Student Investigator at [phone number] or aburford2@student.gsu.edu

- If you have questions about the study or your part in the study
- If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the study

Contact the GSU Office of Human Research Protections at 404-413-3500 or irb@gsu.edu

- If you have questions about your rights as a research participant
- If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research

### **Consent**

We will give you a copy of this consent form to keep. If you are willing to volunteer for this research, please sign below.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Principal Investigator or Researcher Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**APPENDIX C**  
**INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

Empty Seats at Circle Time: A Phenomenological Perspective of  
Social-Emotional Learning in Preschool

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Title \_\_\_\_\_  
School \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

I appreciate you for taking time to speak with me about your lived experiences as a school leader. The purpose of this interview is to describe your perceptions and accounts of preschool behaviors that effect school readiness and often lead to exclusionary discipline measures. More specifically, the questions seek to explore the implementation of social-emotional learning in preschool classrooms as a preventative behavior intervention.

During this interview, I will use a digital recorder to record the interview so that I may script all of your comments verbatim. Afterwards, you will be able to review all scripted notes and listen to the recordings. At this time, you will be able to decide whether or not you conveyed your intended thoughts and feelings. Confidentiality will be maintained throughout the study through the use of pseudonyms for participants. As we talk, please refrain from using any names or information that could identify other people. In addition, all data collected and materials related to this study will be kept by the researcher in a locked, filing cabinet and will only be viewed by the investigator during the study.

I want to really know your experiences so feel free to discuss your views. Are you ready to begin?

**Personal Background Questions**

1. Tell me about yourself, personally.
2. Tell me about your background in education.
  - a. How long have you been in the field of education?
3. What made you choose a career working with children?

**School-Specific Questions**

4. What is your title and role in your school?
5. How long have you been at your school?
6. How would you describe your school? Strengths? Weaknesses?

7. How many preschool classrooms are there in your building?

#### Preschool-Specific Questions

8. Do your preschool teachers address social-emotional learning standards?
9. How are teachers “educated” about social-emotional learning standards?
10. What do you see as the main social-emotional needs of children in preschool?
11. From an educator's point of view, what role do you think schools have, if any, in promoting these social and emotional skills of children?

#### Behavior-Specific Questions

12. What role do administrators play in assisting with the social-emotional needs of children?
13. What challenges or barriers, if any, have you experienced related to behaviors with preschool aged students?
14. Can you give an example of a situation where you were confronted with internalizing behavior from a preschool aged child? How did you react?
15. Can you give an example of a situation where you were confronted with externalizing behavior from a preschool aged child? How did you react?
16. What do you find most challenging about managing the internalizing behaviors of preschool students? Externalizing behaviors?

#### Social-Emotional Competency Discussion

17. Preschool teachers are proactively building social-emotional skills with students in their classrooms. In your opinion, what is the importance of social-emotional development in students?
18. In your opinion, what aspects of the students’ life will benefit by the development of these skills?
19. Are you aware of the following five internationally recognized core social and emotional competencies for students? • Self-awareness • Self-management • Social awareness • Relationship skills • Responsible decision making? The next set of questions are specific to these competencies.
20. Self-awareness has been defined as: identifying and recognizing emotions; recognizing personal interests and strengths; maintaining a well-grounded sense of self-confidence. In what way do you assist students to develop this competency? What behaviors do you see from students which could demonstrate their development of self-awareness?
21. Self-management has been defined as: regulating emotions to handle stress, control impulses, and motivating oneself to persevere in overcoming obstacles, setting and monitoring progress

- toward the achievement of personal and academic goals; expressing emotions appropriately. In what way do you assist students to develop this competency? What behaviors do you see from students which could demonstrate their development of self-management?
22. Social awareness has been defined as: being able to take the perspective of and empathize with others; recognizing and appreciating individual and group similarities and differences. In what way do you assist students to develop this competency? What behaviors do you see from students which could demonstrate their development of social awareness?
  23. Relationship skills has been defined as: establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships based on cooperation and resistance to inappropriate social pressure, preventing, managing, and constructively resolving interpersonal conflict; seeking help when needed. In what way do you assist students to develop this competency? What behaviors do you see from students which could demonstrate their development of relationship skills?
  24. Responsible decision making has been defined as: making decisions based on a consideration of all relevant factors, including applicable ethical standards, safety concerns, and social norms; the likely consequences of taking alternative courses of action; evaluation and reflection. In what way do you assist students to develop this competency? What behaviors do you see from students which could demonstrate their development of responsible decision making?
  25. In what ways has the development of social-emotional learning skills changed the atmosphere in your school? If so, in what ways and why?

\*\*Additional follow-up questions for clarification may be presented, pending participant responses.

Thank you again for your time and assistance. I hope the information that you have provided will assist school and district administrators, teachers, policy makers, and most of all, children. May I contact you later for follow up information if necessary?