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Learnings from the Impact of Online Learning on Elementary Students' Mental and Social-emotional Well-being Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

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**Learnings from the Impact of Online Learning on Elementary Students’
Mental and Social-emotional Well-being Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic**

by

Nadeen Hamzeh

A culminating thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education

Dominican University of California

San Rafael, CA

May 2021

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Abstract

This research examined practices that foster students' mental and emotional well-being, quality relationships among students and staff, and safe and inclusive climates through online platforms, especially during times of crisis such as during the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve that goal, this study sought to identify the kinds of protective and risk factors that help or hinder students' ability to cope and thrive, through a scholarly framework of Critical Race Theory (Yosso, 2005), Online Learning pedagogy (Hughes, 2004), and Social and emotional learning (Durlak et al., 2011). The researcher conducted qualitative interviews with a variety of educators at largely low-income public primary schools and with bilingual and non-native English-speaking parents in Willow Creek County. The findings highlighted that students do not equate to academic selves, that the level of expected responsiveness was surprisingly high while online, and that new connections and social and emotional support systems emerged. These findings have important implications for understanding how teachers and educational professionals iterate their practices of online learning going forward.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgments	iv
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Statement of Purpose	1
Overview of the Research Design	3
Significance of the Study	4
Research Implications	5
Chapter 2: Literature Review	7
Online Learning	7
Critical Race Theory (CRT) in Education	14
Social and Emotional Learning	17
Improving the Online Experience	21
Conclusion	22
Chapter 3: Methods	24
Research Questions	24
Description and Rationale for Research Approach	24
Research Design	25
Data Analysis	29
Validity	30

Chapter 4: Findings.....	33
Students Do Not Equate to Their Academic Selves	34
Unexpected Levels of Expected Responsiveness to Parents and Learning	40
My Mental Health Reflects On My Students.....	43
Socially Distant Coffee: Finding Resilience in Emergent and Creative Community.....	45
Conclusion	46
Chapter 5: Discussion	51
Implications for the Literature	53
Implications for Practice and Policy	54
Limitations of the Study and Future Research.....	57
Conclusion	59
References.....	61
Appendix A: Teacher Interview Questions.....	74
Appendix B: Sample Parent Interview Questions	77

Chapter 1: Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic showed that supporting teachers and providing them with adequate technical training and professional development is vital for the successful online class implementation. The concerns suggested by educators and parents in this study point towards the fact that more research should be conducted to provide effective design and methodology of online classes. Research reveals that Social and Emotional Learning can advance learning outcomes and improve academic performance (Allbright, et al., 2019). This research aims to contribute to a broader conversation about how to enhance student's success, mental health, and social-emotional well-being in an online learning environment.

Statement of Purpose

Research examining the impact of perceived stress and emotional disturbance on students in an online learning experience has shown that students may experience reduced motivation, increased pressures to learn independently, abandonment of daily routines, and potentially higher rates of dropout as direct consequences (Holzweiss, et al., 2020). When increasing academic stressors in a population with heightened pre-existing stress levels and a potentially reduced ability to rely on typical coping strategies – such as families who themselves may be experiencing heightened distress due to structural inequities the COVID-19 pandemic has placed an unprecedented mental health burden on students.

It is critical to know and understand the conditions for students to succeed in these environments. For instance, Zubrick et al. (2010) have identified that the basic human needs of students must first be met for education programs to be able to succeed, especially with regards to mental health and well-being. Studying the impacts of online learning on the students' mental and social-emotional well-being is necessary to ensure students' health, academic success,

equity, and inclusion. Research has shown that it is not the computer that makes students learn, but the design of the real-life models and simulations, and the students' interaction with those models and simulations (Kozma, 2001). Results from Bernard et al. (2004) and other reviews of the distance education literature (Cavanaugh 2001; Moore 1994) indicate no significant differences in effectiveness between distance education and face-to-face education, suggesting that distance education, when it is the only option available, can successfully replace face-to-face instruction. Garbe (2020) conducted a study to investigate parents' experiences and struggles during school closure and concluded that, although parents faced some challenges, they agreed with the school closure policy and were generally satisfied with the level of support provided by school districts.

This study seeks to identify the kinds of protective and risk factors that help or hinder students' ability to succeed during COVID-19. This review of the literature focuses on three central frameworks: online learning history and pedagogy (Hodges, et al., 2020), Critical Race Theory (Yosso, 2005) and Social and Emotional Learning (Durlak, et al., 2011). Online learning is "the use of the Internet to access learning materials; to interact with the content, instructor, and other learners; and to obtain support during the learning process, to acquire knowledge, to construct personal meaning, and to grow from the learning experience" (Ally, 2004). Yosso defines Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a "theoretical and analytical framework that challenges the ways race and racism impact educational structures, practices, and discourses" (Yosso, 2005, p.74). Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is the process through which students acquire attitudes, skills, and behaviors to manage their emotions and achieve personal and collective goals (Duckworth &Yeager, 2015).

While there is a growing consensus that educators should support their students' social-emotional development, we lack a clear understanding of how schools might do so, especially for elementary students in a virtual classroom. Besides, there is a gap in research about the impacts of online learning on elementary students' mental and social-emotional wellbeing, particularly during crises and urgent situations like the COVID-19 pandemic. This study sheds light on the need for educational change towards more flexible practices that recognize all students' needs and empower educators to respond to any changes in society.

Overview of the Research Design

To research the effects of online learning on elementary students' mental health and social-emotional well-being amid COVID-19, the research was designed as a phenomenological qualitative study with a transformative worldview. A qualitative approach enables the provision of a holistic account of the research inquiry and integrates multiple perspectives and factors that may be involved (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The researcher designed this study to examine the impacts of online learning on elementary students' mental and social and emotional well-being amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, this study addresses the broader range of extant inequities that may arise due to the shift to online learning (from educator and parent perspectives). The researcher used a qualitative approach to address three key research questions:

- How does online learning affect students' mental health and social-emotional wellbeing?
- What factors limit the elementary students' academic performance in online learning?
- What strategies can teachers and parents use to connect with students and help them manage their learning and overcome the challenges that may arise?

The researcher conducted individual interviews with six educators and six parents of students who attend different elementary schools in one local county. Due to the pandemic and the social-distancing protocols, some participants preferred to have online interviews via Zoom video conferencing, and other participants chose to interview over the phone.

This research represents a perspective shared by the participants and researcher. Thus, the identities of the researcher and the participants may impact the research process (Bourke, 2014). As an educator who works for one of the districts in Willow Creek County, and as a mom of a second grader, I had a vested interest in the quality of my son's experience. Also, having a pre-existing relationship with some of the participants both helped me interpret the meaning of their responses and may have conditioned them to respond in ways that were already familiar in our past conversations.

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study indicate that creating a resilient and creative community can foster student learning and enable students to excel academically, socially, and emotionally. According to the respondents of this study, teachers must tailor curricula and instruction to meet all the students' needs. The pandemic and the unexpected transition to online learning required teachers to be more responsive to their students and their families' needs and at the same time, adapt new strategies and develop professionally. Four major findings emerged from the participants' responses: (1) students don't equate to academic selves; (2) there were unexpected levels of expected responsiveness to parents and learning; (3) teachers' self-care matters; and (4) participants found ways of nourishing resilience in an emergent and creative community.

This study is the cumulative result of the participants' interview responses that examined the perspectives of parents and educators who worked with elementary students at the time of the

COVID-19 pandemic. This study helps fill the gap in the literature because it examines the learnings from the online experience during COVID-19 and suggests new strategies that teachers and schools can adapt to keep students engaged and empower them to reach their highest potentials (strategies that are also applicable when schools return to normal in-person conditions). Data collected from the interviews revealed that for students to succeed, it is crucial to meet the students' academic, mental, and social-emotional needs, empower educators, support families, and maintain community-wide communication.

Research Implications

The findings of this qualitative research show that interpersonal relationships (at home and school) and emotional intelligence improves students' engagement and motivation. According to the participants of this study, schools must educate the whole child. This means that students must feel empowered and supported to excel academically, mentally, socially, and emotionally. This study shows that teachers must tailor online instruction to meet all their students' needs and provide necessary accommodations for students to succeed. Moreover, parents and educators play a central role in the student's development and achievement. Therefore, maintaining positive home-school relationships enhances student learning and improves the quality of education. Also, the findings revealed that teacher's self-care is a priority, and teachers' networks provide them with necessary self-care tools and resources, which impacts their students' learning.

Through an equity and social justice lens, this research reveals that incorporating intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cognitive skills in online learning environments can help support lifelong success for diverse groups of students. The findings of this study suggest that education stakeholders should develop policies that affirm the continuity of education during the

COVID-19 pandemic, help teachers and parents overcome any challenges that arise, and inspire students to be agile, flexible, and resilient. Building a positive and creative community that empowers students, educators, and parents improves learning outcomes for all students.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic shuttered many school buildings and disrupted academic instruction across the world. Schools had to shift to online learning, which became a necessary platform for teaching students at all levels (Katzman & Stanton, 2020). Considering the challenges of this unprecedented crisis, schools had to adapt to remote learning and implement inclusive pedagogical approaches to meet the needs of all students. Online learning has focused on making learning accessible to students.

This review of the literature focuses on three central frameworks: online learning history and pedagogy, Critical Race Theory, and Social and Emotional Learning. The online learning framework addresses the history of online learning, methods and instructional strategies, benefits and challenges for students, differentiation, and equity and access. Critical Race Theory (CRT) highlights how teachers and education professionals need to understand and prepare for the realities of their increasingly diverse student learners. This framework sheds light on absenteeism, vulnerability, online access and the impact of CRT on students' social-emotional learning. Third, the Social and Emotional Learning framework (SEL) explores the social and academic benefits of SEL on students' mental and social-emotional wellbeing and is contextualized to address the impacts and influence of pervasive online learning during a pandemic.

Online Learning

Online learning includes learning technologies, pedagogical views, instructional strategies, and pedagogical tools that facilitate learning. During online learning, the instructor uses asynchronous and synchronous communication tools that engage learners. With internet

access, collaborative activities and information sharing, students can experience learning anytime and anywhere and interact with instructors and other teachers (Colorado & Eberle, 2010).

Online learning requires the use of the internet to access learning materials, interact with the content, instructor, and other learners, and acquire knowledge to construct personal meaning and to grow from the learning experience (Ally, 2004). Feldman and Zucker (2015) argued that synchronous interactions (involves tools as a shared whiteboard and live chats) and asynchronous interactions (includes tools like file attachments and e-mail) are two processes that take place in an online environment (as cited in Khoshsima et al., 2018).

According to McBrien et al. (2009), the rapid development in technology has made distance education easier and created opportunities for more advanced conversation and learning than might occur in a traditional classroom (McBrien et al., 2009). Cojocariu et al. (2014) used the terms *online learning*, *open learning*, *web-based learning*, *computer-mediated learning*, and *blended learning* to describe the ability of a student to use a computer while connected to a network (Cojocariu et al., 2014).

History of Online Learning

The foundation of online education has origins in correspondence courses employed over 170 years ago when teachers and students were in contact by mail in Great Britain (Bower & Hardy, 2004). The terms *virtual learning* and *online learning* are used as the equivalents of *e-learning* (Britain & Liber, 2004). In the early stages, distance courses were offered to the learners for the instruction of specific topics or skills. Isaac Pitman was among the first who instructed his students via correspondence in the 1840s (Bower & Hardy, 2004). “Distance education was common beginning in the late 1800s, but its rapid growth began in the late 1990s with the advance of the online technical revolution” (Kentnor, 2015, p. 22). In 1924, great

success was achieved in the e-learning field after the invention of the testing machine which allowed the students to test their knowledge in particular subjects (Bower & Hardy, 2004).

Skinner (1958) invented the “teaching machine” which was of noticeable importance for schools to manage the instruction and utilize the new machine to teach their students in a purposeful programmed way (Skinner, 1958).

“By the late 1960s and early 1970s, significant changes in distance learning occurred due to the development of new media technologies and delivery systems” (Nagy, 2005, p.79). In the 1980s, people began to purchase computers for their homes and used them to learn particular skills and special subjects (Thompson et al., 1994). Between 1995 and 2000, “e-learning became the state of the art for the use of technology in education” (Keegan, 2002, p.4.). In the late 20th century, online learning expanded in different ways with the use of the computer, internet, e-learning tools, and new methods.

By the beginning of the 21st century, higher education institutions in the United States offered more than 100,000 different online courses, and about one-quarter of American students took at least one online course each term (Simonson & Berg, 2016). Technological advancement opened a new horizon in the field of online learning (Khoshsima et al., 2018), and people who were not able to attend schools due to place or time constraints could make the best use of online courses. Students in an online learning environment have more access to information and can log into virtual classes anytime, regardless of their time zone or geographic location.

Methods of Online Learning

Several studies showed that to meet the needs of learners in an online environment, educators must direct their focus toward the learner-centered approach, design learning communities, and apply differentiated teaching methods.

For instance, Anderson (2008) argues that implementing a learner-centered approach in an online learning space provides a safe environment and encourages dialogue and communication with students. According to Anderson (2008), in a learner-centered classroom, the teacher knows and understands all the students and builds on each student's pre-existing knowledge, cultural perspectives, and comfort level with technology. Also, students get the opportunity to express themselves and interact with each other (Anderson, 2008). Anderson (2004) notes that learning communities encourage students to communicate and interact and improves their perceptions and understanding.

According to Stavredes (2011), students studying online may face physical separation, isolation, lack of support, and may feel disconnected. The lack of face-to-face interaction and direct contact can negatively affect students' engagement, understanding, and motivation. To avoid these barriers, teachers must design learning communities that encourage dialogue, collaboration, and peer interaction.

Moyle (2012) notes that technology can promote differentiation in an online learning environment. She argues that teachers can use the data collected to address each student's needs, personalizing student learning and improving student performance online. Well-designed learning activities extend the knowledge and skills of every student and give them control over their learning.

Student Readiness in an Online Learning Environment

Borotis and Poulymenakou (2004) believe that e-learning readiness includes the students' technological manner of living and operational and strategic preparation for e-learning. These authors noted that there are no exact benchmarks for what e-ready represents, but this readiness measure is created from various coherent readiness scales. Borotis and Poulymenakou (2004)

found a proportional relation between e-readiness and students' social-emotional well-being. Students who are self-directed, motivated, and who believe in themselves and their technological abilities score higher on e-readiness. The level of social and emotional readiness accordingly impacts students' interactions, communication, and cooperation skills. Besides, the student's perception of how the teacher supports them impacts their readiness scores (Borotis & Poulymenakou, 2004). So, educators must assess students' challenges and strengths and prepare activities to familiarize students with the entire online course process. Researchers assure that the readiness score influences student responsiveness during the online learning experience but does not guarantee student success. The lack of educators' assistance and technical support leads to student frustration and disengagement. To improve social, emotional, and academic student readiness, it is crucial to commit to increasing student familiarity and satisfaction with the online learning material. Educators must design activities that help students adapt to the new lifestyle and teach them to interact virtually.

Benefits for the Students

Online learning provides many benefits to students of all backgrounds and in all stages of their academic careers. With online learning, participants do not face physical restrictions to accessing classes as they can access a class anytime through the internet (Lambe, 2007).

“Teachers can track student progress and achievement through online support tools and utilize additional resources to enhance student's learning experiences and go beyond geographic limitations, which will greatly benefit struggling students” (Martaney & Bernadowski, 2016, p. 180).

One of the greatest benefits of online learning for students is the flexibility afforded to them when taking a course online versus in-person. At home, the student can flexibly schedule

their courses to suit their needs, and they can pace their learning and workload (Martenev & Bernadowski, 2016). Furthermore, students can take breaks as often as needed, work at preferred times, and take as much time as they need to master course content and complete assignments, without classroom disruptions (Martenev & Bernadowski, 2016). Additionally, because the entire course is often posted all at once, students can plan and create a schedule that suits their learning needs (Catalano, 2014). Finally, students assume greater responsibilities and autonomy in online learning, especially in asynchronous learning environments (Artino, 2008).

Equity and Access

“Access means ensuring learners everywhere are not prevented by circumstances from being in school and getting an education” (Krishnan, 2020, para 8). By providing all students access to up-to-date instructional materials, tools, computers, and related technology, schools can prepare their students for a lifetime of success. According to Miller (1956), because humans have limited short-term memory capacity, information should be organized or chunked in pieces of appropriate size to facilitate processing. Designers of online learning materials should use intrinsic motivation strategies to motivate learners (Malone, 1981). Also, Cassidy believes that a variety of learning strategies should be included in online instruction to accommodate individual differences and learning styles (Cassidy, 2004).

Access to Technology for Successful Online Distance Education

The creator of Khan Academy, Salman Khan, believes that technology has the potential to transform the educational platform and make education accessible for all. He argues that the internet can make education more accessible, so knowledge and opportunity can be more broadly and equitably shared (Khan, 2012).

As Khan takes a positive view towards the future accessibility of technology in education, Maxwell (2000) argues that there are still major social determinants of accessibility to technology for online learning to become a valid solution to the educational opportunity crisis. Maxwell also describes three main “impediments” to accessing technology in the United States: gender bias, racial bias, and geographical location bias.

Khan and Maxwell both agree that with access to equitable broadband and internet devices, technology can reduce educational disparities to implement SEL and cultural education into online platforms; however, there must be access to online materials in the first place.

Parental Involvement

As one of the major stakeholders in the education process, the experiences of parents with their children during remote learning are worth examining to inform future policy decision-making (Garbe, et al., 2020). Studying the experiences and struggles of parents may yield useful data to inform the development of programs and policies targeting students' needs in the online learning environment. Garbe, et al. (2020) identified self-identified issues and struggles that a sample of 122 parents encountered while engaging in their children’s remote learning during Spring 2020 when school transitioned from traditional classroom learning environments. These parent participants worried about a lack of motivation, personal connection, social-emotional engagement with peers, and learning that typically occurs in social settings with same-age peers.

Debates about Online Learning

There is an ongoing debate about whether using a particular delivery technology improves learning. According to Rossett (2002), online learning has many promises, but it takes commitment and resources and must be done right. Doing it right means that online learning materials must be designed properly, with the learners and learning in focus and that adequate

support must be provided. Kozma (2001) claims that it is not the computer that makes students learn, but the design of the real-life models and simulations, and the students' interaction with those models and simulations. Cavanaugh, et al. (2004) note that students may feel isolated in an online environment and may experience challenges learning a foreign language and subjects that require practical skills, such as Music.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) in Education

CRT draws on the array of cultural knowledge, skills, and abilities possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged. Yosso (2005) defines CRT as a framework that analyzes the impacts of race and racism on educational structures and practices and acknowledges the lived experiences of communities of color. CRT also highlights how teachers are ill-prepared for the realities of their increasingly diverse student learners.

CRT is one framework through which researchers can study the impact of social categories on educational performance. Acknowledging, valuing, and using students' cultural backgrounds and cultural identities is essential for building environments optimal for learning (Gay, 2010). Through this framework, the researcher will shed light on absenteeism, vulnerability, online access, and the impact of CRT on students' social-emotional learning.

Critiques of CRT include the ad hoc nature of multicultural modules (Zeichner, 1992), and the lack of integration of diversity issues into all classroom and field experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1999).

History of CRT

CRT began in the early 1970s with scholars like Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado, who emphasized social activism and transforming the notions of race, racism, and power (Yosso, 2005). In the 1970s, Derrick Bell made several contributions to CRT, such as

calling for separate black institutions and responding to the slow progress following the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. He argued that the landmark civil rights case *Brown v. Board of Education* was a result of the self-interest of white people who support minority rights only when it is in their interest, rather than their desire to desegregate schools and improve education for Black children (Yosso, 2005).

During the early to mid-1980s, CRT critiqued the law, society, race and education (Hartlep, 2009). According to Yosso, “In its post-1987 form, CRT emerged from criticisms of the Critical Legal Studies (CLS) movement” (Yosso, 2005, p.71). Several critical race theorists argued that CLS opposed the change and did not listen to the lived experiences and histories of those oppressed by institutionalized racism (Yosso, 2005). In 1989, early scholars, such as Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado, and others held the first group workshop in Madison, Wisconsin to come up with new theories and strategies to reject racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

García and Guerra (2004) discussed assumptions and beliefs about culturally diverse students and acknowledged that deficit thinking pervades in United States society. They believed that schools and people who work in schools mirror these beliefs (García & Guerra, 2004).

According to Yosso (2005), “Daniel Solórzano identified five tenets of CRT: (1) the intercentricity of race and racism; (2) the challenge to dominant ideology; (3) the commitment to social justice; (4) the centrality of experiential knowledge; and (5) the utilization of interdisciplinary approaches (p. 73)”.

CRT in an Online Classroom Environment

Access plays an important role in limiting disparities in an online environment and with access to equitable broadband and internet devices, technology can reduce educational disparities

(Khan, 2012; Maxwell, 2000). In the academic domain, racial/ethnic identification has been shown to attenuate the effects of discrimination on academic outcomes (Eccles, et al., 2006; Wong, et al., 2003)

Levy et. al. (2016) presented a model called the Biopsychosocial Stress Response Model, which argues that racial/ethnic disparities in educational achievement and attainment are partially explained by the effects of race-related stressors, such as stereotype threat and perceived discrimination, on psychological and biological responses to stress, which in turn impact cognitive functioning. Considering both psychological and biological responses to race-related stressors will yield a more comprehensive understanding of the emergence of academic disparities between whites and racial/ethnic minorities (Levy, et al., 2016).

Second, the basic human needs of students must first be met for education programs to be able to succeed (Zubrick, et al., 2005). The likelihood of any positive impact from educational programs on vulnerable students will be greatly increased if support is also provided to meet their basic needs, including care and protection. Emerging literature has highlighted that students at particular risk of poorer learning outcomes include those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, those with English as a second language, young people who faced persistent disadvantage pre-pandemic (Brown, et al., 2020; Hattie, 2020) and students with “special learning needs and those in rural and remote areas” (Cowden, et al.,2020).

Absenteeism and Equity in an Online Classroom (through the lens of CRT)

A report by the Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) revealed that absences negatively impact the academic achievement and behavior outcomes of students, especially those considered vulnerable (Cottingham, et al., 2020). This report found that extended absence from

school has the strongest negative impact on the social-emotional development of elementary and middle school students (Cottingham, et al., 2020).

Social and Emotional Learning

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) as the process of acquiring the skills required to manage one's emotions and make good decisions (CASEL, 2005). Social and emotional learning enhances student development, which includes beliefs, dispositions, attitudes, skills, and behaviors beneficial to individuals and society (CASEL, 2005).

The California Department of Education (2019) notes that social and emotional learning is fundamental to academic success and must be implemented in every classroom, especially in an online classroom environment. This research also shows that Social and emotional learning impacts the student, as a whole. According to Greenberg et al. (2003), SEL competencies positively impact student achievement and social behavior and lower conduct problems and emotional distress (Greenberg, et al., 2003).

Benefits of SEL

Social and Emotional Learning has academic, social, and emotional benefits. Several studies demonstrated the importance of SEL for learners' success both during and after school. For example, a research study by Han and Johnson (2012) found a positive correlation between students' emotional intelligence, such as the understanding of facial expressions, and their social bonds with peers in online classroom environments. If this argument is expanded to include SEL into the curriculum, raising the students' Emotional Intelligence levels might improve their engagement with online learning. Also, this research showed that peers connected are likely to be more productive in an online learning setting, potentially raising their Emotional Intelligence

levels even further (Han & Johnson, 2012). Therefore, the implementation of SEL has the power to reduce isolation and create better student outcomes, leading to greater longevity in online platforms.

Durlak et al. (2011) meta-analysis of 213 SEL programs aimed to study the impact of social and emotional learning in K-12 learners. The results showed that SEL curricula increase students' social behavior, improve academic performance, and positively affect students' attitudes toward self, others, and school. This study concluded that SEL programs are effective at all educational levels and in both traditional and online classrooms (Durlak, et al., 2011).

The Increased Focus on SEL

For the past decade, a growing number of scholars and educators have called for greater attention to aspects of student development beyond mastery of academic content, such as students' mindsets, beliefs, dispositions, emotions and behaviors. Interest in advancing these aspects of student development, broadly described as Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), is gaining momentum among teachers, administrators, researchers, and policymakers across the United States.

The term *Social and Emotional Learning* refers specifically to student development in this broad domain, which includes beliefs, dispositions, attitudes, skills and behaviors that are distinct from academic achievement and are widely perceived as beneficial to individuals and society (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015). Social and emotional learning is the process of acquiring core competencies to recognize and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish and maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle interpersonal situations constructively (Elias, et al., 1997).

According to CASEL (2005), SEL programs enhance school performance and youth development and help students develop skills and attitudes to manage their emotions, show empathy for others, and maintain supportive relationships. Social and Emotional Learning improves the social, emotional, and academic outcomes and helps students develop self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2005).

SEL as a Lever for Equity

According to the CASEL (2005), Social and Emotional Learning can be a powerful lever for creating caring, just, inclusive, and healthy communities that support all individuals in reaching their fullest potential. Systemic implementation of the SEL curriculum both fosters and depends upon an equitable learning environment, where all students and adults feel respected, valued, and affirmed in their interests, talents, social identities, cultural values, and backgrounds. SEL helps districts promote high-quality educational opportunities and outcomes for all students, irrespective of race, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, and other differences (CASEL, 2005).

Trends in Social and Emotional Learning Research

Studies now find long-term effects of Social and Emotional Learning programs. A 2012 meta-analysis of 75 studies reported effects of universal social-emotional and behavioral programs at least seven months after the program. This meta-analysis showed increases in social skills and decreases in antisocial behavior (Sklad et al., 2012).

Qualitative survey and interview studies show outcomes of SEL differently. A November 2018 report on the perspectives of high school youth about social and emotional learning shows that 89 percent of current high school students from strong SEL schools say students at their

school get along well with one another, compared to 46 percent of current high school students from schools with a less developed SEL presence (DePaoli et al., 2018).

Evidence for specific Social and Emotional Learning programs is also increasing. Implementations of the Committee for Children's own Second Step curricula have recently shown strong results in the research literature. Second Step SEL for Early Learning has been associated with many positive outcomes, such as increased executive-function skills for early learners (Wenz-Gross et al., 2018).

While many researchers and educators have argued that SEL is beneficial, others have critiqued SEL. Hoffman (2009) argues that Social and Emotional Learning relies on dominant values that may not be shared by all cultural groups. Both Hoffman (2009) and Kohn (2014) believe that SEL prioritizes obedience over critical questioning. According to Stokas (2015), Kohn (2014), and Hoffman (2009), SEL focuses on individual students, rather than broader social systems.

Integrating Social and Emotional Learning into Online Distance Education

A meta-analysis conducted by Durlak and colleagues (2011) showed that universal Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs improve social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance of K-12 students.

Findings showed that SEL curricula increase social behavior, whether in the traditional classroom setting or within online distance learning platforms (Durlak et al., 2011). Also, Katzaman and Stanton (2020) studied the effects of SEL on the students' online learning experience; they found that the introduction of SEL curricula into online learning improves the learner's emotional skills and allows them to succeed.

Improving the Online Experience

The current COVID-19 crisis has presented a situation quite different from previous approaches to online study for both teachers and students in terms of readiness, appropriate tools and resources, lack of design support, and issues with infrastructure (Hodges, et al., 2020). Teachers need to be involved in planning so that technology fits with instructional needs; however, the sudden changes to educational delivery in response to the pandemic prevented this. Moreover, teachers need time to upskill in facilitation techniques and assessment practices if teaching is offered solely in online mode.

Cultural Relevance & Student-Teacher Interaction

This study suggests that greater attention should be devoted to laying the groundwork for developing online courses that consider cultural diversity and allow instructors, educators, and students to build relationships that lead to better academic performance from minority students. Online instructors must be aware of and knowledgeable about cultural differences and create an inclusive, accessible, and flexible learning environment to attract and promote better academic performance from minority students in online learning (Gay, 2010).

Learning involves an appropriate balance of teacher-directed, group work, and individual work that includes synchronous and asynchronous activity. A three-pronged approach to remote learning, developed in Singapore over three years, is relevant to this context. This approach aims to strengthen student-teacher interaction through planning regular checkpoints with live student responses and utilizing student interaction (Fung, et al., 2020).

Physical Re-engagement and Enhancing Students' Well-being

Literature specific to the wellbeing of students in the COVID-19 crisis is emerging, pointing to increased anxiety around the loss of schedules and routines, and feelings of isolation from a lack of direct contact/interaction with friends (Brazeau, et al., 2020; Ziebell, et al., 2020). Social and emotional needs of children, with particular reference to what they miss when being at home in terms of socialization/sharing with peers in a physical space, is also being considered along with how wellbeing and health literacy should come to the fore when school resumes (Colao, et al., 2020; Hargreaves, 2020; World Bank, 2020).

In terms of enhancing student wellbeing when school resumes, there should be a “targeted strategy of physical re-engagement” (Brown, et al., 2020, p. 2) and ongoing promotion of healthy habits through the communication of health topics and healthy lifestyles using authentic learning activities. This can be supported by the introduction of health literacy into school curricula, “either within scientific subjects or as extracurricular matter” (Colao, et al., 2020, p. 370).

Conclusion

Research shows that strong school culture is rooted in students' sense of belonging, with evidence that suggests school culture plays a crucial role in students' engagement. SEL efforts both contribute to and depend upon school engagement (CASEL, 2005). This research will help educators evaluate the direct link between online strategies and outcomes. Moreover, this study may behoove researchers to examine SEL practices within the elementary school context. Finally, this paper highlights the need for educational change towards more flexible models and practices that respond to the complexity and unpredictability of today's fast and interconnected, but still fragile, society.

While there is a growing consensus that educators should support students' social-emotional development, we lack a clear understanding of how schools might do so, especially in a virtual classroom. Besides, there is a lack of clarity or agreement about the definition of SEL, or the relationships among its five competencies and the school climate. Furthermore, there is a gap in research about the impacts of online learning on elementary students' mental and social-emotional well-being, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 3: Methods

This study focuses on the learnings from the different perspectives on the impacts of online learning on students' mental and social-emotional well-being and addressing the broader range of extant inequities that may arise.

Research Questions

This research was conducted through a holistic approach as a qualitative study focused on individual parent's and educational professionals' interviews. The interview questions were based on the following essential questions:

- How does online learning affect students' mental health and social-emotional wellbeing?
- What factors limit the elementary students' academic performance in online learning?
- What strategies can teachers and parents use to connect with students and help them manage their learning and overcome the challenges that may arise?

Description and Rationale for Research Approach

To research the effects of online learning on elementary students' mental health and social-emotional well-being amid the COVID-19, I conducted a phenomenological qualitative study with a transformative worldview. A qualitative approach was chosen because it enables the provision of a holistic account of the issue under study by reporting multiple perspectives and identifying multiple factors involved (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Qualitative researchers ask open-ended questions designed to "elicit views and opinions from the participants" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 187). This approach involves collecting, analyzing, and evaluating data.

This research further implemented a phenomenological approach that dove into the diverse perspectives and worldviews of the participants in this study (Creswell & Creswell,

2018). This focused on the distinct importance of the lived experiences of the parents and educators interviewed and acknowledged their specific biases and worldviews.

The research followed the transformative philosophical worldview, which focuses on the needs of groups and individuals that may be marginalized and provides a voice for the participants in the research process, thus allowing them to improve their own lives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Research Design

The study aims to use the collected data to help inform parents, educators, and educational institutions about the students' mental, social, and emotional needs. A major significance of this study is that it informs instructors who teach online courses about the best pedagogical practices for promoting multicultural presence in the interest of promoting the educational needs of minority students in online learning environments. The findings from this research study may contribute to school site decisions about the implementation and adoption of specific Social and Emotional curricula and may influence future teacher practices of embedding Social and Emotional Learning in their lessons.

Research Sites and Entry into the Field

This research was conducted in a county in Northern California (named Willow Creek County for this research). The participants were either parents of students who go to elementary schools in Willow Creek County or educators (i.e., teachers, principals, administrators) who were working in elementary schools in Willow Creek County at the time of this research. I chose the participants based on my understanding that parents and educators who interact with children and students on a personal level can directly impact the way students behave and think. Also, the perspectives of parents and professional educators on online learning and the way it impacted the

students' mental health and social-emotional well-being can pave the way to new social-emotional curricula or contribute to school-site decisions regarding the students' academic performance.

Six parent participants were invited to participate through personal and professional networks cultivated over several years living in Willow Creek County. Also, I had pre-existing relationships with the professional educators invited to participate in this study. I had previously worked at two school sites in a local district, which will be referred to as Silvertown School District. Six Professional educators from Willow Creek elementary schools were interviewed in this study. Participating educators were staff and colleagues from these schools. Both schools have students from diverse cultures, economic and religious backgrounds, race, ethnicity, and educational level, with a high percentage of low-income and English Language Learners. Silvertown School District is composed of nine elementary schools, and it serves a total population of approximately 7,200 students.

Participants and Sampling Procedure

All parent participants have children in elementary classes at the time of this study. All educational professionals were working at elementary schools in Willow Creek County at the time of the research. Some of the educator participants worked at the same school site. Some parents had pre-existing relationships with other parents and recommended them for participating in this study.

Educator Interview Participants. The six educator participants interviewed in this study are of mixed ages and levels of experience in education. This sample includes some English-only and some Bilingual (English and Spanish) speakers. All the participants had two or more years of experience. The study relied on a population of educators with diverse teaching

backgrounds. For this specific study, the selected population was desirable because each interviewee had a different perspective on online teaching and had experience across the desired grade levels. This purposeful selection allowed for differing perspectives and a broader look into the impacts of online learning on students' wellbeing and implementation as a whole (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Parent Interview Participants. The six parent participants were of mixed ages and backgrounds. Some parents speak English only, while others are Bilingual English/Spanish speakers. These parents have children in Willow Creek County elementary schools.

Sampling Procedure. Before each interview, the researcher emailed the participants to provide the consent form and had the participants sign allowing for their participation in the study. Some participants requested a sample of the interview questions ahead of time to know exactly what was going to be asked of them before signing the consent forms. The consent form outlined the study's purpose, provided methodology and risk information, and detailed how data would be collected and protected. The interview questions were designed by the researcher to gather information on the participant's experiences with online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the challenges that affected the students' mental health, behavior, and achievement (see Appendix B for sample interview questions for educational professionals and Appendix C for sample interview questions for parents).

Methods

The research questions allowed the researcher to look at online learning through the perspectives of educators and parents who have varied levels of experience. The researcher also let each participant know that follow-up questions might be asked during the first or second interview to gain deeper insight into the observations and experiences of the participants.

Due to the pandemic, the interviews were conducted online via Zoom or over the phone, based on the participants' preferences. The researcher held a thirty-minute interview with each of the participants. The first interview discussed their experiences with online learning during the pandemic, observations of their students during online learning, and the challenges they have faced. The researcher asked open-ended questions about the strengths and struggles of online learning, the obstacles their students faced and how they overcame them, and the changes they would make if they continued to teach online. Two sets of interview questions were used. Each interview flowed differently from the others since the participants were given the chance to add any ideas or elaborate in their own words. The participants' responses shaped how the interviews proceeded.

All of the interviews were recorded through the researcher's cell phone using the Voice Memo application. During each interview, the researcher also took notes detailing the participant's tone of voice, connections to the researcher's own experiences and the experiences of other participants, new findings shared, and key insights into their experiences with online learning amid the pandemic. The combination of an audio recording and notes from the interviews allowed the researcher to reflect upon each interview and draw upon the similarities and differences expressed between the participants in the dialogue and insights into the online learning and the learnings regarding the students' mental health and social-emotional well-being. The researcher conducted follow-up interviews when any further information or clarification was needed. All interviews were transcribed and saved on the researcher's password-protected computer. Then, the researcher used thematic qualitative analysis to analyze the interview data. The transcribed data was broken down and coded. The transcribed text was read several times

with line-by-line reading technique and analyzed by content analysis. After that, the codes generated from the data were listed and examined to come up with universal themes.

Data Analysis

Data from the interviews were collected and automatically stored via Google Forms before coding and triangulating (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Then, the interview data was categorized through thematic qualitative analysis and coded with concept mapping and open coding focused through the lens of constructivism (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Interview Analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded for analysis and analytic memos from these interviews were transcribed and stored electronically. Analytic memos “facilitate [analytic] thinking [about data], stimulating analytic insights” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 105). After conducting the parents’ and professional educators’ interviews, the researcher used thematic qualitative analysis. The process of the interview data analysis included three phases of coding to deeply explore the students’ well-being. Initially, all the interview transcripts were broken down using computer software. After reading the interviews thoroughly, the texts were analyzed using concept analysis. Using Atlas.ti9, the researcher completed a manual encoding listing. After doing the codes for all the interviews, she examined the common points to create categories and later on combine the common categories into universal themes. The researcher took the coded information to create a concept map allowing for comparative analysis between all of the interviews.

Holistic Analysis

The researcher gathered all the data from the interviews to look at the information through a holistic approach. This approach was selected to view the impact of online learning

through multiple perspectives. When looking at the themes presented through coding the interviews, many different points of view arose. The researcher took the concept maps created from the interview analysis to create a combined concept map focused on the key findings of the data. The holistic analysis allowed the researcher to take the insights and opinions of participants and give them a voice in the research.

Validity

The researcher is a parent and has been a teacher for twelve years. The researcher also identified, to the best of her capability, all personal biases before coding, categorizing, and analyzing data results.

As some degree of unintentional bias is nearly always present in any study, however, in this study the biases of the researcher were prevented to a good degree by proper study design and by the proper implementation. At the first level, the researcher chose participants using rigorous criteria to avoid any confounding results. All participants originated from the same general population to avoid any biased outcomes. Yet, sampling bias still occurred as the study sample was too small to represent the surrounding target community. As well, there might be a sort of misclassification bias which occurred as the concept of “well-being” is multifaceted and requires detailed standards for diagnosis and might not be easily detectable. This way some participants might falsely classify their “well-being” due to the absence of a reliable psychological test. The researcher made sure that her biases were not transferred, and that the way questions were asked did not encourage one outcome over others.

For the sake of increasing construct validity, the researcher piloted the interview with some teachers and other educators. The aim was to ensure the interviews serve each purpose of the study. Moreover, the researcher established a consistent standard process of data evaluation

and data analysis. The researcher used three participant groups to ensure triangulation- parents, teachers, and educators. Triangulation increases the validity and reliability of the study conclusion and aims to collect data from multiple perspectives. Also, establishing triangulation reduces the risk of systemic biases and allows a better assessment of the generality of the explanations that a researcher develops (Maxwell, 2013).

The researcher used cross-validation by combining these multiple data sources to ensure consistency of findings and to reduce the threat of biases. Triangulation is an approach to using heterogeneous data sources and comparative data analysis. Researchers corroborate the study findings to compensate for any weakness of reliability.

Using methodological triangulation, the researcher cross-checked the data from the parent perspective, teacher perspective, and education stakeholder perspective (Creswell, 2009). This led to obtaining a comprehensive understanding and exploring an in-depth scenario about the impact of online learning on the students' well-being. Collecting data from three different perspectives ensured most fundamental biases were overcome and provided varied insights that supported reaching a coherent conclusion.

This respondent validation was used by “soliciting feedback and data from the participants interviewed” (Maxwell, 2013, p.126). To check the accuracy of the data analysis, the researcher had to seek alternative explanations of the data from the participants themselves. To strengthen the respondent validation and to deeper understand the meaning, whenever the scenario held variant meaning, the researcher referred to the interviewees to detect the accurate meaning and to exclude any divergent scenario. Also, the researcher handled incomplete data of inaccurate databases or data recording. This ensured that data will not be misinterpreted, and the participant's points of view will be represented accurately.

The researcher looked for discrepant evidence to determine if it would “retain or modify the conclusion” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 127). She looked for any variance or irregularity, displaying any unexpected differences in order not to misinterpret the meaning of what the participants said. Evidence in this study meets the conclusion and answers the research questions. Most children would internalize their uncertainty due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and our task as parents or educators is mainly to help them express their feelings and share their thoughts.

Chapter 4: Findings

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Willow Creek County schools had to shift away from in-person instruction and towards remote learning in March of 2020. For the 2020-2021 academic year, Willow Creek County schools responded to the unique and challenging circumstances by taking measures that ensure student learning could proceed safely and effectively. Elementary schools in the county started online in August 2020 with some shifting to blended learning starting by October. Some schools adopted a two-cohort blended/hybrid model, including one in the a.m. and one in the p.m. (after lunch) for in-person learning, to ensure safety and social distancing. Also, schools limited parents' visits, and volunteers and visitors were not allowed on the campus. The researcher conducted individual interviews with parents and professional educators in Willow Creek County to better understand the impacts of online learning on elementary students' learning and well-being.

Several overarching findings emerged when closely examining the interviews. Participants responded to questions about their experience with online learning and its impacts on the students' mental and social-emotional learning. The participants' responses included perspectives about meeting the students' academic, mental, and social-emotional needs, empowering educators, supporting families, and maintaining community-wide communication. The research participants identified among their responses the following four insights from this unique educational period: (1) that students don't equate to academic selves; (2) that there was an unexpected level of expected responsiveness (in terms of communication) to parents, students and staff; (3) that self-care matters, which is epitomized by one teacher's quote that, "My mental health reflects on my students"; and (4) that teachers found resilience in emergent and creative community, such as socially distant coffee gatherings.

Students Do Not Equate to Their Academic Selves

Emotion triggers learning and affects engagement, excitement, and attention (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). At the same time, consistent structures that allow the student to know what to expect and how to be successful reduce cognitive load and free up the mind for learning other challenging material. Interpersonal relationships and emotions engage students and motivate them to persevere and succeed in school and life beyond. For learning to be effective learners, all aspects of children's well-being should be supported (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

Participants shed light on the importance of peer interaction, check-ins, and building good relationships with students to help them overcome any challenges that might hinder their learning and achievement during online learning. Some educators and parent participants believed that children are more than students for school or, in other words, more than just "academic selves," and that education must focus on the whole child. These participants believe that learning is academic, social, and emotional.

After reviewing all interview codes and participant quotes, three sub-themes emerged around topics such as students' negative emotions as an issue that needed to be addressed through online learning, that there was a noticeable lack of peer interaction, and that parents had new roles and responsibilities to support learning.

Negative Emotions

Parents were open and shared their children's experiences with the sudden transition to online learning amid the pandemic. Some parents explained how their kids felt sad and moody. For example, Cynthia, a mother of two, shared about her kids:

Spencer is in first grade, and Albert is in fifth grade. They love school and they're very sociable, but I've seen a shift in mood and changes in their overall emotional state, from being sad a lot to be a little bit more buoyant and happier when they went back to school on hybrid mode.

Cynthia felt that both of her kids were sad during online learning but enjoyed going back to school in Fall 2020. She shared that her kids are returning from school happily because they are seeing their teachers and friends and interacting with others. They are more open to talking to her about school after they returned to school in the Fall.

Some educators and parents talked about times when students felt challenged, especially at the beginning of the pandemic and the shift to online learning. Jihan, a mother of two middle schoolers and a first-grader, revealed, "My son Brian is in first grade. He is still young and can not study independently. It was challenging for him to use the computer and study online in the beginning." Peter is a principal of a public elementary school located in a small city setting. He reported that "everything happened so quickly, and since our school enrolls 70% economically disadvantaged, the sudden changes made the online learning challenging to many students and their families. "At the beginning of the pandemic, schools in Willow Creek County expected the transition from face-to-face learning into online learning to last a few weeks, but the COVID-19 cases were increasing drastically, and online learning continued until the end of that school year (2019-2020). Students had to adapt to the new routine, which was challenging for a lot of them.

Other participants said that students had no clue what was going on, which caused negative emotions like fear, a shift in attitude toward school, guilt, frustration, and sadness. Diana explained with a sigh, "my daughter Angela is in third grade. At the beginning of the pandemic, she had a fear of what might happen. One day, she asked me if we would die from the

Coronavirus, and if she would ever see her friends again.” Cynthia’s younger son Spencer felt “like he was doing things wrong. He always felt like he was in trouble because he didn't know what was going on or what to do.” She explained-

I am concerned about my kids’ attitude toward school. I want my kids to love school and to love learning. And so, I know, whatever happens, I want that love of learning to remain and going through makes it especially challenging, to hold on to that.

May, a parent whose son Alex is in 3rd grade, exclaimed “in the beginning, he was scared and frustrated because he couldn’t follow the teacher’s schedule or submit his assignments on time.”

Some participants shared how students started to dislike school and felt unhappy in an online classroom environment. They also explained that some students couldn’t wait to go back to school and have their normal school schedule. For example, Jihan, a mother of three, stated,

Brian always asks me when school is going to open again. He also mentioned a couple of times before that learning at school is more fun than online learning. Unlike his older brother and sister who felt more engaged online than in a face-to-face setting, it was clear that Brian preferred in-person learning and missed his school and friends a lot.

Based on these interview responses, online learning and the changes that occurred due to the pandemic triggered some negative emotions toward online learning and school. For some students, adapting to the changes was challenging. Other students found online learning engaging and felt more comfortable online than in a regular classroom setting.

Lack of Peer Interaction

This sub-theme focuses on how face-to-face learning is fun for students, how online learning made them feel isolated, and how they are missing opportunities to develop major social skills, due to the lack of peer interaction. Denise affirmed that her second grader had expressed

many times that he would rather be at school because it is more fun, and he gets to chat and play soccer with his friends. Based on some participant responses, the interaction between students teaches them new social skills and is part of their basic development. Ms. Linda, who teaches fourth grade, also acknowledged this- “I hope we go back to school full-time and have our normal school activities and playtime. Students miss recess and the social part.” She added that some parents shared how their children miss Physical Education and in-person enrichment activities.

Teacher and School Strategies

According to participant interview responses, education must focus on the whole child. In one educator’s words, “students are more than academic selves.” This means that school must focus on the student’s cognitive, social, and emotional learning to achieve its major purpose, which is helping students reach their highest potential and being successful.

Participants agreed that it is crucial to check in with students through daily one-on-one conversations. Principal Mary offered that, “you can check in by simply asking a student how he or she is feeling.” For instance, Sara, an educator who has been working in one of Willow Creek’s elementary schools for the last twelve years, shared that her school has what’s called “Monday Morning Minute” every Monday to connect with students “with a social-emotional focus, and we're still trying to do the best we can without being able to do some of the larger school-wide things we would normally do around Social and Emotional Learning.” Based on responses from interview participants, checking in with students is a major part of differentiated instruction. Understanding each student’s needs helps educators improve instruction to reach all students and help each student achieve their learning goals.

Educators also explained that differentiating instruction to meet their students' needs was challenging in an online classroom. Alexa, a third-grade teacher stated, "it's harder to meet individual needs when you have all the kids in front of a screen. Even assessment is harder to do virtually." Alexa felt like her students were different human beings during the transition to online learning. Each teacher had to modify the instruction to make it more interesting and engaging.

Principal Mary mentioned that teachers at her school are meeting weekly with individual students who need academic accommodations or extra support via Zoom breakout rooms, to fill any learning gaps. Based on Mary's responses to the open-ended questions, differentiated learning is more than academic jargon. She believes that there is no "one-size-fits-all" solution and teachers must plan lessons and activities that enhance each student's learning and help each student achieve their learning goals.

According to some participants in this study, it is challenging to keep students engaged while learning online. Denise said, "in the first hour of online learning, my daughter feels engaged and participates with her teacher and classmates, but later during the rest of the school day you see her discouraged and quiet." Moreover, some educator respondents in this study shared that students had more stamina in-person than in an online class. They believed that students concentrate more and stay more focused in a real classroom environment. For example, Amanda exclaimed, "we need to reward and encourage students to keep them engaged. It's difficult for them to stay focused when they're in front of a screen. Sometimes, I feel like I am talking to a wall." She elaborated that it was harder for her to plan lessons and activities for an online class than planning for an in-person class. She had to add some fun videos, songs, and games to keep students interested and engaged. Moreover, two educators, Sara and Peter, shared

that their schools teach students to self-regulate because they believe that self-regulation is vital for the students' social-emotional development. Sara explained-

We have a school-wide program called Soul Shoppe to teach students and teachers some breathing techniques and strategies to help regulate our emotions. For example, there is starfish breathing, where you take your hand out and you breathe in and out five times with your fingers. It helps calm students down.

According to Peter and Sara, a school must help all students excel academically, socially, and emotionally. Educators need to tailor learning and design activities that meet each student's needs. Principal Peter told me that the district has hired a counselor who joins some classroom Zoom or Google Meet meetings to talk to students about the importance of self-awareness, self-regulation and reaching out to adults for help.

New Roles and Responsibilities for Parents as Co-Teachers

Parents played an important role to motivate their children and keep them entertained and interested in learning online. Some shared that their kids used to be self-motivated in face-to-face learning situations, but it was hard for them to avoid home distractions and stay engaged in a virtual learning situation. Cynthia stated that "I changed their room into a mini-classroom. I bought two desks, two headphones, and all the supplies they might need. I turned off the TV and avoided any distractions, but they still felt bored and unmotivated when learning online." Parents agreed that elementary students need technical support, and having the family around helps students keep track of their classroom schedules. This finding is grounded in the parents' responses to the interview question, "What challenges and obstacles did you encounter during online learning?" For example, Diana stated, "they were not used to studying in front of a screen, and that was so hard for them. Learning how to navigate the internet was difficult. It was so

challenging for her to sign in on the Chromebook and follow up with the teacher.” May said, “I help my son join the meeting, and I sit beside him all day long in case he encounters any Internet issues or signs himself off from Zoom.” Moreover, some parents shared concerns about learning loss due to the sudden transition to online learning, and how they used rewards to keep their children motivated and excited to learn. Jihan said, “I thought that the best way to keep my son focused and prevent learning loss is to reward him. We would watch a movie together or get him a new book or toy.” Cynthia stated:

I came up with a positive reinforcement strategy. Well, I gave my kids points for doing good things, such as joining their classroom meetings on time or doing all their homework. They had to work hard to earn these points, and they received a prize for every 10 points.

Unexpected Levels of Expected Responsiveness to Parents and Learning

Due to the pandemic, teachers had to be more flexible, and the time that was previously dedicated to professional work time and parent-teacher conferences was embedded in their regular workday. All the participants mentioned in the interviews that parent-school communication helps develop a shared understanding of the steps needed for the student to make academic progress. Teachers explained that they reached out more often to check on the students and their families, learn more about their students and provide feedback to families about students’ academic performance than they had in the past. Educators and local stakeholders’ priority was to provide equal access to technology and support to families to ensure connection.

Increased Parent-School Communication

The COVID-19 pandemic placed some restrictions on parent-school communication, and parents were not allowed on school campuses. All meetings took place virtually via Zoom,

Google Meet, or other platforms, and staff reached out via a phone call, text message, or email. Teachers and other educators were creative and flexible, and they built good relationships with the parents. Teachers can learn about the needs of their students and their families through regular check-ins and connections to parents (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). During online learning, parents relied more on teachers and reached out for academic, emotional, and technical support. For example, Linda, a fourth-grade teacher, used Class Dojo to share daily news, pictures, feedback, or concerns about children's learning. Principal Mary further shared that:

All of the teachers had built stronger relationships and a stronger kind of home-school connection with families, out of necessity, but they're also loving it. They're loving that it doesn't matter if they don't speak the same language. They're going through the translators, the apps, and they're doing the best they can. And they're creating that trust between parents and teachers. And that consistency and communication between the school and the home are great.

Educators agreed that parents played a vital role in keeping students connected and engaged. Teachers explained how they regularly checked in with parents to understand their students' needs. They gave examples of parents reaching out for technical help or asking how their kids are doing. Jessica, an educator, noted that "during online learning, families are playing the role of administrators, educators, facilitators, and coaches for student learning." Parents had to balance between their jobs and families and maintain positive home-school communication to help their kids adapt to the changes triggered by online learning. Jessica pointed out that some parents are Spanish speakers, but the language barrier did not stop them from connecting with

teachers. Sara, an educator that works at the Family Center in one Willow Creek elementary school, noted:

We've seen the important role of technology in parent meetings. We've [actually] noticed a lot higher turnout at some of our virtual meetings. In the last DLAC meeting, we've had fifty people. In a normal face-to-face DLAC meeting, we never had more than fifteen people.

Virtual meetings saved parents' commute time, gave them more flexibility regarding their job schedules, and maintained positive home-school communication.

Community Getting Together

Schools, local stakeholders, and generous donors dedicated their time and money to distributing Chromebooks among students and providing resources, including Internet access and hotspots, to support low-income families. Amanda, a second-grade teacher said, "technology is an area that the district is wanting to expand on and use to complement the in-person instruction and boost kids' academic progress." All participants focused on the crucial role of building good relationships, whether they're school-family relationships, school-community relationships, or family-community relationships. Principal Peter explained, "you're not going to trust me unless we build a good relationship. The communication between parents and school at this time is major and a priority." Principal Mary stated that "we've been able to have some good resources out in the community. Our district is trying to do as many training sessions as possible for families to be able to support their kids at home." May, a parent of a third-grader, stated, "we have an excellent relationship with my son's school. I have the teacher's email, and this school is really good. You can call or email them anytime, and they usually get back to you right away."

According to the respondents in this study, to meet all students' needs, schools must maintain good relationships with parents and empower parents to help their children succeed. Educators must create an environment of trust and support students and their families to improve students' learning.

My Mental Health Reflects On My Students

The demands of the unprecedented context of teaching during the pandemic caused stress and frustration. Teachers participating in this study shared how they felt burned out, discouraged, and unappreciated. Linda complained, "it was very stressful and challenging. I was literally up till 2 am every day for the first two months of online learning, which affected my wellness and home situation. My mental health reflects on my students." Teachers' physical, mental, and emotional needs should be met to ensure enthusiasm and motivation and maintain effective teaching. Amanda, a second-grade teacher stated, "I felt discouraged because I thought the amount of time and effort that I put into online learning probably wasn't even noticed by anybody." In the interview, Amanda explained about the new responsibilities that the pandemic has thrown on teachers and about how challenging it was to plan for an online classroom and meet all the students' needs.

Some of the challenges that teachers shared during interviews were issues with technology, time management, workload, and balancing home and teaching lives. Jessica stated, "we had so much work to do, too many staff meetings, and big home responsibilities. I wasn't sleeping well. On some days, I felt like I am losing my balance." Amanda, a second-grade teacher, reported that she couldn't get organized, and some days she had technical issues. She complained, "One day, I have kicked off the Zoom meeting, and it took a few minutes to figure

out what to do.” Teachers faced many challenges and had to come up with instant solutions, forgetting about their own mental health needs.

Some interview data showed that teachers faced new challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic when schools had to shift to online learning. It was crucial to balance between their work and home. A teacher’s mental health affects teaching and reflects on the students.

Self-Care

Self-care is an important component of a teacher’s mental health. Sokal and others (2020) believe that teachers’ poor well-being negatively affects students’ academic performance and achievement. In the interview, Linda, a fourth-grade teacher, emphasized, “my self-care is a priority. So I’m able to give more of myself to each of those students.” Linda believed that a teacher has to show up to a classroom, whether it is an in-person or virtual classroom, with a smile and positive attitude. She explained that when a teacher is enthusiastic about teaching, students feel that they are loved and then become motivated to learn. Moreover, Principal Mary stated-

We try to be supportive of each other. I emphasize a lot of self-care. Every week, I share self-care ideas on the staff bulletins, and in our staff meetings, I always include questions like ‘What are we doing to care for our kids? What are we doing to care for each other? And what are we doing to care for ourselves?’ Because it’s easy to just completely dive into the work and forget to take care of yourself or take stock of what you need. So I remind them of that.

Amanda explained that she felt emotionally drained from work during online learning. She stated, “teaching in a pandemic is very exhausting. I need some self-care.”

She complained about the work overload and not having the time to rest and take care of her wellness.

Linda (a teacher) also shared, “If I could go back to the beginning of this online learning experience, I would just tell myself it’s okay if things don’t look super professional. Just get it done.” Principal Peter advised educators regarding their self-care. He stated, “I would say just don't stress out, like take it day by day. Deep breaths and taking breaks help you get rid of stress.”

The educator respondents in this study stressed the importance of self-care and stress management as it reflects on the students’ learning and attitude toward school. If a teacher is positive about teaching, students can learn to their highest potential.

Socially Distant Coffee: Finding Resilience in Emergent and Creative Community

According to educators Mary and Sara, Willow Creek County is a family-oriented community that values education and partnerships. Participants involved in this research study reported having found creative ways to come together, such as through virtual meetings or socially distanced meetings at coffee shops. Many educators participating in this study felt empowered and grateful for their supportive schools and community. For example, Jessica, an experienced educator who has been working in the school family center of a diverse school for eight years, stated with a voice full of pride, “I love seeing the community come together, and everybody just really supports the families, the students, the teachers, and everybody. It's great when you have a fully functioning healthy community. We support each other.”

This study showed that collaboration and maintaining positive relationships among the teachers and staff was crucial to empower students and meet all students’ needs in this unprecedented time. Principal Mary remarked that “[we] try to keep the morale up. We meet

outdoors every week for some coffee, with masks on, and keeping social distance.” Besides, educators indicated that parents were so engaged in their children’s learning. They reached out via Class Dojo, email, or phone call. Principal Peter pointed out that a significant number of parents were flexible and attended several virtual school-wide and community-wide meetings. He added that his school empowers parents by providing them with the resources and support they need to empower their kids. Sara, who works in the same school affirmed, “we’ve been able to have some good resources out in the community. We’re trying to do as many training sessions as possible for families to be able to support their kids at home.” Sara and Peter celebrated the fact that some local supporters are spending their money and efforts on donations that are distributed fairly among families who could use additional support. They explained how their school district is very supportive to families and offers free computer classes, English classes, and bilingual reading clubs.

Given that effective student learning is the byproduct of a positive school climate as well as the home-school connection, schools must maintain a positive environment for students to succeed to their highest potentials and for teachers and staff to cooperate and exchange resources and expertise. Also, schools must consider involving parents more since parents play a vital role in their children’s learning.

Conclusion

Even during an emerging crisis, the role of education is to educate students, affirm relationships, and find innovative strategies to reach, empower, and teach. The findings of this study suggest answers and explanations to the following research questions:

- (1) How does online learning affect students’ mental health and social-emotional wellbeing?

(2) What factors limit elementary students' academic performance in online learning?

(3) What strategies can teachers and parents use to connect with students and help them manage their learning and overcome the challenges that may arise?

This project's findings showed that students did not equate to their academic selves and that schooling should enable them to excel academically, socially, and emotionally. The parents' and educators' responses to interview questions revealed that positive relationships and continuous check-ins are vital for students to learn and develop. Educators and parents explained how creating a resilient and creative community can foster student learning and help students overcome challenges. Participants gave examples of how schools responded to the unprecedented transition to online learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools played an important role in shaping positive student behaviors, helping students self-regulate, and keeping students and teachers motivated. Teachers also tried new strategies to assess student learning and meet all students' needs. They stressed the importance of flexibility, peer interaction, and hands-on activities, and gave examples of times when they helped students who felt overwhelmed or supported parents who were concerned about their children's learning.

Findings indicate that due to the sudden transition to online learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic, educators were obliged to make rapid decisions to face new situations they were not trained to deal with. According to the respondents, the current challenges required teachers to become more flexible and creative to meet their students' needs. The respondents believed that due to a lack of training, educators were forced to rely on their instincts to react. Jessica (a teacher) exclaimed with a sad voice, "in one of the district meetings, our school principal was sharing some concerns about online learning for elementary students when a district member told him to make things work or the district will make it work its way!"

Schools and districts were faced with nurturing the capacities of educators and parents simultaneously. They had to enhance new skills, such as communication, cooperation, and resilience and to guarantee a dynamic and growth-oriented learning climate that helps students reach their potentials. The COVID-19 situation was new and also continuously changing. Educators, with the help of their school districts, had to plan for the survival of today along with the continuity of teaching and learning for tomorrow. Educators had to implement new strategies and programs relevant to changing parent and student needs. Being multi-taskers, school stakeholders needed to make critical decisions that concern teachers' safety and empowerment, students' learning and empowerment, and parental demands and empowerment, along with financial issues, all at once. All stakeholders had to manage a high run of emotions (such as anxiety or stress) to prevent a clash of priorities and to focus on the continuity of the teaching-learning process. One challenging task was managing the wellbeing of educators, parents, and students during the pandemic.

This study's findings showed that keeping educators engaged and enthusiastic about their work helps maintain balanced mental health and emotional well-being. As some respondents mentioned, sometimes more time was dedicated to boosting the teaching-learning effectiveness than the time dedicated to educators' self-care, the latter of which provided in many ways to be at least as important if not more so.

Of primary importance was supporting parents and educators with navigating a wide range of educational technological innovations, training them, and providing access. Add to that, a situation that led to a flow of mixed emotions. Schools received feedback about teachers' and parents' grief and frustration and tried their best to manage collective anxiety, but it was challenging to provide each individual with the required social-emotional support and with

sufficient social-awareness practice for focusing on their wellbeing. One role for districts was to create innovative communication techniques that helped reduce educators' and parents' concerns.

Schools reportedly put high emphasis on positive reinforcement, a lot of positivity, motivation, and psychological support when needed. They had to strengthen "individual empowerment strategies" by taking care of individual mental, emotional, and physical health.

Findings of this study indicate that teacher and parent empowerment drives student performance higher and supports high-standard educational goals. By way of illustration, Jessica's school held a survey to better understand teachers' and parental needs during the pandemic. The results revealed that teachers focused on the crucial role of collaboration among colleagues and school-family communication. Parents who responded to this survey stressed the important role of schools in fostering students' mental, social, and emotional development.

An important lesson learned from this pandemic was that distributing responsibilities equally and sharing accountability among the community, schools, teachers, parents, and students unlocks the potential for networked collaboration. In Principal Peter's words:

Our school promotes an environment of collaboration among teachers and staff, and we try to maintain a positive learning environment for all students to excel and develop academically, socially and emotionally. Also, our school believes in the great role that parents and the community play in raising student achievement.

While this pandemic-related shift was an upheaval, school stakeholders were tasked with continuing to create motivating environments full of recognition and acknowledgment. Teachers, parents, and students treated each other with authentic appreciation and a desire to cultivate a

culture of positive morale. Supporting teachers and parents on appropriate measures helped them balance their work, health, family, and personal life during the crisis, and accordingly maximize students' achievement.

With a sense of purpose, the community created a social support network that boosts resilience levels and assures proper educational continuity. This included the development of recovery plans, in case of any arising future educational disruptions. Finally, there is no doubt that the scars of the pandemic will last for a long time, including the effects of schools' financial disruptions, educators' job losses and/or reduced salaries, and others. A post-COVID-19 work context will look nothing like the pre-COVID-19 context. Meanwhile, schools in Willow Creek continue to prioritize the care of individual wellbeing, while staying committed to their responsibilities and educational demands. To adapt to the new context, teachers shifted practices to meet the challenges and to inspire students to be agile, flexible, and resilient.

Chapter 5: Discussion

According to the findings of this research, the sudden transition to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic required finding innovative ways for schools to connect to students, teachers, and parents. Data collected from the interviews revealed that for students to succeed, it is crucial to meet the students' academic, mental, and social-emotional needs, empower educators, support families, and maintain community-wide communication. Four major findings emerged from the participants' responses: (1) students don't equate to academic selves; (2) that there were unexpected levels of expected responsiveness to parents and learning; (3) that teachers' self-care matters; and (4) that teachers found resilience in emergent and creative community, such as socially distant coffee gatherings.

This research found that when students' well-being is supported, learning becomes more effective (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). According to the respondents of this study, schools should educate the whole child and meet the students' academic, social, and emotional needs. Moreover, the participants focused on the importance of parent-school communication, as it helps educators to better know their students and tailor learning to meet their needs and enhance the students' academic performance. Data collected from the study interviews shed light on teachers' self-care and the importance of stress management. Some participants explained that the teacher's well-being and self-care reflect on their students and affect their learning. Also, this research revealed that the participants found resilience in their emergent and creative community in Willow Creek County. Respondents to the interview questions believed that effective student learning is the byproduct of a positive school climate as well as the home-school connection. For schools to improve students' academic performance in the online learning environment, school

stakeholders should maintain positive home-school relationships and empower students, teachers and parents.

The emerging insights and findings uncovered by the interview seemed to align with the data generated by the literature review. These findings reinforce the three central frameworks reviewed in chapter two: online learning, Critical Race Theory (CRT), and Social and Emotional Learning. First, Cassidy (2004) demonstrated that a variety of learning strategies should be included in online instruction to accommodate individual differences and learning styles. Participants stressed the importance of check-ins and understanding students' needs in enhancing students' learning and achievement online. Educator participants, in particular, believed that learning is academic, social, and emotional, and teachers should educate the whole child during online learning.

Second, according to the respondents of this study, access plays an important role in limiting disparities in an online environment. Khan (2012) has shown that with access to the internet, students also gain more equal opportunities for education and knowledge. The participants of this study believed that it is vital to provide students and their families with equal access to technology and the resources they need to succeed.

Third, previous research has revealed that students participating in universal SEL programs demonstrated more enhanced social-emotional skills and positive social behavior—as well as lower levels of emotional distress and conduct problems (Durlak, 2011). This analysis was also significant in the findings of this study. Based on the respondents of the interview, interpersonal relationships at home and school, and emotional intelligence improves students' engagement and motivation and enables them to succeed in school and life. For students to succeed in an online learning environment, all aspects of their well-being should be supported.

Also, findings show that peer interaction and play are basic for elementary students' development.

Katzaman and Stanton (2020) found that the introduction of SEL curricula into online learning improves the learner's emotional skills and allows them to succeed. The qualitative results of this research revealed that incorporating Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) into online learning enhances students' academic performance and improves the learning outcomes for elementary students. On the other hand, there is a gap in the literature regarding the value of implementing SEL competencies in online learning, especially during times such as a pandemic.

Implications for the Literature

This research also contributes to the literature with the recognition of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on student well-being. Although the level of student well-being is open for debate, this may be considered as a support or base point for other researchers seeking to conduct a study in this community area. It can also give an insight for educators about the importance of practice to support student mental health. It shows parents the importance of embracing their children's well-being and putting it above any academic achievements in the meanwhile.

While Elias et al. (1997) found that SEL helps students manage emotions and maintain positive relationships, the findings of this research, at least while online during a pandemic, suggest that SEL programs and training are important for teachers as well. The findings of this study also go beyond the result of Fung et al.'s (2020) study about the importance of student-teacher interaction to show that peer interaction and student-parent interaction play an important role in the student's learning. This study expands Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey's (2018) finding that learning is effective when students' well-being is supported to highlight that

teacher's self-care has a great impact on the learning process, especially during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.

The findings of this research fill a gap in the literature with regards to SEL during a massive and immediate migration of learning online and then back through varied and phased reintegration to physical school sites. Human relationships are the essential ingredient that catalyzes healthy development and learning (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). The findings of this research suggest that teachers must maintain a positive classroom environment for students to develop a sense of belonging and engage actively in their online learning.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings of this study have implications for practice and policy. Academic developers and administrators must develop policies that respond to the new demands of the rapidly changing learning context and support innovative teaching practices. Also, they must develop policies for professional development in online learning.

Schools need to develop a comprehensive communication plan to embrace the insecurities of students, parents, and students. Supporting teachers through courses with well-being practices would accordingly trigger and maintain stability in students' well-being. A teacher's poor well-being negatively affects students' academic achievement.

One promising route is to maintain various communication platforms that emphasize social connections for students, triggering structural well-being features. The community stakeholders shall adopt a public health approach that enhances connections between different strands of student well-being. Such interventions require going down to the roots of creating instructional academic opportunities that sustain students' well-being. Educators should effectively facilitate all sorts of social conversations with students and between the peers

themselves to improve students' proficiency. Also, asking direct questions related to one's fears and stress throughout the discussion seems to play a significant role in students expressing themselves.

Implications for Teachers

The findings of this study invite teachers to consider creating a positive classroom environment that affirms and supports all students. This research shows that teachers must differentiate instruction and adapt a curriculum that meets the needs of different groups of students, with special attention to SEL. The findings also indicate that teachers' well-being is central to the learning community and that practices should be in place for teachers to care for themselves and connect meaningfully with others. These findings also give insight for educators about the importance of preparing daily warm-up activities to support student mental health.

Implications for Schools

Schools play a central role in the child's development. A supportive and inclusive learning environment empowers students to reach their highest potentials. Schools must use a range of teaching strategies, tools, and technologies to engage students and meet their individual needs in an online learning environment. Implementing online learning effectively necessitates following school-wide practices that systematically develop students' social, emotional, and academic skills. Also, schools must support teachers and provide professional development opportunities to help teachers develop and adapt new strategies that meet the needs of their students.

It is further recommended that schools develop a comprehensive communication plan to ease the insecurities of students, parents, and teachers, especially during times of emergency or massive and unexpected changes to the educational ecosystem. Supporting teachers through

courses with well-being practices would accordingly trigger and maintain stability in students' well-being. A teacher's poor well-being negatively affects students' academic achievement.

One promising route is to maintain various communication platforms that emphasize social connections for students, triggering structural well-being features. The community stakeholders should also adopt a public health approach that triggers connections between different strands of student well-being. Such interventions require going down to the roots of creating instructional academic opportunities that sustain students' well-being. Educators shall effectively facilitate all sorts of social conversations with students and between the peers themselves to improve students' feeling impression proficiency. Also, asking direct questions related to one's fears and stress throughout the discussion seems to play a significant role in students expressing themselves.

Implications for Policy

The next step is hopefully a quick revision of the curricula to go beyond achievement standards during the pandemic and to consider important indicators of students' mental health and well-being. Expanding the curricula to include daily well-being activities would set a new norm and would prioritize student holistic well-being. A hopeful outcome for this challenging period could be the re-prioritization or stronger integration of whole-person learning. The community and the whole academic system must respond to the students' ever-changing needs especially during crisis times by integrating the required courses to sustain their developing stable emotional, physical, social, and mental health.

Contributions for Equity and Social Change

Even crises like the COVID-19 pandemic have not impacted students equally, with noticeable and documented discrepancies in terms of access to technology for lower-income

communities. There is a noticeable need to identify strategies to maintain and better cultivate lines of communication with students and families with diverse needs, and paying particular attention to culturally responsive SEL to create the conditions for all students to succeed, especially in times such as a pandemic.

Working together as a community ensures that every young person receives the benefit of what is known about how to support their healthy path to a productive future, taking into account accessibility issues and equity standards. Learning must be accessible to everyone as it is vital for children's development and academic success.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research

A drawback of this study might be the exploratory nature of the qualitative methodology. This study involved interviewing parents and professional educators in one diverse county to better understand the impacts of online learning on elementary students' mental and social-emotional well-being amid the COVID-19 pandemic. A further and more in-depth investigation into the use of Social and Emotional Learning in an online classroom setting is warranted and timely. Although the researcher chose participants using rigorous criteria to avoid any biases, sampling bias still occurred. First, the study sample was too small to represent the larger community. The researcher's positionality as a mother and educator also affected the data analysis. Second, the researcher did not interview any students, and the study was conducted within limited demographic diversity. The participants' ages ranged from 27 to 56, and they lived in just one part of one county. Third, the study was conducted in only a few months, limiting the scope of awareness that participants might have been able to add after they had integrated more experience.

Future Research

Further studies might consider strategies that teachers can implement to keep elementary students in specific, and all students in general motivated and engaged in unprecedented situations and crises. Future research might expand the study to examine the impact of online learning on vulnerable students, such as English language learners (ELLs) and students with learning disabilities. Furthermore, based on the findings of this study, the researcher suggests including students in the interviews to learn more about their perspectives regarding online learning and to better understand how implementing SEL programs in online learning affects their mental health and social-emotional well-being. Studying the different perspectives of educators, parents, and students reveals whether online learning hinders or facilitates students' learning and gives school stakeholders insight into effective online strategies that enhance students' motivation and engagement in an online setting. Lastly, the researcher suggests that schools devote more attention to Social and Emotional Learning as this study shows that SEL can teach students new skills to regulate their emotions and make them more responsible. This is especially important for students at risk, students with special needs, ELLs and other vulnerable groups.

The findings of this study focused on the impact of online learning on elementary students but did not give a wider understanding of the perspectives of middle school students. Future research might study whether including Social and Emotional Learning curricula in schools might lead to different results than the ones of this study. Future research could adopt a longitudinal, mixed methods research design to compare the relationship between the impacts of online learning on elementary, middle school, and high school students.

Conclusion

This study offers guidance to teachers and school stakeholders about addressing the challenges of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The experiences and perceptions of the participants mirror the educational consequences of online learning on the students' well-being and academic performance. The findings reflected the importance of tailoring instruction to meet the needs of all students, regardless of their abilities, race, cultural background, or economic status. These findings showed that students are more than academic selves, teachers' self-care matters, parents' relationships with their students and school affect the learning outcomes of these students and building community-wide networks empower teachers and the students' families. Maintaining connection and positive interrelationships, in addition to teacher training, improves the quality of education and allows students to achieve their academic, social, and emotional goals.

This research suggested useful strategies and resources for effective online learning, addressed reassurance to students and parents and provided information about students' needs during and after the pandemic. The researcher concluded that it is necessary to adjust the curriculum and to address individual learning needs for students to reconnect. Moreover, the findings highlighted that students' and educators' well-being is a priority because this impacts student learning. The review of the literature showed that SEL focuses on educational inequities and empowers students to become successful (CASEL, 2005). Based on the interviews, findings, and review of literature, the impacts of online learning address the need for curricula and policies that meet the diverse needs of all students to promote social justice and equity.

It would be interesting to see further research that expands this study to examine the relation between SEL and the quality of online learning and the impacts of online learning on a

wider range of students and in a bigger community. Future research can build on the findings of this study to improve the online learning experience for all students.

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Appendix A: Teacher Interview Questions

- Which grade/grades do you teach?
- How many years of experience do you have?
- What do you like most about teaching?
- Are you currently teaching online or on-site? If you are teaching remotely, when did you start distance learning?
- What is your school's approach to online learning?
- What is preparation for an online classroom like? Explain the daily process of online learning. What are some tips for teaching virtually?
- Which is better for the quality of learning, face-to-face or online learning, and why? What learning platform(s) are you using?
- Did you participate in any teacher training programs about online teaching or dealing with COVID-19 challenges?
- What strategies do you use to keep kids engaged and collaborating remotely?
- What are the biggest obstacles you're encountering as a teacher during online learning? How do you evaluate this experience?
- What are the biggest challenges for students? What advice would you give to students during online learning?
- What are the parents' biggest concerns about online learning?
- What advice would you give to fellow teachers during this time of distance learning?
- How would you help students develop self-awareness and self-worth?
- What strategies would you use to support students affected by trauma?
- Were you able to foster any new emotional, cognitive or social skills in your students during the sudden transition to online learning?

- What experience have you had with students' discomfort or distress and how did you handle it? Provide a time when you dealt calmly and effectively with a high-stress situation.
- What aspects of the changes in learning approaches do you think will continue after the pandemic is over?
- Is there anything else you would like to say?

Appendix B: Sample Parent Interview Questions

- How many children do you have? Do any of your children have special needs?
- Which is an accurate description of your family(single parent, 2 parents, or a combination of parents and caregivers i.e., parents and grandparents in the home)?
- How has COVID-19 impacted your family's life and your physical or emotional health?
- Is your child studying online? In which grade is he/she?
- How old is your child?
- Does your child receive IEP, LEAP, or other support?
- Which explains your child's current learning (face-to-face, online or blended)?
- Do you have WIFI access?
- To what degree does your child appear to enjoy their online learning? Does he/she feel motivated and excited to learn online?
- Does your child feel confident about accessing the internet and joining his class meeting?
- Do you help your child navigate through the tabs or provide support with the assignments?
- How much time is your child currently spending on distance learning (if at all)?
- Is your child given the chance to collaborate with his classmates?
- Is your child receiving enrichment activities such as Music, P.E, Yoga, and Soul-Shoppe?
- What was the impact of lack of predictability and daily routines on your child's mental and social-emotional health?
- Does your child feel tired or have headaches due to excessive screen time?
- Does your child feel isolated?
- Is your child showing behavioral issues and shifts of mood?
- Do you sense in your child a fear of what might happen? How?

- How is your child reacting to changes in the home-school environment?
- How does your child respond to the demands of change triggered by the current situation?
- Does your child have any physical or mental reaction with daily functionality?
- Do you talk to your child about the importance of expressing his/her emotions or check in with him/her?
- In what ways do you support your child to maintain self-control and focus despite the discomfort he/she faces?
- To what extent have the family around helped your child self-regulate and manage stress? For example, are you open to hold a calm discussion with your child about each person's feelings and needs? Does it help as a regulating strategy?
- What are you concerned about mostly?
- What else would you like to share about distance learning for your child?