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Impacts on Elementary School Students Related to COVID-19 and the Role of Social-Emotional Learning in Children's Mental Health

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This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the program chair, has been presented to and accepted by the Department of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education.

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**Impacts on Elementary School Students Related to COVID-19 and the Role of Social-
Emotional Learning in Children's Mental Health**

By

Amanda Davis

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 2022

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Abstract

Research has shown that schools provide an ideal universal location for preventing behavioral issues and supporting students' mental health (Ball et al., 2016; Daunic, et al., 2021; Maras et al., 2015). A large body of research has also connected students' social-emotional skills and their attainment of academic success (Cook et al., 2018; Durlak et al., 2011). With this research and the gaining popularity of SEL, more SEL programs are being created, implemented, and evaluated. The purpose of this study was to understand some of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on young students' mental health and how teachers have responded using SEL programs and strategies. Five teacher participants were interviewed from two elementary schools within the same Bay Area school district. The interviews were designed to gain an understanding of how teachers perceive the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their students. The findings from this research indicate that many students have adversely been affected socially and emotionally by changes related to the pandemic. Teacher participants have responded by prioritizing the development of their student's social-emotional skills. By focusing on promoting social-emotional skills and recognizing their students' mental health, teachers may assist in nurturing as well as educating children, and ultimately increase students' academic achievement and emotional well-being.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In March of 2020, schools were forced to close their campuses in order to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Many parents had to become teachers and were eager for their children to get back to school in person. Schools felt the pressure to “get back to normal.” Several months later, organizations including the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the Children's Hospital Association, declared an emergency in child mental health (Chatterjee, 2022). By the end of 2020, the U.S. Surgeon General issued a public health advisory entitled, “Protecting Youth Mental Health.” In the introduction of this advisory, Vivek H. Murthy (the U.S. Surgeon General and the Vice Admiral of the U.S. Public Health Service) writes, “The pandemic era’s unfathomable number of deaths, pervasive sense of fear, economic instability, and forced physical distancing from loved ones, friends, and communities have exacerbated the unprecedented stresses young people already faced” (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2020, p. 4). Now, in March of 2022, children are back at school, but that does not mean everything is “back to normal.” Many students are still struggling behaviorally and mentally (Chatterjee, 2022). During COVID-19 and social distancing, many children were severely limited in their opportunities for social interaction. Dr. Jody Carrington, a child psychologist, explains that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused many people to live in a “heightened state of arousal” and become “emotionally dysregulated,” which has led us to lose “empathy, kindness, and compassion” (Dombrowski, 2022, 12:45). Dr. Carrington urges those that work with children to “pay attention to the underlying issue which has always been—before, during, and after this pandemic—relationship and connection” (Dombrowski, 2022, 11:54).

Statement of Purpose

Research has demonstrated a connection between children's social-emotional learning skills and their academic achievement (Daunic, et al., 2021; Durlak, et al., 2011). The review of literature for this study focuses on the following four frameworks: social-emotional learning (Durlak, et al., 2011), developmental psychology perspectives (Bowlby, 1988; Hamlin & Wynn, 2011; Rothbart, 2007), behavioral expectations in schools (Rademacher, 2018), and the impact of times of crisis on children's mental health (Kousky, 2016). Social-emotional Learning (SEL) is defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) as "the process of developing the ability to recognize and manage emotions, develop caring and concern for others, make responsible decisions, establish positive relationships, and handle challenging situations effectively" (CASEL, 2003, p. 1). Developmental psychology's concepts of temperament, attachment, and theory of mind work to inform the self-management, relationship skills, and social awareness components of the CASEL framework for SEL. The final topic from the review of literature was how natural disasters affect young children's mental health (Kousky, 2016). While research has focused on the benefits of SEL for students, there is now room to explore the role of SEL in schools during the recent COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this study was to understand some of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on young students' mental health and how teachers have responded using SEL programs and strategies.

Overview of the Research Design

This qualitative study was conducted at two school sites in the Bay Area. Two kindergarten, one first grade, and two second grade teachers participated in discussing their experiences teaching before, during, and partially-post the COVID-19 pandemic. In total, five elementary school teachers were interviewed online via zoom. I had only met one participant

prior as I student-taught her kindergarten class online for 8 weeks in early 2020. Three research questions guided the topics discussed during these interviews. The first was, “How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the mental health of younger elementary school students?” After learning about any differences teachers saw in their students throughout the pandemic, I was eager to learn about how teachers acknowledged and addressed any discrepancies in their students’ behaviors. Thus, my second research question was, “How have teachers responded to the COVID-19 pandemic’s effect on their students?” My third and final question was prompted by my literature review, “If any, what SEL programs are teachers using? Do they find these SEL programs to be effective for their students?”

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated many of the challenging behaviors that teachers of early elementary school students face every day. While the teacher participants have always integrated social-emotional learning into their teaching, these past couple years have pushed SEL to a higher priority. Interview transcript data led me to two main themes. The first theme revolves around the behavioral changes that teachers have seen in their students during and partially-post the COVID-19 pandemic (as compared to pre-pandemic teaching experiences). The second theme speaks to the ways that teachers have responded to these changes in order to best support their students. This study helps to fill the gap in research because it explores children’s school experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic through the perspectives of their teachers. Interview data revealed that many students are lacking independence, social awareness, relationship skills, and demonstrating more physical and validation-seeking behaviors. Some of the ways that teachers are working to counteract the negative impacts related to pandemic-era teaching and learning include teaching emotional

awareness, self-regulation, social skills, and collaborating with school counselors, psychologists, and students' parents.

Research Implications

The findings from this study suggest that kindergarten, first grade, and second grade students are struggling socially following the COVID-19 pandemic. Through an equity lens, this research reveals that educators facilitating social skills, emotional awareness, and self-regulation can be highly beneficial for *all* children. Furthermore, given SEL's connection to academic achievement (Durlak, et. al, 2011), children that develop SEL skills may be better set up for success as students. Teachers can play an important role in supporting students' mental health, but they cannot do this work alone. Child Psychologists, School Counselors, School Administration, and Policymakers all have a position to play as well.

Despite the plethora of media coverage on "learning loss" related to the COVID-19 pandemic, teacher participants emphasized the need to focus on what really matters- the students' mental and physical well-being. The State Superintendent of Public Instruction in California, Tony Thurmond, asserts that, "Supporting the academic recovery of our students is a top priority, but there is nothing more urgent than addressing the social emotional needs of California students" (California Department of Education, n.d.). It is clear that stakeholders are on board with the urgency at which social-emotional needs must be addressed. Discussions of how to most effectively integrate SEL and support students mentally and emotionally are in progress.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Research has shown that social-emotional skills are connected to academic success (Cook, et al., 2018; Durlak, et al., 2011). Durlak et al. (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of 213 SEL-focused studies and found that SEL programs positively affected students' attitudes about themselves, others, and the school; additionally, SEL was found to increase students' prosocial behaviors and academic achievement while reducing conduct problems. Durlak et al. (2011) note that many developmental research studies have found that “effective mastery of social-emotional competencies is associated with greater well-being and better school performance whereas failure to achieve competence in this area can lead to a variety of personal, social, and academic difficulties” (p. 406). With more and more research showing that social emotional learning programs can contribute to students' higher achievement levels, there is a need to closely examine the rationale behind the skills taught in SEL as well as explore factors of these programs that can help or hinder students.

This literature review seeks to unpack social-emotional learning and examine its perceived impact on students. To begin, I will outline the historical context of social emotional learning (SEL), as well as provide definitions. Next, I will explore the influence that schools have on their students outside of traditional academics. Then, I will use a psychological lens to provide developmentally informed evidence for the components of self-management, relationship skills, and social awareness encompassed in one SEL framework. I will then shift away from students as individuals and move outwards to societal and cultural ideologies of what it means to be a “good student” and what behaviors go with and against this ideal. Lastly, I will discuss how disasters in the past have impacted children's mental health.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

Historical Context

In the late 1960's, James Comer, from Yale's School of Medicine's Child Study Center, piloted a program at two schools in Connecticut. This program was based on Comer's belief that "the contrast between a child's experiences at home and those in school deeply affects the child's psychosocial development and this in turn shapes academic achievement" (George Lucas Educational Foundation, 2011, para. 6). This program was found to produce significant results in increased academic performance and decreased truancy and behavioral problems by the early 1980's. Thus, Yale educators collaborated between 1987 and 1992, eventually creating the K-12 New Haven Social Development program. Around this same time period, the W.T. Grant Foundation funded the W.T. Grant Consortium on the School-Based Promotion of Social Competence. This association created a list of skills they felt were necessary to establish social-emotional competence (SEC). These skills included "identifying and labeling feelings, expressing feelings, assessing the intensity of feelings, managing feelings, delaying gratification, controlling impulses, and reducing stress" (George Lucas Educational Foundation, 2011, para. 11). In 1994, the organization CASEL (Collaborative to Advance Social and Emotional Learning) was founded. In 1995, a science reporter named Daniel Goleman (1995) released a book entitled *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ*. This publication increased SEL's popularity as well as provided a direct connection between psychologists and social scientists studying human emotion with educators who were trying to foster social emotional competence in their students. In 1997, educators' roles in children's SEL were made even more explicit with *Promoting Social and Emotional Learning: Guidelines for Educators* (Elias, et al., 1997) written by members of CASEL. In 2001, CASEL changed its name to the

“Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning.” CASEL defines its mission as establishing “social and emotional learning as an essential part of education” (CASEL, n.d.).

Definition of SEL

SEL is defined in many different ways; this lack of coherency and consistency *can* be a barrier to implementing SEL programs in schools (Allbright, et al., 2019). For example, Elias (1997) defined SEL as “the ability to understand, manage, and express the social and emotional aspects of one’s life [...]. It includes self-awareness, control of impulsivity, working cooperatively, and caring about oneself and others” (p. 2, as cited in Allbright, et al., 2019, p. 36-37). However, this same researcher, Elias, provides the following, slightly different definition when they collaborated with Zins in 2007: “the capacity to recognize and manage emotions, solve problems effectively, and establish positive relationships with others” (p. 234, as cited in Maras et al., 2015, p. 200). Another study described SEL as “the process by which children acquire and use knowledge and skills to identify and manage emotions, work towards goals, develop positive relationships, and make prosocial choices” (Daunic et al., 2021, p. 79). SEL definitions may vary, but they seem to all include the skills of managing emotions and creating and maintaining positive relationships. For the purposes of my analysis, I will be using CASEL’s definition of SEL, which consists of the following five core social-emotional competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making.

Education’s Role in SEL

Not only do children learn academics in school, but they also learn how to navigate the school’s social environment and norms, especially during the earlier years. With children spending so much of their time in school, the question, *what is education/school’s role in*

teaching children social and emotional life skills? is particularly pertinent. Schools have the potential to support children emotionally and mentally as well as foster interpersonal skills. Research has shown that schools provide an ideal universal location for preventing behavioral issues and supporting students' mental health (Ball, et al., 2016; Daunic, et al., 2021; Maras, et al., 2015). With this research and the gaining popularity of SEL, more and more SEL programs are being created, implemented, and evaluated.

SEL Programs. For schools to be successful in educating students, they must “integrate efforts to promote children's academic, social, and emotional learning” (Elias et al., 1997, as cited in Zins, et al., 2004, p. 191). With this idea becoming more widely recognized and accepted, many social-emotional learning programs have been created and implemented in schools in the last couple decades. In the next few pages, I will discuss a few different programs and what researchers discovered about their efficacy. In preliminary informal conversations with teachers, I discovered that mindfulness and PBIS are two programs that have been used locally. While there are many different SEL programs to consider, I will be focusing on four studies that evaluated the following programs: mindfulness, *philosophy for children* (P4C), positive behavior intervention and support (PBIS), and *second step*.

Mindfulness. Prior to the creation of many standalone SEL programs, teaching mindfulness to encourage students to release stress and calm down, thereby increasing academic engagement, became popular. In 2014, Zenner, Herrleben-Kurz, and Walach performed a systematic review and meta-analysis of 24 studies that revolved around mindfulness-based interventions (MBI) in schools. Borrowing the definition from Kabat-Zinn (2005), these researchers defined mindfulness as “the psychological capacity to stay willfully present with one’s experiences, with a non-judgemental or accepting attitude, engendering a warm and

friendly openness and curiosity” (p. 1). They found that MBI most significantly affected students' “cognitive performance” which was measured using “attention tests” (p. 13). Smaller but still significant results were found in the “domains of resilience and stress measures” (p. 16). No effect was found in the “emotional problems” measure. While mindfulness may be able to increase engagement, it does not appear to increase self-regulation by any significant amount. Therefore, mindfulness programs themselves may be insufficient in supporting students' mental health. Malboefu-Hurtubise, Léger-Goodes, Mageau, Joussemt, Herba, Chadi, Lefrançois, Camden, Bussièeres, Taylor, Éthier, and Gagnon (2021) put this to the test when they explored the different outcomes of MBI with what they called a *philosophy for children intervention* (P4C). This intervention involved class discussions about the purpose of school, sadness, fear, personal freedom, and death. The researchers found that “P4C intervention was more beneficial to reduce mental health difficulties (anxiety and inattention symptoms),” while “MBI was associated with better outcomes on basic psychological needs satisfaction” (p. 4). Thus, the researchers posit that combining these two interventions may lead to the best results on “overall mental health in elementary school students” (p. 4). They suggest that future programs begin with MBI (students learn and practice identifying thoughts, emotions, and values) and then focus on P4C (students reflect on relevant topics) to produce the most beneficial results. Another widely used SEL program is called Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support (PBIS).

Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS). A case study by McDaniel, Kim, and Guyotte (2017) examined educator's perceptions of implementing PBIS. PBIS is described as a “prevention framework for establishing positive school climate and student behaviors” (p. 35). Four educators (one elementary teacher, one elementary counselor, one middle school assistant principal, and one school psychologist) participated in a focus group. The researchers

found that participants perceived the efficacy of PBIS as dependent on “fidelity, grade level, buy-in, and leadership support” (p. 39). When discussing challenges or barriers to implementing PBIS, the authors recognized teachers and school staff must be not only trained initially on PBIS, but also reinforced with training sessions before each new school year. Participants also “emphasized the need for consistency across building to improve fidelity of implementation and to promote motivation for teachers and leadership” (p. 42). As previous research has found, participants agreed that PBIS was effective for “reducing students’ problem behaviors” and “improving students’ education environment and academic outcomes” (p. 42). Another prominent program designed for schools is called Second Step.

Second Step. The 4th edition of Second Step focuses on “SEL curriculum that emphasizes directly teaching students skills that strengthen their ability to learn, demonstrate empathy and compassion for others, manage their negative emotions, and solve interpersonal problems” (Cook, et al., 2018, p. 2). The researchers chose to study kindergarten, first grade, and second grade students because they are in a “critical developmental period of acquiring core academic skills that will facilitate later learning” (p. 8). After conducting their study, these researchers found that “Second Step was not associated with significant main effects on the academic outcomes measured in this study” (p. 8). To explain this finding, the researchers hypothesize that SEL programming may have distal effects that were not captured in the duration of their observations. They also recognize that teachers “differed in the quality with which they delivered Second Step” (p. 9). They recommend that future implementations ensure that the teachers provide more engaging and a higher number of lessons. Additionally, they recommend that Second Step be “combined with other universal supports that seek to better manage behavior and prevent problems that interfere with learning” (Cook, et al., 2018, p. 10).

As demonstrated by the above studies, not all SEL programs are equally effective in supporting children's' mental health. One of the ways SEL programs vary is by the specific skills that they aim to foster. To find out if these skills are in fact evidence-based and developmentally appropriate, I will now shift to a developmental psychology lens and examine the specific skills of self-management, relationship skills, and social awareness.

Developmental Psychology Perspectives

CASEL defines SEL in terms of the following five skills: self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. While these skills make sense on the surface, I wanted to delve deeper into how developmental psychology research supported and provided evidence or rationale for these skills. The next section examines studies that illuminate why self-management, relationship skills, and social awareness are important skills for children to learn, as well as how they are developmentally appropriate in elementary school settings. The rationale for SEL's inclusion of these skills will be explained through the concepts of understanding children's temperament and attachment theory, and innate preference for prosocial behaviors.

Temperament

When working with children, considering temperament can provide valuable insight into how an educator can best connect with each student. Rothbart (2007) describes temperament as "the initial state from which personality develops and links individual differences in behavior to underlying neural networks" (p. 207). Put simply, Rothbart writes that "temperament and experience together 'grow' a personality" (p. 207). In other words, temperament consists of inborn traits and refers to the way in which a child responds to stimuli, a combination of nature and nurture. Temperament refers to several different spectrums of human qualities such as

activity level, distractibility, sensitivity, adaptability, and persistence (Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development, n.d.). To best support children's different temperaments, it is important that one does not evaluate these qualities in a good vs. bad framework. For example, a child that is highly distractible may disrupt other students. However, knowing that a child is highly distractible due to biologically based traits that form the child's temperament may help a teacher to make necessary environmental adjustments rather than becoming frustrated. Therefore, learning about a child's temperament can help educators meet the children where they are and inform their teaching practices. This understanding can aid in creating the best possible environment for the child to learn in. CASEL defines self-management as "handling our emotions so they facilitate rather than interfere with the task at hand; being conscientious and delaying gratification to pursue goals; persevering in the face of setbacks and frustrations" (CASEL, 2003, p. 5). When combined, these two considerations—understanding a child's temperament and the development of the skill of self-management— can help teachers to provide more individualized, child-centered care. Solely using SEL's component of self-management as a lens with which to evaluate a child's social emotional competencies (SEC) and growth results in an incomplete picture of the child as a whole.

Attachment

One of the most widely known and accepted developmental theories is the theory of attachment. Attachment refers to the bond between a child and a caregiver. The theory emerged from the work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. Bowlby (1988) wrote "attachment behavior is any form of behavior that results in a person attaining or maintaining proximity to some other clearly identified individual who is conceived as better able to cope with the world" (p. 668). Traditionally, attachment is discussed as the relationship between a child and their primary

caregiver (often the mother); however, attachment theory can extend to all adults that play a significant role in a child's everyday life. Having a teacher that serves as a secure base can help students to form relationships with their classmates. Secure attachment is associated with higher academic achievement, "greater emotional regulation, social competence, and willingness to take on challenges" (Bergin & Bergin, 2009, p. 141). Each child's attachment contributes to and influences their ability to form and maintain healthy relationships. CASEL defines relationship skills as "handling emotions in relationships effectively; establishing and maintaining health and rewarding relationships based on cooperation, resistance to inappropriate social pressure, negotiating solutions to conflict, and seeking help when needed" (CASEL, 2003, p. 5). Attachment refers to a bond that is reciprocal and based upon consistent interactions, therefore, this bond or relationship is based on cooperation. This definition of relationship skills mirrors what a healthy secure attachment sets children up for in future relationships. Another component related to the cooperation element of relationship skills is social awareness.

Prosocial Behaviors and Theory of Mind

Research has shown that humans have an innate desire to be social and the capacity to form social awareness very early in life. Hamlin and Wynn (2011) found that humans' preference for prosocial behavior over anti-social behavior starts forming in early infancy. These researchers remarked that "social evaluation is fundamental to perceiving the world" (p. 30). Thus, we are predisposed to favor prosocial behavior, well before we can act prosocially ourselves. CASEL defines social awareness as "understanding what others are feeling; being able to take their perspective; appreciating and interacting positively with diverse groups" (CASEL, 2003, p. 5). Hamlin and Wynn's study provides evidence for the "interacting positively with others" portion of social awareness. Furthermore, the ability to take another's

perspective depends on the development of *theory of mind*. Theory of mind refers to the ability to understand that others have different mental states than we do. Mental states include emotions, beliefs, and intentions. This type of thinking develops around the ages of four and five, right when children are starting school. The ability to take another's perspective and imagine what they are feeling is vital to both form and maintain a relationship. Around the age that children start school coincides with the development of foundational social cognitive skills needed to have social awareness. Alongside various developmental milestones, the entrance into school introduces a new set of behavioral expectations. Often for the first time, children are asked to sit down, listen, and follow specific directions for extended periods of time. Once school begins, children must learn to adapt to a different set of rules than they may be used to, while also adjusting to a new environment with unfamiliar peers.

Behavioral Expectations in Schools

When evaluating SEL programs' efficacy, many researchers point to the difference made in students' problematic behaviors before and after SEL. Problematic behaviors refers to internalizing behaviors and externalizing behaviors. Internalizing behaviors are "over-inhibited" and "internally focused;" these behaviors include anxiety, social withdrawal, and sadness. On the other end of the spectrum, externalizing behaviors are "disinhibited externally focused behavior" such as aggression, oppositionality, and conduct problems (Willner, Gatzke-Kopp, & Bray, 2016). In schools, children who exhibit externalizing behaviors are often disciplined, while children who are more withdrawn and quieter may be more likely to "fall through the cracks" in terms of receiving attention. However, research has shown that internalizing behaviors are "a greater burden than externalizing behaviors on children's mental health" (Kimber et al., 2008 as cited in Daunic et al., 2020, p. 79). *Why do children who exhibit internalizing behaviors often go*

unrecognized? This lack of acknowledgement seems to tie back to Western ideologies of how children should behave. There is considerable cultural variation in what constitutes a “good” child/student versus a “bad” child/student. When Tom Rademache, an English teacher in Minnesota, asked a focus group of students what the “number one rule of school was,” they all answered, “be quiet.” From this experience, Rademache wrote a blog post positing that “maybe we should stop telling kids to be quiet” (Rademacher, 2018). It seems that in many schools, students receive the message that being quiet is one important way to be a “good” student. While working quietly in and of itself is not problematic, it may be an indication of a child who is experiencing internalizing behaviors. This is important for those working with children to notice, as internalizing behaviors are associated with depression and anxiety (Weist, et al., 2018).

Cook, Frye, Slemrod, Lyon, Renshaw, and Zhang (2015) explored the connections between two SEL programs and student mental health. Mental health outcomes were measured using the *student internalizing behavior screener* (SIBS) and the *student externalizing behavior screener* (SEBS). SIBS includes nervous/worried or fearful, withdrawn, and spends time alone; SEBS includes defiant or oppositional to adults, gets angry easily, and disrupts class activities. The researchers believed that the two SEL programs would have a different impact in reducing students’ internalizing versus externalizing behaviors. While they did find that both SEL programs decreased students’ externalizing behaviors and negative mental health outcomes, they did not find a significant difference in students’ internalizing problems for either program. The authors provide a possible explanation for this by stating that based on their prior research, students themselves are better reporters of internalizing problems; these researchers only used teacher-reports for their study. Thus, there is a lack of knowledge on whether SEL programs impact students’ internalizing behaviors.

Times of Crisis and Children's Mental Health

Research has shown that natural disasters can have a negative impact on children's physical health, mental health, and educational success (Kousky, 2016). Kousky (2016) remarks that disasters can leave children vulnerable, especially when they are relying on caregivers who “may be underprepared or overwhelmed” (p. 75). Further, Kousky writes that “a disaster can cause stress and trauma, which can be exacerbated by witnessing their parents’ stress” (p. 76). The effects of stress on children can be long lasting, even persisting into adulthood depending on the environment and individual characteristics of the child (Kousky, 2016). This finding is echoed in a study completed by Weissbecker, Sephton, Martin, and Simpson (2008). Specifically, they assert, when children are exposed to disaster, they “must cope with a cascading series of life stressors set into motion by the event” (p. 32). These life stressors (“loss of home and personal property, change of schools, loss of friends and pets, altered leisure activities, disruption of family and community resources, and relocation”) “can elicit chronic psychological and physiological stress reactions” (p. 32). Consequently, it is vital that caregivers and educators are aware of the possible repercussions following a disaster so that they can attempt to mitigate the negative effects. Some may argue that children should be *protected* and not brought into serious discussions regarding crises. Oftentimes in the face of disasters, children’s capacity to comprehend what is happening is underestimated. Conversely, Pynoos, Steinberg, and Raith (1995) found evidence that children as young as five years old “are cognitively capable of understanding the effects of disasters” (as cited in Weissbecker et al., 2008, p. 31). Beyond just understanding disasters, Peek (2008) argues that children have “considerable strengths that could serve as a significant resource” in response to disasters (p. 14). Peek urges adults to be cognizant of “children’s knowledge, creativity, energy, enthusiasm, and social networks” during periods of

disasters and bring them into discussions rather than shutting them out. While these studies demonstrate that there is some research about how events such as natural disasters or smaller scale health crises impact children's mental health, there is still very limited research examining the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on elementary school students' mental health. The COVID-19 pandemic is a time of crisis in which educators will want to consider children's mental health and SEL in concert. In doing so, the negative impacts noted by researchers can be adequately addressed.

Conclusion

This literature review sought to unpack social-emotional learning and explore how it has impacted students. What social emotional learning is and how it was created was discussed, and multiple programs were evaluated. A developmental psychology lens was used to examine elements of SEL, and ideal student behavior was investigated. In addition, past disasters and their impact on children's mental health was considered. While there has been research on natural disasters in the past, the COVID-19 pandemic presents new challenges for children, especially in the field of education. Schools had to make major adjustments to stop the spread of COVID-19 and children have had to adapt to circumstances never seen before. While there have been studies on the psychological effects of natural disasters in children, there is a need to examine the unique situation created by COVID-19's significance for children, one of the most vulnerable populations. There is limited research exploring the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on young children's' mental health and how schools need to adjust to best support their students. *Are SEL programs still effective, or do changes need to be made? How can developmental and social psychology inform educators in adequately addressing their students' needs during this time of crisis?* The purpose of this study is to increase understanding

of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on young students' mental health and how teachers have responded.

Chapter 3: Methods

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to increase understanding of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on young students' mental health and how teachers have responded. In order to gain information, the following research questions guided this study:

1. How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the mental health of younger elementary school students?
2. How have teachers responded to the COVID-19 pandemic's effect on their students?
3. If any, what SEL programs are teachers using? Do they find these SEL programs to be effective for their students?

Description and Rationale for Research Approach

My educational research aligns with elements of both a constructivist and a transformative philosophical worldview. According to Creswell (2018), constructivists “focus on the specific contexts in which people live and work in order to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participant” (p. 8). In this study, teachers in one county in the Bay Area working with young children during a pandemic were interviewed. The climate of educational practices in California, the nation's mental health crisis, and all the changes that came with the COVID-19 global pandemic taken together may inform us about children's mental well-being at this time. Moreover, Creswell (2018) also explains that the transformative worldview is change-oriented and “focuses on the needs of groups and individuals in our society that may be marginalized or disenfranchised” (p. 9). While the stigma around mental health issues has improved over the past few decades, there is still a long way to go. When I analyze interviews

with teachers, I hope to find themes that point to suggestions in supporting elementary school students' well-being, especially in the area of internalizing behaviors.

This study used a qualitative method of inquiry. Creswell (2018) describes qualitative research as “an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). While reviewing the relevant literature, I found that most studies involving social-emotional learning (SEL) were conducted quantitatively. While I understand that quantitative studies are useful to bring to administrators when advocating for additional attention and funding for SEL programs, I felt that the human qualities (i.e. relationship skills and social awareness-- ironically what was being studied in the students) was lacking in these quantitative conversations. Therefore, this study is qualitative and focused on educators' experiences working with students in the areas of social emotional learning and mental health. Rather than using behavioral rating scales, I asked teachers to discuss how social emotional learning lessons within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic have affected their students and the way they teach.

This study used interviewing as the method for data collection because my goal was to understand student's experiences, through the eyes of their teachers. Seidman (2019) states that “the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9). Through the process of an in-depth interview, teachers had the agency to use any language they desired to describe their experiences and their personal significance. Seidman (2019) writes that “at the very heart of what it means to be human is the ability of people to symbolize their experience through language” (p. 8). Since this study is concerned with the very human topic of mental health, I felt that interviewing was the best method of inquiry.

Another important facet of this study was to steer away from what Tuck (2009) called “damage-centered” research and lean into “desire-centered” research instead. Tuck explains that damage-centered research can pathologize people and become “all-too-easy, one-dimensional narratives” (p. 417), whereas “desire-based research frameworks are concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives” (p. 416). This type of research “accounts for the loss and despair, but also the hope, the visions, the wisdom of lived lives and communities. Desire is involved with the not yet and, at times, the not anymore” (p. 417). Human beings are incredibly complex; reducing them to stereotypes or describing them in simplistic terms does a disservice and does not align with increasing knowledge or understanding. Accordingly, to represent participants as accurately as possible, this study uses verbatim quotes that were checked for understanding with participant validation.

Research Design

Research Site and Entry to the Field

This research was conducted at two schools in the Bay Area. Both the schools and the teacher participants have been given pseudonyms to protect privacy. The school district has nine elementary schools and had a total of 4,415 students enrolled in the 2020-2021 school year. One school in this study is a K-8, while the other one is a K-5. Both schools are in the same district and within five miles of each other. While they are geographically close by, these two elementary schools, Verona Hill Elementary and Summer Hill Elementary, have quite different student demographics. For the 2020-2021 school year, Verona Hill Elementary had 83.5% of the student population classified as socioeconomically disadvantaged. Their student population consisted of 88.7% Hispanic or Latinx, 6.1% White, 2.8% Asian, 0.6% African American, 0.5% Filipino, 0.3% Native American of Alaskan Native, and 1% with two or more races (School

Accountability Report Card, n.d.). For the 2020-2021 school year, Summer Hill Elementary had 22.4% of the student population classified as socioeconomically disadvantaged. Their student population consisted of 60.4% White, 26.6% Hispanic or Latinx, 2.9 % Asian, 0.9% Filipino, 0.7% African American, 0.7% Native American or Alaskan Native, 0.2% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 6.9% with two or more races (School Accountability Report Card, n.d.). These schools were purposefully selected because of proximity to the researcher, connections made during the researcher's student teaching experience, and in an attempt to capture different ends of the socioeconomically disadvantaged spectrum. Before I sought out participants, I ensured that my study was approved by the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Participants (IRBPHP). Then, to gain access for teachers to participate in this study, I first emailed the principals asking if I could interview a few teachers voluntarily. Once that permission was obtained, I emailed teachers individually until I found five participants. I ended up with two kindergarten, one first grade, and two second grade teachers to interview.

Participants and Sampling Procedure

Kindergarten, first grade, and second grade teachers at two schools, within the same district in the Bay Area, were recruited for participation in this study. Once teachers expressed an interest in participating, they received a letter of introduction for this study and consent forms. The letter of introduction contained this study's purpose statement. The consent form included permission to audio record the 45-minute online interview (See Appendix B). Specific participant details have been omitted to protect privacy. The five teacher participants have varying years of experience, but all have been teaching for at least four years at the time of the interviews. Participants were purposefully selected from the younger grades of elementary

school because these children were introduced to school in a nontraditional way; given the COVID-19 pandemic, these children may have begun school with online instruction or had their first year interrupted with the transition to distance learning. Participants were not compensated for their participation.

Methods

I conducted one 45-minute interview with each participant online, thus, data was collected solely qualitatively. Seidman (2019) posits that “at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 13). The purpose of this study was to glean insight as to how the COVID-19 pandemic had affected young elementary school students; therefore, teachers that could articulate their students’ school experiences were interviewed. Prior to the interviews, participants were provided with a brief overview of this study’s purpose. Written consent to being audio and video recorded was also obtained before the interviews took place. While I had written several open-ended questions in preparation for the interviews, I ended up using them more as a backup. Each interview was unique in that it was mostly participant-led following the first couple of interview questions. The interview was kept flexible in that teacher participant responses shaped my next inquiries. Interviews were recorded on the researcher’s password protected personal computer.

Data Analysis

Data was collected through qualitative interviews conducted through online video meetings. OTTER.AI was later used to transcribe the interviews. Once the transcription through OTTER.AI was completed, I re-listened to the interview and corrected any errors. I used qualitative data analysis methods to analyze the interviews; specifically, I completed analytic

memos and conducted categorizing strategies, or coding. Immediately following each interview, I wrote an analytic memo about the overall experience and what I learned. Maxwell (2013) recommends this type of writing “as a way to facilitate reflection and analytic insight” (p. 20).

Once I had an accurate transcription of an interview, I started the process of open coding the data by hand. According to Creswell (2005), the “first step in data analysis is to explore the data” (p. 237). Specifically, Agar (1980, p.103, as cited in Creswell 2005, p. 237) recommends that researchers “read the transcripts in their entirety” in order to “get a sense of the interview as a whole before breaking it into parts” (p. 237). I followed this advice and re-read the entire transcript a few times before I open-coded it. Creswell (2005) describes coding as “the process of segmenting and labeling text to form descriptions and broad themes in the data” (p. 237). Once I felt that I had achieved a rudimentary whole picture understanding of the interview, I continued the process of re-reading this time highlighting words or concepts that came up often as well as words or phrases that stood out to me, thereby beginning the “categorizing strategies” stages of qualitative data analysis. I repeated this open-coding process a few times with each interview transcription. I made a list of code words and then grouped similar codes together, forming several themes or categories. This process was repeated for each interview. The expected codes for these interviews were social-emotional learning, social skills, mindfulness, distance learning, and COVID-19. The unexpected codes included independence, teacher modeling, physical behavior, and delay. After I open-coded myself, I used peer coding to verify that my codes represented the data accurately and thoroughly. Peer coding involved first asking two colleagues to read through an interview transcript and take notes independently. After doing so, I had a discussion with my peers in which they described what stood out most to them. Then I moved to the focused coding stage in which I identified related themes, narrowing my code list to end up

with a final shorter list of themes/categorizes. With this list, I created a concept map, comparing all the themes that each interview brought to light. I also created a data analysis matrix in which I categorized participants' quotes about the same themes together. To do this, I followed the "data analysis matrix" model that Maxwell (2013) demonstrates (p. 109-111); meaning that I used "google sheets" and labeled the first column "codes/themes." Then, in the second through the sixth column, I put the teacher participants' pseudonyms, one per column. I organized participants by the grade they taught so that I could easily see the similarities within grades and differences across grades if any were present. Then I went through each interview and transferred relevant participant quotes into their column and in the corresponding row depending on which theme the quote spoke to.

Validity

When reading this study, it is important to remember that each person's understanding of the world is constrained/limited by their own experiences. Seidman refers to truth as "epistemological constructivism" and asserts rather eloquently, "our understanding of this world is inevitably our construction, rather than a purely objective perception of reality, and no such construction can claim absolute truth" (p. 43). Although interviews can never result in objective truth, learning about other's experiences through their own words, their own perception of reality, is extremely valuable and vital to humanity and our acquisition of knowledge. Takacs (2003) wrote, "only by listening to others can I become aware of the conceptual shackles imposed by my own identity and experiences" (p. 29). On the other hand, while collecting qualitative data has the potential to allow researchers to gain novel and valuable insights, it is not free from limitations. Inherent in qualitative research is "interpretive research" (Creswell, 2005, p. 183). The research in this study comes primarily from interviews, thus, misinterpretation or

inaccuracy is quite possible. Thus, it was important for me to consider my positionality, bias, and reactivity when analyzing and interpreting the data (Maxwell, 2013). For one, I was also teaching elementary school students during the time period I inquired about. However, I was student-teaching which is quite different from being a teacher of record. I was only involved with two online classes for a total of 15 weeks. Therefore, I would not qualify as a participant for this study which is concerned with more long-term teacher observations. Moreover, I used open-ended prompts such as “tell me about SEL curriculums at this school” to mitigate any of my biases about the efficacy of certain SEL programs versus others. In order to combat other validity threats, I used several strategies suggested in Maxwell (2013). In particular, I used rich data, respondent validation, comparison strategies, and searched for discrepant evidence and negative cases. Rich data refers to verbatim transcripts from interviews. While I used a program, “otter.ai,” in order to more efficiently transcribe the interviews, I also went through these transcriptions afterward while listening to the recorded interview to ensure the complete accuracy of this rich data. Additionally, I followed-up with all participants on quotes I included to make sure that I understood them and am representing their experiences exactly; Maxwell calls this practice “respondent validation.” (p. 126). Because I wanted to find that SEL was effective in supporting students’ mental health, I was especially cognizant of my bias while analyzing the data. Accordingly, I also asked a peer to read through the transcripts and provide feedback on the conclusions I gathered. This discussion allowed me to “check for flaws” in my “logic or methods” thereby adding to the findings’ soundness (Maxwell, 2013, p. 127).

Chapter 4: Findings

The COVID-19 pandemic forced schools to make major structural changes to keep everyone as healthy and safe as possible. In a Bay Area County where this study was conducted, schools moved instruction online from March of 2020 until November of 2020. Schools then moved to a hybrid model which divided students into two cohorts with one cohort on campus before noon and the other on campus after noon. The cohort not on campus had online learning activities. Some parents opted to have their children continue remote learning for the full 2020-2021 school year. At the time that teacher participants were interviewed, students had been back on campus for a few months of the 2021-2022 school year. Given all of the changes in school experience that students have undergone in the past few years, I wanted to uncover how younger students may have been affected, especially in terms of their mental health (RQ1). I was also interested in hearing how teachers have responded to any changes in their students (RQ2). Lastly, since I had done so much research about social emotional learning programs, I was curious if teachers were using these programs. If they were, to what degree did they find them effective? (RQ3)

This qualitative project sought to explore how social-emotional learning (SEL) impacts elementary school students' mental health, specifically within the context of COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with two kindergarten, one first grade, and two second grade teachers. After interviewing five elementary teachers at two different schools within the same Bay Area County, I gained a deeper understanding of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on younger elementary school students and the ways in which teachers have responded. Teacher participants responded to questions about their and their students' experiences since before the COVID-19 pandemic (prior to March 2020) to a partially "post-pandemic" world in

January and February of 2022. Two main themes emerged from analysis of the interview transcripts. The first theme, entitled “Impacts Related to Navigating School during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” describes the ways in which teachers have observed changes in their students behaviorally, socially, and emotionally during the last few years. This theme will be introduced by a few vignettes that encapsulate the impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on these teacher participants’ students. Then these impacts will be further examined, separated into the categories of “behavioral changes” and “social and emotional changes.” The second theme, “Teachers’ Responses to COVID-19’s Impact on Students” speaks to the specific ways in which teachers are responding to the changes discussed in the first theme to better support their students.

Impacts Related to Navigating School during the COVID-19 Pandemic

All teacher participants discussed the ways in which their students in the past couple years have been different than their past students in terms of their behaviors and social competencies. Before those ideas are further explored, this first theme will open with participants’ general statements about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their students. At Summer Hill Elementary, one kindergarten teacher, Melanie, shared:

It's really, really, very noticeable that these children are coming from a completely different place than previously. Both from just being in a COVID world and hearing things on the news, seeing parents and adults speaking and reactions to things, and then also missing out on socialization and preschool experiences. So this year, there's definitely been a lot more support with emotional needs and social needs. It's been a much stronger presence throughout all of our lessons and through the school year. Usually, academics start to take a larger role, but definitely, definitely not this year.

This quote speaks to a common thread of participants' responses that described how social-emotional learning has been more at the forefront of their teaching experience since the COVID-19 pandemic. At Verona Hill Elementary, another kindergarten teacher, Bailey, echoes that students are needing more support, while also drawing attention to the role that a child's environment can have on their behavior in school:

What we're seeing in the classroom definitely goes back to what the family is experiencing as a whole, either with losing their jobs because of COVID or not being able to have enough of the work because of COVID and then that stress carries on to their kids, whether they realize it or not. It's usually two kids max that really need behavioral supports, but right now it is more like three quarters of my class. Definitely more significant than in years past.

Bailey's comment points to the general increase in stress that many families experienced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Younger students especially required greater assistance and support to learn remotely. While resource specialists attempted to further support students, it was not always logistically possible online. This meant that some students may have not had their additional needs adequately addressed. Kate, a second grade teacher, said,

I think COVID took a huge hit on children who were fragile in any sort of way. The kids that were less confident, or had any sort of learning disabilities, 504 plans, or special needs-- those kids struggled the most due to the lack of socialization and regular support that they would get out of school. So I think it hit dramatically.

While students with additional needs were not the focus of this study, it is important to recognize that these students may have also been negatively impacted. However, the sub-theme of “confidence” that Kate mentioned will be examined in the latter half of this chapter.

Unlike the other participants, a second grade teacher at Summer Hill Elementary largely reported that her students did not appear to be heavily impacted by the pandemic. She stated,

I think that the children are very marked by the pandemic. And that we do really need to focus on the social emotional piece a lot. But in my class, I'm not noticing anything particularly different than previous years, except for those two students that I've mentioned.

The two students mentioned will be revisited in the sub-theme, “Increased Emotional Reactivity and Stress Responses in times of Uncertainty.”

While some teachers spoke about the academic impacts related to the pandemic, much more time was spent discussing the behavioral, social, and emotional impacts. When asked about a possible “learning loss” related to the pandemic, both kindergarten teachers pushed back and emphasized their students' social and emotional well-being. Bailey, a kindergarten teacher at Verona Hill Elementary, put it this way: “Yes, a lot of the academic needs are an issue and a concern, but the social pieces are what help us reach the academic pieces. I can't teach anything if my kids are not mentally and emotionally okay.” While the other kindergarten teacher, Melanie (who works at a more affluent school-Summer Hill Elementary), shared a similar sentiment saying that the losses are not with the academics, but rather with “scholarly behaviors and social emotional skills.” She gave the examples of students lacking independence and problem solving skills. While she asserts that these are always skills that she works on with her kindergarteners, she adds that this school year “the need is so much greater. They're very delayed.”

Both kindergarten teachers reported having to “take a step back” academically at times, and focus on social-emotional skills. For example, Bailey usually moves into a Science unit about weather after winter break; however, this year she did not feel that her students were ready. She recalls starting a weather lesson and then thinking, “Oh no. Ok, we're going to stop and just do the social emotional and behavior pieces, because we cannot learn until or unless we have self-regulation in some way.”

All teachers discussed that they felt many of their students were delayed in some way this year. Both kindergarten teachers mentioned feeling much more like preschool teachers this year. Melanie recalls a few experiences at the beginning of the school year that led to this realization:

We need to back up and basically pretend we're preschool teachers, like assume they know even less than what we're used to them not knowing. So it's been tough for us, because we know that now, but we still have trouble anticipating how little they know. And then to plan lessons accordingly. We don't have those resources, necessarily. We're not preschool teachers. So kind of just thinking on our feet and making it up as we go along to some degree. And really going through what the expectations are.

This quote brings to light a concern with not having sufficient resources to support students where they are, given any delays that may be related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers are having to be more flexible and adaptable to their students' needs. These specific needs will be further examined in the categories of “behavioral changes” and “social and emotional changes.”

Behavioral Changes

One theme that surfaced through interview data analysis were the changes in students' behavior as observed by the teacher participants. Most participants discussed that their students lacked

independence and seemed to seek out teacher approval for validation more so than in past years. Additionally, most participants brought up seeing an increase in physical behaviors.

Decrease in Independence and Increased Desire for Teacher Validation. Both kindergarten teachers described seeing a much greater lack of independence in their students in the 2021-2022 school year. When asked broadly about the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on her students, Melanie said, “The biggest thing that we the kindergarten teachers have noticed is that their independence level is very, very low.” For example, Melanie described that at the start of the school year, only about a quarter of her class was able to follow the basic morning routine of hanging up backpacks and getting lunch boxes out without asking for assistance. Melanie remarked that usually just a few kids need help with this routine, but this year it was the majority of her class. Further, Melanie shared that a common experience in her classroom is that when a student finds a material that is not in the right place, they go directly to her. She explained that this is not because the students do not know where a material goes, but rather that they are seeking her validation— “It’s like they need you as a crutch.” Bailey also reported experiencing more validation-seeking behaviors from her students. Specifically, she said “they’re—I don’t want to use the word needy— but that’s essentially what it is. There’s this need for one-on-one attention much more than normal.” Strikingly similar language came up with Kate, a second grade teacher at Summer Hill Elementary who said, “they’re very needy. And that I feel is a definite effect of COVID. Their independence really declined.”

Increase in Physical Behavior. Most teacher participants mentioned an increase in their students’ activity/movement level, both in the classroom and on the playground/outside at recess.

One kindergarten teacher, Bailey, emphasized that her students this year have been making a significant amount of noise throughout the day in the classroom. In particular, she reports hearing “high pitched sounds,” as well as “squealing, shrieking, and forceful bellows.”

Moreover, this teacher also noticed an increase in physical behavior stating, “they're a lot more physically aggressive than I've seen—pushing, hitting, kicking, elbowing.” While no other teacher participant mentioned their students making constant sounds in their classroom, two other teachers described similar concerns with their students' physical behaviors. Melanie remembers having to “dial it down a notch further” than typical for kindergarten after seeing “kids using things inappropriately.” She gives the example of explicitly teaching “how to play with a ball and how to not play with a ball” during recess. While she warmly says that her students are “very very happy to be playing again,” she follows this statement up by saying, “strangely, a lot of things have gotten broken this year. They just seem to like to destroy things.” When asked why she thought this destructive behavior was happening, she posited that it is partially due to a lack of preschool experience and “not having expectations ground into you.” She also pondered that perhaps breaking something serves a sensory purpose or as an “anxiety relief.” Ultimately, she concluded her thought process by saying, “I honestly don't know. But it's really unique to this group of kids.”

A first grade teacher at a different school site, Anna, echoed having to provide more scaffolding regarding the activities allowed at recess stating, “we're having to teach how to safely play, how to kindly play.” This teacher also described her students as “really active” inside the classroom. She suggested that this increase in movement may be due to the students' experiences with online learning- “They're so used to being able to get up and go get their snack anytime of the day or get up and go to the bathroom without having to ask.”

Social and Emotional Changes

While discussing the social and emotional changes in their students this year, all participants mentioned seeing an increased emotional reactivity and stress response in some of their students. They also reported seeing a lack of social awareness and relationship skills in their students.

Increased Emotional Reactivity and Stress Responses in times of Uncertainty. All of the teachers described their students' heightened emotional reactivity this past year (2021-2022). Two teachers specifically mentioned that students are crying more often. Bailey believes that the majority of crying arises out of social conflict. For example, she reports that children sometimes cry during recess and tell her that other students "don't want to be their friends."

One second grade teacher, Reese, reported that two of her students this year are exhibiting signs of distress/anxiety that their parents believe came as a result of the pandemic. Reese revealed, "One child pulls her eyebrows. And there's another one who just kind of nervously speaks all the time." Melanie believes that students' emotions may be a reflection of the adults in their immediate environment. She contends,

If adults are struggling with feeling lonely or feeling sad or stressed, then it's likely that the kids in that same household are feeling those same things, especially when there's been a lot of uncertainty and a lot of change.

Kate posited that many children may be suffering from anxiety and depression due to this change and uncertainty that the pandemic brought about. She stated, "a lot of children lost family members, or they couldn't see their family members. I think there was a lot of loss just in general."

Decreased Relationship Skills and Social Awareness. Part of CASEL's definition of relationship skills is "establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships" (CASEL, 2003, p. 5). All participants revealed they have seen a lack in relationship skills in their

students this year. One consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic was “social distancing,” in which people were told to stay at least six feet apart from each other. Accordingly, many children lack experience with socializing with children that are outside of their family. Bailey described a significant increase in children coming to her during recess and proclaiming that they “don’t know who to play with” or that they “don’t know where to play.” She disclosed, “it’s been really hard. It seems that it’s not easy for them to initiate friendships. There doesn’t seem to be the initiating any kind of play, there’s more of the ‘I’m going to play over here by myself.’” Although Kate has slightly older students, she reports a similar finding that many students are “being left out” because they “don’t know how to talk and join in a group.” She feels that “those kinds of social skills are lacking this year or are delayed.” She has also seen an increase in peer conflict stating, “they’re arguing more with their peers, so those relationships are struggling, more so than typically in second grade.”

Participants also revealed that many students seem to lack social awareness to a higher degree than what is typical of their age/grade. Social awareness refers to the ability to take other’s perspectives and understand “social and ethical norms for behavior” (Minnesota Department of Education, n.d., p. 1). Melanie reported being surprised this year by her students’ lack of social awareness skills saying, “I’ll be in a conversation with another child, and they have no awareness that I’m not available to be spoken to right now.” She also feels that her students are struggling with the amount of other children that they have to share the teacher’s attention with. She explained,

That concept of taking turns, even when speaking, they’re just not used to having to do that. These kids have mostly been at home with two parents who are around. That’s what our demographic is, I think most of our population, parents started working from home and then kept their kids home. Or if they did go to preschool,

preschool class sizes were half of what our class sizes are, and normally had more than one teacher.

Teachers' Responses to COVID-19's Impact on Students

Learning about all the negative impacts related to the COVID-19 pandemic was a bit disheartening; however, I was highly encouraged to also learn about all the ways that teachers are supporting their students. While all but one teacher expressed frustrations with some of the behaviors their students are exhibiting in the last couple years, they all still spoke about their students affectionately and about their roles in students' lives.

Not One Program, But a Set of Practices

A few SEL programs were briefly mentioned; however, participants largely reported that they created their own method of teaching social-emotional skills. These methods included taking elements of SEL programs they had been trained in, mostly from other schools where they previously worked. Several similar teacher practices emerged through examining the interview data. These practices include facilitating mindfulness in the classroom, modeling both desired and undesired behaviors, and fostering emotional awareness in themselves and others. Teachers also discussed focusing on relationship skills and building individual students' self-regulation skills. Lastly, the relationship teachers have with their students' parents and the school counselor will be addressed.

Mindfulness. When asked how she supports her students' mental health, Anna primarily described using mindfulness practices. In fact, she conducted her own study and wrote her Masters thesis on the practice of mindfulness in the classroom. Each month, she selects a different theme like self-control or self-awareness and has a daily activity aligned with the theme. On Mondays, Anna examines a relevant and engaging children's book with the class. On

Tuesdays, her students participate in a “watch and observe” activity. Thursdays consist of a small project such as “cutting out different emotions and pasting them onto different faces” or writing a journal entry. To wrap everything up on Friday, students talk to a partner about what they learned about mindfulness that week. By completing an activity about mindfulness every day, the concepts within it are reinforced and their relevance and usefulness to her students’ lives is more effectively conveyed. She also reported facilitating self-regulation through frequent “brain breaks,” which allow the students to move around a bit in order to refocus, a practice that she says is “always very helpful.”

Verona Hill Elementary also has a schoolwide mindfulness program which includes periods of mindfulness time at assemblies and an outside therapist who comes into the classroom occasionally and teaches a mindfulness lesson. Melanie recalls feeling a bit skeptical at first that hundreds of students would be able to simultaneously participate. However, after the first assembly, she was surprised to see that it was successful— “They completely did it. They were silent and taking a moment of peace. It was really impressive.” Now, Melanie uses mindfulness principles every day. For example, she encourages her students to take deep breaths and have a moment of stillness upon returning to the classroom after recess. She tells her students “leave your recess body and your recess brain outside. It’s time to be a learner again.” She shares that refocusing her students in this way is “one of the best and easiest little tricks because most of the time it really works. You can feel the energy calm.”

Modeling. A common strategy that emerged as a way to teach students social and emotional skills was teacher modeling. Bailey shared that she models both healthy emotional and physical expression and more inappropriate behaviors. For example, she wants her students to know that it is normal and ok to feel frustration, so when she feels frustrated during teaching she

speaks out loud the thinking process of “I feel really angry and frustrated right now and I'm going to use a strong voice to show that or I'm going to take a deep breath.” Along with modeling what she would like her students to do, she also models the disruptive behaviors that occur in the classroom. She explained that she will act out “silly behaviors” such as sliding around on the floor and that students will immediately react telling her that she “shouldn't be doing that.” In this way, she effectively communicates to her students what behaviors are inappropriate in a playful, non-punitive manner.

Anna strongly believes in teaching her students that it is ok to make mistakes and that adults and teachers make missteps all the time. Accordingly, she makes sure to point it out when she happens to make a mistake, and even sometimes pretends to do so. Before correcting the mistake, she will say “Oops, I made a mistake, but that's alright. No big deal!” She laughed and revealed that she says this phrase so often that she hears her students calling out, “Mrs. Anna, that's alright!” or “It's no big deal” in response when she announces a mistake she has made.

Similar to Bailey, Anna also models recognizing the emotions in herself and others and providing a reason for the emotion. She fondly recalls a recent time in which she overheard one student telling another, “I can tell that you're feeling frustrated right now.” She said, “I was so surprised that he was able to notice it because kids this age are very self-absorbed...and that's very normal.” While she was surprised, she admitted that she believes this student said that because she “constantly names emotions” for herself while teaching.

Teaching Self-Awareness and Emotional Awareness. Anna also emboldens her students to voice their emotions, and thereby develop their self-awareness, through writing. She explains, “I'll have a journal prompt such as ‘Today I feel.... because....’ and I try to encourage words other than happy or sad or mad.”

Another teacher, Reese, discussed integrating emotional awareness skills when facilitating conflict resolution between her students. She pushes back against the common advice of telling children to “just ignore them” when they are bothered by someone else. Instead, she makes sure each student has a chance to express what happened and then she follows up with the question ‘and how did that make you feel?’ She asserted that this type of prompted dialogue allows students “to explore the feeling piece of it” and come to a solution together.

Most participants discussed the value of children being able to recognize others’ emotions and react in an empathetic manner. Bailey gave an example of how she responded on a particularly difficult day when some students were being misbehaving during a lesson,

I was trying to write something on a chart. And they were being disrespectful. So then on that chart, I just drew a big giant heart. And I held up the heart and I started ripping the paper to shreds. And they're like, 'NO! Why are you ripping the heart?!' so I hold it up and I'm like, 'This is how I feel' like, 'I feel like every time you're not listening, rip rip rip. Every time you hurt each other, rip rip rip. Now, how are you going to fix this?' And a bunch of them were like, 'We'll fix it!' and they took it out to recess to try to tape it up and get it back to the original piece of paper. And then they're trying to give me hugs, so they got that I was upset, but changing the behavior to prevent me from being upset, or anybody--that's still something they're working on.

Judging by the highly animated and emotionally expressive way that Bailey reenacted the student’s response, it seems that many of her students had a strong reaction to this impromptu lesson. Accordingly, Bailey later created a poster with her students about what they can do to

‘make each other's hearts happy’ and refers to it often to bridge the gap between certain behaviors and a likely negative response.

Teaching Social Awareness and Relationship Skills. At Summer Hill Elementary, there is a room next to the library that is playfully called “the clubhouse.” During recess, children that do not want to play outside on the playground can go to the clubhouse and read, play board games, draw, or participate in any other indoor-appropriate activity. Kate explained how this clubhouse has helped with the influx of more students attending the school recently:

It’s a good place for them to go and meet new kids. A lot of the kids were sheltered [during the pandemic] so this big field was ominous to them. They didn’t know where to start building friendships. So having a smaller environment with some guided activities was really beneficial.

Kate noticed that oftentimes the children who occupied the clubhouse were “those kids that are struggling with social interaction.” Therefore, she created a “social club” that meets on Wednesdays:

So anyone that wants to can come and we’re just chatting. A lot of the people are either kids in my class, or some older girls, that just want to talk about what happened during COVID and how some of their friendships changed. So it's just another avenue to help them, another outlet.

When I inquired about what these students are saying about friendships, I was stunned and disheartened at Kate’s response. During online learning, some children joined a “pod” which was often held at a student’s parents’ house. Pods provided a place for multiple children to learn while their parents went to work. Because these pods were set up entirely by parents, some children ended up in a pod based on where they lived or who their parents knew. Kate reported

that some of the configurations of pods ended up creating tension between the students. She explained that once school went back in person, some children claimed that classmates that they had been friends with previously in person were not their friends anymore because they were in a different pod. While I believe that pods were set up with great intentions on the parents' part, Kate told me, "I think it [pods] split up a lot of bonds." She theorized a possible explanation:

They feel like they have the control and they only want to play with who they want to play with because they haven't been able to control that for a while. So now they are kind of pushing other kids out.

In an attempt to combat this behavior, Kate emphasizes the concept and practice of inclusivity during the "social group" and in general with students.

Building Student's Individual Skills: Self-Regulation, Self-Esteem, and Confidence.

Most participants discussed the importance of their students developing and maintaining confidence in themselves. When discussing her values as a teacher, Reese explained:

I want them to have good self-esteem and to be able to have verbal skills to express what their needs are. They need to speak up for themselves. They need to be kind to each other. If there's not that feeling of safety in the classroom, then you can't learn. So, it has to be safe. It has to be respectful.

Another teacher, Anna, informed me of a practice she does that provides positive reinforcement and pairs it with a movement:

I'll have them kiss their brains (demonstrates kissing hand and then places her hand on her forehead) when they do a good job. I try to have them reflect and do things where they're acknowledging themselves and their hard work.

Melanie also uses movements to teach her students self-regulation. She uses the “garbage can tool” from her experience being trained in the “Toolbox for SEL” at a different school. She tells her students that they all have a “garbage can,” modeling putting one hand on her hip using the other hand to “throw garbage” into the empty space between her arm and body. She explains to her students, “if someone says something unkind, or if you don’t like something that somebody did, you can always ball it up and put it in your garbage can.” Thus, this tool pairs something intangible, an experience, with a physical motion and visual. Melanie has found that these types of acts are “really helpful for kids their age!”

Communication with Parents. The relationship between parents and teachers can be incredibly important for the success of students. Throughout her teaching career, Reese has made it a point to develop a good relationship with her student’s parents. At the end of the school day, she recognizes a different student for something positive they did during the day and calls their parents. She explains,

I'll hold the phone out to the whole class and they'll go 'great job so and so!' in English or in Spanish depending. And that makes them feel good. It makes this child feel good. The parents are happy. And it's a good setup for me to establish a relationship with the parents on a positive level so that if I have to call on something more difficult, then we've already had that first positive experience or several.

Despite the changes that came with distance learning, Reese continued this practice through the screen. However, she did modify it so that the selected student was asked to go get a parent and bring them to the computer rather than call their phone. Reese maintains that communicating

with parents daily through the “happy call” allows her to connect with parents in a positive manner that in turn, positively reinforces her students.

When asked if her relationship with parents had changed at all during the pandemic Anna recalled,

When COVID first hit, there was this shock within the district like ‘oh gosh we don’t have as much access to these parents as we may have thought...’ In the past it was the teachers responsibility to set up a communication platform.

In response, the district selected one platform and now uses it to send class, school, and district-wide announcements. Teachers and parents are also able to text or email each other more easily. Reese reported frequently texting parents to inform them whenever a student had a particularly great day or if they had a more rough day. Additionally, Melanie acknowledged, “we have a great PTO and there's a high level of parental involvement. So we're really fortunate that way.” However, since the pandemic started, parents have not been allowed to spend much time on the school campus. Melanie believes that parents are feeling “emotionally disconnected” despite teachers’ efforts to communicate with parents through newsletters and virtual events.

Unlike Melanie, Bailey feels that “parental support has been really hard to get” this year. Because she often sees challenging student behavior throughout the day, she has been checking in with parents frequently either in person during pick-up or by messaging through the school platform. Critically, the child is always a part of this conversation. Bailey scaffolds the conversation by encouraging the student to tell their parents what happened first. Since the students are often resistant, Bailey will guide them by asking specific questions and then filling in the blanks when necessary. She acknowledges that parents “want their kids to be making the

choices that are appropriate for school” and hopes that these discussions will bridge any gap between the expectations at home versus the expectations at school.

The Role of the School Counselor/ Psychologist and Family Center. At one school site, Summer Hill Elementary, this year is the first that they have a school counselor full time. Melanie and Kate expressed enormous gratitude towards the new counselor. Melanie declared, “Having a counselor on site full time for each school is a huge, huge need. So I'm so happy that was able to be filled this year!” Kate affectionately stated, “she's absolutely amazing. She goes above and beyond.” It seems that the counselor plays a significant role in assisting teachers with building students’ social-emotional skills. Kate explains,

Our counselor comes in and pulls small groups of kids all the time. But she also comes into our classrooms, and teaches small social-emotional lessons with us, which is really great.

Additionally, the counselor speaks weekly at assemblies and leads school-wide positive programs. Melanie gave the example,

Last week, we did national kindness week. So she had activities every day for teachers to do with their kids to be involved in kindness activities. And then we all did a dance party on Friday at lunch to reward them for going the extra mile to spread kindness.

In contrast to the teacher participants at Summer Hill Elementary, teacher participants at Verona Hill Elementary did not mention the counselors beyond affirming that there is a counselor on site and that she conducts individual student counseling based on student needs. One participant shared that the counselor is currently running “friendship groups” which offers students “tips on

basically being kind to one another.” However, this participant admitted that she is not convinced that these groups are effective in increasing students' social and emotional skills.

A resource that Bailey recognizes as helping students a lot this year is the school's “Family Center.” She believes that “since COVID started, families are needing more services and support from the Family Center.” The Family center is a social service that provides families with students in the district with services such as medical and dental. They also do food and clothing drives, and refer families for jobs and housing.

Conclusion

These past few years have provided challenging and unforeseen obstacles for everyone. The purpose of this study was to hone in on younger elementary students' mental health and learn about their experiences through the eyes of their teachers. These two school sites were purposefully selected because of their differences in resources and the amount of students who are classified as socioeconomically disadvantaged. As previously mentioned, for the 2020-2021 school year, Verona Hill had 83.5% of the student population classified as socioeconomically disadvantaged, while Summer Hill only had 22.4% (School Accountability Report Card, n.d.). Thus, I was curious to see if the data would reveal a difference in participants' responses depending on the school that they were at. Interestingly, I did not find any such connections. I believe this lack of correlation reveals the universality of the behaviors that teacher participants reported seeing during and partially post the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of this study provide some insight to my research questions. My first research question was, “How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the mental health of younger elementary school students?” My findings indicate that teachers have seen changes in their students over the past few years- behaviorally, socially, and emotionally. Participants acknowledged that they have seen a greater

amount and degree of physical behavior, decreased independence, increased desire for validation, increased emotional reactivity, and a deficit in the areas of relationship skills and social awareness. These responses prompted my second research question which was, “How have teachers responded to the COVID-19 pandemic’s effect on their students?” The teacher participants’ responses to interview questions revealed that they are actively trying to counteract some of the negative effects they have seen by prioritizing social-emotional learning in their classrooms. This focus allows students to have a foundation in which they can demonstrate age-appropriate social-emotional competency, and, therefore, build academic knowledge on top. My third question was, “If any, what SEL programs are teachers using? Do they find these SEL programs to be effective for their students?” Findings demonstrate that teachers are creating their own SEL activities and lessons to support their students, rather than following any one program. Ultimately, the pandemic has forced teachers and students to be flexible. As Anna declared, “Kids are very adaptive. I think if we’ve learned anything from this pandemic, we’ve learned that kids are very resilient.”

Chapter 5: Discussion

The findings of this research illuminate the importance of teachers meeting students where they are. In this study, students have spent a significant amount of their formal schooling experience during and partially-post the COVID-19 pandemic. The combination of adapting to online or hybrid instruction at a young age, being socially and physically distanced from their peers, as well as plenty more challenges that the pandemic caused, has impacted children in a variety of ways. Data from teacher participants revealed some of the perceived effects on children's behaviors as well as teachers' commitment to supporting their students socially, emotionally, mentally, and academically.

This study's findings overlapped with a few themes discussed in the literature review. The most significant overarching theme was that students need social-emotional support in order to succeed academically. In Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger's (2011) meta analysis of social-emotional learning (SEL) programs, the researchers found that SEL programs had positive effects on "targeted social-emotional competencies and attitudes about self, others, and school" (p. 417). Furthermore, they found that SEL programs "increased prosocial behaviors" and "improved academic performance on achievement tests and grades" (p. 417). Similarly, Reese emphasized that "if there's not that feeling of safety in the classroom, then you can't learn" explaining that students must be "kind to each other" and "respectful." Most of this study's teacher participants echoed the importance of students having a foundation of social-emotional skills before more complex academic subjects can be taught. As Bailey put it, "the social pieces are what help us reach the academic pieces. I can't teach anything if my kids are not mentally and emotionally okay." Both studies affirm that having social and emotional skills is not only beneficial for academic learning, but necessary.

Another similarity found in the research and this study is that parental stress can impact their children's mental health. This seems to be true even when parents specifically try to shield their stress from their children. When discussing the difference in students prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and during, Melanie remarked that her students have been "hearing things on the news" and "seeing parent's and adult's reactions." This point acknowledges that regardless of what parents may be explicitly telling their children verbally, some stress may still be communicated in nonverbal ways. In a study conducted on the impacts of disasters on children, Kousky (2016) wrote that disasters can cause stress, and that children's stress "can be exacerbated by witnessing their parents' stress" (p. 76). Therefore, despite any parental efforts to "protect" their children from the chaos following a disaster, such as a hurricane or a world-wide pandemic, children can still absorb stress and exhibit anxiety.

An interest in practicing mindfulness to facilitate positive mental health was touched on in the literature review and the data found in this study. Some teacher participants discussed using mindfulness after recess to allow students to refocus. Melanie described her mindfulness practice as telling the students to focus on breathing saying "leave your recess body and your recess brain outside. Time to be a learner again." Students are encouraged to participate while imaging a visual such as smelling a birthday cake and then blowing out the candles. Research has shown that practicing mindfulness can be an effective way to increase attention span. Zenner, Herrnleben-Kurz, and Walach's (2014) meta-analysis of mindfulness-based interventions in schools found that mindfulness had a positive effect on children's "cognitive performance" and "in the psychological measures of stress, coping, and resilience" (p. 16). While mindfulness can be helpful, this study and the study conducted by Zenner, Herrnleben-Kurz, and Walach describe

mindfulness alone as being insufficient to address students' mental-health. Rather, mindfulness is better utilized as supplemental to SEL learning practices.

Implications for Literature

The literature review demonstrated the influence that the concepts taught in SEL programs can have on young student's emotional health and social behaviors. The research on students' mental health within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic is just beginning. Only limited research exists exploring the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on young children's mental health and how schools need to adjust to best support their students. This study contributes to growing interest in how the pandemic has altered lives, especially those of children in their early years of school. Children have been affected by the pandemic in a variety of ways that could be long lasting. While another pandemic will hopefully not be occurring again soon, ramifications relevant to this pandemic may appear again. For example, friends and family members may still get sick and be unable to interact in person, or conversely, need help from others who do not want to become sick as well. Also, parents could lose their jobs or need to work hours that don't allow much free time to be spent with their children. Understanding the ways that these concerns may affect children may help teachers to better support individual students moving forward. Further research into how students have been affected by the pandemic will be beneficial to study in order to identify possible protective or mitigating factors moving forward. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased awareness of some of the challenges and trials that children face already regardless of a worldwide pandemic. A greater awareness and understanding of how uncertain times or difficult situations may affect children and their behavior differently can only benefit educators and allow them to connect to their students on a more meaningful level.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The research discussed in the literature review and the findings of this study point to the importance of teaching and scaffolding social and emotional skills with young children. Based on research from the literature review and my findings, there is a need for teachers to be trained in a SEL program that they believe will benefit their students. When I asked about a specific school-wide SEL program, participants at one school admitted that they had been given access to a manual for a SEL program, but had not been trained in it. One participant acknowledged that there had been some SEL-related professional development meetings offered recently, but said that, “Some of us are finding that it's feeling a little bit redundant,” adding that the training is “not concrete.” At the other school site, one participant informed me that their school is planning on purchasing a SEL-related program after a committee decides which program will be the best fit for their school. Despite not implementing any one specific SEL program, teacher participants reported that they teach social and emotional skills everyday--both directly and indirectly. One participant explained,

We kind of integrate it [SEL]. It's just how we handle the kids. You know, we work with them, we don't send kids to the office. We're very flexible. We talk with the kids before anything really explodes. It's more of a conversation, and 'what choices could you make?' So I think, for now, teachers are kind of doing their own thing.

This quote suggests that there is a need for schools to have a SEL program that teachers approve of and have been adequately trained in.

This study offers a glimpse into elementary schools in a partially-post pandemic world, one in which priorities may need to be shifted to better align with what students' needs are now.

Many students are delayed socially and emotionally, and some students may demonstrate academic delays. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on schools must be considered when evaluating data such as test scores. Some students are struggling academically, however, that does not mean they need more academic material and pressure thrust upon them. Students that are scoring lower on tests likely had greater barriers to learning during online instruction. They should not be punished for this, rather, they need to be given even more support in a kind and compassionate manner.

Navigating the world during the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted many discussions about mental health. The stigma around mental health has been improving over the past few decades, however, there is still a long way to go.

Some may believe that mental health services are more relevant for adolescents, but based on my conversations with teachers and parents (one participant was both), it is clear that mental health needs to be addressed as early as possible. Having social-emotional skills benefits every child regardless of any additional needs they may have. Displaying some degree of SEC (social-emotional competence) helps children to become successful, well-rounded adults.

Limitations of the Study

This study was completed in a relatively small time frame and had a small number of participants, therefore, many limitations exist. Interviews were conducted in January and February and chapter 4 was written in March, 2022. With more time, I could have recruited more teacher participants from different school sites to offer a wider perspective of elementary school students' mental health. I also could have participated in more peer coding with the interview transcripts which might have illuminated additional themes. It may also be relevant to know that the two schools that I interviewed teachers from had a considerable difference in the amount of

resources they had and the barriers that students faced during online learning. Furthermore, while these schools offered a range in terms of socioeconomic status, they are geographically virtually identical. While it is possible that this study's findings may be generalizable to the rest of the relevant population, cultural components that may have emerged in other locations should be considered. With a different sample of participants in various locations, cultural differences may have brought other significant themes to light than what was found in this study.

Another limitation of this study is that while young students were the focus, their teachers were the ones interviewed. A more complete understanding of these students' mental health could have been obtained with interviews with their families, interviews with the students themselves, and observation of the student in multiple contexts. However, I chose to only interview teachers for logistical purposes; also, I believe that these teachers have valuable insight and can speak to how their students may be feeling given their observable behaviors.

To address any possible researcher bias, it should be known that I knew Bailey prior to this study as I student taught for her kindergarten class for eight weeks early 2021. Our conversation went on longer than originally planned; accordingly, I have more quotes from her in my findings.

Directions for Future Research

One participant, a teacher and a parent of two children, brought up how the COVID-19 pandemic may have had a greater effect on certain groups of students. She claimed that "COVID took a huge hit on children who were fragile," referring to children with 504 plans, learning disabilities, and individualized education plans. Since this point was only brought up by one participant when speaking about her own children, this study did not focus on how the pandemic may have impacted students with learning challenges. However, it is absolutely critical that

future research explore how this shift in schooling affects this specific group of students so that these students can receive the support they need. This participant also explained,

We're used to getting support, at our school anyway, on a regular basis. And our school really tried to have that intervention continue with teachers, but it just wasn't always possible. Especially those kids that go to resource. Some of them are there a good chunk of the day and they weren't getting any of that support.

Further research should explore the ways that the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically with online instruction and social distancing, impacted students with individualized education plans or learning disabilities.

While this study focused on the students' mental health, future research should also focus on teachers' mental health. How did the COVID-19 pandemic and online learning affect teachers personally and professionally? As mentioned earlier in this chapter, parental stress can have negative impacts on children's stress levels. Since teachers spend a significant amount of the day with students, it is possible that their stress may carry over to their students in a similar way. Considering this, further research should examine teachers' mental health during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, longitudinal studies following the children that had their first couple of years of school disrupted by the pandemic are warranted. These types of studies could help illuminate some of the long-term mental health effects on children that are not yet known.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate some of the effects related to the COVID-19 pandemic on young elementary school students, as told through their teachers. This study offers

a glimpse into the experiences of some elementary school teachers and their students during and partially-post the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is a need for educators to reframe their understanding of certain behaviors that many children are exhibiting post-pandemic. Dr. Jody Carrington states that rather than seeing children's disruptive behaviors as "attention seeking," educators should understand these behaviors as "connection seeking." Following a pandemic that exacerbated youth mental health concerns, educators must seek out more opportunities to integrate SEL principles and facilitate relationship- and community- building with their students. This sentiment is echoed beautifully by the U.S. Surgeon General, Vivek H. Murthy, when he wrote, "I believe that, coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have an unprecedented opportunity as a country to rebuild in a way that refocuses our identity and common values, puts people first, and strengthens our connections to each other." (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2020, p. 4).

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Appendix A

Purpose Statement and Interview Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand teachers' perspectives about how social-emotional learning impacts elementary school students' mental health and observable behaviors, specifically within the context of COVID-19.

1. How long have you been teaching? What grades have you taught?
2. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, what were you doing to support your students' mental health and social skills?
3. Tell me about the Social Emotional Learning programs/curriculum at this school.
 1. What was the training like for these programs?
 2. In what ways were these SEL programs taught differently during the pandemic?
 3. Do you feel that these programs support or do not support students' mental health?
4. Do you discuss your teachings of social-emotional skills with the parents/guardians of your students? If so, how?
5. How have you seen the COVID-19 pandemic affect your students?
6. Has your teaching style changed at all due to the pandemic?
 1. If so, will you keep these changes after the pandemic?

Appendix B

Consent to be a Research Participant

Dominican University of California
Consent to be a Research Participant

I understand that Amanda Davis is a graduate student in the School of Education at Dominican University of California. Amanda Davis is conducting a research study designed to better understand elementary school teachers' perspectives about students' mental health before and during COVID-19.

Procedures

If I agree to participate in the study, the following will happen:

1. I will participate in a 45 minute interview, which will include questions about my experiences teaching before and during COVID-19, with a focus on social-emotional learning and mental health.
2. All names, personal references, and identifying information will be eliminated in the final thesis and no person will be identified by name, thereby ensuring confidentiality regarding responses. Interviews will be audio recorded on the researcher's computer that is password protected and interview notes will not include any names or identifying information (e.g., specific grade level taught, address, phone number, personal references). One year after the completion of the research all written materials will be destroyed.

Consent

I have been given a copy of this consent form, signed and dated, to keep.

PARTICIPATION IN THIS RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY. I am free to decline to be in this study or withdraw my participation at any time without fear of adverse consequences.

My signature below indicates that I agree to participate in the study.

Signature of the Research Participant

Date

Signature of the Researcher

Date